INTRODUCTION: THE PROTEAN THACKERAY

In Charles Lever's *Roland Cashel* we are introduced to "a large, high-shouldered spectacled gentleman" as he arrives at a dinner party in Dublin in the phaeton of a society matron. Peering at the company with "glances, at once inquiring and critical," he is identified as Elias Howle of "that numerous horde of Tourist authors held in leash by fashionable booksellers," one, moreover, "of a peculiar class, which this age, so fertile in inventions, has engendered, a publisher's man-of-all-work, ready for anything from statistics to satire, and equally prepared to expound prophecy, or write squibs for 'Punch.'" This was written in 1850 with a backward glance over the previous decade. In Disraeli's last novel, *Endymion*, published in 1880, but based on a hazy memory of impressions some forty years old, we hear a back-biting littérateur named St. Barbe, contributor to a journal called *Scaramouch*, railing at his publishers Shuffle and Screw for paying him less for a novel than a powdered flunky commands in St. James's Square. He takes up society at once as a theater of operations and as a tuft-hunting preserve: "He had the honour of sitting for a time by the side of Mrs. Neuchatel, and being full of good claret, he, as he phrased it, showed his paces: that is to say, delivered himself of some sarcastic paradoxes duly blended with fulsome flattery." Later he sets himself up to the hero as no mere humorist or gossip, as no less in fact than a "literary diplomatist." "The age of mediocrity is not eternal," declares St. Barbe confidently to the budding politician Endymion. "You see the thing offered, and I saw an opening... I will read the 'Debats' and the 'Revue des Deux Mondes,' and make out something. Foreign affairs are all my future, and my views may be as
right as anybody else's; probably more correct, not so conventional."

Lever and Disraeli had both squirmed under William Makepeace Thackeray's satirical lash, and in these caricatures they were getting back at him. Yet their portraits of Thackeray as journeyman author struggling for recognition, even if etched in vitriol, testify to his imposing presence, his intelligence, his wit, and his readiness to make all mankind his province—qualities that undeniably contributed to the popularity and prestige he eventually won among the Victorian reading public. Diverse impressions left behind by other fellow writers indicate that he could be many things to many people. To Carlyle he appeared an amalgam of Hogarth and Sterne, "a big fellow, soul and body ... a big, weeping, hungry man"; to Edmund Yates he was "cold and uninviting" in his manner, "the cool, suave, well-bred gentleman, who, whatever may be rankling within, suffers no surface display of emotion"; Dickens complained that Thackeray "too much feigned a want of earnestness, and ... made a pretence of undervaluing his art" (reflected possibly in the blasé artist Henry Gowan of _Little Dorrit_); Dr. John Brown, to the contrary, bears witness to his "large, acute, and fine understanding," as well as his "great-hearted, and tender and genuine sympathy, unsparing, truthful, inevitable, but with love and the love of goodness, and true loving-kindness over-arching and indeed animating it all." As against Miss Mitford's opinion that Thackeray was "all cynicism with an affectation of fashionable experience," there is on record Mrs. Oliphant's more balanced estimate of him as "a moralist ... a laughing philosopher, a cynic; yet with a vein of pathos infinitely touching and true," and Charlotte Brontë's resounding tribute to him in her preface to _Jane Eyre_ as a modern lion of Judah, "an intellect profounder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognized."

His readers appropriated him too under different aspects, most tangibly registered by his succession of pseudonyms. Among his earliest identifiable writings are a series of satires and verses contributed to the Cambridge student reviews the _Snob_ and the _Gownsman_, signed simply "T." He was known subsequently as Théophile Wagstaff, Charles Yellowplush, Ikey Solomons, Timothy Titcomb, George Fitz-Boodle, Michael Angelo Titmarsh, Solomon Pacifico, Miss Tickletoby, The Fat Contributor, the Manager of the Performance, and Arthur Pendennis. Furthermore, his delightful habit of intruding himself into the illustrations of his books from time to time impinged on his readers' consciousness in
subliminal and elusive ways. To the alert eye he turns up variously as a little boy (on the title page of *The Great Hoggarty Diamond*), as a hookah-smoking vizier (in a sketch in *From Cornhill to Grand Cairo*), now and then as a jester, even as the Reverend Charles Honeyman in *The Newcomes*.

In his lifetime Thackeray must have been among the most sculpted, sketched, painted, and photographed of authors, and this graphic gallery offers us too a choice of Thackerays: the white marble cherub (the nose not yet marred by young Venables’ fist) carved by Devile when Thackeray was a schoolboy of eleven, now on view in the library at Charterhouse; the chubby, tousled stripling of James Spedding’s pencil sketch; the monocled fledgling journalist posing for Maclise in 1832 with pad on knee; the pudgy, cheeky, rubicund youth preserved in oil at mid-decade by Frank Stone (among the likenesses to be seen in the National Portrait Gallery); the curled, mustachioed dandy peering coolly out of a Maclise drawing of 1840; the silvery, meditative sage of the Samuel Lawrence portraits of the 1850s (contemporaries observed how suddenly he seemed to have aged); the paunchy, bespectacled lecturer, leaning slightly toward his audience with his hands in his pockets, as caught in Sir Edgar Boehm’s statuette; the portly bourgeois, frock-coated, white-haired, top-hatted, staring somewhat frozen-faced out of the late photographs, looking at least ten years older than the fifty-two that he was allotted on earth.

Mutability and variety appear to have been the laws of Thackeray’s life. “As I travelled through these, to me, enchanting volumes,” one of his admirers, George Augustus Sala, recalled late in life of his first acquaintance with Thackeray through the pages of *Fraser’s Magazine* chanced upon in a coffee house, “I became aware of a writer, whose name, so I opined, should have been Proteus, since he was continually assuming fresh incarnations.” This protean quality asserted itself in a practical way in Thackeray’s many talents that made him valuable to editors as a “general hand” before his imaginative genius was recognized—as a critic, travel writer, political correspondent, satirist, poet (well, versifier), and illustrator. In the novel this faculty for “continually assuming fresh incarnations” manifested itself in a unique ability appreciated by his more observant reviewers for “making his men and women talk each in their own voice and tongue” (as John Brown phrased it), for assimilating a myriad of character types, and for expressing an entire diapason of moods. When it turned to creation of fictitious people, Thackeray’s nimble, mercurial mind enabled him to act
upon humanity, in the words of the editor and critic Richard Holt Hutton, “as a kind of pliant material, a moral india-rubber.” What Thackeray’s detractors considered dilettantism or opportunism, Sala and others rightly discerned as insatiable intellectual curiosity and interest in all things human, and a virtually universal empathy.

“The more fully his life is made known to the world, the more clearly will the harmony of his works with it appear,” wrote James Hannay, a friend and fellow novelist, in one of the first memoirs to appear after Thackeray’s death. This prophecy has not been borne out. Thanks to modern scholarship, which has documented the career of Thackeray in greater and greater amplitude, we know far more about his life than did his contemporaries, but, paradoxically, we are in a poorer position than they were to grasp “the harmony of his works.” Thackeray must be unique among great Victorian writers in maintaining his major stature on the basis of so small a segment of his vast output. So little of Thackeray’s writing being known to the general public, or for that matter to the Victorian scholar, they must take on faith the assertion of David Masson that it has “a more constant element of doctrine, a more distinct vein of personal philosophy than could be found in the work of most other novelists,” or George Santobury’s never disputed (but never proved) observation that Thackeray’s work is all of a piece. Although we have seen Thackeray steadily, we cannot be said to have seen him whole.

Obviously a writer of Thackeray’s formidable versatility eludes easy capture as much as did Proteus, to whom he has been likened. Apart from this complexity, the fact that Thackeray’s success with the great public came late (by contrast with Dickens) has meant that readers now tend to take him up in mid-career with little sense of what came before. *Vanity Fair* and *Henry Esmond*, it stands to reason, did not arise out of a vacuum, nor did Thackeray cease to develop with these two masterpieces. To study Thackeray in full span is to strengthen one’s conviction that the caricaturist, artist, critic, traveler, lecturer, historian, and novelist are essentially parts of a continuum. To read through the canon, the “small potatoes” (in his words) as well as the big ones, the “chronicles of small beer” as well as the epical novels, is to discover that although his public recognition was delayed, Thackeray matured early as a writer (it is significant that he was appreciated by intellectuals and by fellow writers before he was taken up by the common reader), and that his progress was not so much an intellectual or artistic development as an expansion of his range and a softening and deepening of his tone.
Even his late works, generally regarded as a creative decline, carry on the curve of his growth, affording him opportunity to reassess himself as man and writer and the age for which he wrote. Early and late, Thackeray never ceases to prod and stimulate us.

"A highly cultured writer, endowed with all the requisites of his calling, a wit reminiscent of Horace, a philosophy as practical as that of Montaigne, but expressed in a language which is as polished and scholarlike as Pope's was in verse, and revealing a knowledge of human nature so wide and comprehensive in its range that it seems unrivalled in the annals of fiction." This eulogy by Charles Eastlake pretty well sums up the esteem in which Thackeray was held on both sides of the Atlantic at the time of his premature death. The philosophic side of Thackeray is perhaps insufficiently appreciated in our age, which generally has responded to his wit more than to his wisdom. Modern critics have been all too ready to take at face value Thackeray's alleged remark that he had "no head above his eyes," but it was his mind above all that impressed his contemporaries. In the memoir appended to the Biographical Edition of the collected works, Leslie Stephen called attention to Thackeray's precocity. His aunt, Mrs. Ritchie, "was alarmed by discovering that the child could wear his uncle's hat, till she was assured by a physician that the big head had a good deal in it." Others besides Charlotte Brontë verified this observation in later life. Dr. John Brown for one wrote: "There was an immense quantity, not less than the finest quality of mind in everything he said. You felt this when with him and when you measured with your eye his enormous brain." A famous drawing by John Leech, in fact, depicts Thackeray as a gigantic, broad-domed head hovering over a lectern. An ample image of the reputation Thackeray attained among Victorian readers and audiences, the Leech sketch can serve as well as an emblem for this study.

Thackeray's assumed modesty about his intellectual ability, the unabashed hackmanship of his early career, his notorious dickering over line rates, have left the impression that he went into literature more under economic necessity than out of any genuine calling. Yet one finds him making an effort, even during his freelancing journalistic days, to establish himself as a writer worthy to be taken seriously. "Ought I take a post script to assure you that I can be as grave as another upon occasion?" he wrote at the end of a letter early in 1842 to the publishers Chapman and Hall. At this time he was making application for an editorial post (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) and put his best foot forward firmly: "I can
show you performances of mine quite as solemn as need be. What I mean is this, that I can appreciate grave things very soundly I believe and know that the Titmarsh style is occasionally fitted to review writing.” If, as Dickens complained, he at times “feigned a want of earnestness,” the pose can be attributed partially to his model Montaigne as well as to his gentleman’s classical education:
INTRODUCTION

both taught him to eschew pedantry, and to carry learning lightly. His extended apprenticeship in the Victorian literary marketplace, moreover, gradually accustomed him to accommodate himself to minds less cultivated than his own. As a result it became quite natural for him to pose as the average man on "Our Street." Although he had an inquiring mind of unusual acuity, his leaning toward the concrete in preference to the abstract made him additionally suited by temperament to speak to the ordinary reader.

The chapters that follow attempt to set Thackeray more firmly in his time and place as a representative Victorian man of letters than previous critical studies have done. In an earlier book, *Fiction with a Purpose*, I examined several nineteenth-century novels as "repositories of literary history," and urged the importance of seeing their authors in relation to their original sociocultural environment. As I pointed out, the novel, examined in this context, established its respectability through its association with mental and moral cultivation, in common with the more outright didactic forms of literature. The present study extends on its predecessor from a different angle—concentrating on the career of an author who was especially instrumental in elevating the status of both the writer and the novel during the last century. Viewed in this light, Thackeray emerges as a remarkable example of a recurrent Victorian literary type, the high popularizer, who answered, if in an idiosyncratic way, to the needs of a serious kind of reader who had emerged in the nineteenth century, the cultural aspirant, and catered to the strong desire for "improvement" encouraged by adult educators—clerical and lay. This was an age, it must be borne in mind, when such aspiration lacked the kinds of outlet that today we take for granted—public libraries, university extension courses, educational mass media—so that the novel took upon itself an instructional burden that it has tended to cast off in the twentieth century. His versatility and adaptability equipped Thackeray well to assume the role of public educator. To account for his success in this capacity I have explored his particular background; the framework of journalism and popular reading that he worked in; his alertness to literary trends and his endeavors both to imitate and to transcend them; and his continuing dialogue with the reading public.

Early in the year when *Vanity Fair* was published, Thackeray wrote to Mark Lemon, the editor of *Punch*: "I should have sneered at the idea of setting up as a teacher at all . . . but I have got to believe in the business, and in many other things since then." How-
ever, in his early "magazinery" we see him "setting up as a teacher," if somewhat deviously, by toying with the vogue for potted learning promoted by the diffusers of useful knowledge. Charles Yellowplush is acquainted with one "Dr. Larnder" who turns up again as Dionysius Diddler in Thackeray's aborted Foolscap Library (an obvious hit at Dr. Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopaedia). The garrulous, Münchausen-like narrator of *The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan* claims to be supplementing the military histories of India by Gleig, James Mill, and Thorn. Fitz-Boodle, the editor of the "Men's Wives" series in *Fraser's Magazine* and alumnus of Slaughterhouse, boasts of "that immense fund of classical knowledge which in after life has been so exceedingly useful to him," though he proves something of a noodle in coping with practical life. The anonymous narrator of "Captain Rook and Mr. Pigeon" refers to the "romances of Adam Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo, and the philosophical works of Miss Martineau" presumably as a fitting introduction to his own tale of political economy with its illustrations of the fortuitous ways of money and the misappropriation of wealth. In collecting the papers of Charles Yellowplush, Michael Angelo Titmarsh claims to have enlisted the aid of the learned Doctor Strumpff, an eminent philologist from Bonn, to decipher this "Cockniac dialect." The reader is further informed that Strumpff "has compiled a copious vocabulary and notes, has separated the mythic from the historical part of the volume, and discovered that it is, like Homer, the work of many ages and persons." Miss Tickletoby, the schoolmistress of St. Mary Axe, authoress of a series of *Lectures on English History* printed in *Punch*, prefigures in facetious manner the later Thackeray of Willis's Rooms, the Mechanics Institutes, and the lyceum. The role that he mocked while he practiced it is immediately evoked on the title page of one of Thackeray's Christmas stories, *Doctor Birch and His Young Friends*, with its etching of a master in cap and gown, whip in one hand, open book in the other.

Thackeray could be said to have lisped in parody. At Charterhouse he rewrote L.E.L.'s sentimental poem "Violets" as "Cabbages." At Cambridge he wrote a mock prize poem "Timbuctoo." This form of mimicry, which in his maturity brought the resentment of fellow writers down on his head, was really a part of his literary education, a means of finding his own path as author. His better known parodies, such as *Punch's Prize Novels*, expose literary pretension or false sentiment. Many of his "jokes and schoolboy exercises," as we have noted, ape intellectual pretension—pedantry
and pseudolearning of various sorts, perversions of the didactic purpose of art that he believed in. Thackeray also, along with his readers, had been brought up on edifying tracts and chapbooks, and in his magazinry he slyly plays along with the sort of moral tags with which authors were expected to point their tales. In his first tale, "The Professor," the title character, "Professor" Dandolo, is revealed as a lecher and thief; the Seminary of the Misses Pidge where he taught is ruined by disgrace; and the heroine goes mad. Yet these disasters have their consolation: "Gentles, my tale is told," it concludes with an address to the reader. "If it may have deterred one soul from vice, my end is fully answered." "Captain Rook and Mr. Pigeon" ends with this high sentence: "The moral of the above remarks I take to be this: that blacklegging is as bad a trade as can be; and so let parents and guardians look to it, and not apprentice their children to such a villainous, scurvy way of living." In other rook-and-pigeon tales, Thackeray enjoyed pseudomoralizing, making the worse appear the better cause. "It was charmin to hear this pair of raskles talking about honour," recalls Charles Yellowplush of his master Deuceace and a crony as they are about to fleece a hapless young law clerk. "I declare I could have found it in my heart to warn young Dawkins of the precious way in which these young chaps were going to serve him. But if they didn't know what honour was, I did; and never did I tell tails about my masters when in their service, out, in cors, the hobbligation is no longer binding." This rationalizing of slippery conduct is elaborated in Barry Lyndon and, at its subtlest, underlies Becky Sharp's self-delusion. In his "comicalities and whimsicalities," Thackeray shows us the farcical side of the "moral philosopher" who guides our reactions in the great novels.

Thackeray considered his calling "as serious as the Parson's own," but he became an unusual parson. He recognized, as with the Reverend Grimes Wapshot and the Reverend Charles Honeyman, that a forked tongue can be concealed beneath pious words. The ultimate point of his satires on moralizing is that no amount of wise saws and adages can make a man moral whose heart and conscience remain unchanged. The widow Crawley is still essentially Becky Sharp even when she writes hymns and becomes a pillar of the church at Bath and Cheltenham. What the great reading public needed, as far as he was concerned, was not more and more professions of the good and the right, but more insight into the insidious sources of evil. Life itself, as he said in his poem "Vanitas Vanitatum," contains many "homilies on human glories" open to the
view of those ready to look into it—and into themselves—with candor and honesty. “I have said this book is all about the world and a respectable family dwelling in it. It is not a sermon, except where it cannot help itself, and the speaker pursuing the destiny of his narrative finds such a homily before him,” reads an address to the reader at the end of the first volume of *The Newcomes*. “O friend, in your life, don’t we light upon such sermons daily?—don’t we see at home as well as amongst our neighbors that battle betwixt Evil and Good?”

This “battle betwixt Evil and Good” is one waged constantly through Thackeray’s books, which in their totality constitute a grand epic of the conscience, a continuing moral inquiry into human affairs, jointly participated in by author, reader, and the author’s fictitious personages. Even before *Vanity Fair*, as the first chapters of this study will show, Thackeray conceived of life as a moral fable, of mankind as a series of object lessons, and of his history as a series of flashes of truth amidst long stretches of delusion. His Human Comedy therefore is largely a Comedy of Errors. Through its chapters walk criminals, demireps, the shabby genteel, and the respectable; dupes, gulls, coxcombs, and charlatans; cynics, skeptics, and sentimentalists; heroes and ordinary men and women; sinners, saints, and those in between—A Victorian Field Full of Folk. All of these people are caught up in currents larger than themselves, play their brief parts in social history, are molded by forces of which they are but dimly aware, if at all, but which their creator sees as through a glass darkly. His subject is no less than “the hidden and awful Wisdom which apportions the destinies of mankind,” as he expressed it in a chapter of *Vanity Fair*. He expounded on this theme later in the poem “Vanitas Vanitatum” inspired by an album containing the autographs of distinguished men from all walks of life:

> What histories of life are here,
> More wild than all romancers’ stories;
> What wondrous transformations queer,
> What homilies on human glories!

> What theme for sorrow or for scorn!
> What chronicle of Fate’s surprises—
> Of adverse fortune nobly borne,
> Of chances, changes, ruins, rises!
How low men were and how they rise!
How high they were and how they tumble!
O vanity of vanities!
O laughable, pathetic jumble!

Methinks the text is never stale,
And life is every day renewing
Fresh comments on the old old tale
Of Folly, Fortune, Glory, Ruin.

Our author's "glances, at once inquiring and critical," then, penetrated wide and deep. The "canvass of humanity" that a fellow Fraserian identified as the proper study of the modern writer seems the phrase most fitting to describe the life work of one who wrought skillfully with both pen and pencil, and whose hand worked busily along with his head. Although I attempt to do justice to Thackeray's achievement as a whole, there are certain limitations to the ensuing study that should be clarified. My concern being principally with the life of Thackeray's mind, I have seen no reason to go over the biographical ground already so thoroughly and so admirably covered by Gordon Ray. Personal events are occasionally alluded to where pertinent, but general knowledge of Thackeray's life history, being so easily accessible, is taken for granted. (For convenience, some highlights are pointed up in the appended Chronology.) I have given only incidental attention also to the political and social issues that form the staple of general histories of the Victorian period, in favor of the cultural environment that I believe more immediately conditioned Thackeray's writing. Fully recognizing that his accomplishment cannot be wholly accounted for by such external causes (there is always the elusive element of "genius"), I have endeavored to relate the novels as far as possible to their various circumstances of publication, to their presumed audiences, as well as to contemporaneous literary vogue and currents of ideas (including some explored by Thackeray himself in reviews and other nonfiction). If to some I may seem to skirt the ultimate question of evaluation, I think that what is far more important for Thackeray is understanding—particularly of the original motive and intent behind his successive works of fiction. Precisely because he was so deeply rooted in his own times, Thackeray, of all Victorian writers, least lends himself to interpretation by twentieth-century literary, linguistic, and psychological theories.
To scant his position as not only the "Gentle Censor" of his age, but its cultural historian as well, is to miss his essential importance and dimension as a writer.

The unique commingling in Thackeray of thinker, aesthete, and entertainer, his easy familiarity with virtually all levels of Victorian culture—humanistic learning, journalism high and low, the lecture platform, popular arts—dictate to an extent the scope and structure of this book. The first section considers in four interlocking chapters general influences on Thackeray: the reading that shaped his attitudes and turned his interest in particular to what we today call social psychology, the study of man collectively as well as individually; followed by his response respectively to art, theater, and early Victorian progenitors of mass media, aspects of his culture that clearly determined his approach to fiction. The larger part of this study is devoted to a more intensive contextual analysis of individual novels, taken up chronologically within related groups according to their origins and to stages of Thackeray's development. The whole, it is hoped, will convey some sense of the rich, accretive imagination that Thackeray brought to his multiple career: the "natural perversity of vision," as he once put it, that enabled him to move so nimbly from waggery to wisdom, and to view life as through a kaleidoscope; the childlike fondness for fantasy and grotesquerie combined with sophistication and urbanity; the "strange and rare mixture of relish for things of the street and things of the study" (in the words of George Saintsbury) that made him a highbrow of lowbrow sympathies; the cosmopolitan sensibility fed by the triple streams of Great Britain, the continent, and America; and, above all, the sense of humility and mortal fallibility that impelled him, with all his genius, to speak to his audiences "as a man and a brother."