IN 1850 THACKERAY, BY NOW ESTABLISHED with the reading public, addressed them in the preface to *Pendennis*, stressing the high seriousness of his calling: “Does he tell the truth in the main? Does he seem activated by a desire to find out and speak it? Is he a quack, who shams sentiment, or mouths for effect? Does he seek popularity by claptraps or other arts? I can no more ignore good fortune than any other chance which has befallen me. I have found many thousands more readers than I ever looked for. I have no right to say to these, You shall not find fault with my art, or fall asleep over my pages; but I ask you to believe that this person writing strives to tell the truth. If there is not that, there is nothing.”

Here Thackeray has put the novelist on a pedestal, but only two years before he had been quite ready to address this same public as a clown from a barrel top. It is amusing to see how quickly the ingenuous narrator of *Pendennis* has superseded the “quack, who shams sentiment” of *Vanity Fair*: “As the Manager of the Performance sits before the curtain on the boards, and looks in the Fair, a feeling of profound melancholy comes over him.” This “Manager” is also one to “seek popularity by claptraps or other arts,” priding himself in fact on his borrowings from crowd-pleasing shows: “The famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire”; “There are scenes of all sorts; some dreadful combats, some grand and lofty horse-riding . . . some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business.” In *Vanity Fair*, as in its predecessors, Thack-
Thackeray was quite openly role playing, mocking not merely his readers, but the writer who has to woo the public. The "Manager" of *Vanity Fair* cajoles his "kind friends" while pretending to cater to them: "Every reader of a sentimental turn (and we desire no other) must have been pleased with the tableau with which the last act of our little drama concluded": "The present number will be very mild—others, but we will not anticipate these"; "I know that the tune I am piping is a very mild one (although there are some terrific chapters coming presently)." As reader, critic, and eventually writer of novels, Thackeray was well aware of the struggles of the serious writer (the "philosopher," or "man of reflective turn of mind," as he refers to him from time to time) getting through to the "lazy, novel-reading, unscientific world."

He had been a part of this world himself as a "lazy idle boy" long before he became either a professional reader or writer. "Oh delightful novels well remembered! Oh, novels, sweet and delicious as the raspberry open-tarts of budding boyhood!" exclaims the silver-haired editor of *Cornhill Magazine* becoming momentarily as a child again. "Figs are sweet, but fictions are sweeter," he affirms in another of his Roundabout Papers where he savors again some of the "jam tarts" of his school days, rendered more piquant by their contraband nature: "What was it that so fascinated the young student as he stood by the river shore? Not the *pons asinorum*. What book so delighted him, and blinded him to all the rest of the world, so that he did not care to see the apple-woman with her fruit, or (more tempting still to sons of Eve) the pretty girls with their apple cheeks, who laughed and prattled round the fountain? What was the book? Do you suppose it was Livy, or the Greek grammar? No; it was a NOVEL that you were reading, you lazy, not very clean, good-for-nothing, sensible boy!"

Memory brings back the primal appeal of some of these early acquaintances peeped at surreptitiously behind more stately tomes. "O Scottish Chiefs, didn't we weep over you!" recalls this old boy of the first romance that came his way, and others made even more lasting impression. "O Mysteries of Udolpho, didn't I and Briggs Minor draw pictures out of you. . . . Efforts, feeble indeed, but still giving pleasure to us and our friends. . . ." These "efforts" are among the stray items inherited by Thackeray's daughter, along with a figure of Sir Aymer de Valence of *Scottish Chiefs* drawn on the title page of a Latin grammar he used as a boy. "'Peregrine Pickle' we liked, our fathers admiring it, and telling us (the sly old boys) it was capital fun: but I think I was rather bewildered by it,
though 'Roderick Random' was and remains delightful," he con­fided to his readers of 1860 of two old favorites that he had ran­sacked for his own picaresque novel, *Barry Lyndon*. Also of happy memory were "Walter Scott, the kindly, the generous, the pure—the companion of what countless delightful hours," and "brave, kind, gallant olde Alexandre," to both of whom he had paid the tribute of loving ridicule. He has a mellow spot in his heart too for G. P. R. James, "the veteran, from whose flowing pen we had the books which delighted our young days," a favorite whipping boy of his adult years, parodied even in the *The Rose and the Ring*. The fun of Pierce Egan's *Life in London*, with its bumptious heroes Jerry Hawthorne, Corinthian Tom, and Bob Logic, had somewhat diminished when he returned to it in middle age, but he looked back on these "Days and Night Scenes" fondly as his first introduction to the bucks and blacklegs of Regency London recreated in *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*.4

"But as surely as the cadet drinks too much pale ale, it will disagree with him; and so surely, dear youth, will too much of novels cloy on thee," the editor of *Cornhill* warns the rising generation. But Thackeray himself in his youth imbibed freely of the literary springs, from witches' brew like *Melmoth the Wanderer* to the claret of T. H. Lister. He kept up with most of the new novelists of the 1820s and the early 1830s, like John Galt ("very clever, though rather dull . . . a man may write very wisely & be no Solomon," he observed after reading *Stanley Buxton; or, The Schoolfellows*); Mrs. Gore (*The Fair of May Fair* was "a sensible book enough"); Bulwer (*Pelham* was to young Thackeray "rather dull & very impertinent"); William Pitt Scargill (*Rank and Talent* is rated "poor"); and Captain Marryat (*The Bravo* is "poor"; *The King's Own* is "very fair"; *Newton Forster* is "better still").4 As a law student he recorded a "day spent in seediness repentance & novel reading—dined in Hall. . . . I did nothing else all day except eat biscuits, a very excellent amusement & not so expensive as some others."5 One supposes that many other such days went unrecorded. In one of Thackeray's last novels, *The Virginians*, the serious-minded George Warrington, also a law student, defends this indulgence: "O blessed Idleness! Divine lazy Nymph! Reach me a novel as I lie in my dressing-gown at three o'clock in the afternoon; compound a sherry-cobbler for me, and bring me a cigar! Dear slatternly smiling Enchantress! They may assail thee with bad names—swear thy character away, and call thee mother of Evil; but, for all that, thou art the best company in the world!" (chap. 29).
Nor was Thackeray’s reading as an art student in Paris confined to Montaigne and Victor Cousin. Along with the heady volumes of history and philosophy that he chewed and digested at the Palais Royal, he nibbled also at the fiction of the day supplied by such shops as Galignani’s and Baudry’s. Here, too, he exercised his early developed critical instincts. His diary for 1832 records judgments on Balzac, whose *La peau de chagrin*, a moral fable on the root of all evil, “possesses many of the faults & the beauties of the school—plenty of light & shade, good colouring and costume, but no character;” and Hugo, whose historical epic *Notre-Dame de Paris* he rated “most highly as a work of genius, though it is not perhaps a fine novel.” He shows more than a nodding acquaintance with the light risqué novels of Paul de Kock, whom later he palmed off on Major Pendennis. He also dipped into such curiosities as the *Roi des ribands*, a historical romance by Paul Lacroix, and the salacious *Chroniques de l’Oeil-de-Boeuf*, a “secret” history of the reigns of Louis XIV and his successors, analogous to the sources he later drew on for *Henry Esmond* and for his portraits of the four Georges.6

It therefore came to Thackeray quite naturally to put his name forward to the editor of the *Edinburgh Review* as a contributor on “light matters connected with Art, humorous reviews, critiques of novels,” as well as on “French subjects, memoirs, poetry, history from Louis XV downwards, and of an earlier period.”7 This was in 1845, when *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, his masterpiece to date, had concluded its run in Fraser’s without applause, and *Vanity Fair* was only barely projected. At this time Thackeray was a kind of professor of things in general, still not sure of his direction, and feeling out his own conception of fiction.

Thackeray’s beloved “French subjects” were indeed the center of his first volume published in England, *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840), and here, significantly, he wrote his most extended apology for “novels, sweet and delicious.” The essay in this book called “On Some French Fashionable Novels” begins with “a Plea for Romances in General,” in which the “lazy idle boy” grown up now takes the side of “all who, from laziness as well as principle, are inclined to follow the easy and comfortable study of novels.” He tries to assure these readers that “they are studying matters quite as important as history,” and that one can learn as much from a duodecimo as from a quarto. “If then, ladies,” continues Titmarsh’s defense, “the bigwigs begin to sneer at the course of our studies, calling our darling romances foolish, trivial, noxious to the mind, enervators of intellect, fathers of idleness, and what not, let us at
once take a high ground and say,—Go to your own employments, and to such dull studies as you fancy; go and bob for triangles, from the Pons Asinorum; go enjoy your dull black draughts of metaphysics; go fumble over history books and dissert upon Herodotus and Livy; our histories are, perhaps, as true as yours." Following upon the "pale ale" of youth, "... our drink is the brisk, sparkling champagne drink, from the presses of Colburn, Bentley, & Co.; our walks are over such sunshiny pleasure-grounds as Scott and Shakespeare have laid out for us; and if our dwellings are castles in the air, we find them excessively splendid and commodious;—be not you envious because you have no wings to fly thither."

The "bigwigs," of course, are the preachers and pedants, from whose prying eyes many a reader besides Thackeray presumably remembered having hidden away their favorite little books. This fledgling novelist may seem to be saying "a fig for your ancient history and metaphysics," but it is possible to read behind his scorn an attempt at a modus vivendi between "our darling romances" and "dull studies." Thackeray had discovered, like Sir Philip Sidney before him, how "sham histories" draw old men from their chimney corners and children from play, and he seems to be renewing in a nineteenth-century context the Renaissance apologist's alliance of fiction with the time-hallowed disciplines of history and philosophy. "The novelist has a loud, eloquent, instructive language, though his enemies may despise or deny it ever so much," he argues in the voice of Titmarsh. He goes further: "sham histories" can teach better than true histories, which are "mere contemptible catalogues of names and places that have no moral effect on the reader."

Titmarsh has in mind not merely the older histories, but the modern "catalogues of names and places" that were rapidly accumulating in this era of potted "useful knowledge," like the Biographie universelle, the Cabinet Cyclopaedia of Dionysius Lardner (or "Diddler," as he is called in one of Thackeray's satires),9 Walker's Gazetteer, and the periodical Court Guide. As a modernist concentrating his attention primarily on "the study of humanity," Thackeray is implicitly promoting the novel as a more effectual means of "keeping up with the world" than ancient history, metaphysics, or new encyclopedias, in the spirit of Isaac Watts's advice to "learn all things as much as you can from first hand." Dr. Watts also prescribed that students "visit other cities and countries when you have seen your own, under the care of one who can teach you to profit
by travelling.” The novel, from Titmarsh’s viewpoint, is, among other things, a less expensive substitute for the Grand Tour, and a more personalized kind of travel book: “On the wings of a novel, from the next circulating library [the reader] sends his imagination a gadding, and gains acquaintance with people and manners, whom he could not otherwise hope to know.” The novelist promises, in other words, not mere escape to “sunshiny pleasure-grounds” and “castles in the air,” but educational travel that may give his readers knowledge of their fellow men more practical and more up to date than the ancient historians and metaphysicians can supply them.

Thackeray’s apprenticeship in France, which opened his eyes to the joys and pathos of genre painting and of “the drama of the common people” at the Théâtre Ambigu-Comique, awakened him also to the power of the novelist to fix “ordinary people” in their natural setting:

... Passing from novels in general to French novels, let us confess... that we borrow from these stories a great deal more knowledge of French society than from our own personal observation we ever can hope to gain: for, let a gentleman who has dwelt two, four, or ten years in Paris... let an English gentleman say, at the end of any given period, how much he knows of French society, how many French houses he has entered, and how many French friends he has made?

He has, we say, seen an immense number of wax candles, cups of tea, glasses of orgeat, and French people, in best clothes enjoying the same; but intimacy there is none: we see but the outsides of the people.10

Important as firsthand knowledge is to mankind, Thackeray is suggesting where it may fall short and how a good novel may extend direct experience:

Year by year we live in France, and grow grey, and see no more. We play écartè with Monsieur de Tréfle every night; but what know we of the heart of the man—of the inward ways, thoughts and customs of Tréfle? If we have good legs, and love the amusement, we dance with Countess Flicflac, Tuesdays and Thursdays, ever since the Peace: and how far are we advanced in acquaintance with her since we first twirled her round a room? We know her velvet gown, and her diamonds (about three-fourths of them are sham, by the way); we know her smiles, and her simpers, and her rouge—but no more; she may turn into a kitchen wench at twelve on Thursday night, for aught we know; her voiture, a pumpkin; and her gens so many rats; but the real rougeless, intime Flicflac, we know not. This privilege is granted to no Englishman: we may understand the French language as well as Monsieur de Levizac; but never can penetrate into Flicflac’s confidence.
Whereas the mere traveler may be confined to the surface of life, in Titmarsh's view, the novelist can make us more intimately acquainted with human nature. It is through his understanding of "the heart of the man" that the novelist has the advantage over the historian, the travel writer, and the journalist.

In his letter to Thomas Longman, editor of the Edinburgh Review, Thackeray added to his qualifications probably the most significant one: "finally subjects relating to society in general where a writer may be allowed to display the humorous ego," an indication of the large context in which he viewed fiction along with the other arts. To him the responsibility of the novelist as social historian extended beyond his own generation:

... A hundred years hence (when, of course, the frequenters of the circulating library will be as eager to read the works of Soulie, Dumas, and the rest, as now), a hundred years hence, what a strange opinion the world will have of the French society of today! Did all married people, we may imagine they will ask, break a certain commandment?—They all do in the novels. Was French society composed of murderers, forgers, of children without parents, of men consequently running the risk of marrying their grandmothers by mistake; of disguised princes, who lived in the friendship of amiable cut-throats and spotless prostitutes; who gave up the sceptre for the savate, and the stars and pigtails of the court for the chains and wooden shoes of the galleys? All these characters are quite common in French novels, and France in the nineteenth century was the politest country in the world. What must the rest of the world have been?11

Thackeray assumed, as this passage emphasizes, that one function of the serious writer, as of the painter, is to leave a record of his times to posterity, but what kind of a record is it to be? From this composite, based mainly on Sue's Les mystères de Paris, it is easy to gather that Thackeray was not taken with the sensational writers who were then enlivening the feuilletons. He was less interested in les mystères than in what the French called les moeurs, or what he referred to as the "inward thoughts and ways," the "manners" and the "customs" of people. "To a person inclined to study these in the light and amusing fashion in which the novelist treats them," Titmarsh writes in his essay "On Some French Fashionable Novels," "Let us recommend the works of a new writer... who has painted actual manners, without those monstrous and terrible exaggerations in which late French writers have indulged; and who, if he occasionally wounds the English sense of propriety (as what French man or woman alive will not?), does so more by slighting than by outraging it, as, with their laboured descriptions of all sorts of
imaginable wickedness, some of his brethren of the press have done.” He is speaking of Charles de Bernard, descendant of a noble family who, like Thackeray, had given up law studies for a literary career, and anticipated his move from journalism into the novel of society. M. de Bernard, Titmarsh was pleased to observe, drew his characters from “men and women of genteel society—rascals enough, but living in no state of convulsive crimes; and we follow him in his lively malicious account of their manners, without risk of lighting upon such horrors as Balzac and Dumas have provided for us.” Thackeray generally admired de Bernard for the “ease, grace, and ion in his style,” and about the time when these words were written he adapted (or had “stolen” as he put it), de Bernard’s Le pied d’argile for his own sociopolitical tale The Bedford-Row Conspiracy. Later he wrote in praise of Gerfaut, de Bernard’s more serious tale of adultery: “It is full of fine observation and gentle feeling; it has a gallant sense of the absurd, and is written—rare quality for a French romance—in a gentlemanly style.” Thackeray had already had his bout with “convulsive crimes,” as we shall see later in connection with Catherine, and was opting now for “genteel society” as his subject and the “gentlemanly style” as his language, though with his “natural perversity of vision,” the “horrors” and “monstrous and terrible exaggerations” of the more sensational writers remained on the periphery of his pictures of society.

Charles de Bernard’s pinioning of more elegant sin furnished Thackeray with one agreeable model for his own broad canvases. He enjoyed the refinements of intrigue—amorous, social, political—that wind their way beneath the bubbly surface of such nouvelles as La femme de quarante ans, with its superannuated belle who plays several former lovers off against one another; Les ailes d’Icaire, with its provincial young man who rapidly accustoms himself to the ways of the big city; and Un acte de vertu, with its hero who starts out as a radical firebrand and ends up as a stuffy bureaucrat. He admired in particular the “accurate picture of the actual French dandy” in Les ailes d’Icaire, an indication to him of de Bernard’s facility for capturing the life of social man in process. “The fashions will change in a few years, and the rogue, of course with them,” Titmarsh predicts, “Let us catch this delightful fellow ere he flies.”

In his essay on French society novels, Thackeray contrasts de Bernard and some of his colleagues with traveling English women writers such as Mrs. Trollope and Lady Morgan, who, “having
frequented a certain number of tea-parties in the French capital, begin to prattle about French manners and men—with all respect for the talents of those ladies we do not believe their information to be worth a sixpence: They speak to us not of men, but of tea-parties.” In The Book of Snobs several years later he ridiculed these and other literary “fashnabbles” of his own land:

If anybody wants to know how intimately authors are connected with the fashionable world, they have but to read the genteel novels. What refinement and delicacy pervades the works of Mrs. Barnaby! What delightful good company do you meet with in Mrs. Armytage! She seldom introduces you to anybody under a marquis! I don’t know anything more delicious than the pictures of genteel life in “Ten Thousand a Year,” except, perhaps the “Young Duke” and “Coningsby.” There’s a modest grace about them, and an easy high fashion, which only belongs to blood, my dear sir—to true blood.¹⁶

This flippant passage serves as an introduction to the “pictures of genteel life” reproduced in “Novels by Eminent Hands” that appeared in Punch the following year, where the distinct impression is conveyed that these authors are anything but intimate with the life they write about. We overhear the “prattle” of the “delightful good company” provided for us by “Mrs. Armytage” in her new novel “Lords and Liveries”:

“Corpo di Bacco,” he said, pitching the end of his cigar on to the red nose of the Countess of Delawaddymore’s coachman—who, having deposited her fat ladyship at No. 236 Piccadilly, was driving the carriage to the stables, before commencing his evening at the “Fortune of War” public-house—“what a lovely creature that was! What eyes! What hair! Who knows her? Do you, mon cher prince?”

“E bellissima, certamente,” said the Duca di Montepulciano, and stroked down his jetty moustache.¹⁷

But they “speak to us not of men, but of tea-parties,” or in this case stag parties. We are indeed confined here to the “outsides” of this fabled countess, “her velvet gown, and her diamonds ... her smiles, and her simpers, and her rouge.”

We meet with a similar frustration in “Codlingsby” by one D. Shrewsbury, Esq. This author gives us the dimensions of a dwelling (“They entered a moderate-sized apartment—indeed Holywell Street is not above a hundred yards long, and this chamber was not more than half that length”) and a full inventory of its furnishings:

The carpet was of white velvet—(laid over several webs of Aubusson, Ispahan, and Axminster, so that your foot gave no more sound as it trod upon the yielding plain than the shadow did which followed you)—of white velvet, painted with flowers, arabesques, and
Thackeray's canvass of humanity

But nothing of the "heart of the man" Raphael Mendoza who occupies this Xanadu in Holywell Street. In his serious review of *Coningsby*, Thackeray generalized: "Not an unremarkable characteristic of our society-novelists is that ardour of imagination which sets them so often to work in describing grand company for us. They like to disport themselves in inventing fine people for us, as we to sit in this imaginary society. There is something naïf in this credulity on both sides: in these cheap Barmecide entertainments, to which author and reader are content to sit down. Mr. Disraeli is the most splendid of all feast-givers in this way—there is no end to the sumptuous hospitality of his imagination."\(^1\)

Disraeli's imagination, moreover, with all its "sumptuous hospitality," seemed to dwell in a hothouse. By comparison with de Bernard's "accurate picture of the actual French dandy," the dandyism of *Coningsby* was to Thackeray "intense, but not real; not English, that is. It is vastly too ornamental, energetic and tawdry for our quiet habits. The author's coxcombrery is splendid, gold-land, refulgent, like that of Murat rather than that of Brummell." He vastly preferred the "refined observation" of de Bernard and other disciples of Balzac who were recording for future generations the emergent society of the *juste milieu*. As against what he regarded as the preoccupation with externals of "our society-novelists," Thackeray translates passages from de Bernard's stories to illustrate the French writer's ability to penetrate beyond costume and decor to reveal the "inner man." Dambergeac, the student activist of *Un acte de vertu*, in particular is presented to us vividly individualized and representative of his times. We see him first as a youth:

He was then a young man of eighteen, with a tall slim figure, a broad chest, and a flaming black eye, out of all which personal charms he knew how to draw the most advantage; and though his costume was such as Staub might probably have criticized, he had, nevertheless, a style peculiar to himself—to himself and the students, among whom he was the leader of fashion. A tight black coat, buttoned up to the chin, across the chest, set off that part of his person; a low-crowned hat, with a voluminous rim, cast solemn shadows over a countenance bronzed by a southern sun: he wore, at
one time, enormous flowing black locks, which he sacrificed pitilessly, however, and adopted a Brutus, as being more revolutionary: finally, he carried an enormous club, that was his code and digest: in like manner, De Retz used to carry a stiletto in his pocket, by way of a breviary.\textsuperscript{20}

and subsequently in middle age, settled into a provincial subprefecture:

In fact a great change, and such a one as many people would call a change for the better, had taken place in my friend: he had grown fat, and announced a decided disposition to become what French people call a \textit{bel homme}: that is, a very fat one. His complexion, bronzed before, was now clear white and red: there were no more political allusions in his hair, which was, on the contrary, neatly frizzed and brushed over the forehead, shell-shape. This head-dress, joined to a thin pair of whiskers, cut crescent-wise from the ear to the nose, gave my friend a regular bourgeois physiognomy, wax-doll like.\textsuperscript{21}

Thackeray reveals here his own preoccupation with the novelist's medium of time and the changes wrought by the years. He was beguiled too by the round of "bets, breakfasts, riding, dinners at the 'Café de Paris,' and delirious Carnival balls" that occupy the young boulevardiers of M. de Bernard. Especially amusing to him was the manner in which "our author describes a swindler imitating the manners of a dandy" as exemplified by Blondeau de Gustan of \textit{Les ailes d'Icaire}; he could not help adding: "and many swindlers and dandies be there, doubtless, in London as well as in Paris." Charles Yellowplush is well acquainted with one of them:

The name of my nex master was, if posbil, still more ellygant and youfonious than that of my fust. I now found myself boddy servant to the Honrabble Halgernon Percy Deuceace, youngest and fifth son of the Earl of Crabs.\ldots

When I say that Mr. Deuceace was a barrystir, I don't mean that he sent sesshuns or surcoats (as they call 'em), but simply that he kep chambers, lived in Pump Cort, and looked out for a commissionership or a revisinship, or any other place that the Wig guvyment could give him. His father was a Wig pier (as the landriess told me), and had been a Toary pier. The fact is his Lordship was so poar, that he could be anythink or nothink, to get provisions for his sons and an inkum for himself.\textsuperscript{22}

Another, who hails from Dublin rather than London, introduces himself:

I presume that there is no gentleman in Europe that has not heard of the house of Barry of Barryogue, of the kingdom of Ireland, than
which a more famous name is not to be found in Gwillim or D'Hozier; and though, as a man of the world, I have learned to despise heartily the claims of some pretenders to high birth who have no more genealogy than the lackey who cleans my boots, and though I laugh to utter scorn the boasting of many of my countrymen, who are all for descending from kings of Ireland, and talk of a domain no bigger than would feed a pig as if it were a principality; yet truth compels me to assert that my family was the noblest of the island, and, perhaps, of the universal world.

The most famous of his rogues has "arrived" in London from obscure Paris origins, claiming descent from the Entrechats, "a noble family of Gascony;"

Becky felt as if she could bless the people out of the carriage windows, so elated was she in spirit, and so strong a sense had she of the dignified position which she had at last attained in life. Even our Becky had her weaknesses, and as one often sees how men pride themselves upon excellencies which others are slow to perceive . . . so to be, and to be thought, a respectable woman, was Becky's aim in life, and she got up the genteel with amazing assiduity, readiness, and success. We have said, there were times when she believed herself to be a fine lady, and forgot that there was no money in the chest at home—duns round the gate, tradesmen to coax and wheedle—no ground to walk upon, in a word. And as she went to Court in the carriage, she adopted a demeanour so grand, self-satisfied, deliberate, and imposing, that it made even Lady Jane laugh. She walked into the royal apartments with a toss of the head which would have befit an empress, and I have no doubt had she been one, she would have become the character perfectly.

Thackeray frequently allows his scamps and charlatans to betray themselves through letters or memoirs, in the manner of the continental models he admired, but for him the novelist as student of the "inward thoughts and ways" of man should transcend language. "There is a great deal of matter for curious speculation in the accounts here so wittily given by M. de Bernard," he wrote in commendation of this elegant farceur still unknown at the time to English readers, "but, perhaps, it is still more curious to think what he has not written, and to judge of his characters, not so much by the words in which he describes them, as by the unconscious testimony that the words altogether convey." Certainly in some of Thackeray's own most memorable episodes, it is the "unconscious testimony" that ultimately is most revealing:

Easy and pleasant as their life at Paris was, it was after all only an idle dalliance and amiable trifling; and Rebecca saw that she must push Rawdon's fortune in their own country. She must get him a place or appointment at home or in the colonies; and she deter-
mined to make a move upon England as soon as the way could be cleared for her. As a first step she had made Crawley sell out of the Guards and go on half-pay. His function as aide-de-camp to General Tufto had ceased previously. Rebecca laughed in all the companies at that officer, at his toupee . . . at his waistband, at his false teeth, at his pretensions to be a lady-killer above all . . . Becky had a dozen admirers in his place to be sure; and could cut her rival to pieces with her wit. But as we have said, she was growing tired of this idle social life: opera boxes and restaurateur-dinners palled upon her: nosegays could not be laid about as a provision for future years: and she could not live upon knick-knacks, laced handkerchiefs, and kid gloves. She felt the frivolity of pleasure, and longed for more substantial benefits.26

We enter the consciousness of Major Pendennis in the midst of a scene that could be one of the Parisian Carnival balls described by M. de Bernard, where “men of all classes high and low . . . congregate and give themselves up to the disgusting worship of the genius of the place,” but the setting is May Fair:

There he stood, with admirable patience, enduring, uncomplainingly, a silent agony; knowing that people could see the state of his face (for could he not himself perceive the condition of others, males and females, of his own age?)—longing to go to rest for hours past; aware that suppers disagreed with him, and yet having eaten a little so as to keep his friend, Lady Clavering, in good-humour; with twinges of rheumatism in the back and knees; with weary feet burning in his varnished boots,—so tired, oh, so tired and longing for bed! If a man, struggling with hardship and bravely overcoming it, is an object of admiration for the gods, that Power in whose chapels the old Major was a faithful worshipper must have looked approvingly upon the constancy of Pendennis’s martyrdom. There are sufferers in that cause as in the other: the negroes in the service of Mumbo Jumbo tattoo and drill themselves with burning skewers with great fortitude; and we read that priests in the service of Baal gashed themselves and bled freely. You who can smash the idols, do so with good courage; but do not be too fierce with the idolators,—they worship the best thing they know.27

Turning from the “jam tarts” of his boyhood to French pastries enhanced Thackeray’s appreciation for the more substantial fare that the novel offered beyond vicarious excitement for the idle mind. His sojourns in Paris gave him opportunity also to observe that fiction writing was a going enterprise. “Their fecundity is so prodigious that it is impossible to take any account of their progeny,” he wrote in an article entitled “French Romancers on England” in 1843, “and a Review which professes to keep its readers au courant on French light literature, should be published, not once a quarter, but more than once a day.” The popular press, one by-
product of the late revolution, cultural as well as political, now
offered a new presumably inexhaustible outlet for the wares of the
"romancers": "... Since the invention of the Feuilleton in France,
every journal has its six columns of particular and especial report.
M. Eugène Sue is still guillotining and murdering and intriguing in
the Débats. . . . M. Dumas has his tale in the Siècle; Madame Gay is
pouring out her eloquence daily in the Presse; M. Reybaud is en-
deavouring with the adventures of Jean Mouton in the National, to
equal the popularity he obtained with "Jérôme Paturot"; in a word,
every newspaper has its different tale." The teller of tales has
discovered the way to the great public. Moreover, these organs with
such resounding names as Débats, Siècle, Moniteur, and National can
accommodate under one fold anything conveyable by the printed
word—gossip, sensation, persuasion, and instruction.

One of the novels referred to in this article, Louis Reybaud's
Jérôme Paturot à la recherche d'une position sociale (1842), made a spe-
cial impression on Thackeray, and he devoted a critical article to it
in Fraser's Magazine during the same season. Reybaud gave him "a
curious insight into some of the social and political humbugs of the
great nation," Titmarsh told his readers, and impressed him with
his ability to inculcate a "wholesome moral . . . with much
philosophical acumen." This wise and witty satire is wide in its
sweep, casting ridicule on virtually all aspects of political and cul-
tural life under the July Monarchy through its ineffectual hero,
prototype of the eternal bungler, "who imagines himself fitted for
everything and cannot make a lasting success of anything." After a
series of aborted careers as social reformer, poet, journalist, politi-
cian, and soldier, Jerome eventually settles down in the humdrum
family business, a happy mediocrity. Jerome's charming aggressive
wife Malvina, an ex-grisette who enjoys a brief whirl in the haut-
monde, is, as we shall see in a later chapter, among the literary sisters
of Becky Sharp. Of more immediate interest is Jerome's attempt,
early in life, to become a man of letters, an experience fraught with
sociological significance. The chapter entitled "Paturon Feuille-
toniste" is an amusing, if cynical and hard-headed, excursion into
the politics and economics of the writing life, focusing our attention
on the emergent bourgeois public and the way to their hearts and
pocket books. Titmarsh translates some advice to Jerome by the
editor of a popular paper whom the aspiring young writer has
approached with his wares:

"You must recollect, sir, that the newspaper, and in consequence,
the Feuilleton, is a family affair. The father and mother read the story
first, from their hands it passes to the children, from the children to
the servants, from the servants to the house porter, and becomes at once a part of the family. . . ."

"Well, granting that the Feuilleton is a necessity nowadays [replies Jerome], what sort of Feuilleton must one write in order to please all these various people?"36

Jerome's question is one that many a nineteenth-century novelist must have asked himself as he reached out to the variegated audience that George Meredith was to refer to as "the republic of the fireside." In his preceding colloquy with the editor, which Titmarsh did not translate but must have read, Jerome, recognizing that the feuilleton "a pris dans notre ordre social une importance au moins égale à celle de la tasse de café et du cigare de la Havane," is inspired with a sense of mission. "Je crois que j'ai trouvé une veine encore inexploitée dans le domaine de l'art," he declares. The editor puts him down quickly enough:

"Sir . . . come off it, please. What you call the domain of art must take second place when you address a large public. Look, let's not take leave of reality. What makes up the mass of readers of newspapers? landlords, farmers, merchants, manufacturers, with a sprinkling of a few men of the law and of the sword; moreover, these are the most enlightened. Now ask yourself what is the average intelligence of this clientele. Do you think that your theories of art will have any effect on them? that they will respond to them? that they will even understand you? When one speaks to everybody, sir, one must speak like everybody."31

Jerome, standing by his principles, replies that the great artist lifts the public up to his level; he does not descend to theirs. He reminds the jaded journalist that not everybody in ancient Greece was a Phidias, but that all Greeks came to admire that sculptor's work; that Cicero, speaking in the Roman Forum, did not mold his rhetoric on that of his fellow senators, but imposed his own style on them. "The true artist does not obey, he rules," affirms the idealistic Paturet. Our sophisticated editor has his rejoinder ready:

"My dear sir, when one writes for a newspaper, one is neither orator nor sculptor. One aims at a great number of subscribers, and the best theory is the one that makes them come to you. You speak besides of two ages eminently artistic, of two peoples who sucked up the taste for grand things with their mothers' milk. Nothing like that here. We live in a bourgeois age, sir, in the midst of a nation that is attracted more and more to trumpery. What to do? Resist? To climb up Mount Hymettus and live off the honey of poetry? One has to be very young to have such ideas, and you will get over them."

The audience of the writer of the nineteenth century, this editor reminds young Paturet, extends beyond the family circle to em-
brace a heterogeneous, respectable, but uncultivated multitude. The fundamental issue raised here is: Who calls the tune, the writer or the reader? "The true artist does not obey, he rules," pronounces the serious writer trying to reach his unknown audience through popular organs. The modern writer must join the multitude, not try to lead them, replies his editor: "When one speaks to everybody, one must speak like everybody" ("Quand on parle à tout le monde, monsieur, il faut parler comme tout le monde"), Thackeray himself had to confront this situation, and it is possible to some extent to infer his position. As one who deplored the "prodigious pomposity" and "fine writing" of some of his more "literary" rivals, parodied in *Catherine* and in *Punch's Prize Novelists*, and liked to refer to his own as "a sort of confidential talk between writer and reader," he seems to side with Jerome's editor on the matter of style. On the other hand, the author of *Jerome Paturot*, which itself originated as a *feuilleton*, offered sufficient evidence that one can write to entertain "la masse de lecteurs" without producing claptrap (what the editor calls "le camelotte"). "I have heard that 'Jerome Paturot' is a political novel.... Perhaps it is a political novel," comments Titmarsh at the conclusion of his review, "perhaps there is a great deal of sound thinking in this careless, familiar, sparkling narrative, and a vast deal of reflection hidden under Jerome's ordinary cotton nightcap." He recommended this "course of French humbug, commercial, legal, literary, political" heartily to "all lovers of the Pantagruelian philosophy." He could not help adding that "if there be any writer in England who has knowledge and wit sufficient, he would do well to borrow the Frenchman's idea, and give a similar satire in our own country," and he followed suit.

In his own country, Thackeray could not help noticing, equivalents to the French *feuilleton* had proliferated since the teens of the century, providing the popular instructor with cheap and easy access to the cultural new masses. "It must be confessed that the controversialists of the present day have an eminent advantage over their predecessors in the days of folios," he observes in another essay in *The Paris Sketch Book*. Whereas the compiling of folios required erudition, intellectual labor, and time, he continues, "now, in the age of duodecimos... a male or female controversialist draws upon his imagination, and not his learning; makes a story instead of an argument, and in the course of 150 pages... will prove or disprove you anything."
One result is "those detestable mixtures of truth, lies, false sentiment, false reasoning, bad grammar, correct and genuine philanthropy and piety," disseminated in tracts, "which any woman or man, be he ever so silly, can take upon himself to write, and sell for a penny." In *The Book of Snobs* we are introduced to the Reverend Lionel Pettipois offering his "awakening" little books at half-a-crown a hundred, "which dribble out of his pockets wherever he goes," and we realize how far the little books themselves travel from one of Thackeray's drawings in *Punch* showing a castaway on a desert island holding up to a fellow in misery a sheaf of tracts from a bottle washed up on shore. In *Vanity Fair* Mrs. Kirk, disciple of the Reverend Doctor Ramshorn, puts "three little penny books with pictures," entitled "Howling Wilderness," "The Washerwoman of Wandsworth Common," and "The British Soldier's Best Bayonet," into the hands of Amelia Sedley for her bedside enlightenment. Off the same press may have plumped "Crumbs from the Pantry," "The Frying Pan and the Fire," "The Livery of Sin," Lady Emily Southdown's "Washerwoman of Finchley Common," and her mother's "Fleshpots Broken; or, the Converted Cannibal," which are intended to draw Miss Crawley away from Pigault-Lebrun and closer to salvation (chaps. 27, 33).

Wherever he turned Thackeray saw himself surrounded by professors with the pen. "Since the days of Aesop, comic philosophy has not been cultivated so much as at present. The chief of our pleasant writers—Mr. Jerrold, Mr. Dickens, Mr. Lever—are assiduously following this branch of writing," he wrote in a review for the *Morning Chronicle*, "and the first-named jocular sage, whose apologues adorned our spelling-books in youth, was not more careful to append a wholesome piece of instruction to his fable than our modern teachers now are able to give their volumes a moral ballast." Before long the faculty was joined by the "dandiacal" author of *Coningsby*. "It will not be the fault of the romantic writers of the present day if the public don't perceive that the times are out of joint, and want setting right very sadly," begins Thackeray's review of *Sybil*. To the *feuilleton*, the tract, and the "little penny books with pictures" could now be added Mr. Disraeli's "three-volume parable," a proper key to which would require "a history of the Reformation, the Revolution, and of parties since the advent of the House of Hanover—a digest of the social, political, and commercial life of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons—a history of agriculture, manufacture, banking, and credit."
In these reviews Thackeray seems to be deploring the compound of fact and fiction, the insinuating of teaching and preaching into books that readers turn to for amusement. In one of his reviews he puts himself in the place of those who would prefer to keep pleasure and instruction on separate shelves: “We like to hear sermons from his reverence at church; to get our notions of trade, crime, politics and other national statistics, from the proper papers and figures; but when suddenly, out of the gilt pages of a pretty picture book, a comic moralist rushes forward, and takes occasion to tell us that society is diseased, the laws unjust, the rich ruthless, the poor martyrs, the world lop-sided, and vice-versa, persons who wish to lead an easy life are inclined to remonstrate against this literary ambuscadoe.” As with religion and politics, so with metaphysics and science, Thackeray suggests in an extreme hypothetical case:

If Professor Airy, having particular astronomical discoveries to communicate, should bring them forward through Mr. Colburn’s duodecimo medium, with, let us say, Newton for a hero—(the apple tumbling on the sleeping philosopher’s nose might be made a thrilling incident of romance . . .)—[but] if the professor, lecturing to a class, should so mingle astronomy and sentiment together, it is needless to say his pupils would not have a very high respect for him; and as they would have a right to doubt and grumble, because upon a matter of astronomy their professor introduced a novel, so conversely, have novel readers good cause to complain, if their teacher, in an affair of romance, think fit to inflict upon them a great quantity of more or less wholesome philosophy.

Thackeray’s position on this question seems to be summed up near the beginning of his review of Sybil: “We stand already committed as to our idea of the tendency and province of the novel. Morals and manners we believe to be the novelist’s best themes; and hence prefer romances which do not treat of algebra, religion, political economy, or other abstract science. We doubt the fitness of the occasion, and often (it must be confessed) the competency of the teacher.” Yet this self-styled “week-day preacher” had himself demonstrated that these areas were not necessarily incompatible. In his first novel, Catherine, he drew upon none other than Professor Airy’s hero to adorn the tale and point a moral of his own: “A fit of indigestion puts itself between you and honours and reputation; an apple plops on your nose, and makes you a world’s wonder and glory; a fit of poverty makes a rascal of you, who were, and are still, an honest man; clubs, trumps, or six lucky mains at dice, makes an honest man for life of you, who ever were, will be, and are a rascal. Who sends the illness? who causes the apple to fall? who deprives
you of worldly goods? or who shuffles the cards, and brings trump, honour, virtue, and prosperity back again?” “The excitement of metaphysics must equal almost that of gambling,” young Thackeray had remarked in reaction to his reading of Victor Cousin’s Cours de l’histoire de la philosophie, and he seems to have felt the same way about some of the other “dull studies” he had ruled out of the novelist’s province. In the “magazinery” that followed Catherine, such as The Bedford-Row Conspiracy and The Great Hoggarty Diamond, politics and economics affect the ups and downs of the characters’ fortunes. Barry Lyndon, along with a swashbuckling, swindling, card-playing hero, offers us a “near view” of the political and military history of Europe during the Seven Years’ War. Religion is intruded into Vanity Fair with the author’s apologies: “Sick-bed homilies and pious reflections are, to be sure, out of place in mere story-books, and we are not going (after the fashion of some novelists of the present day) to cajole the public into a sermon, when it is only a comedy that the reader pays his money to witness. But, without preaching, the truth may surely be borne in mind, that the bustle, and triumph, and laughter, and gaiety which Vanity Fair exhibits in public, do not always pursue the performer into private life” (chap. 19). Certainly by the time the reader has finished this “comedy,” he has had a vivid impression of people who live “without God in the world.” As for the subsequent “mere story-books,” Arthur Pendennis freely discusses religion, philosophy, and politics with his friend George Warrington, and the narrators of Henry Esmond and The Newcomes do not hesitate to cast their lots with “the parson’s own.”

Whatever a superficial reading of his pronouncements on novels and novelists may suggest, Thackeray himself did not separate fact from fiction or teaching and preaching from entertainment. Speaking for the kind of reader who resists tub thumping or finger pointing, he advocates “amusing by means of amiable fiction, and instructing by kindly satire, being careful to avoid the discussion of abstract principles, beyond those of the common ethical science which forms a branch of all poets’ and novelists’ business.” Himself more attracted to “actual manners” than to “abstract principles,” Thackeray set great store by the power of the imagination, combined with observation, to “illustrate” character (in the parlance of the day). Significantly he points out in one of his pieces on Disraeli that “the great success of ‘Coningsby’ arose—not from the Caucasian theory, and discovery of the Venetian origin of the English constitution—but from those amusing bitter sketches of Tad-
pole, Rigby, Monmouth, and the rest, of which the likenesses were irresistible, and the malice tickled everybody.” In Sybil, on the other hand, he complains, “there is very little personality . . . very little pleasant caricaturing, or laughable malice, or Gillray grotesqueness; but there is more Venetian theory, more high-flown Young England mystery.” The novelist’s contribution to “common ethical science,” in other words, is not through “abstract principles,” but through principles personified and exemplified. As a student of the visual as well as literary arts, Thackeray drew freely on graphic analogies to make his own points. “Parson . . . if you come for cards, ’tis mighty well, but I will thank you to spare me your sermons,” shouts the Baroness Bernstein to her chaplain Mr. Sampson in one delightful episode of The Virginians. But earlier we have caught her in a rare moment of truth when she sighs before her portrait painted by Godfrey Kneller in the sunshine of her days: “Ah! Here is a sermon!”

“If truth is not always pleasant, at any rate truth is best, from whatever chair—from whence graver writers or thinkers argue, as from that at which the story-teller sits as he concludes his labour, and bids his kind reader farewell,” are Thackeray’s parting words in the preface to Pendennis. These words can be taken as the upshot of his continuous campaign in the writings before Pendennis to reconcile “the story-teller” with “graver writers or thinkers.” Having allowed the story-teller to speak for himself before the curtain in Vanity Fair, he gives equal time to the more earnest writer in “A Plan for a Prize Novel” that appeared in Punch the year after Pendennis was completed. This satire takes the form of a “Letter from the eminent Dramatist Brown to the eminent Novelist Snooks,” a young author whose “work is eagerly read by the masses.” The letter is supposedly addressed from the Café des Aveugles in Paris. Knowing of Thackeray’s own saturation in the popular Parisian press, we are not surprised that Brown’s plan is “taken from the French . . . in the law report of the National Magazine,” and credited to “a French literary gentleman, M. Emanuel Gonzales.” Brown suggests to Snooks how the French example can be adapted to suit the tastes of the English public:

“Unless he writes with a purpose, you know, a novelist in our days is good for nothing. This one writes with a socialist purpose; that with a conservative purpose: this author or authoress with the most delicate skill insinuates Catholicism into you, and you find yourself all but a Papist in the third volume: another doctors you with Low-Church remedies to work inwardly upon you, and which you swallow
down unsuspiciously, as children do calomel in jelly. Fiction advocates all sorts of truths and causes—doesn't the delightful bard of the Minories find Moses in everything?"  

Both the curtain lecture of *Vanity Fair* and the "Plan for a Prize Novel" of the "eminent Dramatist Brown" wax jocular, in their converse ways, over the dilemma, shared by Thackeray with his rivals, of the serious novelist caught between his desire to educate his readers and his need to amuse them. Although he made fun of neatly packaged nostrums in the form of fiction that "advocates all sorts of truths and causes," he recognized that "wholesome philosophy" needed to be made palatable in order to go down. In one of his first published books, he had characterized satire as a curative medicine, "often sharp, but wholesome, like the bark that is bitter to the palate, but that helps to brace and strengthen the frame." He learned how to sweeten the medicine. As a fellow novelist, Anthony Trollope, was to write in his book on Thackeray: "The palpable and overt dose the child rejects; but that which is cunningly insinuated by the aid of jam and honey is accepted unconsciously, and goes upon its curative mission. So it is with the novel. It is taken because of its jam and honey. But unlike the jam and honey of the household cupboard, it is never unmixed with physic." He was speaking of a writer for whom the "raspberry open tarts" of boyhood had given way to "calomel in jelly." By transforming the cotton nightcap of the French satirist into a cap and bells, Thackeray convinced his public that a "funny book" can "add to one's knowledge of the world" and of mankind.

Thackeray's various critiques of novels and other popular reading show that he was concerned with the medium, as we say today, as well as the message. With the extension of the writer's audience, he saw himself competing not only with the tract writers and the "comic philosophers," but also with what he referred to as the "scandal and ribaldry organs" that had also sprouted up as an outgrowth of the steam press and were further abetted by the reduction of the stamp laws. He has a word to say on this phenomenon also in *The Paris Sketch Book*: "... Why does this immorality exist? Because the people must be amused and have not been taught how; because the upper classes, frightened by stupid cant, or absorbed in material wants, have not as yet learned the refinement which only the cultivation of art can give; and when their intellects are uneducated, and their tastes are coarse, the tastes and amusements of classes still more ignorant must be coarse
and vicious likewise, in an increased proportion.” He was referring specifically to the two-penny papers that had emerged in England in the 1830s, which he found inferior to their French equivalents, the feuilletons and the cartoons through which Parisian polemicists were educating the masses. The former had already been the subject of an article, “Half-a Crown’s Worth of Cheap Knowledge,” that appeared in 1838 in Fraser’s Magazine (published anonymously, but since identified as Thackeray’s). “We have our penny libraries for debauchery as for other useful knowledge,” he wryly concluded this omnibus review of a dozen of the most widely circulated “periodical works” of the time, carrying such titles as *The Poor Man’s Friend, Livesey’s Moral Reformer, The Penny Story-Teller, The Penny Satirist, Cleave’s Penny Gazette of Variety, and The Town. “Blessed be the press, and the fruits thereof!” proclaims this critic, extending mock congratulations to the camp followers of the “March of Intellect.” “In old times (before education grew general),” he continues, “licentiousness was considered as the secret of the aristocracy. Only men enervated by luxury, and fevered by excess of wealth, were supposed to indulge in vices which are now common to the poorest apprentice or the poorest artisan.” But now, thanks to the energies of Lord Brougham and his printers, “this schoolmaster is abroad,’ and the prejudices of the people disappear.” His sarcasm was not, of course, directed to popular education as such, in which he wholeheartedly believed, but at what “the people” were being taught in these rabble-rousing penny guides and gazettes. It is evident from a sequel article, “Horae Catnachianae,” that he was not altogether discouraged with the prospects of teaching the populace through “cheap literature.” Here his subject is broadside ballads. “Our public has grown to be tired of hearing great characters, or extraordinary ones, uttering virtuous sentiments,” he observes in this review of the “literature” that emanated from Seven Dials, “but put them in the mouth of a street-walker straightaway they become agreeable to listen to.” Thackeray himself uttered some of his own “virtuous sentiments” in ballad form, in “numbers” if not in broadsheets. Nor did he find it beneath him to play jester and, at least in spirit, wander among the crowd in the streets as the wrapper design for *Vanity Fair* shows.

Critical as he was of the literature aimed at the working-class reader, some of Thackeray’s most delicious diatribe was directed at that eyewash of genteel ladies, the illustrated gift books, the Albums, Annuals, Books of Beauty, and Keepsakes, which he once flung aside in one heap as: “such a display of miserable mediocrity,
such a collection of feeble verse, such a gathering of small wit," in which "a little sham sentiment is employed to illustrate a little sham art." In one of his "Annual Executions," he asks the readers of Fraser's:

But seriously . . . is this style of literature to continue to flourish in England? Is every year to bring more nonsense like this, for foolish parents to give to their foolish children; for dull people to dawdle over till the dinner-bell rings; to add something to the trash on my lady's drawing-room table, or in Miss's bookcase? Quousque tandem How far, O keepsake, wilt thou abuse our forbearance? How many more bad pictures are to be engraved, how many more dull stories to be written, how long will journalists puff and the gullied public purchase?50

Indefinitely, to judge by the way Arthur Pendennis's publisher, Mr. Bacon of Paternoster Row, kowtows to the Lady Violet Lebas, editor of the Spring Annual, "daintily illustrated with pictures of reigning beauties, or other prints of a tender and voluptuous character."51 Arthur Pendennis contributes a poem to Lady Violet's Annual, as indeed Thackeray wrote for the Keepsake edited by her namesake Lady Blessington. Lady Violet's Spring Annual, we are told, "has since shared the fate of other vernal blossoms, and perished out of the world," but it blossomed anew in other forms. Thackeray showed what he could do with the genre in Mrs. Perkins's Ball, one of his Christmas books in pink wrappers, where, incidentally, are introduced Miss Bunion, the heavy-set poetess of such delicate lyrics as "Heartstrings," "The Deadly Nightshade," and "Passion Flowers," along with Poseidon Hicks, the aesthetic young author of Greek lyrics and epics "in the Byronic manner." His next work was a yellow-wrapped compendium of wit, sentiment, verse, and art called Vanity Fair. As critic Thackeray may have scorned the "pretty picture book," but as author he took it in stride. Vanity Fair, in fact, received a posthumous tribute that he would have appreciated as "one of the best illustrated books in the world."52

"Poor fellows of the pen and pencil! we must live. The public likes light literature, and we must write it. Here I am writing magazine jokes and follies, and why? Because the public like such, will purchase no other," laments Titmarsh in the midst of a gallery tour during the season of 1844.53 Yet the following year he defends these very "magazine jokes and follies" to one of his hypothetical readers: "What a quantity of writings by the same hand have you, my dear friend, pored over! How much delicate wit, profound
philosophy (lurking hid under harlequin’s black mask and span-gled jacket, nay under clown’s white lead and grinning vermillion) how many quiet wells of deep-gushing pathos, have you failed to remark as you hurried through those modest pages, for which the author himself here makes an apology . . . ” A month later, reading Dickens’s “Christmas frolic,” The Cricket on the Hearth, Thack­ eray cannot help admiring how “the author is at highjinks with that half-million of the public which regards him and sympathises with him,” over whom he has “such a kindly, friendly hold . . . as perhaps no writer ever had before.” He likens the tale to a theatrical piece: “It interests you as such—charms you with its grace, picturesqueness and variety—tickles you with its admirable grotesque.” He tries to probe to the source of this magician’s power over readers: “We fancy that we see throughout the aim of the author—to startle, to keep on amusing his reader; to ply him with brisk sentences, rapid conceits, dazzling pictures, adroit inter­ changes of pathos and extravaganza.” Thackeray was working at this time on Vanity Fair, certainly one of the most “adroit inter­ changes of pathos and extravaganza” that he ever achieved. He had come to recognize that the public instructor needed a bag of tricks in addition to a well-stuffed portfolio. If it was possible to convey religion through tracts, politics through broadsheets and ballads, parables in pink boards, and art in gilt-edged picture books, why not “common ethical science” under “gaudy yellow wrappers”? When one speaks to everybody, one speaks like everybody. To these wise words of Jerome Paturol’s editor Thackeray might have added that the author who would speak to everybody must also catch everybody’s eye first.

But Thackeray was not merely making a virtue of necessity. The flimsy, if attractive, dress in which much of his wisdom for the ages originally appeared may be taken as emblematic of his own fascina­tion with the transitory and the mundane. Realism for him meant not merely writing about what one is familiar with, but becoming familiar with what one chooses to write about. The notebooks he gathered for his novels are crammed with jottings from contemporaneous newspapers and magazines, government documents, court records, diaries, guidebooks, maps—indicative of his passion for primary sources, for what is “fresh from the press,” as he phrased it on one occasion. He was encouraged along these lines, one gathers from its influence on his first novel, Catherine, by an essay-review that appeared in Fraser’s Magazine in the mid-1830s called “Hints for a History of Highwaymen.” This writer, calling
attention to the sheets and broadsides that in the last century and his own disseminated “hot newes” of the streets, courts, prisons, and gallows to the populace, declared: “We have ourselves not seldom obtained an insight into the realities of life through the rude language of these ephemeral repertories of sorrow and crime.” Toward the end of his review he throws out a challenge: “Have we not opened out a wide and rich field of labour for a philosophic, literary, legal observer? He must combine some law with a larger portion of literature, to secure for his readers those ballads and pamphlets of the passing hour which, though light in themselves, show most surely the settings of current opinion; and for the satisfactory completion of the task he should possess more moral discrimination than either law or literature.”

A “philosophic, literary, legal observer” is an apt enough description of an aspiring young writer, who, as he was to write of one of his heroes, “behaved to Themis with a very decent respect and attention, but he loved letters more than law always.” By this time Thackeray himself had left the Middle Temple behind for Fleet Street, with Paternoster Row still beckoning. The “light” literature of the hour, the “ephemeral repertories of sorrow and crime,” are, according to the author of “Hints for a History of Highwaymen,” grist alike to the mills of the lawyer, the news reporter, and the novelist. Although the specific context of the Fraser’s article is the literature of outlawry, it emphasizes that the real concern of the “philosophic” writer is “erring man” in general. This writer seems to anticipate Thackeray’s succession of fictitious “histories,” in which men and women of all sorts and conditions are called before the bar of judgment, though a moral rather than a legal one. Certainly he helps define what was to be Thackeray’s dual function—documentalist of his age to future generations, and moral teacher to his own.

It was to his own age, of course, that Thackeray immediately addressed himself, not as one of the “graver writers or thinkers” but as a “laughing philosopher,” the label he used for himself in the preface to his Comic Tales and Sketches. “The best humour that we know of has been as eagerly received by the public as by the connoisseur,” he proclaimed in his essay on Cruikshank. “Some may have a keener enjoyment of it than others, but all the world can be merry over it, and is always ready to welcome it.” He likens Cruikshank to a charismatic leader such as Napoleon who has “fait vivre la fibre populaire,” and attributes the success of his favorite artist to a “general wide-hearted sympathy” that at once “pities and loves the
poor, and jokes at the follies of the great... and addresses all in a perfectly sincere and manly way." \(^{59}\) Although his own brand of comedy appealed at first mainly to "the connoisseur," his whole career can be characterized as an attempt to address "all the world"—or, in his own terms, "leaders of public opinion," "genteel people," "the bourgeois," "people of the working sort," and "low-bred creatures," as he designated the divers elements of the reading public at various times. \(^{60}\)

Thackeray's fundamental conception of his function as author was dominated by an elitist sociology of culture, more readily assumed in his century than in ours. "People in their battles about public matters forget the greatest good of all, social-good, I mean fine arts and civilization, dandyism as you call it," he wrote as a young man to his mother; "We owe this to the aristocracy, and we must keep an aristocracy (pure & modified as you wish) in order to retain it." \(^{61}\) Like many "leaders of public opinion" of the age, Thackeray conceived the progress of culture as a filtering down of "literaturyture and the fine harts" from the top to the bottom of "the edifice of humanity." In time he came to see the writer as taking over the duty, abandoned by the aristocracy, of educating the public intellect and refining their taste. We catch a glimpse of this idealistic side of young Thackeray in his satirical playlet on the literary marketplace called "Reading a Poem" (1841), where he represents a crusading young journalist, one Percy Dishwash, all afire with his vision of "the great republic of genius." In this utopia the writer is expected to "rank with the foremost of the land." \(^{62}\) Quixotic as it may have appeared at the time, this vision seemed to materialize in the person of one citizen of this republic greeted by Thackeray in 1843 as "the first literary man in this country who has made himself honourably and worthily the equal of the noblest and wealthiest in it." The nation at large, he wrote, owed a debt of gratitude to "this accomplished scholar from the unlettered public... for laying open his learning to all, and bidding the humble and the great alike welcome to it." \(^{63}\) Like Macaulay, whom he was eulogizing here, Thackeray aspired to "open his learning to all," to become "a man of letters and of the world, too." In one of his last novels, *Lovel the Widower*, his surrogate, Mr. Batchelor, recalls of his journalistic days: "I daresay I gave myself airs as editor of that confounded Museum, and proposed to educate the public taste, to diffuse morality and sound literature throughout the nation, and to pocket a liberal salary in return for my services" (chap. 1). In this noble cause Thackeray joined forces with Lord Macaulay as well as that other literary aristocrat, Lord Brougham.
Much as he may have complained from time to time of the exploitation of the drivers of the quill by the lords of the press, or hinted at the indifference of Parliament to the welfare of authors, or grumbled over his lack of acclaim by the vox populi, Thackeray became convinced that the lot of the literary man was a happy as well as beneficial one. In a late chapter of *The Newcomes*, he has Arthur Pendennis say that, in contrast to other professions, including the learned ones and the artistic calling, “I have been grateful for my own more fortunate one, which necessitates cringing to no patron; which calls for no keeping up of appearances; and which requires no stock-in-trade save the workman’s industry, his best ability, and a dozen sheets of paper” (chap. 74). Even before he found his way to the “many thousands more readers than I ever looked for” whom he greets in the preface to *Pendennis*, Thackeray expressed his satisfaction with this career open to talents: “Let men of letters stand for themselves,” he writes in 1846. “Every day enlarges their market, and multiplies their clients. The most skilful and the most successful among the cultivators of light literature have such a hold upon the public feelings, and awaken such a sympathy, as men of the class never enjoyed until now: Men of science and learning who aim at other distinction, get it: and . . . I believe there was never a time when so much of the practically useful was written and read, and every branch of book-making pursued, with an interest so eager.”

Although he identifies himself here with “the cultivators of light literature,” Thackeray had already, in his essay “On Some French Fashionable Novels,” established “our darling romances” among “the practically useful”:

Twopence a volume bears us whithersoever we will—back to Ivanhoe and Coeur de Lion, or to Waverley and the Young Pretender, along with Walter Scott; up to the charming enchanters of the silver-fork school; or, better still, to the snug inn-parlour, or the jovial tap-room, with Mr. Pickwick and his faithful Sancho Weller. . . . [A novel] contains true character under false names; and, like “Roderick Random” . . . and “Tom Jones” . . . gives us a better idea of the state and ways of the people than one could gather from any more pompous or authentic histories.

With our hindsight we can see Thackeray laying out here the range of his own “histories”—rogue tales, travel books, “silver-forks,” historical romances, and domestic novels—even one of his parodies. The relish for “jam-tarts,” he discovered, extends beyond childhood, as he reminds the readers of *Cornhill* at the zenith of his career:
Novels are sweets. All people with healthy literary appetites love them—almost all women;—a vast number of clever hard-headed men. . . . Judges, bishops, chancellors, mathematicians are notorious novel-readers; as well as young boys and sweet girls, and their kind tender mothers. Who has not read about [Lord] Eldon and how he cried over novels every night when he was not at whist? . . .

And pray what is the moral of this apologue? The moral I take to be this: the appetite for novels extending to the end of the world—far away in the frozen deep, the sailors reading them to one another during the endless night; far away under the Syrian stars, the solemn sheikhs and elders hearkening to the poet as he recites his tales; far away in the Indian camps, where the soldiers listen to ___'s tales, or ___'s, after the hot day's march; far away in little Chur yonder, where the lazy boy peers over the fond volume, and drinks it in with all his eyes;—the demand being what we know it is, the merchant must supply it as he will supply saddles or pale ale for Bombay or Calcutta.66

“I wonder, do novel-writers themselves read many novels?” the editor of Cornhill asks in this same Roundabout Paper.67 Biting as he could be as a critic and parodist of the novel, he never lost his tolerance even for the kind of fiction that “provides the ne plus ultra of indolence,” that one can “go through . . . with a gentle, languid, agreeable interest,”68 and he conjectures the same about some of his notable rivals, such as Dickens, Ainsworth, Bulwer, Stertees, and the Trollopés, Frances and Anthony. “Dear youth of ingenuous countenance and ingenuous pudor!” he addresses the rising generation, “I make no doubt that the eminent parties above named all partake of novels in moderation—eat jellies—but mainly nourish themselves upon wholesome roast and boiled.”69 Shortly before, he wrote to Anthony Trollope, in the course of confirming his publishers' invitation to contribute a tale to Cornhill: “Don’t understand me to disparage our craft, especially your wares. I often say I am like the pastry-cook, and don’t care for tarts, but prefer bread and cheese; but the public love the tarts (luckily for us), and we must bake and sell them.”70 To apply his own image, Thackeray did not confine himself to the dessert course in his own novels. The opposition he set up between “jellies” and “wholesome roast and boiled” was his homely way of expressing his perennial conflict between the entertaining and the useful. But both were well accommodated within the scope of the novel as he defined it in a review: the “ways of work and pleasure,” of men and women, “their feelings, interests and lives, public and private.”71 Arthur Penden- nis, Thackeray’s prototype of the writer, certainly manages to unite his vocation with his avocation, “contemplating with an unfailing
delight all specimens of [humanity] in all places to which he re­
sorted, whether it was the coquetting of a wrinkled dowager in a
ballroom, or a high-bred young beauty blushing in her prime
there; whether it was the hulking guardsman coaxing a servant-girl
in the Park—or innocent little Tommy that was feeding the ducks
whilst his nurse listened."\textsuperscript{72} Not long after, Thackeray affirmed in
his own voice in a role that he found especially congenial, that of
public lecturer: "Our business is pleasure, and the town, and the
coffee-house, and the theatre, and the mall."\textsuperscript{73} This "lazy idle boy"
had borne witness to, and had himself played an important part in,
the metamorphosis of "our darling romances" into "our society
novels."

3. Ibid., pp. 231, 237–38; "On A Lazy Idle Boy," pp. 169, 171. Some of the
sketches based on his early reading that Thackeray drew in school books are repro­
chap. 2.
4. \textit{Letters}, 3:444 (28 April 1855 to G. H. Lewes); 1:22 (12–21 February 1828 to
Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth); 1:187, 203, 206, 224, 228 (diary, 2 April–23 November
1832).
6. Ibid., pp. 222, 224, 225, 228, 234.
11. "Jerome Paturet. With considerations on Novels in General," \textit{Fraser's
was author of \textit{The Widow Barnaby}, and among Mrs. Gore's novels was \textit{Mrs. Armytage;
or, Female Domination}. The \textit{Young Duke}, as well as \textit{Coningsby}, was written by Disraeli,
and \textit{Ten Thousand a Year} was Samuel Warren's most popular novel.
19. \textit{Morning Chronicle}, 13 May 1844; \textit{Contributions}, p. 40. Thackeray also reviewed
remarked that the "coxcombs" of Disraeli are "quite unlike the vapid, cool cox­
combies of the English dandy: they are picturesque, wild, and outrageous."
30. “Jerome Paturot,” *Works*, 13:390. The formula set out by the editor will be taken up in the chapter on *Vanity Fair*.
31. Chap. 7, my translation (as in succeeding passages). In an illustrated edition of 1846, this passage is accompanied by a cut showing a kitchen maid reading a newspaper while the kettles are boiling on the stove.
32. In his essay “May Gambols,” Thackeray, possibly with this episode in mind, takes artists to task who “paint down to the level of the public intelligence, rather than seek to elevate the public to them” (*Works*, 13:423).
33. Jerome eventually goes into the family business of manufacturing nightcaps—used emblematically in the novel. The headpiece to the illustrated edition of 1846 shows a winged cotton nightcap arched by a rainbow, bearing the label “Au Bonnet Du Grand Romantique.” At the end of the introduction, the author is shown at his desk dozing with a nightcap on his head.
Prior to his success with *Jerome Paturot*, Reybaud had tried to reach the public with a serious political treatise, *Etude sur les réformateurs ou socialistes modernes*.
37. Review of *Sybil*, *Morning Chronicle*, 13 May 1845; *Contributions*, pp. 77–79.
38. Review of *St. Patrick’s Eve*.
39. Review of *Sybil*. The reference is to Sir George Biddell Airy, eminent at this time as a professor of astronomy and director of the Cambridge observatory; in 1835 he had been appointed Astronomer Royal.
40. Ibid.
41. See above, p. 27.
42. Review of *St. Patrick’s Eve*.
43. Review of *Sybil*. In reviewing *Coningsby* for the *Pictorial Times*, Thackeray pointed out the numerous figures in the book representing real people under fictitious names, adding that the author “paints his own portrait in this book in the most splendid fashion; it is the queerest in the whole gallery of likenesses” (*Stray Papers*, p. 222).
44. *Punch* 20 (1851): 75; *Works*, 6:535. The “bard of the Minories” is, of course, Disraeli.
45. Preface, *Comic Tales and Sketches*.
54. “Barmecide Banquets,” Fraser’s Magazine, November 1845, p. 584 (under the pseudonym of George Savage Fitz-Boodle); Works (Furniss Ed.), 10:423.
56. “Anybody who will take the trouble of looking back to a file of newspapers of the time, must, even now, feel at second hand this breathless pause of expectation. . . . Think what the feelings must have been as these papers followed each other fresh from the press” (Vanity Fair, chap. 35, in connection with his account of the Battle of Waterloo); while working on The Virginians, Thackeray wrote to his friend Dr. John Brown: “I read no new books, only Newspapers and Magazines of 1756” (Letters, 4:64). His passion for what was “fresh from the press” persisted to the end. The manuscript of Denis Duval cites, among many other sources, the Session Papers of the Old Bailey, the Gentleman’s Magazine, and the Annual Register.
57. Fraser’s Magazine, March 1834, p. 287. This article has been attributed to Thackeray by several bibliographers, first by C. P. Johnson in The Early Writings of William Makepeace Thackeray (London: E. Stock, 1888), p. 41, followed by Harold S. Gulliver in Thackeray’s Literary Apprenticeship (Valdosta, Ga.: Southern Stationery and Printing Co., 1934), pp. 75–76, and Miriam Thrall, Rebellious Fraser’s (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), pp. 254–56. This attribution was vigorously disputed for the first time by Edward M. White in his “Thackeray’s Contributions to Fraser’s Magazine,” Studies in Bibliography 19 (1966): 74–75. Since White’s piece appeared, a rereading of the article in connection with research for vol. 2 of the Wellesley Index has resulted in the rejection of it as Thackeray’s on the basis of some biographical data supplied by the author that do not jibe with the known facts about Thackeray. Although it can no longer be included in the Thackerayan canon, “Hints” is, I believe, seminal in the formation of his ideas on the moral purpose of fiction, as will be brought out in the chapter on Catherine.
58. George Warrington in The Virginians, chap. 63.
60. See in particular “On Men and Pictures” and “May Gambols,” Works, 13:365, 421; and “George Cruikshank,” ibid., passim.
62. Works, 13:536. This sketch originally appeared in Britannia, 1 and 8 May 1841.
67. Ibid., p. 171.
71. Review of Sybil, Contributions, p. 80.
72. Pendennis, chap. 46.
73. “George the First,” The Four Georges, Works, 8:640.