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THE DANDY AND THE FOGY: THACKERAY AND
THE AESTHETICS/ETHICS OF THE
LITERARY PRAGMATIST

BY ROBERT P. FLETCHER

I. INTRODUCTION

As he recounts Becky Sharp’s rise to respectability, the narrator of 
Vanity Fair pauses, as he does frequently, to redescribe “our” rela-
tion to his fair heroine:

It is all vanity to be sure: but who will not own to liking a little of it? I should like to know what well-constituted mind, merely because it is transitory, dislikes roast beef? That is a vanity; but may every man who reads this, have a wholesome portion of it through life, I beg: ay, though my readers were five hundred thousand. Sit down, gentlemen, and fall to, with a good hearty appetite; the fat, the lean, the gravy, the horseradish as you like it—don’t spare it. Another glass of wine, Jones, my boy—a little bit of the Sunday side. Yes, let us eat our fill of the vain thing, and be thankful therefor. And let us make the best of Becky’s aristocratic pleasures likewise—for these too, like all other mortal delights, were but transitory.1

Thackeray creates in this passage a perspective that takes away as it gives a probationary sympathy to Becky’s ambition, and to a possible reader’s response to it. Our desire for the ephemeral products of existence is first validated; we shouldn’t feel guilty for liking roast beef. Thackeray’s feel for the transitory nature of experience here yields not an abstemious despair, but an unapologetic relish for our “vain things.” “Well-constituted minds” give due attention to the here and now. Yet the chummy exhortation is undercut by his admission in the last sentence that both our and Becky’s pleasures are “but transitory,” as if—even though he admits the persuasive force of roast beef—he would posit something less transitory than temporal existence. Thus he has his roast beef and eats it too; he celebrates Becky’s actions while qualifying (by temporalizing) their success. This wry sympathy is tame, however, compared to the irony in the advice that we should “make the best of Becky’s aristocratic pleasures,” for here the narrator counsels us to consume


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“Becky Sharp” as we do roast beef. The novel itself is offered as just one more of those vain things which are transitory, and by implication our desire for more than a transitory performance is a vanity in itself. The perspective has suddenly doubled, and we get caught in the middle, implicated by our enjoyment of Becky when we thought our voyeurism was harmless reading.

A couple of questions of interest for how we read Thackeray (and other literature) are involved in this short intrusion: how are the author’s fascination with and valuing of temporal existence and his positing of something transcendent to it related? And of what good is a narrative so infused with irony? These questions of value (of experience and of literature) for a “well-constituted mind” hinge on Thackeray’s concept of vanity, that word that pervades virtually all of his work. Depending on context, almost anything and everything presented in a Thackerayan novel is vain (or valueless): material products, words, beliefs, life, love. The last of these is sometimes raised into a transcendent value, but at the end of his (currently) most valued work, Vanity Fair, even it is qualified, its contingency made apparent in the ironic dampening of Dobbin’s ardor for Amelia.

And yet, for a novelist troubled by the emptiness of existence, Thackeray writes books abounding in its materials: turtle soup and good claret, polished boots and shiny buttons, well-turned calves and bare arms fill his novels with the upper-middle class culture of his day. Vain can also mean conceited, or puffed up (certainly Jos Sedley personifies this definition), and Thackeray is fascinated by those who are particularly full of themselves and of life. Philip Firmin, the hero of his last complete novel, is one of Thackeray’s most potent swaggerers. If at his most serious, Thackeray despairs over the futility of human endeavor, he just as often celebrates the vitality of those who, like Becky Sharp, chase after “pleasures.” Few novelists are more conscious than Thackeray of how both culture and literature are forever being reconstituted through redescriptions—the existing sign is found to be empty and is remade into something to be proud of, at least temporarily. And no Victorian novelist is more conscious of his own part in this process. His status as ironist and his foothold in the canon derive from his recognition of the paradox that is the subject of Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s recent book: when we invest something with meaning and/or value, the contingency of that investment subjects it to eventual
devaluation—whether it be the fashions we wear, the books we write and read, or the lives we live.²

If his consciousness of the fragility of value doesn’t lead him to abandon the thrills of the fair, it does, however, occasionally open him to utopian yearnings for something not subject to change. Thackeray’s sentiment today loses him more readers than his irony, but rather than coming from a soft head (a common accusation from unappreciative critics), it arises out of his intellectual realization of the impermanence of life, coupled with an appreciation of the distinctiveness of each life.³ Richard Rorty reads a Philip Larkin poem as an expression of the human need to find something in life both idiosyncratic and universal—of the desire to be both poet and philosopher.⁴ Thackeray communicates this same drive to create both the unique—whether as dandy or novelist—and the representative. His irony, which undercuts every performance (even his own), and his sentiment, which treasures the human urge to perform, are both elements of a temperament which I designate, after Rorty, as that belonging to the protopragmatist.⁵ Thackeray values human effort to act or to know or to believe, while he questions the value of individual acts, knowledge, and beliefs. As a consequence of this pragmatic temperament, Thackerayan narratives are a blend of inquiry and provisional assertion, heuristic in their project to reassess the significance of human action. This disposition of mind lies behind the theme of vanity and influences Thackeray’s concepts of fiction, narrative, and the ethical function of literature.

II. THACKERAY AS AN IRONIST

One of the easiest ways into Thackeray’s literary pragmatism is through irony, doubtless a critical path itself tangled by numerous remappings. When seen as a literary tool, it can be appropriated by writers with radically different philosophies. William Empson’s so-called single irony merely requires the use of an incongruity in one standpoint to bolster another that the writer finds more attractive. The attempt to provide an example of this use of irony, however, might be tricky, as we would quite easily find a point of dispute in whether the writer really endorses the point of view left intact. This problem of where irony stops once it starts brings us to Empson’s double irony, labeled variously by others as Romantic irony, unstable irony, dialectic, or reflexivity.⁶ Here, rather than one viewpoint being permanently adopted in place of an earlier or more conven-

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tional one, the writer retreats from each position, only conditionally accepting any view as a resting point. Every view is qualified, and every use of language is rhetorically marked as self-conscious.

In all such theories, irony includes a self-consciousness about one’s own language. When the thoroughgoing ironist sees a particular use of language as not necessary but only possible, sees it as subject to troping (through parody, for instance) as human life is itself to mutability, the ironist can bring an awareness of this shift in value to his or her own life. According to Rorty, the realization that contingency underwrites human culture allows the ironist to attempt his or her own self-creation through language. The ironist redescribes self and the world, and in so doing, creates a distinctive identity, the difference from all other “I’s,” the loss of which, Rorty claims, is what we fear when we contemplate death (CIS, 23). But the ironist also realizes the contingency of that proud act of invention, and knowing it subject to change, holds it tentatively, until another act of redescribing makes it obsolete. Rorty’s irony, then, is more philosophy than technique, or rather, the technique and philosophy are often found together. This description fits Thackeray both as critic and practicing novelist; coincident with his brilliance as literary parodist and ironist is a pragmatism that reenacts the conflicting desires to be unique and universal, of the moment and lasting.

Drawn from his readings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Freud, William James, Donald Davidson, and others, Rorty’s description of the ironist is of one who conducts inquiry into previously held notions of reality, and of self and others, through redescriptions. How we are like and unlike others is the ironist’s constant object of discovery and reassessment. This figure itself seems to be a good model for understanding Thackeray’s fascination with his culture’s morality and modes of existence. In The Book of Snobs, Thackeray embodies the paradox of the individual seeking distance from a language (in this case, that of snobbery) to a point less open to questioning, and in the end reproducing the same language:

It is a great mistake to judge of Snobs lightly, and think they exist among the lower classes merely. An immense percentage of Snobs, I believe, is to be found in every rank of this mortal life. You must not judge hastily or vulgarly of Snobs: to do so shows that you are yourself a Snob. I myself have been taken for one. (Works, 6:305)
In fact, snobbery for Thackeray is related to irony in an important way. Both the ironist and the snob distance themselves from the language of the other; but snobs take their position (and its accompanying language) as superior to that of the other, as somehow stable or permanently valuable (or more “realistic”), while ironists see their alternative life or language as just one more contingency. We might say snobs are ironists unaware that they are being ironic about one very much like themselves. And the slyly placed point of dispute in the quotation above is just how aware Mr. Snob is.

Thackeray’s willingness to explore and question “final vocabularies” (Rorty, CIS, 73)—those of his culture as well as his own—needs itself to be explored anew. I find evidence for this brand of philosophical irony (which pragmatists would argue enlist under its banner such diverse figures as Emerson and Nietzsche, Wordsworth and Derrida) in Thackeray’s novels and journalism. Rorty’s statement that “since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original” (CIS, 80) sounds like the basis for Thackeray’s evaluative art criticism, in which he unabashedly favors one picture over another, not because it captures an ideal or a truth, but because the clothes on the figures suit him and his culture better. On the other hand, in his travel books he provides a perspective on his own culture as well as the foreign one; the Fat Contributor is first an advocate for English ways but then the satirist of English tourists’ habits—seemingly embodying, so to speak, Rorty’s claim that “nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture—for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies” (CIS, 80). Thackeray embraces the relation between subjective voice speaking and the meaning found in the object, unlike—as Smith points out—critics in the early and mid-twentieth century (CV, 17–29). While the snob, the ironist, and the sentimentalist seem to usurp each other’s position in Thackeray’s mind, their vocabularies finally play against one another to remind him and us that they are each only a vocabulary.

Of course snobs and ironists live in Vanity Fair. Thackeray’s concept of vanity has its place in a philosophical tradition stretching from the utilitarians to the pragmatism formulated by Charles Sanders Peirce at the end of the nineteenth century and developed in

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the twentieth by William James, John Dewey, and now Rorty. Common to all are both the process by which old truths are overturned in favor of new ones and the attitude of inquiry engendered by that process. Thackeray’s inquiries take the form of fictions interspersed with intrusive self-assessments which posit possible relations between the fiction and the reader’s own language, thus ironically exposing the latter as one description. An examination of Thackeray’s irony, therefore, leads us to his concept of fiction and his concern with its uses.

III. EXPLORING, EXPOSING, AND EXPLOITING THE POWER OF FICTION

Modern philosophers and literary theorists engage the problem of truth and fiction (as well as the related one of reality and literature) on a theoretical level. Thackeray, although not articulating their formulations, did anticipate in his narratives and criticism the concerns of those who ponder the connections between fiction and the world, and among fiction, our selves, and the values we define.

In *On the Margins of Discourse*, Smith divides language use into fictive discourse and natural discourse in order to get at the former’s distinctive features. Unlike speech-act theorist John Searle, who opposes “real world talk” to “parasitic discourse” by designating nonfictional uses of language as “natural,” she does not imply that nonfictional uses of language are of more value. Fictive discourse is no more artificial for Smith than other discourse; its ontological status is, if not the same, just as secure. But there is something distinctive about it. She cites children’s ability at an early age to tell (and understand as fictions) imaginative stories, as well as Gregory Bateson’s claim for the significance of the chimpanzee’s ability to distinguish real aggression from fake aggression (or play). The way we respond to utterances (or texts) depends to a great extent on our classifications of them, based upon conventional markers. As Robert Newsom points out in his book *A Likely Story*, the deeply engrossed viewer of a scary movie has classified the experience of seeing a film as one of watching a fiction; this classification makes available a second frame of reference which forestalls the necessity of the viewer getting up and running out of the theater when the monster on the screen stalks as if towards the audience. Yet, as Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo* so whimsically shows, people nonetheless can and do blur the “margin” between fictive text and real discourse. Smith points to
the effectiveness of modern advertising and the "sentimental" value of prefabricated greeting card verse to reveal how we sometimes use and interpret fictive utterances as "natural" (OMD, 55–60). The conventions which allow us to interpret something as fiction are exploited in other nonfictive contexts. We learn from our lifelong experience with language when the conventions that characterize fictive discourse apply and when they don't, but there is always the potential for confusion, purposeful or otherwise.

Thackeray as novelist and critic is fascinated by the problem of fiction, what constitutes it and how we use it. His parodies—both "Novels by Eminent Hands" and the many snippets in the novels, such as the beginning of the "Vauxhall" chapter of Vanity Fair—evidence his sensitivity to how we use language to form our understanding of experiences. As Bateson argues that different "maps" can be applied to the same "territory" and thereby constitute different kinds of knowledge, so Thackeray shows that different "plots" (which includes stylistic variation) can be applied to the same "story" and thereby yield different fictions. He plays such stylized "language games" against one another, exaggerating the markers of Lever's or Disraeli's distinctive vocabularies, for instance, so as to eliminate the representational bond to reality each claims to possess. The conventions of such romances have for him the status of "prefabricated discourse," to use Smith's term; they are overused tools which—though they can stand out when exaggerated in parody—can still be effective when used well. Thackeray's strenuous attacks on the Newgate Novel proceed from an ambivalence about the ways in which Bulwer and others (Thackeray even classified Dickens among them) could adapt prefabricated forms of fiction (romance), complete with markers signaling they were meant to be interpreted as fiction, to subjects (crimes) commonly described in a rhetoric conventionally taken to be "natural discourse" and thereby blur the margins between the two. He objected to Bulwer and company, therefore, not only on account of the unnaturalness of describing criminals as heroes, but because he was acutely aware of the potential unnaturalness of all discourse. No vocabulary is more originally attached to reality than any other; each is merely a construct, a compelling fiction imposed by humans and competing with others quite as capable of describing a given reality if used well and read as natural. As Smith argues, there are no hard and fast rules for when and when not to read something as fiction, and we occasionally cross over from doing the one to the

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other without being aware of the switch (OMD, 41–75). In Catherine, his own attempt to expose the fictionality of Newgate fictions, Thackeray encountered the difficulty of employing a conventional discourse that is marked as fictional without finding it as persuasive as reality. He began with parody, but (like Fielding in Joseph Andrews) found it difficult to carry out the exercise to novel length without creating a coherent orchestration of language which he found convincing himself. Thackeray appropriated the narrative formula but found his heroine more than formulaic:

Your letter with compliments has just come to hand; it is very ingenious in you to find such beauties in Catherine which was a mistake all through—it was not made disgusting enough that is the fact, and the triumph of it would have been to make readers so horribly horrified as to cause them to give up or rather throw up the book and all of it’s [sic] kind, whereas you see the author had a sneaking kindness for his heroine, and did not like to make her utterly worthless.15

Two years later Thackeray returned to this topic of how fictional convention can become part of our natural discourse. Barry Lyndon, unlike Catherine and his own literary ancestor Fielding’s Jonathan Wild, tells his own story. Despite his insistence on plain speaking, he frequently lapses into romance, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes quite consciously, as when he reflects on his challenge for his cousin’s hand:

“I’ll have his blood, or he shall have mine; and this riband shall be found dyed in it. Yes! and if I kill him, I’ll pin it on his breast, and then she may go take back her token.” This I said because I was very much excited at the time, and because I had not read my novels and romantic plays for nothing.16

Although Barry can detect in retrospect the artificiality of his younger self’s language, at other times he adopts a heroic idiom without being aware of its rhetorical nature, as, for instance, when he describes himself as a romantic gambler-gentleman:

Is this not something like boldness? does this profession not require skill, and perseverance, and bravery? Four crowned heads looked on at the game, and an imperial princess, when I turned up the ace of hearts and made Paroli, burst into tears. No man on the European Continent held a higher position than Redmond Barry then; and when the Duke of Courland lost, he was pleased to say that we had won nobly: and so we had, and spent nobly what we won. (BL, 130)

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We enjoy the braggadocio at this point; we simultaneously laugh at Barry and participate in this fictional (in a double sense—perhaps “fictive fictional”) life. Only later, when he terrorizes Lady Lyndon into marrying him, are we made aware of the consequences that Barry’s fictions about himself have for others, and of how our crediting those stories (as readers of Barry Lyndon) somehow implicates us in their effectiveness. When he enters Lady Lyndon’s world as her suitor, Barry poses as the gothic villain—“Terror, be sure of that,” he tells us, “is not a bad ingredient of love” (218)—and succeeds in instilling a fear and fascination in his object. Through Barry’s tireless efforts, this initial contact becomes a “story of her ladyship’s passionate attachment for me,” and our PR wizard is not slow “in profiting by these rumours” (228). He continues his progress:

Every one thought I was well with the widowed countess, though no one could show that I said so. But there is a way of proving a thing even while you contradict it, and I used to laugh and joke so a propos that all men began to wish me joy of my great fortune, and look up to me as the affianced husband of the greatest heiress in the kingdom. The papers took up the matter.

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Thackeray makes his scoundrel a master at manipulating the public voice of gossip, because the novelist understands how much of personal belief is made up of such culturally shared fictions. If Barry can convince the world of this “love story” he can persuade Lady Lyndon as well that “Fate works with agents, great and small; and by means over which they have no control the destinies of men and women are accomplished” (231). She does eventually succumb to Barry’s artfully constructed “fate” and marries him. Throughout the novel, “fate,” “luck,” and “fortune” serve the failed Barry’s own purposes as comforting fictions to explain away his imprisoned end. The novel is largely about belief in fictions: Barry’s own, Lady Lyndon’s, and most importantly the reader’s belief in Barry Lyndon. Thackeray deliberately juggles the moments when we have to credit some of what Barry says with those when we know he is lying, and even adds in a third level of “editor” complete with interpretive tastes for “poetical justice [which] overtakes the daring and selfish hero” (234), all to show us the temptation we have when reading to forget the fictionality of the discourse, or of such things as “poetical justice.” The novel itself succeeds in “proving a thing

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even while [it] contradict[s] it” by getting us to reflexively credit (as a fiction) a fictional liar’s life.

Thackeray focuses so much of his attention on Barry Lyndon and other scoundrels because of their ability to manipulate the conventions governing discursive transactions in an amusing (albeit insidious) way. The dangerous liar is he who not only violates the “basic assumption of the linguistic marketplace” that referents are implied by a verbal or textual event and are to be inferred “in accord with the relevant rules and conventions” (Smith, OMD, 100), but keeps that event coherent and, above all, interesting as well. In other words he is the potential fiction writer. If Barry Lyndon fails at sustaining a coherent narrative (and from the first sentence of the novel Thackeray makes a point of providing plenty of room for interpretive inferences that contradict Barry’s own), he succeeds in making his story interesting, in making himself an interesting character.

Thackeray and other writers who employ such unreliable narrators understand and exploit the rules of a language game which dictate that

a natural utterance [or text] constitutes, for the listener, not only an invitation and provocation, but ultimately an obligation, to respond to the speaker. When we “listen” to someone, as distinguished from merely noticing or overhearing what he says—in other words, when we identify ourselves as his audience—we implicitly agree to make ourselves available to that speaker as the instrument of his interests. We agree not only to hear but to heed his promises, excuses, questions, and commands—and also, of course, his assertions. Most simply, but most significantly, we agree to understand what he means, that is, to infer the motives and circumstances that occasioned his utterance. (Smith, OMD, 101–2)

When we “listen” to a narrative we agree, at least initially, to accept what the narrator presents to us as true, until we detect a violation of the good faith needed to play the game. Even then we have to credit some of what we are told—or stop playing the game with this speaker (or writer), or play our own game—as is often the case with the speaker-less (presence-less) text. What happens, Thackeray seems to be asking in Barry Lyndon, when we know the rules are being transgressed without being suspended (Barry claims to be an autobiographer not a fiction writer), and we find the discourse interesting nonetheless? Are we then believing a fiction to be true? Can we always, while we are enjoying ourselves with the story,
keep the fictive and natural utterances clearly distinguished? And what are the consequences of such a play with the conventions of discourse? Thackeray’s project is to educate his readers in their habits of reading and of belief. Probability and credulity are always at issue for Thackeray, not only in his criticism of others, but in his own novels as well. He seems—as a novelist—to be more interested in how we read and believe than in whether particular beliefs are true. His protopragmatism evidences itself in this preoccupation with how we know and its consequences for how we live.

IV. SKEPTICISM AND BELIEF; VANITY AND VALUE

The interest in fiction’s sway with readers that I have been tracing in the last section is related to Thackeray’s own struggles with skepticism and belief. His theological doubts instill an epistemological uncertainty, or vice versa. Taken together these conditions both make possible the fictions he writes and help determine his eventual difficulty with writing fiction at all.

Gordon Ray has documented Thackeray’s recurring struggles with skepticism, first under the influence of Edward Fitzgerald, and later as he took in the intellectual currents of mid-century. Ray cites extensively chapter 61 of Pendennis, “The Way of the World,” wherein the dialectic between the skeptical, worldly Pen and the resolute, dutiful George Warrington does indeed reflect the author’s own conflict between doubt and certainty. The cynical Pen argues that absolute faith in one’s own voice breeds dogmatism and persecution; he cites historical examples to support his position. So far he is in the right. Even Warrington and the narrator admire the young dandy’s tolerance of human imperfection and rejection of cant. But Pen uses these realizations to justify an indifference to all human endeavor and all morality, and this is where he trips up. Thackeray’s will to believe is embodied in the foggy Warrington, who insists that the struggle itself, “the protest” against the impotence of skepticism, is all. To Pen’s “sneering acquiescence in the world as it is; or if you like so to call it... belief qualified with scorn in all things extant” (Works, 2:614–15) is opposed Warrington’s sense of duty. In this tension between belief and doubt is Thackeray’s peculiar appreciation of fiction born, for in the incongruity of this desire to believe with an ironic distance from forms of belief we find an important element in our understanding of fictive discourse, the mind’s simultaneous use of two frames of reference, the ability to believe while not believing. Thackeray’s tempera-

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ment, exemplified by this coincidence of skepticism and the will to believe, suits him to his chosen task of uncovering vanity, that double-sided coin of conceit and emptiness, which shows us how human culture can be both legal tender and counterfeited at the same time.

If vanity allows Thackeray to express his skeptic side, it also permits him to celebrate the attempt to believe, the attempt to find value. To be self-consciously vain of something is to be cognizant of overvaluing the item even while enjoying it. In this sense of vanity Thackeray himself recognizes what Smith calls the “contingencies of value.” Although we always want to believe in things, people, ideas, and words, without qualification, we find our understanding of each depends upon particular contexts and chance events, and must be kept current through revision.

Belief, then, becomes for Thackeray an ideal that is never fully realized. His temperament of mind favors habits of inquiry once again akin to those of pragmatism. He had been tutored at Cambridge by William Whewell, who lectured on connections between science and morality and was writing his History of the Inductive Sciences while Thackeray attended, and later in life, as a moderate liberal, he admired science’s and society’s advances. I believe a healthy skepticism, which Richard Poirier has deemed a prerequisite to “the deed of writing,” finds its expression in Thackeray’s work in the significant role that discovery and inquiry play in his novels. His chatty narrators may endorse particular values (which we may or may not agree with as we read him now), but they more importantly rehearse the act of valuing, because Thackeray sees how we are capable of changing the nature of things we experience (for ourselves) when we redescribe them:

A word of kindness or acknowledgment, or a single glance of approbation, might have changed Esmond’s opinion of the great man; and instead of a satire, which his pen cannot help writing, who knows but that the humble historian might have taken the other side of panegyric? We have but to change the point of view, and the greatest action looks mean; as we turn the perspective-glass, and a giant appears a pigmy. You may describe, but who can tell whether your sight is clear or not, or your means of information accurate? (Works, 7:222)

Because of this dialogic element in Thackeray’s work, I pair as analogous the concepts of skepticism and vanity, and belief and value (sentimental or otherwise). When we value something we
often believe in it quite fervently (as Thackeray shows in a pathetic character like Old Osborne). Thackeray’s skepticism is best described by the term vanity because the latter hints at the vague notion of something beyond the contingent which instills him with his sentimental melancholy. Perhaps this frame of mind derives from his remarkable sense of the contingency of things past. In a “Roundabout” essay on a fragment by Charlotte Brontë, he speculates about the text (and by implication about aesthetic texts in general): “If the Has Been, why not the Might Have Been?” (Works, 12:187). Not only might things have been different, they “Might Have Been” represented differently, and these two, Thackeray realizes—through his inquiries into probability in narrative—can be very nearly the same.

Once philosophers realize (as Thackeray does) that particular values are possibilities but not necessities, they begin to downplay abstract moral law in favor of individual narratives—the moral function of which depends on such a relativistic ethics. Rorty has described narrative’s central role in exploring the value of particular ethical paradigms—in fact, he calls the history of intellectual and moral progress “a history of increasingly useful metaphors” (CIS, 9). This role is certainly the one Thackeray saw good fictional narratives playing in his own society. However, fictions which either attempt to hide their fictionality or propose too easily a “transcendent” or “romantic” truth come under his severest scrutiny. His own voice, on the other hand, is always clearly that of an individual relating the events of his experience: that is, always clearly in a rhetorical situation complete with all the hazards of argument and deception. Thackeray’s narratives depend heavily on a discernible scaffold of hypothesis and inference for their persuasiveness, and their goal is discovery of new ways of talking about reality, and new descriptions of it that encompass older ones. The ironist specializes in redescribing reality in partially neologistic jargon (Rorty, CIS, 78); Thackeray’s attempts to redefine such things as snobbery, worldly success, and the gentleman are signs of his interest in using narrative as heuristic.19 He realizes there are no values which are not contingent and no vocabularies which are final. Perhaps the most interesting result, for his readers, of his doubts and desire to believe is the effect his uncertainty has on the form of his novels. Uncertain of himself as well as others, Thackeray writes narrative which involves a great deal of speculation, playful and serious at once.

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V. THACKERAYAN NARRATIVE AS COGNITIVE PLAY

Reading Thackeray’s novels as representations of our need to reassess and revise cognitive activity and its accompanying moral judgements allows us to appreciate certain distinctive features of Thackeray’s art, while not denying that many of his individual assessments and judgements are not ours. Thackeray can still make us aware of the “independent charms of epistemic activity” (Smith, OMD, 117). In life we are mainly concerned with cognitive ends which are rewarded by the everyday world. In art we are made aware of cognitive activities—how we know what we know—and Thackeray’s narratives reward readers for taking their cues to examine how they use cultural and narrative conventions to form their worlds. On the other hand, Thackeray’s unrevised racial views as, for instance, in the character of Woolcomb in Philip, are offensive to us (and undoubtedly have lost him many readers). His individual assessments stand up less well than his interest in assessing. But even in that novel, as Alexander Welsh has argued (Welsh, Thackeray), we can find valuable Thackeray’s use of fiction for heuristic purposes.

I think it is worth pursuing the suggestion Welsh has made that Thackerayan narrative is distinctive for its predominantly speculative tenor. According to Rorty, narrative is one of the pragmatist’s primary tools for helping us see and revise our intellectual habits (CIS, vxi). Fictional narrative helps us invent new vocabularies, since—as we have seen—its places of intersection with our present vocabulary help loosen the latter’s hold on our knowledge of the world. Smith sees fictional narratives as examples of “cognitive play,” places where we test out new descriptions of the world and of our place in it with relatively few consequences (when, that is, we can clearly keep distinguished the “margins”). These aesthetic toys and ethical tools allow us to grasp the “structural relations” (Smith, OMD, 117) of our world and modify them, and perhaps consequently modify the world outside us. In order to so work and allow us to learn, cognitive activity must be

characterized by, among other things, a combination—either a balance or a particular ratio—of novelty and familiarity, repetition and variation, conformity and disparity, redundancy and information. Learning is most graciously invited by a situation that appears to some extent unknown but that promises knowability. (Smith, OMD, 118)
It is the testing of such patterns that Thackeray’s novels rehearse. And so he blends the old vocabularies of his world with hypotheses about how they relate to one another.

One of Thackeray’s most direct discussions of this stitching together of observation and inference occurs in an intrusion by Pendennis into his narrative of the Newcome family. According to this theory, the novelist “puts this and that together: from the footprint finds the foot; from the foot, the brute who trod upon it” (Works, 8:491). The entire passage compares the novelist’s job to the paleontologist’s, describing the former as one who, like Professor Agassiz, speculates from a “fragment of a bone” (Works, 8:491). The fragment, the historical evidence, in the novelist’s case consists of language, the vocabularies and conventions of culture, both past and present. But much must be expanded upon, revised, and thus discovered. Thackeray’s blends of commentary and action in his narratives work like the scientist’s hypothesis and experiment. The narrator proposes something as happening, or as a past happening, or even as a possible happening, and then interprets it for us, proposing meanings for it and possibly even applying the meanings to his readers’ lives. Smith writes of our “epistemic fixation” (OMD, 117), our hunger for information, knowledge, and interpretations for us in turn to interpret. Thackeray’s narrators enact that processing. The delight is in watching this acute mind tracing the patterns and making us aware of our own tracings.

One of the most fruitful places to go exploring for this cognitive activity is Chapter 64 of Vanity Fair, aptly labeled “A Vagabond Chapter.”20 As that title suggests, it seems indeed wandering, nomadic, as it follows the fortunes of Becky, the novel’s irrepressible vagabond, who strays ever more after Rawdon leaves her. We catch up with her in this chapter by following her retreat to the Continent and her subsequent ways of life. Filled with ambiguities and evasions about just what Becky does and does not do, how others do or do not act towards her, and why they might or might not have done so, it resists our desire to rest from interpretation. For every piece of evidence of Becky’s guilt there is an extenuating circumstance, a sympathetic reading of the incident, or a complete displacement of responsibility. Becky is depicted as more acted upon than acting in her “abattement and degradation” (625). The snobbish Lady Slingstones who hound her are accompanied by such wolves as the lecherous Grinstone who “showed his teeth and laughed in her face with a familiarity that was not pleasant” (627). The point of view

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wanders in the chapter from a distanced perspective on “poor little Becky” (627) to “our little wanderer’s” (632) own thoughts, endearingly presented, at George Osborne’s grave, until we are indirectly given her genuine anxiety upon encountering Lord Steyne and being rejected. Throughout the chapter, Thackeray has manipulated us through vocabulary and point of view to keep us off balance as to just how much we are to sympathize with Becky.

The chapter starts off very clearly with the distinction between “the moral world” and “vice” (624), even though it teases us with the distinction between appearance and reality in the elaborate description of Becky as siren. The narrator obviously sets out to satirize the “truly-refined English or American female” who doesn’t want vice represented. But in that complaint over censorship a comfortable dichotomy between appearance and reality, and moral and immoral, is itself set up for the purpose of knocking it down. Supposedly we have the decorous (unreal) world of novels and the (real) world of vice, personified by Becky, in her role of mermaid. But as we have seen, the rest of the chapter undermines—through its wavering point of view, conflicting scenes, and ambiguous images—that very category of vice. Even the central metaphor contributes to this collapsing of the dichotomy, though it seems to support the absolute morality of good and bad, woman and demon. The siren is supposedly half woman, half fish, and the mocking opening paragraph warns us against following the creatures into “their native element,” where they “are about no good, . . . revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims” (625).

But as we have seen, within two pages Becky is herself presented as victim, subject to the teeth of other predators. The metaphor of siren is retained, however, with very interesting results. As she is chased from place to place and made more and more lonely through this persecution, she is presented as “perched upon the French coast” (626); she shares “in sea-bathing” and takes walks “upon the jetty” (627), attracts temporary companions with “the sweetness of her singing” (629) and her “graces and fascinations” (630–31). Thackeray has exploited a different interpretation of the siren figure as one of banishment and loneliness to put in question his own earlier use of it. To discredit completely the alignment of his projected readers with good and the sirens with bad, he associates Becky with Mrs. Hook Eagles, “a woman without a blemish in her character” who makes Becky’s acquaintance “at sea, where they were swimming together” (630). Thus the harpy and the siren be-

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come momentarily bosom companions (surely Thackeray is here drawing from the alternative tradition of depicting sirens as half bird, not fish), and the language not only of novels, but of morality is criticized.

The chapter, then, is truly vagabond, not only in its interest in Becky’s leading an unsettled, irregular, or disreputable life, but in its own roving, straying, narration, its point of view seemingly not subject to control or restraint. At its beginning we are presented with a clear distinction between surface and depth, decorum and vice; after its explorations of those oppositions we are left with an opaque verbal and narrative surface, its depth (that is, the “truth” about Becky) imperceptible. The play of the narrative, which is dominated by speculative qualifiers like “perhaps” and “I don’t think” and “very likely,” comes up with no definite answers to the question of “her history [which] was after all a mystery” (629), but it does discover (and discredit) the conventions of a couple of language games. Throughout Thackeray’s work we can find such play with possible meanings, possible responses, and the possible worlds which are implied by both.

There are several ramifications (for other narratives as well as Thackeray’s) of this use of fiction for cognitive play, one of which is the improvisational form that such narratives employ. Part of Thackeray’s genius is his ability to develop his characters and plots as his narrative discoveries change them. Thus, the narrator’s attitude toward Amelia Sedley develops as she does, from admiration for a typical heroine (devoted and passive) to impatience with an obsessive and manipulative woman. He can also suddenly find some interesting qualities in Rawdon Crawley, after he (and we) had him pegged as a stupid bully. The figure of the dandy can signify independence (in Arthur Pendennis) or utter dependence on society (in the Major), depending on context. At the end of The Newcomes, like Scott at the end of Old Mortality, Thackeray even leaves the plot open—anticipating the “modern” phenomenon of “open” texts—by suggesting that the picture we might have of the hero and heroine married is only wishful thinking. He thus emphasizes both how readers participate in creating the novel by bringing their common vocabulary of novelistic conventions to the text and how his dissatisfaction with conventional forms (of literature and knowledge) gives him a certain daring independence with which to play the game. Finally, in Henry Esmond, according to Ray, Thackeray’s most planned novel, his hero’s melancholy sense of change

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and nostalgia for the past (represented by the faithful woman, Rachel Esmond) make one of the very subjects of the novel the extent to which chance and improvisation make up our (or at least, according to this passage, men’s) experience:

What is the meaning of fidelity in love, and whence the birth of it? ‘Tis a state of mind that men fall into, and depending on the man rather than the woman. We love being in love, that’s the truth on’t. If we had not met Joan, we should have met Kate, and adored her. We know our mistresses are no better than many other women, nor no prettier, nor no wiser, nor no wittier. ‘Tis not for these reasons we love a woman, or for any special quality or charm I know of; we might as well demand that a lady should be the tallest woman in the world, like the Shropshire giantess, as that she should be a paragon in any other character, before we began to love her. (Works, 7:272–73)

Another consequence of both Thackeray’s role as ironist and his use of narrative for cognitive play is his understanding of the ethical import of fiction. Since he sees vocabularies not as pictures of the world but as tools for discovery (and for deception), and since he reenacts in his fiction the revisions we constantly make, he is sensitive to the social conflicts that occur when differing vocabularies (complete with their differing values) meet.

VI. THACKERAY’S AESTHETIC AND ETHICAL PRAGMATISM

To say that it is impossible not to be sometimes a snob is to acknowledge in a wonderfully provocative way how we must sometimes inscribe limits to irony even if we consider ourselves complete ironists. We must credit some uses of language at least some of the time. We have to interpret ourselves and others and texts, even if we realize at the same time the inevitable limitations of those readings; we cannot perpetually expect a better reading and still function in our social worlds. If the snob tries to play up his claims and the claims of those he values to truth, the ironist works against this exclusivity, to subvert it in favor of a general leveling, an understanding of the contingency of every vocabulary. Hence, as Rorty says, the ironist, who questions the necessary existence of a permanent moral order, has always seemed hostile to human solidarity (CIS, xv). This subversive enterprise is also the topic of Harold Bloom’s “agonistic” theory of literature and Thackeray’s declaration in The English Humourists: “Yesterday’s preacher be-

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comes the text for today’s sermon” (Works, 7:424). The recognition of his own snobbery, however, signifies Thackeray’s awareness that the ironic process does not go on forever in any individual mind; the revolution (and semiosis) must come to a place of rest at least for a while. It is in this conflict between the status quo and the radical (past meanings and the interpretive impulse, in the analogous terms from hermeneutics) that literature exists for Thackeray. Along with the ironist’s subversiveness Thackeray displays his distrust of revolutionary zeal. Despite the implications of Barbara Hardy’s excellent book The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray, I find him more a pragmatist than a radical, at least philosophically. Realizing the contingency of all vocabularies, he was both bemused and deeply troubled by the competitiveness of existence.

In the pair of dandies, Arthur and Major Pendennis, we see how a cultural entity could signify something valuable at one moment and vain the next. This seemingly cavalier method of using the figure to mean different things in different contexts, what we might call being the novelist-as-dandy, is another example of the ironist in Thackeray. He shows how circumstance helps determine meaning and value by adding one significant variable, age, to the club man, the Major, thereby changing his significance. This role of the novelist-as-dandy captures the bubble-bursting, mocking function of redescription. The young dandy stands as individual, independent of the social conventions of family and work, and, in the metaphors of Thackeray’s universe, as the figure of self-creation. His waistcoats and gloves are signs from this private vocabulary, which is analogous to innumerable other such vocabularies we ourselves form. But occurring with regularity in Thackeray’s discourse is the competing public vocabulary of George Warrington, or the fogy, or the preacher, whose earnestness quite frequently displaces the puppet-master’s irony. Both these vocabularies, which occasion a doubleness itself an irony, are crucial for forming Thackeray’s sense of psychic struggles in individual selves, in the literature they write and read, and in society. With such conflicting voices as part of his own make-up, Thackeray seems to appreciate how completely the self is formed by competing vocabularies. As his use of the dandy indicates, he admires the ability (while also being wary of it) of those who consciously re-create themselves (through recreation and play). The dandy has and exercises choice, though it is a choice limited by the contingencies that have formed his past.

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The voice of the preacher, on the other hand, employs the vocabulary not of self-creation, but of self-transcendence. When he preaches vanity, the fogy is emphasizing the contingency of the self created, and expressing the hope (at times seemingly vain in itself) that there is something not subject to such contextual determination. As I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, Thackeray fails eventually to find anything immune to devaluation and realizes it. He finds that all of life cannot be held in a single language; its contradictions demand compromise. At times, this realization invigorates him, while at others it defeats him.

This awareness of struggle instills his theory and practice of fiction with a slant toward ethical inquiry that is the final product of his own inquiries. Since the snob uses language as a tool—or a weapon, really—to exclude others, the exposure of the snob comes about through an ironic perspective on his language. But of course the catch-22 is that to call someone a snob is to be a snob, to use that same language of exclusion against him. The result for Thackeray is that the examination of the languages of snobbery (of value) becomes a fixation, the only ethical role literature can play. It cannot, according to Thackeray’s practice of it, safeguard us from valueless enterprises and thoughts—to think that it can is to be a literary snob. The snob’s comfort in judging others comes from his ability to hold that person off at a distance and thereby turn him into a thing for ridicule. The snob can voyeuristically enjoy the “meanness” of others, as Mr. Snob enjoys the Ponto family. Thackeray’s play is to turn the language of snobbery—which reifies the other—reflectionly back upon himself and us. To objectify someone, to suspend the rules of how to respond to, or “listen to” (in Smith’s words), a person, is to be a snob. Thackeray forces his readers to examine their language and their actions, to see how like the other’s they are. This inquiry into his society’s (and our) ethical vocabularies is the main subject of the Thackerayan novel. To see how the old preacher is turned into text by the next one, how the father is revised by the son, is to see how we have arrived where we are, and where we will wind up when we in turn are redescribed. This sort of epistemic activity is Thackeray’s only ethical value for narrative. But, like Patricia Meyer Spacks, Thackeray also asks whether we can ever have “narrative without ethics.” And like her, he concludes that reading and writing fictions “heightens ethical self-consciousness” (Spacks, 185). For Thackeray, fictional narratives imitate not so much an outer reality, but the cognitive activity of

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human beings, the “texture of ethical life” (Spacks, 186; emphasis added).

Smith describes the different language uses in society and literature (labelled as natural and fictive discourse) in terms of the metaphors of linguistic marketplace and linguistic playground (OMD, 119). In society language is a tool of exchange; we give and receive real or bogus information for immediate practical ends. Literature is the playground where we can try on vocabularies, see how they are different from our old ones, see if they fit us, with relatively few consequences (other than the knowledge of the nature of vocabularies gained in the process), because the rules governing reactions to linguistic acts are suspended in this “Fable-land,” to use Thackeray’s name for it. The pair of metaphors encompasses both the competitive and playful sides of rhetorical practice, and the satisfactions of both. Thackeray’s use of Bunyan’s place of business, Vanity Fair, in its turn, entails both of Smith’s terms. For a fair involves both the business of the marketplace and the games of the playground, just as Thackeray’s theory and practice of fiction realizes both the hazards and satisfactions of existence in a world of competing descriptions.

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NOTES

5 Richard Rorty (“Freud and Moral Reflection,” Pragmatism’s Freud, ed. Joseph Smith and William Kerrigan [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986]) applies this epithet to David Hume, a man whom Thackeray was both fascinated and disturbed by. In his review of Burton’s biography of Hume, Thackeray depicts the great skeptic as two people, one publicly dangerous, the other privately quite personable. See Contributions to the Morning Chronicle, ed. Gordon Ray (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1955), 113–117. Rorty also indirectly claims Thackeray as a precursor of Neopragmatism because he contributed to our “acquisition of new vocabularies of moral reflection” by inventing “terms like . . . a Becky Sharpe [sic]” (11).
6 Though these terms are hardly interchangeable, they all capture Rorty’s sense of irony as the realization that each vocabulary we adopt is a convention, a made thing, that isn’t necessarily better or worse than any other possible vocabulary. I derive the

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7 Richard Foirier, The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections (New York: Random House, 1987), discusses Emerson and Wordsworth as pragmatists, while Borty (note 4) credits Nietzsche for first doing philosophy from an ironic perspective, which has allowed for the thoroughly ironic of Derrida. What all these figures have in common is the habit of talking of things not in “final” or metaphysical terms, but in figurative, that is rhetorically self-conscious, language.

8 Contrast, for instance, his praise for the caricaturist Daumier’s topically dressed figures (Works, 5:142–66) with his scorn for David’s idealizing neoclassical work (5:41–57), both in The Paris Sketchbook.

9 See From Cornhill to Grand Cairo, where in one paragraph on the Tomb of the Sepulchre, Thackeray expresses both scorn for English tourists’ audacity and admiration for the Anglican Church’s simplicity compared to that of the Roman Catholic (Works, 5:694–95).


18 Poirier (note 7), 3.


20 This chapter has received several critical treatments, two of which I am particularly indebted to: Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982) 89 and passim; and John Loebourow, Thackeray and the Form of Fiction (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), 60–66.


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