

Pantůčková, Lidmila

## Conclusion

In: Pantůčková, Lidmila. *W.M. Thackeray as a critic of literature*.  
Vyd. 1. Brno: Universita J.E. Purkyně, 1972, pp. 414-424

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/103955>

Access Date: 22. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study of Thackeray's critical works has revealed him to be a critic of by no means the lowest order of excellence, whose work is characterized by considerable merits, though his critical approach is not devoid of faults. If we are to sum up his strong points in conclusion, I think we should in the first place emphasize the highly original character and quality of his critical approach, the main factor of which is represented by his remarkable personality, the personality of "an inquiring observer" and of a psychologist "endowed with a gift of amused, or already saddened. penetration", as Cazamian has it.<sup>1</sup> Summed up in general, his criticism is characterized by a surprisingly catholic taste, as Dodds and Saintsbury also point out,<sup>2</sup> a broad fresh sanity, notable clearness of thought, great lucidity and straightforwardness in statement, concreteness of analysis, essentially sound judgment, keen wit, energy and a militant spirit, and reveals a critic who is cultivated, honest, tolerant in the main, sensitive, generous, humorous or sharply satirical, as the case may be, and throughout deeply human, a critic, moreover, who is conscious of the limitations of his capacities and who does not undertake tasks which are beyond his power; a critic whose every statement is permeated with truth and sincerity. For the most part what his criticism primarily reveals is his devotion to the cause of truth in literature and life, his hatred of hypocrisy, affectation and cant, and his clear-sighted recognition of sincerity and sham. Thackeray wrote with an honest desire to understand his author, to interpret him, to do justice to him, to speak "the whole truth" about him — not with the purpose of exhibiting his own learning and cleverness at his author's expense. As Clapp has pointed out, in criticism Thackeray "stands, not with the plodders and the pedants, certainly not with the merely clever, but with the versatile, the suggestive, the intelligent and alert".<sup>3</sup>

In the second place, Thackeray's criticism is well-informed and reveals his perfect acquaintance with the literature of his own country and a very good knowledge of the literatures of several European countries and of the United States of America, his intimate familiarity with the historical, social and cultural background against which these literatures originated and his deep interest in the most topical social, political, economic and literary problems of his time. And in the third place, the amount of his critical work is astonishing in quantity but also not unremarkable in scope and variety. The fields which he had no hesitation in entering upon as a professional critic are relatively very broad, and if we add to his formal critical contributions the informal opinions he expressed on books read and plays seen, the range of his interest becomes surprisingly extensive, covering the whole of English literature and almost all the literary streams and schools that appeared in France and Germany

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 1203.

<sup>2</sup> See Dodds, *op. cit.*, p. 35; Saintsbury, *A History of Criticism*, III, 500.

<sup>3</sup> "Critic on Horseback", pp. 299-300.

before his time, but especially during his whole lifetime. And what is perhaps his strongest point is his emotional, but at the same time simple and natural style, formally perfect, but at the same time possessing the charm of familiar talk, which develops to maturity with the progress of time and which makes his critical contributions permanently readable and quotable, even if they frequently deal with writers who have fallen into deserved oblivion.

The research done in this study tends in my opinion to refute the view supported by E. R. Clapp, who maintains that Thackeray's judgments are not consciously founded "upon a critical credo".<sup>4</sup> Although Thackeray himself would have certainly refused to be restrained by any formal critical code and never elaborated any consistent critical theory, his judgments and his critical method are founded upon a fairly definite conception of the substance and function of criticism and his critical contributions represent its practical application. Although he is often rebuked for not having taken his critical function seriously, with the corollary that it would thus be unjust to hold him responsible for the opinions expressed in his critical contributions, some of which are very superficial (Cazamian<sup>5</sup>), for having written his contributions from day to day "without much thought of what he would like to do or what would help him to build a reputation" (Ray<sup>6</sup>), nevertheless the analysis performed in this work and many of the quotations cited from his criticism prove in my opinion that he did not take his task lightly and that he strongly felt the social responsibility inherent in his critical office. It is certainly true that the motives of his professional critical work were predominantly economic, that criticism was employment for him, not vocation, that he mostly had to write in a hurry and very often had no possibility of influencing the selection of what was offered to him for reviewing — in short, that he was to a great extent, like his hero Pendennis, a "hired labourer", whose Pegasus was "put into harness, and obliged to run a stage every day", and who performed his work "without the least enthusiasm, doing his best or pretty nearly, and sometimes writing ill and sometimes well".<sup>7</sup> Yet we have also evidence that his first critical contributions (to the *National Standard*) were written at a time when he was still materially well provided for and that nevertheless he devoted himself to his task with great zeal and energy. Even if he certainly did do some unselective hack journalistic work especially for the *Constitutional* and the *Examiner*, as a literary critic and book reviewer he mostly selected for evaluation such works which seemed to him interesting or useful, which fell within the sphere of his personal non-literary interests, which gave him the opportunity for good fun-making or for using the sharp critical weapons of a determined fighter for realism in literature, or from which he could gain some inspiration or useful facts for his imaginative work. We do know, too, that occasionally he booked the reviews of some specific works with the editors and that when he offered his services to the magazines he usually specified his interests and capacities. We have also much evidence that he devoted to his critical work considerable honest effort, again closely resembling his later hero Pendennis:

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 1203.

<sup>6</sup> *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 201; see also Malcolm Elwin, *op. cit.*, p. 106, *The Biographical Edition of the Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, XIII, 712.

<sup>7</sup> For the quotations see *Works* XII, 606.

"Pen took a great deal of pains with the writing of his reviews, and having a pretty fair share of desultory reading, acquired in the early years of his life, an eager fancy and a keen sense of fun, his articles pleased his chief and the public, and he was proud to think that he deserved the money which he earned" (*Works* XII, 442—443).

How strongly he was aware of his responsibility as a critic towards his readers is also clearly manifested in his consistent efforts to correct the unfounded enthusiasm of some critics of his time over some new books which in his opinion (almost always well substantiated) did not deserve such an honour, in his refusal to be browbeaten into singing eulogies, as well as in his courage in assuming a negative attitude even when his adversary was an immensely popular writer lauded to the skies by other critics. In general we may indeed say that his criticism is a concrete embodiment, with only a few exceptions noted *passim* in this work, of his critical ideals and that he appears in his reviews and parodies as a critic who only rarely delivers essentially erroneous critical judgments.

I cannot therefore wholly subscribe to Clapp's opinion that Thackeray's verdicts have often a kind of rightness about them, which is in the letter sound, "and yet there are in [them] a certain lack of proportion, a misplaced emphasis, the wrong note somehow, which prevent a complete acquiescence".<sup>8</sup> I have ascertained such misplaced emphasis and a certain lack of proportion in his later criticism, but as far as his professional criticism of the 1830s and 1840s is concerned, I believe that it is Stevenson who is right when he points out that Thackeray's criticism "was usually sound in ultimate verdicts"<sup>9</sup> and that what he criticized in most cases really deserved criticism. As we have seen, Thackeray's praise and blame are, with only a few exceptions, well-placed and in most cases his critical judgments have also been fully confirmed by posterity. He never praises rubbish, though he occasionally tends to overestimate mediocre writers, and we may certainly be content to follow his lead especially when he is evaluating second-rate fiction and bad poetry, notably the literary fashions current in those spheres of literature in his time. Only very rarely does he stand out as a dispenser of mere praise or indulge in excessively laudatory remarks and he almost always takes note, too, of the weak points of the authors to whose achievement he pays tribute. In this respect he did indeed fulfil the demand he formulated when assessing Addison the critic:

"A very great and just and wise man ought not to praise indiscriminately, but give his idea of the truth" (*Works* XIII, 526).

Enzinger has therefore in my opinion rightly emphasized that Thackeray's criticism was useful because he discerned the danger of excessive praise.<sup>10</sup> Nor did Thackeray indulge in excessive blame, but almost always gave ungrudging tribute to anything good he found in the works assessed, whatever reservations he might have had about the individual work as a whole or some aspects of its author's creative approach. On the other hand, however, if the work assessed deviated markedly from the standard of real excellence, he was swift to pronounce his sentence of blame and in the period of his professional criticism he

---

<sup>8</sup> "Critic on Horseback", p. 287.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> See *op. cit.*, vol. 21, No. 2, p. 160.

was almost always justified in doing so. What irritated him was dishonesty, insincerity, egotism or self-complacency on the part of the writer, insufficient knowledge of the subject, tediousness, and especially any misrepresentation of reality. How great a master of irony Thackeray was can be most fully seen in his reviews of tedious books, for in such cases his criticism becomes even more clearly creative than in others and is an advance upon the work criticized — he succeeds in making even such works amusing and interesting. In these cases, too, he never stopped to consider whether his adversary was worthy of him, the outcome of this procedure being that, thanks to his witty ridicule and splendid satire, he saved many insignificant scribblers from deserved oblivion, who will now live in his works for ever (as Heine said of the objects of Lessing's criticism) "as insects stuck in a piece of amber".<sup>11</sup> In none of these cases, however, apart from the personalities characteristic of his pamphlet "Mr. Yellowplush's Ajew", does his criticism turn into "too much abusing", malice or slander, for the faults he exposes fully deserve the censure he gives them. And even if his censure is not so entirely justifiable, as is the case in his criticism of French literature, he is never personal or malicious and in this his assessment markedly differs from the hysterical anti-French attacks of most of the English critics of his time. It is true, however, that in his earliest critical years he tended to be more censorious than sympathetic and was more determined to dwell on failings — fortunately mostly in cases in which critical severity was amply justified.

As we have noticed *passim* in this study, in the later period of his life Thackeray to a large extent modified his earlier critical standards and methods and significant modifications may be also observed in his critical views of the works of other writers and his own. The most convincing of the earlier proofs of these changes is the injustice he committed against his former favourite and model Fielding in his lectures on the *English Humourists of the 18th Century*. Among the later proofs we find his confession, of 1858, that he hated the *Book of Snobs* and could not read a word of it, and his apologies, public and private, to the authors he criticized and ridiculed in the heyday of his critical career. These modifications do not signify an entire retreat from his earlier critical credo and do not represent any sudden and revolutionary changes, but the culmination of a long process, rooted in the gradual development of his general world outlook and conditioned not only by the altered circumstances of his private and professional life, but also by the changes in the whole political and social climate in England after 1848.

In my opinion again, Thackeray had an almost unflinching sense for the great and permanent values in literature and if he did come across a really great author of genius (although mostly only as a critical reader), he almost always recognized him and in most cases also justly evaluated. The gravest errors he commits in this respect occur in his criticism of French literature, where they are due to his lack of deeper understanding for the national characteristic traits of a literature produced in a country other than his own and for the national character and morality of another people; and further, in his later criticism of English literature, where the errors are due to the modifications in his conception of humour, and the impaired equilibrium of his standards due to the

---

<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Heine, *O Německu (On Germany)*, Čs. spisovatel, Praha, 1951, pp. 114–115.

domination of the moral criterion. His erroneous judgments of Balzac, Byron, Hugo, Sand, Swift, Congreve and Sterne have not been confirmed by posterity, yet even some of these (notably his assessments of Hugo and Sand) contain some grains of truth which may be accepted even nowadays. And, as I have pointed out in my study of Thackeray's criticism of French literature, the deepest root of the mistakes he makes as a reviewer and reader of French books should not be sought for exclusively in his national prejudices, but also in his deeply ingrained distrust of the creative approach characteristic of *L'École romantique*, the traces of which he also discerned (and not wholly unjustifiably) in the novels of George Sand and Balzac — an approach essentially differing from or even antagonistic to his own. His failure to do justice to Balzac and partly, too, to Hugo and Sand, and his predilection for Bernard should not lead us to the precipitate conclusion (such as was made in my opinion for instance by the authors of *CHEL*) that he appreciated only second-rate talent and was not able to do justice to a great one. As we have seen, he castigated many mediocre French writers very correctly and justly, not to mention a host of lesser English writers, and was able, though in some cases with reservations, to appreciate the talent and genius of all the great men of letters, English, German, French or Italian, except Balzac (and, in later years, Flaubert).

My detailed analysis of Thackeray's critical contributions emboldens me further to attempt a correction of some statements pronounced upon Thackeray the critic by certain scholars quoted in my introduction and to dissociate myself in particular from the opinion of Professor Clapp that Thackeray's critical judgments are not consciously founded "upon a basis in principle" and that in Thackeray we should not expect, and in fact do not find, any "aesthetic". Nor can I fully agree with a further statement by the same scholar, that the "considerable consistency" which Thackeray has is not "a consistency of theory" but a "consistency of character and of a few well-grounded extra-literary beliefs".<sup>12</sup> I can accept that part of the statement which points to the lack of a consistent theory, but I feel it should be qualified by adding that this lack is to a large extent compensated for not only by the presence of a fairly definite critical creed, but also of a conscious aesthetic creed. As my analysis shows, Thackeray's criticism is based on the clear and solid principles of his conception of literature and art — which are not so extremely limited in number as Melville for instance believes — principles to which Thackeray consistently adhered until the end of the 1840s, when some of his conceptions underwent significant modifications. For the professional criticism I can therefore accept, too, Clapp's insistence on Thackeray's "considerable consistency", along with his opinion that one of the main factors determining this consistency is the critic's character. Nor is Thackeray's later unprofessional criticism inconsistent, but owing to the noticed modifications (due, *inter alia*, to the development of his personality) the quality of this later consistency is not entirely identical with that of the earlier. The results of my research, then, run counter to the opinions of those scholars who believe that Thackeray's critical approach did not change at all or altered very slightly. Nor can I identify myself with the further opinion of Clapp, that the second main factor determining Thackeray's consistency lies in "a few well-grounded extra-literary beliefs". This of course brings us to a controversy, which

---

<sup>12</sup> "Critic on Horseback", p. 290.

is doomed to remain permanently unresolved between scholars who approach it from diametrically different theoretical angles: the main criteria applied by Thackeray in his criticism will not seem so "extra-literary" to those scholars who conceive literature as a reflection of reality as they do to those who confine themselves to the sphere of the literary work itself and reject any excursions beyond its boundaries. Although I am far from imputing to Thackeray my own point of view, the investigation of his aesthetics and criticism emboldens me to say that his constant concern about the faithfulness of literary depiction to life did not seem even to himself to be founded on extra-literary considerations. As many of his statements have shown, he believed that literature was a picture of society, and that it was therefore impossible to arrive at a fully adequate evaluation of a literary work without a knowledge of its origin or in isolation from the actual historical and social conditions which had given birth to it and which it necessarily mirrored. Even the ethical criterion was in my opinion conceived by him as indispensable in measuring the whole artistic value of a literary work, though it "was by no means [his] only canon of judgment", as Stang also points out,<sup>13</sup> and, in the 1830s and 1840s, was in most cases secondary in significance to the criterion of the "truth" of literature in relation to actual-reality. The analysis of his criticism seems also to suggest that both these criteria, the ethical and that of truth to reality, existed in his consciousness in inseparable unity, though he might not have been aware of this himself. And moreover, as we have seen *passim* in this study, he paid much more attention to the purely aesthetic values of literature than he is usually credited with.

It is true, however, that he might be justifiably reprimanded, as Enzinger maintains, for not being able, as a critic, "to enter a realm of thought and imagination more subtle, searching, and metaphysical than that which he himself explored as a novelist"<sup>14</sup> and, both as a critic and theorist of the novel, for a lack of interest in the more subtle problems of the art of fiction and for his failure to formulate in theory and apply in his criticism all the aesthetic principles which underlie his own literary achievement. We may indeed well apply to him what Margaret Ball wrote about Scott, namely that his aesthetic and literary creed, like that of his predecessor, "consisted of general principles which never resolved themselves into intricate subtleties requiring great space for their development". Like Scott, he "could not think in that way" and from his comments quoted in the first chapter (notably that on Burke's *On the Sublime*) we also know that, like Scott, he was averse to futile theorizing and to "any fine-drawn analysis" and that he therefore, again like his predecessor, excels rather in the practical than in the theoretical sphere — his criteria are always derived from experience and his "ideas [are] concrete, as those of a great novelist must inevitably be".<sup>15</sup> Yet in my opinion, expressed as it has been in the body of this work, Thackeray should not be too severely taken to the task for this limitation of his criticism, since it was a common one in the period at which his aesthetic creed was being formed, when the attention of the critics was not yet focussed on the more subtle issues of the art of

---

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., vol. 21, No. 2, p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> For the quotations see Margaret Ball, op. cit., pp. 138, 139.

fiction. We should also bear in mind the fact that, if not in his criticism (though occasionally, as we have seen, he plumbed considerable depths with his analysis), then at least in his own fiction he did exploit even such subtle techniques of the art of fiction of which he had nothing to say in his theoretical reflections — he developed the fictional point of view, as Loofbourow has shown,<sup>16</sup> thus preparing the ground for the novelists following him and even prefiguring the fictional method of Henry James, occasionally resorted to interior monologue, exploited expressive rhythms and proved himself to be a veritable master of the handling of time, as for instance Henri-A. Talon, Myron Taube and Jean Sudrann have demonstrated.<sup>17</sup> Since he was only secondarily a critic, it is after all quite natural that his aesthetic and critical opinions and principles are not elaborated into any coherent system. It should be also emphasized that on the subject of the art of fiction he did develop a somewhat fuller aesthetic theory and that his discussions were not only concerned with ethical and social problems but also with the manner of presentation.

The analysis of Thackeray's critical work enables me to take exception, too, to the opinion of Clapp cited in the Introduction, namely that owing to its highly elusive individuality Thackeray's criticism defies evaluation and that no rules are quite satisfactory to explain why he selected the particular subjects for his criticism or what are the grounds of his aesthetic and critical principles and critical method. It is certainly true, as the same scholar and also Melville and Stevenson maintain, that his judgments predominantly "came from the heart rather than the intellect" and that "it was fortunate when these coincided",<sup>18</sup> while his criticism is occasionally impaired "by elements of impulse and emotion that bespoke the imaginative creator".<sup>19</sup> I cannot agree with Saintsbury, however, that, "with occasional *aperçus* of surprising acuteness and truth, he was at the mercy of all sorts of gusts, not exactly of caprice, but of irrelevant and extraneous influence".<sup>20</sup> Nor can I subscribe to any critical opinion which maintains that Thackeray's criticism was purely impressionistic, that he relied exclusively upon individual caprice and spontaneous subjective judgments and that, like other impressionistic critics, he was at his weakest when he attempted to account for his likes and dislikes. It is true that his criticism is highly personal and subjective in tone, that he allowed himself from time to time to be carried away by his personal prejudices and was occasionally tempted by his impulsiveness to onesided judgment. In his critical writings we find several personal outpourings of subjective emotion in which he expresses his distaste for such works as offended his national feelings or his notions of moral or aesthetic values, but also some other emotive outbursts in which he expresses his personal gratitude not only to the greatest representatives of world culture, but also to

<sup>16</sup> See op. cit., especially pp. 197, 199.

<sup>17</sup> See Henri-A. Talon, "Time and Memory in Thackeray's 'Henry Esmond'", *The Review of English Studies*, May 1962, XIII, pp. 147-156; Myron Taube, "Contrast as a Principle of Structure in *Vanity Fair*", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 18, September 1963, No. 2, pp. 119-135 and "Thackeray and the Reminiscent Vision", *ibid.*, vol. 18, December 1963, No. 3, pp. 247-259; Jean Sudrann, "The Philosopher's Property: Thackeray and the Use of Time", *Victorian Studies*, June 1967, X, pp. 359-388. For Loofbourow's analysis of Thackeray's usage of expressive rhythms see op. cit., pp. 174-175.

<sup>18</sup> Melville, op. cit., I, 180.

<sup>19</sup> Stevenson, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 261.

some minor writers, for giving him so much aesthetic enjoyment, for touching the deepest chords of his heart, or for providing him with entertainment. Like so many other critics, he also likes to succumb to a momentary impulse, a personal reminiscence or a literary allusion, and digresses from his theme — never, indeed, to make a display of his own wisdom, but always to make the book reviewed more attractive (or repulsive for that matter) to the reader. I do agree with Saintsbury, however, that to regret this impulsiveness “would itself be hopelessly uncritical; for it is beyond all doubt the source, in part if not in whole, of that extraordinary freshness and naturalness which we shall never be tired of noticing in him”.<sup>21</sup> It should also be emphasized that Thackeray’s impulsiveness, as well as the other excesses to which his artistic temperament could have led him, are in most cases curbed by his common sense and controlled by reason, his logical way of thinking, penetrating intelligence and keen observation. In his method, as in that of Hazlitt, we find a healthy foundation of rational judgment and not only an irresponsible outpouring of emotion. I think that of all the scholars who paid attention to this problem it is Dr. Thrall who is closest to the truth:

“However tender and roundabout his sympathies ultimately became, he was never able to revel spontaneously in sentiment as was Dickens. He had early developed too steady and apprehensive an eye for fallacies in himself and others to be caught off guard in any real abandonment of the heart. To the end he remained basically the critic whose understanding of situations and characters was in the first analysis unemotional.”<sup>22</sup>

I do also believe that even his choice of subjects for criticism was entirely rational and that (except for the cases in which he had to accept what was offered to him) he knew perfectly well what “dragon-humbugs” to choose for destruction and what “maidens to succor”. Neither do I think, as Saintsbury and Clapp do, that Thackeray does not provide very good reasons for his opinions, although I realize that most of the reasons he does provide must seem unsatisfactory to those critics who are not concerned with the connection between the literary work and actual reality, reject all “external” standards and concentrate upon the more subjective and relative values implicit within the literary work itself.

Thackeray’s criticism has yet another weak point so far not commented upon — it is unequal in quality, both in the individual stages of its development, in individual spheres of literature and in the evaluation of literatures of individual countries. The best in my opinion is his professional literary criticism, notably that produced in the period between the last years of the 1830s and 1847 and from this again his critical contributions to *Fraser’s Magazine*, *Morning Chronicle* and his *Punch* parodies. Upon this part of his critical legacy we may in my opinion well apply Ray’s assessment of Thackeray’s *Morning Chronicle* contributions as “critical journalism of a high order, which has substantial permanent value”.<sup>23</sup> Of this, once more, the best is his criticism of fiction, especially of the various literary fashions prevalent in his day; his criticism of non-fiction books is valuable, while his criticism of poetry is not of so excellent a standard and his criticism of drama can hardly be called

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> *The Uses of Adversity*, p. 324.

legitimate dramatic criticism. He proved to be — and quite naturally so — a keener and more sensitive critic in the assessment of the literature of his own country than in his criticism of French literature, and he might have even been a better critic of German literature than of French, had he paid more attention to it, as Saintsbury suggests in his positive comment on the review of Herwegh's poems.<sup>24</sup>

As follows from the above, the status of Thackeray as a critic need not be substantially revised, but as we have seen after the reassessment carried out in this work, it certainly cannot be placed on a lower level than that which it had assumed previously, as Clapp has suggested it could be. Owing to the weaknesses in his critical approach here investigated, his critical errors and the unequal quality of his critical production as a whole, it cannot in my opinion be assigned to a higher level, but should definitely retain its present position, with the important stipulation, justified, I believe, by the results of my research, that more justice should be done to his notable achievement as a critic of fiction, especially that of his own time and country. I agree with Clapp that Thackeray cannot be placed in the first rank of the English critics of the past and his own time (as for instance Walker believes<sup>25</sup>). He did not establish new foundations for criticism, did not leave to posterity any systematic literary or critical theories, nor any critical survey of literature of his own or past time (though he partly but not very adequately essayed the last, in his *Lectures on the English Humourists of the 18th Century*). He had little pretension to set himself up as a prophet regarding the course of literary development, though when he occasionally contemplated the future fate of some of the authors he critically considered, both minor and great, he was for the most part right in his prognoses. As Clapp has rightly pointed out, Thackeray is “not the architect of a great critical structure nor the builder of a system; the enduring monuments of criticism do not mark the way he passed”.<sup>26</sup> He is no equal of Coleridge or of Carlyle, nor even of Lewes, for he lacks these critics' interest in theoretically substantiating their personal impressions and he never attempted, as they did, to express the function of literature in terms of any philosophical system of his own. He has something of Hazlitt's warmth, as Clapp points out,<sup>27</sup> and something in the total reminds us of this critic, as we have seen *passim* in this work and as Saintsbury also believes — “the *gusto*, the variety itself, the strange and rare mixture of relish for the things of the street and the things of the study”.<sup>28</sup> Like Hazlitt, Thackeray had manysided sympathies, imagination, natural critical abilities, was a master of paradox and allusion, wrote in a splendid style and even surpassed his predecessor in being better educated and better read and in not limiting himself only to one language and one national literature. Yet he did not achieve Hazlitt's greatness, for he possessed his predecessor's penetration only in the sphere of fiction, and that not everywhere, and lacked it, sometimes signally, in his criticism of poetry and especially of drama. Nor does he achieve the greatness of some of his fellow-Victorians. He equalled Lewes in his fine command of languages and extensive knowledge of continental literature, as

<sup>24</sup> See *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 91.

<sup>25</sup> See *op. cit.*, p. 700.

<sup>26</sup> “Critic on Horseback”, p. 296.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>28</sup> *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 98.

well as in deploring the quality of criticism of his time, yet the latter surpassed him in producing a criticism devoid of any traces of national bias and in formulating a distinct critical programme. As Clapp points out, "Arnold is master of a clarity and strength, and Pater of a subtlety and discrimination at once fine and rich which are not Thackeray's". This scholar rightly adds, however, that "this is testing him by an impossible standard. It is fairer to measure him by what he could do than by what he has made no pretense of doing":

"He is the master of a mood and a moment; his is the free-hand stroke. He draws the vignettes that illustrate the book of criticism, and in them is the living line that makes art of decoration."<sup>29</sup>

Although this conclusion of Clapp cannot be essentially objected to, I do not feel that it does full justice to what Thackeray could do and really did. For even if he lacked some of the qualities of the critics enumerated in the preceding, he had something which none of them possessed — the untiring energy of an uncompromising fighter for realism in literature, who felt called upon to defend the form in which he himself so excelled from maltreatment at the hands of inferior novelists and who exploited in his fight all the weapons in his critical armory, certainly more variously equipped than that of the critics mentioned above, for besides the traditional forms of criticism it also contained his brilliant burlesques and parodies and his outstanding art itself. He endeavoured to do no more than try to convince his own generation, but in this respect he did some very useful work, contributing much to the decrease of the popularity of the current literary fashions and paving the way, as Compton-Rickett also believes,<sup>30</sup> for a more emphatic realism entering the English novel, thus also helping to render the literary taste of his contemporaries more discerning and refined and raising it to a higher level. There is also no doubt that he led the mediocre writers of his time to modify or even abandon their inartistic expressive media and that he may have also contributed in the case of some of them (notably Bulwer at the end of the 1840s) to their temporary adoption of modes of expression not far from those of his own, which, if they had been left to themselves, they would not have chosen to cultivate. As the analysis in this work reveals, I hope, his professional literary criticism was even more important for its time than Enzinger points out in his final assessment of Thackeray's criticism of contemporary fiction:

"His insistence on realism and sincerity could do little harm to a literature that was recovering from Scott by way of Dickens and was committing the sins of sentimentality and affectation. In extolling the humor and characterization of Smollett, in proclaiming the greatness of Fielding, Thackeray reminded the novelists of his time of some touchstones they occasionally ignored. Thackeray's criticism must have been tonic when he wrote it, but one would not care to see it applied to the novel after Zola nor that since Freud."<sup>31</sup>

Besides, his critical writings are in my opinion also important in themselves and deserve a place in the history of English criticism. According to my view, Thackeray at least to some extent fills the gap in the criticism of the novel between Romantic criticism and the formulations of Henry James, which is

<sup>29</sup> For the quotations see "Critic on Horseback", pp. 299, 296.

<sup>30</sup> See op. cit., p. 515.

<sup>31</sup> Op. cit., vol. 21, No. 1, p. 59.

usually regarded, as Stang has pointed out, "as a wasteland, because it produced no systematic treatise on the art of fiction, of the sort that Percy Lubbock wrote", but which in all fairness should not be considered such, as the same scholar emphasizes, for "there was, during this period, a very full discussion of the purpose of fiction, in which every important novelist felt called upon to assert the dignity of his chosen form".<sup>32</sup> As I have tried to prove in this study, Thackeray contributed to this discussion not only as a novelist, as Stang also admits, but also as a reviewer of fiction and parodist, and does therefore deserve a place, if on a somewhat lower level, along with Lewes, now generally regarded as the most distinguished reviewer and critic of the novel in the supposedly barren years between the Romantic critics and James. There is in my opinion no doubt, either, that his criticism would have been more appreciated in its time (and would be in ours), if Thackeray had spoken out as a critic in his own name in all his critical contributions, and his critical legacy had thus been known in its entirety. Had he made criticism the main business of his life, his realistic principles and approach were such as to ensure even greater success — though in that case, of course, the gain would certainly not outweigh the loss of the splendid novelist.

---

<sup>32</sup> For the quotations see Stang, *op. cit.*, p. 223.