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**Thackeray's conception of criticism**

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CHAPTER III

# Thackeray's Conception of Criticism

When attempting to evaluate Thackeray's conception of criticism we come across the same difficulties encountered in our preceding account of his aesthetic creed. It is very difficult to state the conception as a complete and systematic whole, for he has not elaborated any coherent critical theory or distinct critical programme, has not left us any consistent conception of the nature, purpose and function of criticism, the duties and rights of the critic and the reviewer, nor did he systematize the principles which are the basis of his critical judgments or his critical method. In spite of this lack of coherent theory, however, we may again gather some more or less explicitly formulated tenets from his critical practice and obtain a fairly accurate idea of his conception of criticism from the casual remarks upon criticism in general dispersed through his imaginative work, critical contributions and correspondence. An important help for us are also his characters of critics and journalists, by means of which he expressed his own views upon some principles, methods and practices of the criticism of his time. In this chapter I shall try to deduce from these sources the main tenets of his conception, assess the latter in relationship to those of Thackeray's predecessors and contemporaries and attempt to ascertain the position of his conception in the development of English critical theory.

## 1. Thackeray's Views on the Social Position and Function of Criticism

In the 1830s, when Thackeray began working as literary and art critic (in 1833 for the *National Standard* and about 1834—1835 for *Fraser's Magazine* and other periodicals), English criticism found itself, as is sufficiently familiar, in a stage of transition from the Romantic to the Victorian period. Romantic criticism had lost much of its former freshness and strength, for two of its main representatives, Coleridge and Hazlitt, died in the first years of the decade, Lamb in 1834, and their successors, De Quincey, Hunt, etc., did not attain the same level, but only presented in their works a diluted decoction of the critical principles and methods of their teachers. The only great fighter for a new criticism, who followed in their footsteps during this decade, was Carlyle, who published important critical works even after 1830, but even he ceased to take interest in pure literary criticism after this date and finally passed over to biography and history. The surviving Romantic criticism brought with itself into this decade that "lawlessness and rulelessness" by which its representatives, as Saintsbury expressed it, "had effected their and our emancipation" from the Neoclassicist critical doctrine.[1] Even its dispute with the older critical school had not yet been concluded during this decade and the fight went on raging, though perhaps with diminished strength, between the protagonists of Ro-

[1] *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, III, 412.

manticism and the followers of the Neoclassicist school, who were still writing at the time of Thackeray's critical beginnings, notably Jeffrey and Maginn, and to some extent, Lockhart. This complicated situation gave birth to a criticism which is strongly motivated by political or private interests and consequently biased, which is anonymous and thus for the most part very abusive and malicious, which reflects the confusion of taste due to the presence of several reading publics with conflicting tastes, as Hollingsworth pointed out,[2] and which is singularly uncertain both in the basic principles of critical work and in its critical judgments. Most of these characteristic traits survive, too, in the following decade of the 1840s, in which Thackeray wrote his mature literary and art criticism. This is also confirmed by the following complaint voiced in the first year of this decade by one of the critics of *Fraser's Magazine*:

"Can it be said that we have any standard of criticism or literary tribunal? I fear not. The art of criticism is not unknown among us, for we often see good and fair reviews in the journals; but there are few reviews on which an author can fairly depend, and from which the public can safely anticipate any just and able critical examination of a new work demanding notice."[3]

When Thackeray began to work as a critic, he was already familiar with most of the above-mentioned typical features of the criticism and journalism of his time, for since his early youth, as I have pointed out in the first chapter, he regularly followed the most important literary magazines, reviews and daily papers. One of the first of the features which he was able to discern was the prevailing party spirit in criticism, its subservience to the political, social, commercial or private interests of the publishers, or to the interests of the sponsoring political parties. At first he denounced this trait only in direct statements, declaring for instance as early as 1833 in his address to the readers of the *National Standard:*

"To speak plainly, the critics are as much the property of the booksellers as the books themselves, and the oracles speak by the inspiration of those who own them" (*Works* I, 15).

Possessing this early evidence of his critical attitude to the political subservience of the criticism of his time and being familiar with his early progressive political views, we are not surprised to find that when he began to make his first contacts with the magazines in the 1830s, he preferred either those which were politically independent, or those which were near to his radical and liberal inclinations. At the dawn of his critical career he refused to contribute to the *Carlisle Patriot,* the tribune of the interests of the all-powerful Cumberland political family of Lonsdale, as the paper seemed to him too conservative.[4] His first critical contributions were published in the independent Radical magazine the *National Standard,* of which he was a part-owner and the independence of which was therefore particularly precious to him, as follows from his address of 28th December 1833 in which he thanks "the kind reader for his favours to us during the past year", and proceeds:

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[2] See op. cit., p. 225.

[3] "On the Present State of Literary Criticism in England, by one of the reviewed", *Fraser's Magazine,* vol. XXI, February 1840, pp. 196–197; see also p. 198.

[4] See *Letters* III, 39.

"Many long hours and weary nights have we laboured through, to cater for his Saturday's feast. We have, at no great cost to him, and small profit to ourselves, made him acquainted with *some hundreds* of books, pleasant and dull: we have praised, with him, when we found genius or merit; and laughed, with him, at dullness and pretension. May these our weekly meetings long continue! and though we can neither boast of the aid of puffing, or the condescending patronage of publishers, we desire no other praise but what the public may award us, and no other patronage than that which we may merit at their hands" (*Works* I, 47).

Unfortunately, however, this very lack of the publishers' patronage and the slight enthusiasm of the public for the paper brought the *National Standard* to an untimely end. The same fortune was in store for the next Radical paper to which he contributed and in which he again invested his money, the *Constitutional,* which had been created, as Ray has pointed out, "to revive the waning fortunes of the Radical party in the House of Commons by giving it a voice in the daily press", but which could not have chosen a worse time for appearing, for the "Radicals' influence in Parliament diminished daily".[5] The other Radical, liberal or independent magazines to which he contributed in the 1830s and 1840s were the *Anti-Corn Law Circular,* the *London and Westminster Review,* the *British and Foreign Review,* the *Morning Chronicle,* the *Examiner, Punch,* the *Foreign Quarterly Review,* the *Edinburgh Review* and probably the *Morning Advertiser, Galignani's Messenger* and the *Globe.* In the 1830s he applied for the position of the Paris correspondent of the planned, but finally not published evening paper of the rich progressive Liberal, Thomas Wentworth Beaumont, one of the chief originators of the *Westminster Review*, and offered himself, too, as the contributor to the latter magazine in the following decade, but the reward offered seemed to him to be too low. In 1844 he also probably worked as Paris correspondent for a short-lived Radical New York paper, the *Republic.*[6] How seriously he endeavoured to make contact with the liberal press is also confirmed by his joining the Reform Club in 1840, chiefly in the expectation that it would "bring [him] into cohesion with Liberal men, and keep [him] out of temptation to write for Tory papers, of which the pay and the number is by far the greatest".[7]

Owing to his difficult material situation, however, Thackeray did not manage after all to evade this temptation, for the majority of the magazines to which he finally contributed were Conservative. It is necessary to emphasize, however, that he never identified himself with their political programme and that collaboration with them was not particularly agreeable for him. This was especially true in the case of the *Times,* which he contemptuously characterized as "that abominable old Times", and the political programme of which he condemned as "bigotry and wicked lies".[8] As Greig has shown, nor was the editorial staff of this paper satisfied with the political views of the young contributor, sharply protested against them and mutilated his contributions to render them suitable for their purposes.[9] This disagreement culminated in an open break between the editor and Thackeray, but the young journalist, obliged to earn his liveli-

[5] For the quotations see *The Uses of Adversity,* pp. 190, 191.
[6] See W. C. Desmond Pacey, "A Probable Addition to the Thackeray Canon", *PMLA,* LX, 1945, pp. 606–611.
[7] *Letters* I, 424.
[8] *Letters* I, 434; for his other critical comments see *Letters* I, 396, II, 266.
[9] See op. cit., p. 3.

hood, eventually managed to swallow the insult and came to terms with the periodical again.[10] The essentially adverse attitude of the staff of the *Times* to Thackeray is also obvious from the relationship of its main critics to his works, which were mostly treated very unjustly, though there appeared, too, a few approving notices.[11] Thackeray himself characterized the reviews of his novels published in this paper as "careful *dampers*" which did his works "a great deal of mischief" and pointed out that the unfavourable criticism of *Esmond*, which appeared there in December 1852 and condemned the novel as a cynical and dismal picture of human nature, absolutely stopped its sale for a time.[12] The paper did not treat Thackeray well even after his death, as Melville emphasized:

"... *The Times* gave a shorter notice of his death and funeral than any other paper, and was the only daily of any importance that did not insert a leading article on the great loss sustained by the world of letters."[13]

In 1840 Thackeray offered himself as contributor to the Tory *Blackwood's Magazine,* but in his letter to Alexander Blackwood, in which he suggested the sort of contributions that could be expected from him, he made it a preliminary condition that he would not write articles on politics:

"No politics, as much fun and satire as I can muster, literary lath[er] and criticism of a spicy nature, and general gossip" (*Letters* I, 450).

His manuscripts were returned to him, however: it seems that in spite of the recommendation of Thackeray by the Reverend James White as a gentleman with a university education, Blackwood may have hesitated to employ a contributor collaborating with such a liberal magazine as was the *London and Westminster Review.* A little later the magazine declined *The Great Hoggarty Diamond* and its critics ignored Thackeray's works until the time when his reputation was firmly established, when their attitude changed.[14] In January 1847 Thackeray vented the following complaint in his letter to W. E. Aytoun:

"Why don't 'Blackwood' give me an article? Because he refused the best story I ever wrote? ... Upon my word and honour, I never said so much about myself before: but I know this, if I had the command of 'Blackwood', and a humoristical person like Titmarsh should come up and labour hard and honestly (please God) for 10 years, I would give him a hand" (*Letters* II, 262).

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[10] The reconciliation took place in March 1840 (see *Letters* I, 424—425, III, 319 and note).

[11] See Thackeray's reactions to some of these in *Letters* I, 453, II, 7.

[12] For the quotations see *Letters* III, 407; see also ibid., p. 175, *Letters* IV, 125; see also Charlotte Brontë's reaction to this review of *Esmond* in *The Brontës: Life and Letters,* II, 287—288 and Mrs. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë,* John Murray, 1920, p. 588n. For some other reactions of Thackeray see *Works* II, 547—548 (to the criticism of *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*); *"An Essay on Thunder and Small Beer"* (1851) and *Letters* II, 728 (to the criticism of *The Kickleburys on the Rhine*; in private conversation, however, Thackeray admitted that in this case the *Times* was in the right and he did not publish any other Christmas book of this type — see *The Age of Wisdom,* p. 101); *Letters* III, 466 and note (to the review of *The Newcomes,* which was, however, more positive than negative).

[13] William Makepeace Thackeray, *Critical Papers in Literature,* London, Macmillan and Co., Limited, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1904 (further to be denoted as *Critical Papers*), p. x. Gulliver's opinion is less negative (see op. cit., p. 120).

[14] In January 1855 there appeared in it a positive criticism ("Mr. Thackeray and his Novels") which pleased Thackeray very much (see *Letters* III, 407—408).

We have no evidence as to whether Thackeray in his earlier years ever thought of becoming a contributor to the *Quarterly Review,* but we do know that at that period of his life this magazine was too conservative for his taste, even more so than the other Tory papers he collaborated with. This is obvious from his attack on the political programme of this magazine in his *Book of Snobs,* in which he characterizes this notorious periodical as the organ of the country gentry — a class which was in his eyes an anachronistic survival from older times destined to inevitable extinction and therefore not worthy of the anger of the satirist — bellowing its war-cry of "no surrender" of the Conservative party, to which nobody listens.[15] In his later years, however, Thackeray did contribute one article to this magazine,[16] but not until after its editorship had been taken over from Lockhart by the Rev. Whitwell Elwin, who was also responsible for its changed attitude to Thackeray's works, two of which (*The Newcomes* and *The Lectures on the English Humourists of the 18th Century*) were very positively reviewed in it.[17]

It is worth noticing that even Thackeray's most important periodical connection, that with *Fraser's Magazine,* concerns a publication the political line of which essentially differed from his own political views. As Dr. Thrall has shown in detail, *Fraser's Magazine* was the organ of a group of young Conservatives, but "never allied itself with the political policies of any government" and "maintained its independence of party leaders".[18] During the whole period of Thackeray's connection with it the magazine adhered staunchly to Tory principles, vehemently defended the established institutions of the country — especially the Church as the bulwark of English law and order as well as of English monarchy — and sharply attacked the Whigs, Liberals and Radicals, along with materialism and atheism, the Utilitarians, materialistic economists and the theory of Malthus. From the position of Conservatives dissatisfied with the policy of their own party, the members of the staff (and notably Maginn) pilloried even some of those aspects of contemporary political and economic life which deserved criticism — the destitution of the working class, the cruelties perpetrated upon the workers, the employment of children in the factories, the unjust verdicts on the poor, inhuman conditions in prisons, capital punishment, etc. — and attached the main blame especially to the indifference of the factory-owners and the incompetence of all the political parties and their leaders (laying more blame, of course, on the Whigs, Liberals and Radicals than on the Tories, though even the latter are not exempt from their criticism). All these attacks, however, though mostly correctly addressed, were in their substance demagogical, for their purpose was the renewal of the old orders in the country in the form of some kind of revived feudal relationships. Even though Thackeray certainly could sympathize with most of these attacks, and himself contributed much to the magazine's campaign against

[15] See *Works* IX, 345—346.

[16] "Pictures of Life and Character. By John Leech", December 1854.

[17] See Stang, op. cit., pp. 46—47, commenting on Elwin's essay on *The Newcomes* (*The Quarterly Review,* XCVII, September 1855, p. 350), the first review of a novel to appear in this magazine since the notorious attack on *Jane Eyre* by Miss Rigby, later Lady Eastlake, in December 1848. For Thackeray's reactions to earlier positive notices of his works in this magazine see note 25 in the next sub-chapter.

[18] Op. cit., p. 7.

capital punishment, its basic political line remained unacceptable to him. This contradiction between the programme of the magazine and his own views was not, however, unsurmountable, for he was able to select topics in which he was not obliged to vent his political views and, moreover, he was not forced to adapt his contributions to suit the political line of the paper. His situation is convincingly summed up by Dodds:

> "As an advanced left-wing liberal he had to swallow his political creed for the time, and doubtless the complete absence of any political allusions in his contributions, amid the Tory drum-fire of the other writers, can be traced to this necessity."[19]

Thackeray himself later depicted this situation in the similar position of Pendennis on the staff of the Tory paper the *Pall Mall Gazette:* Pen has some qualms of conscience that he should be contributing to a magazine of such a political line, but finally arrives at the conclusion that the real political contents of the paper do not much correspond to Captain Shandon's prospectus and that he can contribute to it "without loss of character or remorse of conscience".[20] Like Thackeray, however, he does not take any share in the political department of the paper, but is its most active literary contributor.

If Thackeray could not identify himself with the political line of *Fraser's Magazine,* he could certainly welcome the incessant and consistent fight of its staff against the political subservience of literary criticism, and its endeavour to liberate criticism from its dependence upon journalist cliques and publishers. The magazine reprehended, for instance, the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* for paying too little attention to contemporary literature and evaluating it "generally according to the political bias of the parties, and without the least reference to the merits and demerits of the book".[21] As Dr. Thrall has shown, the Fraserians were successful in making their reviews independent of both publishers and authors: they attacked even books brought out by their publisher, James Fraser, and were capable of poking fun at other contributors to the magazine, though when the occasion warranted it, they again stoutly championed them. Not even the poetess L. E. Landon was entirely spared, although Maginn was personally infatuated with her.[22] As Dr. Thrall emphasizes, the Fraserians were concerned only with the artistic value of the work assessed: their criticism was not a-political, it is true, but if the work of their political enemy showed literary power, they limited their attacks to his political doctrines or personal character; if it "showed symptoms of pretence, of overwrought sentimentality, of undue length or of otherwise faulty execution, their abuse became jubilant".[23] The relative independence of the magazine enabled the Fraserians to write criticism which in its substance was objective and sound, capable of dealing cruelly with the culprits but at the same time positively evaluating what deserved praise. They were themselves proud of their independent position, as the following passage from their editorial article shows:

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[19] Op. cit., p. 21; see also Thrall, op. cit., pp. 251ff., *The Uses of Adversity,* pp. 197, 238, Melville, op. cit., I, 160.
[20] *Works* XII, 445; see also ibid., pp. 440—441, 446.
[21] *Fraser's Magazine,* XXI, February 1840, p. 197.
[22] See op. cit., pp. 94, 95.
[23] Ibid., p. 86.

"In this we have not been altogether alone in the history of contemporary literary history, but we have been very nearly so. No other periodical work has so carefully or entirely eschewed all temptations to unfair bias in our literary judgments, such as they are. We have spoken as we thought; and, without any exception that we can at present recollect, public opinion acquiesced in the justice of our criticisms ... If we now and then roughly handled a literary pretender, we did so because he *was* a pretender; and the cases are extremely rare, if such exist at all, when those who came under our censure are not now forgotten."[24]

It was of course above all Carlyle who was the main teacher of the other Fraserians in this particular respect, and who contributed much to their campaign for making criticism independent of the ruling political parties, though he of course fought this fight in all the magazines to which he contributed. This had not passed unnoticed by Thackeray, who highly appreciated Carlyle's *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* as a significant contribution to this battle. In one of his letters to his mother he wrote:

"I wish you could get Carlyle's Miscellaneous Criticisms, now just published in America. I have read a little in the book, a nobler one does not live in our language I am sure, and one that will have such an effect on our ways of thought and prejudices. Criticism has been a party matter with us till now, and literature a poor political lackey — please God we shall begin ere long to love art for art's sake. It is Carlyle who has worked more than any other to give it it's independence" (*Letters* I, 396).

Thackeray himself enlisted in this battle whole-heartedly and fought against this prevalent abuse not only in *Fraser's Magazine,* but also in other periodicals to which he contributed, as well as in his imaginative works. He criticized the political subservience of literary criticism, as well as the publishers' greed of gain in another letter to his mother written probably in 1847, and satirized it in *Pendennis* in his depiction of the critical practices of the above-mentioned *Pall Mall Gazette,* the contributors to which are expected to praise only the works of those authors who share the editor's Tory sympathies and to condemn the works of those who support the Opposition party.[25] In the same novel he also created the portraits of two editors of rival publishing houses, Bacon and Bungay, in whom be satirized Richard Bentley, the proprietor of several magazines, and Henry Colburn who published the *New Monthly Magazine,* by representing his two editors as ignoramuses who do not even read the works they publish and who are not concerned at all with the advancement of literature, but exclusively with their pockets.[26] We have also plentiful evidence that Thackeray very much resented, too, criticism motivated by social and personal interests. Very much like Goldsmith, Pope and Byron, he sharply attacked the snobbish subservience of the publishers and critics to titled authors, especially in his *Fashionable Authoress,* in *Reading a Poem* and in *Pendennis.* His view on criticism motivated by personal friendship, which reminds us very much of the standpoint of Hazlitt (with whom he also shared his general distaste for the party spirit prevailing in criticism), is obvious from his condemning the spirit of *camaraderie* and partisanship as "the curse of the critical trade"[27]

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[24] "Preface to our Second Decade", *Fraser's Magazine,* XXI, January 1840, No. CXXI, p. 15.

[25] See *Letters* II, 330 (a letter of uncertain date, but 1847 is suggested by Ray as probable), *Works* XII, 441, 443.

[26] See *Works* XII, 402, 415.

and is perhaps best expressed in the following passage from his review of Blanchard's work:

"I don't know anything more dissatisfactory and absurd than that insane test of friendship which has been set up by some literary men, viz. admiration of their works. Say that this picture is bad, or that poem poor, or that article stupid, and there are certain authors and artists among us who set you down as an enemy forthwith, or look upon you as a *faux-frère*. What is there in common with the friend and his work of art? The picture or article once done, and handed over to the public, is the latter's property, not the author's, and to be estimated according to its honest value" (*Works* VI, 554).

In his later years he had perhaps more to say on criticism actuated by personal rancour than on that motivated by personal friendship, but in *Philip* he commented on both extremes, expressing through the mouth of his hero his own earlier attitude. Philip is not a very talented critic but it goes against the grain with him to settle his accounts with his personal enemies in his critical contributions, as it was done by the other contributors to the *Pall Mall Gazette:*

"Certain people were praised in the *Gazette* — certain others were attacked. Very dull books were admired, and very lively works attacked. Some men were praised for everything they did; some others were satirized, no matter what their works were. 'I find', poor Philip used to say, with a groan, 'that in matters of criticism especially, there are so often private reasons for the praise and the blame administered, that I am glad, for my part, my only duty is to see the paper through the press'" (*Works* XVI, 508).

Thackeray's distaste for literary criticism motivated by personal spite is even more clearly expressed in his late essay "On Screens in Dining-Rooms" (August 1860), where he comments upon two such cases in which he was personally involved. He protests against Yates's attacks in the *Saturday Review* on the publisher of the *Cornhill Magazine,* George Smith, and against the other critics of the former magazine who reprimanded Dickens and himself for being superficial thinkers and no gentlemen, and proceeds:

"Attack our books, Mr. Correspondent, and welcome. They are fair subjects for just censure or praise. But woe be to you, if you allow private rancours or animosities to influence you in the discharge of your public duty. In the little court where you are paid to sit as judge, as critic, you owe it to your employers, to your conscience, to the honour of your calling, to deliver just sentences; and you shall have to answer to Heaven for your dealings, as surely as my Lord Chief Justice on the Bench" (*Works* XVII, 412).[28]

In his much earlier satirical sketch *Reading a Poem* Thackeray inveighed against the whole complicated system of blackmail, dishonesty, bribery and snobbery which prevailed among publishers, editors, critics and authors in his time. He created a satirical portrait of an aristocratic but entirely untalented author, Lord Daudley, who hires two journalists to write his poems for him, as well as eulogies upon these for their magazines. In the characters of these journalists, Dishwash and Bludyer (who at the same time represent the two opposite extremes characteristic of the methods of contemporary criticism, pure flattery and pure castigation, with which we shall deal later), Thackeray splendidly revealed the subservience of the literary criticism of his time concealed under the cloak of seeming independence. The sketch concludes with the following words:

[27] *Works* II, 495.

[28] For his other attacks on the *Saturday Review* (which he also calls the *Superfine* or *Bumptious Review*) see *Works* XVII, 423, 510—511, 671—673, 674—675).

"The *Castalian Magazine* [i.e. Dishwash's paper — *LP*] of the next week contains a flaming puff upon Lord Daudley's *Passion-Flowers*; but the *Weekly Bravo* has a furious attack upon the work, because Lord Daudley refused to advance a third five-pound note to the celebrated Bludyer. After the critique, his lordship advances the five-pound note. And at a great public dinner, where my Lord Daudley is called upon to speak to a toast, he discourses upon the well-known sentiment — THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE PRESS! IT IS LIKE THE AIR WE BREATHE: WITHOUT IT WE DIE" (*Works* III, 480—481).

If Thackeray was convinced that criticism should not be subservient to the interests of political parties, social classes, or individuals, it does not mean he believed that criticism had no part to play in the function of the social organism. As follows from the above-quoted passage from "On Screens in Dining-Rooms" and from his other comments, he regarded the critic as a person discharging a public duty, who has a great responsibility both to the author and to the reading public, between whom he has "to arbitrate", whose task is to help his contemporaries to appreciate literature, to give them information about new books, teach them what is good and bad, regulate and discipline their literary taste. He must be therefore honest and tell the truth about the work he assesses:

"But when *I* becomes *we* — sitting in judgement, and delivering solemn opinions — *we* must tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; for then there is a third party concerned — the public — between whom and the writer, or painter, the critic has to arbitrate, and he is bound to show no favour. What is kindness to the one, is injustice to the other, who looks for an honest judgement, and is by far the most important party of the three; the two others being, the one the public's servant, the other the public's appraiser, sworn to value, to the best of his power, the article that is for sale. The critic does not value rightly, it is true, once in a thousand times; but if he do not deal *honestly*, woe be to him! The hulks are too pleasant for him, transportation too light" (*Works* II, 361—362).

In his satirical sketch *The Artists* he writes in a similar spirit about art critics, maintaining that whereas "the writer can bear a fair quantity of abuse without wincing", "the artist not uncommonly grows mad at such strictures, considers them as personal matters, inspired by private feeling of hostility, and hates the critic for life who has ventured to question his judgement in any way", and proceeds:

"We may add now, poor critics, what black personal animosities are discovered for you, when you happen (right or wrong, but according to your best ideas) to speak the truth!... My friend Pebbler, himself a famous Artist, is of opinion that the critic should *never* abuse the painter's performances, because, says he, the painter knows much better than any one else what his own faults are, and because you never do him any good. Are men of the brush so obstinate? — very likely: but the public — the public? are we not to do our duty by it too; and, aided by our superior knowledge and genius for the fine arts, point out to it the way it should go? Yes, surely; and as by the efforts of dull or interested critics many bad painters have been palmed off upon the nation as geniuses of the first degree; in like manner, the sagacious and disinterested (like some we could name) have endeavoured to provide this British nation with pure principles of taste, — or at least, to prevent them from adopting such as are impure" (*Works* I, 592).

Although both the quoted comments are formulated in the usual facetious Thackerayan manner, we can clearly discern in them echoes of Carlyle's conception, according to which the critic should not be "the lackey of Dulness, striving for certain wages, of pudding or praise, by the month or quarter, to perpetuate the reign of presumption and triviality on earth", but "the priest of Literature and Philosophy, to interpret their mysteries to the common man",

the interpreter between the writer and the reader, "the inspired and the uninspired".[29] Thackeray is not very far, however, from some other critics of his time, notably Lewes, who saw the office of criticism in "consciously giving deliberate and impartial opinions for the guidance of public taste and correction of an author's errors".[30]

## 2. Other Main Tenets of Thackeray's Critical Creed

The first of the other tenets which we may deduce from Thackeray's casual remarks on criticism and especially from his own critical practice is his not explicitly formulated but none the less firm belief that criticism should deal with all kinds and *genres* of literature and art and should not regard any of them unworthy of critical notice. As I have said, this tenet remained unformulated. It does lie, however, at the basis of the following comment of his, in which he protests against the adverse criticism of Lever's novels by the Irish Liberal journals:

> "O patriotic critic! what Brutus-like sacrifices will the literary man not commit! what a noble professional independence he has! how free from envy he is! how pleased with his neighbour's success! and yet how ready (on public grounds — of course, only on public grounds) to attack his nearest friend and closest acquaintance! Although he knows that the success of one man of letters is the success of all, that with every man who rises a score of others rise too, that to make what has hitherto been a struggling and uncertain calling an assured and respectable one, it is necessary that some should succeed greatly, and that every man who lives by his pen should, therefore, back the efforts and applaud the advancement of his brother; yet the virtues of professional literature are so obstinately republican, that it will acknowledge no honours, help no friend, have all on a level; and so the Irish press is at present martyrizing the most successful member of its body" (*Works* VI, 391).

This appeal to critics to "back the efforts and applaud the advancement" of every member of the literary craft, including writers of fiction, is of course at the opposite pole not only from the standpoint of the Neoclassicists, but also from Carlyle's discouraging and contemptuous attitude to novelists, commented upon in the preceding chapter, not to mention the same critic's postulate that criticism should deal only with serious literature, which has a moral or spiritual content, and should not pay attention to entertaining literature, in which Carlyle included fiction and drama. That Thackeray himself did not regard fiction (or drama) as unworthy of critical attention is of course best proved by the whole corpus of his critical work, predominantly concerned as it was with fiction and including as it does several reviews of dramatic works.

The next tenet, which may be deduced more easily than the first, since it is several times explicitly formulated, is Thackeray's conviction that criticism should be independent of preconceived rules and principles, that it should not be dogmatic. As I have shown in the preceding chapter, Thackeray openly dissociated himself from those Neoclassicists who believed that literature and

[29] For the quotations see *Essays* II, 7, I, 52. See also Thackeray's protest against dull art critics in England, who "protrude their nonsense upon the town" and "lay down their stupid laws", too easily persuading "our matter-of-fact public of England", which "is itself but a dull appreciator of the arts" (*Works* II, 495; see also ibid., p. 496).

[30] Quoted by Greenhut, op. cit., p. 128, from "Errors and Abuses of English Criticism", *The Westminster Review*, XXXVIII, 1842, p. 240.

art should be judged solely by classic standards, and it is therefore quite natural that he also rejected their endeavour to deduce from the classics all the canons of criticism, to measure literature and art by mechanical rules misread in Aristotle and derived from the ancient writers. He expressed his standpoint more than once, for instance in the following passage from one of his art criticisms:

"I don't pretend to lay down any absolute laws on the sublime (the reader will remember how the ancient satirist hath accused John Dennis of madness, for his vehement preaching of such rules). No, no; Michael Angelo T. is not quite so impertinent as that" (*Works* II, 519).[1]

One of the main reasons which made him protest against any attempts to subject art to arbitrary prescription of rules and precepts was of course his general attitude to life and literature, essentially different from that of the Neoclassicists, as we have seen in the preceding chapter. Since he was strongly aware of the validity of the individual response of the man of his time to reality and art, recognized in individuality the greatest charm of art, and believed that the only approach to reality lay in the simultaneous reflection of "the multiple facets of subjective truth",[2] as Loofbourow has it, he could not but see in any such prescription, like Hazlitt, "a surrender of individual judgment into the hands of authority and a subjection of individual feeling to mechanic rules".[3] His standpoint is therefore very near to that of the Romantic writers and critics (especially of Coleridge, Keats, Hunt, and Hazlitt as quoted) and to that of Carlyle, and essentially different not only from that of the most dogmatic Neoclassicists of the 17th and 18th centuries (especially of Boileau) but also from the conception of their successors in his own century, in particular of Gifford, who believed, as Hazlitt has shown, "that modern literature should wear the fetters of classical antiquity; that truth is to be weighed in the scales of opinion and prejudice; that power is equivalent to right; that genius is dependent on rules; that taste and refinement of language consist in *word-catching*".[4]

Thackeray's awareness of the multiplicity and relativity of the reality of his time, several times explicitly expressed by him (besides some already quoted instances we should mention the statement from his correspondence that "Nothing tastes alike, nothing sounds quite alike, looks quite alike to one person and another",[5] quoted also by Loofbourow), led him to reject the further postulate of the Neoclassicists that everything should be measured by the standard of universal taste, unchangeable and given once for all. For instance in his "Picture Gossip" he comments upon "the blessed variety of tastes" existing among the public as regards painting, and although he does not agree with the verdicts of criticism and of the public concerning the particular pictures he is assessing, he expresses his thankfulness that there do exist different tastes (for "almost all artists have thus a chance of getting a livelihood somehow"), and proceeds:

[1] For his other comments of this kind see *Works* II, 594.
[2] Op. cit., p. 188.
[3] *The Spirit of the Age or Contemporary Portraits*, Fourth Edition, ed. by W. Carew Hazlitt, G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., London, 1915, p. 223.
[4] Ibid., p. 221.
[5] *Letters* III, 217; see also *Works* XII, 183—184.

"But this was our conceit, dear Augusto [i.e. his previous evaluation of the Domenichino Sybil, praised enthusiastically by Bulwer and not appreciated by him — *LP*]; on subjects of art, perhaps, there is no reasoning after all: or who can tell why children have a passion for lollypops, and this man worships beef while t'other adores mutton? To the child lollypops may be the truthful and beautiful, and why should not some men find Martin's pictures as much to their taste as Milton?" (*Works* II, 644—645).

He also realized, however, that some sort of critical standard should exist and that the love for lollypops could appear in the form of a "regular babyhood of taste, about which a man with a manly stomach may be allowed to protest a little peevishly, and implore the public to give up such puling food".[6] In his own art criticism he was guided by his individual taste, as he confessed, and was far from laying his opinion down as the law. In his evaluation of two pictures by Mulready and Eastlake he for instance wrote:

"The 'Sisters' [by Eastlake — *LP*] are two young ladies looking over a balcony; 'The Ford' [by Mulready — *LP*] is a stream, through which some boys are carrying a girl: and how is a critic to describe the beauty in such subjects as these? It would be easy to say these pictures are exquisitely drawn, beautifully coloured, and so forth; but that is not the reason of their beauty: on the contrary, any man who has a mind may find fault with the drawing and colouring of both. Well, there is a charm about them seemingly independent of drawing and colouring; and what is it? There's no foot-rule that I know of to measure it; and the very wisest lecturer on art might define and define, and be not a whit nearer the truth. I can't tell you why I like a blackbird sing; it is certainly not so clever as a piping bullfinch. I always begin with the works of these gentlemen, and look at them oftenest and longest; but that is only a simple expression of individual taste, and by no means an attempt at laying down the law, upon a subject which is quite out of the limits of all legislation" (*Works* II, 573—574).

Or in his assessment of "La Prière" by Trimolet:

"Very likely M. Trimolet has quite a different history for his little personages, and so has everybody else who examines the picture. But what of that? There is the privilege of pictures. A man does not know all that lies in his picture, any more than he understands all the character of his children. Directly one or the other makes its appearance in the world, it has its own private existence, independent of the progenitor. And in respect of works of art, if the same piece inspire one man with joy, that fills another with compassion, what are we to say of it, but that it has sundry properties of its own which its author even does not understand? The fact is, pictures 'are as they seem to all', as Mr. Alfred Tennyson sings in the first volume of his poems" (*Works* II, 554).

As Thackeray's marginal remarks from the middle 1840s and especially his characters of literary critics created at the end of this decade and in the course of the next suggest, it was not until this period of his life that he fully realized that during his own earlier professional critical career he had revealed tendencies to assume a superior attitude to some of the authors he evaluated and that he had thus violated, too, one tenet of his own critical creed, implicit in his early conception of the critic as the interpreter between the artist and the public — that criticism should be subservient to art and not *vice versa.* The first piece of evidence that he did realize this is to be found in the passage from his review of 1844, quoted below in another connection ("Some few — very few years since"), but the next does not appear until *Pendennis,* in his depiction of the critical approach of the titular hero, which is at the same time a reminiscence of his own earlier critical practice:

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[6] *Works* II, 646.

"The courage of young critics is prodigious: they clamber up to the judgement-seat, and, with scarce a hesitation, give their opinion upon works the most intricate or profound. Had Macaulay's *History* or Herschel's *Astronomy* been put before Pen at this period, he would have looked through the volumes, meditated his opinion over a cigar, and signified his august approval of either author, as if the critic had been their born superior and indulgent master and patron... At that period of his life Mr. Pen owns that he would not have hesitated, at twenty-four hours' notice, to pass an opinion upon the greatest scholars, or to give a judgement upon the *Encyclopaedia*" (*Works* XII, 444).

Or a few pages further on we find the following passage in which Thackeray finds some excuses for the young critic and undoubtedly also for himself:

"Well then, the *Pall Mall Gazette* being duly established, and Arthur Pendennis's merits recognized as a flippant, witty, and amusing critic, he worked away hard every week, preparing reviews of such works as came into his department, and writing his reviews with flippancy certainly, but with honesty, and to the best of his power. It might be that a historian of threescore, who had spent a quarter of a century in composing a work of which our young gentleman disposed in the course of a couple of days' reading at the British Museum, was not altogether fairly treated by such a facile critic; or that a poet, who had been elaborating sublime sonnets and odes until he thought them fit for the public and for fame, was annoyed by two or three dozen pert lines in Mr. Pen's review, in which the poet's claims were settled by the critic, as if the latter were my lord on the bench, and the author a miserable little suitor trembling before him. The actors at the theatres complained of him wofully, too, and very likely he was too hard upon them. But there was not much harm done after all. It is different now, as we know; but there were so few great historians, or great poets, or great actors, in Pen's time, that scarce any at all came up for judgement before his critical desk. Those who got a little whipping, got what in the main was good for them; not that the judge was any better or wiser than the persons whom he sentenced, or indeed, ever fancied himself so. Pen had a strong sense of humour and justice, and had not therefore an overweening respect for his own works; besides, he had his friend Warrington at his elbow — a terrible critic if the young man was disposed to be conceited, and more savage over Pen than ever he was to those whom he tried at his literary assize" (*Works* XII, 450–451).

He reverted to the problem in his "Essay on Thunder and Small Beer" (1851), where he protested against the superior attitude of the *Times* reviewer Charles Lamb Kenney to his *Kickleburys on the Rhine,* as well as against the complacency and bombast with which the *Times* laid claim to pontificate in all affairs. He compares the reviewer to the thundering Jupiter, or rather Jupiter's servant, who from his seat in heaven sends thunders and lightnings upon his poor small work. The last piece of evidence is to be found in *Philip,* in the following assessment of the critical methods introduced in the *Pall Mall Gazette* by Pendennis and his friends and used also by the hero of the novel:

"When Pendennis and his friends wrote in this newspaper, it was impertinent enough, and many men must have heard the writers laugh at the airs which they occasionally thought proper to assume. The tone which they took amused, annoyed, tickled, was popular. It was continued, and, of course, caricatured by their successors. They worked for very moderate fees: but paid themselves by impertinence, and the satisfaction of assailing their betters. Three or four persons were reserved from their abuse; but somebody was sure every week to be tied up at their post, and the public made sport of the victim's contortions. The writers were obscure barristers, ushers, and college men, but they had omniscience at their pen's end, and were ready to lay down the law on any given subject — to teach any man his business, were it a bishop in his pulpit, a minister in his place in the House, a captain on his quarterdeck, a tailor on his shopboard, or a jockey in his saddle" (*Works* XVI, 216 to 217).

It should be pointed out, however, that although Thackeray undoubtedly in his earlier years did incline towards the assumption of a superior attitude to

some of the authors he assessed, in his general critical approach he was much nearer to Pendennis than to his hero's followers, for not even in those years was he as ready as they were "to lay down the law on any given subject" (especially not in his art criticism, as we have seen) but, like Pendennis, "had a strong sense of humour and justice, and had not therefore an overweening respect for his own works". Upon the whole we may say, then, that although in his early conception of criticism Thackeray dissociated himself from the Neoclassicist postulate that the critic is superior to the work of art, his own earlier critical approach did bear some traces of its influence, which is after all not very surprising, since he was at that time under the strong influence of Dr. Maginn, the protagonist of the old critical school. His conception in general, however, also shows some other influences: not so much of the Romantic critical doctrine in general, which replaced the subsidiary function of criticism to the work of art by creative imaginative work, but rather of Hazlitt and Carlyle. Hazlitt ascribed to criticism a much humbler function than did the other Romantics, essentially the same function as Thackeray even in his earlier years attributed to it — that of serving art and propagating it, as the intermediary between the artist and the lover of art. Hazlitt pilloried all those critics who did not see their object in doing justice to the author and his work, but in doing themselves homage, the type of critic who considered the author he assessed "as a kind of humble companion or unnecessary interloper in the vehicle of fame, whom he has taken up purely to oblige him, and whom he may treat with neglect or insult, or set down in the common foot-path, whenever it suits his humour or convenience".[7] Carlyle characterized the critical approach of the old school as that of a supreme judge who insults a highly-gifted man, as that of a small Reviewer triumphing over great Authors. The confrontation of the following quotation from Carlyle with that from Thackeray cited in the preceding sub-chapter ("But when *I* becomes *we*") shows the similarity most clearly:

"The first and most convenient [method] is, for the Reviewer to perch himself resolutely, as it were, on the shoulder of his Author, and therefrom to show as if he commanded him and looked down on him by natural superiority of stature. Whatsoever the great man says or does, the little man shall treat with an air of knowingness and light condescending mockery; professing, with much covert sarcasm, that this and that other is beyond *his* comprehension, and cunningly asking his readers if they comprehend it!"[8]

And it was undoubtedly Carlyle's endeavour to replace this old relationship between the critic and the criticized by a new, constructive critical approach, namely the critic's identification with the author, his ability to understand the criticized work in the light of the purpose of the writer and to penetrate to the author's soul, which led Thackeray eventually to realize all his earlier trespasses in the field of criticism and which exerted, too, as Dr. Thrall has shown, a marked influence upon all the Fraserians:

"Though they were sometimes unable to appreciate the integrity of his inquiry, ... they immeasurably strengthened their criticism through the example of Carlyle, gaining a more thoughtful and conscientious approach."[9]

[7] For the quotations see *Table Talk. Essays on Men and Manners,* ed. by William Carew Hazlitt, George Bell & Sons, Ltd., London, 1897, p. 299.
[8] *Essays* II, 5; see also ibid., p. 6.
[9] Op. cit., p. 89.

Carlyle's influence may be also traced in Thackeray's conception of the critic as a "judge", for this term is conceived rather in the Carlylean than in the Jeffreyan spirit. Carlyle envisaged the critic as a judge who does not bestow either mere praise or mere blame, but whose function is "to dispense justice, which in most cases will involve blame as well as praise". He is not to be the judge of the Neoclassicist conception who measured a work by ready-made rules applied from the outside and, like a "critic fly", sought for the slightest infringement of them, but a judge who penetrates the work, evaluates it as a whole, assesses its purpose, the arrangement of its parts and the harmony of construction which is to fulfil this purpose, and, before he pronounces upon its defects, is in the first place to discover its good points. As Carlyle expressed it, the detection of faults is a much shallower and more ignoble employment than the discovery of beauties, and "no man can pronounce dogmatically, with even a chance of being right, on the faults of a poem, till he has seen its very last and highest beauty".[10] In Thackeray's opinion, too, the critic is not infallible, but he must be objective, educated and honest. Like Carlyle, Thackeray rejected criticism which condemned a literary work for what it did not contain and what was not the purpose of the author, as can clearly be seen from the following remark from his review "A Box of Novels":

".... this is a favourite method with many critics — viz. to find fault with a book for what it does not give, as thus — 'Lady Smigsmag's new novel is amusing, but lamentably deficient in geological information'. 'Dr. Swishtail's *Elucidations of the Digamma* show much sound scholarship, but infer a total absence of humour'" (*Works* VI, 392—393).

Like Carlyle, he does not accept the Neoclassicist interpretation of the word "criticism" as fault-finding, taking exception. He does not believe that the critic is one who should take a hostile attitude, whose sole business is to discover and enumerate imperfections. The clearest expression of his standpoint is to be found in the following comment upon the negative criticism of the Antwerp Cathedral spire:

"This style of criticism is base and mean, and quite contrary to the orders of the immortal Goethe, who was only for allowing the eye to recognize the beauties of a great work, but would have its defects passed over. It is an unhappy, luckless organization which will be perpetually fault-finding, and in the midst of a grand concert of music will persist only in hearing that unfortunate fiddle out of tune" (*Works* VI, 477).

This statement, in which Thackeray approaches, too, to the standpoint of Hazlitt, should not lead us, however, to the precipitate conclusion that he did in fact go so far as to maintain (as did Goethe, quoted by him) that the critic's duty was to evaluate the work of art only when he could praise it: that he should not praise indiscriminately, but should be discreetly silent. This is the only case in which Thackeray mentions this principle of Goethe without any critical comment — in all other cases he dissociates himself from it. For instance in a passage which precedes his already quoted statement "But when *I* becomes *we* ..." he writes:

"An eminent artist, who read those remarkable pages on the Annuals which appeared in this magazine last year, was pleased to give us his advice, in case we ever should be tempted to return to the same subject at a future season. He had adopted the new faith about

[10] For the quotations see *Essays* I, 252, 253.

criticism, and was of opinion that it is the writer's duty only to speak of pictures particularly, when one could speak in terms of praise; not, of course, to praise unjustly, but to be discreetly silent when there was no opportunity. This was the dictum of old Goethe (as may be seen in Mrs. Austin's 'Characteristics' of that gentleman), who employed it, as our own Scott did likewise, as much, we do believe, to save himself trouble, and others annoyance, as from any conviction of the good resulting from the plan. It is a fine maxim, and should be universally adopted — across a table. Why should not Mediocrity be content, and fancy itself Genius? Why should not Vanity go home, and be a little more vain? If you tell the truth, ten to one but Dullness only grows angry, and is not a whit less dull than before, — such being its nature" (*Works* II, 361).[11]

If he resented the principle proclaimed by Goethe and Scott (the first of whom did not go in its application to such extremes as the second did), it is not surprising that he dissociated himself, too, from "monstrous, indiscriminate, wholesale" praise which was the fashion of his day. He regarded this "system of too much praising" as "a thousand times worse" than the opposite "system of too much abusing", for it was in his opinion much more dangerous in its consequences, as the critics who indulge "in such unseemly praises and indecent raptures" over second-rate literature and art "may mislead the painters, authors, and the public" and thus prove themselves "to be quite unworthy of the posts they fill".[12] And he did not rest content with theorizing about these two extremes in criticism, but enlisted in the campaign launched against them by *Fraser's Magazine*. What was regarded by the Fraserians as perhaps the greatest abuse in the criticism of their time was the practice surviving from the Neoclassicist period and founded upon the principle "flatter your political friend and destroy your political opponent". This the Fraserians labelled as "Puff and Plunder".[13] In the editorial article "On the Present State of Literary Criticism in England" (February 1840) the author pointed to the harmful influence of this system on the development of literature and emphasized that under its rule any great new work could be successful only if the author had enough money to pay for "puffs" in the magazines. The author also vents the complaint that the publishers use their influence in the magazines on behalf of the works they publish and that the same influence can be exercised, too, by writers of high social position who can be sure of favourable criticism and easily find publishers and reviewers.[14] The attacks of the magazine on the dishonesty of this system and the speculating publishers even scored a certain success, as the author of another editorial article of January 1840 points out:

"It is no great triumph to say... that we have, if not demolished the noble art of puffmongering (which we believe is impossible), at least let the public know its full value, and imposed some decency upon the practice."[15]

Besides the instances quoted in the preceding sub-chapter Thackeray pilloried this system especially in his article "Our Annual Execution" (*Fraser's Magazine*, January 1839), analysed the dictatorial methods used by its protagonists and

[11] See also *Works* XIII, 525—526, *Letters* II, 262.
[12] For the quotations see *Works* II, 360.
[13] The main perpetrators of the "plundering" criticism were the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, those of "puffmongering", Colburn's *New Monthly Magazine* and the *Literary Gazette*. For a detailed analysis of the practices of the latter see Thrall, op. cit. pp. 176—177 and Rosa, op. cit., pp. 190 ff.
[14] See *Fraser's Magazine*, February 1840, p. 199.
[15] *Fraser's Magazine*, January 1840, p. 18.

rejected it, as we have seen, as a system not worthy of the name of criticism. At the same time he condemned extreme savagery in criticism (comparing the critics indulging in it to schoolmasters indiscriminately applying their rod) and, in a passage written in his typical facetious manner, proposed a critical approach which he regarded as the correct one — that used by himself and the other Fraserians:

"The critical rod, too, is, for the most part, thrown aside. This, however, was subject to more abuses than the scholastic rod (which was applied moderately only, and to parts where the defences against injury are naturally strong); critics were too fierce with their weapon, and did not mind where their blows hit. A poor harmless fellow has been whipped unto death's door almost, when the critic thought that he was only wholesomely correcting him; another has been maimed for life, whom fierce-handed flagellifer had thought only to tickle. Such abuses came sometimes from sheer exuberance of spirits on the part of the critic (take the Great Professor[16], who, in fun, merely seizes on an unlucky devil, and flogs every morsel of skin off his back, so that he shall not be able to sit, lie, or walk, for months to come); sometimes from professional enthusiasm (like that which some great surgeons have, who cannot keep their fingers from the knife); sometimes, alas! from personal malice, when the critic is no more than a literary cut-throat and brutal assassin, for whose infamy no punishment is too strong. The proper method, finally — for why affect modesty, and beat about the bush? — is that particular method which WE adopt. If the subject to be operated upon be a poor weak creature, switch him gently, and then take him down. If he be a pert pretender, as well as an ignoramus, cut smartly, and make him cry out; his antics will not only be amusing to the lookers-on, but instructive likewise: a warning to other impostors, who will hold their vain tongues, and not be quite so ready for the future to thrust themselves in the way of the public. But, as a general rule, never flog a man, unless there are hopes of him; if he be a real malefactor, sinning not against taste merely, but truth, give him a grave trial and punishment: don't flog him, but brand him solemnly, and then cast him loose. The best cure for humbug is satire — here above typified as the rod; for crime, you must use the *hot iron:* but this, thank Heaven! is seldom needful, not more than once or twice in the seven-and-thirty years that we ourselves have sat on the bench" (*Works* II, 359—360).

It is worth noticing, however, that Thackeray voiced his protest against the two extremes in criticism, the "Puff and Plunder" system, even before he began to collaborate with *Fraser's Magazine,* as well as after he had stopped contributing to it. Thus for instance in his early review of Bulwer's novel *Godolphin* (*The National Standard,* June 15 and 22, 1833) we find the following protest against indiscriminate praise:

"The clique of literary puffers that infests this reading metropolis has been so often lashed, and apparently with so little effect, that we fear it is incorrigible; and although, in noticing the novel of 'Godolphin', these puffers, and their threadbare artifices, are again forced upon us, we shall simply observe, that in no instance have they prostituted their talents for twaddle more, than in crying up in the extravagant manner they have done the work in question."[17]

He expressed his distaste for mere flattery in criticism, too, in one of his letters[18] and parodied the system of "puffmongering", as well as the style of such critics who were its protagonists, in a fictitious "puff" of the book published by his "Fashionable Authoress" and in the laudatory announcement of the *début* of the ravishing Ravenswing.[19] His resentment of extreme savagery

[16] According to Ray, Thackeray has Professor John Wilson in mind.
[17] June 15, 1833, p. 370.
[18] See *Letters* II, 267.
[19] See *Works* I, 572—575, IV, 450—451.

in the criticism of his own time is convincingly expressed in the following passage from his review "A Box of Novels":

"The fact is, that the blackbirds of letters — the harmless, kind, singing creatures who line the hedge-sides and chirp and twitter as nature bade them (they can no more help singing, these poets, than a flower can help smelling sweet) — have been treated much too ruthlessly by the watchboys of the press, who have a love for flinging stones at the little innocents, and pretend that it is their duty, and that every wren or sparrow is likely to destroy a whole field of wheat, or to turn out a monstrous bird of prey. Leave we these vain sports and savage pastimes of youth, and turn we to the benevolent philosophy of maturer age" (*Works* VI, 388).

In his lectures on the *English Humourists* he has much to say, again, of the ruthless methods used by the critics of the preceding Neoclassicist period, evaluating the situation in the criticism of that time in the following words:

"It must be remembered that the pillory was a flourishing and popular institution in those days. Authors stood in it in the body sometimes: and dragged their enemies thither morally, hooted them with foul abuse, and assailed them with garbage of the gutter" (*Works* XIII, 617).

He condemns Dennis in particular as a critic "who ran amuck at the literary society of his day" and who was not a friend of any man alive, as a man "who scarce praises any other living person" and "who flung abuse at Pope, and Swift, and Steele, and Addison". He is especially angered by Dennis's having made the poor deformed person of Pope the butt of his wit and called the poet many "pretty" names, such as an ape, "a little ass, a fool, a coward, a Papist, and therefore a hater of Scripture, and so forth". On the other hand, however, he sharply criticizes Pope's prose lampoon of Dennis as "a vulgar and mean satire" which in his opinion bears "the foul marks" of Swift's influence and which "is so dirty that it has been printed in Swift's works, too".[20] He does not approve, either, of Pope's attacks upon Addison and has some sympathy and pity for some of the "Dunces" attacked by Pope who had been provoked by the poet's ruthless assaults, which were as unjust as theirs upon him.[21]

Thackeray's distaste for the "Puff and Plunder" system of criticism is, however, even more convincingly expressed in his characters of critics and journalists. Mostly they (as well as the magazines they edit or to which they contribute) have appropriate names. A typical representative of "plundering" criticism is the above-mentioned Mr. Bludyer, with whom we meet not only in the satirical sketch *Reading a Poem,* cited above, but also in *The Ravenswing* and *Pendennis.* Thackeray depicts him as a Bohemian journalist of unpolished social manners and characterizes him as a critic who approaches the literary works he assesses as a butcher mercilessly slaughtering his victims:

"Mr. Bludyer, who was a man of very considerable talent, and of a race which, I believe, is quite extinct in the press of our time, had a certain notoriety in his profession, and reputation for savage humour. He smashed and trampled down the poor spring flowers [i.e. the *Spring Annual* to which Pen contributed his verses and which was reviewed by Bludyer at Shandon's request — *LP*] with no more mercy than a bull would have on a parterre; and having cut up the volume to his heart's content, went and sold it at a bookstall, and purchased a pint of brandy with the proceeds of the volume" (*Works* XII, 449).

[20] For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 575, 511, 617, 607.
[21] See *Works* XIII, 609–610, 617–618.

As one of Bludyer's characteristic traits Thackeray underlines his lack of political principles, his willingness to write a sharp article against anybody and to change his political partisanship according to the given situation.[22] Another critic of this type is Frederick Mugford in *The Adventures of Philip,* who commits one systematic literary murder every week, lacks polished manners and belongs to two or three different political parties.[23] Mr. Squinny in *The Ravenswing* is an essentially harmless critic, for he is only mildly malicious in his criticism:

"He never goes beyond the bounds of politeness, but manages to insinuate a great deal that is disagreeable to an author in the course of twenty lines of criticism" (*Works* IV, 443).

In his resentment of criticism indulging in excessive blame Thackeray is not far from some critics of the Neoclassicist period who realized the danger of such a critical approach (Addison and Johnson, but especially Fielding, who pilloried critics who used the methods of a hanging judge as "odious vermin"[24]), but he is in general much nearer to the Romantic critics, with whom he also shares his distaste for the surviving Neoclassicist critical methods in the prominent magazines of his time. The critical approach which he obviously most strongly resented was that used by the *Quarterly Review,* as follows from his ironic evaluation of the critical line of this magazine, in which he ascribes to it qualities opposite to those it actually possessed:

"Speaking of critics, perhaps there never was a review that has done so much for literature as the admirable *Quarterly.* It has its prejudices, to be sure, as which of us have not? It goes out of its way to abuse a great man, or lays mercilessly on to such pretenders as Keats and Tennyson; but on the other hand, it is the friend of all young authors, and has marked and nurtured all the rising talent of the country. It is loved by everybody" (*Works* IX, 330).

As follows from this quotation, Thackeray's indignation was especially aroused by the hostile attitude of this extremely Conservative magazine to the young talented writers who mostly represented progressive tendencies in literature. He complained of this particular aspect of the critical line of this periodical once again in his letter to his mother of January 1848, in which he expressed his surprise at the *Quarterly Review* paying him compliments, and characterized it as a magazine "that never gave a lift to a struggling man yet or patronized anybody but a dandy lord or a man of made reputation".[25] In this opinion of his he is very near to Hazlitt, although he never attacked the magazine so sharply as did the Romantic critic, who pilloried its critics as "troublesome insects" whom it "is much easier to crush than to catch", characterized the magazine as "a receptacle for the scum and sediment of all the prejudice, bigotry, ill-will, ignorance, and rancour, afloat in the kingdom" and ascribed to it "the express purpose of depriving every author, in prose or verse, of his reputation and livelihood, who is not a regular hack of the vilest cabal that ever disgraced this or any other country".[26]

[22] See *Works* IV, 443, III, 474.
[23] See *Works* XVI, 218.
[24] See *Tom Jones,* Book V, ch. 1; Book X, ch. 1; Book XI, ch. 1.
[25] *Letters* II, 334; he refers to the positive criticism of his *Irish Sketch Book,* which was published in this magazine in the same month. For his earlier reference to a brief positive notice in the *Quarterly Review* for June, 1847 see *Letters* II, 294; for his negative comments on the magazine see *Works* IX, 345, X, 33, *Letters* III, 396.
[26] For the quotations see *Table Talk,* p. 315; *The Spirit of the Age,* pp. 389, 390.

In his *Book of Snobs,* from which the above-quoted assessment of the *Quarterly Review* is taken, Thackeray inveighs, too, against some other critical magazines of his period, commenting ironically on the *Athenaeum,* the *Literary Gazette,* the *Examiner* and the *Spectator,* and reserving the sharpest shafts of his irony for *Blackwood's Magazine*:

"There, again, is *Blackwood's Magazine* — conspicuous for modest elegance and amiable satire; that review never passes the bounds of politeness in a joke. It is the arbiter of manners; and, while gently exposing the foibles of Londoners (for whom the *beaux esprits* of Edinburgh entertain a justifiable contempt), it is never coarse in its fun" (*Works* IX, 330).

As follows from this quotation, Thackeray resented the scandalous and malicious personal attacks of this magazine on Hunt, Keats, Hazlitt, etc. in the notorious article "The Cockney School of Poetry", published in 1818 probably by Lockhart (though he obviously did not know that Lockhart was the author, as I have pointed out in the first chapter) and had a very negative attitude to the critical tone used in this periodical, the horse-play, abusiveness, blackguardism and sharp wit, for which Wilson was mainly responsible.

It is worth noticing that Thackeray omits the *Edinburgh Review* from his satirical attacks on the magazines of his time, which seems to suggest that his attitude to its critical line and methods was not so negative as that of Scott and particularly of Byron. It seems to me that one of the reasons for this attitude might be found in Thackeray's being able to accept the basic political line of the magazine and in his having possibly realized, too, as Hazlitt did, that this periodical, though based upon principles "by no means decidedly hostile to existing institutions", preserved the spirit of "fair and free discussion", did not indulge in foul play, was not governed by ignorance and prejudice and recognized the talents even of those standing on the opposite political side — in short, that it evaluated only literary merit and not the political creed or external circumstances of the writers, as the *Quarterly Review* did. In spite of Thackeray's indirect controversy with Jeffrey, mentioned in the first chapter, he could in my opinion at the same time accept Hazlitt's evaluation of him as a critic who certainly had some blind spots and committed some capital sins, but who was essentially a critic of great natural acuteness, possessing a great range of knowledge and being "neither a bigot nor an enthusiast", nor "the dupe of the prejudices of others, nor of his own", a critic "not wedded to any dogma", nor long "the sport of any whim", writing in a splendid style and having a pure personal character.[27] Another reason for Thackeray's omission of the *Edinburgh Review* from his criticism might have been the deep respect he entertained for some of its regular contributors (especially Carlyle and Macaulay, whose *Essays,* published in this magazine, he favourably reviewed) and further, that he was acquainted with Lord Murray, who was for many years connected with this periodical.[28] A final reason might have been the fact that the *Edinburgh Review* was not so hostile to his works as were for instance the *Times* and the *Quarterly Review,* for it awarded his novels at least two favourable criticisms (even though he himself regarded the first of them, Abraham Hayward's article "Thackeray's Writings",[29] "famous" as a "puff", but as criticism "utterly drivelling"[30]). Thack-

[27] For the quotations see *The Spirit of the Age,* pp. 239, 245.
[28] See *Letters* III, 631 and note.
[29] *The Edinburgh Review,* January 1848.

eray's at least partial approval of the *Edinburgh Review* and obviously, too, of Jeffrey, has been confirmed by posterity, for the magazine is now regarded as one which comes out honourably of the comparison with the other critical periodicals of its time, while Jeffrey is considered to be a shrewd and clever critic, who committed some errors, but was nevertheless an intelligent man capable of careful analysis and delicate discernment, free from political prejudice, who never outstepped the boundaries of decency in relationship to the authors he criticized and whose reputation as a harsh and even cruel judge was not entirely deserved.

Another magazine which is not satirized by Thackeray is of course *Fraser's Magazine,* his "professional nursery-bed", as Loomis has it,[31] which could offer the young writer nothing from the political point of view, but gave him much in the field of aesthetic theory, as we have seen, and which represented an important factor, moreover, in the formative process of Thackeray's conception of criticism, exercising at the same time a strong influence on his early critical methods. It is a familiar fact that under the leadership of Maginn *Fraser's Magazine* sustained, as Elwin has it, "the tradition of militant criticism engendered by Jeffrey in the early days of the *Edinburgh Review* and exaggerated to the utmost excess of violence by Wilson, Lockhart, and Maginn himself in *Blackwood,* and by Hazlitt".[32] In the savagery of their attacks the Fraserians initially exceeded even *Blackwood's Magazine:* adhering to the Neoclassicist critical doctrine, they were able rather to distinguish the faults of the work assessed than to discern and evaluate its merits and their estimate was therefore, as Dr. Thrall has shown, very often harsh and "not infrequently outrageously insulting", much of it being "grossly personal in character" and obviously slanderous.[33] As the quoted scholar has demonstrated, however, the magazine had several redeeming traits. The first of these was that its critical line was founded upon the sound principles which had been introduced by Maginn:

"His critical tenets were absolute: a fine devotion to Fielding, Smollett, Sterne: a distaste for whatever was mawkish or pretentious; a liking for plain speaking, the unaltered detail, the easy, direct word."[34]

In the second place, in contradistinction to *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review,* which assaulted the great Romantic poets, the Fraserians chose as the main target of their criticism a much more suitable object — the degraded Romanticism in the works of the imitators of Scott and Byron. Dr. Thrall evaluated Maginn's contribution to this critical line in the following words:

"The sincerity of *Fraser's* criticism becomes apparent only when we survey the whole field of its rebellion against the literary shortcomings of its day. Maginn believed that the magazine should support vigorous and full-blooded writing. With his own fine relish for Smollett, Fielding, and Sterne, he wished the public to know the denatured state of their contemporary literature in contrast to the wholesome products of the past. He objected to weak imitation wherever he met it, whether in poetry that echoed Byron, or in historical

[30] *Letters* II, 334; see also ibid., pp. 312—314. The second criticism was Nassau William Senior's "Thackeray's Works", January 1854 (see *Letters* III, 277 and note).
[31] Op. cit., p. 7.
[32] Malcolm Elwin, op. cit., p. 59.
[33] Op. cit., pp. 87, 70; see also p. 51.
[34] Ibid., p. 65; see also pp. 12, 87, 104, 108.

novels that exploited Scott, or in stories of criminal life which he felt diminished and sentimentalized their stalwart predecessors.

Again and again the magazine laments the bankrupt state of current writing."[35]

And thus, even though the attacks of the Fraserians were abusive and insulting, their criticism was essentially just and sound, for they were "generally clever enough to recognize faults even if not generous enough to admit virtues" and, for the most part, they "pursued their slashing methods without running foul of genius".[36]

Thackeray, with his natural talent for satire and his early developed bent for realism, irony, parody and burlesque, "thrived in the environment of *Fraser's*", as Loomis has pointed out:

"Maginn and the other Fraserians sharpened his eyes and his pen, and soon he was one of the magazine's most accomplished contributors."[37]

He was so apt a pupil of Maginn, according to Dr. Thrall, "that in the course of time he even outstripped the older man in severity, with a more fastidious eye for flaws in taste and execution".[38] As this scholar points out, and as I have already mentioned, Maginn's tutelage of his protégé had come to an end with *Yellowplush,* in which Thackeray "consummated what [he] had learned from [Maginn's] work on the *Fraser* staff and at the same time added an element which did not spring from the hardy brotherhood, indeed was alien to their hail-fellow practice":

"What Thackeray did was to bring this old *Fraser* material [i.e. lampooning of fashionable novels and the device of the butler himself which had been "satirically suggested by Maginn as a probable source of Bulwer Lytton's eavesdropping on fashionable life", as Dr. Thrall sums it up] to sudden fruition through his own social experience in the life which he was satirizing. For the first time in the history of the strapping periodical a well-bred though supercilious aloofness entered its pages. One looks in vain through the work of Maginn or his other followers for any sign of snobbery or delicate disgust. They were an unscrupulous lot in every sense of the word and quite too hearty to be aware of hairsplitting niceties or even decent refinements. With the act of creating a butler from his own world, Thackeray in a moment also created himself as distinct from William Maginn. To Charles Yellowplush a faint fastidiousness was as natural as was hard and unbending joviality. Nor was Thackeray's writing thereafter ever to be without this inbred condescension."[39]

It is worth noticing, however, that it took Thackeray some time before he began to realize that his early critical assaults, in which he imitated Maginn and the other Fraserians, were unduly savage. At the end of the 1830s he obviously still regarded the critical tone adopted by the magazine as entirely justified, and its methods as cruel, but just:

"For ourselves, our honesty is known; every man of the band of critics (that awful, unknown *Vehmgericht,* that sits in judgement in the halls of REGINA) is gentle, though inexorable, loving, though stern, *just* above all. As fathers, we have for our dutiful children the most tender yearning and love; but we are, every one of us, Brutuses, and at the sad intelligence of our children's treason we weep — the father will; *but we chop their heads off*" (*Works* II, 362).

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[35] Ibid., p. 81.
[36] For the quotations see ibid., pp. 87, 88; see also p. 70.
[37] Op. cit., p. 7.
[38] Op. cit., p. 71.
[39] Ibid., pp. 77–78.

He finished the same article ("Our Annual Execution") with a long appeal to the illustrators of the Annuals, from which I have quoted in the second chapter and which ends with these words:

"Above all, read sedulously REGINA, who watches you with an untiring eye, 'and, whether stern or smiling, loves you still'. Remember that she always tells you the truth — she never puffeth, neither doth she blame unnecessarily" (*Works* II, 378).

In this he identified himself with the attitude of the whole editorial staff who were convinced that their critical methods were much more gentlemanly than those used in the preceding period by the leading critical magazines. The author of the article "On the Present State of Literary Criticism in England, by one of the reviewed" wrote (in February 1840):

"The terrible castigation inflicted on pert, ignorant, and self-sufficient critics, in the *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,* has, however, been of lasting benefit to the tribe at large; for, to the honour of modern criticism, it must be said that reviewers no longer indulge in the low and scurrilous abuse, in the laudable exertions to wound the feelings and ruin the character and reputation of an unsuccessful writer, according to the approved style of the last age. That the *knout,* tomahawk, and scalping-knife, are occasionally resorted to, is no doubt true; but these instruments of literary surgery cannot possibly be dispensed with altogether: and though brandished occasionally, it must still be allowed that the gentlemen of the press perform their reviewing duties in a far more gentlemanlike manner than their immediate predecessors."[40]

But even in this early period Thackeray at least once realized that the weapons he used in his criticism were too sharp: in one of his letters, written probably in January 1839, he confessed that in his review of Mrs. Jameson's book he had been "as disgustingly offensive vulgar and impertinent and cowardly" as he had ever been in his life.[41] Since the middle of the 1840s and increasingly during the rest of his life, however, he began to be more and more aware that the critical methods used by him and all the Fraserians were too ruthless. In February 1844 he wrote in one of his reviews, echoing in his first sentence Byron's reference, in *Don Juan,* to the savage critical methods used by the poet himself in his "hot youth":[42]

"SOME few — very few years since, dear sir, in our hot youth, when Will the Fourth was king, it was the fashion of many young and ardent geniuses who contributed their share of high spirits to the columns of this Magazine, to belabour with unmerciful ridicule almost all the writers of this country of England, to sneer at their scholarship, to question their talents, to shout with fierce laughter over their faults, historical, poetical, grammatical, and sentimental; and thence to leave the reader to deduce our (the critic's) own immense superiority in all the points which we questioned in all the world beside. I say *our,* because the undersigned Michael Angelo has handled the tomahawk as well as another, and has a scalp or two drying in his lodge.

Those times, dear Yorke, are past" (*Works* VI, 386).

Until almost the end of his life, however, Thackeray remained convinced that his own early criticism, as well as that of the whole staff of *Fraser's Magazine,* was essentially honest and was not motivated by any personal rancour. Only in one of his late *Roundabout Papers* did he assess some of his early criticisms

[40] *Fraser's Magazine,* February 1840, p. 200.

[41] *Letters* I, 378.

[42] See *The Works of Lord Byron,* A new, revised and enlarged edition, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, John Murray, London, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, *Poetry,* vol. VI (1905), p. 77.

as unjust, but even in this case he insisted that they were not based upon personal animosity.[43] His later attitude is expressed both in his direct statements (in which he remembers the days of his critical youth, regrets the pain he had unconsciously caused his victims to suffer, confesses that he has grown peaceable with advancing years or comments upon the general improvement in English criticism in this later period[44]) and in his characters of critics and journalists created for his novels *Pendennis* and *Philip*. As we have seen, in the titular heroes of these novels Thackeray to a great extent depicted himself as a young critic on the staff of *Fraser's Magazine*, as well as contributor to several other periodicals.[45] The quotations cited above in this sub-chapter are at the same time a convincing proof of his later realization of the savagery of his early critical assaults and of those of the other Fraserians, as well as of his continuing conviction of the essential honesty of both. Like the young Thackeray, his later *alter-egos* are impertinent and cruel in their attacks, but their main object is to tell the truth about the books they evaluate, to assess even their opponents justly, and they refuse to sell themselves to the interests of the owners of the magazines to which they contribute. In *Pendennis*, however, Thackeray created, too, another portrait of a journalistic critic, Captain Shandon, who could be at first sight regarded as representing rather the reverse side of the critical practice of *Fraser's Magazine* than its redeeming traits. Shandon is a critic who is superior to Pendennis in wit, genius, cleverness and general accomplishment and is notorious, even more than Pen was, for his slashing criticism. But, in contra-distinction to Thackeray's *alter-ego*, he had entirely sold himself to his publisher Bungay and let himself unprotestingly be driven by "such a vulgar slave-driver", for he "had fought and killed on so many a side for many a year past, that remorse had long left him".[46] Pen feels a great compassion for the situation of this unlucky man of genius, which at the same time makes him realize more strongly the danger, to which he is daily exposed, of selling his own honour:

" 'Behold this man', he thinks to himself, 'stored with genius, wit, learning, and a hundred good natural gifts: see how he has wrecked them, by paltering with his honesty, and forgetting to respect himself. Wilt thou remember thyself, O Pen? thou art conceited enough! Wilt thou sell thy honour for a bottle? No, by Heaven's grace, we will be honest, whatever befalls, and our mouths shall only speak the truth when they open' " (*Works* XII, 446).

As Ray in particular believes,[47] Captain Shandon may be a satirical portrait of Maginn. In view of Thackeray's conviction of the essential honesty of *Fraser's* criticism at the time when he created this character, I cannot fully subscribe, however, to this opinion. There is no doubt, of course, that Shandon has many traits in common with Maginn, especially his multifarious accomplishments, undoubted talent, humour and Bohemian way of life, but it is in my

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[43] See *Works* XVII, 408.

[44] See especially *Works* XVII, 516, Stevenson, op. cit., p. 312, *Works* II, 609, IX, 83, XVI, 463.

[45] His work for the *National Standard* is depicted in Philip's work as the Paris correspondent of the *Pall Mall Gazette*; for the *Examiner* in Philip's work as sub-editor of the same magazine; for the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in Philip's work as contributor to the *European Review*; for the *Corsair* in Philip's work for the American *Gazette of the Upper Ten Thousand*.

[46] For the quotations see *Works* XII, 415, 446.

[47] See *Letters* I, 192n. and *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 114.

opinion not a literal portrait. In the first place, as Melville has pointed out, Maginn was a greater character than Shandon:

"He may have dictated the prospectus of some *Pall Mall Gazette* from the Fleet Prison; he may have written — indeed, he did write — articles that are models of virulent abuse; but he was a parodist of no mean merit, and his Shakespearian essays and his Latin versions of 'Chevy Chase' and other ballads extorted praise even from his enemies."[48]

The other traits in which Shandon differs from his prototype were analysed by Dr. Thrall: Maginn was not Thackeray's first editor, as Shandon was Pendennis's, in contradistinction to Shandon he was not the slave-driven hack of Colburn and Bentley (but, on the contrary, made them the butts of his criticism), was not unprincipled in his political beliefs and never betrayed them for money, never having been "willing to put his pen to hire",[49] irrespective of his personal convictions. In spite of Ray's protestations to the contrary, I do think that it is rather Dr. Thrall who is in the right when she maintains that Shandon "is probably best thought of as a caricature of the journalists in general of Thackeray's day".[50]

It should be pointed out in conclusion that even if Thackeray in his later years did come to realize the trespasses he had committed against the ethics of criticism in his early years and especially during his *Fraser* connection, from time to time he remembered his early critical practice with wistful nostalgia and more than once — if only on occasions when his own works were maltreated by critics — openly expressed his longing to return to the old battlefield. After the adverse criticism of *The Four Georges* he for instance wrote:

"I want a fight, I have always told you I can hit harder than any man alive, and I never do — but O! I think a little exercise would do me good!" (*Letters* III, 592).[51]

The last problem to be considered in this chapter is whether Thackeray ever formulated any definition of an ideal critic and whether from this some other tenets of his critical creed than those discussed above might be deduced. The answer to this question is unfortunately negative, for he has not left us any precise definition of this kind. Yet he did something approaching it in his assessments of a few critics of the periods preceding his own, which may to a certain extent take the place of a definition and from which some further tenets may in fact be derived. Thus for instance from his evaluations of Addison and Steele as critics we may deduce his principle that the critic should not be a man with a cold heart, unable to feel much, to "suffer, desire, admire", as Addison was, who stood in his wisdom, justice and impartiality aloof from and superior to the world of men and whose lack of feeling prevented him not only from bestowing indiscriminate praise but also from sharp critical attacks instead of his damning "with faint praise".[52] In accordance with this principle Thackeray naturally found the warm-hearted Steele much more to his liking than the imposing, but somewhat remote figure of Addison, as is obvious from the following comment:

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[48] Op. cit., I, 320.
[49] Op. cit., p. 211; see also ibid., pp. 5, 210.
[50] Ibid., p. 210.
[51] See also *Letters* II, 226 (March 4, 1853).
[52] For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 525, 569, 539.

"He admired Shakespeare affectionately, and more than any man of his time; and, according to his generous expansive nature, called upon all his company to like what he liked himself. He did not damn with faint praise: he was in the world and of it; and his enjoyment of life presents the strangest contrast to Swift's savage indignation and Addison's lonely serenity" (*Works* XIII, 568—569).

The only passage which approaches a definition of a good (though not ideal) critic is Thackeray's praise of Hazlitt as a man endowed with most of the assets which are in Thackeray's opinion the indispensable parts of a good critic's equipment:

"With partialities and prejudices innumerable, he had a wit so keen, a sensibility so exquisite, an appreciation of humour, or pathos, or even of the greatest art, so lively, quick, and cultivated, that it was always good to know what were the impressions made by books, or men, or pictures on such a mind; and that, as there were not probably a dozen men in England with powers so varied, all the rest of the world might be rejoiced to listen to the opinions of this accomplished critic" (*Works* VI, 417—418).

In the review of Horne's *A New Spirit of the Age*, from which this quotation is taken, Thackeray also warmly appreciates Hazlitt's democratic ideas, habits and sympathies (many of which he shared) and prefers this independent "ragged philosopher", who had only an irregular education, lived in poverty and had no aristocratic patron, to "the people who gave authority in his day — the pompous big-wigs and schoolmen",[53] who scorned Hazlitt and hooted him down. In this judgment Thackeray essentially differs not only from the standpoint of those detractors in Hazlitt's own time who made him the object of rude personal attacks, but also from that of those critics who respected him, but reprehended him for lack of education and depth of thought (De Quincey, Coleridge, Lamb, etc.).

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As follows from the analysis in this chapter, Thackeray's critical creed is not a complete system of firmly established and defined principles and does not go into the problematics in depth, for there are many questions, especially the subtler ones, upon which he does not touch. His own statements prove him to be interested rather in the social substance, the position and function of criticism, and in some of its more practical aspects — criticism as a trade, manners of critics, errors and abuses of criticism, ethics of criticism, etc. My analysis has also shown that his conception of criticism is not original and represents a blend of divergent influences. In some of its tenets it is near to the conception elaborated by the more advanced Neoclassicist critics, especially Fielding, and as a whole it bears strong traces of the influence of the critical theory of one of the protagonists of the Neoclassicist critical school of his own time, William Maginn. Upon the whole, however, analysis reveals Thackeray as a staunch admirer of the protagonists of the struggle to establish English criticism on new foundations (especially Hazlitt and Carlyle). Like them, Thackeray actively opposed the old canons of criticism. Although in the early stages of his critical career he himself tended to assume a superior attitude to some of the authors he assessed and to be too savage in some of his critical assaults, in his theoretical reflections of that time he rejected the survivals of the old Neoclassicist methods

[53] *Works* VI, 418.

then prevailing in periodical criticism, and proposed a new relationship, largely indebted to the critical doctrine of the Romantic critics and especially to that of Carlyle. As far as pure theory is concerned, indeed, his indebtedness to Carlyle seems to have been absolute, at least in the tenets he does touch upon. As we shall yet see, however, there is one particular principle of Carlyle's which he might have perhaps accepted in theory (though he does not refer to it), but which he did not succeed in making fully valid in his own criticism — that the nationality of the work and the author should be taken into consideration by the critic, as literature is the product of the whole nation, reflects its manners, customs, and conditions of life, and is "the truest emblem of the national spirit and manner of existence".[54] Not so much in his criticism of German literature (which Carlyle has in mind), but in that of French, Thackeray would have certainly done well if he had followed Carlyle's recommendation, addressed to the English critic and reader in the essay on Goethe, "to remember that a Foreigner is no Englishman; that in judging a foreign work, it is not enough to ask whether it is suitable to our *modes,* but whether it is suitable to *itself*".[55]

[54] Quoted by Wellek, op. cit., p. 99, from *Preface to History of German Literature* in *Carlyle's Unfinished History of German Literature,* ed. Hill Shine, Lexington, Ky., 1951, pp. 6—9; see also Carlyle, *German Romance,* 2 vols., Chapman and Hall Limited, London, 1898, I, 4; *Essays* II, 341—342; Frederick William Roe, *Thomas Carlyle as a Critic of Literature,* The Columbia University Press, New York, 1910, pp. 47—54.

[55] *Essays* I, 256; see also II, 354.