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THACKERAY AS A READER AND CRITIC OF FRENCH LITERATURE

It was in the 1830s and 1840s that W. M. Thackeray worked as a professional critic of French literature, first as foreign correspondent of the *National Standard*, then as the author of the *Paris Sketch Book* and contributor to several magazines, especially the *Foreign Quarterly Review*. His criticism of French literature forms an important part of his critical work and yet it has not been dealt with in any separate study. It may have been investigated thoroughly in the only two studies which have so far been made of Thackeray's relationship to France and his literary criticism, G. N. Ray's *Thackeray and France* and Charles Mauskopf's *Thackeray's Literary Criticism*, but my knowledge of these works is only second-hand, as they have not yet been published.¹ Thackeray's criticism of French literature has of course been evaluated by Saintsbury in his *History of the French Novel* and his critical book on Thackeray² and by several other scholars in magazine articles or introductions to the editions of Thackeray's critical contributions (Melville, Garnett, Clapp, Enzinger³), in biographical and critical works dealing with Thackeray's life and work (besides Saintsbury, we should mention especially Dodds, Greig, Ray and Praz⁴), in works on the criticism of French literature in England (Moraud

¹ I am acquainted with Ray's work from his other writings and from his edition of Thackeray's correspondence and with Mauskopf's work from *Dissertation Abstracts*, USA, vol. XXV, item 5932.

² George Saintsbury, *A History of the French Novel* (To the Close of the 19th Century), 2 vols, Macmillan and Co., London, 1917, 1919. The same, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, OUP, London, 1931.

³ Lewis Melville, "Thackeray as a Reader and Critic of Books", *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 80, pp. 836-845; Introduction by Robert S. Garnett (ed.) to *W. M. Thackeray: The New Sketch Book*, Alston Rivers, Ltd., London, 1906; Edwin R. Clapp, "Critic on Horseback: William Makepeace Thackeray", *Sewanee Review Quarterly*, XXXIII, 1930, pp. 286-300; Philip Enzinger, "Thackeray, Critic of Literature", *Quarterly Journal*, publ. by the University of North Dakota, 1930-1931, vols 20-21.

⁴ John W. Dodds, *Thackeray: A Critical Portrait*, OUP, New York, London, Toronto, 1941; J. Y. T. Greig, *Thackeray: A Reconsideration*, Geoffrey Cumberlege, OUP, London, New York, Toronto, 1950; G. N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity (1811-1846)*, Geoffrey Cumberlege, OUP, London, 1955; Mario Praz, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, transl. Angus Davidson, Geoffrey Cumberlege, OUP, London, 1956.

and partly Hooker⁵), and in chapters on Thackeray in various histories of English literature. Some individual aspects of Thackeray's critical opinions on some greater or lesser French writers of his time and his alleged or real indebtedness to them, have been dealt with in several periodical studies by English as well as French and German scholars (Walter, Lafleur, Pacey, Falconer, Maître, Carey Taylor, Donnelly, etc.⁶). Most of these scholars have presented important or at least interesting theories and conclusions, but none of their works seems to me to be an entirely adequate treatment of this theme. Most of them evaluate Thackeray's criticism of French literature negatively and some condemn it almost entirely, expressing themselves quite severely (for instance Praz). I do not claim to any fully exhaustive treatment of the subject, which would of course require a full-length monograph, nor do I intend to inflate the merits of Thackeray's criticism so as to make him out to be a great critic of French literature, which he certainly was not. My purpose is rather to demonstrate that the utter condemnation of his critical judgments is not quite fair, to emphasize the range of his criticism which is considerably wider than is shown by Enzinger, who could not include all the reviews which have since been identified as Thackeray's, and to draw attention to Thackeray's deep and extensive knowledge of older French literature, which has so far not been commented upon in any published critical work.

I.

THACKERAY'S QUALIFICATIONS FOR CRITICISM OF FRENCH LITERATURE

1. Familiarity with the Country and Language

Thackeray's first qualification as a critic of French literature was his close personal contact with France, which was most intimate in the crucial years of his growth as critic and writer (1833—1837), when he worked in Paris as foreign correspondent of the *National Standard* and the *Constitutional* and studied art in the Paris studios. This connection remained very close in the period of his maturity (until 1847) and was not much weakened even in the remaining years of his life: for a long time he saw in Paris his second home and regularly visited it at least once a year until his death. The French metropolis played an important role, too, in his personal life: there he met and married his wife, and there he spent the first happy months of his married life. Even his parents found a refuge in Paris when their material position became difficult and his

⁵ Marcel Moraud, *Le Romantisme français en Angleterre de 1814 à 1848*, Champion, Paris, 1933, pp. 294 et seq.; K. W. Hooker, *The Fortunes of Victor Hugo in England*, Morningside Heights, Columbia UP, New York, 1938.

⁶ See note 28 to chapter III.

children made a temporary home with them, when his wife's mental illness was ascertained beyond any doubt. Isabella herself was undergoing her treatment first in France, before she was finally brought to England and placed under the care of Mrs. Bakewell in Camberwell. It is therefore not surprising that during this period, whenever he found himself alone in London, he regarded the English metropolis as an intolerably dismal exile and was always eager to return to the town in which all the people who were dearest to him lived and which remained in his memory as the scene of the happiest period of his life.

One of the best assets for Thackeray as a critic of French literature was of course his very good knowledge of the French language which he mastered to such a degree that he could not only read in the original, but also speak fluently and with a good accent. This enabled him to move in Parisian society (though he found there very few personal friends⁷), and to become familiar with the social and political life of the country, the national character of its people, its history, literature and culture. In spite of this familiarity with life in Paris and his hearty liking for it, he never succeeded, however, in getting rid of some prejudices against the French, which exercised a harmful influence upon his criticism of their literature. Although he so sharply condemned the chauvinism of the British, their unbearable contemptuous arrogance towards the rest of the world and that insular pride, which made his countrymen the most hated nation on the Continent (we find this especially in his masterly portraits of the British "Continental Snobs" in his *Book of Snobs* as well as in many remarks elsewhere⁸), he was himself no stranger to these very weaknesses in relation to some particular nations and races, especially the French, the Jews and the Negroes. He resented most strongly those traits of the French character in which it conspicuously differed from the English and wrote about them with amused contempt and even with open disapproval. The French national character was in his opinion a "strange fantastic mixture of nature and affectation, exaggeration and simplicity"⁹ and his most serious objections are therefore aimed at all sorts of pretension and humbug which he supposed he had found in the French way of life. He sharply criticizes the lack of seriousness in French politics, the conviction of the French of their absolute superiority to all European nations, their cynical attitude to religion, the light-heartedness with which they treat sex and marriage and their boastfulness.¹⁰ He even gives vent, though fortunately very rarely, to his dislike of their personal appearance, their

⁷ His only really close French friend was obviously the etcher Louis Marvy (1815 to 1850). For information on their friendship see *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. G. N. Ray, 4 vols, OUP, London, 1945 (cited hereafter as *Letters*), I, cxlviii — cl. For the depiction of the etcher's happy family see *The Oxford Thackeray*, 17 vols, ed. George Saintsbury, OUP, London, New York, Toronto, 1908 (cited hereafter as *Works*), III, 504—505 and *Letters* II, 11.

⁸ See the chapters "Some Continental Snobs", "Continental Snobbery Continued" and "English Snobs on the Continent". For other similar remarks see e.g. *Works* II, 563, 565; IV, 257, 264, 265, 271, 495—496; IX, 102; X, 256, 263, 266; XI, 783, 819; XIV, 462; *Letters* II, 19, 831, etc.

⁹ *Works* V, 520.

¹⁰ See *Works* II, 38, 293, 300—301; IV, 332—333; V, 404, 409—410, 523, 538—539; X, 61.

lively gesticulation and their fastidiousness in clothing and hair-dressing. His most sharply worded expression of this dislike may be found in his "Meditations on Solitude", in which he describes the French visitors to London as odd-looking dwarfs and maintains that the English, do what they will, cannot respect them and regard them as equal. In this article he seems to share the ineffable British feeling of superiority over the French and the rest of the world and all the words he addresses to the French are uncommonly harsh. According to Spielmann this harshness might be explained by Thackeray having been lately moved to passion by some recent deeds of the French politicians (Joinville, the King, Colonel Pelissier, and the rest¹¹). His indignation in these cases was quite justified, but he was obviously unable to prevent it from distorting his evaluation of the French character in general. All his other statements concerning the inferiority of the French to the English should not be taken too literally, for they are always expressed in a jocosé manner¹² and are more than outweighed by statements of an exactly opposite character. These bear witness that he was perfectly aware that his prejudices against the French were prejudices, that he correctly assessed them as the outcome of false British patriotism and that he in fact never fully accepted the British idea of a Frenchman, as he found it presented, for instance, in Cruikshank's illustrations.¹³ His own views are embodied in the French characters in his novels, some of which are coloured by his prejudices and are purely comic (for instance *Mirobolant*), while some provide proof that he was not always the victim of pre-conceived opinions (*Madame de Florac*). Even his frequent statements that the French hate the English are not wholly the outcome of his prejudices, for he is able to admit that "the hatred may be accounted for by many reasons, both political and social".¹⁴ Although he had so many reservations as to French morals, he was not fully convinced that they were worse than those of the English and more than once pointed out that there existed virtues and vices on both sides of the Channel, though of a different kind.¹⁵ He regarded the French way of "making politics" as ridiculous, but, with only a few exceptions, he criticized what really deserved criticism in French political life—the July Monarchy, the charter of 1830 and Louis Philippe. In evaluating his attitude to the French we should always bear in mind this reverse side of the picture, as well as his positive statements concerning

¹¹ See M. H. Spielmann, *The Hitherto Unidentified Contributions of W. M. Thackeray to "Punch"*, Harper and Brothers, London and New York, 1899, p. 155. (Ray finds a different explanation, see op. cit., p. 245.) Joinville, the son of Louis Philippe, published a pamphlet in which he seriously discussed the possibilities of the French invasion of England (for Thackeray's protests see his article "The Prince of Joinville's amateur-invasion of England" (*Punch*, June 1, 1844), his poem "The Dream of Joinville" (*Punch*, June 15, 1844 etc.). Colonel Pelissier and his troops suffocated and burned to death in their cave at Dahara eight hundred Arabs, men, women and children, who would not accept his terms (for Thackeray's protest see "Soldiering" (*Punch*, July 26, 1845, p. 49, reprinted in Spielmann, op. cit., pp. 141–142).

¹² See for instance *Works* VIII, 49; IX, 381; X, 266.

¹³ See *Works* II, 422–423, 439, 441, 565; IX, 102.

¹⁴ *Works* III, 415; see also V, 486, 500–501; XIII, 776.

¹⁵ See *Works* II, 173–174 and especially III, 501–504.

other aspects of French life than those discussed above. His prejudices did not prevent him from having a very high opinion of the artistic taste of the French people, their knowledge of art, their "gaiety, cheerfulness, politeness, and sobriety, to which, in England, no class can show a parallel"¹⁶ and their capacity for enjoying life. He was also able to praise French painters as immeasurably superior to English, especially in the art of drawing.

Whenever Thackeray stayed in Paris, he regularly visited theatres and galleries, and almost always noted down his impressions in his letters, diaries, and newspaper contributions. He also read much and this extensive reading is his second main qualification as a critic of French literature. He was mainly interested in contemporary literature and culture, dealing with it also as a professional literary critic, but he was able to base his reading and criticism of contemporary authors upon a good knowledge of older French literature, and it is to this knowledge that I shall devote the next chapter.

2. Knowledge of Older French Literature

Thackeray's familiarity with older French literature is closer for the period of the French Renaissance and surprisingly extensive for the age of classicism. As I cannot possibly deal with it in detail, I shall try to tackle the problem by making up two lists of the French authors or works he certainly read. The first will contain those writers whose names or works (not always both together) Thackeray only mentions in his literary works, correspondence, diaries or recorded conversation, writers whose works he quotes (not always mentioning his source) or whose characters he uses for defining some particular traits of his own personages. As there is no general index to the Oxford edition of Thackeray's *Works* (though there is to the *Letters*), I shall also state the place where the references or quotations occur. Not to make the footnote apparatus too cumbersome, I shall do so—in the first list—in brackets. The second, much shorter, list will include the names of those writers whose works Thackeray critically appreciated in marginal notes scattered throughout his published writings and will be followed by a short evaluation of his critical views. The authors in both lists are arranged in chronological order, according to the dates of their births (and the few anonymous works according to the dates of their appearance), and cover the period since the 12th century up to the period of Romanticism proper. They are predominantly prose-writers, poets or dramatists, but I have included even the most important historians, letter writers, memorialists and some literary critics. Some of the authors and works (especially the oldest ones) might have been familiar to Thackeray from the English (or in the case of *Huon de Bordeaux* from the German¹⁷) translations or versions, but

¹⁶ *Works* II, 175; see also II, 39, 170–173, 549; III, 436.

¹⁷ He might have been familiar with this old French heroic epic from the generally known German poetic version in Wieland's *Oberon*, which he certainly read (see *Letters* I, 230).

predominantly he read in French. I do not lay claim to any exhaustive treatment of the problem and am fully aware that my lists do not and cannot include all the French authors and works with which Thackeray was familiar. The records of his reading are necessarily incomplete, for he did not always record what books he had read. Even the sale catalogue of his library is not fully reliable, as it includes several summary items (such as "French novels & c.—a large parcel", etc.) which might have included even significant works by other French writers than those subsequently mentioned here, both from the older period of French literature and from Thackeray's time. I may have missed some of his references in the hundreds of pages of his writings and I was unable to identify some of those I found, even with the help of experts in French literature.

- I. *Huon de Bordeaux* (Works IX. 113, XIV. 154), *Roman de sept sages* (Works XV. 891), *Valentin et Orson* (Works I. 69, IV. 216–217, XI. 56, XVI. 243, Letters I. 423), *Amadis de Gaul* (Works II. 198, XIII. 240, XVI. 210), Marguerite de Valois-Angoulême, Queen of Navarre (Letters II. 830), Blaise de Lasseran-Massencome, Seigneur de Montluc (Letters I. 204), Abbé de Brantôme (Works I. 93, II. 45, VIII. 317, 365), Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné (Letters II. 148), François de Malherbe (Works XV. 186), Charles Drelincourt¹⁸ (Works XV. 131), Anne Bigot de Cornuel¹⁹ (Works V. 459, XII. 457, XIII. 41, 722, *Biogr. ed.* XIII, lxxviii²⁰), Madame de Scudéry (Works III. 161, 163, XIII. 42, 739), La Rochefoucauld (Works I. 574, II. 110, XIII. 204), Roger de Bussy-Rabutin (Works I. 93), Jean de La Fontaine (Works XIV. 4), Blaise Pascal (Letters II. 279, Works XII. 799, *Morning Chronicle* 46²¹), Madame de Sévigné (Gulliver 205, 220²²), Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (Works II. 238, 239, 319, 321), Claude François Menestrier (Works II. 319–320), Nicolas Boileau (Works II. 78, XIII. 507–508, 527–528), Guillaume Amfrye de Chaulieu (*Morning Chronicle* 116), Gatién Sandras de Courtilz (Wilson

¹⁸ I think that it is most probably this older Drelincourt (1595–1669), the French Protestant theologian, who is the favourite author of Madam Esmond, who was scrupulous in her devotions and mistrusted imaginative literature, rather than his son Laurent (1626–1681), famous for one sermon and *Sonnets chrétiens* (1670).

¹⁹ Thackeray often quotes (or rather paraphrases) the apothegm "Il n'y a point de héros pour son valet de chambre", which I attributed in my previous study ("The Aesthetic Views of W. M. Thackeray", *Brno Studies in English*, vol. VI, Brno, 1966, p. 20) to Montaigne, relying upon the statement of Praz (see op. cit., p. 399, note 95). On verifying Thackeray's quotations I have found out, however, that he always uses the words "hero" and "valet", and that his source must have therefore been Madame Cornuel rather than Montaigne who phrases it thus: "Peu d'hommes ont esté admiré par leurs domestiques" (*Essais*, Bk. III., ch. 2). Thackeray might have of course become familiar with this saying from the works of some English critics who quote it, for instance Johnson, Hazlitt or Carlyle.

²⁰ *The Biographical Edition of the Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, with biographical introductions by his daughter, Anne Ritchie, in 13 vols, Smith, Elder and Co., London, 1898–1899. Cited hereafter as *Biogr. ed.*

²¹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Contributions to the "Morning Chronicle"*, ed. G. N. Ray, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1955. Further to be cited as *Morning Chronicle*.

²² Harold Strong Gulliver, *Thackeray's Literary Apprenticeship. A Study of the Early Newspaper and Magazine Work of W. M. Thackeray*, Valdosta, 1934.

I. 261²³), Marquis de La Fare (*Morning Chronicle* 116), Anthony Hamilton (*Works* VIII. 540, XIII. 520, *Biogr. ed.* XIII. lxvi²⁴), Antoine Galland (*Works* XIII. 106, XV. 308, XVII. 244, 302, 304, 319), Abbé Fénelon (*Works* II. 319, XI. 56, XVII. 407²⁵), Madame Anne Lefèvre-Dacier (*Works* II. 183, VI. 184), Paul de Thoyras de Rapin (*Works* XV. 308), Charles Rollin,²⁶ Jean Baptiste Massillon (*Works* II. 318), Jean Baptiste Colbert, Marquis de Torcy and Jacques Fitz-James, Duc de Berwick (*Letters* III. 446–447), Louis de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon (*Works* IX. 279), Abbé Prévost (*Works* VI. 570), Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, fils (*Works* I. 35, VI. 154, XI. 106, XIV. 409, *Letters* I. 213), Jean Baptiste Gresset (*Works* VI. 154, *Letters* I. 236), Madame Leprince de Beaumont (*Works* VI. 578, XI. 90, VIII. 366²⁷), Denis Diderot (*Works* II. 250, *Letters* II. 500), Claude Adrien Helvétius (*Works* II. 227), Abbé Barthélemy (*Works* I. 586–587), D'Alembert (*Works* II. 202), Jean Joseph Vadé (*Works* XIV. 409), Madame d'Epinaï (*Morning Chronicle* 116), Jean François Marmontel (*Morning Chronicle* 73), Friedrich Melchior Grimm,²⁸ Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais,²⁹ Jean François Ducis,³⁰ Dieudonné Thiébauld (*Letters* III. 668), Nicolas Edmé Restif de la Bretonne (*Letters* I. 213), Jacques Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (*Gulliver* 58), Abbé Jacques Delille (*Works* XIV. 409), Choderlos de Laclos (*Letters* I. 213), Arnaud Berquin (*Works* II. 706), Jean Pierre Claris de Florian (*Morning Chronicle* 73, 88), Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (*Works* XIII. 492), Claude Joseph Rouget-de-L'isle (esp. *Works* III. 496),

²³ James Grant Wilson, *Thackeray in the United States, 1852–1853*, 2 vols, Smith, Elder and Co., London, 1904.

²⁴ All his references concern Hamilton's *Mémoires du comte de Grammont* (1713). According to Saintsbury, Thackeray might have been inspired by Hamilton's stories "Fleur d'Épine" and "Quatre Facardins" in devising the part of "Sister Anne" in *Bluebeard's Ghost* (see *A History of the French Novel*, I, pp. 313–314).

²⁵ See John Loofbouro, *Thackeray and the Form of Fiction*, New Jersey Princeton UP, Princeton, 1964, pp. 97–98, for an interesting analysis of Thackeray's indebtedness to Fénelon's *Télémaque* in *Pendennis* and *The Virginians*.

²⁶ I have not collected all Thackeray's references to Rollin's *Histoires anciennes* (1730–1738), which he also had in his library. But he certainly refers to this book in *Works* V, 84 and XII, 35.

²⁷ Thackeray was familiar with her fairy-tale "La Belle et la Bête", but obviously did not know by whom it was written, as he was convinced that the author was a man (see *Works* VIII, 366).

²⁸ Thackeray had in his library Baron de Grimm's *Mémoires* (1814). It is most probably the work of Friedrich Melchior Grimm (1723–1807), a friend of Diderot, who was a German by origin but played a significant role in the philosopher's life and in French literature in general. From 1757 he wrote his famous *Correspondance littéraire* (1753–1790), which was published in 1812–1815. In 1776 he became a Baron.

²⁹ Thackeray read all the three plays of Beaumarchais's Figaro cycle, *Le Barbier de Séville* (1775), *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784) and *La Mère coupable* (1792) in 1850 (see *Letters* II, 679). If he read them at that date for the first time, all his numerous earlier references to Beaumarchais's characters (Figaro, Rosina, Count Almaviva, Don Basilio) are to the opera versions of the plays, especially to that of *Le Barbier de Séville* by Rossini, which he saw several times (in 1830, 1832, 1844 and 1862 – see *Letters* I, 127, 186; II, 147; IV, 270–271). Some of the later references might concern the plays, e.g. *Works* XIV, 409, 777; XVII, 218.

³⁰ See "The Last Fifteen Years of the Bourbons", *Foreign Quarterly Review*, XXIX, July 1842, p. 411; *Works* II, 56.

Jean Baptiste Louvet de Couvray (*Morning Chronicle* 62, *Amours du Chevalier Faublas—Works* I. 32, 49), Madame de Krüdener (*Works* VII. 245, “Madame Krudner”), Alexandre, Comte de Tilly (*Letters* III. 668, 677), Charles Jean Dominique de Lacretelle (*Works* II. 383), Madame Marie Risteau Cottin (*Letters*, I. 102), Louis Antoine François de Marchangy (*Letters* I. 237).

II. Jean Froissart, Enguerrand de Monstrelet, Juvénal des Ursins, François Rabelais, Pierre de Ronsard, Michel E. de Montaigne, Pierre Corneille, Molière, Charles Perrault, Jean Racine, René Lesage, Voltaire, Rousseau.

Thackeray was well read in the old French chronicles of the 14th and 15th centuries, especially Froissart and Monstrelet. He must have read them for the first time quite early, as he quotes Monstrelet in 1838 and refers to Froissart in December 1839.³¹ He returned to them again in 1841, when he started writing his unfinished tale of fifteenth-century life, *The Knights of Borsellen*, which depicts the same period as these historians did and contains copious quotations from Monstrelet. Thackeray's purpose in this story was to depict the chosen historical period as it really was, truthfully, and his depiction therefore contains much “violence, grossness and cruelty” as Ray points out.³² I do not think this scholar is entirely in the right, however, when he maintains that the author found these qualities in Brantôme, Froissart, and Monstrelet. Thackeray mentions only the last-named chronicler, with Juvénal des Ursins and the nameless monk of St. Denis, as not presenting “delightful narratives” of the times in which they lived (he adds, however, that no romance can be more amusing than their histories). He does not express his views upon the representation of history in Brantôme, and is perfectly aware that Froissart did not depict his age as it really was, but devoted himself mainly to the celebration of chivalry and the outward splendour of the life of his noble masters, which blinded him to all the dark aspects of the Middle Ages. In *Miss Tickle-tooby's Lectures on English History* Thackeray presents a very acute appreciation of Froissart's merits and demerits. He praises him as a writer “so exceedingly lively and pleasant, that the scenes of the war are made to pass before the reader as if he saw them”, but criticizes him for making reality more pleasant than it really was—more like a well-acted stage representation than unadorned truth. He points out that there is nothing but fighting and killing in Froissart's works, “yet all passes with such brilliancy, splendour, and good humour that you can't fancy for the world that anybody is hurt; and though the warriors of whom he speaks are sometimes wounded, it really seems as if they liked it”.³³ In the following comment, revealing the real character of the wars “which are so pleasant to read of in Froissart”, we recognize Thackeray's familiar negative attitude to the Middle Ages which had never been to him the “good old times” as to some of his contemporaries:

³¹ See his review of Tyler's *Life of Henry V* (*Times*, Nov. 12, 1838) and *Works* II, 56.

³² *Op. cit.*, p. 268.

³³ For the quotations see the review quoted in note 31 and *Works* VII, 308.

“When we read that the King’s son, the Black Prince, burned down no less than 500 towns and villages in the south of France, laying the country waste round about them, and driving the population Heaven knows where, you may fancy what the character of these wars must have been, and that if they were good fun to the knights and soldiers, they were by no means so pleasant to the people” (*Works* VII, 310).

Among the French authors of the period of the Renaissance Thackeray took a special liking to the great humourist and satirist François Rabelais and even found some points of resemblance between the French writer’s burlesque humour and his own creative approach.³⁴ Rabelais remained among Thackeray’s favourites until the end of the latter’s life and Thackeray’s critical estimation of the works of his great predecessor did not undergo any substantial modification (it is worth noticing that it markedly and surprisingly differs from the negative evaluation of his literary teacher, Fielding³⁵). Throughout his whole critical and literary career Thackeray retained his positive appreciation of Rabelais’s Pantagruelian philosophy (understanding it as humour and satire without bad blood and adding to our knowledge of the world), his faithful representation of the life of his society, his keenness of perception, marvellous sense of the ridiculous and the nonsensical, his rich humour and sharp, good-humoured wit.³⁶ It is very interesting that he is able to accept Rabelais’s obscenity and coarseness of expression and even prefers the French writer’s humour to that of Sterne, rejecting—of course not justly—the English novelist’s claim to be the successor of the great French satirist (and of Swift):

“The humour of Swift and Rabelais, whom he pretended to succeed, poured from them as naturally as song does from a bird; they lose no manly dignity with it, but laugh their hearty great laugh out of their broad chests as nature bade them. But this man—who can make you laugh, who can make you cry, too—never lets his reader alone, or will permit his audience repose: when you are quiet, he fancies he must rouse you, and turns over head and heels, or sidles up and whispers a nasty story. The man is a great jester, not a great humourist” (*Works* XIII, 666).

As this quotation suggests, Thackeray found in Rabelais’s works something further which outweighed his nastiness and made it negligible and which he thought he did not find in Sterne—a deep and sincere love for mankind, full-blooded humanity, gay and earthy laughter.

Another favourite whom Thackeray found among the French Renaissance writers was the acknowledged prince of French poets, Pierre de Ronsard. Thackeray refers to his poetry very rarely, but when he does, he appreciates Ronsard’s verses as noble poetry expressing the everlasting feelings of the human heart.³⁷ His positive attitude to this poet is best revealed by his having chosen Ronsard’s most famous sonnet “Quand vous serez vieille, au soir, à la chandelle” for translation (or rather paraphrasis), which was published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in January

³⁴ See *Letters* I, 412.

³⁵ See *Selected Essays of Henry Fielding*, ed. Gordon Hall Gerould, Athenaeum Press Series, Ginn and Company, Boston, New York, Chicago, London, 1905, p. 80.

³⁶ See *Works* I, 574; II, 34; VI, 340, 389; XV, 230. For a quotation from Rabelais see *Letters* III, 494.

³⁷ See *Letters* III, 152; see also his quotation of Ronsard’s verses on Mary, Queen of Scots, from Mignet’s *Histoire de Marie Stuart*, 1851, *Works* XVII, 650.

1846 under the title "Ronsard to his Mistress". Thackeray's predilection for Ronsard is not surprising—he found in him a kindred soul, a gentle Epicurean, looking with melancholy eyes at the ephemeral and inevitably passing values of human life, which he loved so much, a delightful poet fascinated by the jocund and light Anacreontic muse and by the odes of Horace (both Ronsard and Thackeray imitated Anacreon and Horace and were much indebted to the latter poet).

Thackeray had a great affection, too, for the greatest moralist and prose writer of the period discussed, Michel E. de Montaigne, whose *Essais* he had in his library in two French editions and in English translation. They were among his best-loved books, especially in the later years of his life, and were also the favourite reading of some of his later characters (Esmond, General Lambert, George Warrington). The whimsical, wise, melancholy and jovial reflections of this delightful writer on various aspects of human life were in perfect harmony with Thackeray's own philosophy of life, particularly in its later phases, when he could whole-heartedly accept Montaigne's intellectual aristocratism as well as his social conservatism, together with his social and moral ideal of the "honnête-homme", i.e. "gentleman" in Thackeray's conception of the term, which was acceptable to him even in his earlier years. Thackeray must have also realized that there were many points of resemblance between him and Montaigne in style and creative approach and might even have learned from the French author his familiar, digressive and gossipy exchange of confidence with his readers (if Montaigne was not his direct teacher, he was certainly an indirect one through Addison and Lamb). This spiritual kinship with Montaigne is perhaps the main reason why Thackeray does not mind the French writer's garrulousness and egotism and even—very surprisingly for him—his "immorality". In contradistinction for instance to Carlyle, who reprehended Montaigne for crude indelicacy, coarseness, and obscenity (though he was not blind to his merits), Thackeray openly declared that he found Montaigne's offences in this respect negligible and transferred the blame to the writer's time.³⁸

Whereas Thackeray whole-heartedly admired all the great writers of the French Renaissance, he was not so enthusiastic about the representatives of Neo-Classicism in France. This is, however, not very unexpected. Living in a different period of time, and in a social and cultural atmosphere which had gone beyond the phase of Romanticism and was strongly influenced by the rapid progress of the Industrial Revolution, Thackeray was perfectly aware of the inadequacy of pure rationalism to interpret all the multiple aspects of modern human experience. Even though he regarded, as Loofbourow pointed out, the neoclassical conventions of the pastoral and the mock-epic as "valid perspectives on nineteenth-century reality"³⁹ and made full use of them in his fiction, of

³⁸ For Carlyle's opinion see Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 5 vols, Chapman and Hall Limited, London, 1899, V, 66–67; for Thackeray's view see *Works* XVII, 366. For Thackeray's own reading of Montaigne see *Letters* II, 245, 246; for other references to Montaigne *Works* XIII, 87; XV, 592, 908.

³⁹ See Loofbourow, op. cit., ch. IV. "Neoclassical Conventions: *Vanity Fair*, *Pennedennis*, *The Newcomes*", esp. pp. 51–52, 63.

course modified and transposed in his workshop to suit his world, he knew that the retreat to neoclassical principles and formulas was no longer possible and openly dissociated himself from them. His point of view is perhaps most clearly expressed in the following quotation from his article "On the French School of Painting":

"Now, as Nature made every man with a nose and eyes of his own, she gave him a character of his own too; and yet we, O foolish race! must try our very best to ape some one or two of our neighbours, whose ideas fit us no more than their breeches! It is the study of Nature, surely, that profits us, and not of these imitations of her. A man, as a man, from a dustman up to Aeschylus, is God's work, and good to read, as all works of Nature are: but the silly animal is never content; is ever trying to fit itself into another shape; wants to deny its own identity, and has not the courage to utter its own thoughts. . . . Because certain mighty men of old could make heroic statues and plays, must we not be told that there is no other beauty but classical beauty?—must not every little whipster of a French poet chalk you out plays, *Henriades*, and such-like, and vow that here was the real thing, the undeniable Kalon?" (*Works* II, 46–47).

The quotation is taken from a much longer passage, in which Thackeray protests against the intolerable "classical reign" in art and proclaims his intention to fight and pull down, together with the other "anti-humbuggists", the "bloated, unnatural, stilted, spouting, sham sublime, that our teachers have believed and tried to pass off as real".⁴⁰ At the end of his protest he welcomes the death of classicism, brought about by the arrival of romanticism, by the works of Scott and Dumas.

Having such an attitude to the theories of neoclassicism, Thackeray quite naturally could not whole-heartedly approve of those writers who were its most typical practitioners in France, namely (besides Boileau to whom he refers very rarely by name—see page 42) Corneille and Racine. His view of these two great dramatists is best expressed in the introduction to his article "French Dramas and Melodramas":

"There is the old classical drama, well nigh dead, and full time too. Old tragedies, in which half a dozen characters appear, and spout sonorous Alexandrines for half a dozen hours: the fair Rachel has been trying to revive this *genre* and to untomb Racine; but be not alarmed, Racine will never come to life again, and cause audiences to weep, as of yore. Madame Rachel can only galvanize the corpse, not revivify it. Ancient French tragedy, red-heeled, patched, and be-periwigged, lies in the grave; and it is only the ghost of it that we see, which the fair Jewess has raised. There are classical comedies in verse, too, wherein the knavish valets, rakish heroes, stolid old guardians, and smart, free-spoken serving-women, discourse in Alexandrines, as loud as the Horaces or the Cid. An Englishman will seldom reconcile himself to the *ronflement* of the verses, and the painful recurrence of the rhymes; for my part, I had rather go to Madame Saqui's, or see Deburau dancing on a rope; his lines are quite as natural and poetical" (*Works* II, 291).

As we can see from this quotation, the shafts of his criticism are aimed at the two aspects of the French classical drama which he regarded as its weak points—the rhetorical bombast of its majestic heroic tirades and

⁴⁰ *Works* II, 50; see also *ibid.*, 47, 48, 56. See also his protests against the arbitrary prescription of rules and precepts (*Works* II, 519, 593), against the overestimation of reason (*Works* II, 644–645), against the classicist idea of universal taste (*Works* II, 645), against the supreme authority of the ancient classics (*Works* XV, 660), etc.

the use of the Alexandrine. Elsewhere he expresses his conviction that Corneille's *Cid*, whom he appreciates as "the largest and noblest figure of French tragedy", "would talk more nobly still, if he would but talk in prose, and get rid of that odious jingling rhyme".⁴¹ Thackeray's first objection is not entirely unjust, especially as far as Corneille's tragedies are concerned, for even though they were powerful and full of energy, nothing happened on the stage but a sequence of rhetorical speeches. It is true that the pathos of these tirades was one of the greatest beauties of the dramatist's earlier works, especially of his *Cid*, but it was unacceptable to Thackeray, the sober, unheroic and unpathetic realist, even in this stage of its glory, before it degraded into the later hollow rhetoric. Thackeray's second objection is not just, for Corneille was the most outstanding master of verse in French literature and his Alexandrine is richly articulated, sonorous and rhythmical, though not melodious. Racine's style is regarded by French critics as being "infinitely pure and marvellously correct, suitable to its subject, and easy without being too fluent",⁴² and it is certainly much less emphatic and affected than that of Corneille. Thackeray's objection is a typically English one, current among English theatre-goers, to whose ears the French metres sounded unnatural and affected, and common in English criticism of Thackeray's time (appearing frequently in the old controversy "Racine or Shakespeare", revived in 1817 by the Romantic critics⁴³). One of Thackeray's objections is reserved for Racine's tragedies⁴⁴ and concerns this dramatist's predilection for striking antitheses. Thackeray raises it in his evaluation of Girodet's picture "*Deluge*":

"Seen from a distance, the latter's 'Deluge' has a certain awe-inspiring air with it. A slimy green man stands on a green rock, and clutches hold of a tree. On the green man's shoulders is his old father, in a green old age; to him hangs his wife, with a babe on her breast, and, dangling at her hair, another child. In the water floats a corpse (a beautiful head); and a green sea and atmosphere envelops all this dismal group. The old father is represented with a bag of money in his hand; and the tree, which the man clutches, is cracking, and just on the point of giving way. These two points were considered very fine by the critics: they are two such ghastly epigrams as continually disfigure French tragedy. For this reason, I have never been able to read Racine with pleasure,—the dialogue is so crammed with these lugubrious good things—melancholy antitheses—sparkling undertakers' wit; but this is heresy, and had better be spoken discreetly" (*Works* II, 57—58).

⁴¹ *Works* III, 459. See also the episode in *Philip* depicting the visit of the Baynes family, Colonel Bunch and Philip Firmin to the performance of *Le Cid* at the Théâtre Français. For other references to *Le Cid* see *Works* X, 487, 556; XIII, 596; XIV, 382; XVII, 216; for the quotation from *Le menteur* see *Works* VI, 321.

⁴² Émile Faguet, *A Literary History of France*, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1907, p. 438.

⁴³ See Hooker, op. cit., pp. 9—11. See also the opinion of Lytton Strachey: "Englishmen have always loved Molière. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that they have always detested Racine" (*Landmarks of French Literature*, p. 89, quoted in Laurie Magnus, *A Dictionary of European Literature*, George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., London, 1926, p. 420).

⁴⁴ He read or saw several of them — see his reference to *Athalie* (*Works* III, 459), to *Phèdre* (*Works* XIV, 445), quotation from *Les Plaideurs* (*Works* XV, 301) and from *Britannicus* (*Works* II, 209). Colonel Newcome "can recite whole pages out of Racine" (*Works* XIV, 251).

As we can see, Thackeray's evaluation of Corneille and Racine does not do full justice to the genius of these great dramatists and is thus in fact very near to the standpoint of the Romantic critics (English, French, or German) who saw them as representatives of the hated classicism and treated them accordingly. On the other hand, however, it is also near to that of Belinsky, which is even more sharply worded and more unjust. The Russian critic characterized Corneille and Racine's poetry as affected poetry which can charm only people without any aesthetic taste, as declamatory rhetoric, which dissolves—together with sonorous and polished verses—in banal maxims. This last rebuke Belinsky addresses also to Molière.⁴⁵

Thackeray's critical opinion of Molière is much more positive than that of his Russian contemporary. As his marginal remarks suggest, he saw several of Molière's comedies performed on the stage in France or in England, probably read all of them in the original (he had them in his library) and was also acquainted with the course of the dramatist's life, as two of his remarks suggest.⁴⁶ His works are dotted with numerous allusions to Molière's comedies, he makes them the favourite reading of some of his characters (General Lambert and Madame de Bernstein), while some others are characterized by the names of Molière's personages (Pendennis and Esmond). In his critical comments he highly appreciates Molière's truthful representation of reality and ranks him beside Fielding as an author who "drew from nature", expressing at the same time his wish that the old style of these writers "may come into fashion again, and replace the terrible, the humorous, always the genteel impossible now in vogue".⁴⁷ He had warm words of praise for Molière's humour and wit, his capacity for making the spectator laugh.⁴⁸ In his review "English History and Character on the French Stage" (if he is really its author) he uses Molière as his critical standard when evaluating the contemporary dramatist Scribe. The following quotation is very interesting, too, for the greater detail with which it treats other qualities of the dramatist's art than its truthfulness to life:

"But when M. Scribe aspires to be the successor of Molière, he subjects himself to some higher obligations. Molière never sacrificed truth. He cared little, it may be, for the regular progress of a story: sometimes, as in 'L'Avare', winding up a series of delightful scenes by an improbable conjunction of circumstances, as though, his purpose being accomplished, it concerned him little how he disposed of his personages. Having dressed up truth in the robes of satire, he might love, too, to place her in a whimsical frame, but it was one as rich and curious as the Gothic friezes. Your modern dramatists are mechanics, not artists; cobblers, not creators; wanting in imagination, and destitute of nice perceptions. How hearty, and kind, and natural, and generous is Molière, even in his occasional extravagance! How coldly quick, how smartly pretty, how shallow in the fulness of pretension, is his successor! But

⁴⁵ See V. G. Belinsky, *Spisy (Works)*, 5 vols, SNKLHU, Praha, 1955–1960, IV, 21; I, 633; II, 351.

⁴⁶ See *Works* II, 326; XVI, 241.

⁴⁷ *Works* VI, 310–311.

⁴⁸ See *Works* II, 595. For his other references to Molière's works or quotations from them see *Works* I, 14; II, 128, 188, 189, 297, 319, 595; VI, 367; IX, 114; X, 615; XII, 228; XIII, 515; XIV, 5, 14, 657, 758; XV, 220, 288; XVI, 307, 379; XVII, 549; *Letters* II, 152, etc.

the age has always much to do with the creation of its oracles. Molière lived in an age of great men and brilliant deeds, Scribe lives in a time of commonplace actions and commonplace men" (*NSB*,⁴⁹ 150–151).

Of the individual plays Thackeray pays greatest attention to *Tartuffe* and his critical opinion is worth noticing for its ambiguous character. While on the one hand he several times praises Molière for demasking in this play the religious hypocrisy of his time and emphasizes that his shafts still remain sharp and "have poison after two hundred years",⁵⁰ on the other hand he regards hypocrisy in matters of religion as too awful a thing to think of, much less to depict:

"But in matters of religion, hypocrisy is so awful a charge to make against a man, that I think it is almost unfair to mention even the cases in which it is proven, and which,—as, pray God, they are but exceptional,—a person should be very careful of mentioning, lest they be considered to apply generally. *Tartuffe* has been always a disgusting play to me to see, in spite of its sense and its wit; and so, instead of printing, here or elsewhere, a few stories of the *Tartuffe* kind which I have heard in Ireland, the best way will be to try and forget them. It is an awful thing to say of any man walking under God's sun by the side of us, 'You are a hypocrite, lying as you use the Most Sacred Name, knowing that you lie while you use it'" (*Works* V, 332).

Thackeray was obviously not aware that the play excited in him the very reaction that the dramatist intended—loathing instead of laughter. In *Tartuffe* the dramatist's creative approach is satirical, not humorous, and his critical shafts have therefore a wider range—besides religious hypocrisy they also hit sincere piety (and that was a thing Thackeray never could accept) and ascetic morality (in this respect he could identify himself with Molière). Thackeray had some critical reservations, too, as to the titular hero of the comedy, which he expressed through the mouth of Theo Lambert, who reproduces the opinion of George Warrington:

"I agree with him though about *Tartuffe*, though 'tis so wonderfully clever and lively, that a mere villain and hypocrite is a figure too mean to be made the chief of a great piece. Iago, Mr. George said, is near as great a villain; but then he is not the first character of the tragedy, which is Othello, with his noble weakness. But what fine ladies and gentlemen Molière represents—so Mr. George thinks—..." (*Works* XV, 641).

As follows from this quotation, Thackeray sees the main weak point of this character in its oneness, which is the outcome of the selection and exaggeration of one characteristic trait—in this case a very bad trait—and the exclusion of any redeeming positive qualities. His evaluation of the hero of the comedy reminds me to a certain extent of that of Pushkin, who compared Molière, as a creator of characters, with Shakespeare, to the former's disadvantage, pointing out that Molière's personages are not the complex living beings full of many passions and possessing many good and bad traits, whom we find in Shakespeare, but types of one particular passion or vice.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Abbreviation to be used hereafter for Garnett's *New Sketch Book*.

⁵⁰ *Works* VIII, 527; see also II, 188–189; X, 615.

⁵¹ See A. S. Pushkin, *Sobr. soch. (Collected Works)*, vol. VII, Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1949, p. 516.

It seems to me to be very characteristic that the only two French writers of the period of Classicism and Enlightenment whom Thackeray genuinely and unreservedly admired were Charles Perrault, the famous writer of fairy tales, and René Lesage, one of the founders of the realistic novel. Thackeray's references to Perrault's fairy tales exceed in number those to most of the other French literary works and are seldom mere references—almost always he either expresses his admiration, or enters upon reflections concerning the moral of the individual tales. In the latter case he even expresses his disapproval, but this never to the detriment of his love of the story. Thus he several times protests against the unhappy and ferocious ending of Perrault's "Red Riding-Hood" and of its English version and gives preference to the German version in which the little girl and her grandmother are saved by two foresters who cut open the wolf.⁵² One of these protests is a part of a longer passage in which he vents his objections to unhappy endings in general, in fiction as well as in drama, and in which he speaks in one breath about Shakespeare's tragedies and Perrault's tale. For this he was reprehended by Clapp,⁵³ who accepted this statement literally and did not take into account the half-jocose tone in which it is written. As his other remarks bear witness, Thackeray was aware that the fairy-tale is a specific *genre* governed by specific aesthetic principles, which cannot be put on the same level as higher forms of literature. For instance in his review of a fairy tale by the Brothers Mayhew, whom he reprehends for overstepping the boundary of their *genre* in setting out to profess a laborious moral, he writes:

"If a man wants to make a mere fantastic tale, nobody calls upon him to be tight and close in his logic. If he wants to moralize, his proposition should be neat and clear, as his argument is correct. I am reconciled now to the Wolf eating up Red Riding-hood (though I was sceptical in my childhood on this point), because I have given up believing that this is a moral tale altogether, and am content to receive it as a wild, odd, surprising and not unkindly fairy story" (*Works* VI, 596).

Thackeray not only referred to, quoted, and evaluated Perrault's tales, but found in them a rich source of inspiration. Thus Cinderella became for him a symbol which he uses for some of his pretty, modest and humble female characters (Caroline in *A Shabby Genteel Story* and its continuation *Philip*, Amelia in *Vanity Fair*, Ravenswing, Dr. Birch's niece Miss Raby, and Elizabeth Prior in *Lovel the Widower*). He uses this name, however, not only for his females of the genuine Cinderella kind, but also for quite un-Cinderella-like women who appear in this role only in the eyes of love-besotted young men (Fotheringay) or resemble Cinderella only in one, quite inessential trait (Ethel Newcome in her unusually splendid toilette). From Perrault's "Chat botté" Thackeray borrowed the name of the Marquis Carabas for his haughty and insolent nobleman in the *Book of Snobs*. The gates of the huge dismal mansion of this bankrupt aristocrat "are surmounted by the Chat bottés, the well-known supporters

⁵² See *Works* VI, 322, 596; XIV, 2-3.

⁵³ See *op. cit.*, p. 290.

of the Carabas family".⁵⁴ The richest source of Thackeray's inspiration was, however, Perrault's "Barbe Blue". Besides referring to this fairy tale innumerable times, he wrote its burlesque continuation *Bluebeard's Ghost*, and used its plot for his parody of James's novels and historical romance in general, "Barbazure", in *Novels by Eminent Hands*.⁵⁵

René Lesage was one of those few writers whom Thackeray loved throughout his whole life and to whom his attitude never changed. He admired him unreservedly, had no objections against him motivated by moral or national prejudices and appreciated in him what is to be expected from a great realist and satirist—his truthful representation of reality, his gift for drawing lifelike characters, his sparkling humour, and "the merry, brisk, good-humoured spirit" with which Lesage's *Gil Blas* "so charms the reader".⁵⁶ He was obviously also quite impressed by Lesage's *Diable boiteux*, for he several times refers to Asmodeus, once using this name as a sort of symbol for his omniscient narrator Mr. Batchelor, who, like the devil in Lesage's work, can take off the roofs of the houses and inform the reader of all the mysteries hidden beneath them.⁵⁷ Other characters of Lesage which made a deep impression upon him were the valet Frontin from the comedy *Turcaret*, a sort of predecessor of Figaro, and his colleague Crispin from the delightful play *Crispin, Rival de son Maître*, whose names he uses for characterizing servants.⁵⁸ Thackeray might have been even directly inspired by Lesage, for his Yellowplush in many respects reminds us of Gil Blas before his illness and moral crisis and his Jeames de la Pluche has at least some traits in common with Lesage's hero in the period of his prosperity.

Very interesting is Thackeray's relationship to the two great representatives of the French Enlightenment—Voltaire and Rousseau. He refers to Voltaire only in occasional remarks, but these are fairly copious and bear witness that he was familiar with the substantial part of the great philosopher's work, as well as with his life and character. We know for certain that he read or saw Voltaire's *Candide*, *La Henriade*, *Sémiramis*, *Lettres Anglaises*, and his ode "Poème de Fontenoy", as he mentions these works either by their titles, or refers to them so clearly that it is obvious what he had in mind. He was also familiar with Voltaire's essay on the "rules" of the drama, written in answer to the poet De La Motte, which is quoted in full in Goldsmith's translation given in the latter's *Memoirs of M. De Voltaire*, used by Thackeray as one of his sources for his lecture on Congreve and Addison (he quotes from it the famous episode of Voltaire's visit to Congreve). That he was familiar with this essay is also obvious from his reference to Voltaire's attacks on Shakespeare in the

⁵⁴ *Works* IX, 408.

⁵⁵ See also his unpublished drama "Bluebeard" written in blank verse (summarized by Dodds, op. cit., pp. 76–77), and his transposition of the well-known dialogue between Bluebeard's wife and Sister Anne in *The Virginians* (*Works* XV, 232).

⁵⁶ *Works* II, 517–518. For other references to *Gil Blas* see *Works* I, 321; II, 594, 596; III, 528; V, 84; VI, 413; IX, 90, 223; XIV, 278; XVII, 373, 450, 598; *Morning Chronicle*, 119; Lewis Melville, *William Makepeace Thackeray*, 2 vols. London, 1910, II, 69.

⁵⁷ See *Works* XVII, 107; see also II, 176; XII, 367; XVI, 344.

⁵⁸ See *Works* XIII, 515; XVII, 217–218; XIII, 419.

Virginians,⁵⁹ where he reproduces the attitude of the eighteenth-century criticism to the great dramatic genius, dissociates himself from it and makes General Lambert and George Warrington the spokesmen of his own, opposite views. We do not know much about Thackeray's critical views on the above-mentioned individual works of Voltaire. He disliked *La Henriade*, as we know from his protest against the neoclassical doctrine, quoted above (see page 47), and this is confirmed by other remarks of his, in which he comments upon the dead fame of the once so celebrated poem.⁶⁰ On the other hand he praises Voltaire's "Poème de Fontenoy" for the author's generous attitude to the defeated enemy.⁶¹ Voltaire's poem "Ce Qui Plaît aux Dames" obviously was among his great favourites, as he quotes from it several times, once praising the quoted verses as "exquisite lines".⁶² He has a little more to say about Voltaire's personality, work and philosophy in general and it is worth noticing that his evaluation is upon the whole more positive than negative, thus differing both from that of Voltaire's great admirers (for instance Goldsmith or Hazlitt) and from that of his detractors (for instance Johnson and Carlyle, though the latter is able to see some of Voltaire's merits). In his diary of 1832 and in his review of George Sand's *Spiridion*, Thackeray openly gives preference to Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists rather than to the French *École romantique*. In the earlier remark he emphasizes that though the poets and dramatists of the 18th century were considerably circumscribed in metre, time, and subject, "they occasionally produced true poetry", and adds:

"The gentlemen of the *École Romantique* have thrown away all these prejudices, but still seem no wise better or more poetical than their rigid predecessors—The passions which their ancestors discussed in perriwigs, are now in costumes more picturesque but still after all it is the coat that is changed and not the man—In the time of Voltaire the heroes of poetry and drama were fine gentlemen, in the days of Victor Hugo they bluster about in velvets and moustachios and gold chains, partly as in old times creating and partly following the prevailing fashion" (*Letters I*, 224–225).

In the later review Thackeray expresses serious reservations as to the Encyclopaedists' destructive scepticism and atheism, but upon the whole regards "the negatives of the old days" as "far less dangerous than the assertions of the present", i.e. the French pantheism, and adds:

"Voltaire and the Encyclopaedians are voted, now, *barbares*, and there is no term of reprobation strong enough for heartless Humes and Helvetiuses, who lived but to destroy, and who only thought to doubt. Wretched as Voltaire's sneers and puns are, I think there is something more manly and earnest even in them, than in the present muddy French transcendentalism" (*Works II*, 227–228).

I think Prof. Greig is right when he maintains that if only Thackeray "could have forgotten that Voltaire, Helvétius, and the Encyclopaedists in general had been anti-Christian, he would probably have found his

⁵⁹ See *Works XV*, 611.

⁶⁰ See Gulliver, op. cit., p. 213, *Works XVII*, 512. His dislike of Voltaire's tragedy *Sémiramis* is expressed in *Works IV*, 392.

⁶¹ See *Works VI*, 404–405.

⁶² See *Works II*, 173; see also *Works X*, 493; *XIII*, 508.

account in their writings, more than in any other products of the French genius. But when his head approved of them, his heart, untutored and in some degree dissociated, violently rebelled".⁶³ That Thackeray's objections to Voltaire are predominantly motivated by his religious feelings is confirmed by his making the great French philosopher and poet the favourite author of some of those of his characters who live "without God in the world" and have very free notions about religion and morals (Chevalier de Balibari, Becky Sharp and Miss Crawley).

Thackeray's attitude to Rousseau, on the other hand, was upon the whole very negative, though he referred to him only rarely. As a sober, detached and discreet realist he had always been disinclined to describe the progress of a love affair, and therefore resented Rousseau's detailed analysis of the feelings and sufferings inspired by love in his *Nouvelle Héloïse*. He comments upon this disinclination of his to depict the love affair between Caroline and Brandon in the *Shabby Genteel Story*, attributing it "to a natural diffidence and sense of shame" which prevent him "from enlarging on a theme that has in it something sacred", and adds:

"If such coy scruples and blushing delicacy prevent one from passing the threshold even of an honourable love, and setting down, at so many guineas or shillings per page, the pious emotions and tenderesses of two persons chastely and legally engaged in sighing, ogling, hand-squeezing, kissing, and so forth (for with such outward signs I believe that the passion of love is expressed),—if a man feel, I say, squeamish about describing an innocent love, he is doubly disinclined to describe a guilty one; and I have always felt a kind of loathing for the skill of such geniuses as Rousseau or Richardson, who could paint with such painful accuracy all the struggles and woes of Eloise and Clarissa,—all the wicked arts and triumphs of such scoundrels as Lovelace" (*Works* III, 358—359).

None the less negative was Thackeray's opinion of Rousseau's philosophy and his ideas of social reform. He applied to him his usual standard—that a social reformer should be pure himself—and found him wanting in this respect, which is of course not very surprising considering what we know about the French writer's life and about Thackeray. He is, however, too prone to generalization and arrives at the conclusion that no social reformer leads such a life as he or she should:

"I do believe not one; and directly a man begins to quarrel with the world and its ways, and to lift up, as he calls it, the voice of his despair, and preach passionately to mankind about this tyranny of faith, customs, laws; if we examine what the personal character of the preacher is, we begin pretty clearly to understand the value of the doctrine. Any one can see why Rousseau should be such a whimpering reformer, and Byron such a free and easy misanthropist, and why our accomplished Madame Sand, who has a genius and eloquence inferior to neither, should take the present condition of mankind (French-kind) so much to heart, and labour so hotly to set it right" (*Works* II, 230).

He also blames Rousseau (and Diderot) for having given birth to French Romanticism. After evaluating negatively the pantheistic philosophy propagated by Sand in her *Spiridion*, he characterizes her as "the representative of a vast class of her countrymen, whom the wits and philosophers of the eighteenth century have brought to this condition. The

⁶³ Op. cit., p. 76; see also *ibid.*, p. 88.

leaves of the Diderot and Rousseau tree have produced this goodly fruit: here it is, ripe, bursting, and ready to fall;—and how to fall? Heaven send that it may drop easily, for all can see that the time is come".⁶⁴ In view of such an attitude of Thackeray to Rousseau it is not surprising that he makes him the favourite writer of Miss Crawley and the Duchesse d'Ivry.

The results of my research into Thackeray's knowledge of older French literature, presented in this chapter, enable me to arrive at the conclusion that his familiarity with the products of the previous stages of literary development in France was really surprisingly extensive and almost certainly quite uncommon in an Englishman of his time and especially in an English critic. The first representative of English criticism who is usually praised for his knowledge of foreign literatures is George Henry Lewes.⁶⁵ Nobody has as yet duly appreciated the same strong point in Thackeray, at least not with such emphasis as in my opinion it deserves.

II.

THACKERAY AND FRENCH ROMANTICISM

1. Familiarity with the General Atmosphere

While Thackeray's interest in older French literature, as I have demonstrated, was so profound, his professional critical attention was exclusively concentrated upon literature produced in France during his lifetime, or, to be more exact, since the beginning of the 19th century. It is a familiar fact that the motives of his professional critical work were predominantly economic, but in spite of this he did not take his task lightly and strongly felt his responsibility towards the English readers he was expected to inform with regard to contemporary French literature. Attention to this literature was only a critical side-line, for the bulk of his literary criticism is devoted to the literature of his own country, but he took it as seriously as he did the main subject of his criticism and constantly, if perhaps not altogether deliberately, improved his qualifications. To the qualifications discussed in the preceding chapter he added an additional one—intimate knowledge of his subject. He familiarized himself not only with a substantial part of the whole of contemporary creative literature including that of the Romantic school, but also with numerous works of those thinkers and scholars who prepared the ground for the Romantic movement in France and helped to engender its general atmosphere and spirit. He read some of the works, or at least knew something about the ideas and personality of almost all the contemporary

⁶⁴ *Works* II, 250.

⁶⁵ See R. L. Brett, "George Henry Lewes: Dramatist, Novelist and Critic", *Essays and Studies*, 1958, p. 120 and especially Morris Greenhut, "George Henry Lewes and the Classical Tradition in English Criticism", *Review of English Studies*, vol. XXIV, 1948, pp. 136—137.

philosophers, social reformers, historians, memorialists, politicians, literary historians and critics. Almost always he gave critical comments on the works read in his diary or in marginal remarks in his letters or literary works and in three cases (Blanc, Ledru-Rollin and Janin) he made critical evaluations. Of the philosophers of this time he read and positively appreciated Victor Cousin, knew something about the teaching of Saint-Simon, which he evaluated negatively, and about the "chaste, just, dignified social scheme"¹ of Saint-Simon's disciple, Père Enfantin, which on the contrary appealed to him, perhaps by its strict moral principles and idealistic ideas on the transformation of society through the moral regeneration of man and society. He was convinced that if Enfantin had been allowed to carry out his doctrine, the French attitude to marriage might have changed for the better. He was also familiar with the theories of the representatives of Christian socialism in France, Pierre Leroux and Félicité Robert de Lamennais, the inspirers of those romanticists who were interested in the new fermenting ideas of socialism (young Sainte-Beuve, Victor Hugo, and especially George Sand). He refers to them several times and all his references are sharply critical and not quite just—he characterizes them as "silly speculators", calls their doctrine "that extremely polluted well of French speculation", and emphasizes that it would be "absurd to call it a science or a philosophy".² He also very much resents their versatility of belief carrying them and their confused disciples from one creed to another, and the influence of their misty Utopian socialist ideas upon romantic writers. In his review of Sand's novel *Spiridion* he very sharply attacks Lamennais (who figures here under the name Abbé de la M—) as the "mad priest" who converted Madame Sand to Catholicism and thus started her gradual disposal of this and every other creed, until she has left not a single stone standing of the whole fabric of Christianity. He quotes here the opinion of a French priest, who spoke to him about Lamennais "with actual horror" as of an *âme perdue* and obviously finds himself in full agreement with it. Much of what he says about Leroux and Lamennais is correct, but he does not do justice to their sincere endeavour to contribute to the transformation of their society, the evils of which they clearly saw and eloquently denounced.

Very interesting is the development of Thackeray's critical views upon the Utopian reformer, politician and historian Louis Blanc. In 1842 he evaluated Blanc's work *L'Histoire de dix ans, 1830—1840* (Paris, 1842) in a long critical article "The Last Fifteen Years of the Bourbons", in which he also reviews three other historical works dealing with this period.³

¹ *Works* II, 110; for another reference see *ibid.*, 188. For his reading of Cousin see *Letters* I, 225—226 and note; for references to Saint-Simon see *Works* VI, 324, 326.

² *Works* V, 451.

³ *Foreign Quarterly Review*, July 1842, pp. 384—420. The other three works are: 1) *Histoire de la Restauration, et des causes qui ont amené la chute de la branche aînée des Bourbons*. Par un Homme d'État (M. Capefigue), Paris, 1832—1836; 2) *Continuation de l'Histoire de France d'Anquetil*. Par M. Léonard Gallois, Paris, 1837; 3) *Histoire de la Restauration, suivie d'un Précis de la Révolution de Juillet*. Par Émile Renard, Paris, 1842.

This article, which bears witness to Thackeray's intimate knowledge of political life in France in the first decades of the century and is a sort of synopsis of the works noticed, containing many reflections of his own, was written at a time when his political views were still very progressive, especially those concerning the Bourbon and the July Monarchy. He could therefore accept this work of Louis Blanc, which is in its substance an indictment of the whole régime in France from a progressive point of view, without any serious critical reservations and with a good deal of sympathy. He even tries to make Blanc's "strongly republican" tendencies acceptable to the English readers who are, as he writes, prejudiced against the French and especially against French republicanism and liberalism, by pointing out that the Republican party in France is much more intelligent and respectable than that in England (he has in mind chiefly Chartism and is thus very unjust to the English working class, whose intelligence and common sense he elsewhere evaluated so positively⁴). There is only one point in which he disagrees—in Blanc's negative evaluation of the historical role of the middle classes in France. He vents his own views upon the problem, the substance of which is the following: the bourgeoisie is not a natural enemy of the working class, but rather a source for its pride, being recruited from its ranks and thus opening a way to all the talented *prolétaires*. This is of course a much more conservative view than that held by the author reviewed and it is much more typical of Thackeray in the later period of his life than at this relatively early date. In 1848 Thackeray read Blanc's book *L'Organisation du travail* (1839) and his reaction to it was quite different from that to Blanc's historical work. This difference is undoubtedly due to the changes which began to take place in his philosophy of life by that time and which may be characterized as the first steps towards his final compromise with his society. He expressed his views upon this work in a long letter to his mother, in which he proclaimed his disbelief in communism, socialism, or Louis Blanc, appreciated Blanc's clear exposition of "the evils of our present system",⁵ but criticized the programme proposed by the author as absurd and detestable. More than a criticism of Blanc's doctrine, however, his letter is the expression of his bewilderment over the question of property and labour, in which he sees an insoluble mystery, his endeavour to see the justness of the cause of both sides involved in this eternal strife (but rather more so the justness of that of the manufacturers), his fears of any revolutionary solution and his serious disquiet at the evils of the social system existing in France and in his own country. Not long after having written this letter Thackeray met Blanc personally, when the French politician came as an exile to England. At that time Blanc stepped upon the same road of compromise as Thackeray and the two men obviously understood each other very well, as they became good friends.⁶

Another French politician, whose work Thackeray noticed in his

⁴ See for instance *Works* III, 194–195.

⁵ *Letters* II, 355.

⁶ See *Letters* II, 355 note; IV, 198–199 and note.

criticism, was Alexandre Ledru-Rollin. He did so in a short critical notice written in the form of an essay and published under the title "On an Interesting French Exile" (*Proser Papers, Punch*, June 15, 1850). The subject of his criticism is Ledru-Rollin's work *De la décadence de l'Angleterre* (1850). Although he maintains that his purpose in writing the notice is "that of friendly negotiator and interposer of good offices", and that his object is "eminently pacific", his attack is motivated by his anger against the author who reviles the country which provided him with a refuge and partly, too, by his prejudices against the French. He criticizes the author's depiction of England as false and untrue, founded upon "a fine natural ignorance" of the country, its way of life, language and literature, containing many gross blunders and motivated by the author's "enthusiastic malevolence" with which he utters his many "predictions of hatred and ruin" concerning the country which was so generous to him. He characterizes Ledru-Rollin as an insignificant man for whom nobody of London's two millions cares and to whom even the Government does not pay "the compliment of the slightest persecution".⁷ He harps upon the author's insignificance so much that one cannot help wondering why he did not leave this work, which certainly contains many weak points, unnoticed. But he was obviously incensed by it to an unusual degree, as he referred to it briefly even in his next *Proser Paper*.⁸ The explanation is not difficult to find. Thackeray had always strongly resented those foreign travellers who revile the country in which they are hospitably treated and in Ledru-Rollin's case his resentment naturally was much stronger, as this author slandered the country which accepted him when his own native ground had become too hot for him. This attitude of Thackeray to foreign travellers was also the reason for his own disinclination to write a book about the United States and is familiar to us from his many reviews of travel-books by authors of various nationalities. In this connection we should at least briefly mention his reviews of the books on England by other French writers—Alfred Michiels (*Angleterre*) and Vicomte d'Arlincourt (*Les Trois royaumes*)⁹. In the review of the first mentioned book he criticizes the author for the same main demerit as he did Ledru-Rollin—an entirely false depiction of English reality—but uses much sharper weapons: he relentlessly pursues him with biting irony and sarcasm and creates thus a brilliant ironic *étude* on the theme "the great Michiels". Though even in this case he partly reveals his national prejudices, his evaluation of Michiels is essentially just, as Saintsbury and Garnett also believe.¹⁰ In my opinion, his prejudice against the French is not the main motive of his critical attacks upon writers like Ledru-Rollin and Michiels. This is proved by his ability to treat leniently a French visitor to England, if he honestly tries to depict what he saw in the country, does not indulge in the "amateur incendiarism" of Ledru-Rollin or Michiels, who delight in addressing

⁷ For the quotations see *Works* VIII, 369, 371.

⁸ See *Works* VIII, 372.

⁹ "Angleterre", *Foreign Quarterly Review*, July 1844; "The Three Kingdoms", *Morning Chronicle*, April 4, 1844.

¹⁰ See Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 91; NSB, pp. 321–322, 323.

England with veiled threats, but on the contrary is polite and good-natured, is a gentleman. This is done by Thackeray in his review of the Vicomte d'Arlincourt's book. His ability to mete out equal justice to everybody is further shown by his treating with equal severity all the misinformed, untruthful or mischievous travellers of any nationality to any country, and positively evaluating the works of those who are well-informed, good-humoured, honest, and gentlemanly.¹¹

Thackeray had always been deeply interested in history and it is therefore not surprising that he read the works of almost all the French liberal historiographers of the Romantic period (besides those of other French historians of his time not belonging to this school), who contributed much to the formation of its general spirit. In 1835 he was obviously greatly interested in the French Revolution, as he read the two well-known *Histoires de la Révolution française* by Mignet and Thiers. He does not write much about the first, but it seemed to him better than the second. Thiers's work impressed him unfavourably at first, but he found that it improved "very much on acquaintance" and praised the author for his lively picture of "those fearful times" and for "a very just character of the personages who figured in them".¹² But when a few years later Carlyle's *French Revolution* was published and Thackeray read it for his review for the *Times*, he obviously returned to Thiers's book once again, thought over it more deeply and gave preference to Carlyle's conception of history, even though he did so at partial expense of his well-known attitude to the heroic. He finds both historians impartial and very well informed, but rejects the impartiality of Thiers as cold, petty and mean, unmotivated by any noble ideas and bestowing equal justice on the worst as well as on the best historical personages:

"What a pity that one gains such a contempt for the author of all this cleverness! Only a rogue could be so impartial, for Thiers but views this awful series of circumstances in their very meanest and basest light, like a petty, clever statesman as he is, watching with wonderful accuracy all the moves of the great game, but looking for no more, never drawing a single moral from it, or seeking to tell aught beyond it" (*Works* I, 68).

Carlyle's impartiality is in Thackeray's opinion of an entirely different kind, being far loftier and nobler:

"To the one the whole story is but a bustling for places—a list of battles and intrigues—of kings and governments rising and falling; to the other, the little actors of this great drama are striving but towards a great end and moral. It is better to view it loftily from afar, like our mystic poetic Mr. Carlyle, than too nearly with sharp-sighted and prosaic Thiers. Thiers is the *valet de chambre* of this history, he is too familiar with its deshabelle and offscourings: it can never be a hero to him" (*Works* I, 68–69).

Thackeray was also very well informed about Thiers's political career, as his numerous references bear witness. They are mostly negative, except

¹¹ Thus he evaluates negatively Tietz's book on Russia, Grant's and Rellstab's on Paris, Carus's on England, Mohan Lal's on the Punjab, and positively Turnbull's book on Austria, Lord Londonderry's on England, Fraser's on Persia, Elliott's on Austria, Russia and Turkey.

¹² *Letters* I, 285, 288.

in the cases where he selects this politician as being the lesser of two evils.

We have also evidence that Thackeray read the first five volumes of *Histoire de France*, the *opus magnum* of the most original and greatest French romantic historian, Jules Michelet.¹³ Unfortunately he commented upon it so laconically that we know almost nothing about his opinion of this remarkable work which might have appealed to him in so many respects. We know, on the other hand, that the second outstanding representative of romantic historiography, Edgar Quinet, did not arouse in him any enthusiasm. We have no evidence whether he read any of Quinet's historical works, but he was familiar with his philosophical epic in verse, "Prométhée" (1838), which made him include this historian (and if he had read nothing else, quite justifiably) among the French pantheists and treat him accordingly.¹⁴

Among Thackeray's favourite reading were also memoirs written in France during his lifetime, whether genuine or forged and whether dealing with contemporary life or with the past. He refers perhaps most frequently to the spurious *Mémoires du Cardinal Dubois* (1815, re-edited 1829), a work of scandalous and ribald character, depicting the life at the royal courts in the 18th century. This and the numerous other memoirs which he read even served him as a source of information or literary inspiration.¹⁵

Of the literary critics of the period he read Sismondi, knew something about the critical theory of Villemain (if indeed he wrote the article in which this reference may be found) and read the art criticisms of Gustave Planche dealing with English painting, denouncing their author as "an impostor", "a quack on matters of art"¹⁶ (he speaks through the mouth of Titmarsh and so we do not know whether he meant seriously this attack, which is not entirely justifiable). Besides Jules Janin (see below), he knew personally Philarète Chasles who wrote a critical article upon him in 1849 and included in it some of the biographical material which Thackeray had

¹³ See *Letters* II, 16.

¹⁴ See *Works* II, 231.

¹⁵ For the references to the *Mémoires of Cardinal Dubois* see *Letters* I, 233, 253; *Works* II, 173–174; III, 129; XII, 519. For his quotation from the *Memoirs of Madame de Créqui* (i.e. *Souvenirs de la Marquise de Créqui*, 7 vols, 1834–1835, a forgery by the well-known plagiarist Monsieur Cousen, who called himself Comte de Courchamps) see *Works* II, 319 and note. According to Madeleine Rumeau Thackeray's story "Little Poinset" is based on the biography of the French dramatist of the 18th century, Antoine Poinset, which was published in *Supplément au Roman comique ou Mémoires pour servir à la vie de Jean Monnet* (London and Paris, 1772) and his story "Cartouche" on *Mémoires tirés des Archives de la Police de Paris pour servir à l'histoire de la morale et de la Police depuis Louis XIV jusqu'à nos jours* by J. Peuchet (Paris 1838). See Raymond Maître, "Nouvelles Sources françaises de Thackeray", *Etudes anglaises*, XVII, No. 1, 1964, pp. 56–61. In his library Thackeray had several "French memoirs".

¹⁶ He had in his library Sismondi's work which figures in the sale catalogue under the title *Literature of Europe* (1846). It is probably the English translation of Sismondi's work *De la littérature du Midi de l'Europe* (1813, 1819, 1829). His reference to Villemain appears in his article "English History and Character on the French Stage", *Foreign Quarterly Review*, April 1843; see *NSB*, p. 170. For the quotation of his opinion on Planche see *Works* II, 379.

sent him on his request,¹⁷ and Amédée Pichot, who translated some of his works into French and whom Thackeray defended as a great friend of English literature against Lever's unfortunate choice of the critic's name for the villain of his *Tom Burke of 'Ours'*.¹⁸ I was unable to find any reference to Sainte-Beuve, though Thackeray might have read some of his works, as not a few of them were published during his lifetime. Nor does Thackeray refer to Hippolyte Taine, though he was interviewed by the critic in the early 1860s, when the latter was preparing his well-known essay on the English novelist.

The only French literary critic to whom Thackeray devoted professional critical attention was Jules Janin, the well-known contributor to the *Journal des Débats*. He became familiar with Janin's critical and literary work very early¹⁹ and at first evaluated it quite positively. In his review of Bulwer's novel *Alice* (*Times*, April 1838) he summed up Janin's career with a great deal of sympathy:

"M. Jules Janin, as the reader knows, most likely, is the author of sundry romances, and a literary critic of great reputation at Paris. At the age of 19 he published a novel with the pleasing title of the *Guillotined Woman and the Dead Jackass*—a foolish production of a foolish young man of talent, in a very foolish literary epoch in France. This Mr. Bulwer justly abuses in another passage, which we shall quote. Since that period he has written, besides other novels, *Le Chemin de Traverse*—a book containing as noble passages, and evincing as great a genius, as has been shown by any writer in France. Why did not Mr. Maltravers read the works of the man as well as of the boy? Why has he such a contemptuous indignation against M. Janin and all his works? The truth must out: Mr. Maltravers is angry because this rogue of a Frenchman ventured to speak against the *Duchesse of La Vallière!* which celebrated tragedy the critic of the *Journal des Débats* declared to be most pitiful trash."²⁰

But when in 1842 he read Janin's criticism of Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* and of English literature in general and saw the travesty of Dickens's novel upon which it was founded (the dramatic adaptation of the novel which was performed in France under the title *Nicholas Nickleby, ou Les Voleurs de Londres*) his indignation was thoroughly aroused and he attacked the French critic mercilessly in his article "Dickens in France" (1842). He resents very much the superior attitude of a critic, entirely unknown in England, to a novelist who is read and loved by "millions in England and billions in America".²¹ To fill up this gap in the English readers' knowledge he promises to write "a great and splendid" review of Janin's works (which he never did) and for the time being presents at least the following brief characterization of Janin, which considerably differs from his earlier one:

"Who is Janin? He is the critic of France. J. J., in fact,—the man who writes a weekly *feuilleton* in the *Journal des Débats* with such indisputable brilliancy and

¹⁷ See *Letters* II, 460 note, 502, 503–504; III, 411.

¹⁸ See *Works* VI, 402.

¹⁹ According to Enzinger his early contribution to the *National Standard*, "Foreign Correspondence: The Charruas" (13th July 1833), which is for the most part a translation of one of Janin's articles, was written with the purpose of ridiculing Janin's style (see op. cit., p. 157 note).

²⁰ Gulliver, op. cit., p. 216. *The Duchess de la Vallière* (1836) is a play by Bulwer.

²¹ *Works* IV, 174.

wit, and such a happy mixture of effrontery, and honesty, and poetry, and impudence, and falsehood, and impertinence, and good feeling, that one can't fail to be charmed with the compound, and to look rather eagerly for the Monday's paper;—Jules Janin is the man, who, not knowing a single word of the English language, as he actually professes in the preface, *has helped to translate the Sentimental Journey*. He is the man who, when he was married (in a week when news were slack no doubt), actually *criticized his own marriage ceremony*, letting all the public see the proof-sheets of his bridal, as was the custom among certain ancient kings, I believe. In fact, a more modest, honest, unassuming, blushing, truth-telling, gentlemanlike J. J. it is impossible to conceive" (*Works* IV, 174).

As Ray points out, the last two rebukes, to which Thackeray reverts more than once in his other contributions,²² are not just. Janin wrote the essays published with the translations of Sterne and Richardson, but did not proclaim himself to be the translator. It is true that he announced his marriage in 1841 in a feuilleton "Mariage du critique", but when Thackeray met him in Paris in 1849, he lived in a bachelor apartment.²³

Thackeray then vents his indignation at the audacity of the author of such a work as the "marriage" feuilleton and the *Dead Donkey and the Guillotined Woman* in accusing Dickens—a writer whose works even Thackeray's England allows children to read—of being immodest, disgusting and immoral, indulging in depictions of "vice and blood, incest and adultery". When we read these and similar words of Janin, quoted by Thackeray in French or in his own translation, we begin to understand why Thackeray attacks the French critic so savagely, calling him an insolent and blundering ignoramus, who "knows no more of English literature than I do of hieroglyphics" and who might as well attempt to evaluate the literature of the Hottentots. Thackeray is convinced that such an insolence should be stopped, appeals to the literary men in France and asks them to explain to Janin "the enormous folly and falsehood of all that the fellow has been saying about Dickens and English literature generally"²⁴ and gives him a few pieces of advice himself, telling him to learn modesty, to read every book conscientiously before he attempts to judge it and to tell the truth about it. Apart from the two unjust rebukes commented upon above, Thackeray is not, as Garnett considers him to be,²⁵ unduly severe to Janin, in view of the seriousness of the offence committed by the French critic upon Dickens. Entirely reasonable are also Thackeray's attacks upon what Saintsbury calls "a certain mixture of ignorance and impudence"²⁶ in Janin's critical work, which was even more sharply assaulted by other critics of Thackeray's time (for instance Dumas and Chernyshevsky), who found in Janin's criticism many other demerits. Belinsky, on the other hand, was not uncritical, but did not deny Janin great talent and paid generous tribute to his style.²⁷ Thackeray continued his critical assaults upon Janin until

²² See *Works* VI, 382, 511–512; *Letters* II, 500.

²³ See *Letters* II, 499–500 note; III, 460.

²⁴ For the quotations see *Works* IV, 179, 175, 178.

²⁵ See *NSB*, pp. 291–292.

²⁶ *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 370.

²⁷ See Belinsky, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 369–370, 326, 371. For Dumas's views see *NSB*, pp. 291 to 292, for Chernyshevsky's see N. G. Chernyshevsky, *O literatuře (On Literature)*, Čs. spisovatel, Praha, 1955, pp. 120–122.

at least 1847.²⁸ Two years afterwards he met the French critic in Paris, grew to like him as a clever and amusing companion and stopped criticizing him, though he went on poking fun at him and making him the subject of private hoaxes.²⁹

Thackeray prepared himself for his criticism of French romantic literature, too, by extensive, if not systematic, reading of the works of the pioneers of the Romantic movement who contributed much to the atmosphere of the period by writing critical works, political and polemic writings etc., but were at the same time great prose writers and especially poets. It is worth noticing that he was able, even though only as a mere critical reader, to distinguish some positive values and phenomena in the interpenetrating literary movements in France in the first decades of the century, which must have seemed so confusing to a contemporary observer. As his occasional remarks bear witness, he preferred those writers who represented liberal tendencies in French literature and were the direct inheritors of the values of the French Enlightenment. Thus for instance he read and quoted from Benjamin Constant's novel *Adolphe* and followed with interest the political activity of this founder of the liberal doctrine, though he thought his plans to stop Napoleon's advances ineffectual.³⁰ He had in his library the four-volumed *Oeuvres Complètes* (1834) of Paul Louis Courier, the great progressive writer of the Restoration period, and read them quite early with much enjoyment and pleasure.³¹ His most beloved writer of this period, however, was the great song-writer Pierre-Jean de Béranger. He did not evaluate the poet's work as a literary critic, but had paid much attention to it as a reader and translator from the earliest years of his critical and literary career. One of his earliest contributions to *Fraser's Magazine* is a paraphrase of Béranger's "Le Roi d'Yvetot", which exists in two versions (both bear the same title "The King of Brentford"), both of which were included, together with the poems "The King of Yvetot", "The Garret" and "Jolly Jack", among the *Five Imitations of Béranger*. According to Ray the final versions of some of these paraphrases were based upon the translations of FitzGerald, which Thackeray got from his friend in April 1837 and published after substantial revision.³² This fact, however, does not detract from Thackeray's merit in acquainting English readers with the work of the great French poet, a task regarded as impossible by Belinsky, who was convinced that owing to their characteristically national form of expression Béranger's poems could not be translated into any other language.³³ After all, the first version of "Le Roi d'Yvetot" was certainly written by

²⁸ According to Enzinger Janin "seems to be the original of 'Munseer Jools de Chacabac' in 'Crinoline', which is included in the *Novels by Eminent Hands*; this is a satire on the French literary man who writes about the English without earnestly trying to study them" (op. cit., p. 157 note).

²⁹ See *Letters* II, 499, 500—501, 579—580 and note; III, 309, 460; *Works* XVII, 512 to 513.

³⁰ See *Letters* I, 146—147, "The Last Fifteen Years of the Bourbons", p. 392.

³¹ See *Letters* I, 230.

³² See *Letters* I, 331 note; for FitzGerald's translations see *ibid.*, 333—341.

³³ See op. cit., II, p. 446.

Thackeray, as well as "Jolly Jack", the later variation "The King of Brentford's Testament" and the translation of "Jeté sur cette boule".

In the following years Thackeray mentioned Béranger in numerous occasional remarks scattered throughout his early, middle, and late work and correspondence. They all bear witness that Thackeray, like the great progressive critics of his time (such as Heine, Goethe, Chernyshevsky and Belinsky), loved Béranger's poetry and saw in him the only poet of early French romanticism worthy of positive appreciation. Unlike the critics mentioned, however, he did not do full justice to the significance of Béranger's patriotic, socially and politically militant poetry. He chose for his paraphrases only two of Béranger's political songs and even these do not belong to the poet's most scathing satires and, as his critical comments bear witness, he saw in Béranger only a poet who satisfied himself with a low conception of life and had no noble ideas. He characterizes him as a "cynic-epicurean", who celebrated the Parisian grisette and the reckless Paris student "in the most delightful verses in the world".³⁴ Only once does he positively comment upon one of Béranger's excellent satirical types of snobs, careerists, and parasites.³⁵ Moreover, he had some reservations as to the moral tendency of Béranger's poetry, though he is at the same time aware that it is a reflection of the morals of the poet's society:

"No more, however, of the Grisette, the jovial devil-may-care patroness of the masked ball. Béranger has immortalized her and her companion; and the reader has but to examine his song of the *Bonne Vieille*, for instance, by the side of Burns's *John Anderson*, to see the different feelings of the two countries upon the above point of morals. Thank God! the Scotchman's is a purer and heartier theory than that of the Frenchman; both express the habits of the people amongst whom they live" (*Works* III, 503).

As time progresses, and Thackeray mellows with it, he gradually seems to forget that Béranger was predominantly a satirist and presents him exclusively as a lyric poet, a favourite bard of people in love, characterizing his songs as "hymns of love and tenderness".³⁶ It is worth noticing that this later attitude of his very much resembles that of Béranger's defenders in the angry campaign launched against the poet in the fifties and sixties by some French critics and politicians. Like Thackeray these champions of the poet (Lamartine, Dumas, and others) made the militant song-writer, as J. O. Fischer points out, into an extremely noble and good-natured fellow, from whose songs all the venomous satire evaporated without a trace.³⁷ I doubt, however, that these critics exercised any influence upon Thackeray, whose later view of Béranger is in perfect harmony with his whole philosophy of life, aesthetics and criticism of this period.

³⁴ *Works* II, 105; see also *ibid.*, 59, 422-423; VI, 570.

³⁵ See "The Last Fifteen Years of the Bourbons", p. 387.

³⁶ *Works* X, 623; see also XII, 88; XV, 694. For other later references see *Works* XIII, 671; *Letters* II, 702; III, 124 and note.

³⁷ See Jan O. Fischer and collective: *Dějiny francouzské literatury 19. a 20. století (The History of French Literature in the 19th and 20th Centuries)*, I, 1789-1870, Academia, Praha, 1966, p. 141 and note.

Thackeray's attitude to Madame de Staël, chronologically the first pioneer of romanticism, forms to a certain extent an exception to his generally positive view of the liberal stream in this literary movement. It is of course possible that he did not read any of her significant works on literature and aesthetics (and in fact he does not refer to them anywhere) and that he formed his opinion of this authoress only on the basis of his familiarity with her novel *Corinne*. He refers to this novel several times and evaluates it on the whole not very positively, attributing to its authoress, whom he characterizes as "impetuous", a rather too boisterous sentimentality.³⁸ What he thought of the novel is also obvious from his having made Madame de Staël the favourite writer of Miss Crawley. He does not mention the authoress by name, but as he makes the generous old heathen talk "very lightly of divorce, and most energetically of the rights of women",³⁹ and she could not have read the novels of George Sand because of the time of the novel, she must have read those of Madame de Staël. As Thackeray's other references to this authoress suggest, he obviously knew a great deal about her life and political opinions. He probably learned something about her when he was in Germany, for in one of his letters from this country he writes about Schlegel as her great friend. The inclusion of the authoress among the episodic characters of his parody "Phil Fogarty" and one marginal remark of his show that he was well informed about her initial attempts to gain Napoleon's friendship, as well as about her anti-Bonapartist activities. He also refers to her famous saying about the gutters of the Rue du Bac and knew that she was the daughter of Necker. His information about her life was not, however, always correct—he thought that it was her novel *Corinne* that was piled in a mortar, whereas the book thus served as, of course, *De l'Allemagne*. In the fifties he learned something more about this great authoress, by listening, as Wilson informs us, to George Ticknor's recollections of some episodes from her life.⁴⁰ As I shall demonstrate later, he made use of this old and new knowledge when he created the character of the Duchesse d'Ivry.

The essentially progressive character of Thackeray's critical views upon the early phases of French Romanticism is also manifested in his capability to understand which of the tendencies in this literary movement were in the long run unfruitful and socially not altogether wholesome, in spite of all their positive contribution to the development of literature. Since his first acquaintance with their works, he dissociated himself from the representatives of the romanticism of Catholic mystical inspiration, Chateaubriand and Lamartine. During his journey to Cairo he read Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811) and Lamartine's *Voyage en Orient* (1835) (though he does not mention these books by their titles) and evaluated these works negatively, writing that the authors'

³⁸ See *Morning Chronicle*, p. 184. For another slight reference to *Corinne* see NSB, p. 153, for a more positive comment see Gulliver, op. cit., p. 204.

³⁹ *Works* XI, 112.

⁴⁰ For the references see *Letters* I, 118; *Works* VIII, 146; I, 217; III, 502; Gulliver, op. cit., p. 205; *Morning Chronicle*, p. 8 and Ray's note; Wilson, op. cit., I, p. 93 and note.

“religious outpourings” had inspired him “with an emotion anything but respectful”:

“Voyez comme M. de Chateaubriand prie Dieu, the Viscount's eloquence seems always to say. There is a sanctified grimace about the little French pilgrim, which it is very difficult to contemplate gravely” (*Works* IX, 211–212).

His other remarks on Chateaubriand show that he did not like the poet's style and saw in him rather a pamphleteer than a poet.⁴¹ Nowhere does he do justice to the unquestionable merits of Chateaubriand's poetry: the poet's occasional magniloquence and exaggeration in expression obviously prevented him from appreciating the originality of his approach and his significant contribution to the development of French poetry. His attitude to Chateaubriand reminds me to a certain extent of that of Stendhal, Macaulay, and even of Marx, though the last critic, in spite of his very sharp criticism, was able to appreciate the poet's contribution to the development of the literary form of expression.

Lamartine was unacceptable to Thackeray mainly for his mysticism, elegiac sadness and plaintive resignation, his personal vanity and his conviction of a divine mission:

“—Lamartine has had celestial things revealed to him, and has seen heaven through his tears—” (*Works* V, 388).

It is characteristic that he makes this poet the favourite bard of Blanche Amory, the sentimental, hard-hearted and conceited “poetess” from *Pendennis*.⁴² His critical opinion of Lamartine's poetry is very near to that of Belinsky, who paid more attention to it, but found essentially the same weaknesses in it as did Thackeray.⁴³

What irritated Thackeray even more than the poetry of these writers were their political activities. In his review of Hugo's *Rhin* (April 1842) he criticizes both of them (and Hugo) for taking upon themselves the profession of statesmen and uttering absurd pronouncements on questions of foreign policy. Even more savage is his attack upon Chateaubriand in his article “The Last Fifteen Years of the Bourbons” (July 1842). He uses very strong words about him, calling him madman and crack-brained poet, sharply criticizes the impertinence and conceit with which Chateaubriand himself writes or speaks about his great political merits, denounces his whole political work as “incendiary policy” and enumerates all his political actions, utterances or attitudes which Thackeray regards (and quite justifiably) as his great errors (e.g. the role he played after the abdication of Napoleon, his championship of the Bourbons and especially his intervention in Spain). Both passages mentioned in this paragraph reveal that Thackeray was familiar with Chateaubriand's works *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, *René*, his pamphlet “De Buonaparte et des Bourbons” and some of the other political writings, and his speeches, which he characterizes

⁴¹ See *Morning Chronicle*, p. 23; *Works* XII, 338; XIV, 409. For another reference and a quotation see *Works* VI, 383; I, 558.

⁴² See *Works* XII, 283–284. For other references to Lamartine see *Works* V, 453; VII, 447; VIII, 528; *Letters* II, 493, 494.

⁴³ See op. cit., I, 634; II, 439, 742; IV, 180.

as "a specimen of oratory the most impertinent, the most egregiously conceited and pompous, and of reasoning the most utterly ignorant and false".⁴⁴ From Lamartine's works he obviously read *Jocelyn*, the poet's speeches and his verses "Au Comte d'Orsay", which he characterizes as "fatuous and crazy".⁴⁵

As follows from the above, Thackeray was remarkably well-informed about the ideas, beliefs, and theories constituting the atmosphere in which Romanticism was coming to birth in France, as well as about the actual social, political, cultural and literary life in the country during this important seed-time of the new literary movement. With the qualifications discussed in the first chapter, with his education, intelligence, critical acumen, common sense, facile pen and remarkable personality he was thus very well equipped for his critical work in the field of contemporary French literature. So endowed he could have even become a great critic, if he had not become great novelist instead and if he had not lacked some qualifications which are inseparable components of a great critic's equipment for the evaluation of the contemporary literature of a foreign country. He lacked a deeper understanding for the French national character, greater tolerance and magnanimity in moral questions and sharper critical discernment. He was able to discern some positive values and negative phenomena in French contemporary literature, as I have pointed out and shall yet demonstrate below, but as a contemporary observer, lacking the proper perspective of time and having little sympathy for a creative approach different from his own, he was unable to see all of them clearly. His distaste of romantic excesses led him too far and he condemned the whole Romantic movement in France (excepting only some minor writers and in his later years Dumas-père), dissociating himself not only from the representatives of its more escapist or eccentric varieties (Chateaubriand, Lamartine, as well as the Satanic School and *La Jeune France*, as we shall see below), but also from the representatives of the liberal wing (Hugo and Sand), and in addition from those realists whose work is characterized by a fusion of realistic and romantic elements (Balzac). In 1840 he wrote:

"The new French literature is essentially false and worthless from this very error—the writers giving us favourable pictures of monsters (and, to say nothing of decency or morality), pictures quite untrue to nature" (*Works* III, 198).

His point of view again reminds me very strongly of that of Belinsky, though the Russian critic uses much stronger words, characterizing French romanticism as a feverish, crack-brained and drunken literary movement, indulging in the depictions of monsters, violent passions, debauchery, and brutalities of every kind. His evaluation is not, however, so strongly moralistically coloured as that of Thackeray so often is: he does not reprehend the romantic writers for choosing such dark aspects of human life for their depiction, but for dealing exclusively with them, and ignoring the other facets of the complex entity of the life of man and society.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "The Last Fifteen Years of the Bourbons", p. 404.

⁴⁵ See *Letters* II, 733–734.

⁴⁶ See op. cit., I, 655; see also I, 63, 451–452, 531, 600, etc.

Both Belinsky and Thackeray applied this basic point of view in their evaluation of all the literary genres cultivated in France in the period of Romanticism, but Thackeray only as critical reader. As professional critic he did not pay any attention to French poetry⁴⁷ and occupied himself only with prose and drama.

2. Thackeray as a Reader and Critic of Romantic Prose

A. Eccentric Prose and Popular Novel

Thackeray's first published criticism of French literature are two short contributions which he sent from Paris to the *National Standard* as foreign correspondent of this magazine. They both (but especially the first) deal with the production of the eccentric wing of French romanticism, the so-called Young France, which prolonged the tradition of the former eccentric variety of the Romantic movement in France, the so-called frenetic literature, or "Satanic school". He was at least partly aware of the connection, as we shall see later and was not unprepared for his task. In the preceding years he read several of the significant productions of the frenetic school and not merely as a reader seeking amusement—almost in all cases he thought over what he had read and expressed his critical judgment. Thus in 1830 he became familiar with Hugo's early Satanic romances *Han d'Islande*, *Bug Jargal* and *Le Dernier jour d'un condamné* and characterized them as infinitely surpassing "all the horrors we have in England".¹ As A. Carey Taylor believes, he might have also read Balzac's early Gothic novels with which the great realist ranked himself for a time among the representatives of this variety of degraded romanticism, and which he himself regarded as nothing but pot-boilers and "perfect trash".² In these early years Thackeray might have also become familiar with Janin's *L'Âne mort et la femme guillotinée* (we

⁴⁷ He very rarely refers to other poets than Béranger, Chateaubriand, Lamartine and Hugo. Several times he refers to Napoleon's poet Laureate Pierre Marie Baour-Lormian, whom he met in France in 1832 (see *Letters* I, 227–228 and note; *Works* XIV, 409; XVII, 512). In 1848 he became personally acquainted with Gautier and in 1862 tried to gain for him membership of the Garrick Club (see *Letters* IV, 265 and note, 402). He refers to Alfred de Musset only very rarely, naming him among the favourite bards of Laberge, Philip's Parisian friend (see *Works* XVI, 369; for a quotation from Musset see *Works* II, 501). This friend, a poet from Carcassonne, might represent Thackeray's favourite poet of the sixties, Gustave Nadaud, the song writer who had a close connection with the propaganda of the Empire. As Wilson informs us, Thackeray liked to quote the last stanza of Nadaud's "Carcassonne" (see Wilson, op. cit., I, pp. 268, 269).

¹ *Letters* I, 133; see also his later comment on *Han d'Islande* in *Works* II, 456.

² See A. Carey Taylor, "Balzac et Thackeray", *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1960, No. 3, p. 364 and Georges Brandes, *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, 6 vols, William Heinemann, Ltd., London, vol. V (1904), p. 160.

have no evidence as to the date when he read it, but he refers to it for the first time in 1838). As I have demonstrated (see page 61), his earliest comment upon this book is quite positive and even in his "Dickens in France" he is not unduly severe to it, as his indignation against Janin springs from other sources. He does not criticize *L'Âne mort* for the horrors, repulsive details and drastic moments it really contains, for he obviously understands (as also his earlier comment suggests) that the work was partly meant as a parody, but for its immorality, for the author's cavalier treatment of the seventh commandment.³ While he has some critical reservation to each of the works of the Satanic school mentioned above, his attitude to the work of one of the founders of this school, Charles Nodier, is predominantly positive. He refers to it very rarely, but used it as his source of inspiration—his story of Marie Ancel in the *Paris Sketch Book* is founded, as Thackeray himself confesses, upon an account by Nodier, published in the *Revue de Paris*.⁴ The reason why Thackeray could accept Nodier probably was that this charming writer never indulged in the worst excesses of the school, wrote in a sober and classically simple style and possessed, besides his wildly exuberant imagination, naive freshness of feeling and chastity. There was nothing in him that could offend Thackeray's fastidious moral conceptions. Upon the whole Thackeray's attitude to the frenetic school seems to me to be very near to that of Chernyshevsky, who denounced the *école satanique* as being equally false as that of Chateaubriand and Lamartine and of the whole period of early romanticism excluded, like Thackeray, only Béranger as an honourable exception to the general falseness and superficiality of the literature of the first Empire and Restoration.⁵

As I have suggested, Thackeray at least to a certain extent realized that the so-called Young France prolonged the tradition of the frenetic literature and used its media and requisites, as Grebeníčková points out, in the spirit of Janin's slogan "Truth in horror, horror in truth".⁶ In his first "Foreign Correspondence" (*National Standard*, 29 June 1833) he writes about the revolutionary changes brought about in "all creeds, political, literary, and religious" by the arrival of this new "awful spirit of improvement, this tremendous 'zeitgeist'", contemptuous of all former values, but he calls the heroes of the new school of romance "Satanico-Byronico heroes" and emphasizes its uncommonly great predilection for horror, thus clearly marking out its connection with the previous literary school:

"As for murders, etc., mere Newgate-Calendar crimes, they are absolute drugs in the literary market. Young France requires something infinitely more piquant than an ordinary hanging matter, or a commonplace *crim. con.* To succeed, to gain a reputation, and to satisfy La jeune France, you must accurately represent all the anatomical peculiarities attending the murder, or crime in question: you must dilate on the clotted blood, rejoice over the scattered brains, particularize the sores and

³ See *Works* IV, 177.

⁴ See *Works* II, 159 note. In 1832 he saw the stage adaptation of Nodier's short story "La Fée aux miettes" and found it "tolerable" (see *Letters* I, 231, 235).

⁵ See op. cit., pp. 295–296.

⁶ See J. O. Fischer and collective, op. cit., 338.

bruises, the quivering muscles, and the gaping wounds; the more faithful, the more natural; the more natural, the more creditable to the author, and the more agreeable to *La jeune France*" (*Works I*, 32–33).

He has very serious objections, too, to the moral contents of the productions of *La Jeune France*, and therefore leaves out of his account "the tender parts", which are in his opinion "too tender for English readers",⁷ confining himself only to the "terrific". The rest of his critical notice is devoted to a summary of and short comments upon the plots of the individual stories in the collection *Champavert, contes immoraux* (1833) by Joseph-Pétrus Borel, the most typical representative of the school. Choosing only the "terrific parts", Thackeray enumerates all the crimes, murders, cruelties and atrocities depicted in the stories and recoils from them in extreme disgust. As his comments bear witness, he took Borel's stories quite seriously and his anger and indignation are therefore quite understandable. As a realist he could not accept Borel's non-realistic creative approach, using the romantic literary inventory, while as a great humanist he naturally recoiled from the author's depictions of perversities and brutalities. He had always been convinced that the brutal had no place in art, and expressed his point of view perhaps most convincingly in the following passage from one of his art criticisms:

"Why do young men indulge in these horrors? Young poets and romancers often do so and fancy they are exhibiting 'power': whereas nothing is so easy. Any man with mere instinct can succeed in the brutal in art... Don't let us have any more of these hideous exhibitions—these ghoulish festivals. It may be remembered that Amina in the *Arabian Nights*, who liked churchyard suppers, could only eat a grain of rice when she came to natural food. There is a good deal of sly satire in the apologue which might be applied to many (especially French) literary and pictorial artists of the convulsionary school" (*Works II*, 629).

Even though we may accept Thackeray's opinion of Borel with understanding, we must agree with Saintsbury that in this case he did not prove to be a good critic.⁸ He failed to see that the author piled horror upon horror with a definite purpose—to shock the reader, and give thus expression to his vehement and aggressive rebellion against official society and art, to his defiance of the bourgeois, as Brandes has it.⁹

In his second contribution to the *National Standard* (6 July 1833) Thackeray sharply criticizes a journal about to appear in France, *Le Necrologue: Journal des Morts*, characterizes it as a production of *La Jeune France*, ironically commenting upon it as "a triumph of art and taste".¹⁰ He is alarmed especially at the malign influence of such literature upon the French youth, among whom it fosters morbid predilection for brutality and crime. The rest of the article is devoted to the evaluation of some popular melodramas, with which we shall deal in the proper place.

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⁷ *Works I*, 32.

⁸ See *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 322 note.

⁹ See op. cit., V, p. 266.

¹⁰ *Works I*, 35.

Perhaps with an even greater interest Thackeray followed the production of another literary school which continued in the tradition of the frenetic literature—the popular novel written in the form of *roman-feuilleton* or published in the traditional form. With some of the works of this type he became acquainted only as a reader. He was familiar at least with some of the works of one of the first representatives of this degraded form of romanticism, the exceedingly vulgar and indecent, but very popular novelist Pigault-Lebrun. What he thought of this writer's novels is quite obvious from his correct assessment of Pigault-Lebrun's position in French literature in which he underlines the author's vulgarity and licentiousness (in his review of d'Arlincourt's travel-book *The Three Kingdoms*, where he also briefly comments upon the literary career of the reviewed author, another second-rate Romantic novelist) and from his having made this author the favourite novelist of Miss Crawley, the old moral reprobate from *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray's favourite reading were also the popular novels of adventure and intrigue by Paul de Kock, to which he frequently refers in occasional remarks, the earlier of which are predominantly positive, appreciating Kock's novels as clever, lively and pleasant,¹¹ while most of the later are much more critical, reprehending the novelist for his "intolerable vulgarity", lack of humour in some of his later novels and his curious caricatures of Englishmen.¹² This later attitude of Thackeray finds also expression in his novels—he makes Paul de Kock the favourite novelist of some of his young or worldly-wise men about town (Pendennis in his early worldly stage, Major Pendennis and Honeyman). As one of the records of the conversations in which he took part suggests, he either read or knew something about the novels of another popular writer of this class, Alphonse Karr, who is mentioned among the French celebrities commented upon and appreciated at the dinner given by Charles Lever during Thackeray's stay in Ireland.¹³ Thackeray was also very well read in the novels of the greatest representative of the popular novel in France, Alexandre Dumas-père, but we shall deal with his relationship to Dumas and his criticism of his works (among which no novel is included) separately.

As professional critic Thackeray occupied himself only with two representatives of the *roman-feuilleton*, Eugène Sue and Frédéric Soulié. Eugène Sue is one of those few French novelists whose whole literary career was followed by Thackeray with genuine and constant interest. Thackeray's first reference concerns Sue's novel *Mathilde* which he read immediately after its publication (in 1841) and in which he saw a possible subject for parody.¹⁴ According to Garnett¹⁵ Thackeray reviewed this novel for the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in 1842, but as his authorship of this review has not been confirmed by any other scholar, I shall not take it into account, even though internal evidence suggests that Thackeray might have written it. Thackeray's interest in Sue considerably increased when

¹¹ See e.g. *Letters* I, 221, 222, 236; *Works* II, 559; III, 503 etc.

¹² See e.g. *Works* II, 422; VI, 319; VIII, 473; IX, 330; *Morning Chronicle*, pp. 22–23.

¹³ Quoted in *Letters* II, 67 note.

¹⁴ See *Letters* II, 32.

¹⁵ See *NSB*, pp. 313 note, 314 note.

the novelist published his most popular novel *Les Mystères de Paris* (in instalments in the *Journal des Débats*, 1842–1843), so much so indeed, that he booked the review of this work with Chapman and Hall in January 1843.¹⁶ This increase of interest is not surprising, as Thackeray was not the only great man of his time who paid critical attention to this novel. As I have pointed out in my article “V. G. Belinsky, Karl Marx and W. M. Thackeray on Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*”,¹⁷ Sue’s novel is nowadays regarded as a literary work of inferior artistic quality, by itself not worthy of critical notice, but at the time of its publication it enjoyed world-wide popularity, was translated into most European languages, was hungrily read by masses of common readers and excited the interest of progressive intellectuals in France and other European countries (the French Fourierist critics, Engels, Marx, Belinsky) by its democratic tendencies, by Sue’s depictions of the seamy side of his society and by his endeavour to draw the attention of the public to the condition of the people. Engels commented upon it in his early article “Continental Movements” (1844), Belinsky reviewed it in the same year, Marx analysed it in detail in “*Die Heilige Familie“ oder Kritik der “kritischen Kritik”*” (1845), and Thackeray reviewed it in June 1843 for the *Foreign Quarterly Review* under the title “Thieves’ Literature of France”. As I have dealt with his review in detail in the above-quoted article and have nothing significant to add to my conclusions, I shall not repeat here the whole long argument, but only present its short summary, referring those who are interested in details and bibliography to the original source. In the first part of this study I attempted to analyse the causes of the enormous popularity of Sue’s novel, paying attention especially to Belinsky’s investigation of the local and historical reasons of the novelist’s success. By confronting his views with those of Thackeray I have demonstrated that they agree in several important points—both critics evaluate the novel as an advantageous literary speculation and the author as a literary merchant, assume a negative attitude to the commercial spirit pervading literature in France and to its corrupting influence upon some contemporary French authors. Thackeray does not penetrate so deeply as his Russian contemporary, as he ignores the social conditions in which the novel originated (though he knew them from personal experience, certainly better than Belinsky) and seeks the roots of its success only in the sphere of the literary convention and tradition in which it continued. The main part of the article is devoted to the confrontation of the critical judgments of Belinsky, Marx and Thackeray upon the main principles of Sue’s creative method. By analysing and confronting their evaluation of the ideas, characters, plot and composition of the novel I came to the conclusion that in spite of the essential differences between the premises from which the three critics set out and between their critical methods, they all arrive at a completely negative final evaluation of the novel as a distorted and idealized depiction of social reality (Marx), the poorest and most

¹⁶ See *Letters II*, 92.

¹⁷ *Sborník prací filosofické fakulty University J. E. Purkyně v Brně*, D 7, 1960, pp. 149–160.

untalented work (Belinsky), a gross and detestable caricature, "fit to frighten children with, unworthy of an artist" (Thackeray). They also agree in another important point: that the characters created by Sue are not depictions of real, living people, but pale embodiments of abstract standpoints (Marx), impossible and clumsily ugly creations surrounded with theatrical effects (Belinsky), absurd caricatures of human beings (Thackeray). Thackeray's evaluation does not reach the depth of Marx's analysis, nor the penetrating clear-sightedness of the criticism of Belinsky, because he does not do justice to the novelist's democratic protest against contemporary social abuses and to his proposals for their removal, even if the latter are Utopian fantasies, as Marx revealed, pays small attention to the analysis of Sue's characters and neglects their historical substance and social roots. Moreover, his evaluation has a strong moralistic colouring, which is lacking in that of Marx and Belinsky, and which is more conspicuous than in his other critical contributions. Though this strengthening of his moralistic attitude was intentional on his part, as I have shown, and may be to a certain extent explained and excused by the specific situation in English literature and society of Thackeray's time, the fact remains that in comparison with Marx's generous, magnanimous and deeply human attitude to human individuals, even to those who are degraded and downtrodden into the mud of their society, Thackeray's moralistic point of view seems too narrow-minded.

Like Belinsky, Thackeray did not cease to follow Sue's literary career with great interest and his opinion remained highly critical, like that of his Russian contemporary, during the whole time when Sue was at the zenith of his fame. In 1844 he even started to translate Sue's *Mystères* for the publisher Giraldon, but soon threw up the job because he was not promptly paid. In 1845 he was invited to write a short article on Sue's literary career for the *Edinburgh Review*, but refused the offer, for to "go through a course of Sue's writings would require I should think more than a short article and the subject has been much dealt with in minor periodicals here". He did not write this article, or any other, and evaluated Sue since 1843 only in marginal remarks, criticizing him for presenting entirely untrue depictions of reality, from which the future generations would get a very odd notion about French society. In his "History of the Next French Revolution" he prophesied that Sue's popularity would last until 1884, but lived to see its wane in 1862.¹⁸ Upon the whole we may evaluate Thackeray's criticism of Eugène Sue, with all its weak points demonstrated above, as essentially just and for his time in many respects quite clear-sighted, as this novelist was overestimated and celebrated in his lifetime, some of his characters being unduly praised and even regarded as classical.

Thackeray read many novels by the second popular representative of the *roman-feuilleton*, Frédéric Soulié, some of which he mentions by their titles (*Six mois de correspondance: Diane et Louise, Les Quatre*

¹⁸ For the quotation and references in this paragraph see *Letters* II, 139-140 note, 202; *Works* VI, 310, 320; preface to *Pendennis, Morning Chronicle*, 73; *Works* VIII, 509; X, 276-279; *Letters* III, 618; *Works* VII, 349; XVII, 604.

soeurs, *Confession générale*, *Le Château des Pyrénées* and *Les Mémoires du diable*). As his critical comments suggest, he had reservations as to the "ungentlemanlike" style in which these novels are written, but they irritated him mainly by the author's free notions of morals, especially as they are expressed in the last-named novel, which Thackeray condemns as an "astonishingly corrupt book", "a book worthy of its hero for its hideous licentiousness".¹⁹ As usual, he lets himself be carried too far by his moral indignation, but he is not entirely unjust, for the morality of these productions of Soulié is really questionable and, moreover, they are typical examples of melodramatic fiction, imperfect from the point of view of art and written in great haste. For all these reasons they are now deservedly forgotten, though in their time they were ranged side by side with Balzac's novels.

As a critic Thackeray reviewed one of Soulié's plays (of which later) and his political novel *Le Bananier* (in a summary review "French Romancers on England", *Foreign Quarterly Review*, October 1843, in which he takes notice of some other works depicting England). He expresses his conviction that the author "manufactured" his tale "not merely for a literary, but also for a political purpose" and that the whole thread of the intrigue "was probably furnished to him by the statesmen who ordered him to popularize their doctrines by means of this tale".²⁰ He was not far from the truth, for even Garnett believes that the novel was written to the order of a political journal and is therefore not a fair specimen of the novelist's work.²¹ Thackeray pays much attention to this political purpose of the novelist, which was to show that England abolished slavery in her colonies neither out of love of the black race nor out of mere humanity, but with the aim of ruining the French and Spanish colonies, whose prosperity was injurious to her; that the English are therefore natural enemies of the French and that slavery is a praiseworthy institution which should be maintained in the French colonies. The reviewer expresses his indignation that Soulié should have taken up such a theme, unworthy of an artist, and, moreover, should have placed himself on the side of the French slave-owners:

"The subjects are two fine themes for a romantic writer. To paint negro slavery as a happy condition of being; to invent fictions for the purpose of inculcating hatred and ill will; are noble tasks for the man of genius. We heartily compliment Monsieur Soulié upon his appearance as a writer of political fictions" (*Works* V, 483).

His anger is especially aroused by Soulié's attempts to ascribe base motives to the English abolition movement and he regards it as his duty to castigate and expose this lie which is advocated with such a "persevering rage of falsehood" in the major part of the French press. He does so in a longer passage, in which he speaks with warm sympathy about the English abolition movement, characterizing it as "the noblest and greatest" that ever a people made, "the purest and the least selfish".²² He then

¹⁹ *Letters* II, 143; *NSB*, p. 152.

²⁰ *Works* V, 482, 490; see also *ibid.*, 501.

²¹ See *NSB*, p. 318.

²² *Works* V, 489.

pays attention to the elaboration of Soulié's purpose in his characters and sharply criticizes the author for doing this in such a way as to support and foment the chauvinism of the French and their hatred of the English. He is especially irritated by the character of the young Englishman, Mr. Welmoth, who is drawn in extremely black colours and presented as the traditional perfidious Englishman who scores such enormous success on the French stage. The existence of this stock figure in contemporary French comedy is for Thackeray a convincing proof of the savage hatred of the French for the English, which finds expression, too, in every French novel and in all the newspapers. This part of Thackeray's argument is strongly coloured by his prejudices against the French, kindled to unusual heat by Soulié's grotesque representation of English character and all the other faults attributed to the English nation in his "trumpery novel". As a whole, however, it is not entirely unfair to the French, for it contains much truth and, moreover, Thackeray's regrets over the existence of this hatred and his prophecies as to its eventual disappearance. In the conclusion of his review Thackeray vents his main grievance—that Soulié as a novelist should so far overstep the boundaries of the novel as a *genre* as to choose a theme suitable for a political pamphlet. In his opinion the novelist's business is fiction, but not fiction of this sort, not a lie:

"Let this sort of argumentation be left to the writers of the leading articles; it has an ill look in the *feuilleton*, which ought to be neutral ground, and where peaceable readers are in the habit of taking refuge from national quarrels and abuse; from the envy, hatred, and uncharitableness that inflame the patriots of the *Premier Paris*. All the villains whom the romancer is called upon to slay are those whom he has created first, and over whom he may exercise the utmost severities of his imagination. Let the count go mad, or the heroine swallow poison, or Don Alphonso run his rival through the body, or the French ship or army at the end of the tale blow up the English and obtain its victory; these harmless cruelties and ultimate triumphs are the undoubted property of the novelist, and we receive them as perfectly fair warfare. But let him not deal in specific calumnies, and inculcate, by means of lies, hatred of actual breathing flesh and blood. This task should be left to what are called *hommes graves* in France, the sages of the war newspapers" (*Works* V, 502).

In this we recognize Thackeray's familiar objection to the commitment of the novel in political affairs of the day, which he vented in his other reviews of political fiction and with which I have dealt in detail in my previous studies "W. M. Thackeray's Literary Criticism in the 'Morning Chronicle'" and "The Aesthetic Views of W. M. Thackeray".²³ Except for the traces of his national prejudices in his review of Soulié's novel, we may again say that his criticism is quite fair and that the weak points he has found out and castigated are real demerits of this second-rate novelist, none of whose works survived.

Thackeray's relationship to the greatest French romancer Alexandre Dumas-père is worth noticing especially because it reflects the changes which took place in Thackeray's philosophy of life and hence in his liter-

²³ See *Brno Studies in English*, vol. II, SPN, Praha, 1960, pp. 90 ff. and vol. VI, Brno, 1966, pp. 23 ff.

ary and critical standards between the thirties and the sixties. As a literary critic he paid attention to Dumas only in the thirties and forties, but as a critical reader he went on commenting upon his work even in the fifties and the sixties. This is not unusual with him but what is surprising and worth notice is that his later judgments should differ so markedly from his earlier ones. He started his criticism of Dumas by relentlessly attacking his dramas, as we shall see in the third chapter of this study. In October 1842 he turned his attention to Dumas's travel-book *Excursions sur les bords du Rhin* and reviewed it for the *Foreign Quarterly Review* under the title "Dumas on the Rhine". He has several well-founded reservations as to the reviewed book and to the author. One of his critical shafts is aimed at Dumas's extreme productivity which considerably detracts from the artistic value of his works, another at the prolixity with which he can describe a short journey to the Rhineland so as to fill up three volumes. He takes exception, too, to those passages in the book in which Dumas writes "in absurd warlike spirit" about the future conquests of France and which contain a manifest provocation to the Prussians. In Thackeray's opinion these "incendiary" passages should be corrected in the next editions and Dumas should rather use his great authority to expose the vanity of military glory. He reprehends Dumas, too, for his disparaging attitude to the Germans and his scorn for the usages of their country, which he characterizes as stupid conceit on his part and from which young Englishmen should draw a moral how not to behave abroad. Dumas's book, however, does not offend Thackeray's national feelings so much as Soulié's did and he appreciates that the description of Waterloo is written, for a Frenchman, in an uncommonly fair spirit, "with not too much acrimony, and with justice in the main".²⁴ The most interesting part of the review is that in which Thackeray evaluates Dumas's creative method. He characterizes it as a union of the approach of the minute historian and of that of the pure dramatic "romancist" and maintains that Dumas does not succeed in making this union so perfect as it was in his preceding book *Crimes célèbres*. As far as the approach of the historian is concerned, Thackeray criticizes Dumas for his not quite honest habit of replacing personal observation by extensive passages taken from guide-books and other books of reference without quoting his sources, and for committing an even graver offence in presenting, after these "preparatory studies", unreliable information and facts distorted according as his "furious imagination may lead him":

"History and the world are stages to him, and melodramas or most bloody tragedies the pieces acted. We have seen this sufficiently even in his better sort of books. Murders, massacres, *coups de hache*, grim humorous bravoes, pathetic executioners, and such-like characters and incidents, are those he always rejoices in" (*Works* V, 421).

This encroachment of the second aspect of Dumas's creative method upon the first is in Thackeray's opinion the root of the main weak points of the book—the already mentioned inaccuracy in historical facts and the writer's inability to present truthful descriptions of common life. This

²⁴ *Works* V, 430.

does not mean, however, that Thackeray utterly rejects Dumas's "dramatic turn". He resents the author's predilection for the "horrors and indecencies" of history, but he admits that the dramatic turn of Dumas's mind has its advantages—it makes his narrative lively, picturesque and amusing, and his characters vivid, and it makes itself felt in some of the episodes depicted, which are built up with a marvellous sense for dramatic construction. In concluding his review Thackeray appreciates, too, that Dumas is not so bloodthirsty as he was in his earlier youth and that he has grown more moral and decent and adds these final words, which proved to be quite prophetic:

"When time shall have further softened an emphatic bullying manner, which leads him at present to employ the largest and fiercest words in place of simple and conciliating ones; and he shall cease to set down as armed castles all the peaceful windmills of everyday life; it is probable that we shall be indebted to him for much amusing reading. Some we have had already, as our readers know. For he has both humour and eloquence, and in spite of his hectoring manner his heart is both manly and kind. And so schooled down as we trust he will not fail to be, we may look forward to his writing a couple of thousand volumes, even more interesting than those which he has at present produced" (*Works* V, 439).

According to Gulliver and Garnett Thackeray is also the author of the review of Dumas's book *Crimes célèbres*, published in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in the same year (in October). There is indeed very strong evidence—both external and internal—that Thackeray wrote it. He refers both to Dumas's book and to its review in his "Dumas on the Rhine"²⁵ and there are many points of resemblance between his critical approach and that of the other reviewer (the latter, for instance, like Thackeray, characterizes Dumas's creative method as a union of the element of the dramatist and that of the minute historian). Thackeray's authorship of this article has not been, however, confirmed by Ray and I shall therefore not deal with it here in detail. Some of these points of resemblance might have been, after all, the outcome of Thackeray's having been inspired by the previous review.

Soon after the publication of *Crimes célèbres* Dumas began to fulfil Thackeray's prophecy, and began to publish his famous novels *Les Trois mousquetaires* (8 vols, 1844) and *Le Comte de Monte-Christo* (12 vols, 1844–1845). The great part of these novels could have come into Thackeray's hands, according to Garnett, in 1844. This is confirmed by a drawing which he published in that year and which represents Queen Elizabeth and Shakespeare, sitting together at a little dinner at Greenwich. Round the drawing Thackeray wrote: "An Unpublished Romance by Alexandre Dumas." Then follows an extract from "La Jeunesse d'Elizabeth", a romance in 40 volumes, which is according to Garnett a parody of Dumas's style and proves Thackeray's intimate acquaintance with his romances.²⁶ I find myself in agreement, too, with Garnett's opinion that in 1844 Thackeray's attitude to Dumas begins to change: the famous romances of the French novelist become his favourite books, he begins to

²⁵ See *Works* V, 436, 439, 420.

²⁶ See *NSB*, pp. 283–284.

write about Dumas more good-naturedly than sharply critically, but he does not yet close his eyes to the limitations of his creative approach. This change of his attitude is manifested for the first time in his burlesque version of a forgotten tale by Dumas, *Othon l'archer* (1840), which he published in 1845 under the title *A Legend of the Rhine*. His main purpose in writing this charming burlesque was not, however, to parody the story and the creative approach of its author. His critical shafts have a much wider range and are levelled at historical and chivalric romances in general, as well as at sentimental novels and Gothic fiction. They are not so sharp, however, as we are used to in Thackeray—his parody is written, as all scholars agree, in a good-natured and jocose tone which cannot offend even the greatest lovers of this sort of literature. As Loofbourow pointed out, Thackeray follows Dumas's simple plot fairly closely, but adds a contemplative prelude, which has no counterpart in Dumas and in which he mourns over the disappearance of the past depicted by Dumas, using "a convention of medieval poetry, the *memento mori*", to "satirize the pretty-fantasy structures of the modern romance-novel":²⁷

"They are passed away:—those old knights and ladies: their golden hair first changed to silver, and then the silver dropped off and disappeared for ever; their elegant legs, so slim and active in the dance, became swollen and gouty, and then, from being swollen and gouty, dwindled down to bare bone-shanks; the roses left their cheeks, and then their cheeks disappeared, and left their skulls, and then their skulls powdered into dust, and all sign of them was gone. And as it was with them so shall it be with us" (*Works IX*, 3).

This introduction is also the key to the whole parody, the purpose of which is to reveal the real likeness of the brave knights and beautiful ladies of chivalric romances, hidden behind conventional romance patterns and idealized out of recognition. Thackeray's creative approach in this parody is rather that of the humorist than that of the satirist, but whenever he touches upon any idealization of the reality depicted in the parodied work, i.e. of the Middle Ages, his humour sharpens into satire. This concerns especially the episodes of the duel between Ludwig Homburg and Gottfried and of the death of Rowski, which Thackeray depicts as these events must have appeared in reality—in all their cruelty and hideousness—thus effectively satirizing romantic conceptions of knightly valour. The substance of his humorous caricature is in the comic exaggeration of episodes and incidents from Dumas's story and of the positive or negative traits of his characters. Thus he burlesques Dumas's predilection for solving his plots by intervention of fortune or chance—he makes them collaborate remarkably well with the hero of his parody, sending in his way opportunities enabling him to prove his bravery, dexterity, or other heroic qualities, exaggerated, too, into caricature. He also ridicules the stereotype figures of Dumas's story and of romances in general, the usual black-and-white portraits of admirable heroes and incarnations of evil, by exaggerating all the positive traits of his hero and heroine and the negative ones of his villains, especially of the Count Rowski de Donnerblitze, whom he depicts as a man possessing every

²⁷ Op. cit., p. 38.

possible physical and moral deformity. Dumas's story provided Thackeray, too, with the welcome opportunity of satirizing the mannerisms and conventions of the Gothic novel, which he did not accept uncritically even in his very early years. He makes full use of it in the delightful chapters depicting the experiences of Otto and his companions in a haunted castle, which he fills up (certainly with much enjoyment on his part) with the complete inventory of this type of fiction (he depicts the deserted gloomy halls of the ruined castle, lighted by the ghastly moonshine and inhabited only by owls and bats, a devilish marriage-ceremony attended by ghosts risen out of their graves as well as portraits which had stepped out of their frames, etc.). As Loofbourow points out, the chief ghost of this episode, the "lady of Windeck", is the dark anti-heroine of romance, whose "sorry conceits are sufficient satire of the eighteenth-century convention of the gothic temptress".²⁸ And, finally, Thackeray also makes fun of Dumas's unconscious anachronisms, due to the great haste with which this novelist worked, and makes this weakness even more ridiculous by exaggerating it to such an extent that most of his anachronisms are obvious even to a reader who is not well versed in history.

The gradual weakening of Thackeray's originally sharp critical attitude to Dumas is also manifested in his parody *Proposals for a Continuation of "Ivanhoe"* (1846), which is written in the form of an open letter to the French novelist. In the introduction, directly addressed to Dumas, Thackeray proclaims himself to be a devoted admirer of the French writer, complains of the scarcity of historical novels in England and expresses his wish that Dumas, who does not desert his heroes in their youth, but depicts their fortunes in continuation in twenty volumes, might take up Scott's heroes from *Ivanhoe*, some of whom (especially Rebecca) were not in Thackeray's opinion treated justly by their creator.

Thackeray's admiration for Dumas considerably increases towards the end of the forties and culminates in the last thirteen years of his life in uncritical enthusiasm. In his letters and works of this period we find numerous passages in which he expresses his gratitude to Dumas for the happy moments spent over the pages of his novels and which are, with one single exception,²⁹ entirely free of any critical reservations. He appreciates Dumas's skilful composition, the fertility of his imagination which he often compares to the slow and halting pace of his own old blind Pegasus, the vast entertainment provided by Dumas's novels and even his commercial abilities. Dumas's three musketeers become his favourite literary characters, he appreciates them as lifelike creations and sees in them his personal friends, thus paying generous tribute to Dumas's ability of creating vivid and convincing personages.³⁰ He expressed his enthusiasm perhaps most clearly in his longer conversation on Dumas with John Esten Cooke, which is throughout a warm tribute to the French novelist, but from which we shall quote only a short passage:

²⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁹ See *Works* XVII, 445.

³⁰ See *Letters* II, 568, 588; III, 304; IV, 421; *Works* V, 464, 500; XVII, 594, 596, 598, 600, 606; *Wilson* I, 200.

“Dumas is charming!” he exclaimed, ‘everything he writes interests me. I have been reading his »Mémoires«, I have read fourteen of the small volumes, all that are published, and they are delightful. Dumas is a wonderful man—wonderful. He is better than Walter Scott.’³¹

As follows from the above, Thackeray’s expression of critical opinion on Dumas is in the last period of his life limited only to the merits of the French novelist, and therefore onesided. He correctly assessed those aspects of Dumas’s creative approach in which the French writer proved himself to be a genuine master—his art of story-telling, his power of inventing interesting plots and novel dramatic situations, his ability to create real and even immortal characters and his vigorous style. He shuts his eyes, however, to the novelist’s demerits, some of which he had criticized in previous years—the general shallowness of his novels, idealization and falsification of history, cavalier treatment of historical documents and predilection for strong contrasts and effects. This leniency is in perfect harmony with his whole later development as novelist, critic and man, which is directed towards reconciliation with society. He obviously found in Dumas what he needed most at that time of his life and what Saintsbury characterizes as “a blissful suspension from the base realities of existence”.³² As Thackeray himself confessed, Dumas made him forget his illness and perhaps even some other things which he does not mention—his loneliness and general weariness of life. Thackeray’s enthusiasm for Dumas’s novels went so far that they even became one of his sources of inspiration. According to Garnett the duel in *Esmond* is written in the spirit of the *Three Musketeers* and one of the final episodes of the same novel, in which Esmond breaks his sword in front of the Pretender, is borrowed from *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*.³³ Many traces of Dumasian influence might be also found in his last unfinished novel, *Denis Duval*. Thackeray’s later attitude to Dumas considerably differs from that of Belinsky, who did not let himself be carried away by the novelist’s narrative art and clearly saw, as well as correctly assessed, all his weaknesses. Chernyshevsky, however, goes in his negative criticism too far: though he admits that Dumas possesses talent, he reprehends him for not devoting it to the endeavours of his time and relentlessly condemns him as an “empty tattler” who wrote stupid novels, insignificant in all aspects and especially from the point of view of art.³⁴ This is of course a blunder, as well as a great injustice.

The investigation of Thackeray’s critical opinions upon French romantic eccentric prose and the popular novel enables me to arrive at the conclusion that in this particular field he proved to be a fairly perspicacious critic (in spite of the fact that from time to time he succumbed to his national prejudices), and that almost all his critical judgments, including partly even his uncritical enthusiasm for Dumas-père, but

³¹ Quoted by Wilson, op. cit., I, p. 261, from John Esten Cooke, “An Hour with Thackeray”, *Appleton Journal*, Sept. 1879, vol. XXII, pp. 248–254.

³² *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 338.

³³ See NSB, pp. 286–287 and G. N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom* (1847 to 1863), London, OUP, 1958, p. 193.

³⁴ See op. cit., pp. 393, 552.

excepting his judgments on Borel, have been confirmed by posterity. The main critical standard he applies in his evaluation of these works is their relationship to reality and the main question for him always is how far they succeed in depicting it truthfully, presenting it as it really exists or existed. Firmly convinced about the great notional value of literature, he rejects all deviations from the faithful representation of life which nullify this value—any idealization or distortion of the depicted facts, events or people. Adhering to his conviction about the great moral and educational role played by literature in the life of human society, he aims his critical weapons at such works which confuse the boundary between virtue and vice, present criminal or vicious characters in amiable light and thus exercise, as he is convinced, harmful influence upon the morals of the readers. The same considerations are the main motives, too, of his protests against the depiction of the brutal in literature, against undue predilection for cruelties and atrocities. In applying this moral point of view, which is in my opinion not wholly to be condemned, he goes too far, being strongly influenced by the strict and narrow-minded precepts of the moral code of his society. In his reviews of the above-discussed second-rate novels and stories he has quite a lot to say even upon purely literary problems. The question which obviously interests him most, is the creation of literary characters. Basing his judgment of the individual personages he evaluates upon his own knowledge of people and life and his own experiences as a realistic novelist, he rejects all such characters who are absurd caricatures of human beings or schematic black-and-white portraits common in romantic fiction and accepts those who are vivid and lifelike. In his evaluation of the plots of the reviewed works he criticizes all deviations from probability in the depicted episodes or the *dénouement*, and rejects conventional romantic schemes of plot and the abuse of fortune and chance in its disentanglement. In his opinion the plot should be probable and interesting, the dramatic situations novel, the episodes dramatically constructed and the narrative lively and amusing. He negatively evaluates those writers who write in an ungentlemanlike, i.e. vulgar and inelegant style, and praises those whose style is fresh, vigorous and not tainted by vulgarity.

B. Thackeray's Criticism of Victor Hugo and George Sand

Thackeray paid much critical attention, both as reader and critic, to the work of Victor Hugo and George Sand, so that we are fairly well informed as to his opinions of these two great Romantic writers representing the liberal wing of that literary movement. The evidence we have at our disposal shows that he was unable to do full justice to either of them, that he chose for his reviews works which are not fair specimens of their art and that he took very little or no notice of their best achievements, some of which were published during his lifetime. On the other hand, however, he never denied them genius and talent, as I shall demonstrate in more detail in the following.

Thackeray's evaluation of Hugo seems to me to be upon the whole more

positive than his assessment of George Sand. He condemned (and justly) the early Satanic novels, as I have shown above, but he was able to appreciate, if only as reader, those works of Hugo in which the author's positive development after the July Revolution found its first reflection. Of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, which he read in 1832, he thought "most highly as a work of genius", though it did not seem to him to be "a fine novel".³⁵ He did not entirely condemn Hugo's drama *Le Roi s'amuse* (though he was much more severe to his other dramatic productions, as we shall see in the next chapter) and characterized Hugo's lyrical collection "Les Feuilles d'automne" as "very poetical".³⁶ As literary critic he devoted attention to only two of Hugo's prose works—to his critical work *Étude sur Mirabeau* and his travel-book *Le Rhin, lettres à un ami*. He did not review any of Hugo's novels, nor any of his dramas, though he paid much attention to the latter as a critic of romantic drama in general and as a theatre-goer. In his review of Hugo's *Étude sur Mirabeau*, published in the *National Standard* in February, 1834, which for the most part consists of extensive quotations from the work in the reviewer's translation, Thackeray levels his critical shafts especially at Hugo's style. He characterizes it very aptly as "a mixture of sublimity and absurdity, affectation and nature" and reprehends Hugo for excessive usage of most ornate metaphors and ingenious similes, disproportionate to the contents of his book and making his argument unnecessarily lengthy. He pays some attention, too, to the political views propagated by the author, expresses his disagreement with Hugo's political beliefs concerning the present and future of France, characterizes them as "altogether French, absurd, and unnatural", but at the same time admits that they contain "a dash of sublimity"³⁷ for which the book deserves the attention of the reader. He concludes the review in the following words:

"We do not know whether we have succeeded in laying before our readers the vein of misty sublimity, and true poetry, which runs through M. Hugo's bombastic claptrap; if not, the fault must be in our crude and careless translation; and we must refer those who are curious about Mirabeau, or incredulous concerning Victor Hugo, to the *Journal des Débats* of last week, from which we have extracted the fragments given above" (*Works* I, 54).

Thackeray's review contains relatively few critical judgments and these almost exclusively concern the weak points of Hugo's creative method, especially of his style. Thackeray's critical reservations, however, are not entirely unjust, as Hugo's style was far from perfect, indulging in much grandiloquence and pathos. He entirely ignores, however, some of the graver defects of the reviewed work—the shallowness of thought and failure to deal properly with the ideas of the orator of the Revolution.

In April 1842 Thackeray reviewed Hugo's impressionistic travel-book *Le Rhin, lettres à un ami* for the *Foreign Quarterly Review*. In this work Hugo pronounces his prophecies concerning European unity, to which he was inspired by his visit to the Rhineland, the part of Germany which he

³⁵ *Letters* I, 228.

³⁶ *Letters* I, 225.

³⁷ For the quotations see *Works* I, 51, 52.

regards as a possible object for French expansion and a medium for the realization of Franco-German unity. As Hooker points out, the spirit of this book was branded in England "false cosmopolitanism, dictated by nationalistic feeling" and its English translation was therefore published in curtailed edition, from which Hugo's political reflections were omitted and only a mere "guide-book" for the Rhineland remained.³⁸ Thackeray reviewed the book from the French original and it is therefore not surprising that he devoted the substantial part of his criticism to Hugo's political programme, to his reflections upon the past and future of the Rhineland. His indignation is roused especially at Hugo's attempts to play in this book the roles of statesman, politician and great mystical prophet and at his effrontery in prophesying the future of a foreign country to which he has come as a visitor. He evaluates Hugo's political reflections as vague, full of logical blunders and contradictions (and in this he is for the most part right) and criticizes the author for the exaggerated patriotism with which he extols France as the main seat of thought and intelligence of Europe. He reprehends Hugo, as he did Dumas, for his superior attitude to the inhabitants of the Rhineland, his ignorance of the language and of German policy and feelings, and his conviction that this territory, which had always been a part of Germany, is French. Thackeray finds some more weak points which Hugo has in common with Dumas—his incapability of using the normal way of observation, which he replaces either by his prophetic vision or by facts stolen from historical books and guide-books. He devotes some attention, too, to Hugo's creative method. Throughout his review, which he introduces with a quotation from a fulsome tribute to Hugo's book by a French critic (this was according to Garnett unkind of him, as it undoubtedly created a prejudice),³⁹ he in fact argues with those critics in France who extolled Hugo as one of the glories of the age. To this cult of Hugo Thackeray juxtaposes the negative aspects of the poet's creative approach—his bombastic style, occasional vulgarity and bad taste and predilection for sharp contrasts. Especially worth noticing is his quotation of Hugo's description of the butchers' market in Frankfort, which is in Thackeray's opinion a fair specimen of Hugo's method of heightening the effect of his depictions of brutalities and horrors by contrasting them with innocence and purity:

"We quote this elegant extract, not so much for its intrinsic merit, and polite gentlemanlike style, but because it really offers a very good characteristic of M. Hugo's works of fiction, and the secret as it were of his plan in constructing his romances and novels. Butcher's meat, over which *il se penche* with an air of '*gluttonous joviality*',—a little architecture of the middle ages (i.e. the houses of the market streets—LP)—bloody butchers chatting with red-cheeked butcheresses under garlands of legs of mutton—sweet innocents! sweet mixture of love and raw meat! sweet flowers of poetry!—put in a massacre in the midst—children killed like pigs, or pigs like children (Hugo depicts a brutal massacre of sucking pigs observed with compassion by a pretty little girl—LP), the antithesis is equally tickling, and set off the whole by something innocent;—a little speck of white that shows wonderfully in the midst of the ocean of red.—Esmeralda is constructed exactly upon the plan of the butchery of Frankfort" (*Works* V, 386—387).

³⁸ Op. cit., p. 88; see also *ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁹ See NSB, p. 276.

Thackeray is not so unjust, however, as not to recognize the great talent of the writer and the positive aspects of his creative approach. He writes of him as of a great genius, quotes and highly appreciates some of Hugo's vivid, interesting and splendidly written descriptions of nature, people and places, which contain, as he emphasizes, many rich poetic images. He is especially enthusiastic about Hugo's description of a storm, which he quotes in French, lest he should spoil its charm by translation. He is also very generous to Hugo's personal character, expressing his conviction that he is a kind man, even though "he talks like an ogre", and adds: "It is only his art which is bloody-minded."⁴⁰ Upon the whole he evaluates him as a remarkable and interesting personality:

"But a man of such pains and such oddity becomes a very interesting travelling-companion, and keeps one's curiosity perpetually awake. If the road and the scenery is tiresome, at any rate the traveller examining them is always amusing;—that strange, grotesque, violent, pompous, noble figure of a poet, with his braggart modesty, and wonderful simplicity of conceit, his kind heart yearning towards all small things and beauties of nature, small children, birds, flowers, & c., his rich, flowing, large eloquence, and his grim humour" (*Works* V, 376).

I find myself in agreement with Saintsbury and Garnett, who maintain that Thackeray's criticism of Hugo's *Rhin* is essentially just, for the book really contains many absurdities and much grandiloquence, which Thackeray exposed, as Saintsbury points out, "with admirable humour and even with considerable leniency".⁴¹ This scholar especially appreciates that Thackeray saw these weak points of Hugo earlier than most critics, at a time when they were not yet accepted commonplaces of Hugonian criticism and the poet was regarded as sacrosanct.

After 1842 Thackeray ceased to occupy himself with Hugo's work as literary critic and his criticism is therefore incomplete and fragmentary. In his later occasional remarks he does not devote any attention to Hugo's greatest works, some of which were published in his lifetime. He refers to the French poet in his later years only very rarely, and if he does, his comments show that his attitude to Hugo did not undergo any such substantial modification as did that to Dumas-père.⁴² One of the reasons might be that he simply did not read Hugo's later works, another, and perhaps the most probable, that Hugo could not offer him the escape and rest he gained from Dumas's novels, being a disquieting author, arousing the reader to thought and action. Thackeray paid very little attention, too, to Hugo's extensive public activity as tribune of democracy and fighter for the ideals of social justice and humanism. After 1848, when the exiled poet became the citizen and the living conscience of the world, Thackeray has nothing to say about this important aspect of Hugo's personality and anything he might have said would not have been very positive, as his earlier unjust condemnation of the poet's intervention on behalf of the

⁴⁰ *Works* V, 387.

⁴¹ See Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, pp. 90–91. For Garnett's view see *NSB*, pp. 244–245.

⁴² See especially *Works* XIV, 409; for some other comments see *Letters* IV, 427 and *Works* XVI, 369 (a more positive one).

noble revolutionary Armand Barbès seems to suggest.⁴³ For this attack upon Hugo Thackeray is sharply criticized by Hooker, who characterizes it as a "good example of the reaction of a really hardheaded Britisher to Hugo's humanitarianism" and by the authors of *CHEL*, who accuse Thackeray of national prejudices.⁴⁴ I am far from giving approval to Thackeray's attack upon the poet, or to his unjust attitude to the condemned revolutionary, but I think it is necessary to point out that at least one excuse may be found for him—his main concern was rather the way in which justice was being performed in France than the intervention of Hugo and his objections against the "sham justice" prevalent in France under the "sham monarchy" of Louis Philippe are in my opinion well-founded.

The above investigation entitles me to conclude that Thackeray's criticism of Hugo was not entirely, and certainly not consciously, unfair. It differs considerably from the eulogies of the French critics during the poet's lifetime, but is also substantially different from the adverse criticism of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the representatives of which castigated Hugo as mere versifier and whipped him out of the temple of Poetry. It was not until more recent times that Hugo was assigned his rightful place in literature and it is mainly thanks to Eluard and Aragon that he is now recognized as one of the greatest figures of the general culture of his age, the "crown prince of Romanticism", who enriched French poetry with many new themes, forms and rhythms. Thackeray's evaluation differs in some aspects, too, from that of the English criticism of his time, which upon the whole revealed much stronger national prejudices towards the poet, as Hooker pointed out, and "consistently and emphatically disapproved of Hugo and of all the 'French' traits which he supposedly embodied".⁴⁵ Thackeray undoubtedly had some prejudices against the French national character, which revealed themselves also in his criticism of Hugo, as we have seen, but his critical interest was not concentrated exclusively upon the Gallic traits of the poet's works. In my opinion (and partly in that of Clapp⁴⁶) he assessed them primarily as works of a romanticist, from the point of view of a realist. As we have seen, Thackeray could not accept those aspects of Hugo's creative approach in which the latter was a typical romanticist—his Utopian visions, his conception of the leading role of the poet and the individual at the head of the masses, his innate tendency towards picturesque contrast, especially as these were revealed in Hugo's prose. These aspects prevented him, too, from seeing and duly appreciating the realistic elements in Hugo's works, elements which led Aragon to classify the French poet as "the first genuine realist of French poetry".⁴⁷ We must bear in mind that Thackeray paid critical attention only to Hugo's prose works,

⁴³ See *Works* II, 37–38 ("The Fêtes of July", 1839).

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 93. See also *CHEL* XIII, p. 283. It is worth noticing that Hooker, whose book deals with Hugonian criticism in England, mentions this attack of Thackeray, but completely ignores his two reviews of Hugo's works.

⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. vii–viii.

⁴⁶ See *op. cit.*, pp. 288, 289.

⁴⁷ Quoted in J. O. Fischer and collective, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

and that those he noticed did not belong to Hugo's best achievements. His judgments might have been perhaps more positive, if he had assessed Hugo's poetry, as his comment on "Les Feuilles d'automne" seems to suggest.

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The personality and work of George Sand is the subject of Thackeray's more extensive review, which was originally published in the American magazine *The Corsair* under the title "Madame Sand and *Spiridion*" (September 1839) and then reprinted in the *Paris Sketch Book* as "Madame Sand and the New Apocalypse" (1840). As its original title suggests, the reviewer's attention is concentrated mainly upon Sand's novel *Spiridion*, but in the introduction of his review he attempts to assign the authoress a place in contemporary literary streams in France, briefly evaluates her literary career and pays attention to the social and political ideas she had so far presented to her readers in her novels *Indiana*, *Valentine* and *Lélia*. He characterizes her as the high priestess of the "new" religion which was imported to France from Germany (i.e. pantheism and transcendentalism) and which he condemns as a distorted caricature of a doctrine, expressing at the same time his hope that this teaching will take no hold in his country "where there is a fund of roast beef, that will expel any such humbug in the end". He has not much sympathy, either, for Sand's demand of the emancipation of woman, as she proclaims it in the three novels mentioned above, even if he grants, "for argument's sake", that the laws of marriage, especially those in France, "press very cruelly upon unfortunate women". One of his sharpest critical shafts is aimed at the moral contents of these works, especially of *Lélia*, which he characterizes as "a regular topsyturvyfication of morality, a thieves' and prostitutes' apotheosis".⁴⁸ Sand's notions on morals seem to him so "peculiar" that he does not dare to particularize them, being obviously afraid of offending the squeamish English reader. In his evaluation of these early novels of Sand Thackeray assumes his characteristic standpoint that a writer who takes upon himself the character of moralist, philosopher or social reformer has the right of doing so only if his private life is blameless and his morals unquestionable. He emphasizes that he does not know the authoress personally, and can only speak of her from report, and adds:

"True or false, the history, at any rate, is not very edifying; and so may be passed over; but, as a certain great philosopher told us, in very humble and simple words, that we are not to expect to gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles; we may, at least, demand, in all persons assuming the character of moralist or philosopher—order, soberness, and regularity of life; for we are apt to distrust the intellect that we fancy can be swayed by circumstance or passion; and we know how circumstance and passion *will* sway the intellect; how mortified vanity will form excuses for itself; and how temper turns angrily upon conscience, that reproves it" (*Works* II, 228).

⁴⁸ For the quotations see *Works* II, 224, 229, 230.

He is convinced that George Sand is not the proper person to pose the problem of marriage ties, as she herself broke the bondage, set herself free and found consolation elsewhere. She is therefore prejudiced and so personally committed that "her arguments may be considered to be somewhat partial, and received with some little caution".⁴⁹ Thackeray is not so unjust to the authoress, however, as not to recognize and appreciate the beauty of the style in which these novels are written and admit that in her genius and eloquence she can take rank side by side with Rousseau and Byron.

While Thackeray did not dare to particularize Sand's notions on morals in her three early novels, he feels himself to be on safer ground in writing about "her religious manifesto", the novel *Spiridion*. He again pays generous tribute to Sand's splendid style, to her wonderful power of language, which he finds to be even greater in this novel than in the preceding ones and about which he writes:

"Her style is a noble, and, as far as a foreigner can judge, a strange tongue, beautifully rich and pure. She has a very exuberant imagination, and, with it, a very chaste style of expression. She never scarcely indulges in declamation, as other modern prophets do, and yet her sentences are exquisitely melodious and full. She seldom runs a thought to death... but she leaves you at the end of one of her brief, rich, melancholy sentences, with plenty of food for future cogitation. I can't express to you the charm of them; they seem to me like the sound of country bells—provoking I don't know what vein of musing and meditation, and falling sweetly and sadly on the ear" (*Works II*, 232).

This is, however, almost the only positive value he finds in the novel. He has serious reservations regarding the ideas propagated by the authoress, the "new Apocalypse" Sand propagates in this work, which he characterizes as a pantheistic doctrine, dissociating himself from her open attacks upon the received Christian creed:

"She declares it to be useless now, and unfitted to the exigencies and the degree of culture of the actual world; and, though it would be hardly worth while to combat her opinions in due form, it is, at least, worth while to notice them, not merely from the extraordinary eloquence and genius of the woman herself, but because they express the opinions of a great number of people besides; for she not only produces her own thoughts, but imitates those of others very eagerly: and one finds, in her writings, so much similarity with others; or, in others, so much resemblance to her, that the book before us may pass for the expressions of the sentiments of a certain French party" (*Works II*, 230–231).

This passage and his attack upon Lamennais referred to above (see page 56) testify that Thackeray was not only well informed about Sand's philosophical ideas and religious beliefs, but was also familiar with their sources (besides Lamennais, he mentions Saint-Simon, Fourier and Leroux). As V. Brett has pointed out, some parts of this mystical novel were written by Leroux himself and Thackeray must have been well versed in his works to recognize the resemblance.⁵⁰

Thackeray's critical weapons are levelled not only at Sand's philosophy as such, but also at her having chosen such a theme at all. In his opinion

⁴⁹ *Works II*, 230.

⁵⁰ See J. O. Fischer and collective, op. cit., p. 289.

the authoress overstepped the boundary of the novel as a *genre*, neglected her old trade of novelist, of which she was the very ablest practitioner in France and—like the English authoresses of religious novels and tracts (whom she, however, surpasses by her style)—attempted to proclaim her truth concerning the unfathomable mystery of God “by means of pretty sentimental tales, and cheap apologues”, by drawing upon her imagination, and making a story instead of argument. Another critical shaft of his is aimed at the way in which Sand elaborated the main idea of her novel—“the downfall of the Catholic church; and, indeed, of the whole Christian scheme”⁵¹—in the characters and plot of the novel, especially in the fortunes of the titular hero. He positively evaluates only one episode, in which the authoress successfully evokes the dreary and mysterious atmosphere of the cloister and sacristy, praises her fine fancy and her capability of keeping up “the natural *supernaturalness*” of the scene by means of suitably chosen details:

“How skilfully is each of these little strokes dashed in, and how well do all together combine to make a picture!” (*Works* II, 235).

His evaluation of some of the characters, however, and especially that of Peter Hebronius, “Spiridion”, is much more critical, though he finds some positive traits even in this curious personage, who does not appear in the novel in flesh, but as a ghost and at the same time as a mouthpiece of Sand’s ideas:

“This beautiful, mysterious, dandy ghost, whose costume, with a true woman’s coquetry, Madame Dudevant has so rejoiced to describe—is her religious type, a mystical representation of Faith struggling up towards Truth, through superstition, doubt, fear, reason,—in tight inexpressibles, with ‘a belt such as is worn by the old German students’. You will pardon me for treating such an awful person as this somewhat lightly; but there is always, I think, such a dash of the ridiculous in the French sublime, that the critic should try and do justice to both, or he may fail in giving a fair account of either. This character of Hebronius, the type of Mrs. Sand’s convictions—if convictions they may be called—or, at least, the allegory under which her doubts are represented, is, in parts, very finely drawn; contains many passages of truth, very deep and touching, by the side of others so entirely absurd and unreasonable, that the reader’s feelings are continually swaying between admiration and something very like contempt—always in a kind of wonder at the strange mixture before him” (*Works* II, 237).

This character and his fortunes are for Thackeray a proof that Sand had hopelessly lost her way on the paths of her religious speculations. Spiridion gradually abjures the Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic religion, finally renounces Christianity itself and goes through a deep inner conflict in his search for a new religion. Thackeray very strongly protests against this everlasting abjuring of creeds and setting up of new faiths, but at the same time expresses his conviction that in this respect, as a warning to dabblers in religious speculations, the novel “may do a vast deal of good, and bears a good moral with it; though not such a one, perhaps, as our fair philosopher intended”. The moral which he draws from Sand’s book is that it is after all better and safer not to listen to the doctrines of the philosophers who constantly change their creeds, not to allow oneself to be dazzled by fine sentences and fiery declamations of various charla-

⁵¹ For the quotations see *Works* II, 232, 233.

tans, but to remain quiet and sober, "in that quiet and sober way of faith" of one's ancestors. As this quotation suggests, the doctrine of the authoress, not acceptable to Thackeray in itself, and, moreover, propagated by her in an incompetent and amateur way (he emphasizes that not "all the big words in the world can make Mrs. Sand talk like a philosopher"), leads him to a conservative adherence to old established beliefs and to mistrust in any progress of religious thought (a standpoint not wholly characteristic of him in this period of his life). It is therefore not surprising that the truth which Spiridion eventually succeeds in finding, which is a prophecy of the kingdom of everlasting Gospel, does not arouse in him any enthusiasm. He quotes in full Spiridion's manuscript which the prior took with himself to his grave and which contains his heretic doctrine, refuses to see in it, like Sand did, the "absolute truth" and "supreme secret", and evaluates it as the dullest "of all the dull, vague, windy documents that mortal ever set eyes on". His indignation is especially aroused by its final part, which contains an account of the development and decay of Christianity as well as some statements belittling the doctrine and role of Christ, which Thackeray denounces as impious and blasphemous. He expresses his conviction that some words in which Spiridion's philosophy is expressed could be written only after the authoress had passed through "the state of mental debauch and disease", but then relents a little and admits that they might be due to the peculiar influence of French air and sun which makes the French philosophers, politicians, and literary men permanently intoxicated. Thackeray obviously does not want to conclude his review in an entirely inimical spirit and therefore quotes one extract from "the dramatic and descriptive parts of the novel" which in his opinion "cannot, in point of style and beauty, be praised too highly", expressing his regret that he cannot quote more of them for want of space. His concluding remark is, however, not very positive. He explains that he dealt with Sand's religious or irreligious notions in such detail only because she is "the representative of a vast class of her countrymen, whom the wits and philosophers of the eighteenth century have brought to this condition", and pronounces his prophecy, which we quoted in the first chapter (see page 55), as to the inevitable downfall of their doctrine, that "goodly fruit" of "the Diderot and Rousseau tree".⁵² In this, however, he was mistaken, for the imported idealism was not the fruit of the philosophy of the Encyclopaedists, but, on the contrary, as Lafargue has pointed out, was driving their materialism to death.⁵³

After 1839 Thackeray ceased to consider Sand's novels as literary critic and mentioned her only in a few marginal comments. These show that the progressive development of the authoress towards Utopian socialism in the 1840s, bearing fruit in her best novels, either escaped his notice or failed to make him change his former views.⁵⁴ If he refers to her at all,

⁵² For the quotations and references in this paragraph see *Works* II, 240, 242, 248, 243, 246, 247, 248, 250.

⁵³ Quoted in J. O. Fischer and collective, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

⁵⁴ Of her novels of this period he mentions only *Consuelo*, without any critical comment (see *Works* V, 482).

he does so only to include her in his general condemnation of contemporary French literature, or to make her a favourite novelist of the morally questionable, selfish and cold-hearted Blanche Amory, who is moreover characterized as being, like Lélia, a *femme incomprise*. His continued negative attitude to Sand's personality is in my opinion reflected in his character of Madame d'Ivry in the *Newcomes*, who may be regarded as a composite picture of George Sand and Madame de Staël, of course transposed and modified in Thackeray's workshop (as far as I know nobody has as yet dealt with this character from this point of view). Like George Sand Madame d'Ivry married at a very early age, when she left the convent, taking a husband who was many years older (like the husband of de Staël) and who did not understand her (like the husbands of both French authoresses). In the third year of this unhappy *mariage de convenance*, after having given birth to a daughter, she took to literature and (like de Staël and also Sand) opened her *salons* to art, entertaining there (like these women of letters) the representatives of the Romantic School and the Young France. Like George Sand, she gradually renounced several political, religious, and philosophical creeds and finally took to Pantheism, all of which found due reflection in her works, which are—unlike those of de Staël and Sand—written in verse. Like Sand and Staël she takes a fancy to any man who comes near her, but soon quarrels with him and grows tired of him, as Sand especially did. The creeds she adopts in turn include, too, natural sciences, chemistry and botany, i.e. those branches of science which Sand learned from her private tutor, the former priest Deschartes. Like Sand, who dressed herself in masculine attire to be able to share fully the life of the Parisian students and literary Bohemians, Madame d'Ivry adapts her dresses to the robes worn by the members of the particular sects or by individuals she admires at the moment. Like Sand she had been used to smoke cigars, but abandoned the habit. Like Sand, she has a jealous husband and constantly changes her lovers. Like Staël she has a much younger lover, who is a poet, as was Sand's lover Musset, and whom she calls "Stenio"—using the name of Lélia's lover. The outpourings of the Duchess's heart, her *cris de l'âme*, as Thackeray calls them, in which she deploras her unhappy marriage with an old man and expresses her protests against the ruthless egotism of the male sex, remind us very strongly of Sand's views upon these questions and even of her style. Even the Duchess's portrait in the novel (by Richard Doyle, but most probably inspired by Thackeray) reminds us to a certain extent of the likeness of Sand in her younger years, as it was drawn by Musset. The character of Madame d'Ivry is a very convincing proof, too, of Thackeray's negative attitude to Sand's philosophical ideas and religious beliefs. He created in it a very lifelike illustration of the thesis formulated by Lady Kew, that when "a woman forgets religious principles . . . , she is sure to go wrong". He makes the Duchess into another Becky Sharp, but this time without the grudging sympathy he could not help feeling for his courageous little governess—he depicts her in an entirely adverse light, so that she never excites any sympathy in the reader, but only loathing and contempt. She is presented as a selfish, completely worldly, mischievous, scandal-mongering, utterly depraved, cold-hearted and

dangerous woman, who is capable only of nursing her own alleged wrongs and has not a trace of genuinely human feelings for anybody. Like Becky she does not care about her child, neglects her, leaves her to her loneliness and exposes her "maternal" feelings only "before the world, before ladies, that understands itself". As in Becky's case her child is separated from her by her husband and she bears this loss, like Becky, with complete indifference and equanimity. This malevolent viper, this monstre, as Florac calls her, is the cause of the rupture between Kew and Ethel and of the duel between Kew and Stenio, in which the former is seriously wounded. That part of her life, with which we become acquainted from the novel, strongly reminds us of Becky's fortunes after Rawdon's discovery of her unfaithfulness—like Becky, the Duchess leaves her husband (though, in contradistinction to Becky, of her own choice) and, together with depraved females of her own type and with some very questionable males, starts patronizing the roulette-tables and trails "through the country with her vagabond court of billiard-markers at her heels".⁵⁵ The key to both the character of Becky and that of the Duchess is the image of a siren, beautiful and alluring above the surface of the water, which, however, hides the cave full of the bones of her victims. The composite character of this personage shows that Thackeray did not create it with the purpose of attacking and ridiculing either of the two French authoresses and that he only took his inspiration from what he thought he knew about their lives and personalities. Even though he was not motivated by any evil intent, his depiction is very unjust both to de Staël and Sand, and especially to the latter, who was a very pure and noble, warm-hearted and kind person and the tenderest, most affectionate of mothers.

While Thackeray's criticism of Sand is, as we have seen, not positive, nor is it wholly negative—he did not deny her genius and warmly praised her style. His treatment of her novel *Spiridion*, which, like her other novels *à la thèse*, is filled with confused metaphysics and misty symbolism and is unequal in its composition and in its truthfulness to life, is by no means unjust. If we disregard his negative attitude to Sand's personal character, especially as it is expressed in the character of Madame d'Ivry analysed above, his criticism of George Sand the novelist is upon the whole not so adverse as that of her English denigrators, whom George Henry Lewes attacked in his two articles of 1842 and 1844, while it avoids the enthusiasm of the English feminists and most female writers.⁵⁶ He is near to Carlyle, who characterized the authoress as the "sublime Highpriestess of Anarchy", and who confessed that he was so much

⁵⁵ For the quotations see *Works* XIV, 499, 473, 429.

⁵⁶ Lewes's articles were published in the *Monthly Magazine*, June 1842, and the *Foreign Quarterly Review*, July 1844. See Patricia Thomson, "The Three Georges", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 18, Sept. 1963, No. 2, p. 141 and note. Among Sand's admirers we find E. Browning, Mrs. Jameson, H. Martineau, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. The last bowed before the genius of the French authoress in great respect and eternal gratefulness, regarded her as her model and was even inspired by her (see *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, OUP, Geoffrey Cumberlege; New Haven: Yale UP, 1954, vol. I, pp. 277–278.

irritated by the "sick Sentimentalism" in her work that he was often unjust to what was truthful in it. He liked, however, "the melody that runs thro' that strange 'beautiful incontinent' soul,—a *Modern Magdalen*, with the 'seven devils' mostly still in her!".⁵⁷ Thackeray's attitude to Sand reminds me, too, in some respects, of the critical opinions of the Russian democratic critics, especially of those of Belinsky, who criticized her Utopian, unreal and vague social programme and some other limitations of her creative approach almost in the same spirit as Thackeray, and sometimes even in much stronger words.⁵⁸ In contradistinction to this critic, however (and to Gercen and Chernyshevsky), Thackeray criticizes Sand's programme from the point of view of a believer and of an Englishman of the Victorian age, and does not do justice to the democratic and progressive tendency of her works, which was so warmly appreciated by her Russian critics, nor to her genuine and sincere love for ordinary working people, to which Brandes paid such an eloquent and enthusiastic tribute.⁵⁹ This weak point of his criticism is of course mainly rooted in his whole philosophy of life and in his conception of literature, which was the very opposite of Sand's romantic aesthetics, but at the same time also partly results from the limited range of his treatment of the authoress. All his critical judgments, even the later ones, are obviously based only upon his knowledge of Sand's early novels, which are mainly directed against the suppression of woman (this part of her doctrine is not neglected by Thackeray, as we have seen, even if he does not accept it with much sympathy) and represent only the outset of the authoress's fight against the injustices she found in her society.

In his evaluation of the Romantic prose written by Hugo and Sand, the two indisputably great practitioners of this literary kind, Thackeray applies the same standards that he uses in his reviews of the prose-works by second-rate writers discussed in the preceding chapter. He found Hugo's works wanting in their truthfulness to life and reprehended their author for his prophetic visions, his predilection for sharp contrasts and too ornate a style. George Sand offended him more from the moral point of view than because she deviated from the faithful depiction of reality. Furthermore, as in the case of Soulié, he had severe objections to her having inserted her own opinions and prejudices into her novel, thus overstepping the boundary of the *genre* and producing a religious pamphlet instead. In her case Thackeray applies, too, his usual standard that an author should set a good example in his life as well as in his work and should not deal with problems in which he is too closely personally involved. Since Hugo and Sand have retained their high places in literature down to the present day, Thackeray's critical judgments have not been confirmed by posterity. His evaluation is not, however, entirely unjust and, as I have tried to demonstrate, contains some grains of truth which may be accepted even by the greatest admirers of these two writers.

⁵⁷ *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling and Robert Browning*, ed. Alexander Carlyle, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1923, pp. 287—288.

⁵⁸ See op. cit., I, pp. 633—634; II, p. 352, etc.

⁵⁹ See op. cit., V, pp. 360, 362—363.

3. Thackeray and the Romantic Drama

If Thackeray was not badly qualified for his criticism of French Romantic prose, he was almost equally well equipped for evaluating the drama produced by this literary movement. Ever since youth a great theatre-lover, he was lucky enough to spend much of his time in Paris at the very period in which Romantic drama was being born and even witnessed some of the stormy reactions and commotions which were the labour pains that accompanied its arrival in the world. In the 1830s, during the Paris stays of varying length which marked that decade, he went almost daily to the theatre, saw a great number of significant productions of the Romantic movement, some of which he evaluated as critic and some of which he only commented upon in his diary or letters. In fact none of those he saw and recorded were left uncommented. Another qualification of his was of course his very good knowledge of English drama (especially of Shakespeare and the Restoration dramatists) and of classical French drama, which allowed him to confront the productions of the past with those he saw on the French stage in the period of Romanticism. As all the evidence we have at our disposal shows, he deeply admired the art of the French actors and the stage production, but the dramas themselves, even though marvellously acted and perfectly produced, did not evoke in him any particular enthusiasm. Nor was he here very unjust, for the drama was the only literary kind in which the *École romantique* failed to realize its original bold expectations. His earliest acquaintance with the French Romantic drama was, however, not a wholly negative experience. During his first stay in Paris, in his university vacations of 1829, he saw one of the first romantic dramas in France, Dumas's *Henri III. et sa cour*, the most powerful of all the plays written by this dramatist, which was characterized by Henley as "the rallying trumpet of 1830".¹ His knowledge of French was not yet very good, but in spite of this he was able to see at least some of the merits and demerits of this play, which he characterizes as "a drama which as it is cannot be called a tragedy". Quite justly, too, he appreciates the plot of the play as "a good one", praises the costumes as "most scrupulously correct" and enthusiastically writes about the "most excellent acting", especially that of Made-moiselle Mars.² In 1830 he saw at Weimar the German translation of Hugo's epoch-making tragedy *Hernani* and at that time it obviously had not yet aroused his indignation (as it did later), as he recommends his mother to read this play which had made such a commotion in Paris.³ So too the next drama he saw in Paris two years later, Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse* (he saw the première, which was also the last performance, the play being banned by the government), met with his qualified approval and probably made strong impression upon him, in the opinion of Ray, who finds a striking reminiscence of the play in George Warrington's drama *Carpezan*

¹ Quoted by Saintsbury, *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 319 note.

² *Letters* I, 88. The drama had a fascinating and lively plot. In externals Dumas reproduced exactly the historical milieu and the scenery and costumes were adapted according to Scott's *Quentin Durward*.

³ See *Letters* I, 127, 133.

in the *Virginians*.⁴ In the same year he saw the tragedy by Casimir Delavigne, *Louis XI.*, which he found "capital" and in the following year *Les Enfants d'Édouard* by the same writer, which he evaluated as "one of the best acted tragedies I had ever the good fortune to see".⁵ In 1835 he read (but probably did not see) De Vigny's play *Chatterton*, by common consent the high-watermark of the Romantic theatre, and summed up its plot in a letter to his friend FitzGerald which aptly comments on De Vigny's embellishments of fact in the plot as being "very rich", but does not otherwise critically enlarge.⁶ It was obviously not until 1838 that the French romantic drama properly aroused Thackeray's anger, though he commented upon it adversely at least on two earlier occasions.⁷ In that year he saw in Paris Hugo's tragedy *Marion Delorme* and was disgusted in the highest degree, as follows from this communication to his mother:

"I have just come from seeing Marion Delorme, a tragedy of Victor Hugo, and am so disgusted and sick with the horrid piece that I have hardly heart to write. The last act ends with an execution, and you are kept waiting a long hour listening to the agonies of parting lovers, and grim speculations about head-chopping, dead-bodies, coffins and what not—Bah! I am as sick as if I had taken an emetic" (*Letters I*, 362).

His evaluation is of course not quite just, for the play, in spite of the demerits which he saw so clearly, possessed considerable brilliance and was full of charm, as Faguet emphasizes,⁸ and was also politically daring—as an anti-government drama it was prohibited by Charles X. Two years after this characteristic statement of his, which preshadows all his later judgments upon French romantic drama, Thackeray examined the dramatic production of the Romantic school as critic in his article "French Dramas and Melodramas" (1840). He condemns it, sharply and utterly, as drama dealing exclusively in crimes and vices, and therefore highly objectionable from the moral point of view, as drama ridiculing religion. His objections are best expressed in the introductory part of the article:

"Finally, there is the Drama, that great monster which has sprung into life of late years; and which is said, but I don't believe a word of it, to have Shakespeare for a father. If Mr. Scribe's plays (about which he wrote in the preceding paragraph—LP) may be said to be so many ingenious examples how to break one commandment, the *drame* is a grand and general chaos of them all; nay, several crimes are added, not prohibited in the Decalogue, which was written before dramas were. Of the drama, Victor Hugo and Dumas are the well-known and respectable guardians. Every piece Victor Hugo has written, since *Hernani*, has contained a monster—a delightful monster, saved by one virtue. There is Triboulet, a foolish monster; Lucrece Borgia, a maternal monster; Mary Tudor, a religious monster; Monsieur Quasimodo, a hump-backed monster; and others, that might be named, whose monstrosities we are induced to pardon—nay, admiringly to witness—because they are agreeably mingled with some exquisite display of affection. And, as the great Hugo has one monster to each play, the great Dumas has, ordinarily, half

⁴ See *Letters I*, 238 and note. The hero of Hugo's drama is Francis I, the most brutal of the royal debauchees of France; one of the characters of *Carpezan* is another royal Don Juan, King Louis of Hungary and Bohemia.

⁵ *Letters I*, 252 and *Works I*, 39.

⁶ See *Letters I*, 278.

⁷ See *Letters I*, 226 (on Dumas's *drame brutal*, *Le fils de l'émigré*) and *Letters I*, 254.

⁸ See op. cit., p. 565.

a dozen, to whom murder is nothing; common intrigue, and simple breakage of the before-mentioned commandment, nothing; but who live and move in a vast, delightful complication of crime, that cannot be easily conceived in England, much less described" (*Works* II, 291–292).

As we can see, Thackeray's evaluation of the French romantic drama has a very strong moralistic colouring: in his opinion this sort of drama exercises a very harmful influence upon the spectator, equal almost to that exercised by public executions—it makes him indulge in a "hideous kind of mental intoxication"⁹ and in morbid interest in, and perhaps even sympathy for, crime and vice. His second objection is directed against the predilection of French romantic writers for "mixed" criminal characters, for depicting, as Brandes expressed it, "a human soul debased by bad passions, by all kinds of misery and humiliations, by vice, by slavery, by infirmity, yet so constituted that, under given circumstances, it is irresistibly attracted by the good and beautiful, in alliance with which it fights against the horrible past which it has forsworn".¹⁰

All the above-mentioned criteria of Thackeray's are applied in the body of his article, which is devoted to the evaluation of three plays by Alexandre Dumas-père—*Caligula* (1837), *Don Juan de Marana* (1836) and *Kean* (1836). The reason why he had chosen Dumas and not Hugo to represent the Romantic drama in his article is difficult to descry. He might have perhaps recognized in the former a more "dangerous" representative of the school, who had, as his contemporaries thought, and as Faguet believes, "perhaps a greater share than Victor Hugo in bringing about the revolution in the drama in the nineteenth century by substituting historic drama for tragedy".¹¹ The plays Thackeray chooses for his criticism belong, however, to the later period of Dumas's return to melodrama and, being more or less trashy, do not reach the level of his first two dramas, *Henri III. et sa cour* and *Antony*. In the introduction to his critical notice of *Caligula*, Thackeray mentions the cold reception of the play by the Parisian critics and quotes Dumas's defence, in which the dramatist, with considerable lack of modesty, draws his critics' attention to the deep piety of his play and to the new, bold, but chaste and grave thoughts expressed in it and claims for himself the merit of presenting to the spectator "the solution of a problem which he has long and vainly sought in his waking hours". Such words could not but rouse the anger of the sober and modest critic, who reprehends the dramatist for trying to present himself as an apostle and a writer with a divine mission. He pronounces, however, very few critical judgments upon the play itself, and his critical notice consists for the most part of long quotations from the drama in French and in his own translation. But even his scanty critical comments suggest that he very much resents the way in which Dumas treats religion in this play: he stops translating the piece at the point when Mary Magdalen is mentioned for the first time, refusing to enter the sacred ground "with such spotless high-priest as Monsieur Dumas".¹²

⁹ *Works* II, 293; see also 292.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, V, p. 350 (on Hugo).

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 570.

¹² For the quotations see *Works* II, 294 and 297.

Nor does Dumas's choice of his "hero" and "heroine" (Caligula and Messalina), and his sympathetic approach to them, meet with his approval, but he is aware that these personages might have led Dumas into much greater excesses of indecency than they had done:

"All things considered, the tragedy of *Caligula* is a decent tragedy; as decent as the decent characters of the hero and heroine can allow it to be; it may be almost said, provokingly decent: but this, it must be remembered, is the characteristic of the modern French school (nay, of the English school too); and if the writer take the character of a remarkable scoundrel, it is ten to one but he turns out an amiable fellow, in whom we have all the warmest sympathy. Caligula is killed at the end of the performance; Messalina is comparatively well-behaved;..." (*Works* II, 294).

Much more strongly does Thackeray disapprove of Dumas's treatment of religion in *Don Juan de Marana*, the dramatic version of the well-known story of the debauches of Don Juan and his pious repentance. The scene of the play is laid in heaven, on earth and in hell and the plot concerns the contest of a good and a bad angel for the possession of the soul of the hero. Thackeray is especially indignant regarding the character of Don Juan, whom Dumas endowed with some additional qualities, non-existent both in the historical prototype and in his namesake created by Mozart and Molière, but rendering him "eminently fitting for stage representation". In Dumas's depiction this personage is an odd combination of Lovelace and Lacenaire (a notorious criminal of that time—LP): he not only seduces ladies, as his original did, but also blasphemes upon all occasions and "murders, at the slightest provocation, and without the most trifling remorse". Such a conception of this character, considerably deviating from historical truth, enabled the dramatist to fill his scene with numerous intrigues, surprise effects and other romantic accessories, as well as with a number of depictions of various crimes and vices, which Thackeray laconically enumerates in his brief summary of the plot of the play. In his final words he sharply indicts the play as immoral, indecent and vulgar, characterizes its favourable reception as "a very bitter satire upon the country, which calls itself the politest nation in the world" and appeals to the French government, which censors dramas because of political allusions, to exert "the same guardianship over public morals".¹³ His sharpest shaft is reserved, however, for the author's cavalier treatment of religion:

"The honest English reader, who has a faith in his clergyman, and is a regular attendant at Sunday worship, will not be a little surprised at the march of intellect among our neighbours across the Channel, and at the kind of consideration in which they hold their religion. Here is a man who seizes upon saints and angels, merely to put sentiments in their mouths, which might suit a nymph of Drury Lane. He shows heaven, in order that he may carry debauch into it; and avails himself of the most sacred and sublime parts of our creed, as a vehicle for a scene-painter's skill, or an occasion for a handsome actress to wear a new dress" (*Works* II, 300–301).

As usual, Thackeray quotes from the reviewed play an extract in his own rendering, including his successful translation of Martha's prayer in verse, "Le Bon Ange".

¹³ For the quotations see *Works* II, 297 and 300.

Even the third play, *Kean*, did not find mercy in the critic's eyes, but on this occasion he is not motivated predominantly by his religious feelings, but by the indignation of a realist seeking in literature truthful depiction of life, as well as by his offended patriotic feelings and moral sense. He criticizes this play in the first place for its entirely false depiction of English life, enumerating all the biggest blunders committed by the author, and sums up briefly the absurd plot, based upon a conventional romantic scheme and abounding in the usual surprise effects and unexpected *dénouements*. The sharpest of his critical weapons is aimed at Dumas's cavalier treatment of virtue and vice in sexual life. This in Thackeray's opinion faithfully reflects the perverted French code of morals, for which infidelity, adultery and seduction are "a matter of course" and success among women "the proof and the reward of virtue".¹⁴ As Garnett points out, Thackeray's evaluation of *Kean* has been regarded as unjust and prejudiced especially by French critics, who have always treated this drama with the greatest respect as an excellent play from the standpoint of the theatre, even though it contained many mistakes in English history and manners. According to this scholar Thackeray failed to appreciate the excellent stage qualities of this play and concentrated his attention exclusively upon the "'Frenchiness' of the piece, and to the singular mistakes in it". Garnett evaluates Thackeray as a not very good or just critic of French plays, but admits that his "ironic humour" makes his criticisms of the plays depicting English life "exceedingly entertaining".¹⁵ I agree with Garnett that Thackeray ignored the stage qualities of *Kean*, but I am not quite willing to accept his conclusion that his only concern was the "'Frenchiness' of the play. In my opinion he was mainly concerned with the relation of Dumas's depicted scene to reality, as in the case of any other writer, whether English, German or French. That the reality in the play was supposed to be English only increased his anger, but was not, in my opinion, its main cause. I find myself in agreement rather with Saintsbury who argues against the French critics of the play, and adds:

"To which, of course, it can only be replied that if all Europe thought *Kean* a fine play, and only one person perceived the absurdities that Thackeray points out, all Europe would be wrong and the one person right. For these are absurdities, sometimes in themselves, sometimes as exhibiting ignorance of his subject, which the author had not business to commit if he took that subject at all."¹⁶

After all, not all Europe accepted *Kean* with enthusiasm. Belinsky, for instance, characterized it as a "feeble" play, and all Dumas's popular melodramas, including *Kean*, as sanguinary pieces of bad taste, even though he did not condemn them utterly, seeing in them a protest of the human individual and his appeal to society.¹⁷

The rest of Thackeray's article is devoted to the evaluation of several popular melodramas, both of religious and non-religious character. He

¹⁴ *Works* II, 301, 302.

¹⁵ For the quotations see *NSB*, pp. 300, 301.

¹⁶ *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 42.

¹⁷ See op. cit., I, p. 525; II, p. 352.

sums up either briefly or in detail the plots of some of them¹⁸ and criticizes the former for the liberties they take with the text of the Bible, the latter for their occasional indecency, lack of refinement, "absurdities and claptraps". Upon the whole, however, he prefers these popular plays, which are mostly anonymous productions, to the whole production of the *École romantique*. They do not pretend to any divine mission, "do not deal in descriptions of the agreeably wicked, or ask pity and admiration for tender-hearted criminals and philanthropic murderers, as their betters do", depict virtue as virtue and vice as vice and lead all the vicious characters to due punishment. In contradistinction to the dramas of the great representatives of the Romantic school they therefore contain, as Thackeray points out, "fine hearty virtue" and "pleasant child-like simplicity", and "a kind of rude moral":¹⁹

"So that while the drama of Victor Hugo, Dumas, and the enlightened classes, is profoundly immoral and absurd, the *drama* of the common people is absurd, if you will, but good and right-hearted" (*Works* II, 305).

These plays appeal to Thackeray, too, by always expressing the standpoint of the people regarding the classes in power: the seducer and villain is always an aristocrat, and is punished at the end of the play, thus expiating, and quite justly, as Thackeray emphasizes, the wrongs which his class did a hundred years ago. Thackeray warmly sympathizes with this "republican" tendency of the popular melodramas and expresses his wish that it should live on the French stage for a long time yet. His evaluation is essentially correct, for these plays, in spite of their stereotype characters, lack of depth in thought and exaggerated sentimentality, expressed the democratic ideals of their time and contained, as E. Uhlířová points out, a strong note of social criticism.²⁰

The concluding part of Thackeray's article is devoted to a general assessment of the depiction of English life and manners on the French stage. He notices the most striking blunders occurring in four plays dealing with the subject (including again Dumas's *Kean*) and in a poem by Roger de Beauvoir,²¹ concluding his "catalogue" of errors (and his article) with the following question:

¹⁸ The "Catholic" plays include *The Wandering Jew*, *Belshazzar's Feast* (criticized by Thackeray also elsewhere as early as 1833 — see *Works* I, 37 — as a scandalous parody of scripture and parodied by him at a dinner party given by Lever — see W. J. Fitzpatrick, *Life of Charles Lever*, 2 vols, London, 1879, II, pp. 405–410, quoted in *Letters* II, 67 note), *Nebuchadnezzar*, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, *Joseph and his Brethren*, *The Passage of the Red Sea*, and *The Deluge*. The non-religious melodramas include *La Duchesse de Vauballière* (he does not mention the author, but this is not an anonymous production — it was written in 1839 by Nicolas Balisson de Rougemont), *Hermann L'ivrogne* (according to Thackeray this play is of Polish origin; I have found out that a play of this title was written by Joseph Bouchardy in 1836), and *Le Maudit des Mers* (I was unable to identify the author, but it is obviously one of the numerous versions of the famous story about the Flying Dutchman).

¹⁹ For the quotations see *Works* II, 308, 305.

²⁰ See J. O. Fischer and collective, op. cit., p. 316.

²¹ The first play he notices is one of the satirical plays upon the follies of the year, played at Christmas in France; the second is Dumas's *Kean*; the third is *Bergami et la reine d'Angleterre* (1833) by Charles-Désiré Dupeuty (with Alhoy and

"Would a playwright or painter of the Chinese empire have stranger notions about the barbarians than our neighbours, who are separated from us but by two hours of salt-water?" (*Works* II, 312).

After 1840 Thackeray's critical interest in the French romantic drama noticeably declined. He ceases to pay any attention whatever to Hugo's dramas, which might be partly explained by the fact that Hugo's drama was already outside the centre of interest of the whole of English criticism. As Hooker points out, the critical storm against Hugo's dramas had calmed down and English critics had become indifferent, probably because the dramas written after *Ruy Blas*, no longer so strongly politically committed, did not offer so much provocation as the earlier ones.²² Dumas's dramatic work, on the other hand, remained within the range of Thackeray's interest for a longer time. If he is really the author of the summary review "English History and Character on the French Stage" (as some scholars believe and Ray does not wholly deny), he returned to it again in 1843. The main reason for this renewal of his critical interest was obviously his surprise at the versatility of the dramatic resources of Dumas, who had written a comedy in the previous year (*Halifax*) and thus entered the domain of the lighter dramatic Muse. As a great lover of the Parisian vaudeville, Thackeray very much resents the intrusion of the heavy-handed Dumas, the author of the monstrous tale of *Don Juan de Marana*, with all its melodramatic effects and blasphemies, into the smiling garden of "that genuine, sparkling, essentially French thing, the Vaudeville".²³ He then briefly sums up the plot of the comedy, which takes place in England at the time of Charles II, sharply criticizes the character of the titular hero who is, contrary to historical truth, depicted as a low, brawling ruffian, and protests against the improbabilities of the resolution of the plot (Lord Halifax, in spite of all his cheating, drinking and killing, is rewarded by the marriage with Jenny). In concluding his notice of the play, Thackeray sighs over Dumas's queer notions of mirth and the perverse morality of his play:

"And this is a vaudeville, or, by the book, a comedy, mixed with couplets; and this is the lugubrious mirth, not to speak of the morality, of the romantic school. Oh! Alexandre Dumas" (*NSB*, 161).

In 1848 Thackeray once again, and for the last time, attacked the drama of the Dumasian type in the form of a little parody, "La Duchesse de Montefiasco", included in his Christmas story *Our Street*. He ridicules in it Dumas's predilection for rhetorical declamations, unlawful passion, tragic deaths of his heroes and surprise turns of the plot (the hero of the parody, Don Alonzo, falls in love with a duchess, who eventually turns out to be his own grandmother).²⁴

Of the other representatives of the drama of the Romantic school

Fontan); the fourth is *Naufrage de la Meduse* (I was unable to identify the author). Edouard Roger de Bully, called Roger de Beauvoir (1809-1866) lived for many months, as Thackeray points out, in England as the attaché to the Embassy of M. de Polignac. He was the author of many romantic novels, plays and poems, and was an old friend of Thackeray (see *Letters* II, 588 note).

²² See op. cit., p. 64.

²³ *NSB*, p. 157.

²⁴ See *Works* X, 140-143.

Thackeray paid formal critical attention only to Soulié. In the same review, in which he reviewed Dumas's *Halifax*, he takes notice of Soulié's play *Gaëtan, Il Mammone* (1842), by which he is even more horrified. In the very first words of his review he hints that he regards the play as unworthy of critical notice and that he deals with it only because Soulié is a prominent writer, who is on the staff of the *Journal des Débats* and whose play is likely to get an audience. Soulié, the author of the corrupt and licentious book *Les Mémoires du diable*, is according to Thackeray "assuredly not the best of historical guides", but his views upon English history and people are worth having, as in the eyes of some of his countrymen "he who could so well paint the devil, ought to draw an Englishman or Englishwoman to perfection".²⁵ Thackeray then sums up briefly the plot of the play which is based upon the idea that the world is governed by mean causes, evaluates it as "bewildering" and the play as a whole as "egregious rubbish" beyond all criticism. One of its numerous weak points is in Thackeray's opinion "a total absence" of character and the proper motivation of the action and behaviour of the personages:

"Nor, indeed, is there the least necessary connexion between the conduct of the personages, and the incidents of the piece. Any body might have filled the place of Lord Merton. He is an English admiral, without one marked feature or characteristic: a singular evidence of the author's dulness in the appreciation of force of soul, or determination, or humour, or whim of manner" (*NSB*, 155).

Garnett does not agree with Thackeray in his total condemnation of the play and rates Soulié much higher, as a dramatist of great power, though not much *finesse*. He emphasizes that *Gaëtan* was very successful in Paris, points out that it "abounds with happy strokes of national character" and blames Thackeray that his "national prepossessions prevented him from enjoying what was after all not a bad play".²⁶ I think, however, that time has proved Thackeray right—as far as I know, Soulié's play is now entirely forgotten.

Thackeray's evaluation of the French romantic drama cannot be regarded as genuine dramatic criticism, for he does not deal in it at all with the specific problems of the drama as literary form and ignores the theatrical qualities of the individual plays he assesses. His approach to the reviewed dramas is essentially the same as that he used in evaluating novels and other prose-works: it almost seems as if his judgments were based upon his reading them in book form and not seeing them on the stage. He had obviously only very general notions about the drama as literary form and about dramatic production. In the dramas he evaluated he sought only for the depiction of characters and manners, lively dialogue, interesting situations and episodes, while the technical aspects of this literary kind, the process by which a written drama is transformed into a powerful play performed on the stage, failed to draw his attention or at least did not stand in the forefront of his interest. As the preceding account implies, Thackeray took some share in the campaign of the other critics of his country against the "immoral" and "depraved" dramas of Hugo and Dumas, which is characterized by Hooker as a wholesale attack

²⁵ *NSB*, p. 152; see also *ibid.*, p. 155.

²⁶ *NSB*, p. 303; see also *ibid.*, p. 317.

launched by the awful edict in the article on "The State of the French Drama", published in the *Quarterly Review* in March 1834, after the appearance of which no English critic, except Lewes, ventured to defend the French drama, and especially that of Hugo, again. In my opinion, however, Thackeray's criticism differs from that of most English adverse critics—if not in its conclusions, at least in its informed character. As Hooker points out, these critics passed their negative judgments very easily and extended their disapproval to productions about which they knew nothing except that they were French.²⁷ Thackeray's judgments, on the other hand, are based upon his good knowledge of all Hugo's dramas, probably of the whole dramatic production of Dumas, of plays by lesser Romantic dramatists, of French classical drama, and, of course, on his familiarity with Shakespeare's dramatic work. It is true, and I have pointed it out above, that his judgments are coloured by his national prejudices and, moreover, strongly influenced by his own strictly moralistic and narrow-minded point of view and that of his society, but I am convinced that a very important, if not a decisive, role in his criticism is played by his fundamental opposition to the romantic creative approach of the above-discussed French dramatists, which was entirely foreign to his own conception of literature. The essentially schematic dramatic methods of Hugo and Dumas, their predilection for grandiose exaggeration, strong dramatic contrasts and hyperbolized characters, their love of the unusual and the monstrous, their delight in melodrama and pathos and their lack of humour and irony prevented Thackeray from appreciating what was really positive in the French romantic drama and what made it so epoch-making in its time—its lyricism, feeling for nature and verse, its romantic protest against the injustices of the régime, its social criticism and the choice of heroes (especially in Hugo) from among the declassed elements of society. And thus though Thackeray set out from different presumptions than did the other English critics of his time, he arrived at the same explicit condemnation of the Romantic drama. His evaluation is not, however, entirely unjust—the plays of Dumas and Hugo, which he criticized, had something frenzied and ridiculous about them, as even Praz admits,²⁸ while scarcely any of all the dramas mentioned in this chapter ever found real favour with the public or ever became part of the permanent repertory of any theatre. His evaluation of Dumas's dramas is near to that of the Russian democratic critics, as we have seen, but his criticism of Hugo's dramatic work is more negative. It is true that even the Russian critics sharply criticize the romantic excesses in Hugo's creative approach, evaluate his characters as defying the laws of nature (Chernyshevsky) and his dramas as a genuine slander on human nature and as artificial plays full of violence and theatrical effects (Belinsky).²⁹

²⁷ See op. cit., pp. 39, 57, 59, 62, 65, 85. Lewes defended Hugo's drama in his article "The French Drama: Racine and Victor Hugo", *Westminster Review*, Sept. 1840.

²⁸ See op. cit., p. 207.

²⁹ For Chernyshevsky's view see V. V. Ivasheva, *Istoriya zapadno-evropeyskoy literatury XIX. veka*, 3 vols, Izdatelstvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1951 (*The History of the West-European Literature of the 19th Century*), III, pp. 272–273; for Belinsky's opinion see op. cit., I, pp. 384, 587; II, p. 455.

But, in contradistinction to Thackeray, Belinsky was able to appreciate the "poetic element" in Hugo and even that aspect of the dramatist's creative method which aroused Thackeray's deepest indignation—his endeavour to prove that even the most corrupt human being possesses some beautiful traits of character.³⁰ The Russian critic evaluated correctly, too, the significance of Hugo's dramas for their time. He regarded all the French romanticists as ephemeral writers, including among them, as did Thackeray, also Balzac, but he was able to appreciate that their works responded to the needs of their age and reflected its interests and problems and that they therefore deserved their enormous popularity.

III.

THACKERAY AND FRENCH REALISTIC FICTION

As I have suggested in the preceding chapter, Thackeray condemned contemporary French literature as a whole and included in his condemnation, with only negligible exceptions, even the realistic fiction of the period. He had found almost no works which he could regard as representing serious fiction, found almost no difference between such novelists as Dumas, Soulié, Hugo, Sand, Sue, and Balzac, and characterized their whole production as profane, light literature, in its substance and effect immoral, utterly lacking in gentility, elegance and all other gentlemanlike qualities and as literature presenting an entirely false picture of the French society of its time. He expressed this opinion of his perhaps most clearly in his review of Reybaud's *Jérôme Paturot*. After having sharply criticized Sue, Balzac, and Soulié for not writing like gentlemen, he adds:

"These are hard words. But a hundred years hence (when, of course, the frequenters of the circulating library will be as eager to read the works of Soulié, Dumas, and the rest, as now), a hundred years hence, what a strange opinion the world will have of the French society of to-day! Did all married people, we may imagine they will ask, break a certain commandment?—They all do in the novels. Was French society composed of murderers, of forgers, of children without parents, of men consequently running the daily risk of marrying their grandmothers by mistake; of disguised princes, who lived in the friendship of amiable cut-throats and spotless prostitutes; who gave up the sceptre for the *savate*, and the stars and pigtails of the court for the chains and wooden shoes of the galleys? All these characters are quite common in French novels, and France in the nineteenth century was the politest country in the world. What must the rest of the world have been?" (*Works* VI, 320).

Perhaps this quotation also suggests the reason why Thackeray paid such slight attention to the French realistic fiction of his time as critic—as we shall see, he reviewed only the works of two second-rate writers, Bernard and Reybaud, and devoted some space, too, to the

³⁰ See *op. cit.*, II, p. 352.

evaluation of the realistic sketch and caricature, paying more attention, however, to the latter. As reader however, he had extensive knowledge of the realistic novel and story produced in France in his lifetime, certainly more extensive than we can learn from the records of his reading and the references in his works.¹ He read Balzac, as I shall demonstrate in more detail below, he was familiar at least with some works of Prosper Mérimée and admired them very much, even though he had an antipathy to the personal character of this writer.² He read some novels by Alexandre Dumas-fils and found them "very impudent and amusing".³ In the second half of the 1850s he became acquainted with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, but disliked the novel very much, evaluating it as a "bad" book, "a heartless, cold-blooded study of the downfall and degradation of a woman".⁴ This view of his, though very surprising in view of some indisputable points of resemblance between the two novelists, for which they have often been compared, contains some grains of truth—he seems to have perceived some of the limitations of Flaubert's almost naturalistically objective approach to his characters. His short comment suggests that he might have found Flaubert's standpoint too disinterested, his view of life too pessimistic, his negation too absolute, his loss of faith too entire and his scepticism too supreme. It is worth noticing that Thackeray probably did not read any novels of Stendhal, at least he does not refer to them anywhere. This complete absence of evidence is a regrettable gap in our knowledge of his critical opinions of French literature of his time and it is all the more provoking as there are so many parallels between the creative methods, literary and critical theories of these two great realists, which are closer and exceed in number even those between Thackeray and Balzac. They are indeed so striking that they have led Jerome Donnelly, who is determined to overlook this gap in factual evidence and relies solely on internal evidence, to the conclusion that Thackeray was almost certainly directly influenced by his great French contemporary.⁵ I find myself in agreement with this scholar in many of his findings (though some of the parallels he finds seem to me too far-fetched and there are again some which he does not notice), but his strong insistence upon Stendhal's direct influence implies, at least in my eyes, a certain underestimation of Thackeray's own creative power. All arguments of this sort, however, are beyond the scope of this article.

As I have suggested, in his critical judgments upon contemporary

¹ Besides the prose-writers mentioned in this chapter he read many second-rate authors, both realists and romanticists, such as for instance Le Comte Horace de Viel-Castel, whose two novels he noticed in his review "On Some French Fashionable Novels" (see *Works* II, 110 ff.), Émile Souvestre (see *Letters* II, 33, 142), Joseph Xavier Boniface, known as Saintine (see *Letters* II, 829; III, 668), Émile-Marco de Saint Hilaire (see *Letters* I, 234; II, 830), Olivier Gloux Aimard, called Gustave (see *Works* XVII, 601–602), etc.

² See *Letters* III, 460.

³ See *Letters* II, 679–680 and note.

⁴ *Letters* IV, 82 note; quoted from Henry Sutherland Edwards, *Personal Recollections*, London, 1900, p. 36.

⁵ See Jerome Donnelly, "Stendhal and Thackeray: The Source of 'Henry Esmond'", *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1965, No. 3, pp. 372–381.

French literature Thackeray committed the blunder, not uncommon in his time, of not making any distinction between the leaders of the Romantic school and the great realist Honoré de Balzac. It is true that the latter at first ranged himself among the Romanticists with his early Satanic novels and in fact never used the term "realism" when characterizing his own creative approach. But he very soon abandoned the road he started upon with his early romances, had no illusions about their literary value and, before the twenties were over, presented himself as a realist. If Thackeray's early judgments on Balzac had been founded only on his knowledge of Balzac's first works, they would have been of course correct. But he persisted in assigning Balzac to the Romanticists even on the basis of the novels published in the 1830s, in which the fundamental creative approach of the author was already that of a realist. In 1832 Thackeray read the novel *La Peau de Chagrin* (1831), which he at first liked very much, but soon afterwards classified as a typical product of the Romantic school, possessing many of its "faults" and "beauties"—"plenty of light and shade, good colouring and costume, but no character".⁶ As this judgment suggests, the blend of romantic and realistic motifs and images, characteristic of this novel, prevented Thackeray from seeing and appreciating its merits, especially Balzac's marvellous art of characterization (for which he uses here the unusual and to Thackeray unacceptable method of profound allegory), not to mention the splendid depictions of French society and the underlying forces which govern it, which have so many traits in common with Thackeray's own later images. It is worth noticing that *La Peau de Chagrin* and *Les Chouans*, upon which he commented later, are the only two novels of Balzac that Thackeray mentions in all his public and private writings. Although he worked as a professional literary critic of French literature, he did not review any of the works of his remarkable French contemporary,⁷ nor did he anywhere say a word about Balzac's great novels of his *Comédie Humaine*, which were all published during Thackeray's lifetime. It is, however, most probable that he was familiar with at least some of these novels, and that for several reasons: he was an omnivorous reader of French contemporary literature, read everything he could take hold of, read mostly in French and for the most part immediately in Paris; he followed regularly the two satirical magazines, *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari*, with which Balzac was connected; he visited France and worked there as literary critic at the time when Balzac was in his full creative power and beginning to be famous, and he referred to Balzac in several occasional remarks which might concern his great novels. Thus for instance in his comments of the years 1839–1840 he reprehends the

⁶ *Letters* I, 225; see also *ibid.*, 222.

⁷ Garnett ascribes to him the authorship of the review of Balzac's work *Monographie de la presse parisienne* (1843), published in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in April 1843 under the title "Balzac on the Newspapers of Paris". His authorship of this review has not been, however, definitely ascertained and both Ray and Maitre regard it as very doubtful. Even the internal evidence seems to suggest that this review was not written by Thackeray, for it differs considerably, with its positive evaluation, from all the other statements pronounced by Thackeray upon Balzac at this time. I shall therefore not take this review into account.

French novelist for depicting merely states of “convulsive crimes” and horrors, criticizes his melodramatic stories for betraying bad taste and his style for not being sufficiently polished, light, graceful, and elegant.⁸ In July 1840 he refers to Balzac in his evaluation of Dickens’s portrait:

“If Monsieur de Balzac, that voluminous physiognomist, could examine this head, he would, no doubt, interpret every tone and wrinkle in it: the nose firm, and well placed; the nostrils wide and full, as are the nostrils of all men of genius (this is Monsieur Balzac’s maxim)” (*Works* II, 518).

From 1842 we have the already mentioned (see page 71) record of the conversation at the dinner in Lever’s house, during which “full justice was done” to the contemporary French celebrities, including Balzac. According to Carey Taylor we could deduce from this laconic sentence that Thackeray reserved his severest judgments of Balzac for his articles and it might perhaps even be regarded as a signal of the change of his attitude to Balzac.⁹ Thackeray’s statements from the following years, which remain negative, speak against the latter alternative, but the fact that all of them appeared in his articles, speaks for the first. Some of these later comments might refer to Balzac’s great novels as well. It is, first of all, his remark in the review of Sue’s novel (April 1843), in which Thackeray confronts Sue’s enormous popularity with the lesser success of Soulié, Balzac and Dumas and emphasizes that “even Balzac has grown wearisome with his monotonous thrummings on the cracked old string”.¹⁰ In the same month and year Thackeray refers to Balzac’s play *Vautrin* (that is, if the review “The English History and Character on the French Stage” is his) and correctly assesses the hero as an imitation of Robert Macaire.¹¹ In October of the same year he expresses his pleasure at Balzac’s “subsiding” for the moment and being at St. Petersburg. Still in the same year he again reprehends Balzac for not writing like a gentleman and therefore not being fit for the *salon*, and three years later, in his review of English illustrated books for children, he comments upon the “voluptuous pictures” with which the French designers provided Balzac’s (and some other writers’) novels making them thus insuitable for children to look at.¹² In July 1844 he read Balzac’s novel *Les Chouans*, but even this work did not arouse in him any particular enthusiasm. As one of his diary items bears witness, he was convinced that the work contained the germs of a good novel but that these remained undeveloped.¹³ In this case,

⁸ See *Works* II, 98–99, 109.

⁹ See *op. cit.*, p. 364.

¹⁰ *Works* V, 461.

¹¹ See *NSB*, p. 172. Thackeray mentions here, too, the prohibition of the play by the police for satirizing a highly-placed personage, obviously referring to the performance of 1840, when Lemaitre in the titular role wore his hair arranged so as to recall Louis Philippe (see J. O. Fischer and collective, *op. cit.*, p. 477 note). He also mentions that even Macaire himself has since not been permitted to appear. It is worth noticing that Thackeray visited the prototype of Balzac’s *Vautrin*, the chief of police François Eugène Vidocq, in Paris, when his money was stolen. It is also very probable that he read Vidocq’s *Mémoires*, published in 1828 (see *Letters* I, 223 and note).

¹² For the references see *Works* V, 482; VI, 320, 570.

¹³ See *Letters* II, 146.

however, he is not far from the truth, as *Les Chouans* does not belong to Balzac's greatest works and has many weak points, as Saintsbury has demonstrated.¹⁴ In his later novels *Pendennis* and *The Newcomes*, Thackeray characterizes Balzac as one of the representatives of the profane literature of the lighter sort, places him on the same level not only with Lamartine and George Sand, but even with Sue, Dumas-père and Paul de Kock and makes him the favourite author of such characters as Blanche Amory and Honeyman. His last remark upon Balzac may be found in his *Roundabout Papers*. It concerns *La Peau de Chagrin* and even though it is not explicitly positive, it is not so negative as are all his preceding comments. It shows that this novel, in spite of the reservations we have noted, retained its vitality in his memory ever since the 1830s, when he had read it.¹⁵ We should also mention that Thackeray took some interest, in 1839, in Balzac's well-known intervention on behalf of the murderer Peytel. In his article "The Case of Peytel" (November 1839) he describes the whole case in detail, but his purpose is not to declare his belief in Peytel's innocence, as Balzac had done, or to proclaim his guilt, but to demonstrate, by analysing the act of accusation and the trial, that this man was condemned upon circumstantial and very feeble evidence. He expresses his indignation at the "wicked, illegal, and inhuman" proceedings of the French court, emphasizes that the law should be more wise and more merciful and that justice should never be executed in the way it was in this case. He prefers the way such things are managed in England and makes a passionate plea against capital punishment, which should be either abolished altogether, or, if this is not possible, executed in moderation, and only in such cases when we are "sure of a man's guilt before we murder him".¹⁶ He is convinced that Balzac's intervention was most unfortunate and rather harmed the condemned man than helped him:

"Perhaps Monsieur de Balzac helped to smother what little sparks of interest might still have remained for the murderous notary. Balzac put forward a letter in his favour, so very long, so very dull, so very pompous, promising so much, and performing so little, that the Parisian public gave up Peytel and his case altogether; nor was it until to-day that some small feeling was raised concerning him, when the newspapers brought the account how Peytel's head had been cut off, at Bourg" (*Works* II, 251).

I am convinced that Thackeray was essentially right and that if his analysis of the case could have been brought to the notice of the court in time, it would have proved more efficient than Balzac's intervention. Saintsbury is of a similar opinion:

"It is, however, pretty certain, to some who have read what both these great novelists and critics of life have to say, that Thackeray was right and Balzac wrong."¹⁷

Although we have such a small number of references of Thackeray to Balzac at our disposal, they clearly show that he never comprehended the

¹⁴ See *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 160.

¹⁵ See *Works* XVII, 368-369.

¹⁶ For the quotations see *Works* II, 266, 279.

¹⁷ *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 38.

real greatness of the French novelist and that Balzac's work remained practically a closed book to him. As the remarks quoted in this chapter testify, he was especially repelled by the moral contents of Balzac's novels, by his self-confidence and naïve boastfulness, his pretences and grandiose plans, by the qualities in which Balzac's style differed from the generally accepted norms and by the romantic elements in his creative approach. As Las Vergnas and Carey Taylor point out, Thackeray's critical remarks very rarely concern the literary values of Balzac's novels—his judgment is almost always distorted "par le point de vue moral et la hantise du snobisme".¹⁸ This is true, but it is also necessary to point out that each of Thackeray's judgments is naturally based upon his own literary theory and that even if he does not always explicitly mention literary values, he has them always in mind and they are implied in his judgment. All his critical rebukes addressed to Balzac are founded upon his conception of literature as a faithful depiction of reality devoid of any romantic excesses and it is therefore quite natural that whenever he comes across anything in Balzac's works which deviates from the sober, matter-of-fact representation of real facts (and Balzac's novels offer plenty of such instances), he revolts and expresses his disapproval. I am far from seeking unjustified excuses for Thackeray's attitude to Balzac, which is certainly unjust and from the present-day point of view indefensible. But if we look at it from the point of view of Thackeray's time, it does not appear so heretical. He certainly should not be too severely rebuked for not having appreciated Balzac's greatness. Even the best critics of his time, such as for instance Sainte-Beuve and Belinsky, failed to do the great novelist justice, being—like Thackeray—too unlike him and too near to him in time. According to Garnett, the entire Balzac was something too big and grand, and too fantastic and strange for any single contemporary—except his sister—to comprehend entirely.¹⁹ Many critics of Thackeray's time, too, shared with him the error of wrongly classifying Balzac according to existing literary movements, as for instance Belinsky, and even those who were much nearer to Balzac than the Russian critic and Thackeray—the French critics. Some of them connected him with the realistic school, according to others he initiated the second phase of romanticism and some believed that he deviated from realism by the exceptionality of his characters.²⁰ One of the causes of this current confusion in classification was undoubtedly the fact that in Balzac's lifetime no realistic literary school yet existed in France, which could be recognized as such by its representatives and by critics and that the term "realism" did not become current in that country until after 1850, as Weinberg has pointed out.²¹ Even for the strong moralistic colouring of

¹⁸ See Raymond Las Vergnas, *W. M. Thackeray, L'homme, le penseur, le romancier*, Champion, Paris, 1932, p. 324, quoted by Carey Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

¹⁹ See *NSB*, p. 296.

²⁰ See Bernard Weinberg, *French Realism: The Critical Reaction, 1830—1870*, New York, Modern Language Association of America, London, OUP, 1937, pp. 33—79.

²¹ See *ibid.*, p. 117. For Belinsky's views see especially *op. cit.*, I, pp. 390, 391. In contradistinction to Thackeray, however, Belinsky eventually began to evaluate Balzac more positively and praised his rich art of characterization (see for instance *op. cit.*, I, p. 135; II, p. 352).

Thackeray's criticism some explanation may be found: it is another instance of his having succumbed to the precepts of the moral code of his time and society. We must bear in mind, however, that he was well aware of the restricting influence of this code upon literature and protested against it. In the case of Sue, for instance, he even admitted that the French novelist had one advantage over his English literary brethren in not being so restricted by moral prejudices and being able to express himself more freely, and he wrote in this spirit, at least in the 1830s and 1840s, about the eighteenth-century English novelists. It should also be pointed out that Thackeray's critical opinion of his great French contemporary ceases to seem so very hostile and prejudiced, if we confront it with the current Balzacian criticism in France, which was for many years more adverse than positive, as Weinberg, Maître and Jules Romains have demonstrated, and especially with that in England, evaluated by Clarence R. Decker.²² Thackeray shared the moralistic point of view of the English critics of his time and though he did not identify himself with the very few sympathetic critics of Balzac in his country,²³ he never indulged in such sharp personal attacks upon the French novelist, as for instance the reviewer of the *Quarterly Review*, who abused Balzac as a base, mean, and filthy scoundrel who pollutes society,²⁴ nor did he ever pronounce such adverse judgments as Ruskin in *Time and Tide* or George Eliot who characterized *Père Goriot* as "a hateful book".²⁵

Thackeray's critical opinions of his great French contemporary certainly cannot be regarded as proper literary criticism and I have devoted to them relatively so much space only because they are worth noticing for other reasons. The principal of these is that it is always worth knowing the views of one great novelist upon another, as this knowledge throws additional light upon the criticizing author's own conception of literature and creative method, especially in such a case as this, when he has so many things in common with the criticized novelist. Even a mere reader of Balzac and Thackeray can see that there are numerous points of similarity between the creative methods of the two great novelists. Some of these were noticed and commented upon even during Thackeray's life-

²² See Weinberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-79, Maître, "Balzac, Thackeray et Charles de Bernard", *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1950, p. 281 (quoting, too, Jules Romains), Clarence R. Decker, "Balzac's Literary Reputation in Victorian Society", *PMLA*, vol. XLVII, Dec. 1932, No. 4, pp. 1150-1157. See also Hooker, *op. cit.*, p. 87 and Miriam M. H. Thrall, *Rebellious Fraser's*, Morningside Heights, Columbia UP, New York, 1934, p. 113 upon the fate of Balzac's novels in England in the 1830s.

²³ For the positive criticism of Balzac see Decker, *op. cit.* (he mentions the review "The Philosophy of Fiction", published in the *Westminster Review* in April 1838 and the article "Balzac and His Writings", published in the same magazine in July 1853) and A. Carey Taylor, *op. cit.* (he mentions the same review and two positive comments by Ainsworth and Browning). Hooker includes Thackeray among Balzac's admirers, whom he otherwise enumerates correctly (see *op. cit.*, p. 87).

²⁴ See *Quarterly Review*, April 1836, LVI, p. 69, quoted by Decker, *op. cit.*, pp. 1150, 1157.

²⁵ See *The Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition, George Allen, London; Longmans, Green, and Co., New York, 1905, XVII, pp. 344-345; George Eliot's statement is quoted by Dr F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition*, New ed., Chatto and Windus, London, 1962, p. 29.

time by French and English critics and readers, who started to compare the two novelists when Thackeray began to publish his great novels. It is very interesting that the English novelist was not unaware of the existence of such comparisons. He was for instance familiar with Philarète Chasles's article in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (1849) which I have mentioned above (see page 60) and in which the critic compares the methods of observation used by Balzac and Thackeray.²⁶ Thackeray's reaction to one of such comparisons, made in his presence by one of the two Misses Berry, his friends, was recorded by another friend of his, Miss Perry:

"'Thackeray and Balzac,' she added (Thackeray being present), 'write with great minuteness, but do so with a brilliant pen.' Trackeray made two bows of gratitude (one, pointing to the ground, for Balzac)."²⁷

Ever since that time the parallels between Balzac's and Thackeray's novels, the theories and conjectures as to their being the outcome of a direct or indirect influence of Balzac upon the English novelist, and in this connection Thackeray's knowledge of Balzac's writings and his critical opinions upon them, have been in the foreground of Thackerayan criticism. The scholars who investigated this interesting problem²⁸ have presented many remarkable and valuable conclusions which would deserve notice if they were within the scope of this study. Certain conjectures, however, concerning a supposed direct influence of Balzac upon Thackeray, appear to me to be rather far-fetched.

Thackeray was also familiar with the representatives of the French realistic sketch of his time. He briefly refers to Henri Monnier, the creator of the legendary figure of Joseph Prudhomme, with whose work he obviously became acquainted as a regular reader of *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari*.²⁹ He paid much more attention, however, and also very correctly evaluated the work of the famous satirist Charles Philipon and his collaborator, the designer Honoré Daumier. In his critical article "Caricatures and Lithography in Paris" (1840) he describes in detail the courageous struggle of these artists against the régime of the July Monarchy, highly praises especially their attack upon the King, "the *facile princeps*"

²⁶ Maître quotes, besides Chasles's article, some other instances of such comparisons in Thackeray's lifetime: the article in the *Edinburgh Review*, 1848 and the well-known passage in H. A. Taine's *History of English Literature*, in which the author compares Becky Sharp to Valérie Marneffe.

²⁷ *A Collection of Letters of W. M. Thackeray* (1847-1855), ed. Jane Octavia Brookfield, 2nd ed., Smith, Elder and Co., London, 1887, p. 179; see also *Biogr. ed.*, XIII, p. xx.

²⁸ See the works of the anonymous contributor to the *Dublin University Magazine* (Dec. 1864), Erwin Walter, Paul T. Laflaur, W. C. D. Pacey and J. A. Falconer quoted in Maître, op. cit. See also Moraud, op. cit., pp. 388, 392-394, Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 169, and *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 164 and note and some later comments - Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1952, p. 33; Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1954, p. 9; G. N. Ray, op. cit., p. 228; V. V. Ivasheva, *Tekkeresatirik (Thackeray, the Satirist)*, Izdatelstvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1958, p. 260, and A. Carey Taylor, op. cit.

²⁹ See *Works* II, 171.

"in a country of humbugs and swindlers", which he evaluates as "a blow that shook the whole dynasty", writes with warm sympathy about the prosecutions they were exposed to and about the final "murder" committed upon their political caricature by the September laws, enacted in 1835 by the King. He warmly appreciates the courage with which they continued in their struggle even after this mortal blow, by transferring their activities to the field of "the ridicules and rascalities of common life"³⁰ and concentrating their attention upon the general corruption in public life, which is only the reflection, as Thackeray emphasizes, of the corruption of the Government itself. He then deals with the famous character of the sharper and impostor Robert Macaire, both in its stage form, represented by Frédéric Lemaître, and in the form in which it appears in the splendid caricatures of Philippon, who invented the figure, and Daumier, who gave it its pictorial form.³¹ He pays only small attention to the comedy *L'Auberge des Adrets* (1823, by Benjamin Antier, Saint-Amand and Polyranthe) in which this clever rogue appeared for the first time, characterizes it as melodrama and rates it much lower than for instance Balzac did and contemporary progressive criticism does:

"It is needless to describe the play—a witless performance enough, of which the joke was Macaire's exaggerated style of conversation, a farrago of all sorts of high-flown sentiments, such as the French love to indulge in—contrasted with his actions, which were philosophically unscrupulous; and his appearance, which was most picturesquely sordid" (*Works* II, 179).

He correctly appreciates, however, the decisive authorial share of the actor Lemaître in the character of Macaire and, as his whole criticism suggests, he obviously realizes that by changing the conception of his role Lemaître transposed the text of the sentimental comedy into a satirical farce, in fact into a grandiose parody of the whole régime of the July Monarchy, thus transforming the original, not very significant figure, into a splendid typical character, a convincing embodiment of a modern villain of great size. He evaluates this character, both as it was represented on the stage and depicted by the caricaturists,³² as "the type of roguery in general", a great villain representing "greatness" in the sense which Fielding gave it in his Jonathan Wild, the embodiment of the whole villainy of the time. Macaire is a satirical commentator upon "all the prevailing abuses of the day" who, after his banishment from the field of politics, "found no lack of opportunities for exercising his wit"³³—the whole world lay open before him:

³⁰ For the quotations see *Works* II, 181, 178.

³¹ Daumier's Macaire caricatures, *Les cent et un Robert Macaire*, were based on Philippon's themes and published in 1837–1838 in *Le Charivari*.

³² He evaluates this character much better in his article "Caricatures and Lithography in Paris" than in his later review (if it is really his) "English History and Character on the French Stage", where he only comments — and very briefly — upon its stage representation by Lemaître, evaluating Macaire as the embodiment of modern villainy, as a devil incarnate, being a peculiar combination of Mephistopheles and Grimaldi, and as a character at the same time parodistical and real, the parody being aimed at the villains of Dumas (see *NSB*, p. 172).

³³ For the quotations see *Works* II, 179, 180, 181.

"There was the Bar, with its roguish practitioners, rascally attorneys, stupid juries, and forsworn judges; there was the Bourse, with all its gambling, swindling, and hoaxing, its cheats and its dupes; the Medical Profession, and the quacks, who ruled it alternately; the Stage, and the cant that was prevalent there; the Fashion, and its thousand follies and extravagances. Robert Macaire had all these to *exploiter*. Of all the empire, through all the ranks, professions, the lies, crimes, and absurdities of men, he may make sport at will; of all except of a certain class" (*Works* II, 181 to 182).

Thackeray approves of Macaire's keeping aloof from the prohibited zone, for there would not be any use of his martyrdom—his prosecutor, whom Thackeray compares with Bluebeard, cannot live for ever and "perhaps, even now, those are on their way (one sees a suspicious cloud of dust or two) that are to destroy him". This prophecy is very clear-sighted—not more than eight years elapsed before it was fulfilled, Louis Philippe lost his throne and Macaire could again appear on the stage and in the satirical magazines in his original likeness. In the rest of his article Thackeray evaluates the various roles in which Macaire and his companion Bertrand appear in the caricatures, confronts these fictitious figures with some real speculators and impostors in France and finds many analogies, too, between the abuses satirized in these characters and those in the society of his own country. Upon the whole he highly appreciates the Macaire caricatures as providing the readers with very interesting and instructive information about the life of Parisian society and enabling the future generations to gain intimate knowledge of "the manners of life and being of their grandsires", as well as to laugh at the immensity of their follies and superstitions. As far as the two main characters are concerned, Thackeray places them side by side with the immortal creations of Fielding and emphasizes that they are as real and convincing, or even more so, as historical personages who had once really existed. He managed so entirely to convince himself of the reality of these figures that he has quite forgotten, as he writes, to speak of their creators and therefore devotes the last paragraphs of his article to warm praise of Philipon and Daumier. The whole series of their caricatures is in his opinion a remarkable work of *esprit* and art, possessing extraordinary cleverness and variety, a work all the merits of which "cannot be described on paper, or too highly lauded".³⁴ His evaluation is essentially correct and in some places even penetrating. It bears witness to his progressive political views, and provides us, too, with much interesting information about the French art, humour, manners and morals, as confronted with those existing in England.

Thackeray as a literary critic is often reprehended for having underestimated the work of the great French romanticists and realists and appreciated chiefly second-rate talent, especially Charles de Bernard. The authors of *CHEL* for instance write:

"As a critic of literature, his appreciation was always limited by considerations which have little bearing upon purely literary merit, and it is not surprising to find that the French novelists of manners whom he selected for his approval were by no means of the first class. We are invited to the perusal of long extracts from

³⁴ For the quotations see *Works* II, 182, 194, 193.

Charles de Bernard, 'without risk of lighting upon any such horrors as Balzac or Dumas have provided for us'. It is strange to think that anyone could have preferred these easily written, but somewhat insipid, passages to the 'horrors' of *Le Père Goriot*, *Béatrix*, *Eugénie Grandet*, or *Le Curé de Tours*, from all of which it would have been possible for Thackeray to select."³⁵

This rebuke is certainly justified. Charles de Bernard,³⁶ Balzac's disciple, friend and imitator, was in his time recognized—and even by such critics as Sainte-Beuve and Zola³⁷—as an author of keen observation, capable of analysing social manners and especially the life of the aristocracy, as a writer of graceful and elegant style free from coarseness, of light wit and considerable powers in composition and characterization, but he inclined to observe rather external details than the passions of the human heart, was unable to make generalizations from what he observed and therefore never reached the depth and strength of his master's social analysis. If he had done so, his works would have certainly survived alongside those of Balzac and not fallen into their present oblivion. Some scholars, however, are of the opinion that Bernard has been rather belittled by official French criticism and that he is not so slight a novelist, as he has been thought (Saintsbury, Maître³⁸). Whatever his literary merits might have been, he was certainly not as great as Balzac, and yet Thackeray not only deeply admired his works, but also used them as the source of his inspiration. That he took the theme and plot of his early story *The Bedford-Row Conspiracy* from Bernard's nouvelle *Le Pied d'argile* and openly confessed to this "theft",³⁹ is well-known. Less familiar is perhaps the indebtedness of one of the motifs in his *Ravenswing* (the rivalry between the barber and the tailor) to Bernard's nouvelle *La Chasse aux amants*, which was suggested by Dr. Erwin Walter and demonstrated by Professor Maître.⁴⁰ There is undoubtedly, too, a great similarity between the creative methods of the two novelists, as Saintsbury has demonstrated, characterizing Bernard as "a not so very minor edition of his great English contemporary".⁴¹ This similarity is indeed so conspicuous that it led Maître to the conclusion that certain parallels between the works of Balzac and Thackeray, which cannot be explained by the direct influence of the French novelist (for against it speaks Thackeray's hostility to Balzac), could be explained by indirect influence through the medium of the works of Balzac's disciple.⁴²

³⁵ CHEL XIII, p. 283; see also the opinion of Henri Peyre, quoted by Praz, op. cit., p. 396, note 84, of Enzinger, op. cit., Winter Number 1831, pp. 151–152 and of Clapp, op. cit., pp. 288–289.

³⁶ The pen-name of Pierre Marie Charles Bernard du Grail de la Villette (1805 to 1850).

³⁷ See the views of Sainte-Beuve and Zola quoted by Maître, op. cit., pp. 290–291 and the opinion of Sainte-Beuve quoted by Praz, op. cit., p. 396, note 84.

³⁸ See Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 33, and *A History of the French Novel*, II, pp. 237, 289, 293, 294–296; Maître, op. cit., pp. 290–291.

³⁹ For Thackeray's confession see *Preface to Comic Tales*, *Works I*, xlix–l, *Works VI*, 319–320 (quoted below) and *Letters I*, 433 and note. For the extent of his indebtedness see Saintsbury, *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 294 and note.

⁴⁰ See Maître, "Nouvelles Sources françaises de Thackeray", pp. 56–57.

⁴¹ *A History of the French Novel*, II, p. 293.

⁴² See Maître, "Balzac, Thackeray et Charles de Bernard", pp. 290 ff.

As literary critic Thackeray dealt with Bernard in the summary review "On Some French Fashionable Novels", in which he reviewed one of his novels and summed up the plots of several others. In the introduction he argues with those critics who persist in underestimating the novel and in reprehending it for alleged "frivolity", underlines the instructive value of this *genre*, which is in his opinion the same as (if not higher than) that of regular historical works and emphasizes that from the contemporary French novel the English reader can gain much more knowledge of French society than he could get from his own personal observation as a foreigner. Not all the French novelists, however, are according to Thackeray such safe guides. He recommends only Bernard, whom he places above all his contemporaries as a writer whose works wound the English sense of propriety only occasionally, who paints actual manners "without those monstrous and terrible exaggerations in which late French writers (i.e. Balzac, Soulié, and Dumas, whom he mentions earlier—LP) have indulged". Bernard's characters are "men and women of genteel society—rascals enough, but living in no state of convulsive crimes", and the English reader can therefore follow Bernard "in his lively, malicious account of their manners, without risk of lighting upon any such horrors as Balzac or Dumas have provided for us".⁴³ Thackeray then briefly reviews Bernard's novel *Les Ailes d'Icare* (1840) which drew his attention especially by a delightful depiction of a French dandy, sketched by the author in a sparkling and gentlemanlike way. Bernard endears himself to him, too, by knowing something about life in England and giving his English characters more decent names than Paul de Kock does. From the second novel, *Un Acte de Vertu*, Thackeray highly appreciates Bernard's lifelike picture of the Paris student, both in his ferocious revolutionary youth and in his middle age when he settles down as a Sous-Préfet. He praises Bernard even for something which the novelist did not intend—for his unconscious, but very truthful representation of the immorality and lack of religious faith prevailing in contemporary French society. According to Maître these words of praise addressed to Bernard are quite exceptional among Thackeray's other statements upon French literature pronounced at that time.⁴⁴ Thackeray is not entirely uncritical, however, and has some reservations regarding the moral notions of this favourite of his, as follows especially from his brief summaries of the plots of three novels (*Gerfaut*, *La Femme de Quarante Ans*, and *Un Acte de Vertu*), all of which deal almost exclusively with adultery. But he is inclined to forgive Bernard even this weak point, which is a very grave offence in his eyes (as we know from all his critical works and also from his reflections upon the French and English morals which may be found in this very article), because he writes "like a gentleman: there is ease, grace, and *ton*, in his style, which, if we judge aright, cannot be discovered in Balzac, or Soulié, or Dumas".⁴⁵ As Maître briefly and rather maliciously

⁴³ For the quotations see *Works* II, 98–99.

⁴⁴ See op. cit., p. 291.

⁴⁵ *Works* II, 109.

sums it up, Thackeray almost forgives Bernard for being a Frenchman, because he is a "gentleman".⁴⁶

Thackeray evaluates Bernard in the same spirit also in his review of Reybaud's *Jérôme Paturot*, committing a surprising mistake in the title of Bernard's best-known novel *Gerfaut*, which he elsewhere quotes correctly:

"Besides Paul de Kock, there is another humorous writer of a very different sort, and whose works have of late found a considerable popularity among us—Monsieur de Bernard. He was first discovered by one Michael Angelo Titmarsh, who wrote a critique on one of his works, and pilfered one of his stories. Mrs. Gore followed him by 'editing' Bernard's novel of *Gerfeuil*, which was badly translated, and pronounced by the press to be immoral. It may be so in certain details, but it is not immoral in tendency. It is full of fine observation and gentle feeling; it has a gallant sense of the absurd, and is written—rare quality for a French romance—in a gentlemanlike style" (*Works* VI, 319–320).

As follows from the above, Thackeray really overrates Bernard and is very unjust to Balzac when he places him below his imitator. On the other hand it is necessary to point out that though he fails to see Bernard's demerits, he praises him only for those qualities which he really possessed and which had been appreciated by such great critics as Sainte-Beuve, whose estimation we have mentioned above.

The review *Jérôme Paturot*, to which we have several times referred, is the review of the novel *Jérôme Paturot à la recherche d'une position sociale* (1843) by another second-rate realistic writer, M.R.L. Reybaud, one of the most influential propagators of Utopian socialism, a serious historian and a student of social philosophy. In the introductory part Thackeray discusses in detail the fortunes of the *gaieté française* under the censorship of the July Monarchy and accuses its main representative, Louis Philippe, of being the cause of the total disappearance of humour, laughter and even politeness from public life and literature. This long exposé, from which I have several times quoted on various occasions in the preceding chapters, contains his already familiar attacks upon the immorality of contemporary French literature, its predilection for depicting horrors and its ensuing untruthfulness to life, which will prevent the future generations from gaining reliable knowledge of the depicted society and time. The reviewed novel is in Thackeray's opinion one of the very rare honorary exceptions to this general taste for horrors and deaths in France, being "a good, cheerful, clear, kind-hearted, merry, smart, bitter, sparkling romance". He characterizes it as "a little manual of French quackery" and positively appreciates that the author gives in it "a curious insight into some of the social and political humbugs of the great nation".⁴⁷ His evaluation bears at the same time witness to his changing conception of satire, which is by this time (as I have demonstrated in detail in my previous study⁴⁸) gradually being replaced by humour. The most positive aspect of Bernard's approach to the depicted society seems

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 291. The same opinion is held by Praz, see *op. cit.*, pp. 206–207, 396, note 84.

⁴⁷ For the quotations see *Works* VI, 323, 330.

⁴⁸ See "The Aesthetic Views of Thackeray", pp. 32 ff.

to him to be that it is not motivated by indignation, but by kind-heartedness and good humour:

"The latter is no bad quality in a satirist, and I think one may mistrust the genius whose *indignatio facit versum*, and as a general rule, set him down as no better than his neighbours. Swift was no better than the demoniacal libeller, nor Byron that one knows of; and, be pretty sure on't, that foul-mouthed Juvenal could not have described what he did, had he been the delicate moralist he pretends to be" (*Works* VI, 329-330).

Thackeray finds words of praise, too, for Reybaud's lively and convincing sketches from Parisian life which contain, moreover, a wholesome moral—that it is better to live in poverty than to participate in the life of fashionable society. As the only improbable part of the novel Thackeray regards the temporary salvation of the hero by his rich uncle. In the conclusion of his review he argues with those critics who denoted Reybaud's work as a "political novel" and pronounced it to be a failure. According to Thackeray perhaps it is a political novel and contains a great deal of sound thinking, but first and foremost it is a funny and entertaining story, in which there is not a trace of bad blood and malice. He recommends it to all readers who want to add to their knowledge of the world, as well as to enjoy a hearty laugh, and expresses his hope that the author, whose main business is political economy, Fourierism, "and other severe sciences", will follow the example of his great predecessor, the police-magistrate Fielding, and find some spare time to write other novels of this kind "for the benefit of the lazy, novel-reading, unscientific world".⁴⁹ As Reybaud's novel is not accessible to me, I cannot verify the validity of Thackeray's critical judgments and have only to rely upon the evaluation of Saintsbury, who finds in it the same positive qualities as Thackeray (and even some further positive features) and very few demerits. He also warmly praises Thackeray's review as a very readable, delightful, and unequalled abstract, which must have fulfilled the reviewer's aim of drawing the reader's attention to the novel.⁵⁰

Thackeray's evaluation of the French realistic fiction of his time is perhaps the least satisfactory part of his whole criticism of French literature, though it is certainly not wholly to be condemned, for some of his judgments (especially those he pronounced in evaluating the satirical sketch and caricature) are sound and have remained valid up to the present day. In the first place, and in contradistinction to his criticism of the French romantic prose, its range is too narrow, for it deals only with two second-rate novelists and leaves out all the great ones. This is inexcusable from the present-day point of view, but after all not very surprising, as French realistic fiction was in the initial stages of its growth

⁴⁹ *Works* VI, 341. In 1844 Thackeray briefly commented upon Reybaud's next novel *Jean Mouton*, pointing out that its author is endeavouring "to equal the popularity which he obtained with *Jérôme Paturot*" (*Works* V, 481). Thackeray's wish had not been granted, as Saintsbury points out, until after the February Revolution, when Reybaud published the continuation of *Jérôme* (see *A History of the French Novel*, II, pp. 308-309).

⁵⁰ See *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 100; see also *A History of the French Novel*, II, pp. 306-307.

at the time when it drew Thackeray's critical attention, while Romantic fiction was well established and generally acknowledged as a literary school. In the second place it contains his greatest errors, for neither in his criticism of the French Romantic prose, nor in that of the English Romantic or realistic novelists, did he commit the blunder of not recognizing great talent, as he did in the case of Balzac. This error of his is not defensible from our point of view, but excusable from the point of view of Thackeray's time, as I have shown. In the third place, we should expect deeper and more clear-sighted judgments upon the realistic novel and its theory from a critic who himself wrote in this *genre* and eventually became a great master of it. Such judgments, however, are not to be found even in his criticism of the English realistic novel, where he was not hindered by the barrier of a foreign language from seeing and duly appreciating the talent and all the merits of the writers he evaluated. The root of this weakness is his comparative lack of interest in purely aesthetic values. Although he was constantly and keenly interested in all the more significant basic problems of literature and art and applied them, too, in his evaluation of French realistic fiction (paying due attention to its relationship to reality and overemphasizing, as usual, its moral function), he took almost no notice of the subtler problems of literary form. In my opinion, however, he should not be too severely reprimanded for this limitation of critical approach, for it was quite general in his time, when the realistic novel and its theory were in process of formation both in England and France, these problems not beginning to draw the attention of novelists and critics until later (in England, not till the last decades of the century).

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I have not reserved any special chapter for Thackeray's criticism of non-fictional French literary works, as I have dealt with most of them in the sections devoted to their authors (as in the case of Thackeray's reviews of Hugo and Dumas's travel-books) or elsewhere. One work of this type, however, defying all such classification, has been left upon my hands and should be therefore dealt with separately. The present chapter may well be the most suitable place for it, with its faithful and authentic account of contemporary French society, i.e. the same subject-matter as that of the realistic novelists discussed earlier. It is the collection of feuilletons *Lettres Parisiennes*, written for *La Presse* by the poetess and journalist Delphine Corinne de Girardin under the name of Vicomte de Launay. Thackeray's evaluation of this work forms a part of his longer review "New Accounts of Paris" (*Foreign Quarterly Review*, January 1844), in which he takes notice of two books of a similar kind by non-French authors.⁵¹ To review this work was a very congenial task for Thackeray, because the authoress depicts the milieu which fascinated the English satirist for many years—the world of high fashionable society—and does it unconsciously in a way which confirmed the generalizations he drew

⁵¹ *Paris im Frühjahr*, 1843 by Von L. Rellstab, Leipzig, 1844 and *Paris and its People* by James Grant, London, 1843.

from his own observation of the same fair of vanities in his own country. He welcomes this work as a really true and authentic picture of French fashionable society, presented by a woman of fashion who possesses, besides first-hand knowledge of this sphere of life, "the unconscious wickedness, the delightful want of principle" of the great fashionable men and women, and is therefore perfectly qualified for her task. She depicts her society with genuine French *esprit*, in a very lively and amusing manner, and paints it as a society in which all genuine values have been replaced by futile trifles. Although her purpose is not satirical (she shares in the life of this society and has a perfectly good opinion of it and herself), her depiction contains "an admirable unconscious satire", which is in Thackeray's opinion the satire "of the best and wholesomest sort", i.e. polite, not too ill-natured, and not motivated by indignation. As such her depiction also contains a very wholesome moral for the lower classes who long to take a share in the delights of fashionable life: they will find, after having read her book, that this life is a "heartless, false, and above all, intolerably wearisome existence" and that rather than sigh after it, it is better to be contented with one's own condition. Thackeray also highly appreciates that the authoress, who is sometimes not very sincere, is never snobbish and looks even "at kings and queens without feeling the least oppression or awe".⁵² He reprehends her, however, for the graceful levity with which she approaches vice and passion, this being in his opinion unacceptable to English mothers of families, and finds it hard to believe that the character of the Parisian women is really so odious as she paints it. At the same time, however, he admits that she depicts morals as she finds them and only reproduces the attitude of the whole French *beau monde* to such matters.⁵³ Thackeray's review is extremely readable, contains several extracts from the work in his own translation and a very interesting long digression upon the difference between the social position of the Parisian journalist and that of his colleague in London and upon the snobbishness of the English middle classes.

IV.

THACKERAY'S CRITICISM OF FRENCH COMEDY AND REALISTIC DRAMA

Thackeray did not concentrate his critical attention merely upon the dramatic works of the French romanticists, but followed with great interest the works of almost all the other practitioners of this literary kind, who were patrons of the French stage during his lifetime and whose products differed from the drama of the Romantic school both in creative method and inspiration (they were either comedies of intrigue written in the manner of the 18th century or realistic problem dramas). Even among

⁵² For the quotations see *Works* V, 507, 506, 518.

⁵³ See *Works* V, 508; see also *ibid.*, 523.

these dramatists, however, he did not find any author who would meet with his unqualified approval, although he saw a great number of plays during his visits to Paris and became a very well-informed expert especially in French comedy and vaudeville. This is, however, not very surprising, for at that time the French stage was under the patronage of skilful but definitely second-rate manufacturers of comedies, such as Eugène Scribe, and later began to be supplied with productions by realistic dramatists of the second order, such as Dumas-fils and Émile Augier. As I have shown above, Thackeray was a great lover of the Parisian vaudeville, but he had many critical reservations as to the regular comedy of the day, resenting its lack of art, its superficiality, schematic depiction of human nature and its immorality. He expressed his standpoint very clearly in his article "French Dramas and Melodramas":

"Then there is the comedy of the day, of which Monsieur Scribe is the father. Good heavens! with what a number of gay colonels, smart widows, and silly husbands has that gentleman peopled the playbooks. How that unfortunate seventh commandment has been maltreated by him and his disciples. You will see four pieces, at the Gymnase, of a night; and so sure as you see them, four husbands shall be wickedly used. When is this joke to cease? Mon Dieu! Play writers have handled it for about two thousand years, and the public, like a great baby, must have the tale repeated to it over and over again" (*Works* II, 291).

It is therefore not surprising that he selected the main representative of this *genre* for a more detailed critical analysis in his review "English History and Character on the French Stage" (we present the following with the usual stipulation concerning the uncertain authorship of this contribution). He selects for his evaluation three comedies by Scribe, *Le Verre d'eau, ou les effets et les causes* (1840), *Le Fils de Cromwell, ou une restauration* (1842) and *Une Chaîne* (1843)—all of them new ventures of the author, originally a vaudevilliste, in the field of regular comedy, the first two on a historical theme. Thackeray begins his review by expressing his deep regret at this unexpected transformation of Scribe into "a Professor of English History" and, moreover, a discoverer of a new historical doctrine—"that the historical trophies of England are in general but the result of some mean accident, which entirely strips them of their ideal glory".¹ Thackeray sharply criticizes this basic doctrine of Scribe's pseudo-historical plays, as well as its elaboration in the two comedies *Le Verre d'eau* and *Le Fils de Cromwell*, in which the author depicts great historical events in England as consequences of quite trivial accidents and circumstances. In his opinion, which is quite correct, the actual role of insignificant incidents in history and their relationship to the destinies of the whole nations essentially differs from that ascribed to them by the dramatist:

"But M. Scribe is as wrong in his general principle, as he is mistaken in the bearing of the present particular fact, assuming it to be true.² Trivial circumstances

¹ NSB, p. 139.

² The comedy *Le Verre d'eau* is founded upon an anecdote, recorded by Voltaire, about the Duchess of Marlborough, who accidentally poured a glass of water upon the dress of Queen Anne, thus bringing about, according to Scribe, a change in the course of English history — the fall of the Premier, the overthrow of the Whigs and the peace with France.

are in this life pretexts, not causes, for breaches of long-established connexions. They are the ready available facts which discover the depth of an existing difference; they are seized to decide an already established rupture. Such an occurrence as the falling of a glass of water could, if an accident, have been apologized for and explained, unless indeed, as a pretext, it had been wanted and watched for" (NSB, 140).

An even more serious offence committed by Scribe is in Thackeray's eyes the choice of momentous historical events for the theme of a comedy. In the first place, such a theme oversteps the boundary of the given *genre* and encroaches upon the sphere of history and philosophy. The result of such a choice is then naturally such a mongrel as Scribe's *Le Verre d'eau*, which Thackeray characterizes as a "politico-philosophical comedy", at the same time lamenting over the dramatist's desertion from the realm of vaudeville:

"Oh! Scribe, why didst thou abandon so happy a realm, where thou wert supreme, to take to history and politics, and the legitimate five-act comedy forsooth, where thou art last among the great?" (NSB, 157).

In the second place, the events of similar kind overstep the boundary of the sphere of the comic and cannot be treated lightly:

"Accidents arising even from the infirmities of human temper, when they affect human destinies, are no longer subjects for laughter; and the levity with which historical circumstances of great political import are treated in these comedies, is assuredly no very gratifying evidence of the spirit of the time. It is the antagonist of reverence: not only of reverence for things sacred, but of reverence for historical and traditional associations—for great names and great characters. We quarrel with it as an unwise and unmannerly invasion of the comic drama" (NSB, 141).

As his critical standards Thackeray uses mainly Shakespeare, and his conception of the trivial causes in history, and Molière, whom he selects because Scribe obviously aspires to take over the ground occupied up to that time by his predecessor's pleasant spirit, thus subjecting himself to higher obligations than merely to amuse the spectator, as he did in his vaudevilles. Thackeray compares Scribe to Molière in a longer passage which we have quoted above (see pages 49–50) and in which he ascribes the weaknesses of Scribe's creative approach to a great extent to his time. In contradistinction to his great predecessor

"Scribe lives in a time of commonplace actions and commonplace men. It has been justly said that it takes a good people to nourish a good and great man, and Scribe is the poet laureate of the Financiers of the Chaussé d'Antin" (NSB, 151).

That is also one of the reasons for the great success of his comedy, the philosophy of which "was up to the low current mark" and the morality of which "was appreciable by those whose best maxim is 'take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves'". Another reason for the dramatist's success is according to Thackeray his depreciation of virtue and character in the "man of money", satirical attacks upon Englishmen and "claptraps about the glory of France".³ As the main demerits of the comedy Thackeray points out the author's ready method of inventing

³ For the quotations see NSB, p. 151.

expedients, enabling him to place his characters into artificial relationships which have never existed (as for instance the relationship between Queen Anne and the Viscount Bolingbroke). The reviewer's anger is especially aroused by the entirely false representation of the real facts of history in the play, which he generally assesses as "a lie against history, as it is a lie against morals";⁴ a play vulgar in conception and containing some ridiculously travestied characters and unnatural incidents.

Similar weak points—especially falsification of history—are discovered by Thackeray even in the second comedy, *Le Fils de Cromwell*, which he characterizes as history turned "into a sad farce":

"His licences bring art itself into contempt. If any subject might thus be trifled with, fictitious writing would cease to be regarded as a medium of truth of any kind. Fiction should assume the cap and bells, and Imagination go out as a pantomime clown" (*NSB*, 152).

Another critical weapon of the reviewer is turned against the titular hero, who is a sort of Timon and with whom—considering the free speech allowed on the French stage—much could have been done. But Scribe in his opinion is not a writer who could provide "an analysis of inward action".⁵ Thackeray admits, however, that such an analysis would look out of place in comedy, certainly in comedy as understood by this dramatist.

Thackeray's evaluation of Scribe's "historical" comedies is certainly just—they were in fact pseudo-historical plays, or anecdotal comedies, in which historical facts were treated quite arbitrarily and were violated to suit Scribe's *apriori* theses.

The last comedy of Scribe, which Thackeray evaluates in this article, *Une Chaîne*, serves him as a guide in his introductory exposé concerning the inroad of the French drama upon the domain of general morals, which he regards as much more serious than that upon the narrowed region of English history and character. Evaluating this comedy exclusively from the moralistic point of view, he sees in it evidence that the immorality of modern French novels has begun to affect even the classic atmosphere of the *Théâtre Français*. Thackeray devotes much space to the discussion of the problem of whether and to what extent modern French drama reflects the morals of its age. He is willing to accept the opinions of M. Saint Marc Girardin and Scribe that the manners of French society are more decorous than its literature, but emphasizes that even if the fiction of the day does not depict these manners faithfully, at least the stage should adhere to Shakespeare's adage and give more truly "the body of the time".⁶ In Thackeray's eyes it unfortunately does not do so and he tries to find the explanation. As he sees it, the stage does not reflect the manners of its time so immediately as Villemain thinks—it obeys its routine habits and traditions and only slowly adapts itself to sudden changes in society, which must assume something of a permanent form before they begin to affect the drama. This is the reason why the improved manners of French society have not yet found reflection in

⁴ For the quotations see *NSB*, p. 150; see also *ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵ *NSB*, p. 152.

⁶ *NSB*, p. 170.

modern French plays. These are immoral, but it is in Thackeray's opinion immorality of the kind naturally engendered by a revolution and the following years of military success. As he sees it, a generation whose mind was nurtured upon tales of horror at home and of battles abroad would naturally seek for highly impassioned entertainments, could have little taste for gentle depictions of domestic virtue, and could hardly have a refined taste. This generation could have been pleased for a time by such writers as Dumas or Soulié, who would further debauch their taste, but then they would seek for "stronger and coarser food", such as for instance great villains of the type of Robert Macaire and Balzac's Vautrin, who were convincing embodiments of the depths of modern villainy and thus more acceptable to the modern audience than old Tartuffe was. In his evaluation of this current public taste in France (which is remarkable for its length and subtlety and does not in all places sound like Thackeray) the reviewer takes into consideration, too, the phase in which the French public finds itself at the moment—that "of weariness succeeding excitement in all its moods" and of indifference to all moral values. The comedy *Une Chaîne* is for him a startling proof that in this state of indifference the distinctions between moral right and wrong have already so far disappeared, "as to confound the sharp observation of even such a man as M. Scribe".⁷ The comedy depicts a liaison between the hero and a married woman, which is not marked by any slightest guilt or shame, but, on the contrary, invested with considerable charm. And thus, even though the play is not indecent in the broad sense of the word, it contains "much of that thorough indelicacy which is the sure attendant upon a dull moral sense".⁸ Thackeray then poses the question of whether the presence of these traits in a play by one of the most popular living dramatists, performed upon the boards of the most classic theatre, demonstrates the existence of vice in contemporary society or whether it is only the evidence of a careless people seeking amusement without reflecting upon the means, provided only they are novel. He arrives at the conclusion, consistent with his reflections quoted above, that perhaps the second alternative suggests the true solution. In either case, however, Scribe is in his opinion as bad a teacher of morals, as he is a bad illustrator of history. The reviewer then argues with the possible objection that the dramatist does not aspire to either. If that is the case, Thackeray exhorts him to remove his enervating pictures "of an ill-drawn and worse imagined state of society" from beside the comedy of Molière, whose mirth is not over-nice, but does not offend the delicacy of the spectator, and asks Scribe to return to his vaudevilles and present some new combinations of his stereotype personages:

"In his hands these are 'marionettes' to be shifted about at his pleasure: without character, colour, or physiognomy, it is true, but exciting curiosity by varying changes of position, and still appearing to talk from themselves, though it be but the author's voice which is heard in the one unchanged tone, cutting his jokes upon the passing occurrences of the day. In this light walk of the drama, M. Scribe could not do much harm" (*NSB*, 178).

⁷ *NSB*, p. 173.

⁸ *NSB*, p. 177.

Thackeray's evaluation of Scribe is certainly not unjust. He clearly saw the main demerits of this undoubtedly second-rate dramatist, but he was also able to appreciate some of his strong points, especially his talent for observation, his skilful management of plot and his witty colloquial language. His fair attitude to the dramatist is most clearly apparent in his praise of Scribe's play *Bertrand and Raton*, which he juxtaposes to *Le Verre d'eau* as a good comedy with excellent purpose, well-sustained action, and very happy language.⁹

In the summary review we are dealing with, Thackeray also briefly notices two comedies by Scribe's imitators Léon Gozlan and Madame Ancelot. The first of them is Gozlan's comedy *La Main Droite et la Main Gauche* (1843), which is the altered version of the original play *Il était une fois un Roi et une Reine*, prohibited for containing an allusion to the English Queen and Prince Consort. Thackeray condemns this play very sharply as the most tiresome production he has ever seen, which is, moreover, not original, as one of the scenic effects was stolen from *Whittington and his Cat*. The author is in the reviewer's opinion an ass in a lion's skin, utterly devoid of inventive power and extremely feeble in language.¹⁰ Garnett regards Thackeray's judgment as too severe and is convinced that it was pronounced under the influence of the idea that the play contained allusions to Victoria and Albert.¹¹ This reason does not seem to me to be very convincing, as Thackeray wrote the review (if indeed it is his work) at the time when he had a very critical attitude to the English royal family which he had revealed in his correspondence a few years before he wrote this article and proved many times in the very decade in which it was published, especially in his contributions to *Punch*.

The last play Thackeray notices in his review is Madame Virginie Ancelot's comedy *The Two Empresses; or, A Little War*, which was inspired by Scribe's doctrine of little causes and great effects. In his opinion, which tends to be more positive than the occasion warrants, the authoress succeeded better in elaborating this doctrine than her literary teacher, so much so indeed that she seems to give her master a lesson in his own art, by filling up the hard outlines of his depictions with warm feeling. Thackeray especially praises her kindly spirit, genuine mirth and lively portraiture, and adds in conclusion:

"If we are to have nonsense about history, let us have it at least in an agreeable shape. Let it come from a clever woman like Madame Ancelot, and we shall be spared its nauseous dogmas and abominable attempts at philosophy" (*NSB*, 168-169).

Garnett finds it strange that Thackeray, after having condemned Scribe, Dumas, Soulié, and Gozlan, is subjugated by the charm of an authoress who is hardly known to the present generation, and finds a possible explanation in Thackeray's unduly developed patriotism:

"But if there was little to admire in 'The Two Empresses', there was nothing to which an Englishman could object" (*NSB*, 304).

⁹ See *NSB*, p. 149.

¹⁰ See *NSB*, pp. 164-165.

¹¹ See *NSB*, p. 304.

We should add, perhaps, that Thackeray saw and positively evaluated at least one of the other plays of this authoress and that he became personally acquainted with her in 1851.¹²

Thackeray paid critical attention to contemporary French comedy for the last time in 1849, in his article "Two or Three Theatres at Paris" (*Punch*, February 24), in which he assumes an even more strictly moralistic point of view than in the review discussed above. He praises *Punch* for its modest and harmless humour, appreciates the high sense of the public morality in England, sharply condemns the "general smash and bankruptcy" of morality and religious faith in France and pillories the French comedy for the cynicism with which it ridicules all beliefs and moral values:

"Sir, these funny pieces at the plays frightened me more than the most blood-thirsty melodrama ever did, and inspired your humble servant with a melancholy which is not to be elicited from the most profound tragedies. There is something awful, infernal almost, I was going to say, in the gaiety with which the personages of these satiric dramas were dancing and shrieking about among the tumbled ruins of ever so many ages and traditions. I hope we shall never have the air of 'God Save the King' set to ribald words amongst us—the mysteries of our religion, or any man's religion, made the subject of laughter, or of a worse sort of excitement" (*Works* VIII, 473).

As a proof of this he mentions the play *La Foire aux idées* and especially *La Propriété, c'est le vol*,¹³ in which the main protagonists, Adam and Eve, dance a polka and sing a song quite appropriate to their costumes—and the audience laugh and enjoy themselves, never thinking "about being ashamed of themselves"! He emphasizes that if he hears one day about Paris meeting the same fate as "certain other cities", he will not be surprised. This conspicuous strengthening of his moralistic indignation and his religious feelings is in perfect harmony with the whole development of his philosophy of life after 1848. In this article Thackeray also briefly notices the stage adaptation of Paul Féval's popular novel *Les Mystères de Londres* (1844) and criticizes it for its entirely false depiction of English life, as well as for its absurd plot based upon improbable and too exciting incidents.¹⁴

When Thackeray stopped working as a professional literary critic (in 1847), he did not lose interest in the further development of the French drama in the period when Romantic drama had outlived itself, but commented upon it only as a spectator. Once again he found little that he could genuinely admire. He saw the play which inaugurated the new "theatre of common sense" in France and which was written in conscious reaction against the drama of the Romantic school, the tragedy *Lucrèce* (1843) by François Ponsard, but only recorded his visit to the performance,

¹² He saw in 1838 her *Isabelle ou deux jours d'expérience* which he found "chock full of sentiment, but tolerably entertaining" (*Letters* I, 358). For his acquaintance with Madame Ancelot see *Letters* II, 747 and note.

¹³ *La Foire aux idées* (1849) is by Adolphe de Leuven, Le comte de Ribbing (with Lhérie), *La Propriété, c'est le vol!* (1848) by Louis-François Nicolaie, called Clairville.

¹⁴ See *Works* VIII, 474–476; see also *Letters* II, 496–498.

without evaluating the play in any way, except calling it "famous".¹⁵ The plays of the leader of this dramatic school, Alexandre Dumas-fils, did not evoke in him any particular enthusiasm, though his first reaction was positive. He liked Dumas's comedy *Le Demi-monde*, which he saw in the year in which it was written (1855), and which even reminded him of his own characters of depraved women and adventuresses:

"It put me in mind of myself rather—it's a comedy of Beckys and Madame Cruchecassés and the like" (*Letters* III, 460–461).

In 1856, however, he went to see the dramatic version of Dumas's successful novel *La Dame aux camélias*, and did not stay longer than the third act, because the play seemed to him to be "too wicked".¹⁶ His indignation was obviously not aroused so much by the heroine being a *femme galante* (as his later remark suggests he much more strongly resented the marriage market in his society than the existence of Traviatas¹⁷), as by the typically romantic theme of the play, always unacceptable to him—that of the regeneration of a depraved human being through love.

Of all the realistic dramatists of the second half of the century Thackeray found most acceptable Émile Augier, who delighted him with his comedy in verse, *Gabrielle* (1849). He found it charming and highly appreciated its moral as finer and more proper than that of the majority of French plays he saw at that period.¹⁸ In his short comment he evaluates this comedy exclusively from the point of view of its morals, but it might have appealed to him, too, in being a realistic play close to the everyday reality of Parisian middle-class life, and attacking with much power and wit those vices of these classes which were the target of Thackeray's own critical assaults—avarice, vanity and snobbery.

Thackeray's evaluation of the French drama of the second half of the century is not unfair, although it is, like all his literary judgments, too strongly influenced by his notions of morality and religion and bears traces of his national prejudices. The Common-sense School could not boast of any great dramatists, though its representatives possessed many skills and merits, and did not produce any really great dramas which would grapple with great ideas and endeavour to struggle for higher values of the human soul.

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The detailed investigation of Thackeray's criticism of French literature has enabled me to come to the final conclusion that it is not wholly condemnable and contains many merits, even though it possesses several weak points. In the first place, it betrays Thackeray's lack of understanding for the national characteristic traits of French literature, for the

¹⁵ See *Letters* II, 124.

¹⁶ *Letters* III, 618.

¹⁷ See *Works* XVI, 110–111. This reference shows that he saw Verdi's opera version of the play, as the name of the heroine of both Dumas's novel and its dramatic version was Marguerite Gautier.

¹⁸ See *Letters* II, 656.

French character and morality. I find myself in agreement with Dodds, Garnett, Enzinger, Clapp and Carey Taylor who see in his national prejudice the main weakness of his criticism, but I think some of these scholars go too far when they call him a chauvinist, for this term is surely inappropriate for the author of *The Book of Snobs*. Saintsbury is in my opinion too much inclined to reject the indictment of Thackeray for "John Bullishness" as absurd, but he rightly emphasizes that Thackeray's judgments upon French literature are passed "under codes and before courts where no nation can plead lack of jurisdiction" and that his Anglicism was not too rigid, for "he sees English faults as clearly as French".¹⁹ It should be added, however, that Thackeray proved to be—and quite naturally so—a keener and more sensitive critic in the evaluation of the literature of his own country than of that of France, and that he might have been a better critic of German literature than of French, had he paid more attention to it, as Saintsbury suggests.²⁰

In the second place, Thackeray's criticism is characterized by a strong moralistic colouring. He overemphasizes the moral aspect and effect of literature and in consequence of this the organic unity of the moral judgment and the aesthetic is in many cases impaired and in some seriously injured. In my opinion, however, which I have tried to prove in the course of my investigation and which considerably differs especially from that of Clapp and Saintsbury, the aesthetic judgment, though often relegated to the background by other considerations, is in fact never wanting. Thackeray did not attempt to force the evaluated works into any ready-made aesthetic canon, for he had not elaborated any; he applied only a small number of criteria, for he was little interested in subtle literary problems and did not formulate all the principles of realistic aesthetics; but all the judgments he pronounced upon French literature are founded upon clear and firm aesthetic principles to which he consistently adhered until the middle of the 1850s and from which he did not entirely recede even in the later period, although he modified some of them, as I have demonstrated in my previous study.²¹

In the third place, he failed to do full justice to two great writers of the period (Hugo and Sand), wrongly evaluated and classified Balzac and overestimated the second-rate writer Bernard. For these errors, however, there are some excuses, as I have pointed out, and they should not lead us to the precipitate conclusion that he appreciated only second-rate talent and was not able to do justice to any great one. As we have seen, he evaluated many French writers of the second order very correctly and justly and was able to appreciate the talent and genius of all the great ones except Balzac.

In spite of all these main limitations and some slighter faults demonstrated in the course of my investigation, however, Thackeray's criticism of French literature has many merits. In the first place, its range is comparatively wide, and if we add to his formal critical contributions

¹⁹ See *A Consideration of Thackeray*, pp. 21–22, 42–43.

²⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 91.

²¹ See "The Aesthetic Views of Thackeray", *passim*.

the informal opinions he expressed on books read and plays seen it becomes surprisingly extensive, covering almost all the literary streams and schools that appeared in France in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the second place, it has very solid foundations in the critic's knowledge of older French literature, and in his familiarity with the language, the country, and the general social and cultural background. In the third place, most of his critical judgments are sound and have been confirmed by posterity. I find myself in agreement again with Saintsbury that the absurdities Thackeray detected in French literature "*were* absurdities, *are* so, and will be so whenever they recur 'a hundred years hence', or a thousand".²² His criticism betrays his common sense, his honesty and sincerity, his devotion to the cause of truth in literature and life and his hatred of hypocrisy, affectation and cant, which he attacks with all the vigour of his satire whenever he comes across them in any literary work he evaluates. Although he was not able to distinguish all the positive and fruitful tendencies and phenomena in contemporary French literature, he was able to discern most of the negative and unfruitful ones and was in this aspect of his criticism very near to some of the great critics of his time, especially the Russian revolutionary democrats, with whom he shared, of course unconsciously, even some critical errors. His criticism of French literature is never personal or malicious and in this it markedly differs from the hysterical attacks of some of the English critics of his time. And last but not least, Thackeray's reviews of French literary works are written in his characteristic fine style which develops to maturity with the progress of time and which makes his critical contributions permanently readable, even if they deal with many writers who have fallen into deserved oblivion.

²² *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 22.

THACKERAY JAKO ČTENÁŘ A KRITIK FRANCOUZSKÉ LITERATURY

V úvodu studie autorka shrnuje výsledky dosavadního bádání o daném problému a vyslovuje výhrady k závěrům těch vědců, kteří Thackerayovu kritiku francouzské literatury hodnotí příliš negativně. Jejím záměrem je ukázat, že paušální odmítání Thackerayových kritických soudů v této oblasti není zcela spravedlivé, upozornit na ty kladné aspekty jeho kritiky, které nebyly dosud patřičně zhodnoceny a podtrhnout jeho rozsáhlou znalost starší francouzské literatury, jíž se doposud žádný badatel podrobněji nezabýval.

V první kapitole autorka rozebírá kvalifikaci Thackerayho ke kritice francouzské literatury, zejména jeho dobrou znalost společenského a politického života Francie a francouzského jazyka, která byla výtečnou výzbrojí pro kritika literatury této země, i když mu nenapomohla, aby se zbavil některých předsudků vůči Francouzům, jež nepříznivě ovlivnily i jeho literární kritiku. Autorka dále rozebírá Thackerayovu četbu starší francouzské literatury a podrobněji se zabývá jeho kritickými názory na její významnější jevy. Dospívá k závěru, že Thackerayova znalost v této oblasti je překvapivě rozsáhlá a ne zcela obvyklá u anglického kritika jeho doby.

V druhé kapitole se autorka zabývá vztahem Thackerayho k francouzskému romantismu. V první části kapitoly rozebírá jeho obeznámenost s celkovou atmosférou období zrodu tohoto literárního proudu ve Francii a ukazuje, že v podstatě pokrokový charakter jeho kritických názorů na rané fáze francouzského romantismu se projevuje především v jeho schopnosti rozpoznat některé pozitivní hodnoty a většinu negativních jevů v tomto literárním proudu. Jako současný pozorovatel, jemuž chyběla patřičná časová perspektiva a také některé kvalifikace nezbytné nutné ve výzbroji velkého kritika cizí literatury (hlubší porozumění pro francouzský národní charakter, velkodušnost v morálních otázkách a tolerantnost vůči jiné tvůrčí metodě, než byla jeho vlastní), Thackeray však nebyl schopen rozpoznat všechny tyto hodnoty a jevy. Jeho nechuť k romantickým výstřelkům ho zavedla příliš daleko — až k celkovému odsouzení celého romantického hnutí ve Francii, včetně představitelů jeho liberálního křídla (Hugo a Sandová). V druhé části kapitoly autorka rozebírá Thackerayovy kritické názory na romantickou prózu a hlavní kritická měřítká, která Thackeray ve svém hodnocení uplatňuje. Dochází k závěru, že ve svém hodnocení výstřední prózy a lidového románu se Thackeray projevil jako bystrý kritik a že téměř všechny jeho kritické soudy byly potvrzeny budoucností. Jeho hodnocení tvorby Victora Huga a George Sandové není podle autorčina názoru vědomě nespravedlivé a není tak nepřátelské jako postoj většiny anglických kritiků Thackerayovy doby. Autorka rozebírá kritická měřítká, která Thackeray aplikuje na tvorbu Huga a Sandové, a dospívá k závěru, že jeho hodnocení sice nebylo v tomto případě potvrzeno budoucností, že však obsahuje některé kritické soudy, které mohou být přijaty i největšími obdivovateli těchto dvou velkých autorů. Další část kapitoly je věnována Thackerayově hodnocení francouzského romantického dramatu. Autorka ukazuje, že jeho první kritické soudy nebyly zcela negativní; počínajíc r. 1838 však Thackeray toto drama ostře a jednoznačně odsuzuje jako zavrženíhodné především z morálního hlediska. Autorka dospívá k závěru, že jeho hodnocení francouzského romantického dramatu není skutečnou dramatickou kritikou, protože se vůbec nezabývá specifickými problémy dramatu jako literárního druhu. Thackerayův přístup k hodnoceným

dramatům je v podstatě identický s přístupem, jehož používá v hodnocení prózy. Jeho kritika francouzského romantického dramatu se však přes všechny své nedostatky příznivě odlišuje od hodnocení většiny anglických kritiků. I když jsou jeho soudy zabarveny jeho nacionálními předsudky a silně ovlivněny úzkoprsé moralistickým hlediskem jeho společnosti, jsou postaveny na principech realistické estetiky a nejsou zcela nespravedlivé — téměř žádná z her, které kriticky posuzoval, nenašla přízeň u obecnstva a nestala se trvalou součástí repertoáru žádného divadla.

Třetí kapitola je věnována Thackerayově kritice francouzské realistické prózy. Autorka dochází k závěru, že kritikovo hodnocení v této oblasti je nejméně uspokojivou částí z celé jeho kritiky francouzské literatury. Obsahuje sice některé dodnes platné kritické soudy (zejména o realistické črtě), avšak také Thackerayovy největší omyly (nespravedlivé hodnocení Balzaca a přecenění druhořadého romanopisce Bernarda). Tyto a jiné slabé stránky jeho kritiky (zejména nedostatek zájmu o jemnější problémy románu jako literárního žánru) jsou neomluvitelné z dnešního hlediska, jsou však pochopitelné z hlediska jeho doby, kdy francouzská realistická próza byla v začátečních stadiích svého vývoje a kdy realistický román vůbec a jeho teorie byly v procesu utváření ve Francii i v Anglii.

Ve čtvrté kapitole se autorka věnuje rozboru Thackerayovy kritiky francouzské komedie a realistického dramatu. Dospívá k závěru, že jeho hodnocení dramatické tvorby Scribeovy, Gozlanovy, Madame Ancelotové, Alexandra Dumase mladšího a Augiera není nespravedlivé, i když je příliš silně ovlivněno jeho moralistickými a nacionálními předsudky.

V závěrečném hodnocení autorka shrnuje hlavní slabiny Thackerayovy kritiky francouzské literatury, zdůrazňuje však, že jeho kritika má i mnohé kladné aspekty. Její rozsah je poměrně široký a jestliže k jeho formální kritice přidáme neformální názory na přečtené knihy a zhlédnutá představení, stává se tento rozsah překvapivě extenzivní — pokrývá téměř všechny literární proudy a školy, které se objevily ve Francii v první polovině 19. století. Jeho kritika současné francouzské literatury má velmi solidní základy v jeho znalosti starší francouzské literatury a v jeho obeznámenosti s jazykem, zemí a celkovým společenským a kulturním prostředím, v němž posuzovaná díla vznikla. Většina jeho kritických soudů je zdravá a byla potvrzena budoucností. Celkově jeho kritika svědčí o jeho čestnosti a upřímnosti, oddanosti pravdě v literatuře a životě a nenávisti k pokrytectví, afektovanosti a falši, které napadá vši silou své satiry, kdykoli se s nimi setká v posuzovaném literárním díle. Ačkoli Thackeray nebyl schopen rozpoznat všechny kladné a plodné tendence a jevy v současné francouzské literatuře, byl schopen správně hodnotit většinu záporných a neplodných a byl v tomto aspektu své kritiky velmi blízký některým velkým kritikům dané doby, zvláště Bělinskému, s nímž sdílel, ovšem nevědomky, i některé kritické omyly. Poslední, ale nikoli nejmenší předností jeho recenzí francouzských literárních děl je jeho charakteristický styl, který se vyvíjí k zralosti s průběhem doby a který je příčinou toho, že jeho kritické příspěvky jsou dodnes čtivé, i když se zabývají mnohými autory, kteří upadli do zaslouženého zapomenutí.

