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Thackeray as a Reader and Critic of Poetry

Although Thackeray was undoubtedly better qualified for criticism of fiction than for that of poetry, his qualifications for critically assessing the latter literary kind were not negligible. As the list of his reading shows, his great asset was his extensive knowledge of the works of a very great number of poets of all ages and several countries. Though very important, however, this endowment was not the only one he possessed. Besides reading poetry he also produced it: since his schooldays he had always amused himself by composing verses in his private capacity, and during his literary career he produced and published about one hundred poems, one fifth of which were on political subjects and written for *Punch*, the rest being poems of various kinds, ballads, love-songs, occasional verses, imitations and paraphrases of classical or French and German poets, parodistical and satirical poems, and so forth. The merits and demerits of his poetry have been evaluated by several Thackerayan scholars (especially Melville, Saintsbury, the authors of *CHEL* and Ray), whose conclusions may pass unchallenged. They have pointed out that he did possess a certain command of the verse form (though his rhymes "are often appalling" and his metre "not always perfect", as Melville has shown¹) and a not very great, but genuine poetical talent, and that some of his poems are possessed of distinction, the best of these bearing the hall-mark of his individuality.² As we know from his own statements, Thackeray was a severe critic of his own poems (often entirely revising them after publication, as Melville has pointed out³). He generally produced them after much harder labour than he devoted to his fiction,⁴ and he was also perfectly aware of his limitations in this sphere and correctly estimated his own powers. He himself confessed that he had "a sixpenny talent", but he correctly realized that the "small beer" he was producing was "the right tap", and was justifiably proud of the touch of originality in his poetry, pointing out that his might not be the best music but that it was his own.⁵

Even if Thackeray's poetry cannot boast of any very high achievements, his creativity in this sphere of art served him in good stead when he criticized other poets, for it helped him to some insight into the process by which the poet's experience and emotions are embodied in a poetic form. He had not many opportunities, however, to test in his critical chair the abilities thus gained. When he started to work as a professional critic, at the beginning of the 1830s, English poetry was in the same stage of transition as was fiction and very little poetry of importance was being produced. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, during his professional critical career Thackeray regarded

¹ Op. cit., I, 305.

² See Melville, *ibid.*; Saintsbury, *A Consideration of Thackeray*, pp. 108, 114; Ray, *The Age of Wisdom*, pp. 103-107; *CHEL* XIII, 294.

³ See op. cit., I, 298.

⁴ See especially *The Biographical Edition of the Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, XIII, xxiii.

⁵ For the quotations see Locker-Lampson, *My Confidences*, p. 300, quoted by Melville, op. cit., I, 301; see also *ibid.*, I, 305.

it as his main duty to inform his public about works produced in his and their time and he had therefore no alternative but to take what was offered in this sphere. His criticism of poetry forms therefore only a small part of his critical legacy, consisting only of five reviews of individual poems or collected poetical works,⁶ three reviews of illustrated annuals (in which, as we have seen, he concerns himself more with the pictorial than the literary part, but in which he pays some attention to the poetry published in these fashionable volumes), one review of street ballads ("Horae Catnachianae"), and one lecture (on Pope, Prior and Gay) in his *English Humourists* (in his lectures on Swift, Goldsmith, Addison and Congreve he pays brief attention, too, to these writers' poetry). What he assessed as a critic was mostly second-rate production which offered him sufficient scope for his critical ability of discerning the grain from the chaff, but very little scope for verifying his conception of the sublime in poetry which came up to its standard and for proving his susceptibility to poetic beauty. The degree of this susceptibility is therefore, as Enzinger has rightly pointed out, "difficult to ascertain" because of the paucity of evidence.⁷ What can help us to bridge this gap in factual evidence, however, are his critical comments upon the poets with whose works he became acquainted only as a critical reader. With the help of these we can deduce from his normal criticism the main criteria he used in assessing poetry much more easily and even attempt to find out what sort of poetic beauty appealed to him most.

The criteria Thackeray applies to poetry both as critical reader and critic are fully consistent with his aesthetic creed as analysed in the second chapter. The supreme criterion is his postulate that poetry should be "like nature", that poets should find inspiration directly either in exterior nature or in the world of men. He formulated this demand very clearly in 1838, in his review of Southey's *Poetical Works*, where he dissociated himself from the poet's statement in the preface that the greatest of all his advantages was that he had passed more than half his life in retirement, "conversing with books rather than man, constantly and unweariedly engaged in literary pursuits, communing with [his] own heart, and taking that course which upon mature consideration seemed best to [himself]".⁸ Thackeray points out that life in continued solitude and self-contemplation is rather a great drawback than advantage for the poet, for it cannot "conduce to the healthy development of the poetical character", but may lead the poet to egotism and vanity, make him "examine himself a vast deal too much" and forsake other no less fascinating studies, as he ironically remarks, "fully as noble, and quite as requisite to complete his education as a poet":

⁶ "Woman: the Angel of Life. A Poem. By Robert Montgomery", *The National Standard*, June 15, 1833 (reprinted in *Works*); "The Poetical Works of Dr. Southey", *The Times*, April 17, 1838 (reprinted in *Works*); "George Herwegh's Poems", *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, April 1843 (reprinted in *Works*); "The New Timon" (by Edward Bulwer-Lytton), *The Morning Chronicle*, April 21, 1846 (reprinted in *Contributions*); "The Poetical Works of Horace Smith", *The Morning Chronicle*, September 21, 1846 (reprinted in *Contributions*). Gulliver (see op. cit., p. 43) has attributed to Thackeray, too, the review of Alfred Bunn's *Poems* (*The National Standard*, June 22, 1833), but since the first corroborative evidence for Thackeray's authorship is that presented by Hawes in the already mentioned article published this year (see note 1 to Chapter IV, part V), I could not take this review into account.

⁷ Op. cit., vol. 21, No. 1, p. 59.

⁸ *Works* I, 106.

"Surely the period of solitude and contemplation should not commence too early, for repose, which is so wholesome after action, is only enervating without it, and a strong genius, just like a powerful body shut out from the world and the fresh air, grows indolent and flaccid without exercise, or, what is worse, morbid" (*Works* I, 107).

Thackeray does not want to hint that Southey suffers from the disease of self-approbation (though, to be sure, he finds a very slight tinge of it in the preface), what he wants to say is only that this poet "retired too early from the world, where he might have found a healthier and even a higher school of poetry than in his quiet study", emphasizing in conclusion that "a great artist has the whole world for his subject, and makes it his task to portray it".⁹

The postulate that poetry should be directly inspired by nature (whether exterior or human) lies of course, too, at the basis of his negative criticism of Addison's poem "The Campaign", dealt with in detail in the second chapter. He pays attention to this poem also in his lecture of 1851, pointing out that it contains some very bad lines, but finding words of praise for the verses containing the famous comparison of Marlborough to an angel riding "on the whirlwind" and directing "the storm", and obviously at least partly agreeing with those critics who pronounced this simile "to be of the greatest ever produced in poetry".¹⁰

Closely connected with Thackeray's demand that poetry should not forsake the world of men but should find inspiration in it is his postulate that it should be pervaded by deep love for mankind and genuine sympathy with the unfortunate and oppressed. That is why he so much admired Goldsmith's "Deserted Village", as we have seen in the preceding sub-chapter, which appealed to him, moreover, through some other qualities to be discussed below. That is also why he enthusiastically praised Hood's poems "The Song of the Shirt" and "The Bridge of Sighs" for faithfully depicting "the poor man's country" and telling the higher classes their "tale of terror and wonder"¹¹ of the miserable condition of the poor, though this was again not the only quality of these poems he admired and though there were some later modifications in his attitude, as we shall see. This is also the reason why in the earlier period of his life he had a decided predilection for poetry produced either by poets who drew much upon folk tradition, whether folk song, popular ballad or fairy tale, or by those who in their poetry proclaimed progressive social and political ideals near to those in which he himself believed in that stage of his development. We have evidence that he read the ballads of Bürger, Goethe and Schiller, Wieland's *Oberon*, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* by Brentano and von Arnim and Goethe's adaptation of the old German epic *Reineke Fuchs*.¹² For his translations and

⁹ For the quotations see *Works* I, 107.

¹⁰ *Works* XIII, 531; for an earlier quotation and comment on these verses see *Works* III, 148; for a quotation of one verse see *Works* XIII, 233.

¹¹ *Works* VIII, 257.

¹² For his reference to Bürger's "Lenore" see *Works* XI, 389, for its echoes in "The Chronicle of the Drum" see Werner, op. cit., p. 21. His hero Pendennis translated the ballads by Goethe and Schiller on the Fisherman and the Diver (obviously Goethe's "Der Fischer" and Schiller's "Der Taucher") — see *Works* XII, 280, 303: Thackeray also refers to Goethe's ballad "Der Gott und die Bajadere" (see *Works* XIV, 787), and uses the quotation from Goethe's poem "Vanitas! vanitatum vanitas!" as the title of Chapter XVIII of *Philip* (see Frisa, op. cit., p. 14). For his reference to *Oberon* see *Letters* I, 230 and to *Reineke Fuchs* *Letters* IV, 253.

paraphrases he chose some poems by von Chamisso, Arndt, Uhland, Körner, de La Motte-Fouqué and Béranger and was a warm admirer of the poetry of Robert Burns. He referred to the poetry of the great Scottish poet only in a few marginal comments and made one curious mistake in his evaluation to be noticed below, but he perfectly understood how near this poet was to the people whose joys and woes he depicted. This is obvious from the following later comment of his, though he notices in it — in harmony with the mellowed philosophy of life characteristic of him in this period — only one aspect of the appeal and significance of Burns's poetry:

"At a Burns's Festival, I have seen Scotchmen singing Burns, while the drops twinkled on their furrowed cheeks; while each rough hand was flung out to grasp its neighbour's; while early scenes and sacred recollections, and dear and delightful memories of the past came rushing back at the sound of the familiar words and music, and the softened heart was full of love, and friendship, and home" (*Works* X, 623).

As a professional critic he also found much to praise in the poetry produced by the people themselves, the street ballads and songs he reviewed in "*Horae Catnachianae*", in which he found a "fountain-head" from which the reader can get a more accurate notion of humble life than from popular romances depicting it, for these ballads relate "to actual occurrences, characters, and modes of life", express "the thoughts, jokes, habits, expenses, and feelings of poverty",¹³ and do not present such perfectly absurd and unreal scenes as the Newgate novels in particular did.

Worth noticing in this connection is also Thackeray's attitude to Tennyson's poetry, upon which he commented only as a critical reader. He recognized the talent of his old University friend very early, in the first years of the 1830s,¹⁴ began to rank Tennyson among the greatest poetic geniuses in English literature, side by side with Keats and Milton, in the 1840s,¹⁵ yet had critical reservations as to some traits of the poet's personal character¹⁶ and did not fully share, as Stevenson has pointed out, the solemn devotion with which his other University friends listened to the poet "chanting his own poetry or proclaiming his verdicts on the classics".¹⁷ In the later period of his life, however, he grew positively enthusiastic over Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, accepted without any reservations the poet's idealized depictions of the medieval knights, which had been unacceptable to him, as we have seen, as presented by Scott, Dumas and James, and which were later sharply criticized by Bagehot and Meredith.¹⁸ One of the reasons underlying this enthusiasm was his gratefulness to the poet for reintroducing him into the enchanting land of fairy and oriental tale which charmed him in his boyhood, but which he did not cease to love until the end of his life. This is obvious especially from the following comment from his letter to

¹³ For the quotations see "*Horae Catnachianae*", pp. 407, 409, 420.

¹⁴ See *Letters* I, 196 and note, 198, 287, 288, II, 691, Melville, op. cit., I, 85, *The Biographical Edition of the Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, III, xv, xxi.

¹⁵ See *Works* II, 620, V, 163–164, 328, VI, 424–425, 541, 557, IX, 128, 220, 330, *Contributions*, 134; for his later comments see *Works* X, 231, 619 (quot.), XIV, 261, 863 (quot.), XVI, 185, 480, XVII, 58, 91, 148, 606, *Letters* II, 691, 710, 815, III, 12, 128, 298, IV, 372, Melville, op. cit., I, 66–67, *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 364.

¹⁶ See e.g. *Letters* I, 205, II, 57, 148, 765.

¹⁷ Op. cit., p. 105.

¹⁸ See Meredith's letter to Captain Maxse, December 19, 1869, quoted by Clapp in "The Victorian Mettle", p. 15, and Bagehot's views quoted *ibid*.

the poet, which concerns the verses "The Splendour Falls" from the poem "The Princess":

"and, reading the lines [i.e. "Blow, bugle, blow ..." — LP], which only one man in the world could write, I thought about the other horns of Elfland blowing in full strength, and Arthur, in gold armour, and Guinevere in gold hair, and all those knights and heroes and beauties and purple landscapes and misty gray lakes in which you have made me live. They seem like facts to me, since about three weeks ago ... when I read the book. It is on the table yonder, and I don't like, somehow, to disturb it, but the delight and gratitude! You have made me as happy as I was as a child with the *Arabian Nights*, every step I have walked in Elfland has been a sort of Paradise to me ... I have had out of that dear book the greatest delight that has ever come to me since I was a young man; to write and think about it makes me almost young" (*Letters IV*, 152).

It seems to me, however, that Thackeray, the former relentless critic of the chivalric romance, could accept Tennyson's creatures "that have not a breath of vital humanity in them", as Meredith pointed out,¹⁹ only because at that period of his life he increasingly shared the poet's satisfaction with the existing society and could therefore whole-heartedly identify himself, too, with the essentially Victorian ideal of Truth and Beauty embodied in Tennyson's "medieval" knights (in this again differing from Meredith, who discerned "a scent of damned hypocrisy in all this lisping and vowelled purity of the Idylls" and dissociated himself from the poet's social and moral ideals²⁰).

Due notice should also be taken in this context of Thackeray's attitude to poets who were much concerned about the future of mankind and warmly sympathized with the most oppressed social classes, but whose social and political ideals differed (or at least he was convinced they differed) from his own. In such cases he never fails to express his critical reservations, as we have seen in the second chapter, where I dealt with his relationship to Shelley and Byron, and as is also obvious from his review of the first volume of Georg Herwegh's *Gedichte eines Lebendigen* (1841), the literary manifesto of the revolutionary democratic stream in German literature, which had historical significance for the German revolutionary literature of the 1840s. The review reveals Thackeray's good knowledge of the German poet's life and career up to 1843, when his criticism was published, as well as his negative attitude to the doctrine proclaimed in Herwegh's poetry. Although he is not anxious, as he says, to speak of Herwegh's politics, but rather "of the quality of his poetry, and of his turn of mind", he does pay considerable attention to the poet's political opinions, characterizing them as "of the strongest republican kind" and condemning his whole doctrine as atheistic, blasphemous and warlike, as a doctrine of hatred. He is especially exasperated by the poem "Zuruf" in which the poet welcomes the arrival of a new Saviour, Freedom, into the world and compares it to the Baptist and to Christ; he expresses the conviction that, before several years are over, "M. Herwegh will know that such coarse blasphemies are not in the least sublime or poetical; and (merely as a point of art) that this furious and mad kind of yelling is by no means a proof of superior energy

¹⁹ Quoted in "The Victorian Mettle", p. 15.

²⁰ Ibid. As the authors of *CHEL* point out, the character of Colonel Newcome "responds to those ideals which were the contemporary theme of the poetry of Tennyson" (XIII, 297). The Colonel himself, however, could not understand the "prodigious laudations" bestowed on Tennyson's poetry by Clive and his young friends.

or power". The reviewer also tries to discover the roots of Herwegh's philosophy, finding them not altogether correctly in the teaching of those "silly French speculators" (meaning by this the Christian socialists Leroux and Lamennais, and George Sand) who set themselves out to propound new creeds and to act as prophets on their own account, having a special mission from Heaven. The outcome of the poet's doctrine is in Thackeray's opinion "the coarsest and worst part of M. Herwegh's genius", namely his too great appetite for war and "his ferocious descriptions of blood and slaughter". As Thackeray believes, it is this part of his genius and not his Republicanism which lies at the root of the poet's enormous popularity: the German public flock to listen to him not because they would all be Republicans or because Germany was on the eve of Republicanism, but because they have "discovered a wild young man who sings in what is (happily) a new style" and listen to him "not, let us hope, so much on account of his opinions, as on account of their strangeness".²¹ Heine's analysis of Herwegh's popularity with the German middle class strongly confirms that in this opinion Thackeray is not far from right.

As we may see, Thackeray does not do full justice to the German poet's courageous struggle against the existing *régime* in his country nor to his enthusiastic belief in the destruction of the old world and the final victory of justice. On the other hand, however, he was able to see (though not so clearly as Heine did) that Herwegh's appeals were only abstract proclamations, isolated from actual reality and endangering very slightly the foundations of German society (not of course that Thackeray wanted to see these endangered). He points out that Herwegh's "dark prophecies and sanguinary images have excited in our minds anything but a feeling of terror", for the poet, as he says, is not such a hero or martyr as he makes himself out to be, and even if his poetry might have some influence upon the Germans, who are easily moved, it is not likely, in Thackeray's opinion, to make such an impression in phlegmatic England, for there "is scarce so much sedition in his poems as can be bought for fourpence in a Chartist newspaper; and not more irreligion than might have been read the other day in Holywell Street, until Mr. Bruce . . . assaulted the obnoxious printshop".²² Thackeray's attitude is perhaps best expressed in the conclusion of his review, where he maintains that it is absurd to put this young man forward as a master and the founder of a new literary school (though he found many positive qualities in Herwegh's poetry, as we shall see later, along with some other demerits not yet noticed), and proceeds:

"His poetry is a convulsion, not an effort of strength; he does not sing, but he roars; his dislike amounts to fury; and we must confess that it seems to us, in many instances, that his hatred and heroism are quite factitious, and that his enthusiasm has a very calculating look with it. Fury, to be effective either in life or in print, should, surely, only be occasional. People become quite indifferent to wrath which is roaring and exploding all day: as gunners go to sleep upon batteries. Think of the prodigious number of appeals to arms that our young poet has made in the course of these pages; what a waving and clatter of flashing thoughts; what a loading and firing of double-barrelled words; and, when the smoke rolls off, nobody killed! And a great mercy it is too for that cause of liberty which, no doubt, the young man has at heart, that the working out of it is not entrusted to persons of his flighty temperament. No man was made to be hated; no doctrines of peace and good will can be very satisfactorily advocated by violence and

²¹ For the quotations see *Works* V, 444, 442, 450—451, 445.

²² For the quotations see *Works* V, 443, 446.

murder; nor can good come out of evil, as is taught in those old-fashioned 'temples' which our young bard says he cannot frequent. Is he much better or happier where he is?" (*Works* V, 457).

The critic finds some excuse for the poet, however, in his youth and his personal character:

"He is very young yet, very much intoxicated by his success; and the egotism consequent on it is quite ludicrously manifested in his book. In those visionary combats which he foretells, he himself is made to bear a very considerable share" (*Works* V, 444).

Thackeray did not prove to be an entirely reliable prophet as to Herwegh's future literary fame, for he believed that in a few years "silly Berliners" would stop worshipping him, and yet many of Herwegh's revolutionary poems, as Reiman points out,²³ have retained their power and freshness up to the present time, especially for the progressive sections of German society. On the other hand, however, the reviewer rightly prophesied the further political development of the poet and the eventual moderation of Herwegh's political views, which Thackeray of course conceived as a development for the better. After 1848 Herwegh did alienate himself from the working-class movement and it was not until the end of his life that he found his way back to it.

Our analysis has so far shown that Thackeray could not whole-heartedly approve of any poetry the spirit of which was more or less openly revolutionary, this attitude of his being of course in full harmony with his own political beliefs, as well as with his conception of the social function of art, analysed in the second chapter. What is yet worth noticing, however, is his attitude to the political ideals of a poet who, in contradistinction to Byron, Shelley and Herwegh, tended to isolate himself from the world of men and whose mature philosophy was the very reverse of revolutionary — namely, Robert Southey. We do possess direct evidence from Thackeray's later years that he had great reservations with regard to this poet's political doctrine, for in *The Four Georges* he openly declared that his generation had left Southey's "old political landmarks miles and miles behind", that they "protest against his dogmatism" and, moreover, "begin to forget it and his politics".²⁴ Yet in his much earlier review of Southey's *Works* he has not a word to say on the ideas expressed in the poems he assesses, not dissociating himself in any way, as he did in his criticism of other writers, from the poet's idealistic conception of history, or from his predilection for medieval mysticism. The reasons underlying his silence might have been several. One of them was suggested by Saintsbury who pointed out that Southey "has proved one of the most difficult of all writers for critics — especially critics Radical, as Thackeray then was — to deal justly with".²⁵ The young critic might also have been unwilling to attack the only great English poet he ever reviewed, who was at that time an old man and whose place in English literature was firmly established; and he probably would not even have been able to vent any objections of the political kind, for he was writing for the *Times*. It is worth noticing, however, that he found nothing but positive

²³ See op. cit., p. 553.

²⁴ *Works* XIII, 805.

²⁵ *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 23.

qualities in Southey's *Life of Nelson*, which of course bears strong traces of the poet's philosophy and political creed, but which obviously appealed to him especially for the poet's pure, clear and racy prosaic style, thanks to which this book has well stood the test of time.

Another criterion Thackeray applies to poetry both as reader and critic is his postulate that it should be unobjectionable from the moral point of view. As a reader he vented in this respect some objections even to the poetry of Béranger and of Burns, yet after having compared "Bonne Vieille" and "John Anderson" he came to the conclusion that the Scottish poet's morality was purer and heartier, as, in his biased opinion, the morality of the national life depicted by Burns was purer than that of the French nation.²⁶ He found no apologies, however, for the moral content of Byron's poetry (upon which he also commented only as a reader) and especially of *Don Juan*, which he sharply condemned as a work propagating evil and exercising harmful influence on the morals of young people,²⁷ having not a word to say on the poet's powerful satire, nor on the sovereign elegance of style characteristic of this particular poem. In his condemnation of Byron's poetry from the moral point of view, which is obviously to a great extent motivated by his highly critical opinion of the poet's private morals as well as of those of Byron's class,²⁸ Thackeray closely approaches the standpoint of the poet's arch-enemy Southey and essentially differs from the more clear-sighted critics of his time who saw in the poem the mighty rebellion of a strong personality against conventional moral code and against tyranny of every kind (Pushkin, Scott, Goethe, Shelley, Ruskin, Swinburne), as well as from those critics who had serious objections to Byron, but found warm words of praise for this particular masterpiece (Carlyle).

The moral criterion is also applied by Thackeray the critic in his later assessments of Congreve as a poet and of Prior. Congreve's poetry irritates him especially by the disrespectful attitude to women the poet reveals in it, but he partly excludes it from his general condemnation of this writer (to be noticed in the next chapter), characterizing it as the only part of Congreve's legacy from which he dares quote to his audience. And it is obviously first and foremost his moral reservations (for he does not present any aesthetic judgment) that make Thackeray disagree with the verdict of the critics of Congreve's time who ranged his poems "amongst the most famous lyrics of the time" and pronounced him equal to Horace (or even superior in some points to Shakespeare, as Thackeray points out in a non-critical context, in *The Newcomes*²⁹). Yet he admits that the quoted poems may give an idea of Congreve's power and grace, "of his daring manner, his magnificence in compliment, and his polished sarcasm".³⁰ On the other hand, however, Thackeray in the same period of his criticism takes exception to the attitude of those critics who accused Prior of immorality, and praises Johnson for defending this writer (though dissociating himself, as I have mentioned before, from the latter's low opinion of Prior's poetry):

²⁶ See *Works* II, 426—427, III, 503.

²⁷ See especially *Works* XII, 995, III, 302.

²⁸ See especially *Works* VI, 507, IX, 463, XIII, 792—793, 799, XI, 885, *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 497, note 18.

²⁹ See *Works* XIV, 261—262.

"Perhaps Samuel Johnson, who spoke slightly of Prior's verses, enjoyed them more than he was willing to own. The old moralist had studied them as well as Mr. Thomas Moore, and defended them, and showed that he remembered them very well too, on an occasion when their morality was called in question by that noted puritan, James Boswell, Esq., of Auchinleck" (*Works* XIII, 584-586).

In *The Virginians*, however, though he makes Colonel Lambert praise Prior as a rare poet, he causes the Colonel at the same time to characterize his poems as reading not suitable for young girls.³¹

Closely connected with his moral evaluation is Thackeray's Johnsonian postulate (also accepted by Emerson, Ruskin and Carlyle) that great poetry (and art in general) can only be produced by morally pure men. Several poets suffer by being measured by this standard, especially, as we have seen before, Goethe and, as suggested above, Byron and Congreve, but some gain — Schiller, as I have shown in my second chapter, to some extent Southey, whose unobjectionable personal character, gentlemanly qualities and morally pure life redeem in Thackeray's eyes his political errors,³² and especially the critic's two contemporaries, Horace Smith and Thomas Hood. As we shall yet learn, Thackeray does find in the poetry of these two lesser poets something else than the reflection of their positive personal qualities, and the criterion we are dealing with is not the only one which makes him bestow warm praise upon their productions. Yet there is no doubt in my opinion that his great admiration of these poets (both of whom he knew personally) as men does play a not negligible role in his tendency to overestimate their poetry, which in neither case bears the hall-mark of genius. It should be pointed out, however, that Thackeray was not uncritical of Hood's poetry, as we shall yet see, and openly confessed (almost as if he were echoing Johnson) that he liked "Hood's life even better than his books".³³ Another poet who gains by being assessed from this point of view, but mostly only what is his due, is Alexander Pope. Thackeray's lecture of 1851 is pervaded by his deep compassion for that unfortunate deformed man, who suffered so much from the coarse ridicule of opponents, and by his admiration of some of the poet's personal qualities, especially his affectionate love for his old mother, "that constant tenderness and fidelity of affection which pervaded and sanctified his life".³⁴ Not even in this case, however, is this sympathetic compassion the decisive criterion which leads Thackeray to be somewhat too extravagant in his praise of the merits of Pope's poetry, as we shall yet see. To Pope the man, however, Thackeray gives what was due to him and what was denied him by his detractors, for his evaluation of the poet's personal character is objective and just and his attitude to Pope's person much more generous than was for instance that of his contemporary Taine who wrote about Pope's physical deformities with an almost ruthless cruelty.

Thackeray's postulate that poetry should be "like nature" of course implies some further demands which he lays upon the poetry he critically considers. It is above all his conviction that poetry should be faithful to life, should depict

³⁰ *Works* XIII, 519.

³¹ See *Works* XV, 326-327.

³² See *Works* XIII, 805.

³³ *Works* XVII, 469.

³⁴ *Works* XIII, 615.

real human beings and express "a genuine feeling".³⁵ These demands were more or less adequately fulfilled by several poets he assessed as reader or critic. As reader he highly appreciated Cowper for presenting in his poetry the simple truth of everyday life and for possessing, moreover, delicate wit, tenderness, piety and other gentlemanly qualities, all of which found due reflection in his poems.³⁶ Sincerity of feeling, honesty and manliness were also the qualities Thackeray chiefly admired in the poetry of Burns, as is shown especially by his praise of the "noble candour" with which this poet sings in his "Jolly Beggars". We even possess a much more eloquent piece of evidence than this short comment, though it is based on a mistake or misunderstanding on Thackeray's part. In his review "About a Christmas Book" he quotes and negatively assesses one poem written in "the Catholic spirit", pointing out that "these meek canticles and gentle nasal concerts" cannot survive the comparison to "the full sound which issues from the generous lungs when A POET begins to sing",³⁷ and to prove this quotes two stanzas from "Of A' the Airts" ("And bring the lassie back to me"). Although he does not refer to Burns by name, nor to the poem by its title, he obviously and quite naturally has Burns in mind, as the following warm tribute confirms:

"Heaven bless the music! It is a warm, manly, kindly heart that speaks there, — a grateful, generous soul that looks at God's world with honest eyes, and trusts to them rather than to the blinking peepers of his neighbour. Such a man walking the fields and singing out of his full heart is pleasanter to hear, to my mind, than a whole organ-loft full of Puseyites, or an endless procession of quavering shavelings from Littlemore" (*Works* VI, 547).

The two stanzas attached to Burns's poem are not, however, this poet's work (and are not to be found in the *Complete Word and Phrase Concordance to the Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*³⁸), but were written by John Hamilton, an Edinburgh music-seller, as the editors of the *Centenary Edition of Burns's Poetry* have pointed out, characterizing them as "bathetic additions".³⁹ As there is in my opinion no doubt as to whom Thackeray has in mind in this tribute, we may include it in our evidence, though of course his mistake, even if understandable, tells adversely against his capacity as a critic of poetry.

As a reader, Thackeray applied his postulate — that poetry should express genuine and sincere emotions — to Byron's works as well, but found them utterly wanting. He declared that he did not "believe much of what my Lord Byron, the poet, says",⁴⁰ and severely reprimanded him for writing "cant":

"That man *never* wrote from his heart. He got up rapture and enthusiasm with an eye to the public" (*Works* IX, 127).

Several times he also rebuked the poet for presenting false depictions of actual reality (mostly concerning the song praising the Rhine and German maidens from *Childe Harold*⁴¹). Thackeray very much resented the fact that Byron should

³⁵ *Works* VI, 543.

³⁶ See *Works* VI, 544.

³⁷ For the quotations see *Works* II, 426, VI, 546.

³⁸ Compiled and Edited by J. B. Reid, Glasgow, Kerr & Richardson, 1889.

³⁹ See *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, Centenary Edition, ed. by W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, The Caxton Publishing Co., London, vol. III, Notes, p. 345.

⁴⁰ *Works* XVII, 640.

⁴¹ See *Works* IX, 20, 127, X, 258; see also his own sketch of a very hideous German peasant girl, facing p. 284, *Works* X.

he called "our native bard" and his following comment at the same time shows which poets he regarded as appropriate representatives of this office:

"Our native bard! *Mon Dieu!* He Shakespeare's, Milton's, Keats's, Scott's native bard! Well, woe be to the man who denies the public gods!" (*Works* IX, 127).

His attitude to Byron, then, essentially differs not only from that assumed by those critics of the time who ranked the poet among the greatest of the period and in the whole of world literature (for instance Scott, Belinski and Arnold), but also from the opinion of those present-day critics who reject as unjustified those accusations of insincerity, affectation and theatrical pose which have called in question the revolutionary content of Byron's poetry, such as Read, who has found "at the base of all Byron's work an essential sanity, a hatred of sham and humbug, generous impulses and manly courage."⁴² The general negative impression we get from Thackeray's comments upon Byron, which is also confirmed by the statements he pronounced in private conversation,⁴³ is not substantially corrected even by the fact that not all his references are negative and that he several times also quotes from Byron's poetry. As a critic Thackeray applies this postulate of sincerity in poetic feeling to all the lesser poets with whom we shall be concerned later, as well as to Herwegh, rebuking this poet for expressing thoughts in which the critic discerns a certain straining after effect, and which therefore remind him of remarks uttered by a set of conspirators "on the theatrical boards".⁴⁴ Of the refrain of Herwegh's famous poem "Das Lied vom Hasse" he writes:

"Other men have written songs in the world besides George Herwegh, and know the value of those dashing sounding rhymes. But though such may pass muster on the boards aforesaid, great POETS are in the habit of producing different kind of wares" (*Works* V, 448).

In harmony with his conception of beauty in art, both in his assessments of paintings and also in his critical judgments of poetry, Thackeray gave preference to a sublime of a humbler sort, openly confessing that he had a much greater liking for the charming lively verses of some of those poets who have not reached the highest level of poetic beauty than for the magnificent works of much greater geniuses:

"I have always had a taste for the second-rate in life. Second-rate poetry, for instance, is an uncommon deal pleasanter to my fancy than your great thundering first-rate epic poems. Your Miltons and Dantes are magnificent, — but a bore: whereas an ode of Horace, or a song of Tommy Moore, is always fresh, sparkling, and welcome" (*Works* VIII, 58).

As I hope to show in the following, this confession of Thackeray's (alongside some others written in the same spirit⁴⁵) should not be taken so literally as it has for instance been interpreted by Melville and Enzinger. Yet the fact remains that Thackeray, both as reader and critic, had a great liking for poetry which did not treat the most exalted subjects, but depicted quiet domesticity, was

⁴² Herbert Read: *Byron*. Supplement to *British Book News*. Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1951, p. 34.

⁴³ According to Ainsworth, Thackeray, in a talk with this writer about 1846, was "abusing Byron in a ludicrously absurd, and Cockney fashion" (quoted by Malcolm Elwin, *op. cit.*, p. 154).

⁴⁴ *Works* V, 448; see also *ibid.*, p. 450.

⁴⁵ See *Works* II, 59–60, 573.

characterized by moral orderliness and was pervaded by the familiar Wordsworthian tone, as well as poetry which touched, as the authors of *CHEL* say about Thackeray's own verses, "the deeper chords of feeling lightly and gracefully"⁴⁶ and contained a vein of tenderness or pathos. That is why he so much admired, as reader, the poetry of Horace, Ronsard and Cowper, the kindly, fresh and homely poems of Crabbe, Burns's poem "John Anderson", the "pleasant quaint lines" of Allan Ramsay, the "most exquisite love-tunes"⁴⁷ of Thomas Moore (who gained his sympathies, moreover, by his Liberal political views and patriotism⁴⁸) and Hood's truthful depiction of the humble milieu. In the last case Thackeray pointed out that though the theme Hood selected for depiction in his "Song of the Shirt" was humble, it was not unpoetical:

"Is it, however, a poetical subject? Yes, Hood has shown that it can be made one, but by surprising turns of thought brought to bear upon it, strange, terrible, unexpected lights of humour which he has flung upon it" (*Works* II, 615).

As critic he found this "moderate-sized sublimity" in Gay's pastorals *The Shepherd's Week* and the mock-heroic poem *Trivia*, which in his opinion reflect all the positive traits of Gay's personal character, and which he evaluates as delightful works retaining their freshness up to his own day:

"They are to poetry what charming little Dresden china figures are to sculpture: graceful, minikin, fantastic; with a certain beauty always accompanying them" (*Works* XIII, 591).

Thackeray was aware that Gay's *Shepherd's Week* was written with the satirical purpose of parodying Ambrose Philips's pastorals, for he characterizes the latter writer as "a serious and dreary idyllic Cockney" and prefers Gay's approach as "far pleasanter than that of Philips", but yet maintains that Gay's characters are not "a whit more natural than the would-be serious characters of the other posture-master",⁴⁹ regarding them as typical pastoral figures having nothing in common with actual reality. In this he is of course wrong, for this work of Gay, though in the first place a parody of the false languor of pastoral tradition, contains vivid realistic pictures of country life (as Johnson had noticed⁵⁰), while the second work, which depicts life in London, is an authentic historical document and at the same time an amusing mock-heroic poem.

Thackeray's requirements in the sphere of poetic beauty are clearly met even more adequately by the poetry of Prior and in this case he also proves to be a good critic, for he gives Prior his due, not degrading him to the degree that Johnson did⁵¹ and not accepting, as we have seen, Johnson's opinion, nor overestimating Prior's merits. In general his attitude to this poet reminds me very much of that of Hazlitt. He does not assign Prior to the highest place in

⁴⁶ *CHEL* XIII, 294.

⁴⁷ For the quotations see *Works* II, 512, XIII, 790.

⁴⁸ For his defence of Moore against the attacks of young Irish critics upon the latter's *History of Ireland* see *Contributions*, 163-164 (in his review of that work). Thackeray was not entirely uncritical of Moore's poetry, however (though he never condemned it as immoral, as for instance Byron did), for he made this poet (along with Byron) the favourite of lovers and sentimental ladies (Miss Adeliza Grampus, Miss Griggs, Mrs. Sackville, Ethel Newcome, Andrea Fitch, but also Fitz-Boodle and Pendennis) and the model (again with Byron) for his fashionable poets Adolphus Simcoe and Mr. Hicks.

⁴⁹ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 591.

⁵⁰ See *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, II, 38.

⁵¹ See *ibid.*, I, 465.

the poetry of the period, and correctly appreciates his playful, charming and natural verses as belonging to "the easiest, the richest, the most charmingly humorous of English lyrical poems",⁵² rightly recognizing at the same time the poet's indebtedness to Horace:

"Horace is always in his mind, and his song, and his philosophy, his good sense, and his happy easy turns and melody, his loves, and his Epicureanism, bear a great resemblance to that most delightful and accomplished master. In reading his works, one is struck with their modern air, as well as by their happy similarity to the songs of the charming owner of the Sabine farm" (*Works* XIII, 582).

What is also worth noticing is that Thackeray to a certain extent found what he was looking for also in popular street ballads — the simple humour, earnestness, deep feeling, simplicity, the droll "notions of the sublime and pathetic", and a "lurking spark . . . of true poetry":

"One puzzles how to define it, and only contraries with it: it is a kind of queer, fantastical tenderness, melancholy comicality, and touching nonsense."⁵³

Neither the poetry of Gay nor of Prior, nor that produced by the process of popular invention could, however, satisfy Thackeray's demand completely, for in the sublime they presented he obviously did not discern that quality which he regarded as the highest element of beauty in art — Christian love. Only four of those poets to whom he paid formal critical attention did in fact satisfy him on this point, Goldsmith, Addison, Southey and Horace Smith. Goldsmith met his demands in "The Deserted Village", as is implied (not explicitly declared) in his eulogy upon this poem quoted in the preceding chapter and in other laudatory remarks in his lecture on this writer as well as outside it, and Addison in the "Ode" from the *Spectator* (No. 465. August 23, 1712 — "Soon as the evening shades prevail"⁵⁴), as is explicitly stated by Thackeray, who evaluates this poem as "sacred music" which fills him with love and awe:

"It seems to me those verses shine like stars. They shine out of a great deep calm" (*Works* XIII, 540).

Robert Southey fulfilled Thackeray's requirements only in his ballads and minor poems, in which Thackeray found sublime philosophy and fervent and humble piety. He rather overestimated this part of Southey's legacy, for he assessed these poems as belonging "among the very best of that species of composition in our language" and failed to see the negative traits of the ballads in particular, so clearly discerned for instance by Byron and Belinski. It should be duly emphasized, however, that he quotes or mentions by their titles only those poems which really are among the best ("Blenheim", "My Days among the Dead are Past" and "The Holly-Tree") and that (though much later, in *Pendennis*) he characterizes the "Devil's Walk" as a "hackneyed ballad".⁵⁵ Southey's exotic epics do not come up to his expectation (though he was brought upon the

⁵² *Works* XIII, 582.

⁵³ "Horae Catnachianae", p. 417; see also *ibid.*, pp. 413, 410.

⁵⁴ These verses quoted by Thackeray are the beginning of the second stanza; the first begins with "The spacious firmament on high". For another positive comment upon this hymn see *Works* XIII, 296—297.

⁵⁵ For the quotations see *Works* I, 109, XII, 475.

Curse of Kehama and *Thalaba*⁵⁶ and his review discovers noble poetry in these poems), as follows especially from his later comment in *The Four Georges*:

"In the combat between Time and Thalaba, I suspect the former destroyer has conquered. Kehama's curse frightens very few readers now; but Southey's private letters are worth piles of epics, and are sure to last among us, as long as kind hearts like to sympathize with goodness and purity, and love and upright life" (*Works* XIII, 805).

Horace Smith, on the other hand, seems to fulfil Thackeray's requirements entirely, as is obvious from the whole review of this poet's *Works*, and especially from the following assessment of the general spirit pervading Smith's poetry:

"Such verses surely give a very favourable idea of man and poet. He is full of love and friendship, mirth and simple reverence — this honest, genial, and humble spirit. All through the poems indeed these delightful qualities of the writer are indicated — the warmest family affections, the most generous social friendliness, the strongest religious feeling breaking out involuntarily at sight of natural objects. Perhaps *sensibility* is the quality, in that much mooted question of the difference between wit and humour, in which the latter's superiority lies."⁵⁷

As the last sentence of this quotation suggests, Thackeray's evaluation of Horace Smith's poetry also bears traces of the changes which were taking place in his conception of humour and satire in this period of his life. In his opinion Horace Smith has all the qualities which "go to the making of a comic poet",⁵⁸ naturalness, lack of affectation, sweet melancholy and reflection, and natural pathos. Thackeray shows especially high appreciation for the fact that the poet does not attempt anything beyond his power and does not strive for the highest sublime:

"There is not one of these many lyrics that is not pleasant and pretty: often they rise higher, and in the midst of the easy graces of this most kindly and unaffected of lyrical poets you come upon the noblest thoughts, images, and language. But the author is so modest (or understands his office as a comic poet so well), that these glimpses of the sublime are but transitory, his business being social wit and friendly and harmless laughter. Yet, like that of every generous humorist, his humour is of a plaintive turn, closes mournfully, like a school-boy's holiday, and leaves a certain sadness for re-action. Such a sadness, however, is not in the least bitter, but gentle, kindly, and full of charity. This is the brotherly Christian privilege of humour. It is impossible to accompany for any length of time this cheerful philosopher without being touched and charmed by his hearty and affectionate spirit."⁵⁹

Even if Thackeray as reader and critic did have a great predilection for poetic beauties of a humbler sort, and openly confessed to it, this should not lead us to the precipitate conclusion (as it to a certain extent did lead Melville and Enzinger) that he was not susceptible to genuine poetic beauty and therefore entirely incapable of assessing poetry. In the first place, his confessions of his liking for "second-rate" poetry should not be taken at their face value. He does not express them as his own opinion but as that of his comic *alter-egos* Titmarsh or the Fat Contributor and there is also another reason which suggests that he could not have meant them entirely seriously, for he speaks in

⁵⁶ For his early reading of *Kehama* see *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 67; for that of *Thalaba* see his own later reminiscence, *Letters* IV, 224.

⁵⁷ *Contributions*, 181.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179; see also for a similar comment in his letter to the author, *Letters* II, 249—250.

some of them disparagingly about Dante and Milton and yet we have plenty of evidence that he sincerely admired the beauty of their poetry and ranked them among the greatest geniuses of world literature.⁶⁰ It is also worth noticing that he makes Esmond a great lover of Milton and Shakespeare and certainly identifies himself rather with his hero than with Beatrix who, both in youth and her old age, contemptuously speaks about Esmond's (and Addison's) predilection for "that dreadful, dreary Milton", and gives preference to Congreve.⁶¹ Thackeray's own standpoint is after all clearly expressed in the following statement, from which I have already quoted in the chapter concerned with his criticism of "Christmas" literature:

"There is no doubt that in the public estimation the sublime has the *pas* of the ridiculous, and that Milton, for rank and brains, must certainly be classed before Rabelais. Writers of fun must live in the world and go out of it with this woeful conviction, that there is a kind of art incomparably higher than theirs, and which is not to be reached by any straining or endeavour."⁶²

As Thackeray saw it, art should provide for the taste of everybody and even a much humbler sublime (if it could still be denoted by this term) than that he was himself seeking has a right to its existence, if it is not sham sublime. does not exercise any harmful influence on the aesthetic taste or morals of the public and can bring some pleasure and enjoyment to anybody:

"Let those humble intellects which can only understand common feeling and everyday life have, too, their little gentle gratifications. Why should not the poor in spirit be provided for as well as the tremendous geniuses? If a child take a fancy to a penny theatrical print, let him have it; if a workman want a green parrot with a bobbing head to decorate his humble mantelpiece, let us not grudge it to him; and if an immense super-eminent intelligence cannot satisfy his poetical craving with anything less sublime than Milton, or less vast than Michael Angelo, — all I can say, for my part, is, that I wish he may get it. The kind and beneficent Genius of Art has pleasures for all according to their degree; and spreads its harmless happy feast for big and little — for the Titanic appetite that can't be satisfied with anything less than a roasted elephant, as well as for the small humble cock-robin of an intellect that can sing its little grace and make its meal on a bread-crumbs" (*Works* II, 594).

We have plenty of evidence, moreover, that Thackeray as reader was able to discern and appreciate the beauty of the poetry created by other great geniuses besides the two mentioned above, even if he had no opportunity to do so as critic, since such a task did not come his way. He was himself to a certain extent convinced that he did possess this capacity, as follows from one of his earlier letters to Mrs. Procter (of 1841), in which he wrote about Tennyson's having "the cachet of a great man", and proceeded:

"His conversation is often delightful, I think, full of breadth manliness and humour: he reads all sorts of things, swallows them and digests them like a great poetical boa-constrictor as he is. Now I hope, Mrs. Procter, you will recollect that if your humble servant sneers at small geniuses, he has on the contrary a huge respect for big ones, or those he fancies to be such" (*Letters* II, 26).

And he was not far from right (though not entirely in this particular case), for he did have, as reader, great reverence for literary genius. He obviously greatly

⁶⁰ For his references to Dante, especially to the Ugolino episode from the *Inferno*, see e.g. *Works* X, 98, 470, 524; of his numerous references to Milton see especially *Works* II, 47.

⁶¹ For the quotation see *Works* XV, 560; see also XV, 622, XIII, 363.

⁶² *Contributions*, 101.

admired Tasso's *Jerusalem*, as his references to or quotations from this work suggest,⁶³ was a great admirer and connoisseur of Shakespeare, as we shall yet see, and of La Fontaine; in spite of his critical reservations he saw in Goethe a great genius and literary giant⁶⁴ and enjoyed some poetical collections or individual poems by Voltaire and Victor Hugo, while he never denied genius to Shelley and greatly admired the poetry of Keats, whom he always ranked among the greatest writers of genius in English literature⁶⁵ (thus proving to be a better judge of poetical genius than even Ruskin and Carlyle). Keats had become his favourite as early as his Charterhouse days, as the following reminiscence by Boyes suggests:

"His beau-ideal was serious and sublime; he was too familiar with, too much a master of, the humorous, to think as much about that mastery as his admirers did. I have heard him speak in terms of homage to the genius of Keats which he would not have vouchsafed to the whole tribe of humorists."⁶⁶

Thackeray did make mistakes of judgment, however, both as reader and critic, these being chiefly due to his applying to poetry some criteria which are not wholly acceptable from the modern point of view. One of the demands he laid upon poetry, besides those already discussed, was that it should be comprehensible and another that it should be melodious. Of course it was Browning who suffered especially by being measured by these standards, although applied by Thackeray only as a reader. As we know from his direct statements, he did not read Browning's poetry because he could not "altogether comprehend him"⁶⁷ (in this he was not far from Carlyle, who also rebuked the poet for the unintelligibility of his poetry, though he found in it many strong points⁶⁸) and what he read did not satisfy him, for he wanted "poetry to be musical, to run sweetly".⁶⁹ If Thackeray expected from poetry "the sweet, soothing cadences and themes of the verse" which "affect one like music",⁷⁰ as he expressed it elsewhere, it does not surprise us that he found what he sought for in the pleasingly harmonious, sparkling, clear and majestic verses of Tennyson, which charmed him so much indeed that he overestimated the art of this poet by ranking it entire in the very highest sphere, side by side with the art not only of Keats and Milton, as we have seen before, but also of Titian, Horace and Beethoven. Besides Tennyson, it was especially Gay and Goldsmith in whose poetry he found the quality he sought, discerning "a peculiar, hinted, pathetic sweetness and melody" in one of Gay's songs in the *Beggar's Opera*, and proceeding:

⁶³ See *Works* I, 587, II, 385, 403, IV, 285, XIII, 596, XVII, 578.

⁶⁴ See especially his later tributes in his reminiscences of Weimar, sent on Lewes's request for the latter's *Life of Goethe* (*Works* X, 631ff.); for his other later tributes see *Works* X, 158, XIII, 490.

⁶⁵ See *Works* II, 391, 620, VI, 425, IX, 127, 174, XIV, 261.

⁶⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

⁶⁷ Quoted by Wilson, *op. cit.*, I, 118.

⁶⁸ See *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling and Robert Browning*, ed. Alexander Carlyle, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1923, pp. 297-298; see also *New Letters of Thomas Carlyle*, I, 233-235.

⁶⁹ William Allingham, *A Diary*, ed. H. Allingham and D. Radford, London, 1907, pp. 76-78; quoted in *Letters* IV, 112n.

⁷⁰ *Works* VI, 541.

"It charms and melts you. It's indefinable, but it exists; and is the property of John Gay's and Oliver Goldsmith's best verse, as fragrance is of a violet, or freshness of a rose" (*Works* XIII, 593).

Some of Thackeray's critical errors are again due to his measuring the evaluated poetical works by the standards of his gradually changing conception of humour and satire. As partly follows from the preceding comments on his criticism of Herwegh, it is especially this poet who suffers when measured by these standards, for in his poetry Thackeray discerned satire of the highest degree, motivated by hatred of the satirized object, from which, in this period, he began openly to dissociate himself, though as yet only in his theory and criticism. Some of Herwegh's satirical attacks are, however, still acceptable to Thackeray. He has words of praise for the poet's "restless, generous, eager spirit", appreciates his "honest and fair" satirical assaults upon "prevalent cant or affectation" in literature and thought, especially his satire "The Protest" aimed at the enormously popular but — in Thackeray's quite correct opinion — pompous ballad of Nikolaus Becker,⁷¹ placing at the same time, and entirely justifiably, this writer far below Herwegh. He finds in the poems, moreover, very neat and happy "epigrammatic turns" and "some passages of exceeding tenderness and beauty". His admiration is especially aroused by one serious ballad "with a wild sadness in the metre, which lies beyond our humble powers of translation" and he points out that the spirit of the "rude hearty song",⁷² "Das Lied vom Hasse", which he does translate, has evaporated in his rendering. In conclusion he emphasizes that, in contradistinction to Becker, Herwegh does possess "fancy, wit, and strong words at command", and proceeds:

"He has a keen eye for cant, too, at times; and in the Sonnet to the Poetess which we have quoted, and in another on German mystical Painting for which we have not space, shows himself to be a pretty sharp and clear-headed critic of art" (*Works* V, 457).

Two other poets who are made to suffer by Thackeray's applying to their works that conception of humour and satire at which he eventually arrived in the late 1840s and especially the 1850s, are Hood and Gay. In the earlier decade Thackeray was still able to appreciate the bitterness of Hood's social criticism, so much so indeed that he overestimated both "The Song of the Shirt" and "The Bridge of Sighs", assessing the first as "the most startling lyric in our language" and the second as the "astonishing poem . . . to which our language contains no parallel",⁷³ though he also took notice of the other aspect of the poet's approach, the exquisite tenderness of the two poems and the soft humour which "draws tears", that is, of Hood's sentimental philanthropism, which was also noticed but criticized by Engels, an ardent admirer of "The Song of the Shirt". In this period of his life Thackeray even rebuked the painter Redgrave on the grounds that in his picture on the theme of Hood's "Song of

⁷¹ He refers here, though he does not say so explicitly, to Becker's song of the Rhine (1840), beginning with the words "Sie sollen ihn nicht haben, den freien deutschen Rhein".

⁷² For the quotations see *Works* V, 453, 454, 448.

⁷³ *Works* II, 614 and note. The footnote is very interesting, for it was the first public recognition of "The Bridge of Sighs" which, as Thackeray later pointed out, "appeared almost unnoticed at first" in the magazine in which those "amazing verses" were published. As Thackeray added, he was proud to think that his words of appreciation reached the poet on his death-bed, "and pleased and soothed him in that hour of manful resignation and pain" (*Works* X, 626).

the Shirt" he has "illustrated everything except the humour, the manliness, and the bitterness of the song" and that he has "only depicted the tender, good-natured part of it".⁷⁴ In his later comments, however, Thackeray ignores the satire of these poems and speaks only about the tender feelings they evoke in the reader:

"That *Song of the Shirt*, which *Punch* first published, and the noble, the suffering, the melancholy, the tender Hood sang, may surely rank as a great act of charity to the world, and call from it its thanks and regard for its teacher and benefactor. That astonishing poem, which you all of you know, of *The Bridge of Sighs*, who can read it without tenderness, without reverence to Heaven, charity to man, and thanks to the beneficent genius which sang for us so nobly?" (*Works* X, 626).⁷⁵

Gay suffers by being in Thackeray's lecture of 1851 presented exclusively as a "gentle-hearted Satirist" and "true humourist" whose "quality" "was to laugh and make laugh, though always with a secret kindness and tenderness, to perform the drollest little antics and capers, but always with a certain grace, and to sweet music". This is of course true of the poetry Thackeray considers in his lecture, but not of the *Beggar's Opera*, from which (and from "its wearisome continuation"⁷⁶) he selects only songs for his assessment, paying no attention whatever to Gay's bitter satire which he so much admired in his earlier years.

The only poet who gains is Pope, whose satire perfectly fitted within the narrowed boundaries of Thackeray's modified conception, as the critic himself realized:

"If the author of the *Dunciad* be not a humourist, if the poet of the *Rape of the Lock* be not a wit, who deserves to be called so?" (*Works* XIII, 594).

His evaluation is not basically erroneous, however, for almost everything this poet gains is what he really deserved. Thackeray pays great attention especially to *The Dunciad*, highly appreciates the power and malice of Pope's satire and correctly characterizes the latter as abusive attacks upon the poet's personal enemies. In the famous feud between Pope and the Dunces he stands essentially on the side of Pope (indignantly condemning especially Dennis's offensive assaults on the poet's person), but he has some understanding, as we have seen in the chapter dealing with his conception of criticism, also for Pope's rivals, "the worn and hungry pressmen in the crowd below",⁷⁷ whom the poet belaboured so mercilessly. His most serious objection concerns Pope's descriptions of the poverty of literary men, by which this poet in his opinion established the Grub Street tradition and "contributed, more than any man who ever lived, to depreciate the literary calling". Although Thackeray's rebuke is not entirely unjustified, he commits the error of shifting the blame for the ruin of the profession of letters from the social and economic conditions prevalent in Pope's time to the poet himself, notably to his "libel", the *Dunciad*:

"It was Pope that dragged into light all this poverty and meanness, and held up those wretched shifts and rags to public ridicule. It was Pope that has made generations of the reading world (delighted with the mischief, as who would not be that reads it?) believe that author and wretch, author and rags, author and dirt, author and drink, gin, cowheel,

⁷⁴ For the quotations see *Works* II, 614.

⁷⁵ See also Wilson, op. cit., I, 47 and *Works* XVII, 462.

⁷⁶ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 591, 593.

⁷⁷ *Works* XIII, 618.

tripe, poverty, duns, bailiffs, squalling children and clamorous landladies, were always associated together. The condition of authorship began to fall from the days of the *Dunciad*: and I believe in my heart that much of that obloquy which has since pursued our calling was occasioned by Pope's libels and wicked wit" (*Works* XIII, 618–619).

Thackeray also realizes that the personal abuses and libels of this part of the *Dunciad* are not difficult to write and that it is especially easy to wing shafts which are aimed at the person of your enemy. But he is convinced, and quite justifiably, that Pope was a master even here, for the "shafts of his satire rise sublimely".⁷⁸ In much more enthusiastic words than Johnson, who wrote with high praise about the "crowded thoughts and stately numbers which dignify the concluding paragraph"⁷⁹ of the *Dunciad*, and in agreement with the opinion of recent research, Thackeray addresses the following eulogy to "that wonderful flight with which the *Dunciad* concludes":

"In these astonishing lines Pope reaches, I think, to the very greatest height which his sublime art has attained, and shows himself the equal of all poets of all times. It is the brightest ardour, the loftiest assertion of truth, the most generous wisdom, illustrated by the noblest poetic figure, and spoken in words the aptest, grandest, and most harmonious. It is heroic courage speaking: a splendid declaration of righteous wrath and war. It is the gage flung down, and the silver trumpet ringing defiance to falsehood and tyranny, deceit, dullness, superstition. It is Truth, the champion, shining and intrepid, and fronting the great world-tyrant with armies of slaves at his back. It is a wonderful and victorious single combat, in that great battle, which has always been waging since society began" (*Works* XIII, 620).

As is obvious from the above, Thackeray evaluates Pope's art essentially correctly: he appreciates his wit and humour, his true criticism of his society and time, the power of his satire and its personal tendency, the formal perfection of Pope's verses. But he considerably exaggerates when he characterizes Pope's satire as the most brilliant in the given period and attributes to the poet the highest place among his contemporaries, as "the greatest name on our list — the highest among the poets, the highest among the English wits and humourists with whom we have to rank him", elevating him thus above Swift and Fielding, and when he assesses him as "the greatest literary *artist* that England has seen",⁸⁰ placing him thus even above such poets as Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton (and thus greatly differing in opinion for instance from De Quincey and Macaulay, and in a lesser degree from Hazlitt, none of whom saw Pope in this supreme role).

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If Thackeray occasionally erred in his critical judgments, as we have seen, gave more than their due to some of the great poets, but in particular to lesser men and demoted those who deserved more praise, he proved to be a very good judge of almost all those poets of his time (with two exceptions) who are now by common consent regarded as decidedly inferior artists and from whose legacy to posterity not a single work has survived. The critical contributions which we are now going to discuss are, it appears to me, a proof that as a critic

⁷⁸ *Works* XIII, 619.

⁷⁹ *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, II, 294.

⁸⁰ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 594.

of poetry Thackeray is a safe guide when he deals with literary productions of the very lowest order of literature and that also in this sphere of art, as in fiction, he is able to discern and justly assess the sham sublime whenever he comes across it. What deserves special praise, too, is that all the poets with whom we shall be concerned here were enormously popular and "fashionable" in Thackeray's time and that he did not allow himself to be blinded by their popularity, but clearly saw all the weak points of their poetic effusions and, disregarding the opinions of some other critics of his time, made them the butts of his parody and satire, as well as the targets for the more traditional critical weapons which he uses in his reviews.

In his criticism of these poets Thackeray applies all the criteria discussed above except the moral and my usual procedure of making these criteria the backbone of my analysis would therefore necessarily lead to tedious repetition. For this reason and because I regard it necessary to treat his criticisms of these writers separately, I exceptionally resort to the chronological arrangement, though this is not devoid of its own intrinsic interest, for it reveals that in his criticism of poetry Thackeray as it were reversed that process we are used to from his criticism of fiction — the first critical weapon he selected, though only for his private amusement, was the parody, which, in his criticism of fiction, was mostly used by him to deliver to the enemy his last deadly stroke. As early as his Charterhouse days he wrote a witty parody "Cabbages" which ridiculed the saccharine sentimentality of the poem "Violets" by the popular fashionable poetess L. E. Landon, while his later parody written at Cambridge, "I'd be a Tadpole",⁸¹ chose as its target the very popular poem "I'd be a Butterfly" by the fashionable "boudoir poet" Thomas Haynes Bayly.⁸² His first published parody in verse is "Timbuctoo" which he also wrote as student at Cambridge⁸³ and in which he successfully ridiculed the prize poems produced by university students of his time, as well as the theme set in that year for the Newdigate prize competition (which was then won by Tennyson). His parody has, however, a wider range than this, as Ray has pointed out:

"Thackeray's heroic couplets neatly parody the fading eighteenth-century style of verse-writing which still prevailed among prize poets, just as his elaborate notes effectively burlesque the paraphernalia of erudition by which their effusions were often accompanied."⁸⁴

The next target for his criticism was one of the best-known imitators of Byron in Thackeray's time, Robert Montgomery, who enjoyed immense popularity throughout his whole life. As we learn from Lounsbury's assessment of this author, Montgomery's works were enthusiastically acclaimed by many critics of his time, who regarded him as a second Milton, some of his productions (*The Omnipresence of the Deity*, 1828) saw several editions in one year, selections from his poetry were published in school textbooks, one of his poems was even

⁸¹ Published in the *Gownsmen*, November 12, 1829.

⁸² As Ray has pointed out, in *Vanity Fair* Thackeray quotes one phrase from another preposterous ditty by this poet, "We Met — 'Twas in a Crowd" (see *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 403 and *Works* XI, 42).

⁸³ Published in the *Snob*, April 30, 1829.

⁸⁴ *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 119. Thackeray himself points out in a footnote that in the last six lines "he has very successfully imitated ... the best manner of Mr. Pope" (*Works* I, 3).

awarded a medal by the Queen, and his collected works were published in his lifetime. The same scholar also convincingly analyses the causes of this poet's "extraordinary and prolonged success" and emphasizes that even if Montgomery's poems abounded "in commonplace thoughts set forth in pompous phraseology", these thoughts "were sometimes expressed in a striking way", his poems cleverly reproducing certain characteristics of the style of the Classicists and, what was perhaps the most decisive cause of their success, dealing with moral and religious topics which were of supreme importance to a large body of men in his time.⁸⁵ Although these topics were very dear also to Thackeray's heart, as we know, he did not share the general enthusiasm, but rather the opinions of the more clear-sighted critics of his period (Carlyle and especially Macaulay) who had no illusions about this poet's worth.⁸⁶ His attitude is also very near to that of the Fraserians (analysed by Dr. Thrall), who attacked Montgomery in the very first number of their magazine, devoted to him consistent critical attention and sharply criticized his poetry, applying to him such slanderous nicknames as "Holy Bob", "a rhyming monkey" and "Satan Montgomery"⁸⁷ and ranging him (with Bulwer and Alaric Watts) among "snakes, rats, and other vermin".⁸⁸ Thackeray's negative attitude to Montgomery's poetic effusions clearly crystallized, however, before he became a regular contributor to *Fraser's Magazine*, though its formation could have been influenced by his friendship with Maginn or by the opinions of Carlyle and Macaulay. He devoted to this poet one of his earliest reviews, selecting for his criticism Montgomery's poem "Woman: The Angel of Life", published at that time. His judgment is entirely negative: he utterly condemns the poem as unbearably wearisome when compared with the unintentional humour of the poet's previous absurd works, recommends it as a gentle narcotic in "the most desperate case of want of sleep",⁸⁹ and proceeds:

"You could not help being jolly with 'Satan'; he created a laugh beneath the ribs of 'Death'. 'Oxford' was droll to a degree; and so forth: but here, in 'Woman', everything is dead. Page after page there is the same sound, somnolent, sonorous snore. It is not enough to say that the book is *dull* — it is *dullness*; the embodied appearance of 'the mighty Mother' herself" (*Works* I, 26).

He puts this main critical reservation of his also in verse, adjoined to the last-but-one extract he quotes:

⁸⁵ For the quotations see Thomas R. Lounsbury, *The Life and Times of Tennyson* (From 1809 to 1850), New Haven: Yale University Press, London: Oxford University Press, 1915, pp. 199, 200; for the whole analysis see *ibid.*, pp. 178ff.

⁸⁶ For the views of Carlyle see *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling and Robert Browning*, pp. 192–193; for those of Macaulay see his celebrated attack on the poet in "Mr. Robert Montgomery", *The Edinburgh Review*, April 1830; see also *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*, by his nephew Sir George Otto Trevelyan, Bart., enlarged and completed edition (1908), 2 vols., Longmans, Green and Co., London, New York, Toronto, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, 1923, II, 599 and note.

⁸⁷ One of the popular productions of Montgomery was a collection of religious poems *Satan, or Intellect Without God* (1829).

⁸⁸ For the quotations see Thrall, *op. cit.*, p. 101 and Lounsbury, *op. cit.*, pp. 185–186.

⁸⁹ *Works* I, 25.

"And so and so, and so and so,
Does Bob Montgomery onward go.
In snuffling, snoring, slumberry verse,
Smooth as the motion of a hearse;
A swell of sound inducing sleep,
But not a thought in all the heap.
A spinning Jenny would compose
A hundred thousand lines like those,
From rising until setting sun,
And after all no business done" (Works I, 28).

In this review Thackeray for the first time uses as one of his critical weapons the trick of reversing the quotation (from the conclusion of the poem), which is evaluated by Saintsbury as "almost a stroke of genius"⁹⁰ and by means of which he very convincingly demonstrates that neither his version nor the original has any sense whatever. Although so early, this apposite review is certainly more amusing than the poem dealt with. I especially liked the confession, in the opening lines, that the only pleasant line he found in the book was the name of the printer on the last page, "set up as the last milestone, to show that our wearisome pilgrimage was at an end".⁹¹ His critical judgment is entirely fair and just, though merciless, and reminds me very much of the later assessment of this poem by his contemporary R. H. Horne⁹² (though Thackeray himself seemed not to have noticed this similarity when he later reviewed Horne's book, for he does not comment upon it). As Gulliver has pointed out, Thackeray's review was also effective, for Montgomery made some alterations in the later editions of his poem which made it impossible to reverse his lines so easily.⁹³ It is symptomatic of Thackeray's later development after 1848 that he substantially modified his views on Montgomery's poetry, as follows from his letter to the poet of 1850, in which he thanked him for his poems, referred to Macaulay's sharp criticism, and proceeded:

"It was not fair to judge of you or any man by his works at nineteen, though many men would be proud to have been able to write as you did then, at any period of their lives. And it will give me great pleasure to know your works better & and you in your works, as I promise myself to do ere many days are over" (*Letters* II, 687).

As Dodds correctly remarks, it would be interesting to know whether in writing this letter Thackeray remembered what he himself had written about Montgomery's poetry in his early review.⁹⁴

When a few years after the publication of his review of Montgomery, Thackeray started to work as a professional literary and art critic, his attention was in the first place attracted by poetry published in the extremely popular illustrated *Annals* which in the preceding decade (the 1820s) could still boast of such celebrated contributors as Wordsworth, Lamb, Coleridge, Southey, Scott, Moore, Carlyle and other distinguished men of letters and critics, but at the time

⁹⁰ *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 20.

⁹¹ *Works* I, 25.

⁹² See op. cit., pp. 425ff.

⁹³ See op. cit., p. 44.

⁹⁴ See op. cit., p. 11 and note (Dodds evaluates Thackeray's review positively, but ascribes to it a lack of subtlety).

⁹⁵ Op. cit., p. 252; for the whole analysis see Chapter IX, "The *Annals*", part one, "The Origin and History of the *Annals*".

when they caught Thackeray's critical eye had rapidly assumed, as Lounsbury has shown, "a specially aristocratic and exclusive character, the rank of the writer frequently supplying the lack of merit in the writing".⁹⁵ When Thackeray started to subject them to his critical assessment, they could therefore be regarded as a sort of by-product of the Silver-Fork School, most of the best-known representatives of which were their regular or occasional contributors (Disraeli, Bulwer, Lady Blessington). though of course many other second-rate poets not connected with this school contributed to them, as for instance Robert Montgomery, Barry Cornwall, Horace Smith, Mrs. Hemans, L. E. L., and so forth. As Lounsbury has pointed out, the degeneration of the literary matter and especially of the poetry soon attracted the attention of the more clear-sighted critics, who correctly understood that the commercial spirit governing this sort of literary enterprise was not favourable to art. Thackeray certainly belonged to these, for he paid detailed critical attention to the *Annals* in three reviews of his (though White doubts his authorship of the first), published between 1837 and 1839, upon which I have already drawn when assessing his criticism of fashionable prose. He pays more attention to the poetry published in the *Annals*, however, though of course his main concern are the illustrations, as I have already pointed out. As he shows, the poetry to be found in the *Annals* has been already sufficiently abused by "the wicked critics", but in spite of this he always finds some space for sharply condemning the major part of it as "silly twaddle", "boundless dullness and imbecility" and "fashionable milk and water", characterized by emptiness of content and imperfection of form, unintelligibility or entire lack of thought, sham sentiment and unnatural, pompous and conventional poetic style. In his opinion "such a display of miserable mediocrity, such a collection of feeble verse, such a gathering of small wit, is hardly to be found in any other series".⁹⁶

The main target of his criticism is the silly versifying of Lady Blessington, pervaded by sham sentiment and written in an entirely conventional form. In this case his criticism is entirely just, yet in these reviews of Thackeray's we come across one of the two exceptional cases mentioned above, in which he commits the error of overestimating second-rate talent, a case not unfamiliar to us from his criticism of fashionable fiction — that of L. E. Landon. Even here he gives this authoress much more than is her due, writing of her as "a woman of genius" led astray by the bad pictures to which she wrote her poems, thus degrading her talent "by producing what is even indifferent",⁹⁷ and placing her alongside Miss Mitford (though in this case he is nearer the truth, for he only speaks of this authoress as of "a lady of exquisite wit and taste", and that indeed she was). There are some other second-rate poets for whom Thackeray finds in these reviews some words of praise (James Montgomery, his friend R. M. Milnes, Mrs. Hall) but none of these are so unduly extolled by him as Miss Landon. His attitude to this poetess was, however, after all not entirely uncritical, but this we learn elsewhere than in his criticism — he parodied her, as we have seen, and made her the favourite poetess of the

⁹⁶ For the quotations see *Works* II, 337, 366, 354, 375, 337.

⁹⁷ For the quotations see *Works* II, 339, 347; see also *ibid.*, pp. 353–354 and his very positive assessment of the poems in Miss Landon's novel *Ethel Churchill* (see Gulliver, op. cit., p. 205).

sentimental young girls, Adeliza Grampus and Caroline Gann. He also proves to be a good judge when he praises, in one of these reviews, "a very clever ballad"⁹⁸ by Miss Barrett.

In the third of these reviews he also takes from his critical armory his most effective weapons — satire and parody. He creates here a satirical portrait of an unsuccessful poetess, Rosalba de Montmorency, who complains in a letter to the editor of *Fraser's Magazine* that her humble origin (her real name is Eliza Slabber and she lives in Camden Town) prevents her from joining "the chorus of England's aristocratic minstrelsy" in the *Annals*. In the poems offered by this authoress for publication ("The Battle-Axe of Polacca" and "The Almack's Adieu", which are both variations upon the popular ballad "Wapping Old Stairs") Thackeray parodies the poems celebrating medieval chivalry and the sentimental verses about noble lords and ladies which were a typical feature of the *Annals*, expressing his preference for the popular song upon which his poetess formed her verses and characterizing it as "one of the simplest and most exquisite ditties in our language".⁹⁹ In this connection it should be pointed out that Thackeray created a whole gallery of similar satirical portraits of fashionable poets and poetesses,¹⁰⁰ his best achievement being the character of Miss Bunion, who is mentioned in *Love-Songs of the Fat Contributor* and appears in *Mrs. Perkins's Ball* and in *Pendennis*. Thackeray depicts her as a plain old maid, sincere and not snobbish, who writes poetry full of suffering, devastating passion and despair (*Heartstrings, The Deadly Nightshade, Passion Flowers, The Orphan of Gozo*), although in her private life she is an eminently practical person, enjoying to the full all the material joys of life. According to the authors of *CHEL* this character is a composite caricature of Mrs. Hemans and L. E. L., to a certain extent unjust to both authoresses:

"One may ... say that a certain amount of injustice has been done to both, and especially to Mrs. Hemans, during the last half, if not three quarters, of a century by Thackeray's 'Miss Bunion'. It was in no way a personal caricature, for Mrs. Hemans was almost beautiful, and L.E.L. decidedly, though irregularly, pretty. But it hit their style, and especially their titles, hard, and their sentiment has long been out of fashion."¹⁰¹

In 1840 Thackeray devoted to fashionable poetry his satirical sketch *The Fashionable Authoress*, considered previously in the analysis of his criticism of fashionable prose, and in 1841 another satirical sketch, this time concerned exclusively with fashionable poetry, *Reading a Poem* (*Loose Sketches, The Britannia*, 1 and 8 May 1841). This is a witty assault upon those members of the English aristocracy who have gone "poetry-mad" under the influence of Byron's popularity (as Thackeray's mouthpiece Yellowplush points out), but who do not possess the genius of their model and are therefore obliged to get their poems written by literary hacks and publish them under their own names. The poem

⁹⁸ For the quotations see *Works* II, 339, 351.

⁹⁹ For the quotations see *Works* II, 371, 374.

¹⁰⁰ Lady Blanche Bluenose (*Cox's Diary* and *Reading a Poem*), Titmarsh's daughter Jemima (*Rolandseck*), Lord Southdown (*Jeames's Diary*), Adolphus Simcoe (*Miss Tickletoby's Lectures on English History*), Miss Rudge (*Authors' Miseries*), Clementina Clutterbuck (*The Book of Snobs*), Clarence Bulbul (*Our Street*), Mrs. Timmins (*A Little Dinner at Timmins's*), Fitzroy Clarence (i.e. the Fat Contributor), the Hon. Percy Popjoy and Lady Violet Lebas (*Pendennis*).

¹⁰¹ *CHEL* XII, 125–126.

"The Song of the Flower-pot" which is thus "created" by Lord Daudley, is a successful parody of the poetic effusions to be found in the *Annals*, as Thackeray underlines in a footnote:

"A poem very much of this sort, from which the writer confesses he has borrowed the idea and all the principal epithets, such as 'free and feathery', 'mild and winsome', &c., is to be found in the *Keepsake*, nor is it by any means the worst ditty in the collection" (*Works* III, 478n.).

For his further wholesale attack upon fashionable poetry Thackeray sharpened his weapons of burlesque and parody. In *Punch* of June 18, 1842, he published his burlesque *The Legend of Jawbrahim-Heraudee*, choosing as his targets several second-rate poets of his time (Heraud, Bulwer, Milnes, Rogers, Moore, Montgomery, "Alphabet Bayley"), but not entirely sparing even some of their great predecessors, notably Wordsworth and Byron. As the title of this burlesque suggests, the main butt of his satire (which was this time, however, very good-natured) was John Abraham Heraud, his fellow Fraserian, whose best-known poetical works were two long religious poems, "The Descent into Hell" (1830) and "The Judgment of the Flood" (1834). As Dr. Thrall has pointed out, Heraud was one of the few inferior poets who escaped the critical assaults of the Frasersians, for these sincerely admired his poetry (this being, as Dr. Thrall shows, one of the weak points of their critical work¹⁰²). In contradistinction to his colleagues, Thackeray revealed a keener critical judgment, for in his burlesque he ridicules all the main weak points of Heraud's poetry — the intolerable tediousness and unjustifiable length of his poems, the archaic style, unnatural metaphors and excessive use of learned and foreign words.

Some of the productions of the second-rate poets of his time are also considered by Thackeray in his review "About a Christmas Book", to which I have several times referred in my preceding analysis. His main concern are the illustrations, but he finds warm words of appreciation for Burns and Cowper, as we have seen, and also some qualified praise for Collins,¹⁰³ and at the same time criticizes some inferior productions (not always mentioning the names of the authors), condemning some of them as "of the theatrical sort, and quite devoid of genuineness and simplicity". I have already quoted some of his judgments upon the Catholic poetry published in the book he is assessing, and we should add that he also takes exception to this poetry as packed with "all the middle-age paraphernalia, produced with an accuracy that is curiously perfect and picturesque".¹⁰⁴

In April 1846 Thackeray published his review of Bulwer's epic poem "The New Timon" in the *Morning Chronicle*. The poem was published anonymously and Bulwer jealously guarded this anonymity and even disclaimed authorship, though the work was universally ascribed to him. Thackeray pretends that he accepts Bulwer's disclaimer, but he knows Bulwer's poetic style so intimately (indeed, he had ridiculed it in marginal comments much earlier than this and had much to say upon it when he reviewed Bulwer's dramas, as we shall see)

¹⁰² See op. cit., pp. 112–113.

¹⁰³ See especially *Works* VI, 540, 547. In 1829 he was writing with his friend Carne a parody on Collins's "The Passions. An Ode to Music" (see *Letters* I, 39), though this was one of the earliest poems he had learned by heart in 1818 in order to please his mother who was very fond of it (see *Letters* I, 9 and note).

¹⁰⁴ For the quotations see *Works* VI, 546.

that he cannot but come to the conclusion that the poem bears the stamp of Bulwer's "tone of thought and jingle of verse" in every line. Thus in the hero of the poem, Morvale, he recognizes "a hero of the Lyttonian order", who, with the "calmness of his force, the prodigious pomposity of his language, and *the smallness of his feet*", is "worthy of the great painter of heroic dandies". He also recognizes Bulwer in the author's liberal usage of substantivized adjectives, which are by the "easy typographical artifice" of being written with capital letters "exalted to extra importance", and of substantives figuring as verbs, and indignantly asks whether any writer "has a right to take liberties in this way with our venerable mother, the English grammar", pointing out that Bulwer "has done so repeatedly". His whole review is in fact a polemic directed to those critics who were loud in praise of the poem, compared its author to Churchill, Crabbe and Byron, and even maintained that "a great poet is *at length* before the world", who "is to be a standard study beside Byron". In contradistinction to these critics (whose eulogies are to his great indignation quoted on the first page of the new edition), Thackeray finds the poem very bad and intolerably tedious, its style "tawdry to a wonder", strongly reminding him of "the manner of the Cambridge prize poems", "the use of the English language supereminently coxcombical", the descriptions turgid and weak, the sentiment untrue, the author's notions of the East absurd and the plot typically romantic and conventional. He does find in the poem some "pretty and unaffected lines" and praises one couplet for being as "terse and happy as a satiric couplet of Pope", but the poem as a whole is utterly (and justifiably) condemned by him:

"This is called a romance of London. Clever sketches of O'Connell, the Duke of Wellington, Lord Stanley, Lord John Russell, and Sir Robert Peel, are introduced in the early part: but for these 'the New Timon' might be a romance of Jericho, or any other city. 'The New Timon' is not like Timon at all; the poetry, to our mind, is not like nature, though it is sometimes something like poetry. It has the loudness, but not the passion — the rage without the strength. It is ingenious, often pretty and fanciful; scarcely ever, as we think, natural and genuine."¹⁰⁵

He finishes his review with the following statement, in which he refers to Bulwer's diatribe against Tennyson's poetry, contained in the first publication of the work, but suppressed in the reviewed edition:

"The protest here is against the critics rather than against Timon. He is *not* a great poet come amongst us: he is not a resuscitator of our bardic glories, &c. Great poets we have amongst us perhaps; and the best thing the writer of Timon has done in this the third and gilt-edged edition, is to expunge an impertinence towards one of them, which appeared in the former issues of this most bebuffed of poems."¹⁰⁶

Thackeray's last critical contribution which concerns contemporary minor poetry is one part of his summary review "A Grumble about the Christmas Books", in which he deals with Bulwer's poem published in the popular annual *Fisher's Drawing-room Scrap-book*, and dedicated to the editor of the publication. Thackeray's personal friend, Mrs. Norton.¹⁰⁷ His original intention was to review

¹⁰⁵ *Contributions*, 133; for the preceding quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 134, 131, 132, 133, 134, 128, 133, 129, 133, 132, 130.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁷ He became acquainted with this lady about 1845 and she helped him to gain access to aristocratic society. He rewarded her by writing a poem "The Anglers" for this very publication which he was reviewing.

the whole publication and praise it, as he confessed in a letter to the editor,¹⁰⁸ but he did not find this an easy task, for the illustrations did not come up to his expectations, as they went along the old lines criticized by him before in other publications of this sort. Moreover, his critical attention was almost wholly captivated by Bulwer's poem,¹⁰⁹ which aroused his deepest indignation and to which he devoted almost the whole review. He sharply criticizes the poet's pompous metaphors and his "platitudes" and "beatitudes", and adds:

"There's some error in the Bard's (or, to speak more correctly, the Bart's) description. This sort of writing, this flimsy, mystical nambypamby, we hold to be dangerous to men and reprehensible in Barts" (*Works* VI, 603).

In the rest of the review he speaks with great admiration of Mrs. Norton's beauty, but unfortunately, too, of her poetry, committing the second of the errors mentioned above by evaluating her as a great artist and a true poet and overestimating her art as spontaneous and natural, "sometimes gay, often sad, always tender and musical":

"What a mournful, artless beauty is here! What a brooding, tender woman's heart!" (*Works* VI, 606).

As Hollingsworth has pointed out, it was apparently this article in *Fraser's* (chronologically Thackeray's last critical attack upon Bulwer) which roused the poet to such desperation that he intended to send his relentless (but, let us add, entirely just) critic a challenge to duel, though he was fortunately prevented from realizing this rash impulse.¹¹⁰

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As follows from the analysis in this chapter, Thackeray's criticism of poetry, though not among his best critical achievements, is not wholly to be condemned, nor devoid of interest. The main limitation of his critical approach is that in his regular critical contributions concerned with this essentially different literary art he limits himself to the same criteria as those he exploited when evaluating fiction and especially that he is much more inclined to lay very slight emphasis on the specific aesthetic elements of the works he is here dealing with. What he expects from poetry is first and foremost truth of life, naturalness, sincerity in emotion and moral purity, and he is quick to discern any trace of false feeling, affectation and pose in the poetry he assesses as critic or reader, being in this respect at fault only in one case — in that of Byron. Yet he does not ignore the pure aesthetic qualities of poetry altogether — as we have seen, he has something to say on the poetical style of several minor poets (the poetesses of the *Annals*, Bulwer), but also of greater ones (Herwegh). I believe that my analysis also shows that he was not entirely unsusceptible to poetic beauty. Though in harmony with his conception of beauty in art he did prefer, both as

¹⁰⁸ See *Letters* II, 263–265.

¹⁰⁹ So was the attention of his friend FitzGerald, who (in a letter to W.F. Pollock of 1846) evaluated Thackeray's poem as "pretty verses", but sharply criticized Bulwer's poem as "vulgar flattery", pointing out that it was "impossible to read verses worse in sense or sound" (*More Letters of Edward FitzGerald*, ed. William Aldis Wright, Macmillan and Co., London, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1902, pp. 20–21).

¹¹⁰ See op. cit., p. 200.

critic and reader, the sublime of a humbler sort and "appreciated fully", as Enzinger has it, "the charm of well-fashioned light verse and the subjective note that came honestly from tender, sensitive personalities like Goldsmith's," as reader he was also able to discern and enjoy the highest sublime provided by the poetry of great poetical geniuses whose works had been produced before he mounted upon the critical bench. I cannot therefore fully identify myself with the following final assessment of Enzinger of Thackeray as a critic of poetry:

"In nothing that Thackeray says about poetry is there any sure indication that he could consider the reading of a poem an emotional experience entirely apart from ethical associations. In the lines that stir him most he finds 'loftiness' although the modern reader is likely to find mainly conventional rhetoric; he is susceptible to obvious appeals to the heart, but apparently very little so to appeals to the senses and the imagination."¹¹¹

Though this conclusion is based upon the limited material which this scholar had at his disposal when he wrote his study (published in the 1930s), he takes no notice whatever of Thackeray's comments on Keats and Wordsworth, which are to be found in his material and which invalidate most of the quoted assessment (these are comments of Thackeray the reader, but as Enzinger did include other statements of this type to be found outside Thackeray's regular criticism, he ought to have taken even these into account). They are a very convincing proof that Thackeray did consider "the reading of a poem an emotional experience entirely apart from ethical associations" and that he was susceptible not only to appeals to the heart, but also to those to the senses and the imagination. Besides some of his comments on the poetry of Tennyson, Gay and Herwegh dealt with in this chapter and some quotations to be found in the second chapter (especially his comments on Wordsworth's poetry and his comparisons of poetry to music), I can quote another statement indicating this, which is the direct continuation of one such comparisons, but not yet cited:

"Keats's *Ode to the Grecian Urn* is the best description I know of that sweet, old, silent ruin of Telmessus. After you have once seen it, the remembrance remains with you, like a tune from Mozart, which he seems to have caught out of heaven, and which rings sweet harmony in your ears for ever after! It's a benefit for all after-life! And you have but to shut your eyes, and think, and recall it, and the delightful vision comes smiling back, to your order! — the divine air — the delicious little pageant, which nature set before you on this lucky day" (*Works* IX, 174—175).

It is of course true that Thackeray was more susceptible to the appeals to his heart, finding as he did the highest beauty of art in the feeling of Christian love pervading some of the poems he reviewed or read and most highly appreciating poetry imbued with strong religious feeling, family affections, sweet melancholy, honesty and charity, yet the capacity for enjoying the sensuous beauty of poetry certainly cannot be entirely denied him.

As far as the critical value of his assessments of poetry is concerned, we have seen that Thackeray also in this field revealed an essentially sound judgment, especially in his evaluation of lighter, minor, or merely bad poetry, in which he commits relatively few critical errors (his overestimation of the poetry of L. E. L., Mrs. Norton, Thomas Hood and Horace Smith). What is worth special notice is that when he is in no doubt about the artistic inferiority of a poetical production, and even in such cases when the work has been highly

¹¹¹ Op. cit., Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 65; for the previous quotation see *ibid.*, p. 61.

praised by other critics of his time, he does not resort to the ethical evaluation which he otherwise regarded as indispensable. This seems to suggest that he thought even less of the prevalent fashionable modes in poetry than he did of those in fiction, in the evaluation of which the moral criterion is rarely wanting, and that he thus in fact, and of course entirely justifiably, excluded the fashionable poetry he evaluated from the sphere of genuine art altogether. In assessing great poets he has worse faults, not doing full justice to Herwegh and not being a reliable prophet as to the future fame of this poet, while he is unjust to Byron, wrongly attributes some bathetic verses to Burns and fails to understand Browning.