THACKERAY'S SECONDARY FICTIONAL WORLD:
AN AESTHETIC STUDY OF NARRATOR AND READER ROLES IN THE NOVELS

by

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ABSTRACT

Thackeray's post-1847 novels make increasing use of a complex and indecisive narrator. The clear perspectives of Thackeray's early narrators—such as the boastful Gahagan, the cynical Yellowplush, and the sentimental Fitzboodle—are superseded by the man of many parts, who is the mature narrator of the novels from *Vanity Fair* to *Denis Duval*. This many-faceted figure keeps one eye on his reader as he moves between joyous certainty and utter bewilderment regarding his own feelings and his own fiction. He is not afraid to be fickle, and appears in many guises:—as novelist and historian, visionary and disenchanted worldling, preacher and clown. The secondary fictional world is determined by the narrator's continued changes of stance, not only towards the characters, but also towards the reader, who, too, must play many parts.

In its focus upon Thackeray's secondary fictional world, this study sees Thackeray as one of a line of novelists from Cervantes and Sterne to Joyce and Nabokov. These "novelists in motley" present their fiction as an elaborate game drawing the reader into the dual process of involvement in the main story, or primary fictional world, and detachment from it. In the secondary fictional world, both narrator and reader see the primary illusion as an illusion, yet they feel also its instinctive truth, its power to quicken their responses, and its value as a mode of self-discovery. Thus, while Thackeray's primary fictional world frequently suggests the neatness of conventional
patterns found in heroic myth, moral fable, or the contemporary melodrama and fashionable novels, the secondary fictional world undermines these forms, even while they are being used as probes of the narrator's consciousness. These established literary conventions are the means through which the indefinite self attempts definition. In Thackeray's secondary fictional world, the reader is made to see himself playing such parts as those of hero, villain, and lover, but he is also made to understand that his whole self consists of an infinite number of potential parts, none of which defines him exclusively.

Thackeray's own vacillation and waywardness becomes increasingly obtrusive in his mature work until, in *Philip* and *Lovel the Widower*, the plot and setting are dwarfed by the vastness of the narrator, whose monologues, in a bewildering variety of tone, style, and viewpoint, dominate the novels. The sharp satire and detached social observation of Yellowplush and Titmarsh give way to the ironies of a later narrator, who is painfully involved with his creations. Thackeray's typical novels thus purposely present no conclusive form, but, rather, a medley of loose ends and unresolved conflicts.

Unlike the central intelligence of the traditional novel, the Thackerayan narrator never finally sheds his illusions, never comes to see the truth about himself, and never reaches a climactic moment of ultimate vision; yet neither does he become victim of the illusion that man can live without illusions. He presents his reader not
with a progression of events leading to self-discovery, but with a revelation of the forms through which the changing self becomes manifest.
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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The editions of Thackeray's works and letters used in quotations and subsequently documented internally, are as follows: The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray, 32 vols. (New York: Scribner's 1904); Vanity Fair, ed. Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963); The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray, ed. Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1945-1946). Apart from Vanity Fair, which will be cited as VF, citations of the works will consist of volume and page references. Quotations from Thackeray's correspondence will be cited as Letters.

The Scribner's edition includes almost all the illustrations made for the original part issues of the novels and the serialized works. Quotations have been checked against the Biographical edition (London: Harper & Bros., 1898-99), and only minor variations of spelling and punctuation were revealed.

Scribner's is retained because the initial illustrations to the chapters frequently make ironic comment on the text and make a significant contribution to Thackeray's secondary fictional world.

Useful accounts of the early illustrations to Thackeray's work are provided in Lewis Melville's Some Aspects of Thackeray, pp. 124-139.
INTRODUCTION: AUTHOR AND READER ROLES

In reality, every reader, as he reads, is the reader of himself. The work of a writer is only a sort of optic instrument which he offers to the reader so that he may discern in the book what he would probably not have seen in himself.

—Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past

It is generally true that "the novelist moves cautiously from the real to the fictional world, and takes pains to conceal the movement." However, certain novelists, among whom are Cervantes, Sterne and Thackeray, conceal this movement, either by emphasizing the fictional nature of their stories, or in giving them an inconclusiveness by recourse to a vacillating or bungling narrator, who painfully admits his incapacity. While in Don Quixote Part II, The Don and Sancho Panza offer comments and criticism on their biographer, in Tristram Shandy and Vanity Fair, the narrator comments upon and criticizes himself; he is aware of his own inadequacies, biases, and the ultimate impossibility of telling a clear and straightforward tale, which both he and his reader can take seriously. Thus, while the typical novelist (concealing the movement between the fictional and the real world) creates one coherent fictional world, the "novelist in motley" (typified by Cervantes, Sterne and Thackeray) through his self-conscious narrator, moves adroitly between a fictional world of characters and a fictional world where he addresses a reader who must play a variety of roles. It is therefore clear that the "novelist in motley" offers his reader

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two fictional worlds, and that his predominant concern is to reveal the distance between the quasi-real world of narrator and reader and the fictional world of the characters.

The essential factor contributing to the secondary fictional world is the reader's understanding of a dimension above and beyond the simple story. It offers a kind of sub-plot on the difficulties of reading and writing a novel, and is vitally concerned with the relation between illusion and reality. For the reader who is predominantly concerned with the sequence of the hero's adventures, the various guises and tricks of the narrator will inevitably seem tedious and frustrating. The narrator, the reader, or even the characters may see the ineffectiveness or the flaws of the story, but the story is not the main issue — rather, the light which falls upon it. Don Quixote is sure that his narrator "is no sage but some ignorant prater who set himself blindly and aimlessly to write it [his story] down and let it turn out anyhow."² For the "novelist in motley," the story is a minor affair, and, as Sterne's incompetent narrator has it, "digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; — they are the life, the soul of reading!"³

This study attempts to show that the typical digressions and narrative anarchy of the "novelist in motley," as employed by Thackeray, lend greater verisimilitude to his novels. His secondary fictional


world, in fact, is suggestive rather than definitive, and this suggestiveness is not a structural defect but an intrinsic virtue. Furthermore, the contention here is that, although the "novelist in motley" persists in destroying the primary illusion of the story, his narrator's doubts, hesitations, self-contradictions and reader-interrogations, are a crucial part of the aesthetic experience presented. The reader is offered not simply an anti-novel but a novel of broader scope than the more typical novel. This multiplex, or as I call it "expansive", novel attempts to show reality in the process of being shaped into art.

In this process, fundamental questions are raised between narrator and reader, and the most insistent and unanswerable is the question "Who am I?" The narrator employed by the "novelist in motley" attempts to reconcile contradictory aspects of himself and his reader; the solemn and the impish; the logical and the wayward; the pious and the cynical. And if narrator and reader contain such contraries, how, it is constantly implied, can one tell an unequivocal and direct tale which clearly distinguishes heroism and villainy, wisdom and folly, or beauty and corruption? The "expansive" novel thus offers the reader that ever-fertile foolishness, which we can only embrace by the words "Quixotic" and "Shandean."

It is in the quiet dialogue between narrator and reader that the question of self-definition becomes crucial. Thus after Don Quixote's advice to Sancho Panza on how to rule his island in the sky wisely, the reader is invited to scoff at the folly of knight and
servant—to see them as other than his own sane and civilized self. But The Don's fantasy is also the reader's and becomes a reality through the tricks and plotting of others, until finally, like all plots, schemes, systems and enchantments it dissolves "like smoke into the air." Yet the fantasy is a means of self-probing for Quixote, Sancho and the reader, and the Don's conduct in the role of governor draws wonder, amazement and admiration from all. Through his fantastic role-playing, he "carries to a high pitch both his good sense and his madness." The reader is asked by the narrator, "who . . . would have taken him for a very wise person, whose wisdom was exceeded only by his excellent intentions?" The greatest wisdom, the narrator implies, is to take up the role which "sane" people, securely ensconced behind their social personae, consider to be folly. For in this way the self goes beyond convenient definition and realizes its boundless possibilities.

A reader of Don Quixote or Vanity Fair can never be a purely passive partner in the fictional enterprise. Although he usually finds little difficulty in identifying with central characters in novels or speakers in poetry or drama, when faced with an inconsistent, ironical or consciously role-playing narrator, the reader is forced into a more complex role. The narrator drops his formal pose at frequent intervals in order that he may suggest a richly diffuse otherness behind his ostensible role. His purpose thus becomes a tantalizing self-revelation in which he is something of a confidence man and trickster enticing

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4Don Quixote, p. 827.
his reader to disclose and discover the secret selves which lie behind the "gentle reader" facade. When the narrator's disclosures take place, the reader is made defensively self-aware, and as the narrator begins to probe the reader, security and definition are lost. Because the Manager of Vanity Fair will "deferentially . . . submit to the fashion at present prevailing, and only . . . hint at the existence of wickedness in a light, easy, and agreeable manner, so that nobody's fine feelings may be offended" (VF, 617), the reader is forced to decide for himself the extent of Mrs. Rebecca Crawley's guilt. The narrator, as urbane and uncommitted commentator, offers only possibilities and leaves his reader to decide upon ultimates at his own peril; for to risk definition and commitment is to attempt to remove oneself from the flux of time through which the changing self is revealed.

The Manager seeks to avoid the constriction of role-playing in order to avoid definition by his reader. By so doing he makes plain the impossibility of final knowledge and his own unwillingness to pronounce judgement. His role is thus that of multiple role-players and the common ground between narrator and reader is the masquerade where truth lies in a convincing performance and the self is freed from the shackles of everyday responsibilities, and role-playing is blatantly acknowledged rather than tacitly implied as it is in normal

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5Cf. Erving Goffman on the two needs of those who would renounce the constricting typical role: "a need for an audience before which to try out one's vaunted selves, and a need for teammates with whom to enter into collusive intimacies and backstage relaxation." The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), p. 190.
life.

It is thus with the changing selves of the narrator that the reader is confronted rather than with a stable self, and since he does not simply identify with a character or a point of view, the reader cannot rest secure in the role of vicarious performer but must also play the part of watcher. The reward for the reader's acceptance of uncertainty and the discomfort of an insecure role is a sense of self-transcendence, a going beyond the convenient tidiness of sensible everyday polarities of good and bad, wisdom and folly, self and other, form and content, and a release into a world of unlimited possibility.

In summary, then, we can say that the self contains a vast complex of dark and private impulses which will only be realized in dreams, imagination or under conditions of extreme stress. The "self" of the novelist communicates with the reader only across the bridge of metaphor—or, to keep the original terms, the author adopts and the reader accepts the convention of a role. Novelists who are conscious of the arbitrary nature of this role, and who consequently seek to communicate this arbitrariness, eschew the consistency of a

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6I am assuming here for the convenience of argument that there is such a thing as a stable self, a feeling of self-identity in normal life. Cf. Erich Fromm, Man for Himself: An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics (New York: Rinehart, 1947), p. 206: "We are aware of the existence of a self, or a core in our personality which is unchangeable and which persists throughout our life in spite of varying circumstances and regardless of certain changes in opinions and feelings. It is this core which is the reality behind the word 'I' and on which our conviction of our own identity is based." Cf. also Charles Horton Cooley, Human Nature and the Social Order, new ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), p. 245: "Where there is no self-feeling, no ambition of any sort, there is no efficacy or significance."
unified point of view and present their world to the reader through an unstable and conflicting persona who seeks to evoke from the reader an awareness of the fluctuating and incalculable self. Such novelists are Cervantes, Sterne and Thackeray, and they offer their reader not the neatness of pattern and plot carefully developed and concluded, but a medley of story within story and reflection upon reflection. Paradigm is sacrificed to process and the reader is a vital partner in this process.  

Communication demands at least two people who understand and observe the rules on which its basis rests. Without a mutual acceptance between transmitter and receiver of the role-playing conventions involved, a break-down in meaning occurs; the lines become crossed and the message is garbled and confused. In the diagram below, efficient social and artistic role-playing corresponds to area 'B', and area 'A' represents the normal sub-conversation that goes on in the confused and conflicting self. Area 'C' is one of excessively simplified role-playing where the role is too well-defined to allow for human

To lose the sense of a separate, productive, resisting self, would be to melt and merge and cease to be." This absence of self-definition, letting go of identity, so alien to Western philosophy, is the only reality for expounders of Oriental philosophy such as Alan Watts and J. Krishnamurti.

7Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, Modes of Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1938), p. 131: "We must not dwell mainly on the issue. The immediacy of experience is then past and over. The vividness of life lies in the transition, with its forms aiming at the issue." Cf. also George W. Morgan, The Human Predicament: Dissolution and Wholeness (Providence: Brown Univ. Press, 1968), p. 330: "Man is more whole or less whole, but his wholeness is never a static condition to be achieved and thereafter maintained in fixed form."
variability and freedom.

The "novelist in motley," while he meets his reader in area 'B', manages to suggest the existence of the neighbouring areas which define it.

The narrator of *Vanity Fair* has received considerable critical attention, but only one study has attempted "to trace the strange mixture of jester and philosopher, of spectator and actor, which characterizes the basic narrator" of Thackeray's novels. The relationship of narrator and reader to the complex medley of shifting forms which Thackeray presents has not, however, been very thoroughly explored. In fact the highly sophisticated play between narrator and reader, which contemporary novelists such as Nabokov, Durrell and Barth make a vital part of the reading experience, has been, in Thackeray, almost totally

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9 A most penetrating discussion of "Thackeray's great subject, the relationship of the self to forms" is found in the last chapter of James Wheatley's *Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1969).
ignored. John Loofbourow's study of Thackeray's "allusive textures" in Vanity Fair and Esmond attends closely to Thackeray's use of parodic form.¹⁰ Loofbourow draws an interesting comparison with Proust which is valid perhaps for Esmond but not for the serialized novels.

Thackeray's "expansive" novels depend on collusion between a playful narrator and a patient and watchful reader. This relationship builds up the secondary fictional world which encloses the progressive story in a series of illusion-breaking digressions.

For Thackeray, illusion and reality are merely different terms for the same phenomena; for today's illusion becomes tomorrow's reality and vice versa. Knowing that life offers an incomprehensible wholeness, an inexhaustible complexity, Pendennis, who epitomizes the playful narrator, artfully asks the reader of Philip: "Have you made up your mind on the question of seeming and being in the world?" (XV, 186). The reader who has made up his mind will have little time for the evasive narrator of Thackeray's mature novels whose favourite qualifying phrases are "I dare say," "I wonder whether" and "I believe." The self-conscious narrator, catching himself out revealing a prejudice, turns to his reader and invites him to take an active part in the novel: "What is this? Am I angry because Twysden has left off asking me to his vinegar and chopped hay? No. I think not. Am I hurt because Mrs. Twysden sometimes patronizes my wife, and sometimes cuts her? Perhaps" (XV, 189).

Thackeray knows that the self is an unstable compound, subject to continuous change and made up of fluctuating memories and aspirations. Since the self can expand infinitely in space and time through the imagination, it follows that any distinction between self and world is purely arbitrary. Furthermore, if the imaginative extensions of the self into past and future are to be called illusions, then the only reality is the eternal now. This question of the indeterminate self which pervades Thackeray's novels is plainly articulated in a letter to Mrs. Brookfield:

But what is memory? Memory without Hope is but a negative idiosyncrasy and hope without memory a plant that has no root. Life has many such; but still I feel that they are too few. Death may remove or in some way modify their poignancy; the Future alone can reconcile them with the irrevocable fiat of yesterday; and Tomorrow I have little doubt will laugh them into melancholy scorn. Deem not that I speak lightly, or that beneath the mask of satire any doubt any darkness any pleasure even at foreboding can mingle with the depth of my truthfulness. Passion is but a hypocrite and a monitor (however barefaced)—Action febrile continuous action should be the pole star of our desolate being. If this is not reality I know not what is—(Letters, IV, 309-310).

This study is an attempt to suggest the depth of Thackeray's truthfulness as revealed in the secondary fictional world of the novels. Both reader and narrator must put on a bewildering variety of masks in the novels, but we are never in doubt that these masks are mere forms through which the changing self is revealed. The mercurial narrator exists to expand the primary fictional world of the novels where the ostensible action takes place. He exists to broaden the novels' range, to nudge the reader, to suggest possibilities, to break down schematism and blur moral outlines. As he tells the reader the
story he discloses himself, relives the story with the telling and anticipates possible reader reaction. He cuts himself short in a passage of moralizing, declines to comment on some particularly spicy item of gossip, adds an extraneous episode or anecdote to his story, takes on the role of improvisatore, repeats himself at length, becomes, what would be in life, a bore. He teases his reader with suggestions and hints regarding what might have happened or what reaction the reader might take. Naturally, the narrator is inconsistent, inconclusive and hypocritical, for his vision of the world changes according to the dominant mood of the writing present.\textsuperscript{11} As he runs the gamut from omniscience to ignorance regarding his characters, they become puppets or independent people accordingly. In consequence, the reader, too must become protean and be prepared to recognize himself in "unlikely" places.\textsuperscript{12} He must be the sentimental reader and the cynical reader;

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. D.M. Stewart, "Vanity Fair: Life in the Void," College English, 25(1963), 211: "The moral center of the book is not a principle that can be formulated; it is precisely the evolving situation in which conventional moral principles are repeatedly reversed and inverted so that one never reaches a resolution." Stewart's article is an excellent counter-argument to many critics of the narrator of Vanity Fair, such as Greig and Van Ghent, who object to his intrusiveness, unreliability or confusion. Stewart goes on: "Thackeray lies, cheats, dissembles, suppresses information. . . . He gives us a world that reflects honestly the real world—which certainly deceives us quite as often, quite as blatantly. A better wisdom than that which condemns his contradictions would express gratitude to Thackeray for making it difficult after reading Vanity Fair to deceive oneself into believing he was ever quite undeceived."

\textsuperscript{12} Perhaps Thackeray finds his ideal reader in the mid-twentieth century in the role of "protean man" whom Robert Jay Lifton sees as a modern archetype: "While he is by no means without yearning for the absolute, what he finds most acceptable are images of a more
he must find within himself such seemingly incompatible elements as moralist and hedonist, upright judge and malicious gossip, idealistic hero and cynical villain.

fragmentary nature than those of the ideologies of the past."
"Protean Man," Dialogue, 1, No. 3 (1968), 94. Cf. Todd Andrews in John Barth's The Floating Opera (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 271: "It is one thing to say 'Values are only relative'; quite another, and more thrilling, to remove the perjorative adverb and assert 'There are relative values!' These at least, we have, and if they are all we have, then in no way whatsoever are they inferior."
CHAPTER I

THACKERAY AND "THACKERAY" AS ROLE-PLAYERS

It's the other one, it's Borges, that things happen to. . . . News of Borges reaches me through the mail, and I see his name on an academic ballot or in a biographical dictionary. . . . I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges may continue his literature and that literature justifies my existence. . . . I am well aware of his perverse habits of falsifying and exaggerating. . . . Years ago I tried to free myself from him and I passed from lower-middle-class myths to playing games with time and infinity, but those games are Borges now. . . . I do not know which of us two is writing this page.

—Jorge Luis Borges, The Maker

Just so I glut
My hunger both to be and know the thing I am,
By contrast with the thing I am not; so, through sham
And outside, I arrive at inmost real, probe
And prove how the nude form obtained the chequered robe.

—Robert Browning, Fifine at the Fair

Although the strange presence, who fathers the story-teller, who in turn fathers the characters, is something as removed from the narrator as he is from the historical author, there are intimate connections between man and artist. We are not dealing with a man, but neither are we dealing with a mask, when we speak loosely of "Charles Dickens," "William Makepeace Thackeray" or "Henry James."

When we read David Copperfield, Vanity Fair, or The Ambassadors, we sense the ghost of the old artificer who is present in these works, but we should not confuse our sense of "him" with our sense of David Copperfield, the Manager of the Fair or Lambert Strether. For these are masks only, although they are masks that "he" assumes to make his presence felt. "Thackeray" therefore is the artist in the work,
whereas Thackeray's remains are found in the records that the historical figure left outside of his deliberately created works of art. The characteristics of this authorial presence are, nevertheless, crucially related to the historical man. In Thackeray's case, an examination of the private life, with its multiple awareness, agonizing self-consciousness and deliberate posturing, lays the ground for an evaluation of the narrator who is to dominate the mature novels.

This chapter shows some of the ways in which the historical Thackeray attempted to define himself through a variety of convincing but conflicting roles, in his letters, public lectures, novels and criticism. The portrait that emerges from his letters is that of a man who has no strong self-image. He is a writer who knows the arbitrariness of literary and social roles, but who is also aware of their necessity to efficient self-presentation. The impulsive and anarchic self frequently breaks through the conventional facade that is essential to harmonious social relations, and this frequently causes Thackeray to apologize for indiscretions committed when the social rules are broken or the literary codes violated. His rudeness to Trollope, his disparagement of his former *Punch* colleagues, and his dubious remark through the narrator of *The Virginians* that Washington's courage was worthy of a better cause, lead him to later retractions in an attempt to smooth over ruffled sensibilities and mend the rules he has broken. For, though the inner self be unsure and full of conflict, the presented self must appear secure and consistent if the performance is to succeed in its purpose of cementing social and cultural relationships.
But Thackeray found a constraint in such role-playing, where a persuasive performance is achieved at a considerable cost to the diverse claims of the self for recognition and expression. The intensity and concentration of playing a single role, or of stressing a solitary part of the self, puts the whole self under duress. As both man and novelist, Thackeray gives expression to the contrary claims of the self, and his honest acceptance of inner discord results in his characteristic vacillations and contradictions.

Thackeray can be severe in censuring Sterne's lewdness or Dickens' failure to depict nature, but he is always aware that faults and virtues inevitably grow side by side. Although one part of Thackeray is critical, another part of him is aware of the limitations of his criticism. His role in the lecture on Sterne and Goldsmith is basically that of exposcer of Sterne's false sentiment and impurity, yet he quotes at length a passage where he finds "wit, humour, pathos, a kind nature speaking, and a real sentiment." Twelve years later, in the Roundabout Papers, he exclaims of Master Laurence Sterne, whom he recalls as an old schoolfellow, "what a genius that fellow has! Let him have a sound flogging, and as soon as the young scamp is out of the whipping-room give him a gold medal" (XXVI, 371; XXVII, 328).

Criticism demands an appreciation of good and bad qualities and an attempt at a just assessment of the overall work or writer, but Thackeray's criticism does not rest in judicious summary. His only

1Thus Edwin Clapp sees him as a "critic on horseback," and for this "critic-errant ... no rules (unless they be the White Knight's)
certainty is that of the momentary self that is called out in response to the work.

The unstable sense of self that Thackeray displays in his criticism—his inability to maintain a fixed role—is brought out most strikingly in his correspondence. Many of his letters were torn up, not sent or couched in evasive terms or a disguised hand. Lionel Stevenson emphasizes this and points out that Thackeray in his indecisiveness burnt or destroyed as many letters to Mrs. Brookfield as he sent.2 Conscious of his own failure to maintain an acceptable social role, Thackeray apologizes to Lady Blessington for his former indiscreet remarks on Bulwer. He later apologizes to Bulwer himself for the fun he had at the baronet's expense when he wrote under the pseudonym of Yellowplush (Letters, III, 278). Thackeray is continually finding that the needs of the self frequently upset social conventions, that wicked irreverence and sentimental devotion can only be expressed by means of various disguises, contradictions and retractions.

In a book review of Dickens' The Cricket on the Hearth one can almost see Thackeray changing his mind as first one aspect of the work and then another seizes his attention. The dialogue and characters are, he complains, "no more like nature than the talk of Tityrus and Meliboeus is like the real talk of Bumpkin and Hodge over a stile, or

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than Florian's pastoral petits maîtres, in red heels and powder, are like French peasants, with wooden shoes and a pitchfork." Later, however, Thackeray finds all these impossibilities "become perfectly comprehensible now, and the absurdities pleasant, almost credible." Thackeray's earlier strictures on the story's artificiality, caricature and pantomime quality are mellowed by a recognition that we are creatures of extravagant imagination and that the child lives on in the man. Typically, he appeals to the reader: "Have you not sympathised with the distresses of many princesses described by Mother Bunch? — given a certain credence to dwarfs and ogres, singing trees, and conversation-al animals?"

Significantly, one of Thackeray's favourite metaphors in his art and in his letters is that of the stage or the puppet show. He realizes that "It is very difficult for literary men to keep their honesty. We are actors more or less all of us we get to be public personages malgré nous" (Letters, III, 13). He knows that as soon as a man begins to write, his pen runs away with him, so to speak, and produces a more or less beautiful fabrication which he feels undermines his integrity as a man. The artist can only offer us what Fernandez would call "superficial imitations" of the man. Thackeray's awareness of this causes him to underline the artifice in his works in order

Stevenson's account of Thackeray's letters at a crucial stage of his relationship with Mrs. Brookfield is apposite here: "Not having heard from her for some days, he composed a letter in French, giving a florid account of his anxiety, and did not post it. Three days later he sent her a long missive, partly in an assumed hand, with the explanation that the use of a different language or calligraphy produced a complete change in his character." p. 179. (My italics)

3 Thackeray's Contributions to the "Morning Chronicle," ed.
that we do not take them as definitive statements of Thackeray the man. He shows us a reflection in a deliberately distorted mirror, in order that we see, at the same time, the likeness to our world of the fictive world, and also its essential otherness. Sometimes the incongruity itself is the chief delight in our appreciation, as for instance, when Mr. Snob at one and the same time mocks and supports the adage that in a nation's hour of crisis a saviour will arise, that "cometh the hour, come the man": "just as in the Pantomime (that microcosm) where when the Clown wants anything—a warming-pan, a pump-handle, a goose, or a lady's tippet—a fellow comes sauntering out from behind the side-scenes with the very article in question" (XXII, 4). The significance of Thackeray's emphasis on the diminutive world of *Vanity Fair* is completely missed by Frank O'Connor, who, in his eagerness to expose the cynical worldling (who is also a Peter Pan figure for O'Connor) he sees Thackeray to be, finds that "the device of the puppet show in *Vanity Fair* is merely another method of indicating that it does not much matter whether the characters are good or bad, noble or ignoble; they must die just the same."

When O'Connor says that "virtue in Thackeray's eyes is always weak or stupid," or that "he regards instinct as weakness; selfishness, for all that he affects to denounce it, as strength," he is exactly one half right. Thackeray's attitude to his "dear old mother," like

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the Manager's to Amelia, fluctuates between maudlin worship and crabbed censure of her single-mindedness (Letters, III, 13; 93-94). Thackeray knew, certainly, that "virtue" had its weak and foolish as well as its admirable aspects, and "Thackeray" exploits these polarities in his work, through such ambivalent figures as Amelia, Helen Pendennis and Rachel Castlewood. The latter two "are both angelic mothers, but their beatitude is slightly tarnished by pronounced jealousy towards their sons' love objects."^5

The intrinsically histrionic and capricious character of Thackeray the man is capitally exploited by Thackeray the artist. The facility to see all aspects of a question and the reluctance to draw conclusions permit him to lose himself in a convincing performance. "I don't control my characters," he told Cordy Jeaffreson; "I am in their hands, and they take me where they please." To Whitwell Elwin, he maintained, "I have never seen the persons I describe, nor heard the conversations I put down. I am often astonished to read it myself when I have got it down on paper."^6 This is an apparent confession of loss of control over his material, yet Thackeray, by surrendering himself to the mood of the moment, succeeds in creating a variable response to a potentially static situation. Raptures over Amelia, or grateful prayers for the beautiful Helen Pendennis are balanced by


sobering assessments that bring out the negative qualities of these seeming moral touchstones. It is because of his awareness of various opposing modes of seeing that Thackeray is able to give such successful performances as the cynical Yellowplush, the boastful Gahagan and the sentimental Fitzboodle.

If "the man who habitually uses a pen name must . . . think of himself as playing a literary role,"7 the man who uses a wide variety of pen names must see himself as a constant role-player.8 Thus Thackeray, in "Punch's Prize Novelists," captures the spirit of Mrs. Gore's fashionable novels, Lever's rollicking Irish rogue stories, and Disraeli's high-flown Young England mystique, not with the savagery of Augustan satire, but with the sympathy of gentle burlesque. He does not set himself apart from the subject he chooses to mock, but rather becomes the part so convincingly that the reader is enveloped in the mood of the original and is barely conscious of the folly which is being subtly caricatured. In Thackeray it often seems that the role takes over and the man with a purpose almost disappears. If we are reminded of Joyce's Dubliners with its pastiche of romantic modes of seeing, we are not in Thackeray's parody conscious of the bitter incongruity between author's view and character's view.9


8For a list of some of the pseudonyms used by Thackeray, see J.Y.T. Greig, Thackeray: A Reconsideration (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), pp. 206-207.

9The parallel with Joyce can be further extended to their sense
Thackeray was, above all, a performer in his life as in his letter-writing, reporting, lectures, and through various personae in his sketches, tales and novels. Because he failed to take himself seriously, to cast himself in a secure and convincing mold, it is impossible for his reader to see Thackeray as a stable compound with set views or any particular convictions. Writing to Mrs. Scott about Henry Esmond, which he considered his best novel, he declares "that is such an old story that I forget the book—a melancholy novel wasn't it, & a dismal imitation of the old style." Does this represent a conclusive judgement by the author, or is he merely entertaining the point of view of the hypothetical North British reviewer whom he invents on the spur of the moment to damn the book (Letters, III, 286; 286n)? Which of Thackeray's poems on the opening of the Great Exhibition of 1851 represents his true feelings—the stately ode or the humorous skit published in Punch? These must remain open questions, for Thackeray is not concerned with ultimate justice or final answers but with expressing the blur and complexity of his whole self. Since it is impossible to communicate this complexity without the adoption of a point of view, Thackeray makes it plain that his medium is an artificial convention which does no more than represent the feelings of the moment.

of the arbitrary nature of language. Thackeray's use of French, German and Latin phrases in his letters and novels, his use of cockney, Oxford, American and broken-English accents and his penchant for puns, archaisms and portmanteau words show his constant endeavour to extend the range of acceptable forms of expression. There is a Joycean flavour for instance in the following coinages: "simtim," "pianofortification," "noncents," "refugeedom," "tollerollarable," "dthrinokh," "deleeshus," "lickwise my stummick," "suckinstansies," "ate o'clock," "womanifesto," "individdiwidyouall."
For Thackeray it was in the play-world or the dream-world that the normally constricted parts of the self gained expression. He would draw no sharp distinction between fantasy and reality, and spoke of his fictitious characters as friends, or projected his own dreams onto real people. When asked by Mrs. Bray, with whom he was staying while lecturing in Coventry, if he had slept well, Thackeray answered "How could I with Colonel Newcome making a fool of himself as he has done?" After meeting the Baxters in America, Thackeray kept up a continuous correspondence with Sarah Baxter to whom he played, among other roles, that of wooer. For a man who is prepared to admit that life is made up of much nonsense and who seeks to delight people by marketing "a pack of cards to be sold at all railway stations &... bought by everybody who loves stuff and nonsense," certitude of performance is the only reality (Letters, III, 438n; 380; 386).

Thackeray frequently took on a role not as an advocate but in order to see just how much of himself he could find within its limits. His defence of America was not so much a matter of personal conviction and loyalties as an opposition, for the sake of argument, to John Bullishness. He writes to Sarah Baxter: "I go about praising you Americans to all that will hear Hush! between ourselves I know some of what I say is unjust; and that I speak too favorably; but if you could hear the vulgarity and ignorance and outréecuidance on our side!" (Letters, III, 282). Travelling under the banner of New World Liberty, he catches himself in the act of rhetorical sermonizing. Thus he writes to Harriet Thackeray:
Greater nations than ours ever have been, are born in America and Australia—and Truth will be spoken and Freedom will be practised, and God will be worshipped among them, as they never have been with the antiquarian trammels that bind us in the Old World. I look at this, and speculate on this bright Future, as an Astronomer of a Star; and admire and worship the beautiful goodness of God.

Hullo! What sort of conversation is this?—It seems like a bit out of a Sermon doesn't it? If I had anything funny to say you should have that; but there's no Fun at home today. (Letters, III, 175)

Reality for Thackeray is not in any intellectual or moral position but in the conviction of the moment's performance, in the surrender of the self and its desire for preservation through definition. On the conversion of John Hungerford Pollen to Catholicism, Thackeray shows a mixture of admiration and scepticism, and he adopts Pollen's position in order to examine and understand it. He concludes, however, that he can only look at Catholicism "artistically as at Paganism Mahometanism or any other ism" (Letters, III, 341). In having no one position the self is free to lose definition and realize its fulfillment in diversity. The man like Thackeray, whose "position" is in commitment to no position, is free to become a performer and discoverer of his latent self. Such a man cannot take himself seriously, and, in his waywardness, imaginative daring and social unpredictability, has much in common with the child.

The artist does self-consciously for humanity at large what the child does unconsciously for himself—he engages men in a play-world of strange fancy where the normal logic and restraints of adult conformity are suspended. The artist preserves men's "sanity"
by allowing free play to the "folly" of their inner world. Thackeray and the other "novelists in motley" permit their readers to see the flimsy basis on which our normally water-tight structures of "sane" and "foolish," "true" and "false" are built. By accepting their created worlds as nonsense, these novelists show their command over reality in the same way that a man who claims he is a liar tells the truth, or one who accepts his insanity is alone in his sanity. The difference between child and artist is essentially one of knowledge. The novelist offers us controlled fantasy, and because he knows that he is a deceiver, he is able to project his self-knowledge onto narrators and characters who are parts created by a writing self. He can only communicate by parts, and his honesty lies in not pretending that his parts are wholes.

While all novelists are perforce role-players, the "novelist in motley" plays the role of role-player. He seeks to communicate a sense of the fragile rationales on which our convictions rest. Truth lies for him in perpetual flux. Just as Thackeray the man would point out to his mother the arbitrary nature of belief, so does Thackeray the novelist, through his narrator, emphasize the arbitrary

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10 Thus Freud says that the growing child "makes use of play in order to withdraw from the pressure of critical reason." Freud goes on to say education demands rigid restrictions "along the right lines of thinking, and . . . the separation of reality from fiction, and it is for this reason that the resistance against the pressures of thinking and reality is far-reaching and persistent." The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, trans. and ed. with Introd. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 717.

nature of novelistic convention. To his mother's criticism of Catholicism, Thackeray responds with: "Do you think you would not have had the same love for Catholicism [as you have for the Church of England] if you had been bred to it? Indeed you would, as I fancy, in any other creed" (Letters, I, 466). For Thackeray, "God has a responding face for every one of these myriad intelligences" (Ibid., 467), and there is an element of absurdity in doctrinaire adherence to any one creed. Although his letters to his mother are at times pious, he is also capable of scepticism: "What numbers of gates to heaven have we built? and suppose after all there are no walls? But this is a mystery" (Letters, III, 604). In a world where men are always being proved liars and pretenders, the artist is the honest liar, who, like Arnold's Callicles, fables but speaks truth. Our enduring passions, Thackeray realizes, are largely a matter of self-induced hypnoses. Thus he says, through the Manager of Vanity Fair, that "one of the great conditions of anger and hatred is, that you must tell and believe lies against the hated object, in order ... to be consistent" (VF, 171).

Thackeray is very aware that art, too, demands a consistency that does injustice to life's complexity. In reply to Lewes' charge of cynicism in Vanity Fair, he recognizes the arbitrariness of theme and the way in which thematic requirements inevitably distort the wholeness of life:

de fabricateur, le poète s'est dégradé en faiseur, au sens d'imposteur."
The "novelist in motley" presents himself as an honest impostor.
I am quite aware of the dismal roguery which goes all through the Vanity Fair story—and God forbid that the world should be like it altogether; though I fear it is more like it than we like to own. But my object is to make every body engaged, engaged in the pursuit of Vanity and I must carry my story through in this dreary minor key. (Letters, II, 354)

Time after time in his novels the avowed purpose and the ostensible meaning is undermined by his use of a confused or inconsistent narrator. This figure acts out the balance of contraries that Thackeray found in life and sought to include within his art. Thackeray's sympathy lies with the man who plays many parts and will be defined or restricted by no one part.

His admiration for artists and Bohemians is closely related to their flexibility in the face of life's complex demands. Speaking of Vanity Fair, he declares:

I like Becky in that book. Sometimes I think I have myself some of her tastes. I like what are called Bohemians and fellows of that sort. I have seen all sorts of society, dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, authors and actors, and painters—and taken altogether I think I like painters the best and "Bohemians" generally. They are more natural and unconventional; they wear their hair on their shoulders if they wish, and dress picturesquely.

Becky, like Thackeray, is a performer—one who is equally at home in the salon or the garret and who can take on the colour of the mood or society which envelops her. In his lectures, Thackeray finds "at certain passages a sort of emotion springs up, I begin to understand how actors feel affected over and over again at the same passages of the play" (Letters, III, 184). Thackeray, whose narrator declares

12 James Grant Wilson, Thackeray in the United States, 1852-3, 1855-6 (London: Smith, Elder, 1904), I, 258.
that he knows not whether Becky's tears are genuine or not, himself can draw no hard line between the simulated and the "real." The whole person is the one who makes the most of every part and knows that he contains them all. Such a person gives rigid allegiance to none; he is guided by the winds of change like the arrow of the weathercock. Thomas Carlyle finds Thackeray such a man: "There is a great deal of talent in him, a great deal of sensibility,—irritability, sensuality, vanity without limit;—and nothing, or little, but sentimentalism and play-actorism to guide it all with."\(^{13}\)

Thackeray has been criticized for his excessive fondness for the domestic virtues and mawkish indulgence in sentimentality and mother-worship,\(^{14}\) but his letters support the view that these feelings did not dominate him. We find an understanding that precludes such adoration in this letter of 1852:

It gives the keenest tortures of jealousy and disappointed yearning to my dearest old mother . . . that she can't be all in all to me, mother sister wife everything but it mayn't be— There's hardly a subject on wh[ich] we don't differ. . . . Eh! who is happy? When I was a boy at Larkbeare, I thought her an Angel & worshipped her. I see but a woman now, O so tender so loving so cruel. (Letters, III, 12-13)

A perusal of Thackeray's early letters suggests that he was well aware of his own tendency to idealize women, and that he knew his role of dutiful and loving son was but a partial expression of his


whole self. He humbly admits to his mother the idleness, extravagance and unworthiness of his nature (Letters, I, 143), but when he writes to his friend Fitzgerald his repentance occupies him only temporarily, for the very contemplation of his life as "a melancholy succession of idleness & dissipation" brings out the hedonist in him:—"I looked by chance at the opposite page after I wrote the word repentance, & do you know seeing that account of my dinners & wine drinking has quite gladdened me, & made me think there is some chance for me after all" (Letters, I, 152). In another context he tells Fitzgerald that "A woman's piety somehow does not suit me it is so made up of exclamations—love—chastenings & so forth" (Letters, I, 158). In his novels, too, despite the pious adorations of Pendennis and Esmond for Helen and Rachel, the selfishness of mother-love is markedly present. We are given rapturous worship but also an occasional sobering assessment of the worshipped icon.

Like his later narrators, Thackeray the man had an incredible facility for shifting his ground to accord with his feelings of the moment. He praises his grandmother's "extreme warmth of heart" and "delicate benevolence," in a letter to his mother. But he immediately turns upon himself with: "This kind of writing is . . . better fitted for 'My Grandmother' a sentimental novel than for a letter to my Grandmother's daughter; but if I did not praise, I should I think abuse; as I am at this moment writhing under the stripes of her satire, & the public expression of her wrath" (Letters, I, 273).

For Thackeray, the self has no hard boundaries but rather
includes all potential roles which are realized by external stimuli. Moreover, the self outgrows the selves of yesterday and must continue in this process if it is to absorb the new challenges that life presents. Thackeray's work has often been attacked as snobbish and hypocritical, usually by critics who are biographically oriented. But this is a very limited criticism, since Thackeray accepts these qualities as characteristic of all men. Snobbery and hypocrisy interest Thackeray because they are aspects of disguise by means of which a man seeks to define himself—they are vitally connected with the human need to identify with something larger than oneself—a certain class, party or country. If we insist on defining ourselves as friend, enemy, novelist, historian, we must inevitably do so at the cost of our whole self. For these are merely parts that a man might play. "I often think," he wrote to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth in 1842, "that in one's intercourse with men, which creates sympathies with some & antipathies with others, the party who hates you, & he who loves you, are both right" (Letters, II, 72). At other times he did not believe in the reality of his own past. "It seems to me such a time ago that VF [Vanity Fair] was written that one may talk of it as of some body else's performance," he wrote in 1848, the year in which serialization of his novel finished (Letters, II, 425). It is as the performances of another that Esmond, too, sees his past.

Ikéy Solomons, like his successors, is a role-playing narrator who has one eye on his reader as he prompts him to applaud, hiss,

15See esp. Greig, Thackeray, A Reconsideration; Ennis, Thackeray: The Sentimental Cynic.
admire, or condemn the personages he presents. Like the wise and prudent king from whom he is named, Ikey likes to dispense his own justice and at the same time indulge his own voracious appetites. By vicarious living he is able, like the "editor" of Moll Flanders, both to condemn immorality and enjoy it at the same time. Ikey finds within himself performer, spectator, and critic of criminal activity, and his uncertainty about his own centre of moral gravity leads him to see a corresponding confusion in the world:

And do not let us be accused of an undue propensity to use sounding words, because we compare three scoundrels in the Tyburn Road to so many armies, and Mr. Wood to a mighty field-marshial. My dear sir, when you have well studied the world—how supremely great the meanest thing in this world is, and how infinitely mean the greatest—I am mistaken if you do not make a strange and proper jumble of the sublime and the ridiculous, the lofty and the low. I have looked at the world, for my part, and come to the conclusion that I know not which is which. (XXIX, 194-195)

Thackeray, like Ikey, frequently finds his material by the working out of various potential selves contained within. He deliberately and consciously chooses to confuse the external appearance with the internal felt reality. Tieck "admitted that he would act out ideas for a whole year before he actually came to believe them." He commits himself to a state of half-belief in the projected figure or personality found in his work. Thackeray, working on the material for Esmond, writes to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth in 1851, that "I have been living in the last century for weeks past—

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all day that is—going at night as usual into the present age; until I get to fancy myself almost as familiar with one as the other" (Letters, II, 761). Many people in life who must preserve a consistent front realize that consistency can only be achieved by a deliberate use of artifice. Only by the dual process of acting and watching oneself act can one see what one is not, and thereby understand more about what one is. Ramon Fernandez asks us

Combien connaissons-nous d'individus qui, introduisant subrepticement dans la conduite de leur vie des procedes que justifient seules les lois de combinaison artistique cultivent un compromis entre l'imaginaire et le reel, nous proposent comme actions personnelles revelatrices de leur unite interieure des actes qui ne sont que d'habiles dans superficielles imitations?\(^{17}\)

In his life and his art, Thackeray wilfully confused the real and the imaginary in order to further the process of self-knowledge.

The actor in Thackeray frequently caused him social embarrass­ment, however. Thus, he apologizes to Alfred Tennyson for slighting his friend's eulogy of Catullus. One can imagine any such fulsome praise stirring the iconoclast within Thackeray, and in response to Tennyson's assertion of love of Catullus "for his perfection in form and for his tenderness" Thackeray declared,"I do not rate him highly, I could do better myself." His chastened withdrawal of this idle boast shows a characteristic humility and self-knowledge that make clear that the label "braggart" is no more appropriate than that of "snob" or "hypocrite" in defining the whole man:

My dear Alfred,
I woke at 2 o'clock and in a sort of terror at a certain

\(^{17}\) Messages (Paris: Gallimard, 1926), p. 90.
speech I had made about Catullus. When I have dined, sometimes I believe myself to be equal to the greatest painters and poets. That delusion goes off; and then I know what a small fiddle mine is and what small tunes I play upon it. It was very generous of you to give me an opportunity of recalling a silly speech; but at the time I thought I was making a perfectly simple and satisfactory observation. Thus far I must unbus'm myself: though why should I be so uneasy at having made a conceited speech? It is conceited not to wish to seem conceited. (Letters, IV, 360)

Every front that a man puts on, every role that he plays, is but a part of a larger unexplored self. The snob, the hypocrite, and the conceited man fail to penetrate into this concealed region; they are actors who perpetually play one role and are unaware that they are actors.

The simulation of art, however, is not in itself valuable for Thackeray unless it is seen as a sham. We must not only believe in the performance but also disbelieve in it as well—admit that it is a quackery. Cynicism is a necessary adjunct to sentimentalism, as disbelief is to belief, and laughter to tears. Thus Thackeray only half-believes in his pathetic plea on behalf of George III and shows contempt for those who find more than a half-truth in his performance. Speaking in the third person of Thackeray the lecturer, he writes:

When people seemed inclined to cry as he narrates the pathetic end of George III, he feels inclined to cry out, "You great donkies, don't you know that the Speaker is ashamed of himself whilst he is talking to you, and of you for being so humbugged by his stale declamation? How much longer is this quackery to continue?" (Letters, III, 583)

To engage with such a self-proclaimed deceiver and exploiter of our latent selves, the reader, or the listener, too, must put on the
motley, and recognize that he does, indeed, belong to a race of "great donkeys" who delight in humbug in spite of their normal working "selves."
CHAPTER II
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY FICTIONAL WORLDS

Strange, indeed, that you should not have suspected that your universe and its contents were only dreams, visions, fiction. Strange, because they are so frankly and hysterically insane—like all dreams.

—Mark Twain, "The Mysterious Stranger"

Les jeux flambent, le sang chante, les os s'élargissent, les larmes et des filets rouges ruissellent. Leur raillerie ou leur terreur dure une minute, ou des mois entiers.

J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage.

—Rimbaud, Les Illuminations

Introductory Discussion

Dorothy Van Ghent's alignment of Thackeray with Fielding, rather than Sterne, leads her to find the narrator's comment on Becky Sharp's dream of capturing Jos Sedley for a husband, "inane and distracting." "We feel," she continues, "two orders of reality are clumsily getting in each other's way."1 It is with the interaction and juxtaposition of these two orders of reality, each characterized by its own particular doubts and certainties, that this chapter deals. My contention is that, far from getting in each other's way, these "two orders of reality" complement and support each other; that, in fact, the second order of reality, based on the relationship between narrator and reader, expands the primary fictional world in order to create a more subtle and complex whole.

Jean-Paul Sartre makes an important distinction between

primary and secondary subjectivity. Medieval story-tellers, Sartre reminds us, were intermediaries who did (or pretended to do) little more than point to traditional stories. The teller "invented little; he gave them [his stories] style; he was the historian of the imaginary." When the narrator became more self-conscious, however, when he became aware of the relativity of the truthfulness of his stories and the subjective nature of the character of the teller and his mode of presentation, he would draw attention to himself and his own contriving; he would attempt to justify himself. "When he himself started contriving the fiction which he published, he found himself. He discovered simultaneously his almost guilty solitude and unjustifiable gratuity, the subjectivity of literary creation." The teller is now no longer an anonymous bard but a writer with a hidden audience. A new relationship is thus set up between narrator and reader, rather than between speaker and audience, and this relationship gives rise to a secondary fictional world. As Sartre points out, the narrator "represented himself in his works by means of a narrator of oral tradition, and at the same time he inserted into them a fictitious audience which represented his real public." The figures created in the secondary fictional world are therefore no more and no less real than those of the primary fiction, since they are all aids to communication between a real author and a real reader; in themselves they have no independence.

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3 Ibid., p. 137.
These fictional creations outside the world of the fable cause the real reader to live in two worlds at once. The deliberate disruption of the primary fiction makes the reader aware of the contingent secondary world which is more mimetic in the sense that it is more free from pattern than the primary fictional world. One is reminded of the Verfremdungseffekt of Brecht and Pirandello. Thus, the narrator of *The Newcomes* personates an irate critic with: "'What a farrago of old fables is this! What a dressing up in old clothes! . . . As sure as I am just and wise, modest, learned, and religious, so surely I have read something very like this stuff and nonsense about jackasses and foxes before'" (VII, 5).

We see here that this fictitious critic of the fable is not performing the function of strengthening the primary illusion by which Ernest Baker justifies the intrusive narrator. The narrator in fact intrudes to dismiss the intruding critic as "a Solomon that sits in judgment over us authors and chops up our children" (Ibid.). Thus he admits his authorial omniscience and implicates the reader in the fancies of a fictitious author called Arthur Pendennis, and the illusion is broken only that another may be constructed. The reader comes out of the world of fable and into the equally fictional, but more mimetic, world where critics seeking new and "realistic" stories castigate authors for telling old and "unrealistic" ones.

Thackeray can thus be seen to belong to a long tradition of tale-tellers, from Chaucer and Cervantes to Nabokov and Durrell, who

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readily admit that they are giving us an illusion of reality. These writers go out of their way to point out the artifice of their stories. Louis D. Rubin Jr. has emphasized the fact that "if a novel is to succeed in interesting us it is essential not only that there be created an illusion of reality, but that we remain quite aware that it is an illusion." Furthermore "by slyly reminding us of its [illusion's] existence . . . the author can intensify our conscious delight in our participation in the artistic process." One of the ways that Thackeray reminds us that we are dealing with art and not life is by his use of parody; another is by his continual breaking of the fictional spell by use of the narrator and the reader as observers of and commentators on a spectacle. In this way the primary fiction is at once mocked for its unreality and admired for its artifice. The fiction can only be seen and admired for what it is, when the reader is made to stand back and observe detachedly, rather than to involve himself emotionally in the lives of the characters. By a touch of exaggeration in a portrait or a rather too insistent sermon the reader is made aware of his relationship to the fiction.

Thackeray's Shandean Narrator

Although critics of the English novel frequently demonstrate Thackeray's debt to Fielding, few, if any, acknowledge the many common features between Thackeray and Sterne. By his use of the


6See e.g. Ernest Baker, The History of the English Novel, VII,
narrative persona Thackeray draws attention to the subjective nature of the recording mind. It is in his realization of this central figure that Thackeray aligns himself with Sterne and romanticism rather than Fielding and neoclassicism. Geoffrey Tillotson sees Thackeray as "a Rip Van Winkle author, a Fielding redivivus." But surely the vacillating and uncertain narrator, from the Manager of Vanity Fair to Pendennis of The Newcomes and Batchelor of Lovel the Widower, has more in common with the confused Tristram desperately trying to cope with chaotic reality and failing hopelessly!

As one might expect, Thackeray's persistent violation of the conventions of the novel is intimately associated with his awareness of the inadequacies of art to do much more than suggest the richness and complexity of experience outside art. Unlike the central consciousness of James's or the story-teller of Conrad's novels, Thackeray's narrator is both a novelist and an historian by turns. He is fact-finder and honest recorder, but he is also novelist and sly contriver. Moreover, the style of the novels is diverse and uneven, not merely because of the use of parodic form but because the reality Thackeray seeks to comprehend is multiform and indeterminate. In his use of the seemingly incompatible figure of novelist-historian and in his rapid changes of narrative voice, from inspired bard to club gossip, we can see Thackeray's affinity with Sterne rather than with Fielding.


in whom a more uniform tone and a more controlled form predominate. When Tom Jones comes to the rescue of Molly Seagrim in the mock-epic battle in the church-yard, or when Partridge defends himself against his wife's attack for suspected infidelity, we are in no doubt where we as readers or observers should stand. For the reader the only possible reaction to "one of the most bloody Battles . . . that were ever recorded in Domestic History" is a humorous one. We appreciate the incongruity of Mrs. Partridge in loose cap and inadequate stays behaving like an Amazonian heroine: "her face was likewise-marked with the blood of her husband; her teeth gnashed with rage; and fire, such as sparkles from a smith's forge, darted from her eyes."\(^8\) In the mock-heroic diction that describes a Dobbin or a Harry Warrington, however, the element of the genuine hero in the characters makes our reaction much more complex. Furthermore, we are not allowed to maintain a secure and unified point of view towards the characters, nor are we reassured by the attitude of an urbane and trusty guide as we are by the narrator of Tom Jones.

Both Thackeray's narrator and Fielding's enjoy their role of recorder of ludicrous heroic exploits, but in the description of Dobbin's victory over Cuff or Rawdon's disposal of Lord Steyne we are encouraged to blend admiration with our ridicule. The narrator of Vanity Fair has in his mind, as he describes the encounter of schoolboys, the pretentious jargon of sports journalists and the

\(^8\) The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling (London: Collins, 1955), p. 78. Subsequent references, documented internally, are to this edition.
chauvinistic press reports on English and French troops in the Napoleonic War, just as Homer lies in the mind of Fielding's narrator. The names of the combatants—Figs, alias Dobbin, and Cuff—are almost as deflating as the two Partridges in *Tom Jones*. Nevertheless, neither contestant is wholly ridiculous and the grandiose imagery, used to portray what is after all perhaps the archetypal noble cause—giant killing—from David to Tom Brown, elevates the characters rather than deflates them. The narrator modestly protests he cannot do justice to the scene, yet allows his pen to sport with the exuberance of battle imagery:

> It was the last charge of the Guard—(that is, it would have been, only Waterloo had not yet taken place)—it was Ney's column breasting the hill of La Haye Sainte, bristling with ten thousand bayonets, and crowned with twenty eagles—it was the shout of the beef-eating British, as leaping down the hill they rushed to hug the enemy in the savage arms of battle. (*VF*, 49-50)

The contrast between shifting narrator and the stable narrator is further borne out by a comparison of the internal monologues of the teller of, say, *Lovel the Widower* and the reader-addressing in *Tom Jones*. In Fielding the appeal is to external standards, to history, to the classics or to general common-sense, whereas in Thackeray the appeal is to the puzzling conflict of personal experience. Echoes of Johnson resound through the prose of Fielding as he takes

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9 Thomas Hughes, however, seems unimpressed by Dobbin's schoolboy heroics and in criticizing the "kid-glove" attitude to boys' fisticuffs says, "even Thackeray has given in to it." *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Everyman edition (London: J.M. Dent, 1906), p. 268.
delight in arriving at general conclusions by the methods of ratiocination. This is exemplified by a passage from his comparison of the world to a stage compared with the bachelor of Beak Street's meditations over the setting of his story:

Upon the whole, then, the man of candour and of true understanding is never hasty to condemn. He can censure an imperfection, or even a vice, without rage against the guilty party. In a word, they are the same folly, the same childlishness, the same ill-breeding, and the same ill-nature, which raise all the clamours and uproars both in life and on the stage. (p. 267)

Here speaks one who is surely exempt, in his own mind, from the "clamours and uproars" of ignoble and indelicate passion. A glance at the mind of the melancholy Batchelor, who embodies in an extreme form the despondency of the generalized narrator in Thackeray and who, like all Thackeray's narrators, is prone to confession and indecisive conclusions, reveals the distinction between what has been called monist and pluralist positions: 10

Who shall be the hero of this tale? Not I who write it. I am but the Chorus of the Play. . . . There is no high life, unless, to be sure, you call a baronet's widow a lady in high life; and some ladies may be, while some certainly are not. I don't think there's a villain in the whole performance. There is an abominably selfish woman, certainly; an old highway robber; an old sponger on other people's kindness; an old haunter of Bath and Cheltenham boarding-houses (about which how can I know anything, never having been in a boarding-house at Bath or Cheltenham in my life?); an old swindler of tradesmen, tyrant of servants, bully of the poor—who, to be sure, might do duty for a villain, but she considers herself as virtuous a woman as ever was born. (XXVIII, 197-198)

Doubts about the nature of his own vision pervade Batchelor's narrative. The narrator, who would perhaps like to be an objective commentator or chorus, is inextricably involved with the story and can only narrate by a process of contradictory tentative hints regarding any general truth. His initial attempt to be accurate and rational about his tale is very soon proved futile by a torrent of invective which he pours on Mrs. Baker, the mother-in-law of his rather ordinary and ineffectual hero. Unlike Fielding's narrator, Batchelor makes no unqualified statements and time after time shows his own doubts and insecurities by re-investigating his original statements of his position. As his mood changes, or as more facts are revealed to him, ultimate knowledge becomes more and more problematic. The subjunctive mood predominates here; Fielding's narrator by contrast shows a massive certainty.

The two passages further illustrate the contrast between general certainty and specific doubt by their prose style. Thackeray's short jerky sentence structure, interrogatives and parentheses suggest momentary second thoughts and improvisation, whereas Fielding's measured prose leads us to a preconceived and unavoidable climax. Although Thackeray can at times write remarkably good Augustan prose, his style is never constant in the way that Fielding's is. Even in his lectures and in the Roundabout Papers, the wayward and eccentric interjection or aside frequently disturbs the rhythmic flow of his story or argument. As Leonard Lutwack says,

Uniform style in a novel generally depends upon the writer's settled conviction of the single, unambiguous nature of his materials and of the novel's adequacy as a vehicle for their serious presentment. In so far as style is a means of shutting
out many possible views on a subject and directing attention to a few selected views, a uniform style has the effect of better narrowing the scope to a single, unified view of reality. A uniform style is assimilative in that it helps to create under a single aspect of language a single vision of the multiplicity of reality; it is a bond between author and reader, insuring that no different adjustment to language and viewpoint will be demanded from the reader than that established at the outset.

There is never any doubt where the narrator of *Tom Jones* stands *vis à vis* his world, and the reader knows what Fielding intends him to see. He also knows how to interpret his irony. Sterne and Thackeray, however, employ a confused narrator whose irony is predominantly painfully self-directed rather than being securely pointed at others. As we would expect, the prose style is uneven, full of false starts, showing the impossibility of being true, at one and the same time, to artistic form and empirical experience.

Sterne, unlike Fielding, shows us, by repeatedly jerking us out of any narrative flow, that the structure which the mind needs in order to comprehend the vicissitudes of life are bound to be artificial and restrictive; that in order "to make sense" of reality we inevitably distort it. A smoothly flowing prose style is therefore as inappropriate to express his vision as a conventional narrative. Thus Tristram indulges in repeated intrusions and qualifications:

> I dare say, quoth my mother——But stop, dear Sir——for what my

mother dared to say upon the occasion—and what my father did say upon it—with her replies and his rejoinders, shall be read, perused, paraphrased, commented, and descanted upon—or to say it all in a word, shall be thumbed over by Posterity in a chapter apart—I say, by Posterity—and care not, if I repeat the word again—for what has this book done more than the Legation of Moses, or the Tale of a Tub, that it may not swim down the gutter of Time along with them?"

We are thus shown that traditional form is less than adequate to give a map of the narrator's consciousness. If Tristram is to do justice to Mrs. Shandy's tentative reflection on Corporal Trim's story of Tom's marriage to a Jewish widow, and all the certain and uncertain motives which led up to the marriage, then he will never get "his own story" told—and indeed he does not. In order to tell a story, so much must be ignored for the sake of the end, so many doubts brushed aside, so many reflections glossed over, so much injustice done to the humanness of humanity. When we are in the world of the self-conscious narrator, we can never have more than his doubts; and final meaning and the tidiness of form must be sacrificed to the immediacy of impression. As Robert J. Nelson puts it, "conscious of all doubt, man becomes self-conscious. Not only the meaning of action but the meaning of meaning is examined."¹³

Like Batchelor, or the Manager, or any of Thackeray's mature narrators, Tristram, in his awareness of the impossibility of telling


the objective truth, honestly accepts his human limitations. But Sterne is more radical than Thackeray in his use of the casual interjection or reflection on material of the "story" which is past. There is a greater use of redoubling and an even greater immersion of the reader in the mind of the teller—so much so that the tale is frequently lost under digressions that threaten to take over the whole book. It seems that the story will never get told, and indeed, as in life itself, there is no conceivable beginning or ending, for the story follows the labyrinthine paths of the mind rather than being concerned with bodies, with "action"—the business of getting born, getting married and dying. Thus there is no "story" in the usual sense, only a polymorphous consciousness. Tristram, showing extraordinary courage, accepts, with a candid open-ness, responsibility for the reality he finds in himself, in others, and in the world; we see his novelistic structures breaking down under the pressure of the insistent demands of a complex reality. Tristram is like Batchelor in telling a story with no hero or villain, but unlike him in his freedom from the neurotic compulsion to condemn others for not complying with his own needs. He allows a maximum of human freedom within a minimum of moral or aesthetic form—there are no heroes or villains, and, in effect, no "story." We might say, then, that Sterne's secondary world has overwhelmed his primary world, that the teller has finally triumphed over his tale.

The chief quality shared by Thackeray and Sterne is the sense of intimacy and collusion between narrator and reader. Both novelists present their stories through a hesitant and vacillating central
consciousness who frequently admits he is merely conjecturing about his story or relying on hearsay and inference. On many occasions, the narrator sadly admits his own doubts and insecurities. Unlike Fielding's narrator, who shows a massive certainty and arrives at conclusions by a rational organization of fairly easily comprehensible facts, Sterne's and Thackeray's story-tellers are never sure of their facts and are unable to organize them into an easily assimilated whole. Thus they frequently appeal to the reader to supply his interpretation, and their stories, when they do finally get told, abound in loose-ended suggestion, if not muddle. While *Tristram Shandy*'s conclusion suggests that the story is, like that of Obadiah's calf, merely one of a cock and a bull, *Vanity Fair* offers its reader an ambiguous "happy ending," in which a doting Amelia and a foolish Dobbin are united and Mrs. Rebecca Crawley re-instates herself respectably in society. *The Newcomes* presents a double ending: a happy union of Ethel and Clive in fable-land for the sentimentalist; a final estrangement of the lovers, by the indirect assaults of the mercantile marriage market, for the reader who would dwell with the hard facts of life.

The Thackerayan narrator, like Sterne's Tristram, frequently seems to have little regard for his story. Not only does he continually interrupt the narrative, he often openly disparages the story which ostensibly he exists to relate. Thus the narrator of *The Virginians* sees that although his old and typical story is valuable, it is also hackneyed. So he mercilessly exposes the folly of Harry Warrington's passion for the middle-aged siren, Maria, only to find
under the last veil of illusion he strips away—himself, his reader, and the next generation. For "what is the good of telling the story? My gentle reader, take your story: take mine. To-morrow it shall be Miss Fanny's, who is just walking away with her doll to the schoolroom" (XII, 232).

Although the narrator of *Tom Jones* comments freely on his story, his characters, and human nature in general, he differs from the exuberant and contradictory narrators of Sterne and Thackeray, who, in their marvellous facility for changing roles, attempt to ensnare a fluid reality which perpetually eludes their grasp. Fielding's narrator is never in doubt about the nature and purpose of his story; the actions of his characters illustrate indisputable moral truths, and he is always in command of his story's structure:

It is our purpose in the ensuing pages, to pursue a contrary method to the historian. When an extraordinary scene presents itself . . . we shall spare no pains nor paper to open it at large to our reader; but if whole years should pass without producing anything worthy his notice, we shall not be afraid of a chasm in our history. (p. 69)

Although the teller takes the reader into his confidence, yet the relationship is unequal, for the reader resigns himself to his urbane mentor with whom he feels secure.

Tristram and Pendennis, by contrast, are frequently defensive, hesitant and unsure of themselves. Their digressions are usually more germane to themselves than their "stories" or any truth to nature to be extracted from them. Reader-consciousness in Sterne
and Thackeray is intimate and personal. Thus Tristram apologizes:

My dear friend and companion, if you should think me somewhat sparing of my narrative on my first setting out—bear with me,—and let me go on, and tell my story my own way:—Or, if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road,—or should sometimes put on a fool's cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along,—don't fly off,—but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside;—and as we jog on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short do any thing,—only keep your temper. (p. 26)

Although Pendennis, in Philip, tells the story of a young "scapegrace" rather than his own, yet he, too, is uncertain and open to suggestion as he abstracts his hero from his setting in the novel and offers him to his reader for their mutual inspection:

I have told you I like Philip Firmin, though it must be confessed that the young fellow has many faults, and that his career, especially his early career, was by no means exemplary. Have I ever excused his conduct to his father, or said a word in apology of his brief and inglorious university career? I acknowledge his short-comings with that candour which my friends exhibit in speaking of mine. Who does not see a friend's weaknesses, and is so blind that he cannot perceive that enormous beam in his neighbour's eye? Only a woman or two from time to time. And even they are deceived some day. A man of the world, I write about my friends as mundane fellow creatures. Do you suppose there are many angels here? I say again, perhaps a woman or two. But as for you and me, my good sir, are there any signs of wings sprouting from our shoulder-blades? Be quiet. Don't pursue your snarling cynical remarks, but go on with your story. (XV, 215-216)

In this internal drama, the narrator's self-excusing is more important than his elaborate defence of his hero. He reveals his own propensity to vacillate between illusion and disillusionment. He knows the folly of seeing erring beings as angels, yet his final self-reproach
suggests the painfulness caused by the awareness of this folly.

Both Tristram and Pendennis continually look beyond the world of character and neat plot to the random and fortuitous world inhabited by the reader beyond the "story." Thus, Tristram, meditating on the parson's reasons for investing his wife as midwife, says to his reader: "lay down the book, and I will allow you half a day to give a probable guess at the grounds of this procedure" (p. 31). Pendennis, having got his gallant but penniless hero and his sweet young heroine together, tells the reader of Philip to allow the routine part of the story to take care of itself while he goes about his own business. Thus both he and the reader pause from the unpleasant and routine aspects of the story:

All I can promise about this gloomy part is, that it shall not be a long story. You will acknowledge we made very short work with the love-making, which I give you my word I consider to be the very easiest part of the novel-writer's business. As those rapturous scenes between the captain and his heroine are going on, a writer who knows his business may be thinking about anything else—about the ensuing chapter, or about what he is going to have for dinner or what you will. (XVI, 72)

The Shandean narrator knows that there are an infinite number of res modi considerandum and that any story he tells is arbitrary and subjective. Pendennis, The Manager, George Warrington and Batchelor punctuate their narratives with "I dare say," "perhaps," "it seems" and "it might have been." The subjunctive mood also predominates in Book V, Chapter 10 of Tristram Shandy, where several speculations are offered regarding the reason for the pause in Trim's narrative. The narrator of Philip even manages to identify
with Dr. Brand Firmin, the villain of his story. For, if Philip's father, who sees himself as innocent of causing his son's poverty and hardship, is deluded, why should not his narrator, Pendennis, who sees Brand Firmin as the necessary villain of the piece, also be deluded? Many roles await to be played and many stories to be written from a given set of facts:

People there are in our history who do not seem to me to have kindly hearts at all; and yet, perhaps, if a biography could be written from their point of view, some other novelist might show how Philip and his biographer were a pair of selfish worldlings unworthy of credit; how uncle and aunt Twysden we're most exemplary people, and so forth. ... I protest, as I look back at the past portions of this history, I begin to have qualms, and ask myself whether the folks of whom we have been Prattling have had justice done to them; whether Agnes Twysden is not a suffering martyr justly offended by Philip's turbulent behaviour, and whether Philip deserves any particular attention or kindness at all. ... Perhaps I do not understand the other characters ground about him so well, and have over-looked a number of their merits and caricatured and exaggerated their little defects. (XVI, 443-44)

Now, it is true that Thackeray is less radical than Sterne; he does give us a basic narrative line from which his digressions take wing and his page is less studded with typographical ligatures. However, Thackeray's use of dashes, parentheses, and convoluted sentences increases in the later novels, until in Lovel, Batchelor's confessional narrative, we find such a typical passage as this address to the reader:

I dare say you are beginning to suppose (what, after all, is a very common case, and certainly no conjuror is wanted to make the guess) that out of all this crying and sentimentality, which a soft-hearted old fool of a man poured out to a young girl—out of all this whimpering and pity, something which is said to be akin to pity might arise. But in this, my good madam, you are utterly wrong. Some people have the small-pox twice; I do not. (XXVIII, 231)
Although he does not offer, as Tristram does, a chapter on digressions, Batchelor's tortuous pursuit of the "mallard thought" as it crosses his path gives the reader the same sense of the teller's spontaneity that he finds in Sterne's novel.

Both Sterne and Thackeray offer their readers a dual fictional world: the past world of the characters and the "story"; and the world of the writing present where the randomness and immediacy of the moment forces the "story" into the background. This duality is emphasized when both narrators suspend their characters momentarily at the insistence of a "digressive" thought. Uncle Toby, for instance, is left "knocking out the ashes of his tobacco pipe" while Tristram chats to his reader (p. 63). Batchelor, too, keeps Miss Prior waiting at the door as he reminisces aloud to his reader, apologizing for interrupting his narrative with:

You see, as I beheld her, a heap of memories struck upon me, and I could not help chattering; when of course—and you are perfectly right, only you might just as well have left the observation alone; for I knew quite well what you were going to say—when I had much better have held my tongue. (XXVIII, 229)

Pendennis, in Philip, leaves General Baynes "dipping his nose in the brandy-and-water" (XVI, 140), to take time out to go behind the scenes and chat with his socially aspiring lady reader.

The cap and bells are the insignia of the Thackerayan narrator as they are of Tristram. Each takes the maximum advantage of the clown's freedom to move adroitly between sentiment and cynicism, self-pity and self-mockery. Although in Thackeray, the clown's gaiety
and irreverence are frequently jettisoned in place of the preacher's solemn address, this moral stance is merely temporary. The black mood of world-weariness in *Vanity Fair* is not sustained, and we detect an ironical tone even in such a parsonical passage as this:

> O brother wearers of motley! Are there not moments when one grows sick of grinning and tumbling, and the jingling of cap and bells? This, dear friends and companions, is my amiable object—to walk with you through the Fair, to examine the shops and the shows there; and that we should all come home after the flare, and the noise, and the gaiety, and be perfectly miserable in private. (*VF*, 180-181)

The Manager of *Vanity Fair* is more typically discovered in the act of changing roles: protesting the innocence of his "guilty" heroine, Becky, or exposing the selfish possessiveness of his "sweet" heroine, Amelia. He loves to reveal the virtues of the vicious and the viciousness of the virtuous, and in so doing involve his reader in a game of fluctuating roles. Having exposed Becky as a scheming worldling and cunning deceiver, the Manager makes a nimble volte face:

> I protest it is quite shameful in the world to abuse a simple creature, as people of her time abused Becky, and I warn the public against believing one-tenth of the stories against her. If every person is to be banished from society who runs into debt and cannot pay ... why, what a howling wilderness and intolerable dwelling Vanity Fair would be. (*VF*, 491)

Since we are all hypocrites by social necessity and rogues by internal compulsion (though we carefully mask our roguery as virtue), how, the Manager asks his reader, can we have the temerity to criticize
Becky the arch-rogue and arch-hypocrite, who has merely climbed to the
top of the ladder whither the reader himself aspires?

Although it is broadly true that Thackeray's area of
interest is social and moral, whereas Sterne's is intellectual and
philosophical, yet their common feature is their use of the mercurial
narrator—the confused but tenacious figure who takes his reader on
a hobby-horsical roundabout journey through the narrator's own
consciousness, to the detriment of both ostensible plot and character­
ization. The narrators of Sterne and Thackeray tell neither a very
comfortable nor a completely satisfactory story in which virtue is
rewarded and vice punished and everything is finally resolved. Instead,
they offer the peculiar virtue of "Shandeism" in which the narrator
tenderly ironical or comically alarmed, with one eye on
his characters and another on his reader, never leaving
anyone out of his sight for a moment; leaping from one idea
to another, tangling the threads of his story only so as
to untangle them the more brilliantly later; attentive to
every inconsequence, juxtaposing incompatibilities, reconciling
extremes, passing from the rational to the irrational
with enviable agility of mind; always subtle, always smiling,
always borne up by the intellectual excitement that enables
him to move effortlessly through the impenetrable forest
of "hypotheses" offered by the reality he has imagined
on the one hand, and on the other by the reality that
stands across his path.  

The Narrator's Unifying Presence

The tale in Thackeray's novels usually gets told, even if it is

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14 Henri Fluchère. Laurence Sterne: From Tristram to Yorick: An
Interpretation of "Tristram Shandy," trans. Barbara Bray (London:
left half-open to possibility and speculation, as in *Vanity Fair*, or if the reader is given a double ending, as in *The Newcomes*. The pose of historian or editor of private papers which the narrator frequently adopts is always overlaid by his imaginative participation in the lives of his characters, by his reflections on them, by his dialogue with imaginary readers, and by parts of his own life which become mingled in his mind with what he has heard, read or imagined about the lives he purports to record. As in *The Newcomes*, the narrator tells us early in the book that he is like an archeologist following traces that human beings have left and filling in the gaps by conjecture, so in *The Virginians* he looks at the letters of his characters:

They are hints rather than descriptions—indications and outlines chiefly: it may be, that the present writer has mistaken the forms, and filled in the colour wrongly: but, poring over the documents, I have tried to imagine the situation of the writer, where he was, and by what persons surrounded. I have drawn the figures as I fancied they were; set down conversations as I think I might have heard them. (XII, 3)

This admission of limitation and appeal for license, however, does lead the narrator to a wanton self-indulgence which we could never allow a historian, even were that historian Thomas Carlyle himself. The narrator is like the speaker of a dramatic monologue in his need to recapitulate his own experience and try to give it some meaning. Extraneous material, it seems, will keep breaking into the narrator's mind as he attempts to formulate his story, and while his digressions seem to throw light on the story, in fact, they only blur the clarity of it and reveal instead the mind of the teller.
Ann Y. Wilkinson, in one of the very few studies of *Vanity Fair* that can be said to attempt to reconcile the primary and secondary fictional worlds, suggests that we, as readers, should feel that the action in both worlds "exists essentially in the narrator's mind, insofar as we have to rely on its vagaries and memories and all its other movements for our point of view." If we see the novel in this way, she goes on,

it becomes a kind of existential document .... It is an experience which takes place in the reading of the novel, with the reader involved in half-truths, malice, and sentiment, and left just as frustrated as the persona is in his inept attempts to get at what is really happening.

The crucial questions for us are surely: does the narrator really know or care "what is really happening," and is he not at least as concerned with the impossibility of final and certain knowledge? If he is merely attempting "to get at what is really happening" as an historian or archaeologist would, what is the purpose of his incessant self-revelations and of his continual appeal to the reader or to "authority," which may be anything from the Bible and Homer to the *Arabian Nights* or his own impression of last night's opera?

There are no simple answers to these questions and my purpose in asking them is not to agree or disagree with Ann Wilkinson, but rather to use her idea of the novel as existential document as a point of departure. The issues raised here are vital to a full appreciation both of Thackeray's constantly shifting perspectives and of his

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15 "The Tomesesian Way of Knowing the World: Technique and Meaning in *Vanity Fair*," *ELH*, 32 (1965), 381; 382-383.
use of an eccentric narrator who is by turns master and victim of illusion in a world where there can be no stable reality.

Unlike Sterne's Tristram, Thackeray's narrator pursues his random story-telling against a background of fable, fairy-tale, or even the conventional triple-decker novel. These forms check the unrestrained flights of imagination and provide the course in which the primary fiction flows. Thus Harry Warrington becomes for the narrator of The Virginians not so much a historical or "actual" figure as a typical young man embodying the aspirations of hero and lover, in a world which will inevitably show their inadequacy. Young, innocent, Virginian Harry is seen as an ideal figure in a corrupt world; he is the male prototype of the Jamesian American heroine. In his love-affair with the far from beautiful Maria Esmond who has a rather dubious past, Harry reveals himself as foolishly idealistic and impractical. He is, after all, a descendant of Henry Esmond the Colonel in Queen Anne's army. With childish simplicity, Harry fails to distinguish the complex and corrupt world from that of the fairy tale. "I want to do something—to distinguish myself—to be ever so great. I wish there was Giants, Maria, as I have read of in—in books, that I could go and fight 'em. I wish you was in distress" (XII, 227). A slightly ludicrous love-scene follows in which the narrator, who has promised his reader the fidelity of a historian of the imaginary, continually shows Harry as fool and dupe to Maria's calculating worldliness. In a two-page monologue following this scene, the narrator discon...
by a gleeful reminiscence of Telemachus and the Sirens. Buried beneath the weight of the narrator's reflections, Harry is reduced to an ideal type as the narrator's mind struggles to reconcile real and the ideal, the truths of experience and the truths of imagination.

Thackeray's narrator is not so much a mock-historian filling in gaps with conjecture and supposition as a figure who uses the situation or story, to which he purports to be so faithful, in order to give rein to his own fancy. The primary world is reduced to more aesthetically satisfying patterns to allow the secondary world of the narrator's consciousness to expand, and thus the immediate present of the writer and reader is invoked, with all the doubts and interrogations seen in the discussion of Lovel's narrator. After his imaginative re-creation of Ulysses' encounter with the Sirens, the narrator of The Virginians turns to his reader:

In the last sentence you see Lector Benevolus and Scriptor Doctissimus figure as tough old Ulysses and his tough old Boatswain, who do not care a quid of tobacco for any Siren at Sirens' Point; but Harry Warrington is green Telemachus, who, be sure, was very unlike the soft youth in the good Bishop of Cambray's twaddling story. (XII, 230)

The reader is now facetiously given two roles in the same story; in the primary fictional world he is naive Harry Warrington snared by illusion, while in the secondary fictional world he is the sophisticated "Lector Benevolus." But Harry, we are told, is unlike his prototype Telemachus and in any case the story is dismissed as "twaddling."

This story, moreover, is one which the narrator has previously described gleefully and at length. The reader is asked to take roles in a story
in which he must believe and disbelieve. Moreover, the colloquialisms—"tough old Boatswain," "quid of tobacco," "twaddling story"—mix incongruously with the ironically learned terms for his roles in this strange and fanciful drama where a "real" reader and a fictitious character literally share the same boat for one moment, only to see it capsized in the next.

The necessity constantly to undermine the reality of whatever internal structure their consciousness impose on the external world is characteristic of Thackeray's narrators. Thus the narrator above plays at being Ulysses only to reject the role when it has served its purpose. In a sense all men become Ulysses, wanderers tempted from the path of rigour or duty by the seductions of the imagination. We can also say that all men have been "green Telemachus" ready to jump overboard for worthless prizes. The ironical narrator is aware that he is only half involved in the spectacle he describes, and he realizes the disparity between the hypothetical and the actual, the way men appear and the way they are. Naturally enough there is no formula of style or story that is adequate for this representation of his reality. The most he can offer us is a medley of possibilities, each one quickly put aside as inadequate. The Thackerayan narrator's irony shows "the struggle between the absolute and the relative, the simultaneous consciousness of the impossibility and the necessity of a complete account of reality."\(^{16}\)

This ironical awareness that today's reality is tomorrow's illusion, and tomorrow's reality is brought about by today's illusion, leads to the continuous monologues of the narrator and to his mercurial bent for role-playing. In fact, it might be said that for the ironist "illusion" and "reality" are but different names for different ways of seeing the same thing. In the consciousness of the narrator there is no easy distinction between romance and common sense—both are convenient fictions for handling the emotional and practical difficulties of life. In an effort to keep his mental equilibrium, the narrator hovers between the truths of fable, which are comfortably fantastic and can therefore be easily punctured at need, and the truths of empirical experience, which are always contradictory and open to question. Although the narrator disposes of the "twaddling story" of Homeric epic, yet at the end of his monologue, following the seduction of Harry, he reasserts the reality of romantic love as a persistent factor in human experience. Harry's experience, which might be scoffed at by an outsider, is seen to be as real to him as the narrator's or reader's:

The song is not stale to Harry Warrington, nor the voice cracked or out of tune that sings it. But—but—Oh, dear me, Brother Boatswain! Don't you remember how pleasant the opera was when we first heard it? Così fan tutti was its name—Mozart's music. Now, I dare say, they have other words, and other music, and other singers and fiddlers. . . . Well, well, Così fan tutti is still upon the bills, and they are going on singing it over and over and over. (XII, 230)

It is within the freely moving consciousness of the narrator that the reader finds his own counterpart. Whether Becky or Colonel Newcome or Beatrix Esmond are "people" or puppets, whether the
narrator is a novelist or a historian, depends on the extent of the reader's identification with them. Whether the figures were ever known to the narrator in person or through their papers, or whether he conjured them up out of his imagination, we can never ultimately decide, for they are unmasked and re-masked—treated variously as persons and objects. The reader's view of them is governed wholly by the way they appear from moment to moment in the narrator's mind. It is here that the reader finds the key that he needs to make sense of the novels, just as in life it is in his own mental and, in a sense, "fictional" universe that he gives order and clarity to the impressions received from the world outside him. For, "in narrative works it is the narrator who convinces. . . . A talking horse does not make sense, but Homer makes sense of Achilles' talking horse."17

Since it is within the narrator's consciousness that the reader finds the unifying device in the novels, he cannot expect the consistency of vision such as is found in the more "pure" forms of epic or romance. He is asked to look not merely at events for their own sake, but at the way they impinge on the mind of the recorder at a particular moment. In the mind of Henry Esmond, for instance there is a continual fluctuation between heroic and romantic ideal and the more impure compounds in which these elements are found in Esmond's day to day life, where men are less predictable than the creative mind would like them. Thus Dick Steele can tell young Henry that

"'Tis not the dying for a faith that's so hard . . . 'tis the living up to it that is difficult" (X, 76). And young Harry goes off heroically to war and, like Barry Lyndon, finds a total deficiency of nobility and greatness in the corrupt and rather dull existence among the troops. Greatness and nobility in the mind have their reality, but they are found in life's deeds to be debased, spasmodic and fleeting. Esmond leaves Rachel, asking her blessing on his knees as a knight who "longs for a dragon this instant that he may fight," but in the battle of Cadiz: "the only blood which Mr. Esmond drew in this shameful campaign, was the knocking down an English sentinel with a half-pike." In doing this he was not rescuing a beauty or a princess, but a "poor wheezy old dropsical woman, with a wart on her nose" (X, 131; 265-266). This novel is replete with beautiful, romantic motifs, and the home of Castlewood and the wild splendour of Beatrix live in the reader's mind as they do in Esmond's. We are made aware, however, that we live not wholly in the world of the wonderful and strange, but also in the world of hard fact where clumsy life spoils our neat and delightful aesthetic patterns. In this world faith is unstable, and kings and heroes behave like men rather than gods.

Failure to take into account not only the story but the narrator's various attitudes to the story will almost certainly lead to a misinterpretation of Thackeray. He will be found too sentimental, too cynical, too romantic or too worldly. Thackeray seeks to embrace, within the narrator's mind, a world in which dreams come true and difficulties surmounted lead to happiness and a world of humdrum
reality and money-grubbing selfishness. When Juliet McMaster says of *The Newcomes* that "we have no dramatic depiction of the marriage of Clive and Ethel, because according to the reality of the main body of the novel it does not happen," she takes only what she needs for her argument as "the reality of the main body of the novel," and leaves out the rest which includes the doubts, dreams, improbabilities and possibilities that lurk in the mind of the narrator and are as intangible as the contents of the unopened closet in Bluebeard's castle.

The narrator may turn to his reader with a demand for niggardly self-scrutiny or, on the other hand, he may almost forget his reader as he indulges in a bout of self-confession or a wild flight of imagination. In *The Newcomes*, the reader is interrogated regarding his hidden desires, at the same time that he is tempted to think of the skeletons in his wife's closet. Immediately following this, he is treated to a fanciful escape from such sordid doubts and questionings, while his narrator takes wing through the imagination of J.J. Ridley, who listens enchanted to the piano playing of the feeble old Miss Cann in the parlour on a Saturday evening. The narrator moves between the vexed realities of existence and majestic visions conjured up by the music of an old piano. Thus he indulges in a medley of confession and reader-interrogation:

*When you in your turn are slumbering, up gets Mrs. Brown from your side, steals down stairs like Amina to her ghoul; clicks open the secret door, and looks into her dark depository.* Did

18"Theme and Form in *The Newcomes*," *NCF*, 23(1968), 185.
she tell you of that little affair with Smith long before she knew you? Psha! who knows any one save himself alone? Who, in showing his house to the closest and dearest, doesn't keep back the key of a closet or two? I think of a lovely reader laying down the page and looking over at her unconscious husband, asleep, perhaps, after dinner. Yes, madam, a closet he hath: and you, who pry into everything, shall never have the key of it. I think of some honest Othello pausing over this very sentence in a rail-road carriage, and stealthily gazing at Desdemona opposite to him, innocently administering sandwiches to their little boy—I am trying to turn off the sentence with a joke, you see—I feel it is growing too dreadful, too serious. (VII, 192)

Having played the part of the mean scrutineer, the narrator soon loses himself in the imagination of a young lad listening to an old lady play on an "old and weazened" piano that is "feeble and cracked as is her voice." Nevertheless

the little chamber anon swells into a cathedral, and he who listens beholds altars lighted, priests ministering, fair children swinging censers, great oriel windows gleaming in sunset, and seen through arched columns and avenues of twilight marble. The young fellow who hears her has been often and often to the opera and the theatres; as she plays, "Don Juan," Zerlina comes tripping over the meadows, and Masetto after her, with a crowd of peasants and maidens; and they sing the sweetest of all music, and the heart beats with happiness, and kindness, and pleasure. Piano, pianissimo! the city is hushed. The towers of the great cathedral rise in the distance, its spires lighted by the broad moon. The statues in the moonlit place cast long shadows athwart the pavement; but the fountain in the midst is dressed out like Cinderella for the night, and sings and wears a crest of diamonds. That great sombre street all in shade, can it be the famous Toledo?—or is it the Corso?—or is it the great street in Madrid, the one which leads to the Escorial where the Rubens and Velasquez are? It is Fancy Street—Poetry Street—Imagination Street—the street where lovely ladies look from balconies, where cavaliers strike mandolins and draw swords and engage. (VII, 195-196)

We see from these passages that any attempt to reduce the discordant elements cast out from the narrator's consciousness is inapposite. By the fertile union of pragmatic doubt and visionary
fancy, the narrator guides his reader through the wilderness of the human psyche from painful scepticism to the most positive certainty, from clinical intellectual probing to extravagant emotional conviction. The need to reduce the free play of the mind to a manageable "position" causes some critics to misinterpret the narrator's function in the novels. It is important to see that the narrator is not the interpreter absolute of the action and that his vision is broad, contradictory and at times fallible, because impermanent and vacillating. He is not a propagandist for any particular point of view, but a spokesman for the vast range of possibility. Sister Corona Sharp seeks to find the moral centre of Vanity Fair by studying the narrator's character, and concludes that the clue to his "position" is in his sympathies with Lady Jane Sheepshanks. To prove her point, Sister Corona is forced to emphasize certain aspects of the narrator's voice at the expense of others. "If he is shiftless and irresponsible," she says, then "the novel is defective in meaning, merely a jest at the reader's expense." Though she accurately states that "numerous illustrations prove that the narrator cannot take Rebecca's faults any more seriously than Amelia's virtues," her eagerness to determine the narrator's "position" and the seriousness of the book's moral meaning is emphasized by her special plea on behalf of Lady Jane: "By presenting this woman the narrator espouses the values represented by her, and in so doing proves he is no cynic. . . . She is an interesting example of a minor character used to highlight the major characters and to fix the position of the narrator."  

19"Sympathetic Mockery: A Study of the Narrator's Character in
As a moral guide and philosopher, the narrator of <i>Vanity Fair</i>, we are bound to conclude, is indeed "shiftless and irresponsible."

He calls his novel "a novel without a hero" yet in Dobbin he shows us a figure who embodies, despite his gaucheness, the heroic virtues of courage, constancy, and idealism. Dobbin's heroism is proclaimed early in the novel when, as a youth, in defending the weak against the strong, he puts down his copy of the <i>Arabian Nights</i> to defeat Cuff, the school champion. Dobbin is, moreover, one of the very few characters who remains aloof from the values of <i>Vanity Fair</i>. Yet, even so, the narrator shows his own instability and an awareness of the mixed motives which constitute even outwardly heroic deeds:

I can't tell what his motive was. . . . Perhaps Dobbin's foolish soul revolted against that exercise of tyranny; or perhaps he had a hankering feeling of revenge in his mind, and longed to measure himself against that splendid bully and tyrant, who had all the glory, pride, pomp, circumstance, banners flying, drums beating, guards saluting, in the place. (<i>VF</i>, 48)

The narrator is, generally, only too well aware that qualities that we conveniently label "heroism," "tyranny," or "cowardice" are unstable compounds and not as easily typified in life as they are in story. So while, for Amelia, George Osborne is the quasi-chivalric hero, Dobbin is an inferior underling fit only to carry her shawl at the Vauxhall pleasure-ground. But with George dead, and a suitably long time spent in idol-worship of his memory, Amelia finds a new hero in the sober and upright Dobbin. "But have we not all been misled about our heroes, and changed our opinions a hundred times?"

<i>Vanity Fair</i>, ELH, 29(1962)325; 329-330.
the narrator asks his reader, suggesting, at this time, a token sympathy with his sentimental heroine.

One of the narrator's primary functions is to challenge the reader by offering him a multiplicity of appearances and leaving him to find his own spasmodic sense of reality. His idea of virtue is not that of Lady Jane Sheepshanks any more than it is that of Becky or Amelia. Thus John K. Mathison is nearer to the truth than Sister Corona Sharp when he points out that "Amelia is Lady Jane Sheepshanks' idea of virtue, the evangelical idea of virtue."²⁰

By his use of the controlling device of the narrator, Thackeray is able to do justice to the romance and epic forms and the "sense of felt life" which has given the novel its vast scope and sense of immediacy. In Esmond, as in his other novels, the "story" or primary fiction controls the novel's shape while the digressions, reflections and addresses to the reader provide the necessary openness and suggest a world of possibility, doubt and random mental association. In Esmond, the narrator's initial determination to expose the sham and hypocrisy which dwell behind the august appearance of majesty in history books, and in the minds of men who see royalty and loyalty in ideal or heroic terms, is betrayed by his own propensity for romance and idealism when he tells his own story. He gives us a sense of a recording mind in the present which can only give shape and significance to his past by seeing it in ideal terms. Though he seeks to

tell the truth about historical figures such as Queen Anne, Marlborough, Louis Quatorze, Addison, or the Pretender, he can only reveal his own inner truth through a variety of fictional forms. He would unmask others, but must give himself the mask of hero, lover, knight, or outcast; for, without the form of the typical, there would be no way of his making sense of the chaos of his experience.

Through the mind of the recording Esmond we are offered momentary truths of present feeling—the patterns are used to give experience shape but they are continually modified. Esmond is reluctant to let the dream vanish, but he is forced to acknowledge the persistent failure of the ideal vision to bear any but a fleeting relation to the exigencies of life and human inconstancy. "After the illumination, when the love-lamp is put out . . . and by the common daylight we look at the picture, what a daub it looks! what a clumsy effigy!" (X, 148). The moment of joy or passion exists and is real, but it does not and cannot last. It is to this truth that the Romantic poets bear witness and even the ironical Chaucer or Byron acknowledge it with reluctance. Chaucer prefers not to know whether Criseyde gave her heart to Troilus, and before he demolishes the lovers' idyll of Haidee and Juan, Byron ecstatically recreates their beautiful and fragile world. In Thackeray, too, behind the ironical, the clear-sighted and the slightly cynical pose, the vision of the ideal perpetually hovers. Thackeray's narrator fluctuates between emotional identification with received forms and an awareness of their inadequacy to encompass the totality of his experience. He has the melancholy that comes with the knowledge that
perfect love and devout chivalry are mental constructs, infinitely remote from the concerns of everyday life. Thus Pendennis loses his judgement over the very practical and ordinary actress, but it is the narrator who is pained by the knowledge; in the same way, Esmond finally realizes that the bewitching Beatrix is an aspirer to wealth and rank who has only a limited concern for her humble adorer. Nevertheless, in Esmond's mind the dream persists. As Frank Kermode says, "fictions, though prone to absurdity, are necessary to life, and . . . they grow very intricate because we know so desolately that as and is are not really one."²¹ Awareness of this disparity results in irony and one part of the narrator's mind always holds this ironic awareness of the incompatibility between seeming and being. The narrator's mind becomes in a sense a testing ground for ideas of being. Esmond, in maturity, must relive the ideals and aspirations of his youth, seeing himself as gallant knight or brave hero, in order to appraise them. He must see his whole life—even his death—laid out before him like a map and retrace the paths of youth that he may conquer and comprehend them.

The narrator, who meets his readers as equals in the secondary world, is both serious and not serious in his attitude towards the primary world. At times he becomes so involved with his characters that he not only speaks to them but enters actively into "their" drama. Thus in Vanity Fair, the narrator meets his characters at

Pumpernickel. The borderline between ironic detachment and sympathetic involvement is crossed and the narrator is temporarily on the other side of the mirror, reinforcing in the reader's mind a recognition in that he too is involved in an illusion and that this is "only a story." We see here the impossibility of the story teller's complete detachment from his imagined world. He breaks the illusion for the reader by becoming a victim of his own deliberately created world. This emphasis on the humanity of the teller is typical of Sterne and romantic ironists who are aware of the essential polarities of "self" and "world" and their mutual dependency. While the "realistic" novelist seeks to put the reader in the position of the observing "self" who is unaware of himself as he sees the world, the ironist sees his own subjectivity, and his reader cannot "lose himself," as we say, in the game by becoming the mask of the central consciousness. The reader must be aware of the reflecting self of the narrator interacting between an event more or less distant in time and space, and an immediately felt present. These are the dramas of primary and secondary fiction and their deliberate confusion is based on the narrator's underlying awareness that the observer needs the observed, that "self" and "world" are inextricable in the way that

22 A similarly flagrant and deliberate breach of artistic decorum occurs in an English movie, The Courtneys of Curzon Street (director Herbert Wilcox; producer: Sydney Box), where a character, played by Michael Wilding, introduces himself by his fictitious film name, only to be put down by his host's suspicious reply: "Oh, how strange! I could have sworn you were Michael Wilding!" Cervantes, Tieck and Pirandello also delight in such illusion-breaking.
we can only know one through the other.

Thackeray, then, through the perceiving consciousness of his narrator, shows us that the physical world is always a world seen from the outside, as a collection of things, of surfaces, conveniently plastered with linguistic labels. It has no reality beyond the perceiver. His narrator loses himself, and forces his reader to lose himself, in an imagined character or situation that is as real, or as unreal, as that world we conveniently call "reality" which we experience through the senses. He shows that it is through the imagination that one discovers his "self": looking through the eyes of a conventional "villain" such as Lyndon or a conventional "hero" such as Esmond, we discover our reality. A central characteristic of Thackeray's narrator is "a willingness to become." He is a man of many masks and no face, and to the bafflement of critics, he is neither a mirror nor a lamp. An examination of his "personality" is not enhanced by seeing him as social or moral critic or as an author surrogate; he is both of these and yet is not reducible to any single role. If he is a moral realist, he is also an epicurean and hedonist; if he is the perennial child seeking the security of the mother, he is also the cynical club-haunting worldling. The personality of the narrator, like the inner "I" of the Hindu Atman, retreats before us with the words "Neti, neti, Not this, not this."²³

Thackeray combines the probabilities of life with the marvels of fable, by establishing the core of his novel in a subjective

recorder, to whom imagined truths are as real as practical performance. The narrator can allow his fancy free rein, yet, at the same time, sees that the cold light of day will prove him a liar. Like Tristram Shandy, who thought all problems should be debated twice—once drunk and once sober—Thackeray's narrator realizes the essential dual dependency of the mind on the fanciful and the pragmatic. The narrator of The Virginians, for instance, does not doubt that under the influence of good Bordeaux wine there is a point when a man's generous faculties are alerted and in full vigour, "when the wit brightens and breaks out in sudden flashes; when the intellects are keenest; when the pent-up words and confused thoughts get a night-rule, and rush abroad and disport themselves." This new awakening and quickening of the nobler and more uninhibited aspects leads him, says the narrator, in a wildly idealistic flight, to succour the poor and rescue the oppressed, "but the moment passes, and that other glass somehow spoils the state of beatitude." Indulgence in grandiose dreams is followed inevitably by a correspondingly chastening awareness of the ordinary anxious and petty concerns of life, when

> there is a headache in the morning; we are not going into Parliament for our native town; we are not going to shoot those French officers who have been speaking disrespectfully of our country; and poor Jeremy Diddler calls about eleven o'clock for another half-sovereign, and we are unwell in bed, and can't see him, and send him empty away. (XII, 402)

Unlike Esmond, the typical narrator in the secondary fictional world tends to puncture the romantic visions he conjures up. He does not deny their reality but their durability; he does not deny their
relevance to human vision, but he is aware that they do not give a complete account of total reality.
CHAPTER III

THACKERAY AND HIS NARRATORS

I forget who I am, if indeed I have ever known. I become the other person. (They try to find out my opinion; I have no interest in my own opinion. I am no longer someone, but several—whence the reproaches for my restlessness, my instability, my fickleness, my inconstancy).

—Gide, Journal of "The Counterfeiters"

The Ironist is committed to the search of a more and more exterior point of view, so as to embrace all contradictions . . . . Beyond the Ironist's perception of a situation is his Ironic perception of himself Ironically perceiving the situation.

—Haakon Chevalier, The Ironic Temper: Anatole France and His Time

As Thackeray's fiction develops, he makes increasing use of a complex narrator who is much more aware of himself and the reader than the earlier one-dimensional narrators—such as Fitzboodle, Cahagan, and Yellowplush. This chapter traces the changing role of the narrator in Thackeray's fiction, from the early sketches to the mature novels. The reader's role, in the later work, becomes more subtle as he attempts to relate to a protean figure who challenges him to define either himself or others with any assurance. This post-1847 narrator, moreover, asking questions about the very nature of the illusion he projects, entices his reader into an elaborate game that dares him to demarcate the genuine and the sham.

Thackeray's earlier narrators closely identify with the masks which they present to the world. The later narrators, by contrast, present an ever-expanding vision in which limited or partial truths...
of youthful heroism or moral idealism become essential parts of a more comprehensive whole. Both the negative and positive aspects of the ideal are retained in the novels after *Vanity Fair*. Thus Barry Lyndon, looking back on the crucial accident to Nora Brady while they were gooseberry-picking sees, on reflection, his own folly, and seeks to desecrate the lovers' idyll:

In the course of our diversion Nora managed to scratch her arm, and it bled, and she screamed, and it was mighty round and white, and I tied it up, and I believe I was permitted to kiss her hand; and though it was as big and clumsy a hand as ever you saw, yet I thought the favour the most ravishing one that was ever conferred upon me, and went home in a rapture. (XVIII, 22)

Barry seeks to discredit his own past feeling, whereas a later narrator would include the feeling of past enchantment within the moment of present enlightenment. As the narrator of *Pendennis* or *The Virginians* sees the discarded mask, he must also try it on again, test out the part and rediscover the reality of the illusion by again becoming that part for the moment; Barry, by contrast, seeks to preserve a unified front.

The result of this continual re-invigorating of once discredited forms and rejected selves is an increasingly complex sense of identity and a blurring of the distinction between illusion and reality. The narrator is, thus, both outside the story and within it—he is omniscient author and conjecturing historian, telling his own story or reporting another's. The Manager of *Vanity Fair* purports to be giving his reader an entertainment, but we soon find
he is in his own show, talking not about his puppets, but in effect becoming one of them in Pumpernickel. Pendennis, the narrator of The Newcomes, is supposedly following traces and filling in the gaps with conjecture, but he ends by placing Laura and himself within this fabulous tale. He is, in fact, the figure condemned by Norman Friedman as "the irresponsible illusion-breaking . . . garrulous omniscient author, who tells a story as he perceives it, rather than as one of his characters perceives it." Yet, as we have seen, he also lives through his characters' experiences as if they were his own, and there is no hard line between personal and vicarious experience.

Thackeray's awareness of the limitations inherent in any one "position" led him to make his later narrators contradictory and vacillating. The earlier narrators are victims of the spectral Thackeray's irony because they are unaware of their posturing and role-playing. Thus, Ikey Solomons, seeking to expose the Newgate school of novelists, ultimately exposes himself by identifying with the rogues, and Barry Lyndon adopting the pose of gentleman reveals himself as a rogue and a braggart. These narrators are no more ironists than are the satirical aspirer Yellowplush or the melancholy self-justifying Fitzboodle. Even Mr. Snob, who comes nearest to the central ironical narrator from Vanity Fair onward, is often caught out by the silent author behind him. The genuine ironist realizes that everyone, including himself, indulges in various disguises, and that person and persona are only related, not identical.

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Barry Lyndon, although he incorporates many of the contradictions and shifts that we come to associate with the later narrators, is ever a victim of satire. His attitude to Nora is ambivalent—he sees her as a jilt, but also as a divine creature (XVIII, 51). He is also prone to tender recollections of past mistresses whom at other times he sees as worthless jilts and heartless jades. There is a romantic within the disenchanted cynic as this passage shows:

Oh, to see the Valdez once again, as on that day I met her first driving in state, with her eight mules and her retinue of gentlemen, by the side of yellow Mançanares! Oh, for another drive with Hegenheim, in the gilded sledge, over the Saxon snow! False as Schuvaloff was, 'twas better to be jilted by her than to be adored by any other woman. I can't think of any one of them without tenderness. I have ringlets of all their hair in my poor little museum of recollections. Do you keep mine, you dear souls that survive the turmoils and troubles of near half a hundred years? How changed its colour is now, since the day Sczotarska wore it round her neck. (XVIII, 238)

Barry acts out an imagined past and indulges the mood of self-pity and regret, but he is unconscious that he is creating a fiction out of fragments of his life. He is not an ironist, and like the typical alazon of Greek drama he is essential prey to the subtly aware eiron, found here in the spectral author and his reader.

Thackeray delighted in the use of an alazon figure as narrator of his earlier work for Fraser, the New Monthly and the Comic Almanac. In these early stories and sketches, the spectral presence of the

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author is felt silently watching and enjoying the posturing and boasting story-teller and would-be social satirist. It is in Thackeray's work from The Book of Snobs and Vanity Fair on that the narrator combines the alazon and the eiron. In the later work, as Gordon N. Ray and John Kleis have pointed out, the satirist modulates to the ironist.3

Barry Lyndon, who acts like a scoundrel but who looks upon himself as a gentleman, frequently allows his reader to catch him out in his disguises. The gap between the real and the ideal is all too frequently revealed. Like Moll Flanders, Barry is one who would be thought genteel, and like her, he looks down on his peers as wretches, cheats, and criminals. Barry tells us

I never had a taste for anything but genteel company, and hate all descriptions of low life. . . . Pah! the reminiscences of the horrid black-hole of a place in which we soldiers were confined, of the wretched creatures with whom I was now forced to keep company, of the ploughmen, poachers, pickpockets, who had taken refuge from poverty, or the law (as, in truth, I had done myself), is enough to make me ashamed. (XVIII, 77)

Up to this point in the story, by his own account, Barry has cheated tradespeople, impersonated an Irish lord, and killed an English captain in a duel over a girl who was not interested in the Irish adventurer. The reader's pleasure in the story is to a large extent owing to Barry's unawareness of the disparity between the image he seeks to project and the one he does actually show his reader. From his spurious ancestry

to his spurious grievances against the world, Barry's modes of self-deception are apparent to the reader, but Barry is an actor who is quite innocent of his roles. Thackeray lets him play his parts, and if the reader plays his part, he will see that none of the roles define the narrator completely. Barry is something other than his parts of romantic lover, aristocratic gentleman, fearless fighting man, or even outright rogue and villain. He defines himself through the process of playing many parts, and we find there is a sense of the man beyond what he, for the moment, becomes.

The Great Hoggarty Diamond and Barry Lyndon are novels that offer only a primary fictional world. Catherine is complicated by a narrator who is not only unreliable but self-conscious. We find the narrator frequently digressing, reminiscing, appealing to his reader, and pointing playfully to his own story. All the tricks, in fact, that we come to associate with the more seasoned Thackeray narrator of the novels from Vanity Fair to Denis Duval, are displayed. However, the waggish tone of many of the asides seems more calculated to excuse the crudity of the main story than to enhance reader involvement and to play with secondary illusion. Such passages as this, for instance, do not go very far towards suggesting an enclosing mental world of the narrator in which his reader can take a rewarding part:

Ring, ding, ding! the gloomy green curtain drops, the **dramatis personae** are duly disposed of, the nimble candle-snuffers put out the lights, and the audience goeth pondering home. If the critic take the pains to ask why the author, who hath been so diffuse in describing the early and fabulous acts of Mrs. Catherine's existence, should so hurry off the
catastrophe where a deal of the very finest writing might have been employed, Solomons replies that the "ordinary" narrative is far more emphatic than any composition of his own could be, with all the rhetorical graces which he might employ. (XXIX, 234)

The apology for writing an "immoral" and dull tale goes on for several more pages, with Ikey's usual excuse that he is writing about real criminals who are really worthless and not deserving of our sympathy. The irony at Ikey's expense becomes a little superfluous. His mind is wayward and contradictory, but it does not have the richly ambivalent fascination of the later narrators' minds.

The narrators from *Vanity Fair* onward, like Ikey Solomons, make elaborate use of parody. Ikey, however, continually emphasizes his own disbelief in the momentary illusion which the parody creates. Like the later narrators, he shows us a mask, but says, in effect, not only "this is not I," but "this never was and never could be I." He does not suggest, as the later narrators do, an infinite range of inner reality. Ikey delights in the incongruous figure of Count Maximillien Galgenstein, the aristocratic seducer of Catherine Hayes who ends in a madhouse listening to the wailing of the tortured and the clanking of chains:

The splendid Count came up. Ye gods, how his embroidery glittered in the lamps! What a royal exhalation of musk and bergamot came from his wig, his handkerchief, and his grand lace ruffles and frills! A broad yellow riband passed across his breast, and ended at his hip in a shining diamond cross. As Jove came down to Semele in state, in his habits of ceremony, with all the grand cordons of his orders blazing about his imperial person—thus dazzling, magnificent, triumphant, the great Galgenstein descended towards Mrs. Catherine. Her cheeks gloved red hot under her coy velvet mask, her heart thumped against the whalebone prison of her stays. What
a rush of long-pent recollections burst forth at the sound of that enchanting voice!

As you wind up a hundred-guinea chronometer with a two-
penny watch-key—as by means of a dirty wooden plug you set all the waters of Versailles a-raging, and splashing, and
storming—in like manner and by like humble agents, were Mrs. Catherine's tumultuous passions set going. (XXIX, 182-183)

We are here in the region of low burlesque—the form is distorted and tortured, but we do not feel the restraint and sympathy that the later narrators show us where we find a strange and enchanting reality within the warped illusion.

With Thackeray's narrators from *Vanity Fair* to *Denis Duval*, we sense an ability to live in two worlds at once. The semi-satiric passages partake of the quality of the object, state, attitude or illusion that is being ostensibly ridiculed. Like Chaucer's and Lucian's satire they caress their object, they are, in the words of David Worcester on those two writers, "exquisite pieces of lapidary art. They show us . . . grotesquerie sublimed into loveliness. Chinese painting often possessed the same quality."4 As we saw in the preceding chapter, the narrators of *The Virginians* and *Pendennis* mingle sympathy with ridicule in their exposure of the ardent lovers of worldly maidens. Pendennis and Harry Warrington are blindly romantic in their infatuations with their unsuitable partners, and they come to be aware of their own blindness. The narrators, however, turn to their readers and invite them to identify with that passion which in the cold light of day appears as folly. The later narrators

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force the reader through the experience of this "folly" and do not permit escape by laughter. The whalebone stays, in Catherine, are as incongruous in a love scene as Maria's false teeth are, in The Virginians, but in the first instance the detail is an essential part of the ridicule of sentimental fashionable fiction, whereas the latter detail comes to the reader after the scenes of idyllic passion have done their work. Furthermore, the later novel presents the detail through the effect that it makes on Harry—there is something ridiculous in his obsession with a "fact" that he has received through the malicious gossip of Madame Bernstein. In Ikey Solomons' burlesque scene, the reader's reaction is uncomplicated by doubt and the shifts of feeling between the poles of adoration and repulsion; we are invited to scoff not to pity. Maria and the Fotheringay, unlike Catherine and Nora Brady, are floating figures within the narrator's consciousness, and can be used as touchstones of romance or of reality according to the story-teller's mood. They are never purely elucidative; neither are they dummies through which the narrator can acquire self-glorification.

Since the irony of the later narrator is not only directed at the subject of the story, but also at himself, the reader is never in the comfortable position of watching a pretender unwittingly display the disguises. The narrator of "The Fatal Boots," in contrast, makes a bid for the reader's sympathy and esteem by adopting the role of penniless persecuted orphan and cheated gentleman by turns. He is wholly unaware of the incongruity involved in his alternate whining and bragging, and is so unaware of the real significance of his story
in revealing the human need for self-justification, that he cannot see why his lying, cheating, bullying and cringing should have any moral significance. He is baffled by the literary man who sells the story of his adventures to the booksellers:

I'm blest if I can see anything moral in them. I'm sure I ought to have been more lucky through life, being so very wide awake. And yet here I am, without a place, or even a friend, starving upon a beggarly twenty pounds a year. (XXII, 545)

Bob Stubbs, alias Boots, alias Lord Cornwallis has much in common with Barry Lyndon in that he sees greed, wickedness, and corruption in the world but not in himself. While the later narrators relate the vanity and hypocrisy of the world to themselves, the earlier narrators make an artificial division between an innocent self and a corrupt world. The reader of the later works is thus put in the position of having no pharmakos, or scapegoat, onto whom he can project his own guilt. He finds within himself—what the narrator admits in himself—alazon, eiron, and pharmakos.

Like Ikey Solomons, Mr. Snob begins his series of papers with an ostensibly moral purpose, but he shows some realization that he is also involved in the object lesson he sets before his reader. His avowed purpose is to show that "Society having ordained certain customs, men are bound to obey the law of society, and conform to its harmless orders" (XXII, 11). Snob is plainly a sycophant, as his paper on literary snobs reiterates, but he is also aware of himself as a possible target of criticism. He does not shy away from self-
questioning, although he provides his own self-flattering answers. Punch stares in the mirror in the initial illustration to the paper on literary snobs, and draws a flattering likeness of himself, and Mr. Snob follows his editor's lead throughout, but the question from his hypothetical reader does arise:

Will that truculent and unsparing monster who attacks the nobility, the clergy, the army, and the ladies, indiscriminately, hesitate when the turn comes to egorger his own flesh and blood? (XXII, 90)

In common with Thackeray's later narrators, Mr. Snob shows an awareness of the need to mask his envy and malice. Snob presents his reader with an ingenious whitewash of literary vulgarity, envy, and pretence, but his defence, although it diminishes the squalor of Grub Street, shows an awareness of other views. His flattery of Mr. Punch, moreover, is far from gross toadyism:

Suppose, for instance, I good-naturedly point out a blemish in my friend Mr. Punch's person, and say, Mr. P. has a humpback, and his nose and chin are more crooked than those features in the Apollo or Antinous, which we are accustomed to consider as our standards of beauty; does this argue malice on my part towards Mr. Punch? Not in the least. (XXII, 91)

Snob gives us question and answer it is true, and his brutal smear leaves him with clean hands in his own view, but here, as throughout The Book of Snobs, under the varnish of certainty lurks the suggestion of doubt.

Mr. Snob is, perhaps, Thackeray's first depiction of the self-doubting narrator who is to become central to his mature novels. He
sees his targets as plainly as C. J. Yellowplush sees, for instance, the pretence of Bulwer to serve the public morally, but he is less sure of his own immunity to vanity, snobbery, and parasitism. Yellowplush, of course, does have these vices that he exposes in others, but his keenly sardonic eye is rarely, if ever, turned upon himself. We get the rare aside from him, as, for example, that his master, the scheming Deuceace, who had contrived to win a fortune by marriage to either Lady Griffin or her daughter, "was sure of one; as sure as any mortal man can be in this sublimary spear, where nothink is suttin except unsertnty," but he lives in a predictable world generally and is relatively untroubled by irresolution (XIX, 244). Snob, on the other hand, knows that "Man is a Drama—of Wonder and Passion, and Mystery and Meanness, and Beauty and Truthfulness" (XXII, 224). Though he stops himself in the middle of such a passage of fine writing, and turns on himself his own critical eye, saying "let us stop this capital style, I should die if I kept it up for a column," Snob is aware of an impenetrable inner life in his club-mates, as he scrutinizes the enigmatical Pawney:

I see . . . old Pawney stealing round the rooms of the Club, with glassy, meaningless eyes, and an endless greasy simper—he fawns on everybody he meets, and shakes hands with you, and blesses you, and betrays the most tender and astonishing interest in your welfare. You know him to be a quack and a rogue, and he knows you know it. But he wriggles on his way, and leaves a track of slimy flattery after him wherever he goes. Who can penetrate that man's mystery? What earthly good can he get from you or me? You don't know what is working under the leering tranquil mask. You have only the dim instinctive repulsion that warns you, you are in the presence of a knave—beyond which fact all Pawney's soul is a secret to you. (XXII, 225)
In a recent study of the narrator's character as the clue to the ambivalence of *Vanity Fair*, Bernard J. Paris uses the psychological studies of Karen Horney to diagnose what he considers to be Thackeray's neurosis. Paris maintains that "the implied author . . . is not in harmony with himself because he is troubled by neurotic conflicts."\(^5\) Although the post-1847 narrators Thackeray uses are closer to what might, for want of a better phrase, be called his "moral norms," we have to remember that Thackeray is not and cannot be his narrator. A confused narrator does not necessarily imply a confused Thackeray, any more than a confused Tristram means a confused Sterne. When Paris concludes that "the real trouble with the narrative technique of much Victorian fiction . . . is that the author as interpreter usually does not know what he is talking about,"\(^6\) he shows his impatience with the irrational and unpredictable. Like the anomalous works of Erasmus, Burton and Browne, Thackeray's novels thrive on the conflicts of carefully juxtaposed truths. Thackeray's failure to interpret his story or to present his theme coherently is not due to neurotic conflicts or faulty technique, but is a deliberate device which allows him to reveal his vision of life's precariousness and instability.

Thackeray's narrators develop from the unreliable and consistent to the reliable and inconsistent. The narrator of the mature novels embraces the naïveté of Barry Lyndon and the sophistication of Ikey Solomons, the romanticism of Fitzboodle and the wide-awake valetism of Yellowplush. He can no longer tell a plain unvarnished tale about

\(^5\) "The Psychic Structure of *Vanity Fair*," *VS*, 10(1967), 390.

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 410.
rogues and dupes because he sees himself as an amalgam of such easily identifiable figures; he is Deuceace, Brough, the Earl of Crabs, Mr. Pigeon and Sam Titmarsh as occasion demands, but he goes beyond their immediate social scene to find within himself the truths of history, legend, and romance. Amelia and Becky, Laura and Blanche, Rachel and Beatrix are projections of dove and serpent that the mature narrator discovers in himself. He sees them as heroines, fools, or villainesses according to his domination by the domestic, mundane, or chivalric mood.

Pendennis is saved from bad marriages as much by the worldly Major as by the unworldly Helen. Mrs. Pendennis would continue to spoil her son by lavishing on him an ever-increasing approval if it were not for the checks of the Major. Helen, the narrator reminds us, is always sacrificing herself with just a little too much insistence, for Arthur's good, and her suspicions of Pendennis' relationship with Fanny Bolton suggest the angel is not above jealousy and malice when her own preserves are threatened. In the story he tells us, the narrator offers us only his own visions of saints and heroes which are based on a complex blend of the worldly and prudent with the ephemeral and romantic. So even George Warrington, the honourable, good and generous alter-ego of Pendennis, is as tainted with self-interest as Helen:

For ours, as the reader has possibly already discovered, is a Selfish Story, and almost every person, according to his nature, more or less generous than George, and according to the way of the world as it seems to us, is occupied about Number One. So Warrington selfishly devoted himself to
Helen, who selfishly devoted herself to Pen, who selfishly devoted himself to himself. (VI, 77)

The narrator here sees his story as a moral tale but this moment of disenchantment is not a final assessment, and his ironical vision does not permit him to take one side exclusively and to deride the other.

Just as the narrator's idolatry of Helen leads to a recognition that the qualities he finds in her are largely projections of fancy, so his indulgence in the vicarious experience of youthful passion has its obverse side. Before he punctures his own illusion, the narrator sees Emily Costigan in the prime and fulness of her beauty as follows:

Her forehead was vast, and her black hair waved over it with a natural ripple, and was confined in shining and voluminous braids at the back of a neck such as you see on the shoulders of the Louvre Venus—that delight of gods and men. Her eyes, when she lifted them up to gaze on you, and ere she dropped their purple deep-fringed lids, shone with tenderness and mystery unfathomable. Love and Genius seemed to look out from them and then retire coyly. . . . She never laughed (indeed her teeth were not good), but a smile of endless tenderness and sweetness played round her beautiful lips, and in the dimples of her cheeks and her lovely chin. Her nose defied description in those days. Her ears were like two little pearl shells. (IV, 58)

We are again in the realm of burlesque, but the passage, unlike Ikey Solomons' on Catherine as romance heroine, barely touches on bathos. The large feet and imperfect teeth hardly disturb the narrator's soaring vein once the fit is on him; there are no whalebone stays to shatter the fanciful picture. However unworthy the subject may be, and however trite the phraseology he employs, the narrator cannot,
and does not wish to, discredit his own feelings. The use of the theatrical setting in Pendennis' romance with the Fotheringay prefigures a similar use of the unreal and deliberately pompous and melodramatic setting of George Warrington's play in The Virginians. Tears are aroused in the sentimental Theodosia there, as they are in Bows in Pendennis. The narrator partakes of the passions before he discredits them, before he lays aside the mask.

In the novels after 1847, Thackeray's burlesque pertains more to irony than invective-satire. The targets are used not as a means of self-glorification on the narrator's part, but as a means of exploration through identification. The "real" Fotheringay, Helen Pendennis or Blanche Amory, is less important than the visions which they excite in the observer's mind. As John Loafbourow says of Esmond, and his observation can be applied equally to the later novels, "expressive metaphors no longer depend on parodic textures; they can evoke universal perceptions, aspects of human experience so fundamental that they cannot be discounted as unreal." The narrator makes this explicit after "The Stranger" has played before an electrified audience:

Nobody ever talked so. If we meet idiots in life, as will happen, it is a great mercy that they do not use such absurdly fine words. The Stranger's talk is sham, like the book he reads, and the hair he wears, and the bank he sits on, and the diamond ring he makes play with—but, in the midst of the balderdash, there runs that reality of love, children, and forgiveness of wrong, which will be listened to wherever it is preached, and sets all the world sympathising. (IV, 59)

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We can thus conclude that Thackeray's later narrators have a greater power to become what they burlesque than the more clearly defined early narrators. The narrators of *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis* partake of the moods of fashionable writing, mock-heroic, and pastoral myth, at the same time that they mock them. Similarly, the conventions of the theatre are exposed as sham, yet commended for their ability to express human feeling. The narrators have moved a long way from the social unmaskers, Fitzboodle and Yellowplush, who knew what was real and what was sham, and the rather naive role-players, Barry Lyndon and Ikey Solomons, who were easy targets for reader irony. The mature novels have a much more erudite and responsive narrator who has no position to maintain, apart from telling a loosely structured moral story. The narrator here tries to probe behind superficial facts to discover the truer facts of feeling. The facts needed for narrative frequently elude the narrator's grasp, and although narrative art is the art of story telling, yet "the more literate and sensitive a man is, the more he feels creative pressures which drive him to seek beauty or truth at the expense of fact."  

The later narrators find that truths can only be revealed through the deliberate acceptance of the shams of Art. Thackeray's

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9. In a letter to David Masson complaining of Dickens' use of caricature, Thackeray maintains "that the Art of Novels is to represent Nature; to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality—in a tragedy or 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
narrators, in the post-1847 novels, apparently know better than the
writer of the Pendennis preface that a "MAN," such as Tom Jones, is
no more than a convenient fiction. When Batchelor, in Lovel the
Widower, keeps Miss Prior waiting while he prepares his reader to
meet her, or when the narrator of Pendennis begins Chapter VIII,
"Once upon a time, then, there was a young gentleman of Cambridge
University," the fictional nature of our narrative is impressed upon
us. The later narrators want their readers to be aware that they
are in the land of make-believe and to enjoy not only the story but
the ingenuity of the story-teller. They impress upon their readers that
"almost every story we read demands that we accept as fact something
that we know to be nonsense: that good people always win, especially
in love; that murders are . . . solved by logic." These conventions,
that Frye calls "the maddened ethics of fairyland," which have little
or no connection with "the normal behaviour of adult people,"10 are
not only accepted, but delighted in, by Thackeray's later narrators.

Whereas the earlier Thackerayan narrator is frequently con-
temptuous of the spectator's need for dramatic pabulum, the later
narrator gleefully exploits this human need. Saintsbury points out
Thackeray's unsparing mockery of theatrical sham in Flore et Zéphyr
and other early work,11 and The Paris Sketch Book of Mr. M. A. Titmarsh
embroidered tunic, nor a great red-hot instrument like the Pantomime
weapon."—Letters, II, 772-773. This opinion, of course, is
constantly belied by Thackeray's blending of stage and novel
customs.

10 Northrop Frye, The Educated Imagination (Toronto: CBC

11 A Consideration of Thackeray (London: Oxford Univ. Press,
exposes French drama and melodrama with a cavalier disdain for the hallowed conventions of the stage and the needs of the audience:

After having seen most of the grand dramas which have been produced at Paris for the last half-dozen years, and thinking over all that one has seen,—the fictitious murders, rapes, adulteries, and other crimes, by which one has been interested and excited,—a man may take leave to be heartily ashamed of the manner in which he has spent his time; and of the hideous kind of mental intoxication in which he has permitted himself to indulge.

Titmarsh finds "such tragedies are not as good as a real, downright execution," yet "the horrors of the play act as a piquant sauce to the supper" (XVII, 369). For him reality is found only in the solid molecular universe, and the play is a petty and unimportant concern.

While Thackeray the man enjoyed the absurd and exaggerated aspects of the stage, and Thackeray the writer delighted to expose them to ridicule at considerable length, his narrator, Titmarsh, stands aloof from the carnival. Titmarsh pokes fun at the lower classes' reception of the Boulevard dramatists where "you see very fat old men crying like babies; and, like babies, sucking enormous sticks of barley-sugar. Actors and audience enter warmly into the illusion of the piece" (XVII, 383). Titmarsh is pleased not to be part of the sensation-hungry child-like audience, for he cannot, and is unwilling to, share in illusion, feeling that he has his own


12 Cf. the account by Major Frank Dwyer of Thackeray's comic turn illustrating the absurd aspects of French theatre. Thackeray impersonates the protagonist of "some drama or opera . . . who comes on stage with a pirouette, and waving his hand in a majestic manner to a chorus, representing Jews in exile at Babylon, says 'Chantez nous une chanson de Jerusalem!'" Letters, II, 67n.
superior reality. The later narrators, by contrast, manage to project their feelings onto even the most tawdry stage trappings, as we have seen in *Pendennis*, and even while realizing the trumpery nature of the "props" or the artificiality and arbitrariness of their own story-telling convention, they are able to involve themselves in a fictional and counterfeit world.

The introspective nature of the later narrators and the apparently elusive hold which they retain on their ostensible subject, frequently leaves the reader feeling he is dealing with an impostor. The narrator begins to partake of the colour of whatever mood takes his fancy, and to point disconcertingly to his avowed subject with some disdain as an "old" story about which we need not trouble ourselves overmuch. As a story-teller he becomes something of a failure in the manner of Tristram. "The story-teller is often faced with the choice of being either a bore or a charlatan. The great story-tellers inevitably choose the latter." Once the narrator has indulged or "thrown off" the lyrical passages, he shows the same disdain towards them as to the story itself. The narrator sprinkles his story not only with apologies for the story, but with gestures of self-renunciation, metaphorical shruggings of the shoulders and grimaces to his reader that suggest not only the impossibility of telling a coherent story, but the futility even of attempting communication. Part of the elusive charm of the narrator is due to the fact that we can never be sure of him; neither is he sure whether he is the part he plays even

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13 *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 258.
after he has played it.

The later narrators seek to contain contradictions by avoiding commitment to any one point of view, and to give themselves a third dimension by becoming ironic watchers of their changing selves. Whereas Barry Lyndon sees himself as a hero in Frederick of Prussia's army yet also confesses to the baseness in the looting, murder and pillage of civilian homes, Esmond, in maturity, sees his heroic and chivalric past as a part played with conviction at the time, but not involving his whole nature. Esmond sees the reverse side of Addison's celebration of British victories; he knows that mean motives and base acts lie behind the triumphs bruited in heroic couplets. Yet, when the fit is on, Esmond can still give himself up to a glamorous vision of the mercenary Beatrix. She inspired him to feel heroically and to perform what seemed great deeds, and he enjoys recalling and entering into the visions of past glories which are made part of his present reality. Joseph E. Baker notices that both Thackeray and St. Augustine "recognize the reality of delight even when it is ephemeral, or inferior," and that Thackeray "contemplates life with something of that poetic feeling which makes Platonism so charming, that love for the beauties it recognizes to be transitory." Barry Lyndon, Ikey Solomons, Yellowplush, Cahagan, and Titmarsh are too concerned with appearing as integrated personalities to be able to mirror the nuances of the changing self. They offer us engaging

14 "Vanity Fair and the Celestial City," NCF, 10(1955), 95.
incongruities and a series of biases, based upon an almost total lack of introspection.

By standing back from the society they seek to reflect, the early narrators give a sharply satirical picture. The later narrators, however, enter into this society of Vanity Fair and see themselves reflected through others. They no longer laugh with the certainty of superiority and they experience some pain through this process of identification. A.R. Thompson says that to perceive irony one must be detached, but "to feel it one must be pained for a person or ideal gone amiss. . . . Someone or something we cherish is cruelly made game of; we see the joke but are hurt by it."15 Barry Lyndon sees no irony, Ikey Solomons sees it but does not feel it, but Esmond both sees and feels irony. The knowledge that one is both latently the same and yet patently different from the world outside oneself leads to doubts about the stability of one's own personality. One becomes nothing but a series of parts of "characters." But if this ironical awareness is painful, it can also be liberating, for one is then free to take on whatever role the mood of the moment suggests.

The earlier narrators who tell "stories"—rather than giving "sketches" or "papers" on contemporary life—have a more or less fixed part to play. Barry Lyndon is an Irishman, Ikey Solomons a Jew, Yellowplush is a footman and even Titmarsh, in The Great Hoggarty Diamond, plays the role of an ingenu at the mercy of the rapacious world. Mr. Snob has more flexibility, since "snob" becomes a virtual

15The Dry Mock: A Study of Irony in Drama (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1948), p. 15.
synonym for "pretender," but he has no narrative thread and no opportunity to identify with familiar puppets. The later narrators make use of a story which is basically an "old" story and is ostensibly not their own, but the story of a "scapegrace," whose adventures in the world consist of resisting the lures of ogling females and the lures of glittering gold. Upon this simple theme the later narrators work their own strange and enchanting medley. The reader is taken into the world of theatre, of fairy-tale, of exotic legend, of classical myth and fable, and into the uncomfortable world of speculation and perplexity which occupies the forefront of the narrator's mind.

The narrator of the mature novels is so complex and ephemeral in his moods that it is impossible to do much more than suggest the flavour of his quicksilver-like presence. This difficulty of definition is experienced by Laurence Brander who finds that the narrator of the Pendennis series

is a charming Victorian gentleman of moderate means, happily married and almost uxorious, with his whole life based on his family and his writing. He is Thackeray himself, plus what Thackeray would have liked for himself. To some of us in London today, he might be the image of one of our friends.16

Almost any fixed description can be contradicted, for the narrator is more like a sensitive ear that picks up suggestions of rhythms of his story, and beats them out as if they were heart beats heard through a stethoscope. The normal rhythms of life become distorted and exaggerated, and beneath the urbanity that Brander finds, the narrator

reveals an infinite variety and a vast range of imaginative potential. He partakes of the respectable worldly middle-class values only superficially, for beneath his suave exterior is revealed a figure who is at once erudite, grotesque, impish and child-like in his response to love and danger.

Apart from Sterne, it is perhaps in Rabelais that the mature narrator finds his nearest counterpart. John Cowper Powys maintains that "what Rabelais has the power of communicating to us is the renewal of that physiological energy which alone makes it possible to enjoy this monstrous world." Though Pendennis, the Manager, Esmond, and the rest, lack the essential vulgarity of Rabelais, they are, like him, brilliant and sly improvisors who treat their imitations with both love and contempt. Esmond, it is true, is more melancholy and restrained than the typical narrator, yet even he gives a sense of abounding concern for discovering the ideal in unlikely places. "Rabelais' entire effort is directed toward playing with things and with the multiplicity of their possible aspects; upon tempting the reader out of his customary and definite way of regarding things, by showing him phenomena in utter confusion." The element of gleeful exaggeration, which has such a liberating effect on the reader, is often paralleled by an almost cruel act by the protagonist.


This, too, has the effect of appealing to the reader's destructive or demonic urge. We see that Pantagruel, chasing the town bullies who eject a student with cause, "would have drowned them, had they not burrowed into the earth like moles and lain in hiding a good two miles under the river." Philip Firmin acts as just such a scourge of the mendacious politician Woolcomb, when at Philip's instigation, Yellow Jack and his donkey cart make a travesty of Woolcomb's campaign. Exuberance and cruelty justify themselves in this passage:

Flying their whips, the post boys galloped towards Yellow Jack and his vehicle. . . . Just as Yellow Jack wheeled nimbly round one side of the Ringwood statue, Woolcomb's horses were all huddled together and plunging in confusion beside it, the forewheel came in abrupt collision with the stonework of the statue railing: and then we saw the vehicle turn over altogether, one of the wheelers down with its rider, and the leaders kicking, plunging, lashing out right and left, wild and maddened with fear. . . . This accident, this collision, this injury, perhaps death of Woolcomb and his lawyer, arose out of our fine joke about the Man and the Brother. (XVI, 474-475)

For the mature narrator in Thackeray's work a beautiful lie has more value than any reported or purely "objective" truth. Just as Chaucer ironically states that he will swear his narrative is as true as the story of Sir Launcelot, so Thackeray, again like Rabelais, through his insidious narrator craves reader indulgence for his preposterous story. He offers to join his reader in hurling scorn on stories containing the happy ending of the circulating library novel, while at the same time presenting him with just such a novel. Rabelais declares that "it has never occurred to me to lie or to make false

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representation. I speak like St. John in the Apocalypse *Quod vidimus testamur*, we relate what we have seen."\(^{20}\) We are here blatantly asked to believe that the creator of Gargantua never says the thing which is not. Mr. Roundabout does not ask us to give credence to absurdities, so much as he maintains that we cannot live without them, for

> a lie once set going, having the breath of life breathed into it by the father of lying, and ordered to run its diabolical little course, lives with a prodigious vitality. You say, "*Magna est veritas et praevalebirt.*" Psha! Great lies are as great as great truths, and prevail constantly, and day after day. (XXVII, 156)

Thus, the later narrator of Thackeray's novels agrees with the narrator of *Middlemarch* that "signs are small measurable things but interpretations are illimitable,"\(^{21}\) and it is with the interpretations that he is fascinated. Gossip and scandal, typified in the figure of Tom Eaves,\(^{22}\) form the mainstay of the mature novels, and Mr. Roundabout is ironical towards worthy Mrs. Candour on their supposed pact to be strictly accurate and truth-telling about their neighbours:

> We will range the fields of science, dear madam, and communicate to each other the pleasing results of our studies. We will, if you please, examine the infinitesimal wonders of nature through the microscope. . . . We will take refuge in cards, and play at "beggar my neighbour," not abuse my neighbour. (XXVII, 159)


\(^{22}\) For an interesting assessment of *Vanity Fair* as a product of
Thackeray's narrators develop from the acute social observer of the middle-class scene to the ubiquitous narrator of the post-1847 period. Although the satirist is never completely absent from the mature novels, the sting has gone from his strictures. It can be said that after *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray discovered his natural métier and real vocation as a novelist rather than a hack-journalist. He became sympathetically involved with his creations and his narrators learn that they cannot separate themselves arbitrarily from the mean-ness, viciousness and folly that they discover in their external environment. Lionel Stevenson suggests prudential reasons for the decline of his satirical sketches: "If he was to make a living by his novels, he knew he had to humor the complacent illusions and fetishes of his public." However true it may be, this statement ignores the fact that the same traits of moral and social satire remain in his work right up to the end, but, after about 1847, a pervasive irony envelops the would-be satirist and moralist. The narrator becomes more and more aware that he himself contains as many complacent illusions as he detects in his fellows. This self-conscious stance makes him change at will from shovel-hat to cap-and-bells, and see himself reflected in the social scene.

This awareness of the narrator of his own changing roles leads to a constantly changing point of view and a concomitant


increasing disruption of the novel's form. Critical opinion is still mainly hostile to the later and more digressive novels, which, it is true, do not offer the vitality of character of *Vanity Fair* or even *Pendennis*. However, in an age sensitive to irony, few critics would support the verdict of G.U. Ellis on *Lovel the Widower* that it

is no novel. Without a knowledge of Thackeray's life, it is practically meaningless. There are at least three "stories" in it... and characters so jumbled together and yet so unrelated that without the clue of his own life the book must seem some puzzling allegory.  

Lionel Stevenson's criticism of *Philip*'s "lack of integrated structure... disguised by a tissue of discursive comment," is merely an echo of James Oliphant's comment in 1899 that "Thackeray's narrative power is... constantly interrupted by his tendency to moral disquisition."

The same questions of the sham and the true occupy the narrators from the early to the later work, but the smooth, confident flow of the early columnist gives way to the unrestrained probing of the narrators of the chief novels. Thus, in reviewing French fashionable novels in 1840, Titmarsh says sedately,

> I have often thought that, in respect of sham and real histories, a similar fact may be noticed; the sham story appearing a great deal more agreeable, life-like, and

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natural than the true one; and all who, from laziness as well as principle, are inclined to follow the easy and comfortable study of novels, may console themselves with the notion that they are studying matters quite as important as history, and that their favourite duodecimos are as instructive as the biggest quartos in the world. (XVII, 114)

Little of the doubts, imprecations to the reader, exclamations and rhetorical questioning of the later narrators appears in the style itself. The phrases are long and their rhythm is confident and measured. Apart from the style, however, there is something familiar and re-assuring in the very nature of such eccentrics as Yellowplush, Lyndon and Fitzboodle, whereas the later narrators are unsettling and bizarre in their bewildering protean aspects.

The later Thackeray does not assume a solid reality beyond that which his narrator can see. As vision becomes more volatile, moreover, not only do character types begin to break down, but reader-interpretation becomes more difficult and more crucial. Solomons is unsure about rogues and heroes, but, because he seeks to appear as consistent and unified in his outlook, the irony is directed against him. Pendennis, the Manager, Esmond, and the narrator of *The Virginians*, invite the reader into a world of multiple perspectives in which the ultimate perspective of perspectives lies somewhere in the shared experience of reader and narrator. How we feel about Becky Sharp or Beatrix, Lord Castlewood or Colonel Dobbin, depends to a large extent on our mood of the moment, whether we are under their spell or whether we have moved outside their sphere of influence. The narrator's own temporary position complicates the
reader's response, for often when the narrator sees Amelia as a heroine or Maria as an object of pity, the reader's response may be the opposite. He is, at times, not only an unsure guide, but also an unreliable filter between Thackeray and the reader. When he declares that he would give all of Mr. Lee's conservatories for a kiss from Amelia, the narrator becomes his sentimental reader. But he can also become his cynical reader—the counterpart of Jones at the club who would write "twaddle" in the margins of the tender passages of Vanity Fair. The real reader is thus a marginal commentator on his elusive narrator, and he includes within himself both the sentimental and cynical reader. Irony thrives on such contradictions, and in using the nimble sprite to tell his story, Thackeray draws his reader into a macabre game where the reader can see himself playing a variety of incongruous roles which, strangely enough, seem to be "him," yet are also nothing but frivolous illusion.
CHAPTER IV

ILLUSION AS PROBE: NARRATOR-CHARACTER-READER RELATIONSHIPS

"Stop, Don Quixote! Look and you'll see that those you are knocking over and killing are not real Moors, but only little pasteboard figures!"
—Cervantes, Don Quixote

"It was the mask engaged your mind,
And after set your heart to beat,
Not what's behind."
—W. B. Yeats, "The Mask"

Sometimes I wonder whether these pages record the actions of real human beings; or whether this is not simply the story of a few inanimate objects which precipitated drama around them.
—Lawrence Durrell, Justine

Masks

Critics of the novel in general and of Thackeray's novels in particular are reluctant to accept the novelist's deliberate emphasis on the artificiality of art. The overt dehumanization of character, so typical of the Thackerayan narrator as he moves between two distinct fictional worlds, is glossed over by many critics of the novels. Thus Geoffrey Tillotson feels it necessary to make an elaborate apology for the continual references in Vanity Fair to the puppets which the Manager displays:

It was only because of his modesty that he called them puppets. And even the word puppets may have carried a more human connotation for him than for us, who think of puppets as small doll-like things. Puppets for Thackeray may have meant the pygmies we find in the drawings of the day... The last
sentence of *Vanity Fair* may have been meant to set the showman at a distance from men, ironically seen as children, rather than to stand him close to dolls."

This chapter maintains that, on the contrary, Thackeray's narrator means precisely what he says. The narrator in *Vanity Fair* and the other serialized novels deliberately and provocatively draws his reader's attention to the fact that he is involved in an imaginative experience, that a novel is art and not life. Thackeray is not afraid to destroy the primary illusion momentarily, by having the Manager refer to his puppets, in order to construct a further, more speculative and incomplete—and hence more life-like—illusion.

The secondary fictional world where narrator and reader meet reflects not only the ironies of life but the ironies of art. It, thus, contrasts with the fictional worlds of Ford, Conrad, or James. The worlds of Dowell, Marlow, or Strether are paralleled by those of their readers who are prepared to accept Ashburnham, Lord Jim, or Chad Newsome, as "real men." These characters are the means by which their narrators explore their own consciousness, but the reader is asked, and is willing, to accept them as "real." Pantagruel, Don Quixote and Becky Sharp, on the other hand, although they perform analogous functions for their narrators, while they are "real" in one fictional world, must be seen as fictions in the secondary world.

This world is neither the world of the characters nor that of the actual world of eating, sleeping, writing letters and attending

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1 Thackeray the Novelist (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1954), pp. 116-117.
classes. It is a world halfway between these which seems full of possibilities and fun. In this world the narrator sees himself as an exploiter of illusion and the reader here, if he is willing to play the game, will put on many disguises. It is a less serious world than either the primary world or the actual world because both narrator and reader know that they are playing games. The narrator draws the reader's attention to himself as a reader of the novel and there is a personal feeling of collusion and dialogue. The pleasure the reader gains from this quasi-personal contact with his story-teller is comparable to that of a member of a theatre audience who goes into the dressing-room between the acts, or the child who after the puppet-show insists on seeing and handling the no-longer-animated rags and sticks which captured his imagination during the show.

The novelist who admits us into the dressing-room, so to speak, does not undermine his art, any more than the conjurer who shows how a trick is performed spoils the trick. We know with one part of ourselves that he is not really sawing a woman in half or smashing our watch with his hammer, but that he is a deceiver and we are willingly deceived. Knowledge does not necessarily inhibit belief which ought logically to be undermined by an awareness of the facts. Greig complains that Thackeray "indulged so often in a kind of fictional ventriloquism." Thackeray merely insists that fiction is fiction and that his reader must be at least partly aware that he is inside the realm of art. When Greig notices "how often he [Thackeray] is tempted to interpose between himself and his readers a supposed
narrator—a sort of dummy on his knee, into whose mouth he can project his own voice slightly muffled," he is merely accepting that this is a work of art. And art deals with dummies in the form of painted heads, marble bodies, Elizabethan boys pretending to be women, poets pretending to be in love with ravishing maidens, and novelists creating fictitious worlds out of words. To see the artist in his studio, the boy rehearsing his part out of costume, the novelist standing back and pointing to his novel does not destroy the work for us, but adds, rather, another dimension—the dimension of knowledge that we are mysteriously involved with the world of symbols and their excellent dumb discourse.

Thackeray's characters do not so much resemble flesh and blood people we might meet in the world as the masks of the travelling theatres of the early Italian theatre and its successors in pantomime and vaudeville. Costigan and M. de Florac are successfully portrayed through typical eccentricities of speech and action associated with Irish Paddies and French noblemen. The figures of the commedia dell'arte whose masks "were not poetically realized characters but pawns in the plot . . . tended to assume a stereotyped habit and name, more significant, really, than anything he might do." A glance at the vast number of characters in any of the novels shows that Thackeray, too, relies heavily on the use of the descriptive label.


When Becky Sharp, Lord Steyne, Lady Bareacres or Sir Pitt Crawley move through *Vanity Fair*, or when Dr. Brand Firmin, Dr. Goodenough or Walsingham-Hely appear in *Philip*, the reader needs little introduction, and expects cunning, wickedness, decency, or their opposites, according to the worn emblem. Such figures as Blanche Amory or Ringwood Twysden represent more subtle vices of hypocrisy and sophisticated chicanery, but we know them as surely by their names as we know the essentials about Dobbin and George Warrington by theirs. Naturally, since a novel is never pure allegory, dumb fidelity and knightly valour are not the sole qualities of the latter. Nevertheless, Thackeray's narrators depend on the reader quickly identifying the dominant traits of their characters, in order, subsequently, to disturb his equanimity.

The typical narrator is an ironic observer who has much in common with the Zanni of the *commedia*. His is the watching brief of the *eiron* who enjoys allowing the other masks who are *alazons* to act out their more active and positive roles. In the *commedia*, the "Zanni ... often spoke the prolog or epilog to the comedy," and his speeches express traditional complaints, passions, serenades and sonnets of love that belong to no one firmly defined character. "They merely express incoherently enough, sentiments and opinions appropriate to the cleverest, the most plain-spoken, the most satirical and the most cynical of the Italian Masks, for whom the insensate raptures of a lover are only food for mirth." Although Pendennis, the Manager, and the successive narrators of Thackeray's novels are as liable to identify with the mask as to delight in unmasking, this description
of the Zanni's function has obvious parallels with the Thackerayan narrator:

The Zanni . . . was a Mask, or rather an infinite variety of Masks. Always of humble station, usually the servant or confidant of a principal character, sometimes a rascal, sometimes a dunce, oftenest a complex mixture of the two, almost always the chief plot-weaver,—his main function was to rouse laughter, to entertain at all costs. . . .

He imitated different voices and led on his impatient dupes to their own confounding. . . . Still more remarkable he was able in his own person to play several parts, even on occasion simultaneously.4

Thackeray's narrators, although they never quite allow their readers to observe detachedly the splendid spectacle of human folly and vanity, take delight in a grotesquely exaggerated pageant of pretence, hypocrisy and vice. *Vanity Fair, Pendennis, The Newcomes, The Virginians* and *Philip* deal with the perennial themes of love versus fortune and friendship versus duty, but with a freshness and abandonment on the part of the narrator which makes the moral themes subservient to the narrator's eccentric personality. The *commedia dell' arte* also used these themes, "and twisted them to suit its purpose of merrymaking; shameless old men and still more shameless young people attempt to get their wills through a series of outlandish maskings and tricks."5

If Thackeray's narrator is something of a Zanni, yet he never

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utterly relinquishes sympathy for knaves and fools. It is through the narrator's perspective that we should see the vices of the gaudy Lord Steyne, the cunning Becky, the pseudo-amorous Blanche Amory and the treacherous Ringwood Twysden, and in their glorious follies the reader should recognize his own. In Thackeray, laughter at others' folly is never completely comfortable. Would the reader after all refuse an invitation to Lord Steyne's party? If he did so on moral grounds, could he be quite free from the smug hypocrisy of feeling his own superiority? It is this sense of involvement that the narrator induces in the reader which makes laughter less comfortable than the belly-laugh of vaudeville and pantomime. The spice of pain which A.R. Thompson finds endemic in the ironic mode creates in the reader a suggestion of uneasiness. This reaction is not evoked by pure comedy or farce and seems somewhat removed from the scurrilous tricks of the commedia. For while "comedy builds up a psychic pressure in one direction, then suddenly releases it by offering something unexpected in another, ... irony involves the contrast but not the playfulness; its effect is the emotional discord we feel when something is both funny and painful." Self-recognition, then, is as essential to the reader as to his narrator.

Self-discovery on the part of a central character is perhaps the most hard-worked theme in the novel since Jane Austen. In Thackeray's novels, however, it is the narrator and reader who come to

6The Dry Mox: A Study of Irony in Drama (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1948), p. 11.
recognize themselves in all the characters. Becky, Philip, and Harry Warrington remain largely unchanged at the end of their stories—they are merely catalysts in an experiment performed between narrator and reader. If it is true, as Darley in Durrell's *Justine* maintains, that "to every one we turn a different face of the prism" of our character, then the corollary holds that from everyone we observe we receive a different aspect of our own character. We need others in fact in order that we may discover ourselves. Emma Woodhouse and Lambert Strether are, in their different ways, rewarded for clearing the motes from their own eyes. Mr. Knightley and Chad Newsome, we might gather, would mean different things to different people if we could only see them from the point of view of say Miss Bates and Gloriani. Their reality then would be made up, not only from what they thought themselves to be from moment to moment, but from the contradictions that every observer of, or meditator on, their character perceived in them from moment to moment—an impossible situation for a novel which must assume some tangibility of character. Thackeray's novels present us with conveniently labelled characters who behave in conveniently consistent ways; it is narrator and reader who provide the variables.

If the narrator gives us scapegraces for heroes, he also gives us frequently an active and a passive heroine betwixt whom his allegiance sways. We can not find stability in Amelia, Laura and Rachel by rejecting the bad girls, Becky, Blanche and Beatrix, because each

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needs the other for her own definition, and even the constant, domesticated and devoted heroines have their subtle tyrannies and obstinate prejudices.

A.E. Dyson notes two very significant points about Becky. Firstly, the narrator refers to her consistently as "our little schemer," and speaks of her "very much as one might speak of a naughty but not wholly unsympathetic child." Secondly, Dyson notes that "though she employs hypocrisy, she is never taken in by it herself. . . . She is able . . . to laugh at herself exactly as though she were someone else." The first observation suggests the friendly diminution of the ironic narrator's own particular faults, which Goethe sees as characteristic of the ironic mode:

If we do not indulge in the common habit of unloading our errors on circumstances or on other people, there will at last arise . . . a kind of Irony within and with ourselves whereby we treat our faults and errors in a playful spirit—as if they were naughty children who would perhaps not be so dear to us, were they not afflicted with such naughtiness.

By making Becky a masked figure, or, as he himself calls her, a puppet "uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire" (VF, 6), the Manager is enabled to treat his vice-figure playfully and affectionately without any danger of her becoming too threatening.

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8 The Crazy Fabric: Essays in Irony (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 80; p. 88. Becky's detachment from her part is perhaps less apparent when her schemes collapse with the uprising of the Curzon Street ménage.

9 As cited by G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony: Especially in Drama, p. 16.
to his own necessary sense of his own values. The vicious and destructive impulses within him are minimized to the point where they can be seen and manipulated with security, and he feels toward them a benevolence and paternity.

On the other hand, as the leading figure in the Manager's drama, Becky is endowed with a great deal of her literary sire's own awareness. She is perhaps the only character in *Vanity Fair* who is aware that she is playing the world at its own game. The daughter of an artist and an opera dancer, Becky continues to work her spell in the *haut monde*, winning over not only the wealthy Crawleys but also Lord Steyne and Lady Grizzel. She is at her most brilliant in the charade scene, and would cast her own husband as a Master of Ceremonies at a fair booth. Lord Steyne thinks of Becky as "an accomplished little devil . . . a splendid actress and manager" (*VF*, 506). Becky herself, doing the social round of fine dinner parties in impeccable houses of the great circles of London fashion, thinks "how much gayer it would be to wear spangles and trousers, and dance before a booth at a fair" (*VF*, 487). The narrator tells us "she was an artist herself, as she said very truly" (*VF*, 488). She is the only figure, apart from the narrator, able to see the masks worn by herself and others, and she thus emerges superior to her surroundings, controlling them by her knowledge. The mask that knows it is a mask begins to move into fiction of another dimension. There is an uncanny obstinacy about such a figure who seems to enter our lives with her own particular vitality. We feel in a similar position to Darley who finds the hand
of Cohen who "had become merely an historic figure" influencing him: "And yet here he was, obstinately trying to insist on his identity, trying to walk back into our lives at another point in the circumference."\(^{10}\)

Despite her ability to transcend the mask, however, Becky's "freedom" is illusory. Dyson insists that Becky could have been a good woman on five thousand pounds a year, at least as the world judges, but he is wrong as far as can be predicted from the evidence.\(^{11}\) Becky's role is that of aspirer and intriguer within whatever social rank fortune may give her. Although the narrator suggests that she could be a good woman in other circumstances, we know that she can be no other than Becky Sharp—consummate actress, hard bargainer and perfect hypocrite. In spite of Thackeray's letter to Lewes defending Becky as no worse than many other comfortable middle-class people (Letters, II, 353-354), we know that she is nothing more than a functional character who suggests an aspect of human aspiration in a milieu that is purely social and purely worldly. Becky is an archrogue in a rogues' gallery!

We have here a world which, as Joseph Baker says, is "a picture of life as it would be without the spiritual. To take this for 'man as he is' constitutes a profound misunderstanding."\(^{12}\) In

\(^{10}\)Justine, p. 104.

\(^{11}\)The Crazy Fabric, p. 89.

\(^{12}\)"Vanity Fair and the Celestial City," NCF, 10(1955), 93.
any case, to take a picture for anything more than a representation also constitutes a profound misunderstanding. Becky's liveliness and flexibility, then, come from her surroundings rather than ours. As Hugh Kenner says: "From *Moll Flanders* (1722) to *Bleak House* (1852) and *Lucky Jim* (1954), novel after novel has demonstrated how rogues (intelligible, like all fictional characters, because automated) are qualified denizens of an intelligible because automated world."¹³

Becky's naturalism, therefore, is restricted to the realm of *Vanity Fair* both in the novel and in the imaginative carrying-over in the mind of the reader. She is still a mask or puppet however lively she may be on the wire, and like all automated creatures she needs the manipulation of author and reader to bring her into being. However, since she has the function within the novel of being "like Jonson's Volpone . . . a fitting scourge for the world which created her,"¹⁴ she is endowed with more spirit and ingenuity than her fellow masks. While we are watching Becky play her clever game with society on our behalf, she has tremendous vitality, but outside the world of the Crawleys, the Osbornes and the Sedleys she has no existence corporeal or visionary. Becky cannot live in the world of the Jarndyces, or the Woodhouses, or in the world of the supermarket and the drive-in bank.


¹⁴ *The Crazy Fabric*, p. 85.
It is because Thackeray makes Becky play the social game so exquisitely well that we attribute to her superior knowledge over her fellow characters. J. Hillis Miller says that

society cannot be anything but a system of conventional rules, exchanges, and substitutions which are like metaphors. As long as a man takes the metaphor as reality he is deluded. When he sees through the metaphor and takes responsibility for living according to it, he is still caught in a play, but now he sees the game as a game.\[15\]

The reader of *Vanity Fair* sees that he is playing a game, and Becky within the novel sees that she is playing a game of pretending she is more virtuous, more wealthy, and more concerned with the welfare of others, than she really is. Both Becky and the reader, in their different realms, thus rise superior to their environment and are not deluded.

The Thackerayan narrator is more of a conscious entertainer and role-player than an exhaustive analyst of situations. His allegiance is to the mask primarily and he acknowledges that the reality of personality is intangible. His talent is more histrionic than scientific. He knows that all conclusions are temporary and to believe otherwise is to become an unwilling victim of illusion. Pendennis, Batchelor, and their fellow narrators do not seek conclusions in their ephemeral worlds, for they are never sure about their own vision; they have only consciousness and no stable character,

and they are always in danger of losing themselves in parts played by others. The attempt to establish central control of a self which is being pulled in various directions at times leads the narrators to adopt a purely impersonal stance. Batchelor's recourse to tabulation of mysterious questions that arise from his story suggests the similar use of objective documentation in *Ulysses*, where Stephen and Bloom make their way to Bloom's lodging, while the narrator seeks to track down the minutiae of their motives, actions and reactions to each other. Batchelor, like the narrator of *Ulysses*, uses semi-legal jargon or civil service officialese in a desperate attempt at objectivity. In both novels, the effect is of an omniscient author drawing attention to his own power over his characters and complete knowledge of their most intimate and fortuitous thoughts. The characters are temporarily reduced to workable puppets, while the narrators catechize themselves self-consciously as they elect to tell the whole truth about their characters. Batchelor poses these questions to himself and his reader:

1. Why did Mrs. Prior, at the lodgings, persist in calling the theatre at which her daughter danced the academy?  
2. What were the special reasons why Mrs. Lovel should be very gracious with her son, and give him 150 L. as soon as he asked for the money?  
3. Why was Fred Lovel's heart nearly broken? And  
4. Who was his consoler? (XXVIII, 223)

Joyce, more exhaustive, uses his official narrator to sum up and explain the many clues to the book's narrative and symbolic meaning that he has scattered throughout the previous 800 pages. The effect of both
passages is nevertheless to emphasize authorial power and reader collusion in an elaborate game with make-believe characters.

In both *Lovel the Widower* and *Ulysses*, the narrator artfully selects his questions in order to further the reader's response to the narrative. He is both clarifying the narrative past and preparing for the narrative future. Both narrators, moreover, by their deliberate and straight-faced adoption of legal and scientific phraseology poke fun at the mask of impersonality which they have chosen. The ostensible desire for objective report frequently verges on the incomprehensible or the ludicrous. Thus Stephen, revived by a cup of cocoa, is enticed by Bloom to sing a jocular song about a Jew:

Did the host encourage his guest to chant in a modulated voice a strange legend on an allied theme?

Reassuringly, their place where none could hear them talk being secluded, reassured, the decocted beverages, allowing for subsolid residual sediment of a mechanical mixture, water plus sugar plus cream plus cocoa, having been consumed.  

And Batchelor answers the question of Mrs. Lovel's generosity to her son in this way:

The reason why Emma, widow of the late Adolphus Loeffel, of Whitechapel Road, sugar-baker, was so particularly gracious to her son, Adolphus Frederick Lovel, Esq., of St. Boniface College, Oxbridge, and principal partner in the house of Loeffel aforesaid, an infant, was that she, Emma, was about to contract a second marriage with the Rev. Samuel Bonnington.  

(XXVIII, 223)

The exhaustiveness and final lack of clarity, due to the clutter of insignificant detail and circumlocutory devices, suggest the difficulty of communication on the part of scrupulous narrators. If the reader does not see his narrator as very stupid in this thoroughness, he will consider him engagingly wicked and fun-loving, even if the fun, in *Ulysses* at least, tends to become enervating to the point of boredom.

The role of the objective reporter can thus be interpreted as another narrative mask, and it is one which, by reminding the reader that he is in a fictional world, deliberately reduces the characters to objects at the mercy of a scrupulously omniscient narrator. In this predominantly clinical mood, no detail is allowed to escape, and the puppets are temporarily reduced to silence. The narrator occupies the centre of the stage as he lays before his reader the vastness of his researches. There is an inhumanity about such a narrator's meticulous objectivity. He attempts to efface himself as well as his characters. In Thackeray's novels this point of stasis is rarely reached, for his narrators are essentially histrionic and reflective rather than analytically exhaustive. They are interested in the changing mood and the play of possibility, and their stories rely upon doubt and suggestiveness.

**Human Variants**

In life, as in novels, we find it convenient to label our surrounding reality, but while objects passively accept their labels, people persist in defying them and surprising us. The Thackerayan
narrator seeks to allow his characters maximum flexibility within their conventionally narrow range. If he could hear the criticism frequently hurled at him for not knowing his characters or for telling lies about them maliciously, he would not take offence, for he makes no pretence to more truthfulness or less malice than his neighbour. It does not come as a shock to him to learn that he has been wholly misreading Dr. Brand Firmin's character any more than he is shocked to learn that Molière has been unfair to Tartuffe. Allowing for the nature of all human frailty, including his own, the typical narrator is never faced with a sudden traumatic realization of his own prejudices. Thus, he is impervious to such shocks as that suffered by Nicholas, the narrator of Anthony Powell's The Acceptance World, who discovers that his own image of his shy and awkward schoolfellow Widmerpool, is not held by Widmerpool's business associates. Nicholas is similarly shattered to discover that his current mistress, Joan, has in the past had a love-affair with the paunchy and boyish Spaulding whose mind and body spelt repulsion to the narrator. Being an observer who is only an occasional actor in his own fiction, the typical Thackerayan narrator does not have to present a consistent front to his reader. Since his characters are tied to their parts in a fairly simple narrative, he himself can afford to be random and floating.

Before examining the relationship of reader and extraneous narrator to the masks of the primary illusion, I will briefly deal with the character-narrator who is, in some respects, less disinterested. Whether the narrator has a personal part in his story or not, whether
he is telling his own story or presenting a wholly or partly invented story, he uses his characters as sounding-boards for his own self-scrutiny. Usually the characters fall into some fairly conventional pattern involving a hero and a number of villains. Legend, fable and Biblical and Greek myth lie readily to hand, for appropriate use in the narrator's process of self-discovery. Never are the characters of value in and for themselves but only as they reflect different aspects of the narrator's psyche. The narrator's own bias and prejudices are plain to see, yet because he sees them himself, he cannot easily be typed or characterized. He is always on the point of shedding his own skin, as it were, and putting himself in the position of his reader or an observer. Two examples should make clear the method by which the narrator's fleeting consciousness and generalized awareness enable him to elude classification.

George Warrington, in *The Virginians*, tells how his mother opposed his love-match with the impecunious and untitled Theodosia Lambert, daughter of the honest Christian gentleman, Colonel Lambert. George refuses to condemn his mother for calling down the wrath of God on his head and cutting him off from his inheritance, because in her he sees personified all human aspiration with its facility for self-justification. He becomes by her action not simply an outcast and cheated elder son sacrificing himself for love's sake, but part of a vast human procession struggling with conviction towards some illusory goal. His own wrongs and sufferings, his own part in the mock-drama of Pyramus and Thisbe, are momentarily forgotten as George's
mind moves beyond his own present situation and dwarfs it to insignificance.

When our pride, our avarice, our interest, our desire to dominate, are worked upon, are we not for ever pestering heaven to decide in their favour? In our great American quarrel, did we not on both sides appeal to the skies as to the justice of our causes, sing *Te Deum* for victory, and boldly express our confidence that the right should prevail? Was America right because she was victorious? Then I suppose Poland was wrong because she was defeated?—How am I wandering into this digression about Poland, America, and what not, and all the while thinking of a little woman now no more, who appealed to heaven and confronted it with a thousand texts out of its own book, because her son wanted to make a marriage not of her liking! We appeal, we implore, we go down on our knees, we demand blessings, we shriek out for sentence according to law; the great course of the great world moves on; we pant and strive and struggle; we hate; we rage; we weep passionate tears; we reconcile; we race and win; we race and lose; we pass away, and other little strugglers succeed; our days are spent; our night comes, and another morning rises, which shines on us no more. (XIV, 191-192)

Where George Warrington loses both himself and his character in an Olympian digression on human aspiration, Charles Batchelor's wandering consciousness moves more nimbly and less majestically in realms of particulars and personalities. In *Lovel the Widower*, as in *Barry Lyndon* and *Henry Esmond*, the reader must interpolate between the utterances of the narrators what he knows of their own biases. These novels have something akin to the dramatic monologue where the action takes place in the narrator's mind. By keeping the action there, the author presents a consciousness which has its own bias and character, its own earnest desire for self-articulation. These narrators, in varying degrees, are more interested in self-justification
than in telling a story which gives them opportunity for imaginative
digression. Thus Charles Batchelor reduces Lovel's mother-in-law to an
ogre-figure on whom he can vent his wrath and display to us his own
furious prejudices, yet his frequent mockery of his own story and his
denial of its resemblance to anything in life show a fear that he
might be giving himself away. Batchelor, in his passionate hatred for
Mrs. Baker and his foolish love for Elizabeth Prior, is infinitely
more aware than Barry Lyndon. He indulges these passions but one
part of him remains behind as watcher. If he has to cast one as a
villainess and the other as a heroine he will do so, but he does not
accept the permanence of either label. For Mrs. Baker, "who, to be
sure, might do duty for a villain, but she considers herself as
virtuous a woman as ever was born" (XXVIII, 198), is little more than
a mask in the drama. Her function is to provide an outlet for his
own malice, and he is not interested in her as a personality in
her own right.

In his awareness of the many-sidedness of personality,
Batchelor frequently gives the reader the sense of the narrator's
own transcendence over his own limitations. It is, however, the
transcendence of knowledge rather than a demonstration of his
capacity or desire for actual change. In this he goes beyond the
normal awareness of the speaker of the dramatic monologue, and
certainly beyond the awareness of a Barry Lyndon or Henry Esmond. He
succeeds in taking on what would be the reader's part in a dramatic
monologue. Robert Langbaum makes it clear that the reader is involved
with the speaker of the dramatic monologue for the sake of experiencing his life, and it is "because the speaker himself is so much particularized, because his characterization through contradictory qualities renders inapplicable the publicly recognized categories of character, that we find in him a pole for sympathy." Batchelor, like Clamence in Camus' The Fall, goes beyond such a speaker in giving words not only to his own thoughts but his reader's. Speaker and reader seem at times to change places and the reader knows that if he mentally supplies the deficiency in his narrator he is at the same time supplying his own deficiency. Batchelor openly calls himself the muff of his story, then suggests to his reader that even he might be a muff in one context or another:

But is many a respectable man of our acquaintance much better? and do muffs know that they are what they are, or, knowing it, are they unhappy? Do girls decline to marry one if he is rich? Do we refuse to dine with one? I listened to one at Church last Sunday, with all the women crying and sobbing; and, oh dear me! how finely he preached! Don't we give him great credit for wisdom and eloquence in the House of Commons? Don't we give him important commands in the army? Can you, or can you not, point out one who has been made a peer? Doesn't your wife call one in the moment any of the children are ill? Don't we read his dear poems, or even novels? Yes; perhaps even this one is read and written by—Well? Quid rides? Do you mean that I am painting a portrait which hangs before me every morning in the looking-glass when I am shaving? Après? Do you suppose that I suppose that I have not infirmities like my neighbours? Am I weak? It is notorious to all my friends there is a certain dish I can't resist: no, not if I have already eaten twice too much at

dinner. So, dear sir, or madam, have you your weakness—your irresistible dish of temptation? (or if you don't know it, your friends do). (XXVIII, 198)

The typical narrator is one who has come to terms with his own prejudices and romantic predilections; he is able to enjoy his own follies and phobias and act them out through people he shapes to fit his own world, who are plainly puppet-figures or functional characters in his drama. He is what Stephen Pepper would call the "normal man" in that he has come to terms with his own abnormalities. "Only a normal man," says Pepper, "with a well integrated and relatively free emotional life, can perceive normality. Moreover, he alone can also perceive abnormality. He perceives it not only because he can contrast it against the background of his own normality, but because in himself he has the impulses which have become exaggerated in the abnormal man and he resonates to the impulses and directly feels their exaggeration." The narrator realizes, moreover, that he is dependant on his puppets to express his own conflicts. He needs hero, villain, saint and rogue to make his internal conflicts come alive. Although he knows that "we are no heroes nor angels; neither are we fiends from abodes unmentionable, black assassins, treacherous Iagos, familiar with stabbing and poison" (XXVIII, 199), he has to give life and interest to his story, and "you know, my dear madam, all good women in novels are insipid" (p. 201). The un-named narrator, Pendennis, the Manager,

and, to a lesser degree, Batchelor and George Warrington, see themselves painted larger than life in the characters of their stories. They are pure examples of what G.G. Sedgewick calls "the Irony of Detachment or Spiritual Freedom." This is "the attitude of mind held by a philosophic observer when he abstracts himself from the contradictions of life and views them all impartially, himself perhaps included in the ironic vision."  

In submitting to the novelist's design, the reader permits his complex and indeterminate self to be simplified and crystallized. He is re-created anew by his author. He becomes, as Walker Gibson says, "the 'mock reader'—whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language." Gibson points out that in the phenomena we call the reading experience, there is a spectral part assigned which we must take if we are to experience a work fully. We must not allow our "normal" self to enter the part, for it will drag in the extraneous and unnecessary controls which are useful only in our day-to-day life, but must be put aside if we are to become a "mock-reader."

If the "real author" is to be regarded as to a great degree distracting and mysterious, lost in history, it seems equally true that the "real reader," lost in today's history, is no less mysterious and sometimes irrelevant. The fact is that every time we open the pages of another piece of writing, we are embarked on a new adventure in which we become a new person—a person as controlled and definable and as remote from the chaotic self of daily life as the lover in the

sonnet. Subject to the degree of our literary sensibility, we are created by the language.

The "mock-reader" is naturally a multiform creation capable of becoming many parts within an individual work. He will agree, disagree, or withhold judgement on both the narrator's pronouncements on the characters, and those of the characters upon themselves and each other. In a Thackeray novel, he will have to take many shapes as, for example, a young lady reader of fashionable novels, a guilty husband, an ignorant parent, a fellow clubman, a humble worshipper or a sentimental mother. Not only does he become these parts but he also puts on the masks of the characters. This does not mean that he necessarily comes to understand how they feel, but he comes to appreciate them for what they are—masks, parts in a drama that is archetypal and inclusive, for it transcends particular variations of time, place and person.

But the "mock-reader" is not only required to put on the masks; he must also take them off, and see just how far these borrowed robes "fit" him, or how well they "become" him. To do this he must look into the mirror which is held partly by the narrator and partly by himself. The reader of Thackeray discovers that "the world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face" (VF, 19). Thackeray's primary fiction displays, with a constantly lurking parody and irony—perhaps seen to best advantage in the initial illustrations to the chapters—myths of innocence, heroic myths and love myths. The secondary fictional world both contains and undermines

20 "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," College English, 11(1950), 266; 265.
these myths within the created consciousness of the "mock-reader."
Maud Bodkin says that the artist performs for the community "the
function of objectifying in imaginative form experience potentially
common to all, but exceptionally deep and vivid, and revealing a
certain tension and ideal reconcilement of opposite forces present in
actual life." Thackeray is less interested in expressing this
"ideal reconcilement" than in the process of applying the ready-made
paradigm to random and elusive experience.

The narrator, like his reader, contains both primitive child
and sophisticated adult. He is torn between the magical world of art
and the threatening and less reassuring world where action and
decisions are demanded. The reader is made to see that beneath the
practical adult self which he shows to the world there lies a
delighted and imaginative child who is devoted to illusion. Thus
Pendennis addresses his reader, the text emerging from the Good Fairy's
magic wand, as she rides away to her Bower of Bliss in her resplendent
coach:

You know—all good boys and girls at Christmas know—that,
before the last scene of the pantomime, when the Good Fairy
ascends in a blaze of glory, and Harlequin and Columbine
take hands, having danced through all their tricks and
troubles and tumbles, there is a dark, brief, seemingly
meaningless penultimate scene, in which the performers
appear to grope about perplexed. (XVI, 448)

But just as Hansel and Gretel's or Cinderella's final ordeals are

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21 Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of
resolved in a happy ending, so this pantomime is preparing to satisfy the longings of the spectator. It is after this climax that the reader is left face to face with the narrator, with the effect of a child who watches the trappings of pantomime swept away leaving him alone in the cheerless and unassuring world of his own vulnerable reality:

I tell you the house will be empty and you will be in the cold air. When the boxes have got their nightgowns on, and you are all gone, and I have turned off the gas, and am in the empty theatre alone in the darkness, I promise you I shall not be merry. Never mind! We can make jokes though we are ever so sad. We can jump over head and heels, though I declare the pit is half emptied already, and the last orange-woman has slunk away. Encore un pirouette, Columbine! Saute, Arlequin, mon ami! (XVI, 449)

While the reader is in the primary fictional world, the characters speak wholly for him, for he identifies with them in the same way that the child identified with the pantomime. When he retreats into the secondary fictional world, however, he sees that he has been in a world of masks, which, although they were psychic probes that opened up ways of self-discovery through role-playing, now are sadly realized to be inadequate or temporary.

The reader is thus forced back upon himself; he is interested in the fictional characters purely as modes of self-exploration. Henri Bergson says that "what has . . . interested us [in a drama] is not so much what we have been told about others as the glimpse we have caught of ourselves—a whole host of ghostly feelings, emotions and events that would fain have come into real existence."22 The characters

in a drama, an epic or a novel have no reality in themselves, but we invest them with our reality. Thackeray, however, takes pleasure in letting his reader see that he is involved with an insubstantial pageant which will fade and leave not a rack behind.

There is a common critical preference for "round" characters rather than "flat" ones, and the creation of the former in the novel is frequently felt to be an artistic triumph. Characters who are rounded must seem to have some kind of existence outside the scheme of the novels that embody them. As Geoffrey Tillotson puts it, "Unless the personages are made flesh, how can they seem to be tempted as we are, how can we feel with or for them?" Tillotson finds this roundness in Thackeray's Barry Lyndon. To him "Lyndon seems an actual person . . .", is so credible that the reader "goes in awe of him." He goes on to say that "Lyndon is apparently an actual man," and of Becky Sharp he claims, "I saw her at an evening party the other day." A willingness to become emotionally involved in the reality of a fictitious character is an essential aspect of the artistic experience, but there are dangers in becoming too much like Don Quixote confronted by the puppets. When characters, who are painted with commendable regard for techniques analogous to the trompe l'oeil painters, are taken as real people, critical perspectives cease to be operative.

One part of the reader must sympathize with Tillotson's view

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of the characters of Barry and Becky, but another should realize that these "round" characters are little more than cleverly animated types. Barry is a rogue and boaster type to whom the reader must mentally play the part of eiron, and Becky is a clever worldly aspirer in whom the reader should recognize himself. Furthermore, neither Barry nor Becky has much in common with the more rounded and seemingly "free" characters that we frequently meet in Lawrence or Tolstoy. Anna, Karenin, and Skrebensky do not have the driving monomania of the Thackerayan villains and rogues, and they are, consequently, less threatening and compelling since, like the reader, they are made up of many conflicting parts pulling in different directions.

When Tillotson says that "Barry Lyndon is . . . terrifying because he is as credibly a man as Hamlet or Othello," the boundaries between art and life seem to have been confused for little purpose. 24 In life we may meet, on occasion, boastful rogues and jealous husbands, if not vacillating princes whose father's spirits reveal the true nature of their villainous uncles, but the reality of these figures is confined to their setting. For the average adult in the greater part of his waking life, people are not terrifying, and their credibility consists in the variety of their environment and responses to it, rather than in their predilection for a particular course. Hamlet and Othello may show some degree of flexibility, but their reality for us lies in their "untruth to life"—in their violent rages, their incredible obsessions,

24 Ibid., p. 243.
and unlikely idealisms. If we met Barry Lyndon, a Hamlet or an Othello tomorrow, we would surely say he was behaving "incredibly," if not "incredibly badly."

Fictional characters allow the reader to invest them with his own problems and aspirations. This happens whether the characters are "round" or "flat," life-like or grotesquely incredible and blatantly schematic. If the characters are "flat" like Giant Despair, Mr. Micawber or Jos Sedley, their range of movement will tend to be more restricted and the burden they carry on the reader's behalf more uniform than that of more "round" characters such as Tertius Lydgate, Ursula Brangwen or Bloom. The reactions of the first group to any given situation would be more predictable than those of the second group who are more like ourselves in having a seemingly wider range of freedom and choice. But, of course, the latter must remain as associated in our minds with their fictive environment as the former, and ultimately we may feel that Vanity Fair is just as real as Joyce's Dublin.

We may conveniently say that the primary world of Thackeray's novels has a predominant quality of comedy, while in the secondary world, irony, with its painful sense of reader involvement, is the dominant mode. Bergson says that "comedy depicts characters we have come across and shall meet again. It takes note of similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes." If the reader of Thackeray's novels looks to life rather than to art for the framework within which to see the characters, he will not only conclude that Thackeray's

view of the world is jaundiced, but, more important, he will miss much of
the exuberance and wit with which his author plays with accepted forms.
The primary world of the novels gives us the traditional happy ending
of comedy, while the secondary world leaves reader and narrator facing
each other in an empty theatre as we have seen in *Philip*, or shutting
up the box of puppets as in *Vanity Fair*, or day-dreaming over the
fable of *The Newcomes*. There is, in the conclusion of the secondary
fiction, a sense of inconclusiveness and suspension from the comic
entertainment which has been presented. This sense of return to the
world of contingency after the footlights have been dimmed is also
shown in *Pendennis* and *Lovel the Widower*. In *Esmond* and *The Virginians*,
a mature narrator looks back on the theatre, as it were, of his own
life, and commends God for uniting him with an angelic wife. Although
the narrators are here within their own fiction, the reader does not
take either Henry Esmond's or George Warrington's wife-worship too
seriously. After reaching what he calls the summit of his domestic
felicity, George has already confessed to boredom, and the editor
of his journals regrets three pages torn from the MS. book which were
about to tell us of the period following the consummation of his
happiness.26

26Saintsbury misses the ironic juxtaposition of the two fictional
worlds, the necessarily typical and positive seen through the eyes of a
dubious and conflict-ridden narrator, when he says "I am not sure that
the three pages torn out of Sir George Warrington's notebook are quite
legitimate or artistic."A Consideration of Thackeray (London: Oxford
Through his juxtaposition of the two fictional worlds, Thackeray does justice to the reader's demands for the neatness of form and the incompleteness which a sense of life necessarily requires. He gives us, what Barbara Hardy finds in Sons and Lovers, examples of "categorical form blurred by truthfulness." Northrop Frye points out that "all lifelike characters, whether in drama or fiction, owe their consistency to the appropriateness of the stock type which belongs to their dramatic function." In his primary fictional world, Thackeray offers us stock types, who, although they seem lifelike to an exceptional degree while we are under their spell, are plainly puppet-figures set in motion by the narrator. The narrator, however carried away he becomes at times by his own virtuosity in creating an illusion, nearly always returns his reader to the theatre, the puppet-show or the world of fable. Illusion, theatricality and fictional artifices are deliberately contrasted with a world of greyness and unanswered questions. The conclusion of Lovel is typical:

We may hear of LOVEL MARRIED some other day, but here is an end of LOVEL THE WIDOWER. Valete et plaudite, you good people, who have witnessed the little comedy. Down with the curtain; cover up the boxes; pop out the gas-lights. Ho! cab. Take us home, and let us have some tea; and go to bed. Goodnight, my little players. We have been merry together, and we part with soft hearts and somewhat rueful countenances, don't we? (XXVIII, 370)

Like Prospero at the end of *The Tempest* or Chaucer at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the narrator emphasizes the illusory nature of this world he has presented, but at the same time shares with his reader an affection for the fictive creatures who have acted out the dreams and desires of them both. This sense of joint-participation by reader and narrator in a shared experience runs all through the secondary fictional world of the novels.

Through an unashamed adoption of the conventional character type and traditional story, narrator and reader are enabled to conduct researches into the nature of the self. Illusion has its own reality, for the self can invest all parts with its own being, can become hero, villain, saint and sinner, can see at one and the same time the desirability and the impossibility of happy endings and the banishment of villains. Lionel Trilling points out that "love, morality, honor, esteem . . . are the components of a created reality. If we are to call art an illusion then we must call most of the activities and satisfactions of the ego illusions." By accepting the illusion frankly as an illusion, the reader can experiment with possible modes of being. He does not simply escape into a fantasy world, he does not in Freud's terms forsake a reality principle for a pleasure principle, but extends his own range of tolerance by extending the boundaries of the self.

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This stretching of the self, through vicarious experience, to embrace "other" ways of being is open only to the reader who leaves behind the world of "normality" and "common sense." The reader of a Thackeray novel, of any novel, must be prepared to travel into strange and unknown realms where he will meet figures like Barnes Newcome, Emily Costigan, and Old Lady Kew who will have scant similarity to anyone he is likely to meet in life. Yet, however fantastic these figures may be, compared to those of our normal worlds, they have in a way more reality and power over our subconscious. We can dismiss them from our thoughts, ridicule them as fictions, but they subtly modify our way of seeing, they reach out from the page and touch our lives in ways that our friends and acquaintances frequently fail to do. Real people are too busy living their own lives, but fictional characters lie quietly waiting for us to recognize them and unrealized areas of ourselves through their agency.

When I am immersed in a play or novel, I can live out fantasies about my future possibilities of existence while at the same time I work through, existentially and creatively, past modes of life which I have never confronted before in their dynamic impact on my life.

The relationship of the reader to Thackeray's characters must be complex and varied. When the reader is immersed in the primary fictional world he is confronted with various symbolic figures whose reality consists in their playing a categorical part in a fairly

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consistent pattern. Under the influence of the narrator's doubts, qualifications and speculations in the secondary fictional world, however, the reader finds these characters more elusive, and, as in his ordinary life, hard and fast categories no longer apply. The pattern becomes random and incomplete, open to a variety of interpretations. One part of the reader is quite prepared for Becky as villainess to commit all manner of malicious deeds and he will cheerfully sacrifice Lord Steyne to the embraces of Old Nick, but another part needs to justify Becky and allow for Steyne's humanity. Frank Kermode says of the novel genre that "nowhere else, perhaps, are we so conscious of the dissidence between inherited forms and our own reality."  

Thackeray's novels, while sounding this dissident note, make us aware that our sense of our own reality depends to a considerable degree on our perpetual adoption and violation of these inherited forms.

In his attitude towards the characters of the novels, the reader's guide is the narrator's tone, which is not usually consistent. In Chapter X of *The Newcomes* for instance, Pendennis tells the story of Ethel's youth according to the story Clive Newcome told him. Yet he then introduces a parallel fairy story involving King, Queen, Princess, and Prince Prettyman, the scapegrace hero who escapes parental tyranny to go and sow his wild oats. The digression in favour of the follies of youth is extended to include Prince Hal, the Prince Regent, Lord Warwick, and Tom Jones. The theme of rebel youth is tangentially related to Ethel's spirited resistance to the

cruel and stupid values of the aspiring Newcomes. We have not so much Clive's thoughts about the youthful Ethel as Pendennis' own outburst in favour of youthful prodigality. By Chapter XLV, Pendennis is much less sure of his youthful heroine. Although he would like to blame Old Lady Kew entirely for the attempted match with Lord Parintosh, he cannot easily exonerate Ethel:

I hope there was a good excuse for the queen of this history, and that it was her wicked domineering old prime minister who led her wrong. Otherwise, I say, we would have another dynasty. Oh, to think of a generous nature, and the world, and nothing but the world to occupy it! (VIII, 348)

These perplexing shifts of viewpoint are an intrinsic part of the ironist's method, for "all ironists like to baffle us, to test our mental and moral agility as we read."32 The neatness of categories of character and of theme tend to become blurred under the open-mindedness, and at times perverse-mindedness, of the narrator of Thackeray's novels. One part of Pendennis would have Ethel as the traditional comic heroine overcoming, what Frye would call, the "humorous blocking characters" of her parents.33 On the other hand, he invests her with his own sense of the way things happen in life, and realizes she may not fit the part assigned:

For a heroine of a story, be she ever so clever, handsome, and sarcastic, I don't think for my part, at this present stage of

32 The Crazy Fabric, p. 113.

33 Anatomy of Criticism, p. 172.
the tale, Miss Ethel Newcome occupies a very dignified position. . . . A girl of great beauty, high temper, and strong natural intellect, who submits to be dragged hither and thither in an old grandmother's leash, and in pursuit of a husband who will run away from the couple, such a person, I say, is in a very awkward position as a heroine; and I declare if I had another ready to my hand (and unless there were extenuating circumstances), Ethel should be deposed at this very sentence.

But a novelist must go on with his heroine, as a man with his wife, for better or worse, and to the end. For how many years have the Spaniards borne with their gracious queen, not because she was faultless, but because she was there. (VIII, 342-343)

Pendennis gives us the sense that issues in life are so much more complex, shapeless and subject to fluctuating mood and point of view than those of art, that if he is to write a novel that is true to life it will be a makeshift and imperfect affair. Though he appeals at times to the idealist within his reader, here he appeals to the iconoclast.

Since the mature Thackerayan narrator finds ironies not only in his subject matter but in the very act of writing, it follows that his, and consequently his reader's, view of the characters will fluctuate between conviction and doubt of their fidelity to an ideal pattern and conviction and doubt that he is telling the truth about his friends' innermost reality. For the ironist "is deeply concerned with both aspects of the contradictions he perceives; and this concern leads to an ambivalence of attitude to one side and to the other—to both at once." And the ironist, being "not sure which is and which merely seems,"\(^{34}\) attempts an inclusiveness that is bound to

\(^{34}\)Andrew H. Wright, "Irony and Fiction," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 12 (1953), 113.
be inconclusive, characterized by open questions and loose ends. The narrator is never quite sure about the conduct and motives of his characters, and though he would apparently like to tell a simple story about heroic youth overthrowing parental tyranny and worldly scheming, he is sceptical about the neatness of such ideal patterns.

In a novel, reader, author, narrator and characters are caught up in a "dance of confrontations, role-playings, and clashes of will." The reader allows various aspects of his "real" self to be drawn into an "unreal" world. Thus, Thackeray's reader is told not to trust his children, his wife or even himself; he is asked to wait while the narrator prepares to introduce him to Miss Prior; he is asked whether he would attend social functions in places he knows do not exist, if he were invited; he is advised not to tell his old boring jokes to his family, and warned that if he does he can only expect hypocritical responses. The reader is thus put on a similar footing to the fictional characters, and in fact becomes partly fictional. Luckily, the reader can withdraw himself at will from this world and see that he has been nothing but an actor in a theatre which he then beholds empty as the characters dissolve into thin air.

While under the fictional spell, the way the reader feels about the characters is analogous to the way he feels about people outside the book. He projects personal feeling into them and sees them as more or less wicked, heroic, or beautiful because he has these feelings

inside himself and they need to be expressed by becoming affixed to another rather than floating freely within his subconscious. As Darley in *Justine* is told, "the love you now feel for Justine is not a different love for a different object but the same love you feel for Melissa trying to work itself out through the medium of Justine,"\(^{36}\) so the reader of *Pendennis* is told

> You have an instinct within you which inclines you to attach yourself to some one: you meet Somebody: you hear Somebody constantly praised: you walk, or ride, or waltz, or talk, or sit in the same pew at church with Somebody: you meet again, and again, and— . . . Or, the affair is broken off, and then, poor dear wounded heart! why then you meet Somebody Else, and twine your young affections round number two. It is your nature so to do. Do you suppose it is all for the man's sake that you love, and not a bit for your own? (VI, 26)

The reader's feelings about the characters in the novels are shown to be based not on their value—for they are intrinsically valueless—but on the reader's need to find an object onto whom he may project love, hatred or a sense of beauty. Potential heroines such as Laura Bell and Theodosia Lambert, and villains like Dr. Firmin and Barnes Newcome, detach themselves less from their functional emblems than others, but the bias of their narrator is made plain in each case. The narrator of *Philip* is well-aware that in choosing to write a story with Philip as nominal hero, he neglects many other alternative stories, some of which might paint Philip in an unfavourable light, or cast him even in the role of villain. Although the reader is, so to speak, imprisoned within the story-teller's

\(^{36}\) *Justine*, p. 130.
consciousness, this consciousness has the capacity to expand beyond the bounds of "story" and become aware of its own subjectivity. The narrator comes to find for example, in Proust's words, "the purely subjective nature of the phenomena that we call love, or how it creates, so to speak, a fresh, third, a supplementary person, distinct from the person whom the world knows by the same name, a person most of whose constituent elements are derived from ourselves."\(^{37}\)

Knowing that he is offering us a supplementary person who is a mere convenience derived from his own desire for self-expression, the narrator repeatedly stresses the artifice of his story and its purely arbitrary nature. The characters become mere pawns used to evoke a vicarious response from the reader who should recognize that, though it is an old and trite story he is involved in, it is also his story. It is de te fabula. Although this seeming abjuration of the characters should tend to diminish the reader's sense of their substantiality, and although the narrator frequently shows more concern with the ramifications of his own train of thought than with the fortunes of his characters, the characters persist in disavowing their unreality because they are predominantly ideal constructs, symbols whose counterparts are embedded within the reader's psyche. Thackeray, as his illustrations frequently emphasize, is happy to work with traditional symbol and myth such as the serpent in the garden, Cupid and Psyche or St. George. These traditional images offer stability

and a sense of continuity. Against this static background, Thackeray's narrator indulges freely in following his own fluctuating moods, probing into his own consciousness and his reader's rather than the particular minds of his characters.

When J.W. Dodds claims that "stroke by stroke, in conversation and description, Thackeray brings out the subtle differences which make individuals of his people," one must surely demur. It is the generic consciousness that Thackeray reveals rather than individual variants, which are accounted for by hints and suggestions or the narrator's admission that he can never really know the darker depths of an individual's heart. In *Pendennis*, for instance, the hero, as the illustrations on the title pages of the first two volumes make clear, must choose either the worldly expediency of a political career and Blanche Amory or the domestic felicity of a humble home and Laura Bell. While Arthur and Blanche play Cupid and Psyche to each other, write romantic poetry and indulge in pretty dreams, Laura remains the constant sister, the saint and good angel, sound as the bell of her name. Pen has to choose Laura's genuine love rather than the blanched, pretendedly pure love of the convict's daughter who appears in many disguises and stands predominantly for affectation and instability. The dice is heavily loaded against the false heroine whose role is that of seducer of the hero away from the plain and simple Laura. The initial illustration to chapter LXXII shows Pen

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as harlequin offering a love letter to a masked and gowned lady. Differences there are and must be between the parts, but their "individuality" is plainly dictated, and happily accepted by the reader as being dictated, by the needs of the plot.

Summary

In the primary world of Thackeray's novels, then, we are faced not with individuals but with types whom we enjoy not for the sense they give us of being complex like ourselves, but because of their simplicity and predictability. We enjoy them all the more perhaps for not being like flesh and blood, for we are not disturbed by their absurdity, wickedness and folly, which have a comic inevitability. The secondary fictional world asks us to reflect on the convention and supply life to the drama by our own experience. When Mark Spilka is outraged by the unreality of a doll-like figure such as Amelia, he ignores the fact that the convention being parodied demands a sweet heroine. Knowing this figure as an ideal type, and knowing, moreover, that Thackeray is aware that she is a dream figure whose reality depends upon the convictions of the moment, it is futile to complain that "the woman scarcely exists in her own right." 39

The fate of Thackeray's "heroes," "villains" and "lovers," as we have seen, does not correspond to their suggested parts in their respective novels. Becky and Barnes end respectably and prosperously,

39 Mark Spilka, "A Note on Thackeray's Amelia," NCF, 10(1955), 206.
while the triumphs of Esmond, Dobbin and George Warrington are ambivalent. Dr. Firmin and Lady Baker refuse to accept the part of villain in which their hesitant narrator would see them. Lovers are united either in fable-land, as in The Newcomes, or equivocally, as in Vanity Fair, Esmond, The Virginians, and Philip. Ideal constructs in the novels are continually reduced to their human context with emphasis on the disparities between aspiration and fulfillment, desire and capacity, and the conflicting demands of the truths of feeling and fact. The uncertainty of the narrator's capacity to distinguish with any degree of permanence between the ideal and the lived "reality" drives him to the retreat of the play world where each role is an expression of the moment's truth, and is self-contained and gives temporary satisfaction. William Dobbin, Henry Esmond, Henry and George Warrington, Arthur Pendennis, and Clive Newcome are thus potential heroes, who, on occasion, do act heroically. Whether they are "real" people to their narrators or whether they merely act out their narrator's own heroic fantasies as puppet figures—and they do both as occasion demands—they do duty for epic hero and chivalric lover, although they may also be at times, rogue, scapegrace, muff, hypocrite, snob and spooney.

Thackeray's fiction moves within the conventions of popular melodrama, fashionable fiction, epic, and chivalric romance. From these worlds he draws a variety of stage and literary types such as Altamont, Lightfoot, Sir Francis Clavering, Amelia Sedley, Blanche Amory, Dr. Brand Firmin, Beatrix Esmond, George Osborn, George Warrington and Henry Esmond. The world of fairy-tale lies behind the
bourgeois worlds of the other novels from *Vanity Fair* to *Loveit the Widower*. It is also insistently present in the fragment *Denis Duval*, whose nominal hero is at various times seen as Adam, Romeo and Humpty Dumpty. Many of the novels have a wicked fairy who wields her power through the spell of money and family influence. Young Henry Esmond has an unjust stepmother and an aunt who resembles a wicked tragedy queen. Caroline Brandon in *Philip* is seen by the narrator as an injured Cinderella whose Prince Charming proves false, while Agnes and Blanche Twysden appear on another occasion as the hypocritical ugly sisters who fail to recognize the true worth of the poor Cinderella, Mrs. Lovel, until she becomes socially and financially influential. In chapter XXII of *The Virginians*, Theodosia Lambert becomes for the narrator a runaway Princess while Harry Warrington is her knight in shining armour ready to overcome ogres and dragons before besieging the fortress where his beloved is imprisoned.

It is plain, then, that Thackeray is not primarily concerned with placing before his reader the inner consciousness of individual characters, but with the fragments of many conventions as they pass through the narrator's mind. The kind of participation the novel typically induces, according to Ian Watt, "makes us feel that we are in contact not with literature but with the raw materials of life itself as they are momentarily reflected in the minds of the protagonists." If this is so, then the Thackerayan protagonist is

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atypical; but then so are the protagonists of novels such as Tom Jones, Oliver Twist, The Egoist, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, and much of Ulysses. A more inclusive statement was made by R.L. Stevenson in 1883, when he said, "All representative art, which can be said to live, is both realistic and ideal; and the realism about which we quarrel is a matter purely of externals." Stevenson, attacking the doctrine of naturalism as "a mere whim of veering fashion," declares that it "has made us turn our back upon the larger, more various, and more romantic art of yore." Watt's phrase "the raw materials of life itself" is clear in nothing except that it is "not . . . literature." The possibility that literature may give a perceiving mind the tools whereby it is able to organize and make coherent the raw materials of life seems to pass unnoticed here. The mind of the Thackerayan narrator, at any rate, expresses itself by showing the tools of art at work upon these intractable raw materials.

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CHAPTER V

ILLUSION AT WORK AND PLAY: HENRY ESMOND AND PHILIP

There is a time when the romance of life
Should be shut up, and closed with double clasp.
—Landor, Last Fruit Off An Old Tree

... wherein was something finite and sad, for the human soul
at its maximum wants a sense of the infinite.
—D.H. Lawrence, The Rainbow

Now my dear fellow I must once for all tell you I have not one
Idea of the truth of any of my speculations—I shall never be
a Reasoner because I do not care to be in the right, when
retired from bickering and in a proper philosophical temper—
—Keats, Letters

Clearly, Henry Esmond differs in aim, tone and method from the
serialized novels. Conceived and published as a unified whole, it
combines the influence of Thackeray's research into eighteenth-century
history with a mood of personal despondency brought on by his affair
with Mrs. Brookfield. It bears the mark of meticulous scholarship
within its sedate and pensive mood. It "is much too grave and sad"
for part publication, Thackeray declared (Letters, III, 24). This
novel, which Thackeray saw as his finest achievement, was written
while the author was secluded from his family, who were for once not
allowed to share in the creative process: "Esmond did not seem to
be part of our lives, as Pendennis had been," Anne Thackeray regretted
(X, v). Her father himself termed Esmond "a book of cutthroat
melancholy" and said that it was "as dreary and dull as if it were
ture" (Letters, II, 807; III, 100).
Moreover, *Esmond* was the only Thackeray novel to be published without illustrations, and the original binding and typography were imitations of eighteenth-century book-making. ¹ Even later editions of the novel were sparingly illustrated and lacked the characteristic initial drawings of the author.

In *Esmond* there are fewer addresses to the reader than in the typical Thackeray novel, and when the narrator does speak to his reader it is usually not to the novel-reader of the nineteenth century but to Esmond's own descendants. The generalized comments, the improvised characters, the witty anecdotes that draw the reader and dare him to make a judgement or pronounce conclusively on the truth, are, if not relinquished, drastically reduced. When such passages do occur, they are usually worked into the story or given out as the reflections of young Esmond—as in this axiomatic declaration to Esmond's grandchildren, provoked by an account of the Colonel's slavery to Beatrix:

> And who does not know how ruthlessly women will tyrannize when they are let to domineer? and who does not know how useless advice is? I could give good counsel to my descendants, but I know they'll follow their own way, for all their grandfather's sermon. A man gets his own experience about women, and will take nobody's hearsay; nor, indeed, is the young fellow worth a fig that would. 'Tis I that am in love with my mistress, not my old grandmother that counsels me: 'tis I that have fixed the value of the thing I would have, and know the price I would pay for it. It may be worthless to you, but 'tis all my life to me. Had Esmond possessed the Great Mogul's crown and all his

diamonds, or all the Duke of Marlborough's money, or all the ingots sunk at Vigo, he would have given them all for this woman. A fool he was, if you will; but so is a sovereign a fool, that will give half a principality for a little crystal as big as a pigeon's egg, and called a diamond; so is a wealthy nobleman a fool, that will face danger or death, and spend half his life, and all his tranquility, caballing for a blue riband; so is a Dutch merchant a fool, that hath been known to pay ten thousand crowns for a tulip. There's some particular prize we all of us value, and that every man of spirit will venture his life for. (XI, 158-159)

The local historical references that accumulate in this passage are calculated to demonstrate the final proposition, which is not only the particular point of the address but the controlling theme of the novel. Never does Esmond allow his imagination, in such a "digressive" passage, to take wing, to activate the scene of the Great Mogul, the Dutch merchant, or the sovereign, casting away their riches for worthless ends. Esmond has reached a point of vantage in his maturity, and looking back on his past he is able to draw general conclusions about mankind. There is a marked absence of irresolution or misgiving in his tone. He moves straight to his settled opinion, pausing only long enough to gather the necessary evidence.

Furthermore, the images of riches are related to a pattern that runs throughout the novel. Beatrix is always a "prize" or a highly prized "object" and associated with rich and precious jewels, or lustrous crowns. Esmond, himself, gives his cousin the family diamonds on the news of her engagement to Lord Hamilton. Beatrix is satisfied, finally, with nothing less than the Pretender's crown. The point to be stressed is that this seemingly digressive passage
has a vital relation to the novel's paramount theme: the incalculable value of individual idealism in contrast to worldly acquisition. It is of course, triumphantly asserted in Esmond's dual abdication of his legal claim to Castlewood.

A typical device employed by Thackeray in his major novels is to have a friendly but detached teller comment on a youthful scapegrace-hero's progress, from passion for worldly sirens to a final realization of the genuine humble virtue near at hand. Thus, ultimately, Blanche Amory is superseded by Laura Bell, Agnes Twysden by Charlotte Baynes, and Beatrix is replaced in Esmond's affections by Rachel. However, the distinguishing feature in Esmond's case—leaving aside for the moment that he tells his own story, is an epic hero rather than a scapegrace, and marries an older woman—is that Beatrix is not discredited until the final chapter, and, like Mary Crawford in Mansfield Park, her vitality dominates the novel.

Beatrix is much more the alter ego of Esmond than are Maria, Blanche, or Agnes of their heroes. Esmond's passion for Beatrix is psychically far deeper than the domestic warmth and silent guardianship that he feels for Rachel. The reader, too, admires her fiery spirit as inevitably as he does Becky Sharp's. Becky's successful amoral campaign is compared to that of Napoleon, and Beatrix, too, in her scorn of the world, her self-sufficiency, her self-knowledge (including that of her own necessary hypocrisy), sees her struggle in military terms:
"I have been long enough Frank's humble servant. Why am I not a man? I have ten times his brains, and had I worn the — well, don't let your ladyship be frightened—had I worn a sword and periwig instead of this mantle and commode to which nature has condemned me—(though 'tis pretty stuff, too— Cousin Esmond! you will go to the Exchange tomorrow, and get the exact counterpart of this ribbon, sir; do you hear?)—I would have made our name talked about." (XI, 164)

Unlike the typical hero, Esmond knows—and even knew at the time of the action—that he is, in common-sense terms, foolish to love such a wayward, headstrong and petulant creature, but he loves her, for most part of the novel, in spite of this knowledge:

Whilst Esmond was under the domination of this passion, he remembers many a talk he had with his intimates, who used to rally Our Knight of the Rueful Countenance at his devotion, whereof he made no disguise, to Beatrix; and it was with replies such as the above [See pp. 148-9] he met his friends' satire. "Granted, I am a fool," says he, "and no better than you; but you are no better than I. You have your folly you labour for; give me the charity of mine. What flatteries do you, Mr. St. John, stoop to whisper in the ears of a queen's favourite? What nights of labour doth not the laziest man in the world endure, foregoing his bottle, and his boon companions, foregoing Lais, in whose lap he would like to be yawning that he may prepare a speech full of lies, to cajole three-hundred stupid country-gentlemen in the House of Commons, and get the hiccupping cheers of the October Club!" (XI, 159)

Although Esmond is no naive hero of the Harry Warrington stamp, he appreciates the qualities of Beatrix and admires "the indomitable courage and majestic calm with which she bore" the death of her fiancé, the Duke of Hamilton, the summit of her worldly ambition (XI, 230). Even as Beatrix's star is setting for him, Esmond still finds in her something great and noble: "Beatrix's
nature was different to that tender parent's; she seemed to accept her
grief, and to defy it" (XI, 230). Esmond is moving between the two
fixed extremes: from amoral Beatrix to moral Rachel, yet the glory of
the first seems to remain in his memory. At no time before her final
defection does Esmond fail to recognize Beatrix's amoral worth:

Not that we should judge proud spirits otherwise than
charitably. 'Tis nature hath fashioned some for ambition
and dominion, as it hath formed others for obedience and
gentle submission. The leopard follows his nature as the
lamb does, and acts after leopard law; she can neither help
her beauty, nor her courage, nor her cruelty; nor a single
spot in her shining coat; nor the conquering spirit which
impels her; nor the shot which brings her down.' (XI, 230)

If Beatrix is a fallen star, Rachel, by contrast, is a fixed
one. Esmond's vision of his "divine mistress" remains constant.

Rachel, in this idyllic passage, seems to hover over the whole of
human existence from Eden to apocalypse:

They walked out, hand-in-hand, through the old court, and
to the terrace-walk, where the grass was glistening with dew,
and the birds in the green woods above were singing their
delicious choruses under the blushing morning sky. How well
all things were remembered! The ancient towers and gables of
the hall darkling against the east, the purple shadows on the
green slopes, the quaint devices and carvings of the dial,
the forest-crowned heights, the fair yellow plain cheerful
with crops and corn, the shining river rolling through it
towards the pearly hills beyond; all these were before us,
along with a thousand beautiful memories of our youth,
beautiful and sad, but as real and vivid in our minds as that
fair and always-remembered scene our eyes beheld once more.
We forget nothing. The memory sleeps, but wakens again;
I often think how it shall be when, after the last sleep of
death, the reveille shall arouse us for ever, and the past
in one flash of self-consciousness rush back, like the soul-
revivified. (XI, 237)
The timeless quality of Rachel's influence on Esmond is also stressed by her refusal to age throughout the novel. Speaking of her daughter she declares, "We are like sisters, and she the eldest sister, somehow" (XI, 109). Returning from Bruxelles, Esmond finds that his "dear mistress, blushing as he looked at her, with her beautiful fair hair, and an elegant dress, according to the mode, appeared to have the shape and complexion of a girl of twenty" (XI, 111). Doctor Atterbury found that Rachel "looked so charming and young," that he spoke of her beauty to the Prince (XI, 309). On another occasion, mother and daughter "made a very pretty picture together, and looked like a pair of sisters—the sweet simple matron seeming younger than her years, and her daughter, if not older, yet somehow, from a commanding manner and grace which she possessed above most women, her mother's superior and protectress" (XI, 157). On Esmond's return to Castlewood, Beatrix "was older, paler, and more majestic than in the year before; her mother seemed the youngest of the two" (XI, 238).

Thus, although in many ways Esmond's movement from the worldly shrew to the humble and divinely affectionate maternal figure is a typical device of Thackeray, Esmond's attachment to and evaluation of these opposites is distinctly different. Esmond seeks his fulfillment in each concurrently rather than sequentially, and, as a moral creature himself, he attempts to do the impossible—to build an essence from two incompatible halves. Before he finally resigns himself to Rachel, he suffers an acute sense of loss and weariness at the double defection of his ideals of love and kingship. Before treating this loss
more fully, however, it is important, to examine further the distinc-
tively different qualities of the narrative mode in *Esmond* compared
with the typical novel.

The narrator of *Esmond* is reflective rather than reflexive
like the typical Thackerayan narrator: he reveals for his descendants
his golden past, but does not elicit consciousness of his ephemeral
writing present. He seldom turns on himself an ironical eye, seldom
has second thoughts, and never exposes himself as jester, fool, or
hypocrite. Esmond's history is, in fact, so far removed from his
writing present that he writes it quasi-posthumously: "To the very
last hour of his life, Esmond remembered the lady as she then spoke
and looked" (X, 8). While Pendennis entertains the ideal world of
romance and fairy-tale in order subsequently to expose its instabil-
ity, Esmond is ever reluctant to jettison the ideals which Beatrix,
Holt, and the Pretender once held for him. Thus, young Castlewood,
paying his respects to the Duchess of Marlborough, looks to Esmond
"like a prince out of a fairy tale" and of Beatrix's planned costume
for King James the Third's coronation, he declares "never a princess
in the land would have become ermine better" (XI, 33; 221).

The ideal forms of love and kingship are indelibly impressed
on Esmond's consciousness and when the human reality tragically fails
to fit these forms, as it does in the case of the Pretender, Esmond's
reaction is one of weariness and despair. The worldly Pendennis,
acknowledging the nature of human weakness—including his own and his
reader's—would draw a discreet curtain over the scene that evokes
in Esmond such a fever of discontent. In this Macbeth-like soliloquy, Esmond reveals not merely personal jealousy of the Pretender (Esmond had become hardened to this experience after Beatrix's affairs with Blandford and Hamilton), but self-doubt combined with a savagery at the betrayal of noble ideals by the shallow and callous figures who ought to uphold them:

"I have done the deed," thought he, sleepless, and looking out into the night; "he is here, and I have brought him; he and Beatrix are sleeping under the same roof now. Whom did I mean to serve in bringing him? Was it the Prince? Was it Henry Esmond? Had I not best have joined the manly creed of Addison yonder, that scouts the old doctrine of right divine, that boldly declares that Parliament and people consecrate the Sovereign, not bishops, nor genealogies, nor oils, nor coronations." The eager gaze of the young Prince, watching every movement of Beatrix, haunted Esmond and pursued him. The Prince's figure appeared before him in his feverish dreams many times that night. He wished the deed undone for which he had laboured so. (XI, 268)

Where the typical narrator, quite at home in a world of flux and ambiguous ideals, delights to reveal the disparity between human aspiration and human achievement, Esmond is always pained in witnessing the betrayal of noble causes. Although he espouses the cause of King James the Third, Esmond bitterly records the Prince's feckless conduct and blind ignorance of his kingly duties: "He let his chances slip by as he lay in the lap of opera-girls, or snivelled at the knees of priests asking pardon; and the blood of heroes, and the devotedness of honest hearts, and endurance, courage, fidelity, were all spent for him in vain" (XI, 127).

Esmond frequently exposes the private reality behind the
outward form of such public worthies as Marlborough, Addison, Steele, and Dr. Johnson. Even King William whom "no man admired . . . more; a hero and a conqueror, the bravest, justest, wisest of men" is denounced as a butcher and tyrant, for "'twas by the sword he conquered" (XI, 126-127). Esmond's dispute with Addison concerning the latter's epic on the battle of Blenheim is based on the fact that poets tell the truth neither about the horrors of war nor the corruption of leaders. Epics are concerned not with men but with heroes; "We must paint our great Duke . . . not as a man, which no doubt he is, with weaknesses like the rest of us, but as a hero," declares Addison (XI, 44). Although Esmond is clear-sighted enough to note the incongruity between the public image and the facts as vouchsafed to Marlborough's intimates, when he deals with his own private life, namely his love of Beatrix and of Rachel, he is seldom capable of consistent detachment. Beatrix remains throughout the memoir Esmond's "enchantress" or his "charmer;" Rachel is always his "dear mistress." Rational assessment is, therefore, inadequate to account for the effect of these women upon him.

Beatrix and Rachel remain for Esmond ideal creatures, even though Beatrix's image ultimately becomes tarnished and Rachel's changes from that of perfect mother to perfect wife. The realist in Esmond knows that Beatrix is hard-hearted, mercenary, and socially aspiring, but it is the ideal vision which dominates his view of her. He is too passionately involved to be amused by the incongruity of his bifurcated vision; he is devoted to an image, to an icon kept sacred in his memory irrespective of any worldly or factual knowledge that may attempt to shatter it. Beatrix is the prize which Esmond
seeks to win by noble and gallant action both in Webb's regiment and in the intrigue to restore the crown to "The King over the Water."

Esmond is not a fervid believer in either of these public causes:
"Esmond thought an English king out of St. Germains was better and fitter than a German prince from Herrenhausen, and that if he failed to satisfy the nation, some other Englishman might be found to take his place" (XI, 136). Esmond is as aware, in his rational moments, of the foolishness of his pursuit of Beatrix as he is of the folly of simple-minded self-sacrifice for the worldly gain of others, yet he cannot dismiss Beatrix as unworthy; this, he makes clear to Rachel:

"What little reputation I have won, I swear I cared for it because I thought Beatrix would be pleased with it. What care I to be a colonel or a general? Think you 'twill matter a few score years hence, what our foolish honours to-day are? I would have had a little fame, that she might wear it in her hat. If I had anything better, I would endow her with it. If she wants my life, I would give it her. If she marries another, I will say God bless him. I make no boast nor no complaint. I think my fidelity is folly, perhaps. But so it is. I cannot help myself. I love her. You are a thousand times better: the fondest, the fairest, the dearest of women. Sure, my dear lady, I see all Beatrix's faults as well as you do. But she is my fate. 'Tis endurable. I shall not die for want of having her. I think I should be no happier if I won her. Que voulez-vous? as my Lady of Chelsey would say. Je l'aime." (XI, 107-108)

Esmond contrasts with Frank Castlewood in being no simple idealist, no naive zealot. While the uxorious Frank becomes dominated by the rather unattractive Clotilda—"my poor Frank was weak, as perhaps all our race hath been, and led by women" (XI, 334)—Esmond retains, at least in his passion for Beatrix, a knowledge of his own foolishness and his beloved's unworthiness. His devotion is the more
exceptional, more moving, and more heroic because of this knowledge. Honours, whether won in the Duke's, the King's, or the Pretender's service, are useless to Esmond if they fail to advance his suit with Beatrix. Typically enough, Esmond renounces his title in favour of Frank, for honours of rank and title mean as little to him as those won on the battlefield. Honour for Esmond lies in self-sacrifice for the only cause he prizes—the conquest of Beatrix. He is not lured by "the twopenny crown" (XI, 260) of the Castlewood entail. Young Frank, to whom the title means so much, who blindly worships his wife and who "was ready to fight without much thinking" for the Jacobite cause (XI, 254), does not suffer as Esmond does at human defection from the ideal.

Esmond knows that, though his fidelity is folly, he cannot help himself. Nevertheless his "folly" is precious to him; he can never laugh at his feverish and insane passion, even in retrospect. Although, after Oudenarde, his name was sent into the Gazette for promotion, and this "made his heart beat to think that certain eyes at home, the brightest in the world, might read the page on which his humble services were recorded," yet "his mind was made up steadily to keep out of their dangerous influence, and to let time and absence conquer that passion he had still lurking about him" (XI, 81). This determination does not cool Esmond's ardour, however, and before long he is back,"pleased at the little share of reputation which his good fortune [at the battle of Wynendaal] had won him, yet it was chiefly precious to him . . . because it pleased his mistress, and, above all,
because Beatrix valued it" (XI, 104). Esmond values neither fame nor title that does not enhance his suit with Beatrix, his splendid private folly that, like young Marcel's adolescent passion for Gilberte in Proust's novel, remains locked in the memory and burnished with time.

Esmond's intimate relationship to his own story, naturally enough precludes him from the self-conscious and reader-conscious addresses that we associate with the typical Thackerayan narrator. Esmond, telling his own story, is not free to stand outside the illusion and see its ephemeral nature; he is "historian" and not a novelist gently mocking a sentimental or cynical reader. In fact Esmond is very rarely conscious of a reader, and his soliloquies, though they do occasionally sound the discursive and fanciful note of the serialized novels, contribute to the unifying theme of the novel—the ultimate value of romantic idealism, and the heroic nature of its pursuit in the face of the tangible and the logical. Esmond does not merely end with a marriage and the prospect of eternal union, but with the affirmation that "love vincit omnia; is immeasurably above all ambition, more precious than wealth, more noble than name" (XI, 333). This is no sudden revelation for Esmond, whose whole life has consisted of the repudiation of ambition, wealth and name, and whose passion for Beatrix is extinguished only by her feckless betrayal of the noble cause to which the Castlewoods are devoted:

She came up to Esmond and hissed out a word or two:—"If I
did not love you before, cousin," says she, "think how I love you now." If words could stab, no doubt she would have killed Esmond; she looked at him as if she could.

But her keen words gave no wound to Mr. Esmond; his heart was too hard. As he looked at her, he wondered that he could ever have loved her. His love of ten years was over; it fell down dead on the spot, at the Kensington Tavern, where Frank brought him the note out of "Eikon Basilike."

(XI, 329-330)

The emotional intensity of such a climactic passage is not qualified by any friendly farewells to the reader or any promise to the sentimental reader that his hero will ultimately be rewarded. In some degree this is indeed the death of Esmond's passion: Beatrix has effectively stabbed him, and although the final realization of Rachel's worth has been prepared for throughout, the reader is pained by the hero's final repudiation of Beatrix. Esmond has moved towards an awareness that not only does his idol have feet of clay, but that its golden splendour emanated from his own ideal vision.

Although it is true that Esmond had reached this sad conclusion much earlier in his life, yet the process by which he achieved this knowledge was rational rather than emotional. Returning to the court, flushed with the dearly-won triumph of Wynendael, Henry meticulously characterizes Beatrix's defects, yet stubbornly defends his vision. In this self-catechism, he approaches the detachment of the more typical narrator of the serialized novels:

What is the meaning of fidelity in love, and whence the birth of it? 'Tis a state of mind that men fall into, and depending on the man rather than the woman. We love being in love, that's the truth-on't. If we had not met Joan we should have met Kate, and adored her. We know our mistresses are no
better than many other women, nor no prettier, nor no wiser, nor no wittier. 'Tis not for these reasons we love a woman, or for any special quality or charm I know of; we might as well demand that a lady should be the tallest woman in the world, like the Shropshire Giantess, as that she should be a paragon in any other character, before we began to love her. Esmond's mistress had a thousand faults beside her charms; he knew both perfectly well! She was imperious, she was light-minded, she was flighty, she was false, she had no reverence in her character; she was in everything, even in beauty, the contrast of her mother, who was the most devoted and the least selfish of women. Well, from the very first moment he saw her on the stairs at Walcote, Esmond knew he loved Beatrix. There might be better women—he wanted that one. He cared for none other. Was it because she was gloriously beautiful? Beautiful as she was, he had heard people say a score of times in their company that Beatrix's mother looked as young, and was the handsomer of the two. Why did her voice thrill in his ear so? She could not sing near so well as Nicolini or Mrs. Tofts; nay, she sang out of tune . . . and yet to see her dazzled Esmond; he would shut his eyes, and the thought of her dazzled him all the same.

Esmond's eye-closing is ambivalent here; it is due not only to the painful brilliance of Beatrix but also to his need to maintain the ideal, even in the face of its sensible and rational contrary. Where Pendennis and his successive narrators would smile at such connivance with their cloud-cuckoo visions, Esmond determinedly clings to the timeless. The "thousand faults" of Beatrix, which the soliloquizing Esmond begins gaily to enumerate, become lost in the culminating transcendent radiance. The tone of the monologue, too, as it moves from the general to the particular, drops its jaunty playful note and takes on a persistently personal one: "Esmond knew he loved Beatrix," "There might be better women—he wanted that one," "and yet to see her dazzled Esmond." It is clear, at this time, that Esmond still prefers to let his mental image dominate his rational sense; his
culminating disgust with his false King and his false Queen still 
needs the final evidence concealed (and never overtly discussed) in 
the "Eikon Basiliké." The title of the volume itself alludes both 
to the serpentine charm of Beatrix and the false image of the "King" 
which Esmond and the other branch of the Castlewood family had indeed 
worshipped as an icon.

Esmond is, throughout his memoirs, possessed by a series of 
romantic images. As a small boy he is introduced to the reader, 
significantly, in the portrait gallery of Castlewood. His inviolable 
image of Rachel, who never seems to age to Esmond throughout his 
adolescence, early manhood, and adult life, remains untarnished to the 
end. In this, Rachel's image contrasts with that of Beatrix, for, 
ultimately, the mother replaces the discredited daughter as the focus 
of Esmond's idealism. Rachel's image precedes her daughter's and 
ultimately remains longer with him; it dazzles but does not dominate 
Esmond until Beatrix's star is dimmed. Esmond looks up at Rachel "in 
a sort of delight and wonder, for she had come upon him as a Đea certè, 
and appeared the most charming object he had ever looked on. Her 
golden hair was shining in the gold of the sun; her complexion was 
of a dazzling bloom; her lips smiling, and her eyes beaming with a 
kindness which made Henry Esmond's heart to beat with surprise" (X, 7).
Rachel appears, thus, as a divine messenger, and has much of the 
quality of a Fra Angelico "Annunciation." She is stiff and brilliant, 
bearing a sacred message from the heavens. Esmond is transfixed by 
the visionary Rachel, but the divine creature returns to him "with a
look of infinite pity and tenderness in her eyes," and the boy "who had never looked upon so much beauty before, felt as if the touch of a superior being or angel smote him down to the ground" (X, 7; 8). This impression made by the "charming object" and "superior being" is never completely effaced from Esmond's memory, but almost immediately this joyful and sublime picture is superseded by that of Beatrix, whose father calls her "Trix." (The name, indeed, is as perfectly evocative of character as Thackeray's "Becky Sharp.") Beatrix "looked at Henry Esmond solemnly, with a pair of large eyes, and then a smile shone over her face, which was as beautiful as that of a cherub" (X, 9). The mixture of the playful and the divine in Beatrix is for most of the novel to haunt and torture the hero, before he realizes, with infinite regret, that the prize is not worth the winning. Ultimately the "cherub," the "madcap girl," so arch, so brilliant, so beautiful, is replaced in Esmond's esteem by "the angel," the "superior being."

There is, however, a submerged aspect of Esmond that has a good deal in common with the mercurial narrator of the serialized novels. Despite Esmond's allegiance to the ideal (the static portrait, the Castlewood past that remains "fixed on the memory") (X, 11), the Esmond who is entranced by Beatrix is a man who despises cant and admires the impulsive. Though the reader misses the delightful, witty improvisations of a Pendennis, Esmond does remove himself from the story to address his descendants and even, occasionally, his reader. The vitality of the novel, on the whole, stems from the
character of Beatrix with her brilliant sallies, petulant behavior, subtle mimicry and amoral adherence to self-advancement in court circles. But a considerable relief from Esmond's humble devotion is attained not only by his evocative pictures of the past, but also by his occasional informality and self-consciousness in the writing present.

Only rarely does Esmond see himself with irony and detachment, but a passage such as this, which in the serialized works would claim an impish illustration, catches the narrator taking time out from his melancholy epic to indulge in light and fanciful speculation:

From the loss of a tooth to that of a mistress there's no pang that is not bearable. The apprehension is much more cruel than the certainty; and we make up our mind to the misfortune when 'tis irremediable, part with the tormentor, and mumble our crust on t'other side of the jaws. I think Colonel Esmond was relieved when a ducal coach-and-six came and whisked his charmer away out of his reach, and placed her in a higher sphere. As you have seen the nymph in the opera-machine go up to the clouds at the end of the piece where Mars, Bacchus, Apollo, and all the divine company of Olympians are seated, and quaver out her last song as a goddess; so when this portentous elevation was accomplished in the Esmond family, I am not sure that every one of us did not treat the divine Beatrix with special honours; at least, the saucy little beauty carried her head with a toss of supreme authority, and assumed a touch-me-not air, which all her friends very good-humouredly bowed to. (XI, 189-190)

Here the epic simile is inverted to mock-epic as Beatrix is seen as "the nymph in the opera-machine." The stately tone and often stilted diction of the bulk of the novel gives place to the ironical: "divine company of Olympians," "portentous elevation," "divine Beatrix," and the colloquial: "mumble our crust on t'other side of the jaws,"
"saucy little beauty," "touch-me-not air." The tooth-drawing analogy itself effectively deflates the image of the loss of the divinity, and we have, finally, the hallmark of the reflexive narrator displayed in the qualifying phrase "I am not sure that."

Esmond's link with the more typical narrator is made stronger when he follows the above passage by the anecdote concerning Colonel Esmond's old army acquaintance. For:

honest Tom Trett, who had sold his company, married a wife, and turned merchant in the city, was dreadfully gloomy for a long time, though living in a fine house on the river, and carrying on a great trade to all appearance. At length Esmond saw his friend's name in the Gazette as a bankrupt; and a week after this circumstance my bankrupt walks into Mr. Esmond's lodging with a face perfectly radiant with goodhumour, and as jolly and careless as when they had sailed from Southampton ten years before for Vigo. "This bankruptcy," says Tom, "has been hanging over my head these three years; the thought hath prevented my sleeping, and I have looked at poor Polly's head on t'other pillow, and then towards my razor on the table, and thought to put an end to myself, and so give my woes the slip. But now we are bankrupts: Tom Trett pays as many shillings in the pound as he can; his wife has a little cottage at Fulham, and her fortune secured to herself. I am afraid neither of bailiff nor of creditor; and for the last six nights have slept easy." So it was that when Fortune shook her wings and left him, honest Tom cuddled himself up in his ragged virtue and fell asleep. (XI, 190-191)

Tom Trett, who plays no further part in the memoir, is merely an illustrative figure, conjured out of the air, to emphasize Esmond's point that the simplest remedy for loss—whether of money or love—is that of speedy acceptance.

The purely illustrative anecdote, such as the above, is, admittedly, rare in Esmond, and the deliberately inflated similes and huge digressions, characteristic of the other novels, seldom
interrupt the single-minded story-teller. Nevertheless, there are occasional generalized and speculative comments that are subordinate to the narrator's purpose. Thus, regretfully considering Rachel's over-protectiveness of her son as a cause of Frank's prodigality, Esmond concludes:

'Twas this mistake in his early training, very likely, that set him so eager upon pleasure when he had it in his power; nor is he the first lad that has been spoiled by the over-careful fondness of women. No training is so useful for children, great and small, as the company of their betters in rank or natural parts; in whose society they lose the overweening sense of their own importance, which stay-at-home people very commonly learn. (XI, 151)

Esmond generalizes on the value of "training" and contact with their "betters" for children, and goes on to compare Frank's secretive conversion to Roman Catholicism with the action of "a prodigal that's sending in a schedule of his debts to his friends, [and] never puts all down, and, you may be sure, the rogue keeps back some immense swinging bill, that he doesn't dare to own" (XI, 151). Esmond is here engaging in the familiar practice of the Thackerayan narrator, by unveiling the young scapegrace hero, but in Esmond there is less delight in the process, and generalized comment, which would be material enough for a two-page "digression" were the subject Harry Warrington or Philip, is all the narrator allows himself.

Thus, it is seen that Esmond, unlike the typical narrator, seeks a personal intensity of vision through fixed images; the impressions of Beatrix, Rachel, Frank Castlewood, and the house of Castlewood itself are engraved on his memory. He reviews his past as
if he were recalling and arranging a series of brilliant portrait and landscape paintings and filling their interstices with narrative.

The dominant motif, or at least the most enduring, is that of Rachel, the "angel," "dearest mistress," "dearest saint," and "purest soul" in whose service Esmond undertakes his knightly duties: "Years ago, a boy on that very bed, when she had blessed him and called him her Knight, he had made a vow to be faithful and never desert her dear service. Had he kept that fond boyish promise? Yes, before heaven; yes, praise be to God! His life had been hers; his blood, his fortune, his name, his whole heart ever since had been hers and her children's" (XI, 234). Esmond's vision of himself as faithful knight kneeling before his lady is a chivalric motif which would have been used ironically by Pendennis or the Manager telling of Harry Warrington's or Dobbin's service on behalf of their rather ordinary and considerably less worthy ladies. But in Esmond, chivalry triumphs and the epic hero, although on occasion he does see himself as the Knight of the Woeful Countenance, triumphs over adversity and wins his lady.

The essential difference between Esmond and the typical Thackeray novel lies in the narrator's distance from the narrative; their underlying moral values are not dissimilar. Despite a variance of method and purpose, Esmond and Philip tell stories of innocent youths who somehow maintain their integrity in a scheming world, to be ultimately rewarded, either materially or spiritually, in a reassuring domestic partnership. The villainous seducers—the Pretender and Dr. Firmin—are finally banished and discredited and a benign dea
Ex machina assures both heroes of a happy ending. Philip's beneficent fairy, however, is seen ironically in the last chapter (in fact "she" turns out to be "the Black Prince," Woolcomb, who unknowingly sets off a chain of circumstance that causes an inheritance to fall on the hero), whereas Esmond marries his guardian angel.

The proximity of Esmond to his own narrative ensures that his moments of comparative detachment will be rare and that he will live into his story to a larger extent than Pendennis. Thus Esmond is aware that his biased view of Marlborough and his partisanship concerning Webb are based on "a revengeful wish to wipe off an old injury" (X, 98). Had the Duke recognized the bashful young lieutenant Esmond, his story would have been different:

A word of kindness or acknowledgement, or a single glance of approbation, might have changed Esmond's opinion of the great man; and instead of a satire, which his pen cannot help writing, who knows but that the humble historian might have taken the other side of panegyric? We have but to change the point of view, and the greatest action looks mean; as we turn the perspective-glass, and a giant appears a pigmy. You may describe, but who can tell whether your sight is clear or not, or your means of information accurate? Had the great man said but a word of kindness to the small one (as he would have stepped out of his gilt chariot to shake hands with Lazarus in rags and sores, if he thought Lazarus could have been of any service to him), no doubt Esmond would have fought for him with pen and sword to the utmost of his might; but my lord the lion did not want master mouse at this moment, and so Muscipulus went off and nibbled in opposition.

(XI, 27-28)

It is spontaneous, self-critical and freely inventive passages like this that are more in keeping with the typical novels, with their assumption of multiple perspective. Esmond, who usually seeks a
unified perspective, does not go to the final position of renouncing
the possibility of all ultimate knowledge. Keats developing the
Byronic notion that knowledge is sorrow goes on to maintain that
"'Sorrow is Wisdom'—and further for aught we can know for certainty!
'Wisdom is folly.'" ² This final possibility is never recognized by
Esmond, whose search is complete in the crowning happiness of his
union with Rachel:

And then the tender matron, as beautiful in her autumn, and
as pure as virgins in their spring, with blushes of love and
"eyes of meek surrender," yielded to my respectful importunity,
and consented to share my home. Let the last words I write
thank her, and bless her who hath blessed it.
(XI, 334)

The ironic vision of a Pendennis would be out of place here, for the
intrinsic value of Esmond's ideal model of perfection has remained
steadfast from the dea certè apparition in the first chapter. The
image of Rachel, remembered to his very last hour, reappears contin­
ually in Esmond's thoughts as pellucid as on the first occasion, when
the boy was enraptured by "the rings on her fair hands, the very scent
of her robe, the beam of her eyes lighting up with surprise and
kindness, her lips blooming in a smile, the sun making a golden halo
round her hair" (X, 8).

Esmond is not a novel in which the central character learns
ultimate wisdom through the shedding of illusions. The narrator
learns to modify his various idealisms through contact with experience,
but he re-experiences them in all their vividness in the writing present, and, as we have seen, ardent romanticism is ever waiting to envelop even the mature Henry Esmond. John Loofbourow finds that Esmond's rediscovery of Rachel's humanity when he returns to Castlewood after her husband's death is the beginning of Esmond's maturation. At this moment, Esmond sees Rachel as a woman and not a divinity. "This recognition of reality," says Loofbourow, "preludes a reconciliation scene in which, for the first time, Rachel and Esmond meet as responsive adults." But at the end of the novel Rachel is again being worshipped by Esmond, her devoted servant. The fantasy motifs of the novel are, according to Loofbourow, "discredited by realistic data," yet the novel ends on a fantasy motif. The joys of marriage and children only are emphasized, and an idyllic conclusion in a trans-Atlantic Eden of sweet sunshine and happily working negroes suggests that Esmond, like most of humankind, cannot bear very much reality.

Esmond is exceptional among Thackeray's novels in having a greater unity of theme, form and style. The narrator seeks security in the coherence of aesthetically consistent patterns, but he lacks the imaginative recklessness of the typical Thackerayan narrator who always knows with half his mind that he is dealing with puppets rather than people. Since he knows that he is involved with a world

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4 Ibid., p. 168.
of illusion, the more typical narrator, such as Pendennis, Batchelor, or the Manager, does not have the mania for self-justification that Esmond persistently indulges. Esmond tries to write what might be described as a Bildungsroman, in which the shedding of illusions is a process of maturation. The other narrators cheerfully accept that not only children, but adults too, need their illusions, and these narrators present their readers not with a growing-up process, but a perpetual flux where there is no hard line between illusion and reality.

It follows from this that the serialized novels present a narrator who is reluctant to draw a distinction between himself and others, for, as the opening illustration to Vanity Fair makes clear, he sees himself reflected in the world he observes. Esmond is, in any sense of the word, the hero of his own story, whereas the serialized novels are novels without heroes. Pendennis and the other biographers are content to tell plebeian stories which exclude the world of high seriousness, the fate of empires and the fall of kings; epic is replaced by mock-epic. When narrators realize that there is a hero within every man, then they see the impropriety of conventional categorization. Pendennis' ironic appraisal of his "hero," Philip, on the latter's failure to see his father's duplicity, makes this clear:

As for supposing that his own father, to cover his own character, would lie away his son's—such a piece of artifice was quite beyond Philip's comprehension, who had been all his life slow in appreciating roguery, or recognizing that there is meanness and double-dealing in the world. When he once comes to understand the fact; when he once comprehends that Tartuffe is a humbug and swelling Bufo is a toady; then my friend becomes
as absurdly indignant and mistrustful as before he was admiring and confiding. Ah, Philip! Tartuffe has a number of good, respectable qualities; and Bufo, though an underground odious animal, may have a precious jewel in his head. 'Tis you are cynical. I see the good qualities in these rascals whom you spurn. I see. I shrug my shoulders. I smile: and you call me cynic. (XVI, 133)

The narrator here finds virtue in unlikely places because he is willing to allow for the maximum possibility, whereas the hero is impatient with half-truths and vague uncertainties. Esmond is unlike the other narrators, in short, because he is not an ironist. For the ironist "never becomes absorbed in his subject because he stands outside and apart from it... He wanders far afield, with his eye and mind open to all things; but while he watches them he also watches himself."5

Before giving detailed consideration of Pendennis, the historian of Philip's adventures, it is appropriate to look at a narrator who neither sees himself as a hero telling his own tale as Esmond does, nor as a novelist-cum-historian in the manner of Pendennis. The initial narrator of The Virginians is a nineteenth-century figure recreating the lives of the Warringtons and Esmonds of the previous century from letters and his own conjecture about what might have happened based upon those letters. Ultimately, however, he includes within his story a transcription of the journal of George Warrington himself. George, in telling his own story, is more akin

to the uxorious Pendennis than the chivalric Esmond. He is a perpetual ironist, both of his own and others' romantic predispositions. Although he is like Esmond in his need to record his life for posterity, he is much more akin to the playfully ironic Pendennis, insofar as he seeks to involve his reader in the drama he recreates. With his soft, kind and devout wife, Theodosia, on one hand, and his fierce, cynical and worldly old aunt, Madame Beatrix Bernstein, on the other, George retires to the neutral ground where he can enjoy what amounts to a contest between an angel of light and the scourge of God on the aspiring Castlewoods.

George Warrington of The Virginians is in the central tradition of the Thackerayan narrator. He appreciates the virtues and the follies of youth and age and is able to see himself as one who, although he delights to unmask others, yet knows that he himself needs to wear a variety of masks. George knows that the self is never fully revealed and can never be completely explored; for much remains hidden or, paradoxically, open to question. Thus, when his devoted wife confesses her schoolgirl attachment for Grigg the mercer, George pays a special visit to the mature Grigg and finds him to be "a little bandy-legged wretch in a blue camlet coat, with his red hair tied with a dirty ribbon," and he congratulates himself on his generosity in not reproaching his wife. He realizes that his wife is as blinded to what he sees to be the truth as he is to her susceptibility for Grigg's lovely eyes. He knows that we believe what we want to believe and that though the masks will change, the mask of the moment is our reality. He concludes "if our wives saw us as we are, I thought, would they love us as they do? Are we as much
mistaken in them, as they in us? I look into one candid face at least, and think it has never deceived me" (XIV, 236)

George Warrington, however, like Esmond, is an autobiographer and not a novelist or puppeteer. Thus, he is never completely free to see illusion as illusion. Although he lives more into the lives of others than Esmond, like Esmond he has his own unshakeable allegiance, at the time of writing, to a romantic image. Theodosia is George's Rachel and, though he is less positive than Esmond, as we can see from the questioning above, he adopts Theodosia as symbol of constancy and a reward for his own endurance of danger, poverty and parental hostility. On the subject of his wife, George is generally reluctant to bring irony and doubts into play. We can perhaps see in her a mother-substitute similar to Rachel, for both George and his grandfather were deprived of maternal affection as children.

Having this personal stake in the story thus restricts the freedom of the narrator to see himself as role-player in certain areas. In their recollection of the past, George Warrington and Henry Esmond are not completely free to discover the truth about themselves; they have certain cherished ideals which prevent them from being travellers without baggage. But where Esmond searches for his lost mother's grave, George has the advantage of having known and been rejected by Madam Esmond. On reflection, he is able to gain in knowledge and maturity. George sees their differences as due to haughty rivalry, but also he sees his pride as the governing principle of his life:

When I commit a wrong, and know it subsequently, I love to
ask pardon; but 'tis as a satisfaction to my own pride, and to myself I am apologizing for having been wanting to myself. And hence, I think (out of regard to that personage of ego), I scarce ever could degrade myself to do a meanness. How do men feel whose whole lives (and many men's lives are) lies, schemes, and subterfuges? What sort of company do they keep when they are alone? Daily in life I watch men whose every smile is an artifice, and every wink is an hypocrisy. Doth such a fellow wear a mask in his own privacy, and to his own conscience? (XIV, 288)

Thus George objectifies his own situation vis à vis his mother in order to probe behind the masks of others. George goes on to point out that he acts in a Christian way not so much through conviction but out of his duty to his own ego. This ability to split the self into an acting and a watching part is typical of the Thackerayan narrator, and an awareness that others do not often have this ability to unmask themselves in this way is what gives the narrator his power and superiority over his characters. George's "pride" above is the spur to self-knowledge found in the typically reflexive narrator.

The narrator of Philip, who can identify with the necessary villains of his story and accuse himself of exaggerating their defects, suggests a vast area of uncharted inner life in his characters. This awareness of possibility is in opposition, however, to the needs of art. The reader needs the illusion that there is one story and if that story tells of a metaphorical journey from Jerusalem to Jericho it needs a robber, a high priest, and a Levite as well as a Good Samaritan. Thus Philip's father, Dr. Brand Firmin, is associated with Hell and the Twysdens are devil's disciples, while Dr. Goodenough and the Little Sister offer succour and sympathy to the
distressed victim. These are the parts assigned by the very nature of the story, but the mature narrator of Thackeray's novels sees beyond the concepts of "story" and "character," for he finds all stories and characters within himself, struggling for expression, and he takes up the part of cynic, sentimentalist, innocent believer and hard-headed worldling by turns.

The mature narrator has a transcendental consciousness that is aware of multivalent nuances. John Bayley points out that "'Character'... is what other people have, 'consciousness' is ourselves." Thackeray's later narrators, after presenting the reader with the paradigmal story and character, proceed to blur its outlines so that the reader begins to read into the original sketch doubts and ambiguities, possibilities which seem in part the product of his own speculations, and in part the suggestions of his ever fertile storyteller and stage-manager. He shows the reader that he lives in a world of polite and convenient fictions which he is accustomed to take for reality. He shows us, in the words of Frank Kermode, that "we are... equipped for coexistence with [chaos]... only by our fictive powers." "We believe what we wish to believe" says the narrator of Philip (XVI, 470). The last chapter of the novel, which

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bears the initial illustration of a beneficent fairy waving a magic wand, is called "The Realms of Bliss." The reader needs the security of a happy ending and the narrator gives it to him, at the same time overplaying his part that we may be sure to recognize it as only one among many disguises. In the same way, Pendennis disposes of one of his supernumerary characters whose function has been to rival his hero.

Good-by, Monsieur Bickerton. Except, mayhap, in the final group, round the FAIRY CHARIOT (when, I promise you, there will be such a blaze of glory that he will be invisible), we shall never see the little spiteful envious creature more. Let him pop down his appointed trap-door; and, quick fiddles! let the brisk music jig on (XVI, 450).

In their exuberance and marvellous facility for changing roles, the narrators of the later novels have something of the tricksiness of the medieval Vice figure. Though they are more self-assured and have definite self-interest beneath their disguises, Webster's tool villains, Flamineo and Bosola, have some of the same rapport with their audience. It is perhaps the delight of having power by knowing more than the "characters" and being, in a sense, outside the drama that gives these figures their uncanny quality of being, like us, somewhat removed from the drama. Yet, as reader or spectator we almost feel we have a stake in the play or novel and are complicitly responsible for its outcome. The sense of collusion with the audience is more than a soliloquy in the Iago manner. The reader is forced to sympathize and mock at the same time. Thus, in this passage, Pendennis reveals
horrors to Laura while he invites his reader to mock at her stereo-
typed reaction:

My dear creature, wrath is no answer. You call me heartless
and cynic, for saying men are false and wicked. Have you
never heard to what lengths some bankrupts will go? To
appease the wolves who chase them in the winter forest, have
you not read how some travellers will cast all their pro-
visions out of the sledge? then, when all the provisions
are gone, don't you know that they will fling out perhaps
the sister, perhaps the mother, perhaps the baby, the little
dear tender innocent? Don't you see him tumbling among the
howling pack, and the wolves gnashing, gnawing, crashing,
gobbling him up in the snow? O horror—horror! (XVI, 132-133)

Pendennis' gruesome metaphor causes Laura to draw her children to her,
but the reader applauds such extempore histrionics. However out of
place this passage may be in the sequence of the story, it is an
extraordinary performance by the narrator, and gives the reader the
pleasure of seeing its essential theatricality.

Pendennis, in Philip, compels his reader to see himself as a
novel-reader who needs to play the game of "let's pretend." But since
the narrator, too, is involved in this game, the reader is not exposed
as a fool or dupe, but rather has a sense of collusion and intimacy
with his narrator.

. . . Suppose there be holidays, is there not work-time too?
Suppose today is feast-day; may not tears and repentance come
tomorrow? Such times are in store for Master Phil, and so
please let him have rest and comfort for a chapter or two.
(XV, 247)

This plea to the reader on behalf of a prodigal son suggests a freedom
in this novel's form which is plainly not there in fact. As a friend of Philip and as a novelist, the narrator knows the outcome of the "adventures of Philip on his way through the world," but as an eager spectator who is in collusion with a reader with whom he is at present identifying, the narrator is subject to the suspense of his own story.

In Philip one finds the indispensable components of Thackeray's secondary fictional world generously displayed: firstly, a dynamic and buoyant narrator who moves adroitly in and out of his story, and secondly, a confounding of absolute values. Unlike Esmond, Pendennis never very seriously entertains his hero's ideal visions. He admits that "Charlotte, you see, is not so exceedingly handsome as to cause other women to perjure themselves by protesting that she is not great things after all." After admitting to her good manners and gentle disposition, the narrator begins to hedge by questioning his reader: "Is she not grateful, truthful, unconscious of self, easily pleased and interested in others? Is she very witty? I never said so—though she appreciated some men's wit...I cannot doubt" (XVI, 245). The reader would, presumably, agree with this assessment, but he is continually required to modify or question previous assumptions. Even such seemingly positive eulogies on his hero's happy poverty as this, are not without ambiguity:

As Philip walks away at midnight, (walks away? is turned out of doors; or surely he would have gone on talking till dawn,) with the rain beating in his face, and fifty or a hundred pounds for all his fortune in his pocket, I think there goes one of the happiest of men—the happiest and richest. For is
he not possessor of a treasure which he could not buy, or would not sell, for all the wealth of the world? (XVI, 246)

The proposition is suitably put in the interrogative mood. The "treasure" is the amiable but rather undistinguished Charlotte, but attached to that precious creature, the reader knows is the inflexible termagant of a mother-in-law, Mrs. Baynes. Luckily, too, for Philip a further windfall from "fortune" helps eke out his modest competence.

Where Esmond underwrites myth and romance, Pendennis first entertains then gently deflates them. The mature Esmond, looking back, sees the vision of himself and Rachel walking in the Paradise garden of Castlewood, in picturesque terms. Nothing disturbs the intensity of the dream. Pendennis, by contrast, breaks off from a similarly harmonious lovers' union with an acknowledgement to an elderly female reader who may look askance at such trivial dalliance by her narrator:

Through the vast cathedral aisles the organ notes peal gloriously. Ruby and topaz and amethyst blaze from the great church windows. Under the tall arcades the young people went together. Hand in hand they passed, and thought no ill.

Do gentle readers begin to tire of this spectacle of billing and cooing? I have tried to describe Mr. Philip's love affairs with as few words and in as modest phrases as may be—omitting the raptures, the passionate vows, the reams of correspondence, and the usual commonplaces of his situation. And yet, my dear madam, though you and I may be past the age of billing and cooing, though your ringlets, which I remember a lovely auburn, are now—well—are now a rich purple and green black, and my brow may be as bald as a cannon-ball; I say, though we are old, we are not too old to forget. We may not care about the pantomime much now, but we like to take the young folks, and see them rejoicing.
the window where I write, I can look down into the garden of a certain square. In that garden I can at this moment see a young lady of my acquaintance pacing up and down. They are talking some such talk as Milton imagines our first parents engaged in; and yonder garden is a paradise to my young friends. Did they choose to look outside the railings of the square, or at any other objects than each other's noses, they might see—the tax gatherer we will say—with his book, knocking at one door, the doctor's brougham at a second, a hatchment over the window of a third mansion. (XVI, 250-251)

The reader and narrator, like the mature Esmond, live through a vicarious experience of young love, but the romantic image is, here, subordinated to a worldly perspective which contains the idyll. The "raptures" and "passionate vows" are somewhat incongruous in the world of the tax-gatherer and the doctor. We see what we want to see, implies Pendennis, who himself essays the broadest possible perspective. He seeks to include the richness and the glory, experienced by the happy couple, within the mundane and the commonplace. Pendennis moves from the majestic brilliance of the cathedral setting which almost vies with Esmond's splendid view of Castlewood (though we miss the haunting movements of the black rooks and plashing fountains) to an examination of his present position vis à vis his reader. The emphasis changes from past to present: "your ringlets... are now—well—are now a rich purple and green black," "though we are old, we are not too old to forget," "we may not care about the pantomime much now," "from the window where I write," and "in that garden I can at this moment see..." Where Esmond sees time as static, Pendennis emphasizes its passing. The juxtaposition of the young lovers in the garden with
the narrator and reader past their prime accentuates the passing of
time. Furthermore, it provides the essentially ironic perspective of
Thackeray's secondary fictional world—a perspective which is much less
prevalent in *Esmond*.

Although the reader is invited to scoff at Philip and Charlotte,
he cannot do so with impunity. The reader knows more than the lovers,
it is true; like the narrator, he sees them "talking some such talk as
Milton imagines our first parents engaged in;" he knows that "did they
choose to look outside the railings of the square," they would see how
fragile was their enclosed world. The scene is, moreover, a "pantomime"
to the spectator rather than a "paradise," and the situation one where
"the usual commonplaces" are uttered. But, if the lovers are a little
ridiculous from our elevated position above the garden—and they are—
the jaded reader and narrator are equally so, or, from the point of
view of the lovers, perhaps more so. The dyed hair of the lady reader
and the brow "as bald as a cannon-ball" of the narrator denote the
price to be paid for the wisdom of experience. As Keats has it, for
all we can say to the contrary wisdom is, at times, folly. If the
reader chooses to disassociate himself from the lady with dyed hair,
he must still face the fact that he is a novel-reader who is getting
his experience vicariously through Philip and Charlotte.

Both *Esmond* and *Philip* end on a blissful note. But the rewards
of Philip are arbitrary and dealt out playfully by his narrator: "And
was the tawny Woolcomb the fairy who was to rescue Philip from grief,
debt, and poverty? Yes. And the old postchaise of the late Lord Ringwood was the fairy chariot" (XVI, 478). Esmond's reward is not simply that of the girl and the fortune. In fact, his gain is to lose both his inherited fortune and his illusions concerning Beatrix and the Pretender. Thus, we see the different impulse that actuates the novels. The reader of *Esmond* is offered a culminating vision of a better world in Virginia where diamonds are turned into ploughs and a gold button is worth more than any jewel (XI, 335). The mature Pendennis offers no such consolation; for him and his reader it is merely the end of the story, the game is over and, come what may: "The night will fall: the stories must end: and the best friends... must part" (XVI, 481).

Playfulness and parody, rather than earnest analysis of motive or fidelity to an ideal, predominate in *Philip*, and a concomitant variety of mood and style prevails throughout. The moral tale of the Good Samaritan is treated enigmatically by Pendennis, who deliberately distances the story to allow the reader's doubts and speculations to come into play. It is narrative distance rather than the underlying fable which distinguishes these two novels. Both heroes are marked with the suspicion of illegitimacy, both are deceived by their parents and, as has been shown, both have to choose between worldly and unworldly women. In each work, Thackeray conjures utopian dreams, but while Esmond humbles himself before the visionary experience of Beatrix, the Prince, or Rachel, and is transfixed by the whole
aura of Castlewood, Pendennis is an improvisatore in the manner of the Byron of Don Juan. We do find in Philip solemn moments, such as that of Philip offering up prayers of thanks for the remission of his poverty, and the narrator develops his own sermon out of the occasion, but this consecrated mood is dispersed as briefly as it is induced; Pendennis moves adroitly from the sanctimonious to the mundane, where he exposes his wife's charitable hypocrisy on Philip's behalf (XVI, 318-320).

The vital question for us concerns the value of the role-playing narrator who constantly dissimulates, who retreats behind layers of irony and ambiguity, and who obstinately refuses to tell a plain unvarnished tale. Playfulness is all very well, but what ultimate purpose, apart from sharpening his reader's wits and extending his sense of the multivalency of life, does it achieve? The main function of the deceptive narrator, and of the ambivalence of the secondary fictional world which he inaugurates, is to undermine the formally structured world of the primary fiction. The essential distinction between Esmond and Philip, then, is not that they are cast in different eras, nor the difference between memoir and biography, nor, necessarily, due to their separate methods of publication; their vital element of divergence lies in their distinct use of the narrative filter. No clouds cross Esmond's final, or, for that matter, his preceding, vision of Rachel. Pendennis, on the other hand, is ever aware of the probability of other perspectives. The seeds of doubt
are sown, for instance, in such a protest on behalf of his divine mistress as this:

My wife humbugged that wretched Member of Parliament in a way which makes me shudder, when I think of what hypocrisy the sex is capable. Those arts and dissimulations with which she wheedles others, suppose she exercise them on me? Horrible thought! No, angel! To others thou mayest be a coaxing hypocrite; to me thou art all candour. Other men may have been humbugged by other women; but I am not to be taken in by that sort of thing; and thou art all candour! (XVI, 320)

The reader may wonder whether Pendennis is being hoodwinked, or whether he is deliberately closing his eyes to the possibility that his wife could deceive him, or whether he is aware of this possibility, but wishes to deceive his reader into believing that he (Pendennis) is a dupe. These questions can never be conclusively resolved, for Thackeray expects his reader to be aware of all these possibilities. It is this awareness that makes up the reader's part in the secondary fictional world.
Forgive this outburst! I can hear my readers protesting: "Hey what's all this about? Are we going to let an ass lecture us in philosophy?" Yes, I dare say I had best return to my story.

—Apuleius, The Golden Ass

Nothing is so easy as improvisation, the running on and on of invention.

—Henry James, The Art of the Novel

Introductory Discussion

Thackeray's secondary fictional world pushes the frontiers of the novel into the territories of the confession and the dramatic monologue. The term "expansive" applies here to novels whose narrators rely on their readers to take part in a dialogue without end. The expansive novel is not merely one that is exceptionally bulky or one whose time-scheme necessarily extends over a long period; in my terms, it is a novel that follows the expanding mental world of a narrator seeking to grapple with dynamic experience. It records the fluctuations between doubt and certainty and does not move towards any prescribed goal or ultimate vision. The expansive novel suggests the intractability of life itself.

Despite its artistic dangers, the installment system of novel publication offered unique advantages in fluidity and openness, and in the gradual familiarity which grew up over an extended period between the narrator and the reader. In the works of Dickens, Thackeray,
George Eliot, Meredith, and Trollope, the story-teller gossips casually to his reader about the characters as mutual acquaintances who lead, or have led, independent lives. When the narrator dramatizes himself as a character, however, and more especially, when his relationship to the reader becomes of more concern to him than his relationship to his characters, the kind of novel which is here termed "expansive" is born.

The Use of Romance and the Contingent World

The narrator of the expansive novel knows, and intends his reader to know, that any reaction to his story is based on self-recognition in a world of illusion. The narrator seems as conscious of his reader as he is of himself, and the story frequently seems a joint production of their common need to reconcile the hard facts of life with the convenient abstractions of art. Reader and narrator bring their own complex humanity with all its passions and prejudices to the theatre of puppets or the novel of tidy ends where love and virtue are rewarded, and vice is punished and dismissed. Fact and abstraction run parallel in this secondary fictional world which superimposes on the neatness and certainty of received forms a sense of life's randomness and inconclusiveness.

Frequently Thackeray's narrator challenges his reader to comment upon the primary illusion in which both are engaged. Thus Pendennis addresses the hypothetical parent—whom the reader must become—who
would hide the sordid realities of existence from her children, and build a beautiful card house in the midst of life's storms:

Now, how will you have the story? Worthy mammies of families—if you do not like to have your daughters told that bad husbands will make bad wives; that marriages begun in indifference make homes unhappy; that men whom girls are brought to swear to love and honour are sometimes false, selfish, and cruel; and that women forget the oaths which they have been made to swear—if you will not hear of this, ladies, close the book, and send for some other. Banish the newspaper out of your houses, and shut your eyes to the truth, the awful truth, of life and sin. Is the world made of Jennies and Jessamies; and passion the play of school-boys and school-girls, scribbling valentines and interchanging lollipops? Is life all over when Jenny and Jessamy are married; and are there no subsequent trials, griefs, wars, bitter heart pangs, dreadful temptations, defeats, remorse, suffering to bear, and dangers to overcome? (IX, 77-78)

Barnes Newcome's wife-bullying becomes an occasion for a homily on the dangers of mercenary marriage disguised as romance. The narrator suggests the parental reader would prefer to keep sordid realities hidden, just as Barnes would keep his conduct to Lady Clara hidden. But the reader scores over the narrator when he catches him in the next breath shielding himself from the unpleasant facts and dreaming of other fates for Lady Clara:

I fancy a better lot for you than that to which fate handed you over. I fancy there need have been no deceit in your fond simple little heart could it but have been given into other keeping . . . . Suppose a little plant, very frail and delicate from the first, but that might have bloomed sweetly and borne fair flowers, had it received warm shelter and kindly nurture. (IX, 83)

After this the reader must return Pendennis to his own question—"Is
The Newcomes can be seen as a cautionary tale in which man's pursuit of materialism causes unhappiness. But since the whole novel is an illusion, a mere dream as the last pages suggest, and since the characters are manipulated puppets acting in a predictable and systematized fashion, the reader must look to the narrator's consciousness for the rationale of the book. Within that consciousness the reader is drawn into a play world; he is repeatedly addressed as a reader who apparently knows he is reading a novel and not a biography of some people called Newcome, whose friend Arthur Pendennis seeks to write their history. Moral theme and historical veracity give place, therefore, to a medley of illusion-making and illusion-breaking which allows "Thackeray" to be Pendennis, Pendennis to be a novelist, historian, biographer, preacher, philosopher, wise parent, romantic dreamer, cynical worldling, outraged friend, uxorious husband, and spinner of old tales. Thus self-contradiction is no more a problem for Pendennis as novelist-historian than it was for him in his part of realist-dreamer above:

I have of late had to recount portions of my dear old friend's history which must needs be told, and over which the writer does not like to dwell. If Thomas Newcome's opulence was unpleasant to describe, and to contrast with the bright goodness and simplicity I remembered in former days, how much more painful is that part of his story to which we are now come perforce, and which the acute reader of novels has, no doubt, long foreseen. Yes, sir or madam, you are quite right in the opinion which you have held all along regarding that Bundlecund Banking Company ... I disdain, for the most part, the tricks and surprises of the novelist's art. Knowing, from the very beginning of our story, what was the issue of this Bundlecund Banking concern, I have scarce had patience
to keep my counsel about it; and whenever I have had occasion to mention the company, have scarcely been able to refrain from breaking out into fierce diatribes against that complicated, enormous, outrageous swindle. (IX, 293)

Surely Pendennis' suppression of his natural anger at his friend's maltreatment is exactly due to his allegiance to "the tricks and surprises of the novelist's art." For here we have the classic device of peripetia in which the reader is made aware of his own worst fears—namely that noble virtue, in the person of Colonel Newcome, has been defeated and humiliated by clever and corrupt mercenary interests.

The narrator here permits his reader to dwell in the realm of illusion while also giving him the sense of complicity in the story-teller's superior knowledge. It is as if Henry James had interspersed his critical prefaces throughout his novels and involved his reader in the story not only of what Chad Newsome meant, at various times, to Lambert Strether, but what the story of the story meant to "Henry James." Wayne Booth, indeed, declares that "the whole process of James's transformations from germ to finished subject is almost as full of suspense as the finished tales themselves."¹ By enabling the reader to share the "author's" confidence as he creates his story, Thackeray gives the story-teller a new dimension of verisimilitude. Like Henry Esmond, or like any man recalling his own past, we are at once creator, actor and

¹The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 49. The novel in which commentary and criticism outweighs the ostensible subject has at last been written in Nabokov's Pale Fire.
spectator of our own drama. Although we are actors only by identi-
cation and creators only by implication, the sense of being involved
in all three essential aspects of a work of art remains. Perhaps the
"sense of life," which has been for so many readers and critics the
novel's raison d'être, is enhanced by this feeling of confusion and
inclusiveness. For, in life, we are all spectators of and actors in
someone else's drama, and they cast us in convenient roles which we
unwittingly play for them. Furthermore, we are all imaginative re-
creators of our own pasts in which other people assume formal parts.
We see Pendennis, in The Newcomes, conventionally arranging and adapting
his knowledge to fit the requirements of the novel reader, repressing
his natural feelings for the sake of his art; yet inviting his reader
to share authorial power and superiority, which his normal role as
reader should preclude.

When Pendennis asks his reader how he would like the story to
go his question is obviously rhetorical. Even if we as readers feel a
response coming to our lips we are powerless to effect a change in the
novel's sequence. But Pendennis, like the speaker of the dramatic mono-
logue, assumes a response in a reader he creates for his own conven-
ience. This created reader either rejects his narrator's demand for
the hard facts of life and ceases to read, or he repudiates the address
to the illusion-seeker and reads on in tacit agreement with his supposedly
iconoclastic narrator. When Pendennis himself falls victim to his dream
of a possibly better lot for Lady Clara, the wary reader partially with-
holds his consent; the fancy is pretty but it is not in keeping with
the realities of what we might call "Newcome Fair." But, on the other
hand, Newcome Fair can only be defined by a recognition of a contrary
state. This fluctuation between fact and fancy in the mind of the nar-
rator makes up the dialectic of The Newcomes in which the fable of New-
come Fair vies with the fable of Fairyland. The story moves towards
two conclusions, which satisfy both the illusion-seeking reader and the
reader who would dwell with the hard facts of Newcome Fair, where Barnes
is rewarded and Clive and Ethel are estranged by the indirect assaults
of mercantile marriage markets.

Pendennis, as narrator, is caught between the claims of two
realities. He must pay homage to the noble old Colonel who, with Laura,
is his touchstone of goodness, but he must also allow for the nature of
his own and his reader's knowledge of human variance, unpredictability
and contrariness. Although in the primary world he can look through
Newcome Fair to an infinitely better world, and personify virtue in
young and old through his wife and the Colonel, yet he must allow for
the humdrum grey world where dragons and angels impinge only remotely.

Pendennis knows that "men must live their lives; and are per-
force selfish . . . . Some say the world is heartless: he who says
so either prates commonplaces (the most likely and charitable suggestion),
or is heartless himself" (IX, 343-344). The heart may be a rag and
bone shop, but it is for Pendennis the basis of reality to which he must
return continually. We would have many friends, Pendennis says, but we
cannot permit their inevitable demands on our own privacy.

How many persons would you have to deplore your death; or whose death would you wish to deplore? Could our hearts let in such a harem of dear friendships, the mere changes and recurrences of grief and mourning would be intolerable, and tax our lives beyond their value. In a word, we carry on our own affairs; are pinched by our own shoes. (IX, 344)

The practical reality is emphasized by the images of paying taxes, carrying burdens, pushing and struggling, and wearing of shoes that pinch.

In Thackeray's novels the secondary fictional world, with its open questions, free-ranging comment and sense of the sheer randomness of life, frequently overwhelms the more tightly-structured primary illusion. A powerful and painful sense of the vast totality of present existence with its niggling cares, conflicting demands and lack of coherent or purposive design weighs down upon the reader. But the secondary illusion is also a world full of potential, of untrodden paths and exciting possibility. The structured primary illusion is like a map which is useful but outdated, for it does no more than hint at the paths which lie before the reader and narrator. Barbara Hardy says that "the truthfulness and readability of fiction depends on characters and language acting in the interest of local vitality as well as . . . theme." ²

It is through their truthfulness to the process of finding out that Thackeray's mature narrators secure our allegiance and sympathy.

Although Pendennis, as we have seen, is eager to descend, as it were, into the market-place of the world which is symbolic of the foul rag and bone shop of his own heart, yet he also finds the appeal of the ideal equally insistent. His hero, Clive, is torn between two mistresses—that of painting symbolized by J.J. Ridley and that of the sweet and soft Rosey who is made available to him through the Colonel's bounty. Clive's movement between the humdrum world of the market and the ideal world of art forcefully illustrates the conflict within the narrator's own heart, and that warring duality which is found even in the Colonel who for all his noble and saintly qualities is still a Newcome and a speculator in the money market. While on another occasion, Pendennis will lay before his reader the brute facts of existence and human selfishness, here he pleads for the beauty and sanctity of the world of art.

The palette on his arm was a great shield painted of many colours: he carried his maul-stick and a sheaf of brushes along with it, the weapons of his glorious but harmless war. With these he achieves conquests, wherein none are wounded save the envious . . . . Occupied over that consoling work, idle thoughts cannot gain the mastery over him; selfish wishes or desires are kept at bay. Art is truth; and truth is religion; and its study and practice a daily work of pious duty. What are the world's struggles, brawls, successes, to that calm recluse pursuing his calling? See, twinkling in the darkness round his chamber, numberless beautiful trophies of the graceful victories which he has won—sweet flowers of fancy reared by him—kind shapes of beauty which he has devised and moulded. (IX, 232)
In his diversionary addresses to his reader we can see how the narrator uses his story and characters as a means for expressing his own sense of the complex nature of reality. The above passage is Pendennis' vision rather than anything to do with the Clive Newcome presented in the primary fictional world. In the mood of worshipper of beauty and heroic defender of art against the threatening barbarism of the market-place, Pendennis the novelist is able to build a secure but fragile world where the shoe of worldly concerns does not pinch; a world where "flowers of fancy" can be reared—a realm of pure mind. But as a historian of the realities of Newcome Pair, Pendennis must include the world of struggle where men are perforce selfish even in their friendships, and influenced more by the realities of the ledger than the marvels of the brush. In this respect, Colonel Newcome refuses to play the part assigned him by Pendennis—he is, despite his virtues, a man of the world with his own strong prejudices.

The Thackerayan narrator of the mature novels knows that man cannot live without illusion. Man finds his illusions in the world of art and in his manipulation of "facts" in the world of pragmatic reality. When John Loofbourow declares of Amelia and Dobbin, at the end of Vanity Fair, that "their wilful evasions of reality have robbed them of a full relationship, but their meagre fruition is better than glamorous sterility," he assumes that there is a reality to be evaded. If Amelia

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and Dobbin are deluded they are so no more than any of the other characters, and a "meagre fruition" is perhaps no more than we are offered in any of the novels. Reality for the Thackerayan narrator is the being aware of illusion. Some glimpses of this are vouchsafed to Amelia and Dobbin, but they, like their narrator and reader, cannot live long without dreams of a better world.

The narrator thus shows that illusion belongs to the ordinary man in the street as much as to the most fabulous artificer. Both are caught in the human predicament of the need to assert absolutes, while at the same time they must live in the world of relative values. As Pendennis narrating the adventures of Philip points out, men are all story-tellers in one or another sense of the word, whether they profess to be historians or entertainers, whether they set out to tell truth or lies, to be honest or dishonest. Of the Twysden sisters, he says,

Agnes might have told stories about Blanche, if she chose—as you may about me, and I about you. Not quite true stories, but stories with enough alloy of lies to make them serviceable coin; stories such as we hear daily in the world; stories such as we read in the most learned and conscientious history-books, which are told by the most respectable persons, and perfectly authentic until contradicted. It is only our histories that can't be contradicted (unless, to be sure, novelists contradict themselves, as sometimes they will). What we say about people's virtues, failings, characters, you may be sure is all true. And I defy any man to assert that my opinion of the Twysden family is malicious, or unkind, or unfounded in any particular.

(XV, 200)
but delights in so doing and in involving his reader with him. His
assertion of fairness to the Twysdens is sufficient to put the reader
on his guard to take Pendennis's assertions with care and scepticism.
In the interest of ideal truth, which demands certainty and black and
white categories, Pen is prepared to tell a local lie—so at any rate
runs the implication. Pen is a story-teller who admits he is dressing
up the "facts"; he knows that art is more concerned with imaginative
than factual truth, and that lies or illusions are the artist's business.

Awareness of relative values, however, tends to be a disadvan­
tage for the man who would tell a clear and coherent story. For the
sake of the scheme of his story he must put aside the obstinate quest­
ing of probabilities and his own lack of certain knowledge. Pendennis
knows—to the detriment of his "story"—that there may well be other
versions of the Twysden character, and that to a considerable degree a
man sees in the world what he wishes to see, for

If you were a bachelor, say, with a good fortune, or a widower
who wanted consolation, or a lady giving very good parties and
belonging to the monde, you would find them agreeable people.
If you were a little Treasury clerk, or a young barrister with
no practice, or a lady, old or young, not quite of the monde,
your opinion of them would not be so favourable. (XV, 200-201)

The implication here is that the Twysden girls would react according to
the company they were in, but Pendennis as we know has his (artistic)
axe to grind, and the reader for the sake of the story will accept that
this is a story "with enough alloy of lies to make it serviceable coin."
In the world of *Vanity Fair*, which is the world of the typical Thackeray novel, hypocrisy is an essential mask. This is the world in which the ironic vision of the narrator thrives, for he is not only an unmasker but one who pretends to take the mask at its own valuation, while all the time he knows better. For irony

is a pretence . . . the purpose of which is mockery or deception of one sort or another: and its force derives from one of the keenest and oldest and least transient pleasures of the reflective human mind—the pleasure in contrasting Appearance with Reality.\(^4\)

While the characters seek to deceive themselves or others by wearing a mask, the narrator seeks to find himself by removing their masks. He is thus, in part, his own target, for he sees himself in both the materialist and the dreamer, in Becky and in Dobbin, in the Twysdens and in J.J. Ridley. It takes one pretender to understand another, and it is the narrator's triumph that he knows he is pretending. The reader likewise is a pretender and if he is to learn from his narrator he must see not only the hypocrites of the Fair but himself as a pretender.

For Thackeray "is the master of a mood and a moment," and "does not so much deflate romance as egg it on."\(^5\) Despite the mock-Arcadian scenes of Queen's Crawley in *Vanity Fair*, the mock-Edenic scenes in *The Virginians*, and a consistent delight in playing with pastoral legends, seen

\(^{4}\) Of Irony: *Especially in Drama* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1948), p. 5.

in the overriding metaphor of sheep-shearing with reference to the marriage market, the Thackerayan narrator becomes involved in this Arcadian world, as in all the other mental worlds, himself. He does not stand back from the myth in order to expose its fallacy in the light of the pushing and shoving of workaday Vanity Fair, but adopts the conventions of both as his own. He finds within himself the values of an idyllic love world and a fiercely competitive mercenary society. He can see himself in the wolves and the lamb.

Although Pendennis feels an attraction towards the old story which he debunks, yet he has sympathy for the Twysden family that martyrs itself for the cause of respectable appearance. He gives them as much sympathetic understanding as he can, from his own position of the ironic observer who must keep one foot outside the story. Thus he removes himself from Philip's position of jilted lover in order to comprehend the Twysden position:

This I can vouch for Miss Twysden, Mrs. Twysden, and all the rest of the family:—that if they, what you call, jilted Philip, they did so without the slightest hesitation or notion that they were doing a dirty action. Their actions never were dirty or mean; they were necessary, I tell you, and calmly proper. (XV, 284)

This is not simply an ironic comment at the expense of the Twysdens, but the narrator's attempt to tip the balance of judgement back in their favour, at this moment. Does Pendennis merely pretend sympathy with the Twysden point of view or has he a genuine appreciation of
their sensible, and not unheroic, conduct according to the rules of Vanity Fair? His later outburst on the almost universal practice of respectable prostitution among the middle-classes suggests he is an opponent of Twysden values, but then he also makes it plain that he is adopting the role of clergyman addressing his "dear brother and sister sinners" as he preaches against Babylon. The answer surely is that the narrator extracts the maximum possible effect from whatever point of view he chooses to take, whatever role commands him at a particular moment. He cannot have a fixed point of view, but is always looking at himself, seeing that without contraries there is no progression. It is the reader's task to be nimble-witted and not to be caught taking the mask for the face, for the Thackerayan narrator, like his ancestors the Zanni, like Arlecchino of the commedia dell'arte, and Arlequin of later date, is essentially faceless. Agility and the capacity to entertain remain the essentials of the Thackerayan narrator as of the Zanni:

Ability to move quickly was the first requisite of the clown; on this he had to depend for the effectiveness of his instantaneous maskings and unmaskings, and the appearances and disappearances that so mystified slow-witted old Pagtolone and Gratiano proportionately delighted the audience.

If the Twysdens are arch-pretenders—and they are—they are ideal material for the unmasking narrator. Yet Pendennis in putting

on the mask of Agnes Twysden, the outwardly pure, gentle and plain-dealing maiden, does not simply expose this disguise as false. He shows that Philip's feeling for Agnes is drawn out of him by the false mask, but the feeling is real or seems to be—and who can make the distinction? When pretence so influences action and feeling, how justified are we in dismissing it as mere worthlessness and sham? Such a judgement implies a knowledge of hard and fast distinctions, and such a knowledge is denied the narrator, who is a perpetual experimenter and examiner of different "positions!" Pendennis shows that we are all inevitably both deceivers and deceived, for if we willingly accept as golden the coin of love, which we know with one part of ourselves to be brass, we must expect perpetual disenchantment. To the lover at the moment of acceptance, the coin is golden, and as such it lives in his mind after devaluation, so to speak. Thus Pendennis shares in Philip's rejection by the Twysdens, and shares his feeling of incredulity, hurt pride and pain. Since this is universal human experience, he invites the reader to share in these moments of disenchantment:

It could not be; ah! no, it never could be, that Agnes the pure and gentle was privy to this conspiracy. But then, how very—very often of late she had been from home . . . . Yes; eyes were somehow averted that used to look into his very frankly; a glove somehow had grown over a little hand which once used to lie very comfortably in his broad palm . . . . Ah! fiends and tortures! a gentleman may cease to love, but does he like a woman to cease to love him? People carry on ever so long for fear of that declaration that all is over. No confession is more dismal to make. The sun of love has set. We sit in the dark. I mean you, dear madam, and Corydon, or I and Amaryllis; uncomfortably, with nothing more to say
to one another; with the night dew falling, and a risk of catching cold, drearily contemplating the fading west . . . . Sink, fire of love! Rise, gentle moon, and mists of chilly evening. And, my good Madam Amaryllis, let us go home to some tea and a fire. (XV, 372-373).

Here as elsewhere, however, the narrator makes it quite clear that he will not be caught out acting any one part for long. As a nimble-witted entertainer, he is prepared to take whatever position yields him another part in his expansive repertoire. Since humility is endless and we learn only by a continual renunciation of convenient parts, the narrator and his reader must let the sun set on today's role of lover, or man of virtue, or whatever mask they place between themselves and the world. Pendennis and Madam Amaryllis return home to the humble domestic scene from which we can assume that all their golden ladders, all their dreams, hopes, new images will start out again. Virtue for the Thackerayan narrator consists in a surrender of self to the process of enchantment and disenchantment. He seeks, like Browning's narrator in Fifine at the Fair, not a glorious heaven, but the earthly goal of wisdom where mimes and mummers perform, and

whereby came discovery there was just
Enough and not too much of hate, love, greed and lust,
Could one discerningly but hold the balance, shift
The weight from scale to scale, do justice to the drift
Of nature, and explain the glories by the shames
Mixed up in man.

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Pendennis' problem in *Philip* is to do justice to the drift of nature, yet at the same time to present a coherent work of art, and it is on these conflicting claims that Thackeray's novels, with their two fictional worlds, are built. Carl Grabo points out that "the more the imagination is hampered by obligations of one kind and another—to historical fact, to an ethical purpose, to the lineaments of an actual model—the less vital, the less 'real' in the sense true to art, will the result be." Pendennis sees the dangers of allegiance to both "historical fact" and "ethical purpose," each of which tempts the reader to rely on some authority which is external to himself, rather than coming down to the foul rag and bone shop of his own heart. He sees "the character of infallible historian" (XV, 201), as just another role that he must temporarily play.

When it comes to a choice of devotion to an ideal of beauty, truth, or goodness, Pendennis chooses beauty—for the others have ambivalent and relative qualities. As in *The Newcomes*, so in *Philip* J.J. Ridley personifies the happy and disinterested artist:

In certain minds, art is dominant and superior to all beside—stronger than love, stronger than hate, or care, or penury. . . . Love may frown and be false, but the other mistress never will. She is always true; always new: . . . I wonder are men of other trades so enamoured of theirs; whether lawyers cling to the last to their darling reports; or writers prefer their desks and inkstands to society, to friendship, to dear idleness? I have seen no men in life loving their profession so much as painters, except, perhaps, actors, who when not engaged themselves, always go to the play. (XV, 240)

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And it is as actor that Pen invites his reader to join him in the intriguing game of masking and unmasking, disguise and recognition, for in acting, as in painting, we find "there is the excitement of the game, and the gallant delight in winning it" (XV, 240). The reader of Thackeray's novels who ignores the narrator's challenge to unravel the various changes of role and of moral stance which he adopts, and who himself refuses to become the part assigned him, inevitably misses the sheer delight of the novels. Vladimir Nabokov, in *Speak Memory*, points out that "competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world.)" So, in Thackeray's novels, it is not Amelia and Becky, Laura and Blanche, Rachel and Beatrix, but the narrator and the reader who oppose each other in friendly rivalry.

By a fruitful contact with the narrator, the reader discovers within himself a range of possibility that was previously hidden. When he is asked for instance if he would have accepted an invitation to Lord Steyne's party, knowing the man as he is presented in *Vanity Fair*, the reader does not answer—for the question is not relevant to his world. But if he plays the game of illusion according to the narrator's rules, a half-conscious idealist in the reader says "No!", while a slumbering cynic says "Yes". This is the mode of self-discovery through

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illusion on which the mature novels are built, and we can say of Thackeray, as has been said of Molière, that he "actually tells us through his irony that in becoming something you think you are not, you become yourself." 10

The process of self-masking and unmasking gives the narrator his greatest opportunity and gives his reader the greatest satisfaction. Pendennis will on occasion flatter his reader, but expect him to see through this flattery. Thus he tells the reader that Philip enjoyed playing the lord and being idle and self-indulgent, and "I dare say Philip liked flattery. I own that he was a little weak in this respect, and that you and I, my dear sir, are, of course, far his superiors" (XV, 243). Later he turns on the reader who would placidly accept his own innocence and not identify himself with the Twysdens who, with Philip's father, are the ostensible villains of the piece. If the reader would understand the Twysdens, he must first find the Twysden in himself, for does he not at some periods live by the rules of Vanity Fair? If he sees himself as virtuous and totally opposed to the Twysdens, then, unknowingly, he shares the quality of hypocrisy with them; for, the price of virtue is hypocrisy:

If somebody or some Body of savans would write the history of the harm that has been done in the world by people who believe themselves to be virtuous, what a queer, edifying book it would be, and how poor oppressed rogues might look up! Who burn the Protestants?—the virtuous Catholics, to be sure. Who roast the Catholics—the virtuous Reformers. Who thinks I am a dangerous character, and avoids me at the club?—the virtuous Squaretoes. Who scorns? who persecutes? who doesn't forgive?—the virtuous Mrs. Grundy. (XV, 275)

Pendennis plainly shows that the censure of others inevitably rebounds upon the head of the censor.

The process of self-expansion by role-playing in the reader and narrator is brought about only by a kind of self-transcendent humility. This stems from the method of Socratic irony which reaches its full flowering only by an abrogation on the ironist's part of any concealed "position" or any hiding behind pretense of ignorance, in order to demolish one's victim by a sudden display of mental or moral superiority. The Thackerayan narrator and his reader discover themselves in their "victims". They adopt the false positions of the characters, not to expose them as vain and foolish, but as a mode of self-exploration. The Thackerayan narrator frequently shows his own awareness that he is not only partly guilty, but also incapable of judging others, since he has not a god-like accessibility to all the facts. His humility is seen in his lack of certainty and his willingness to contradict himself. A reluctance to condemn others categorically and absolutely is typical of the mature narrator. Innocence and guilt are relative in his world; Becky Sharp, Mrs. MacKenzie, Dr. Firmin and Lady Baker proclaim their own innocence of malice or shady dealing, and who will cast the first stone and say they are guilty, malicious, selfish, unreliable and hypocritical? Pendennis confesses that

being young and very green, I had a little mischievous pleasure in infuriating Squaretoes, and causing him to pronounce that I was "a dangerous man." Now, I am ready to say that Nero was a monarch with many elegant accomplishments, and considerable natural amiability of disposition. I praise and admire success wherever I meet it. I make allowance for faults and shortcomings especially in my superiors; and feel that, did we know all, we should judge them very differently. People don't believe me, perhaps, quite so much as formerly. But I don't offend: I trust I don't offend. Have I said anything painful?
Plague on my blunders! I recall the expression. I regret it. I contradict it flat. (XV, 218)

Thus humility turns to sycophancy, but this role, too, is only for the moment. It is the opening of the doors to possibility rather than the arrival at a final destination.

This opening of the door to possibilities accounts for the feeling of the expansiveness of life that we receive from Thackeray's novels. In novels which are dominated by rigid schemes, the suggestion of life going on beyond the selected details is usually absent. Or, if present, as in The Ambassadors or The Marble Faun, awkwardly intrusive. The open questions of the nature of the small domestic object manufactured by the Newsomes, or whether Donatello had ass's ears or not, draw attention to themselves and to their authors' ingenuity. But when the Manager of Vanity Fair, recounting the fantastic prodigality of the legendary Steyne family, declares of a huge sum of money won by the Marquis from Égalité Orleans that "it forms no part of our scheme to tell what became of the remainder," the reader's sense of an imperfectly comprehended life going on beyond the world of the novel is enhanced (VF, 452). The eccentric narrator of a Thackeray novel suggests to the reader the mystery of a world of possibility outside the range of his knowledge. He does this by constant shifts of point of view, by reliance on such gossips and unreliable sources of "information" as Tom Eaves, and by allowing for the subjective nature of himself and his characters, who, though he may see them as villains, see themselves as virtuous martyrs.

The reader of Thackeray's novels must complete the paradigms of art for himself. He is for ever subject to the narrator's appeal and
flattery, and both his own and the narrator's temporary "position" depend on the interpretation the reader himself chooses to put on his narrator's words. What is the reader, for instance, to make of the narrator's opinion of Amelia's feelings towards Dobbin while they journey together on the Rhine? The "story" demands that an honest gentleman and a sweet heroine realize and express love for each other, but the narrator is by no means sure that Amelia is not a silly little fool and that Dobbin is not rather ridiculous. And even though "it was on this very tour that I, the present writer of a history of which every word is true, had the pleasure to see them first, and to make their acquaintance" (VF, 602), yet final knowledge eludes the narrator. However much narrator and reader may desire a love-scene, a happy ending, the expression of a beautiful and eternal passion which will triumph over the petty details of life, they are disappointed. The narrator returns the reader to his own experience to complete the pattern: "Perhaps it was the happiest time of both their lives indeed, if they did but know it—and who does? Which of us can point out and say that was the culmination—that was the summit of human joy" (VF, 602)? The expansive novel imitates life in its uncertainty and inconclusiveness; furthermore, it not only casts doubt on our aspirations for a better world—it also denies the certainty of our knowledge in this world.

There is only one certainty in the perspectives of the secondary fictional world and that is that life must end for individuals. It is in contrast to this surrounding darkness that the gay and exuberant world of Vanity Fair exists. The deaths of old Miss Crawley, Old Lady Kew, and Madame Bernstein provide occasion for the narrator to put off
his motley and don solemn black as he preaches a sermon on life's vanities. But very soon the bustle of the Fair resumes and weeds and crocodile tears are forgotten. Pious and lying epitaphs are all that remain to mock the noble aspirations of those who remain alive and the ignoble conduct of those who have died. Although in the scheme of the novels these semi-serious scenes of meditation on death do not seem very crucial or even very memorable, they have an intense local effect. Like the gossip and the speculation, and the anecdote conjured, as it were, from mid-air, these funereal impromptus thicken the texture of the novels and lead the reader back into his own consciousness. Thus, in the Sedley sick room, the narrator turns to his reader, forgetting for a moment Mr. Sedley, to meditate on the second-floor arch in the well of the staircase.

—What a memento of Life, Death, and Vanity it is—that arch and stair—if you choose to consider it . . . . The doctor will come up to us too for the last time there, my friend in motley. The nurse will look in at the curtains, and you take no notice—and then she will fling open the windows for a little, and let in the air. Then they will pull down all the front blinds of the house and live in the back rooms—then they will send for the lawyer and other men in black, &c.—Your comedy and mine will have been played then, and we shall be removed, O how far, from the trum-pets, and the shouting, and the posture-making. If we are gentlefolks they will put hatchments over our late domicile, with gilt cherubin, and mottoes stating that there is "Quiet in Heaven." Your son will new furnish the house, or perhaps let it, and go into a more modern quarter; your name will be among the "Members Deceased," in the lists of your clubs next year.

(VF, 584-585)

A meditation such as the above, which goes on for several pages, in a book called "Vanity Fair" might persuade us that we had at last reached the narrator's central position, were it not for his equally convincing ability to become worldling, comedian, insidious cynic or
frivolous entertainer. Thackeray's narrator is like Dryden's Zimri, but is not disgraced by the fact that he "in the course of one revolving moon/ Was chymist, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon." "Vanity Fair" was not the book's original title, and in Thackeray's novel, in contrast to Bunyan's allegory, the emphasis is as much on the festivities of life as on its vanities. John A. Lester, Jr. claims of such scenes as the above, that "by virtue of his peculiar detachment, the timeless wisdom of his comment on events and character, Thackeray can touch the intermittent scene with magic. It becomes a delicate balance of scene and summary, of the voices and actions of people plus an acceleration of tempo which reveals their meaning and consequence." Although the intermittent scene "sacrifices . . . the actuality" of the dramatic scene, Lester claims that it helped Thackeray gain what he preferred to dramatic actuality, which was, "a coalescence of characteristic speech and action with the long-range moral perspective of the social preacher." I feel that such scenes have as much "dramatic actuality" as any within the primary fictional world, and that far from offering us "by virtue of his peculiar detachment, the timeless wisdom of his comment," Thackeray's momentary existence is that of a very mortal man creating an elegy out of his own haphazard meditations on death.

Lester thinks of a stable narrator, a "Thackeray" who is a wise old man figure who seeks to convey eternal truths. He lays special emphasis on the bewildering variety of scenes which he sees as "devices for avoiding

dramatic enactment of the story. These "devices" are not so bewildering when we see that we are offered a map of consciousness unrolled extemporaneously, improvised for the moment from the threads of the story as they occur within the narrator's mind. In the secondary fictional world we have "dramatic enactment" of a very different kind, but it is as dramatic, in its own way, as the world of the "story". There is an untidiness, an unfixedness, and a rich sense of the unexpected and the absurd in the narrator's monologues. For the narrator is a part-player who, like the fool, has license to contradict himself, and to run the gamut from wisdom to folly, and even to muddle the reader's sense of which is which. This freedom, his delight, is the reader's problem—the problem of whether to accept the parts for their own sake, or whether to try to add them up and see if they make a whole. The problem of deciding whether or not he should reject the parts as false because they do not cohere with his own design, involves him in a situation analogous to that of actual life, where he must either ignore the data of raw experience or impose his own system-making compulsion upon them.

The narrator's presentation of many points of view from the outrageous and unorthodox to the subtle and invitingly conventional, involves the reader in a constant mental shuffling and re-shuffling of previously accepted ideas. Thackeray, though he touches the grotesque chiefly in his illustrations, delights to play with the reader's expectations, and to confound his propensity for seeing only the better and nobler side of himself. Sometimes, indeed, it is difficult to know where the hypothetical

\[12\] Ibid.
reader is hit by his subtle antagonist. The narrator who consistently "plays the fool" loses his advantage, if the reader does not know how seriously to take him. It is possible that the reader may become lost in the layers of contradiction of this passage, for example, from *The Virginians*, following the narrator's advocacy of wife-beating:

Women will be pleased with these remarks, because they have such a taste for humour and understand irony; and I should not be surprised if young Grubstreet, who corresponds with three penny papers and describes the persons and conversation of gentlemen whom he meets at his "clubs," will say, "I told you so! He advocates the thrashing of women! He has no nobility of soul! He has no heart!" Nor have I, my eminent young Grubstreet! any more than you have ears. Dear ladies! I assure you I am only joking in the above remarks,—I do not advocate the thrashing of your sex at all,—and, as you can't understand the commonest bit of fun, beg leave flatly to tell you, that I consider your sex is a hundred times more loving and faithful than ours. (XIII, 46)

The narrator is plainly not interested in the idea as an idea but as a means of arousing the anger and hostility of his rival, Grubstreet. Women, who are supposed to understand irony, have finally to be cajoled and flattered, because they are too stupid to see the joke. By playing not only the fool, but the wild and uncivilized man, the narrator exposes the needs of the "dear ladies" to be flattered and reassured. The real reader must be able to see himself in both Grubstreet's platitudes and the fears of the ladies—if he does not, the game is played to no effect, for it is a solitary one played by the narrator. The narrative element of the later Thackeray novels becomes increasingly dwarfed by the sheer personality of the expansive narrator. This is the reverse process to that demonstrated by Henry James' novels, in which we find the "gradual desubstantiation of the narrative figure on the wall till he is a mere
John W. Dodds, who finds in *Lovel* a "dull . . . plot" and "colourless characterizations," maintains that it "was a literary indiscretion, and those who love Thackeray will not want to linger long here." He feels that in it "Thackeray is shadow-boxing with himself, that he knew he was being a bore." Modern criticism may well find in the windings of the narrator's self-consciousness, with his wild accusations and justifications of himself and others, much to linger on. John Kleis finds that "the work prefigures the modern narrative techniques that we find in later works like *The Sacred Fount*, *The Good Soldier* and the novels of Conrad and Joyce." We can certainly say that, through Batchelor, the reader comes to re-experience the process by which men manipulate chaotic and mysterious experience into coherent and aesthetically pleasing designs.

Unlike the typical Ford or Conrad novel, however, we find in Thackeray's novels a sense of unlimited life that has somehow managed to escape the neat design of art. The "story" becomes increasingly more shadowy as the personality of the narrator takes command. Lord Jim and Edward Ashburnham are symbols who dominate the minds of Marlow and Dowell. For the Thackerayan narrator, figures such as Harry Warrington, Philip and Lovel do not become obsessive to the same degree. We do not

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have several viewpoints on a character, but differing moods in which various characters become dominant for a fleeting moment. The reader is not challenged to ask himself what the vital significance of Philip, Harry or Lovel may be, for we see them through the vision of an expansive narrator who is more concerned with momentary self-expression than ultimate self-revelation. He seeks not the "truth" about his heroes, but the truth of the moment's experience, which passes and refuses to be held within a rigid framework. Henry James rightly said that "experience is never limited, and it is never complete, it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind."

This can only be suggested by an expansive novel with an expansive narrator, or in a novel where the "design" is muted, and a sense of the open-ness of life retained.

Batchelor, with his perpetual making and remaking of his own experiences, is perhaps the epitome of the Thackerayan narrator. He, if any of the narrators, suggests that "humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms." When his self-esteem is most deeply shattered by his failure to impress Elizabeth Prior with his gallantry, and by his humiliation in being rejected in favour of Edward Dencher, the physician, he is forced to appear calm and unmoved, for his passion had remained unexpressed. The night after his rejection he dreams of the past, and

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sees himself sitting amid the ruin of his own happiness. A multitude of responses to the fact of his "tragedy" suggest themselves. This is not just the saddest story, it is the most ridiculous, the most incomprehensible, the most unreal, the most ordinary and dull. The fact of rejection is turned round in Batchelor's mind, and becomes a brilliant and many-faceted treasure on which his imagination can play. One part of him, indeed, is not really interested in the rather prim and no longer youthful woman. Batchelor's response to the "facts" is complex:

Would you know who is the solitariest man on earth? That man am I. Was that cutlet which I ate at breakfast anon, was that lamb which frisked on the meadow last week (beyond yon wall where the unconscious cucumber lay basking which was to form his sauce)—I say, was that lamb made so tender, that I might eat him? And my heart, then? Poor heart! Wert thou so softly constituted only that women might stab thee? So I am a Muff, am I? And she will always wear a lock of his "dear hair," will she? Ha! ha! The men on the omnibus looked askance as they saw me laugh. They thought it was from Hanwell, not Putney, I was escaping. Escape? Who can escape? . . . I took another omnibus and went back to Putney . . . . It is said that ghosts loiter about their former haunts a good deal when they are first dead; . . . But suppose they return and find nobody talking of them at all? Or suppose, Hamlet (Père, and Royal Dane) comes back and finds Claudius and Gertrude very comfortable over a piece of cold meat, or what not? Is the late gentleman's present position as a ghost a very pleasant one? Crow, Cocks! Quick, Sundown! Open, Trap-door! Allons: it's best to pop underground again. So I am a Muff am I? . . . Why, bless my soul! What is Lizzy herself—only an ordinary woman—freckled certainly—incorrigibly dull, and without a scintillation of humour; and you mean to say, Charles Batchelor, that your heart once beat about that woman? (XXVIII, 346-347)

We see here the attempt of the mind to assimilate facts that are painful and damaging to the ego or self-image which has been built up as a wall between the self and the world. Batchelor indulges in a variety of contradictory suppositions: he is "the solitariest man" but also, by extension, a tender lamb; he is an escaped maniac, a muff,
and Hamlet senior’s ghost. Finally, he is plain Charles Batchelor in love with a plain and common-place woman. He moves from extreme self-pity to the most scathing self-contempt while his consciousness returns in a parabola to his immediate predicament, via his recollection of yesterday’s pleasant and painful events and a personal variation on the theme of the returning ghost of Hamlet.

This constant fluctuation of the mind under stress is emphasized by the continual self-questioning, the bouts of manic laughter, and wayward improvisation. The prose rhythm frequently suggests a wild flight of imagination which becomes suddenly checked by an abrupt realization of the painful immediate situation. The fluency of his picture of the frisking lamb is cut off short by staccato mutterings: "And my heart, then? Poor heart! . . . So I am a Muff, am I? And she will always wear a lock of his 'dear hair,' will she? Ha! Ha!" Batchelor then lets his mind swing into a further recollection, only to bring himself to a standstill over the word "escape." He toys for a moment with this word as if not fully comprehending it as he does with the other key words "muff" and "heart."

If Batchelor’s story had been read by Lovel or by Elizabeth, they would have surely concluded that they were reading the diary of a madman. But for the novel-reader, who finds his own counterpart in the narrator, there is a sense of immediate and personal truth in such a passage which catches the evanescence of authentic experience. The question of truth to "fact" is no longer pertinent, for the "facts" become lost in the cross-weaving of impressions within "the chamber of consciousness."

The reader is never forced into the position of the poet Shade who asks
his perverse commentator and critic Kinbote, "'How can you know that all this intimate stuff about your rather appalling king is true?"\textsuperscript{18}

For Batchelor, like Kinbote, actually writes his own "novel," and in the act of writing becomes obsessed with his "own" subject, or his own interpretations, at the expense of his supposed or claimed subject. Lovel's re-marriage, like Shade's poem, is valuable for the narrator only insofar as it enables him to tap his own sub-conscious, to unleash the demons that lurk within, struggling perpetually for expression.

As a work of literature becomes more steeped in irony so does the ostensible subject become more difficult to locate, and reader participation correspondingly increases. In irony and burlesque "reading has become a game of wits. The reader's creative participation is essential to the author's design."\textsuperscript{19} In Thackeray's novels the secondary fictional world of narrator and reader increasingly threatens to engulf the primary fictional world. In Lovel the Widower, as Lionel Stevenson disparagingly says, "lacking an adequate plot, he [Thackeray] had fallen back on his old device of a semi-fictitious narrator, who had but a small part in the action and yet kept himself interminably in the foreground." In Batchelor, in other words, we have another Tristram, an ancestor of Dowell, Marlow and Proust-Marcel. Stevenson complains that Philip's lack of integrated structure was disguised by a tissue of discursive comment. Repetition and trivial detail clogged its movement, with only an occasional dramatic scene to


cut through the sluggish flow . . . . In previous novels the author's musings had been kept subordinate to the narrative, but in *Philip* they too often seemed to be predominant.20

The ironical awareness of the arbitrary nature of narrative, of plot, and of form, make any "integrated structure" impossible for Batchelor and Pendennis. Furthermore, the knowledge of their own and their reader's subjectivity compel these confused and highly self-conscious narrators to follow the truths of immediate experience and the tortuous windings of their own minds. This clinging to the immediate involves them in the "repetition and trivial detail" which inevitably clogs the movement of the story and reduces it to a sluggish flow.

Henry James, who uses the same metaphor of the stream, not for the "story" but for the freedom of imaginative improvisation which he sought to contain within the form of *The Aspern Papers*, suggests his aim of giving the feeling of life in this passage:

> To improvise with extreme freedom and yet at the same time without the possibility of ravage, without the hint of a flood; to keep the stream, in a word, on something like ideal terms with itself: that was here my definite business . . . to depend on an imagination working freely, working (call it) with extravagance; by which law it wouldn't be thinkable except as free and wouldn't be amusing except as controlled.21

So appropriate is James's statement, he might almost be referring to Thackeray's problem of keeping his fascination with the digressive narrator within the bounds of narrative. Walter Allen says that *Vanity*


Fair is "an extended conversation, a monologue." If life is capable, as James says elsewhere, of nothing but splendid waste, where better can we find the counterpart of this "life" than in the looseness of chatty conversation and the digressions and contradictions of the monologue in which the mind moves between doubts and mutually exclusive certainties? Perhaps scepticism is indeed the mind's natural dwelling place, in spite of the certainties, convictions, or conclusive arguments that may be expressed in speech or writing. Although it seizes upon solid, or seemingly solid, certainties with alacrity, the mind more normally dwells in the hollows between certainties. And while the mind lurks there, the ironical awareness of perpetual flux is the only possible response to the splendid waste that life offers.

The style of the mature Thackerayan narrator's address to his reader has something of the casualness, frankness, and uncertainty of ordinary conversation. It is thus both unlike the polished and slightly bookish dialogue of novels by Jane Austen, Henry James or Ivy Compton-Burnett, and more controlled and self-conscious than the meandering revelations of the stream of consciousness monologue. Of Ivy Compton-Burnett's novelistic dialogue, Nathalie Sarraute says, the speeches "are here, one feels, what they are in reality: the resultant of numerous, entangled movements that have come up from the depths."
But these speeches are far too pithy, compact and grammatical for ordinary speech which, "is concerned mainly with putting into words what is loosely called the stream of consciousness: the daydreaming, remembering, worrying, associating, brooding and mooning that continually flows through the mind."^25 The monologues of the mature Thackerayan narrator seem to catch at thoughts as they fly, but they also control them and give them rhetorical direction. At its most typical, the narrator's monologue combines the drive and enthusiasm of a public speech with the informality of a private confession. This mixture of the personal idiosyncratic association and the speaker's sense of public performance is well illustrated in this half-monologue, half suggested dialogue between Mr. Roundabout and young Walter, in which the topic overriding and "controlling" the digression is the question of the reality of illusion; and whether the senses become less susceptible in age to the spells that entrance the young:

Do not suppose I am going, siout est mos, to indulge in moralities about buffoons, paint, motley, and mountebanking. Nay, Prime Ministers rehearse their jokes; Opposition leaders prepare and polish them; Tabernacle preachers must arrange them in their minds before they utter them. All I mean is, that I would like to know any one of these performers thoroughly, and out of his uniform; that preacher, and why in his travels this and that point struck him. ... I would only say that, at a certain time of life certain things cease to interest; but about some things when we cease to care, what will be the use of life, sight, hearing? Poems are written, and we cease to admire. Lady Jones invites us, and we yawn; she ceases to invite us, and we are resigned. The last time I saw a ballet at the opera—oh! it is many years ago—I fell asleep in the stalls, wagging my head in insane dreams, and I hope affording amusement to the company, while the feet of five hundred nymphs were cutting flicflacs on the stage at a

few paces' distance. Ah! I remember a different state of things! (XXVII, 86-87)

We see at work here what Gordon Ray describes as the "naturalness and informality" of the mature style, and its meandering course suggests the alert but undisciplined mind more bent on seizing the next impression than following a logical train of thought. Mr. Roundabout seeks to expose the frailty of illusion, but at the same time reveals its strength and his own susceptibility. His mind does not control his "subject" but allows the wandering lights, which are loosely in orbit around the central nucleus of the "subject", to reflect upon it. The digressive narrator of the later novels and the Roundabout Papers seeks to comprehend an infinite universe, and his own fumbling for words ("all I mean is," "I would only say that") indicates that the narrator is overwhelmed by the vastness of possibility, and is prepared to retreat from whatever position he for the moment elects to adopt. The reader, who temporarily becomes young Walter, the boy naively delighted by pantomime, is given the part of opposing the disenchanted exposé of the follies of illusion. When the irascible old man reveals, not his own superiority to the sordid trappings and subterfuges of stage illusion, so much as his present susceptibility to the illusions he experienced in his youth—illusions which have become his reality—the reader smiles and has his moment of superiority. But the reader's superiority is only a temporary state, for he too can be carried away, not by argument, but by sheer

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verbal luxuriance when the Roundabout Pegasus impels both narrator and reader into realms where the moment's illusion reigns supreme. Thackeray's reader must realize vital parts of a complex whole. And, as in ordinary conversation, many of the parts will seem opaque and flat in isolation, but on their presence the rhetorical and lucid depend for their conviction, since the narrator's mind moves not straight towards a goal, but cyclically through contraries expressed in appropriately colloquial or rhetorical language. By his refusal to submit to the needs of his public for the security of neat endings, such as Dickens provides in the revised Great Expectations, or George Eliot in Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss, Thackeray shows a distinctly modern tendency. But Thackeray, unlike James, Virginia Woolf, or E.M. Forster, does not subscribe to the modern myth, "that anyone's disturbing, expanding experience can ever be ordered finally, finally made sense of, finally limited, and hence transcended."  

Summary

Joyce, Proust and Faulkner leave in their wake a swarm of critics who pick up the pieces and assemble vast structures which in some way parallel those of the novelists. Thackeray, like Tolstoy, whom he so fruitfully influenced, is not easily subjected to systematic critical scrutiny.  


28 For the influence of Thackeray on Tolstoy, see John Bayley, Tolstoy and the Novel (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), pp. 155; 163.
reader to follow, nor does he give undue emphasis to formal properties such as caves, mosques, towers, lighthouses, or labyrinthine cities. When the sea appears in his novels, as it does in *The Newcomes*, it is there to be enjoyed for its own sake. It is at Brighton that we see humanity at its most various, and Brighton with its pavilion is halfway back to Arthur Pendennis' own youth when the twanging coach-horn left for London and the Prince Regent gave colour and dash to pre-Victorian England. We know that nothing appears in novels entirely "for its own sake," but when the sense of freedom and unpredictability of life as it seems to a perceiving consciousness, who is not a part of the pattern but a creator of patterns, is sought, the "irrelevant" or "digressive" or "intrusive" anecdote is as valuable as the more patently functional or illustrative one.

Thackeray presents reader and critic with peculiar difficulties. Furthermore, when the teller's consciousness overlays the tale to the extent that it does in *Philip or Lovel*, the novel, as we normally conceive the genre, begins to disintegrate. If it is the narrative or story which must be the primary focus of the reader's attention, the later Thackeray novels will prove a disappointment. Martin Schütze, censuring advocates of the "irrational form-type" such as Tieck and Strich, points out that "it is an illusion to seek infinity in poor and fragmentary form." Despite all their complexity and suggestiveness, Thackeray's novels retain the firmness of a basic paradigm which, though it is never obtrusive or rigidly controlling, gives a sense of the continuity of life and literature. For "all structure is based on the repe-
tion of fundamental units in a multiplicity of detail." Thus, underlying the multiple viewpoint of the narrator, we have in Becky and Amelia wicked and virtuous heroines who meet their respective "unhappy" and "happy" ends, in Henry Esmond an Aeneas who marries his Dido, in Philip a man who falls among thieves and whose good Samaritans are Dr. Goodenough and the Little Sister.

The narrator, we may say, is less a supporter of such purely formal systems than one who uses them in order to prove their inadequacy. These old stories provide reader and narrator with a common frame of reference which has the human familiarity of a symbolism handled by generations. But since they are variously inadequate and even inappropriate to explain the inconstant human elements, they must of necessity be undermined by the ironic interpreter. The reader thus has no sure resting place in the novels, for the ironic vision eschews completeness.

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CONCLUSION: VISION THROUGH PLAY

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined
On the real. This is the origin of change.
—Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"

Every novelist has the defects of his virtues. In reading an ironical novelist such as Thackeray, the reader must renounce his need for an ultimate commitment to an ethical ideal. He cannot even commit himself temporarily to such cultural myths as the wisdom of social integration which George Eliot propounds, or D.H. Lawrence's reliance on the power of remote ancestral knowledge transmitted through the instincts. Nor does Thackeray offer us a commitment to a moment of personal revelation or social communion which we find in Joyce, Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster. Thackeray's sole alignment seems to be with a policy of non-alignment. For some readers Thackeray may well appear aesthetically careless and morally confused. But for the reader who is patient, who is prepared to let Thackeray lead him, and who seeks nothing extraneous to the novel and himself through which to understand his author, for that reader Thackeray can provide his own kind of revelation.

Much of the suspicion and disfavour which Thackeray suffered in his day, and still to some extent suffers from in ours, can be attributed to his failure to subscribe absolutely to the human need for certainty and passionate loyalty. The ironist, who alienates himself from himself in order to see the nature of his needs, prejudices, and enthusiasms, can never be a partisan with a programme; he offers us the paradox of a real wholeness (or whole reality) which is incomplete because reality

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is incomplete. To the ironist every position which the self adopts implies an antagonistic position which might have been adopted with equal certitude. He knows that "doubt and trusts subtend each other; they cohere in the unity that is the whole man."\(^1\) The price of this "wholeness" is uncertainty; the attempt to be inclusive inevitably leads to being inconclusive.

Thackeray offers his reader not a vision of the world transformed but vision of man in the process of transforming himself by fluctuation between changing realities. He does not deny the truth of the visionary, as we have seen in his recreation of the moods of Pendennis and J.J. Ridley as they appear to the narrator, but he denies its permanence. Wholeness (that is health) is achieved paradoxically by splitting the self into an actor and a spectator, each learning from and dependent upon the other. The play or pantomime, with its emphasis on artificiality and the human need to experiment and learn through play, thus becomes Thackeray's dominant metaphor. Seeing the play purely as a play enables the spectator to have a vision of himself as a continual part-player. Thackeray's reader, in short, detaches himself from illusion in order to have knowledge of his illusions.

Colin Wilson says that "in some sense, every work of fiction that has ever been written is somehow obscurely concerned with the problem of how men should live."\(^2\) A dialectic between good and evil; or desirable

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and undesirable or less desirable attitudes, runs through the novels of Thackeray as it does through those of, for example, Jane Austen, Dickens, and Virginia Woolf. But although Thackeray supports such moral positives as the value of tact, intelligence and good breeding, the necessity for benevolence and charity, and the need for sensitivity to others, he has the courage, honesty, and humility to admit to the negatives which define these values. Moreover, in both absolutes he finds the seeds of its opposition. In short, he offers no system either explicit or implicit on which men can rely. The problem of how men should live is resolved in Thackeray's philosophy by each one for himself, as he watches himself from moment to moment quietly, closely, without praising or blaming, in a spirit of eternal vigilance.

Thackeray's dialectic is not merely one of moral opposites, where Becky is opposed by Amelia, Blanche by Laura, and so forth; it is also a conflict that takes place within the reader who becomes at once protagonist and observer. It is a process of self-exploration whereby the adult discovers the child within, and enthusiastic participation is balanced by self-critical analysis. The reader must become both Young Walter and Mr. Roundabout. Thackeray's own "Fireside Pantomime," The Rose and The King, is thus appropriately designed by him "for great and small children" (XXIV, 197).

If the child is a natural role-player who learns instinctively through dramatic play, then the adult must recover some of this lost power to learn by becoming a child. Thackeray offers us no simple child-like adults such as Mr. Dick or Joe Gargery, but he takes the spirit of play into the sophisticated and deadly earnest world of the
salon and gaming table. If roles seem more important to him than goals, this does not imply that his world has no meaning, that it is entirely frivolous or ultimately escapist. On the contrary, his play-world is highly serious: it disturbs our hallowed conventions of novels and morals and lets the anarchist, the child, and the dreamer within us come into our stern and repressive consciousness.

Like the mysterious Juggler of the Tarot Pack, the Dreamer is continually doing the apparently impossible, capsizing our solemn ultimates of birth and death, manipulating space and time with a breathtaking impudence, riding roughshod across all our most treasured and assured convictions. With the Dreamer you never know where you are. At one moment he chills by an inhuman cruelty, at another uplifts with a sheer grandeur of spiritual vision; he irritates us by trivialities, silences us with an unreachable wisdom, charms us by his subtlety and wit, and often enough disgusts us with his coarse and bestial fantasies.

The child-at-play within the reader can, like the dreamer when he is recognized, enrich immensely the compulsive planner and organiser who is the essentially sane and respectable adult in the reader. When the adult listens to the babble of the child within he becomes aware that "life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation." Creative artists from Blake and Wordsworth to Van Gogh and Picasso have paid tribute to the unselfconscious visionary power of children. In Thackeray, little Miles Warrington, young Rawdon, and young Walter display a freshness and honesty which shocks, startles, and waylays social conventions which are accepted and inviolable rules to the adult. Freud points out that "under the influence of alcohol the adult again becomes a child who

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4 Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," in *Transport to Summer* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1947), p. 120.
derives pleasure from the free disposal of his mental stream without being restricted by the pressure of logic." Most works of art also contain this ability to liberate the imaginative and undisciplined child within the reader or spectator. Thackeray, however, evokes the eternal watcher as well as the child within the reader—the watcher who protects the child-at-play and who sees the complex self indulging in various forms of child's play. Thackeray does not seek to disparage his reader when he has the Manager of *Vanity Fair* say: "Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out" (*VF*, 666).

Thus, for Thackeray, the only reality is a process of continual self-renewal where the self reveals itself through the play of illusion. Only the child is naturally at home in the world of illusion, but only the adult is capable of seeing the illusion for what it is. For this ultimate vision to take place, adult and child must come together in the person of the reader. The role of the narrator and reader thus necessitates a double projection: into the primary and into the secondary fictional world of the novels. In the primary illusion the reader is actor and believes in his role like a child, and in the secondary illusion he is an adult watcher. Ultimately, the novels do not lead anywhere except back to the reader's own consciousness; hence, their provocatively open form.

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The secondary fictional world in the later novels increasingly predominates over the primary, as the narrator focuses upon himself rather than his "story." In Lovel, in fact, the nominal hero is little more than a supernumerary figure. Batchelor attempts, in jest and earnest, to extract a maximum of truth from a most commonplace and trivial incident. The legendary world of Edenic and Greek myth is compounded with Batchelor's own fabricated past after he is rejected by the spinster who could "never" have more than a filial regard for the kind old gentleman." Batchelor continually re-evaluates his position in this scene which suggests a complex and indeterminate reality:

There were the trees—there were the birds singing—there was the bench on which we used to sit—the same but how different! The trees had a different foliage, exquisite amaranthine; the birds sang a song paradisiacal; the bench was a bank of roses and fresh flowers, which young love twined in fragrant chaplets around the statue of Glorvina. Roses and fresh flowers? Rheumatisms and flannel-waistcoats, you silly old man! Foliage and song? O namby-pamby driveller! A statue?—a doll, thou twaddling old dullard! a doll with carmine cheeks, and a heart stuffed with bran. (XXVIII, 348)

Whether Glorvina is a woman, a doll, a statue, or a phantom of the mind is never clear; Batchelor's ravings have no certainty beyond his own ambiguous dreams.

The incongruent perspectives of the secondary fictional world, which is made up of such contradictions and changes of stance, resist the imposition of any reductive pattern. Thus, George Levine has reservations about James Wheatley's recent study of Thackeray which, he finds, too neat to suggest "the sprawling disorder and redundance
of so much of Thackeray's ... fiction." Thackeray, finding absolute certainty to be unattainable, has constant recourse to alternation and ambiguity. Sprawl, disorder, and redundance are thus essential constituents of his world view, and the secondary fictional world, with its fragmented but dynamic perspectives, faithfully captures this vision. Since, for Thackeray, change is the only reality, then such questions as Becky's innocence or guilt in her liaison with Lord Steyne, and the contents of the pages torn from George Warrington's manuscript revelations about his wife, are vital to his reader. In the context of the reader's experience within the novel, these are, literally, vital questions because any answers he may feel temporarily convinced about giving are always subject to endless revision.

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This essay first appeared in 1901 in the original. This extract is from a translation of the 2nd ed. of Crooe's Aesthetics, 1922.


Excellent exposition of the unconscious constraint which the adherence to social conventions puts upon the self.


