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 Geoffrey Tillotson  
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## CHAPTER I

‘*To Define the Thackerayan Oneness*’

The work of every author cannot but round itself into a unity, of which every reader achieves his own sense at his own rate. As we read, our sense of this unity improves in strength and clearness. The process of improvement, however, does not receive much of our attention during the first stages of reading. It is the differences between one work and another that we notice first—the differences between *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *The Winter’s Tale*, even between *Hamlet* and *Lear*, the differences between *An Evening Walk* and the *Lyrical Ballads*, even between *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, the differences between *Pickwick Papers* and *Edwin Drood*, even between *Our Mutual Friend* and *Bleak House*. As we read on, finding the author’s work ‘before, behind us and on every hand’, we come to feel more at home in it. The mass shrinks to a whole that is manageable. And our sense of this whole being the maturer achievement, the criticism we value most is that which best helps to express it, which comes nearest to naming the foundation of all the writings in the one mind that produced them, which has deciphered and described the one stamp that seals every page of the tens of thousands, which has enriched for us the content of such generalities as the ‘Shakespearian’, the ‘Wordsworthian’, the ‘Dickensian’.

The critic of Thackeray’s novels has little power of choice, as I see it, over the method he adopts. From an early stage he must seek to define the Thackerayan oneness. Inevitably, he is first struck by the separateness of

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the novels. Having its own FINIS, each of them calls for treatment by itself, treatment such as Saintsbury gave each in turn when he wrote those vigorous prefaces to the Oxford edition—later collected in *A Consideration of Thackeray*. As first encountered, each novel differs enough from its fellows to tempt the critic to play the impressionist, calling *Esmond* the prince among them—that novel which is at once rapid and melancholy, a thing of silver and fire—calling *Vanity Fair* the one most ‘lively on the wires’, *The Newcomes* the most golden, *Pendennis* and *The Virginians* the most delightful (as the Pastoral is the most delightful of the symphonies of Beethoven), the unfinished *Denis Duval* the most Dickensian (if we bear *Great Expectations* in mind), that long *nouvelle*, *Lovel the Widower*, a great bell scribbled all over with personal jottings, giving out a deep note; *Philip* the most indolently lordly, and, if the thinnest in matter, containing imagery and description unmatched for scorching richness outside pieces of late Shakespeare or Ruskin—for these later novels belong to the later years of the shortish life of Thackeray, not years of decline but of an older age which, begun almost in youth, was, as Longinus would say, the older age of Thackeray. Some things certainly may be said for the novels one by one. But if, accepting the account I began with, we are on the watch for the dawning of a sense of the Thackerayan oneness, we may be surprised at the speed with which it comes upon us. For Thackeray is an author who encourages it to dawn early. His works, planned to be as alike as possible, implore us to take them together. ‘Of few writers’, Saintsbury asserted, ‘can it be said with so much confidence as of Thackeray, that he is all of a piece.’<sup>1</sup> Or, to quote the

<sup>1</sup> *Corrected Impressions*, 1895, p. 8.

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## THE METHOD PROPOSED

testimony of another critic, 'A writer like Thackeray, who is throughout his career so true to himself, cannot properly be judged by samples.'<sup>1</sup> Our sense of the Thackerayan coherence soon becomes dominant, and we cease to be much aware of differences, ceasing to attend to the chronology of the novels, or, if we are reading his work in all its kinds, to the differences among articles, essays, lectures, sketches (literary and pictorial), stories, *nouvelles*, novels, verses, letters—though I shall be mainly concerned with the six long novels.

## 2

I find something to my purpose in the very bibliography of the long novels. Their format encouraged his first readers to see them as a batch. Thackeray did not give those readers anything like the material objects we read him in. On one occasion he spoke ingeniously of 'lipping in numbers'.<sup>2</sup> It was in numbers, in monthly parts, that four of his six long novels were first published. He responded, that is, to the cue of Dickens, who had gathered readers by the tens of thousands, giving them his long expensive novels in spaced-out pieces they could conveniently afford to buy. Thackeray saw his chance, though not to rival or to beat Dickens; he was always keenly and amusedly aware of the gap between the degrees of their popularity; when he crowed that 'Mrs. Perkins's Ball' had brought him 'very nearly' the popularity of Dickens, he ended broken-windedly:

that is Perkins 500 Dickens 25000 only that difference!<sup>3</sup>

Seeing his chance, Thackeray published *Vanity Fair*, *The History of Pendennis*, *The Newcomes* and *The Virginians* in parts, eighty-nine parts in all, each part

<sup>1</sup> A. A. Jack, *Thackeray: A Study*, 1895, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *The Virginians*, ch. xxxv. <sup>3</sup> *Letters*, II, 258.

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wearing the yellow cover that came to be associated with him as the cover of green or duck-egg blue with Dickens. Of the other two novels, *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.* was published at one go in three bound volumes; but the 'jaundiced livery'—the conscious phrase is Thackeray's<sup>1</sup>—was not denied to Philip Firmin: *The Adventures of Philip*, and also the six instalments of *Lovel the Widower* and the four of the unfinished *Denis Duval*, appeared in numbers of *The Cornhill*, which under Thackeray's editorship, and later, sported the old saffron. At the end of his busy career, then, Thackeray stood before those of his first readers who had not called in the services of a binder as a shelf of pamphlets, like a long run of numbers of a magazine. With the modest air of being no more than ephemera—or their monthly equivalent—of all being alike and of the same importance or unimportance, they wore the appearance of uniformity.

This bibliographical coherence is the emblem of my present study. The Thackerayan unity is a thing felt strongly, however many separable virtues and faults contribute to its formation. And because what we feel strongly we see as magnificent—that at least is how I see it—the Thackerayan oneness is worth investigating.

<sup>1</sup> *The Virginians*, ch. xxxv.

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## CHAPTER II

*The Oneness of the Materials*

Thackeray did what he could to give his fiction a unity that is obvious.

In the first place he was at pains to link his novels by the consanguinity of the personages. The author of *Joseph Andrews* had invented a new member of the family invented by Richardson, but Thackeray, like Balzac and to a lesser degree Disraeli, promoted such transferences into a practice. His novels hang together like a dynasty. If, unlike Balzac and Trollope, he did not group them, or some of them, under one name, it was not for lack of choice. *Esmond*—to neglect chronology of composition as we do in arranging the line of Shakespeare's history plays—leads on to *The Virginians*. Arthur Pendennis, who is the centre of *The History of Pendennis*, is the supposed editor of the materials that make *The Newcomes*, and with his family participates in the action of both. And though at the close of *The Newcomes* we are invited to see him 'disappear... as irrevocably as Eurydice', he returns to share and record the adventures of *Philip*. Lady Kew, important in *The Newcomes*, is the sister of Lord Steyne, who is important in *Vanity Fair*, reappears in *Pendennis* as the friend of Major Pendennis, and is mentioned in *The Newcomes* and *Philip*. By means of *The Newcomes* we learn the later history of some of the personages of *Vanity Fair*. The links between novel and novel are sometimes so fine as to declare themselves all the more as placed deliberately. Even in *Lovel the Widower* the Rev. Charles Honeyman and the dubious Sherrick,

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prominent in *The Newcomes*, get a passing reference. And though the great novels fall into two main groups, those groups themselves are not without their family interconnection. The Warrington of both *Pendennis* and *The Newcomes* is a descendant of the family into which the daughter of Henry Esmond marries. He is also mentioned in *The Virginians* and *Lovel the Widower*. The truncated *Shabby Genteel Story*, which Thackeray foresaw, I think, as a long novel, provided the situation out of which with a little juggling of dates sprang, a generation later, the action of *Philip*. Most of his novels are about the same families. The curious reader may consult the *Thackeray Dictionary*, compiled by Isadore Gilbert Mudge and M. Earl Sears, a fascinating work of the pious sort which, when the novelist is Thackeray, serves a critical purpose.

Thackeray picked up a personage in an earlier novel for use later. If he had foreseen this usefulness he would no doubt have introduced more of them earlier; Clive Newcome reappears in *Philip*: if Thackeray could have gone back, the family might have been introduced in some corner or other of *Vanity Fair*.

Chesterton, I find, has put all this very well in a passage contrasting Thackeray with Dickens:

The habit of revising old characters is so strong in Thackeray that *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes*, and *Philip* are in one sense all one novel. Certainly the reader sometimes forgets which one of them he is reading. Afterwards he cannot remember whether the best description of Lord Steyne's red whiskers or Mr. Megg's rude jokes occurred in *Vanity Fair*, or *Pendennis*; he cannot remember whether his favourite dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Pendennis occurred in *The Newcomes*, or in *Philip*. Whenever two Thackeray characters in two Thackeray novels could by any possibility have been contemporary, Thackeray delights to connect them. He

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## THE CONSANGUINITY OF THE PERSONAGES

makes Major Pendennis nod to Dr. Firmin, and Colonel Newcome ask Major Dobbin to dinner. Whenever two characters could not possibly have been contemporary he goes out of his way to make one the remote ancestor of the other. Thus he created the great house of Warrington solely to connect a “blue-bearded” Bohemian journalist with the blood of Henry Esmond. It is quite impossible to conceive Dickens keeping up this elaborate connection between all his characters and all his books, especially across the ages. It would give us a kind of shock if we learnt from Dickens that Major Bagstock was the nephew of Mr. Chester.<sup>1</sup>

The practice was approved, as we might expect, by Browning, who met it in Balzac:

for *you* [Elizabeth Barrett], with your love of a “story”, what an unceasing delight must be that very ingenious way of [Balzac], by which he connects the new novel with its predecessors—keeps telling you more and more news yet of the people you have got interested in, but seemed to have done with . . . they keep alive, moving—[is it] not ingenious?<sup>2</sup>

‘People you have got interested in’—a novelist would do well to satisfy himself that his personages have caught the interest of his reader before he brings them round again. This proviso underlies a complaint Ruskin made a quarter of a century after Thackeray’s death:

may I be allowed to express one of the increasing discomforts of my old age, in never being allowed by novelists to stay long enough with people I like, after I once get acquainted with them. It has always seemed to me that tales of interesting persons should not end with their marriage;<sup>3</sup> and that, for the general good of society, the varied energies and expanding peace of wedded life would be better subjects

<sup>1</sup> Dickens, *Edwin Drood & Master Humphrey’s Clock*, Everyman ed., pp. xvii f. The fourth word of the quotation should perhaps read ‘reviving’.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of 27 April 1846: *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, 1899, II, 107.

<sup>3</sup> This had been Thackeray’s opinion: see below, p. 19.

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of interest than the narrow aims, vain distresses, or passing joys of youth.

I felt this acutely the other day, when the author<sup>1</sup> to whom we owe the most finished and faithful rendering ever yet given of the character of the British soldier, answered my quite tearful supplication to her, that Mignon and Lucy might not vanish in an instant into the regions of Praeterita and leave me desolate, by saying that she was herself as sorry to part with Mignon as I could be, but that the public of to-day would never permit insistence on one conception beyond the conventionally established limits. To which distrust I would answer—and ask you<sup>2</sup>, as the interpreter of widest public opinion, to confirm me in answering—that for readers even of our own impatient time, the most beautiful surprises of novelty and the highest praises of invention are in the recognised and natural growth of one living creation; and neither in shifting the scenes of fate as if they were lantern slides, nor in tearing down the trellises of our affections that we may train the branches elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Thackeray, happier in an earlier time, had every confidence that reappearance would be welcome. Nor should we contrast times so much as the power of novelists. Were there any complaints, I wonder, when the Christina Light of *Roderick Hudson*, who before that novel ended had married the Prince, reappeared in *The Princess Casamassima*?

## 2

There is also a geographical and historical principle of unification. The action of the novels occupies often the same named places—various districts of London, Brighton, Brussels, Baden-Baden, ‘Pumpnickel’, Virginia. And whether the same or not, all share the

<sup>1</sup> Mrs Arthur Stannard, who produced popular fiction under the name of John Strange Winter. For further annotation see Ruskin, *Works*, xxxiv, 615 and xxxvii, 592 f.

<sup>2</sup> The editor of the *Daily Telegraph*.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, xxxiv, 615.



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THE STRETCH OF SCENE AND TIME

same map, which is as fixed, externally documented, indivisibly one as the stretch of public history to which all the novels also relate themselves. This geographical, as well as temporal range is indicated in *The Virginians*, where after the encounter of the French and British at Duquesne, 'where the great city of Pittsburg now stands', Thackeray comments:

It was strange, that in a savage forest of Pennsylvania, a young Virginian officer should fire a shot, and waken up a war which was to last for sixty years, which was to cover his own country and pass into Europe, to cost France her American colonies, to sever ours from us, and create the great Western republic; to rage over the Old World when extinguished in the New. . . .<sup>1</sup>

And moreover, in time at least the stretch of the novels is even wider than this, since near the heart of *Esmond* lies much of the Stuart-Hanover conflict. Nor must that word 'stretch' imply any tenuity or sparsity of furniture; along the stretch historical detail is sown thick, and almost always it is accurate. The delicacy of this historical detail was noted early on; one contemporary reader, for instance, noted that Thackeray

constantly uses names known before, and almost in the same state of life. Thus Miss Pinkerton [of *Vanity Fair*] keeps a school at [Chiswick], and corresponds or has corresponded with the great lexicographer. Now Pinkerton is a name well known as that of [an antiquary and historian, 1758–1826] and it is really not improbable but that his daughters [who did not in fact exist] might have kept the school;

and the writer goes on to instance, apropos of Becky's father, an artist of the name of Sharp who died in 1840.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ch. vi.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Friswell, 'Novelists' Names', *The Train*, Oct. 1856. For Michael William Sharp the painter, see *D.N.B.*

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This panorama of time, place and public events relates together whatever Thackeray in his novels gives as happening in pockets of it. This is history, he seems to say; in one novel I give you one sample of the minutely peopled soil, and in another a further sample taken from the same huge landscape. He offers his wares as new pieces for that vast jigsaw that none of us can choose but work at as we inevitably come to know more of the past.

These obvious means of unification show that Thackeray planned his work to form a whole. If I now turn to means that are less obvious, it is to these obvious ones that I add them.