AS FAR BACK AS 1844, THACKERAY HAD expressed an ambition to head up "a slashing, brilliant, gentlemanlike, sixpenny aristocratic literary paper." It was not until late 1859, four years before his death, that he finally assumed the kind of editorial chair that he had dreamed of. The post came to him at the invitation of his publishers Smith, Elder, who now looked to his prestige to lend luster to the new shilling monthly they wished to launch. This journal was named after the district of London where Saint Peter's Church was located—a site made much of by Thackeray in the editorial position he adopted as “The Preacher of Cornhill.” As the original host of his most famous essays, as well as of his last three works of fiction, the Cornhill Magazine enveloped the entire sunset of Thackeray’s literary career and provided his ultimate platform. At a time when he felt that his creative vein had been depleted, the new magazine offered him a free hand to indulge his tendency toward discourse without straining his powers of invention. Nostalgia consequently provides the linking thread through the writings of his silver age. Some stanzas from a poem of his late years called “The Past—Looking Back!” anticipate this mood:

Alone in the evening’s shadow-light
In the deepening gloom and sadness
I roam the paths of past delight,
Of youth’s wild dream of gladness.

I see that panorama vast
That to these eyes is giving
The joyous scenes of that dead past  
Still in my bosom living.

I call those thoughts and mem'ries back  
That stern-faced toil banish'd,  
And wander o'er the beaten track  
Of happy days long vanish'd.  

The "dead past" indeed returns over and over again in the significantly titled Roundabout Papers that Thackeray contributed to the Cornhill Magazine virtually at monthly intervals through early 1863 (though his editorship ceased in March 1862) under such heads as "On A Lazy Idle Boy," "Nil Nisi Bonum," "Tunbridge Toys," "De Juventute," "Round About The Christmas Tree," "On A Peal Of Bells," and "Autour De Mon Chapeau." The "paths of past delight" are retraced also in his serials in Cornhill's pages, a harkening back to his hack journalism and his earliest mode of publishing his novels. If the least profound of his "sham histories," the novels that appeared in Cornhill are valuable as Thackeray's final testaments on his life as well as his art. It is not farfetched to read into the narrator of Love I the Widower (called Mr. Batchelor), the first of the Cornhill group, a literary portrait of Thackeray himself, both bachelor and widower (in spirit if not in fact), looking at himself as an observer of life. The Adventures of Philip, which reintroduces his former alter ego Arthur Pendennis as narrator, has obvious connections with Thackeray's own school days, journalistic career, and blighted marriage. Denis Duval, although historical in setting (the eighteenth century once more), is the only purely autobiographical novel in the Thackerayan canon after Barry Lyndon and surges also with the vitality of "happy days long vanish'd." Moreover, for the Duval family Thackeray is known to have drawn on records of his own naval ancestors. The fiction and the essays alike that Thackeray published in the Cornhill Magazine help to place his career in perspective, representing his own assessment of his accomplishments, his literary ideals, and how he may have fallen short of them. His last novel, of which unfortunately only about half was completed, shows him simultaneously "on the beaten track" and setting out in a new direction.

The Roundabout Essays, like the fiction that appeared in Cornhill, proceed filament-like out of Thackeray's busy, self-examining consciousness. "In these humble essaykins I have taken leave to egotise," he admits in one of them; and together they display his "humorous ego" in its variety of moods:
I daresay the reader has remarked that the upright and independent vowel, which stands in the vowel list between E and O, has formed the subject of the main part of these essays [begins “Ogres”]. How does that vowel feel this morning?—fresh, good-humoured, and lively? The Roundabout lines, which fall from this pen, are correspondingly brisk and cheerful. Has anything, on the contrary, disagreed with the vowel?

. . . Under such circumstances, a darkling misanthropic tinge, no doubt, is cast upon the paper.5

Thackeray could well say along with his favorite Montaigne (also mentioned in passing in these “humble essaykins”) “reader, myself am the matter of my book,” but the self is viewed under controlled conditions. Thackeray’s subject really could be called what Wordsworth referred to as “emotion recollected in tranquility.” The “little sermons” (another name Thackeray gives to these essays) are further linked to the novels by a bifocal vision of time in which past and present coalesce. “When I come to look at a place which I have visited any time these twenty or thirty years, I recall not the place merely, but the sensations I had at first seeing it, and which are quite different to my feelings today,” he writes. “A man can be alive in 1860 and 1830 at the same time, don’t you see?”6 The past stirs up various emotions in him. One is contrition: “In the midst of a great peace and calm, the stars look out from the heavens. The silence is peopled with the past; sorrowful remorses for sins and shortcomings—memories of passionate joys and griefs rise out of their graves, both now alike calm and sad.”7 Another is nostalgia for what seems an irrecoverable primal world once beautiful and new:

I stroll over the Common and survey the beautiful purple hills around, twinkling with a thousand bright villas, which have sprung upon this charming ground since first I saw it. What an admirable scene of peace and plenty. What a delicious air breathes over the heath, blows the cloud—shadows across it, and murmurs through the full-clad trees! Can the world show a land fairer, richer, more cheerful? I see a portion of it when I look up from the window at which I write. . . . [My eyes] are looking backwards, back into forty years off, into a dark room, into a little house hard by the Common here, in the Bartlemytide holidays.8

Suspended between past and present, the editor of Cornhill sees himself at the same time as on the verge of a new epoch: “The pretty little city [of Chur] stands, so to speak, at the end of the world—of the world of to-day, the world of rapid motion, and rushing railways, and the commerce and intercourse of man.”9

These “essaykins,” besides furnishing Thackeray with occasions for periodic self-examination, also enable him to continue the
dialogue with his public begun as early as his first novel, *Catherine*. The tone has become subdued, but the public is still alternately wooed, teased, flattered, and scolded. Keeping his promise to be candid with his readers, he kicks away the pedestal beneath his feet: “Some philosophers get their wisdom with deep thought, and out of ponderous libraries; I pick up my small crumbs of cogitation at a dinner-table; or from Mrs. Mary and Miss Louisa, as they are prattling over their five-o’clock tea.” He makes no great claim for these “rinsings” from his tired brain: “No, I do not, as far as I know, try to be port at all; but offer in these presents, a sound genuine ordinaire at 18 s per doz., let us say, grown on my own hillside, and offered *de bon cœur* to those who will sit under my *tonelle*, and have a half-hour’s drink and gossip.” Behind this modesty lurks a sense of insufficiency, even of depletion: “It is none of your hot porto, my friend, I know there is much better and stronger liquor elsewhere. Some pronounce it sour; some say it is thin; some say that it has woefully lost its flavour. This may or may not be true. There are good and bad years, years that may surprise everybody; years of which the produce is small and bad, or rich and plentiful.” Ultimately he falls back on the justification of sincerity: “But if my tap is not genuine, it is naught, and no man should give himself the trouble to drink it.” Fear of superannuation, of redundancy, of wearing out his welcome—the occupational malaises that have overtaken many a writer—recur as motifs in Thackeray’s swan songs.

One professional concern that carries over into the novels that Thackeray produced during these years is the consciousness that he is repeating himself. “And is it not with writers as with *raconteurs*?” he pointedly asks in one of the essays. “Ought they not to have their ingenuous modesty? May authors tell old stories, and how many times over?” He quotes a letter from a hypothetical reader: “What a poverty of friends the man has! He is always asking us to meet those Pendennis, Newcomes, and so forth. Why does he not introduce us to some new characters? Why is he not thrilling like Twostars, learned and profound like Threestars, exquisitely humourous and human like Fourstars? Why, finally, is he not like somebody else?” Further on in this essay he confronts himself with a leading question: “Will it not be presently time, O prattler, to hold your tongue, and let younger people speak?”

Between self-doubts, the occasional suspicion that he may have had his day, Thackeray’s perennial impatience with obtuse readers is revived: “Now with respect to jokes—and the present company of course excepted—many people are as infants. They have little
sense of humour," he complains after a perusal of the morning mail that has come to the editor's desk.

They don't like jokes. Raillery in writing annoys and offends them. The coarseness apart, I think I have found very few women who liked the banter of Swift and Fielding. Their simple natures revolt at laughter. Is the satyr always a wicked brute at heart, and are they rightly shocked at his grin, his leer, his horns, hoofs, and ears? *Fi done, le vilain monstre*, with his shrieks, and his capering, crooked legs! Let him go and get a pair of well-wadded black stockings, and pull them over those horrid shanks; put a large gown and bands over beard and hide; and pour a dozen of lavender-water into his lawn handkerchief, and cry, and never make a joke again.\(^9\)

Thackeray recalls here his own conversion from satirist to "weekday preacher." But neither are the "gown and bands" always welcome:

Before the Duke of York's column, and between the "Athenaeum" and "United Service" Clubs, I have seen more than once, on the esplanade, a preacher holding forth to a little congregation of *badauds* and street-boys, whom he entertains with a discourse on the crimes of a rapacious aristocracy, or warns of the imminent period of their own souls. Sometimes this orator is made to "move on" by brutal policemen. Sometimes, on a Sunday, he points to a white head or two visible in the windows of the Clubs to right and left of him, and volunteers a statement that those quiet and elderly Sabbath-breakers will very soon be called from this world to another, where their lot will by no means be so comfortable as that which the reprobates enjoy here, in their armchairs by their snug fires.\(^14\)

The way of the iconoclast is a hard one, whether the voice be one of mirth or melancholy.

This clown-parson stoops to conquer, making himself a sounding board to the great vox populi. "Our subject, I beg leave to remind the reader's humble servant, is novel heroes and heroines," he interrupts a reminiscence about his own school-boy reading. "How do you like your heroes, ladies? Gentlemen, what novel heroes do you prefer?" In their preferences his hypothetical readers are divided between the present generation and the one just past. "The gentleman refers me to Miss Austen; the lady says Athos, Guy Livingstone, and (pardon my rosy blushes) Colonel Esmond, and owns that in youth she was very much in love with Valancourt." He recognizes that there are readers to whom the very name Udolpho is a mystery: "'Valancourt? and who was he?' cry the young people. Valancourt, my dears, was the hero of one of the most famous romances which was ever published in this country. The beauty
and elegance of Valancourt made your young grandmamas' gentle hearts to beat with respectful sympathy. He and his glory have passed away."" For the benefit of his younger readers he quotes a page from another favorite of yesteryear, *Evelina*; and in a footnote he offers an "updated" version, substituting the "present modern talk" for the "old perfumed, powdered D'Arblay conversation."

The pages of *Cornhill* furthermore offer Thackeray an open field to carry on his favorite sport of pelting away at rivals. "Some authors, who shall be nameless, are, I know, accused of depicting the most feeble, brainless, namby-pamby heroines forever whimpering tears and prattling commonplaces," he begins another bandying essay. He visualizes an impossible paragon of beauty combined with erudition enough to "surprise and confound the bishop with her learning," who can also "outride the squire," outshoot a military officer, "rescue from fever and death the poor cottager's family whom the doctor had given," and "draw tears from the professional Italian people by her exquisite performance (of voice and violoncello) in the evening." In another essay he regales his readers with a supernatural tale of horror that came to him in a nightmare after reading "one of those awful—those admirable sensation novels . . . which are full of delicious wonders.""18

Assured of a captive audience and the largest he had ever gathered together at one time, Thackeray could now dart from essays to fiction with a freedom that he had not known before. Hence not merely hypothetical novels but his own are openly discussed with the subscribers to *Cornhill*. Among the "thorns in the cushion" are letters from dancers protesting against his treatment of one of their number, Elizabeth Prior, in *Lovel the Widower*. He complains of the constant invasion of "the 'editor's private residence,' to which in spite of prayers, entreaties, commands, and threats, authors and ladies will send their communications," interrupting him in such "exquisite inventions" as how to rescue "Maria . . . from the unprincipled Earl," and how to thwart "the atrocious General . . . in his machinations." Here he was indirectly alluding to two of the plot mechanisms in his serial then in progress, *The Adventures of Philip*. "How do you like your novels?" he asks in "De Finibus," and answers for himself: "I like mine strong, 'hot with,' and no mistake; no love-making, no observations about society . . . ," undoubtedly looking forward to the last of his tales, the swashbuckling *Denis Duval*. Such openness characterizes the fiction itself, with its informality, air of improvisation, and constant interruption by the author *in propria persona*, almost at times making the reader a collaborator.
Shortly before the appearance of *Lovel the Widower*, Thackeray wrote in a letter to Trollope inviting him to contribute to the new magazine: “Whatever a man knows about life and its doings, that let us hear about. You must have tossed a good deal about the world, and have countless sketches in your memory and your portfolio. Please to think if you can furbish up any of these besides a novel. When events occur, and you have a good lively tale, bear us in mind. One of our chief objects in this magazine is the getting out of novel spinning, and back into the world.” This attitude prepares us for a certain casualness about *Lovel* in which the narrator does not so much “spin” his plot as twirl it about, with the teller far more in the forefront than the tale. It begins tentatively: “Who shall be the hero of this tale? Not I who write it. I am but the Chorus of the Play. I narrate their simple story . . . the scene is in the parlour, and the region below the parlour. No: it may be the parlour and kitchen, in this instance, are on the same level. There is no high life, unless, to be sure, you call a baronet’s widow a lady in high life; and some ladies may be, while some certainly are not.” Pretending to draw his readers in as participants of a novel in the making, he solicits their approval of his selection of the cast of characters:

The heroine is not faultless (ah! that will be a great relief to some folk, for many writers’ good women are, you know, so very insipid). The principal personage you may very likely think to be no better than a muff. But is many a respectable man of our acquaintance much better? . . . I wish with all my heart I was about to narrate a story with a good mother-in-law for a character, but then, you know, my dear madam, all good women in novels are insipid. This woman certainly was not. She was not only not insipid, but exceedingly bad-tasted. She had a foul loud tongue, a stupid head, a bad temper, an immense pride and arrogance, an extravagant son, and very little money. Can I say much more of a woman than this?

At least he is able to assure “my dear madam” that the women of this story are not “the most feeble, brainless, namby-pamby heroines forever whimpering tears and prattling commonplaces.” Thackeray’s familiar pose as stage manager in this instance betrays the literally theatrical origins of *Lovel* in his comedy *The Wolves and the Lamb* that he had not succeeded in getting commercially produced. For the seminal situation of both play and novel, however, he went “back into the world,” drawing on a real-life incident from his own experience. In a letter to his American friends the Baxters written during the summer of 1853 he referred to the prospect of a young girl coming to live in as governess and compan-
ion to his daughters. "But says I! No my dear you are a great deal too good looking," the letter continues. "Knowing the susceptibility of this aged heart I'm determined to put it to no more temptation than I can help—She is left behind and my heart is perfectly easy. I think of writing a book 'The Adventures of a Gentleman in Search of a Governess.'" These adventures are projected into those of Lovel, the "muff" hero of the novel (Horace Milliken in the play), newly widowed, responsible for the upbringing of two children, hag-ridden and henpecked by his mother and mother-in-law who descend upon him to aid him in his difficulties, but only compound them. Unlike Thackeray, Lovel does succumb to the wiles of the pretty young governess, who enters his household when she accompanies him and his children home from Naples upon the death of his wife and eventually becomes the second Mrs. Lovel.

Actually Thackeray's relationship to the titular character is confined to the initial domestic situation. (The lining out from the original manuscript of an oblique reference to his own wife, still living in a non compos state, indicates some attempt to depersonalize the narrative.) More of his inner self undoubtedly went into the lonely wistful author Mr. Batchelor (Captain Touchit in the play), weekend guest of Mr. Lovel, who, as we learn, has loved and lost ("Ich habe genossen das iridische Glück—ich habe—geliebt!" he tells us in chap. 3 in words borrowed from Schiller). It is through Mr. Batchelor's sensibility that we get momentarily engaged with this country-house intrigue, giving Thackeray opportunity to play not only with the reader but with himself as author.

In presenting his various characters, Mr. Batchelor tends to adopt the viewpoint of the outsider looking in. He arouses our curiosity about a subsidiary character like Lovel's mother, who "takes a precious long time to dress for dinner": "And, indeed, on looking at Lady Baker, the connoisseur might perceive that her Ladyship was a highly composite person, whose charms required very much care and arrangement. There are some cracked old houses where the painters and plumbers and puttyers are always at work" (chap. 2), no less than the heroine: "I protest here is Miss Prior coming into the room at last. A pale face, a tawny head of hair combed back under a black cap: a pair of blue spectacles as I live! a tight morning dress buttoned up to her white throat: a head hung meekly down: such is Miss Prior" (chap. 2). His part in the events to come is set forth in the chapter aptly entitled "I Play The Spy": "Now it may be that one of the double doors of the room which I inhabited was occasionally open, and that Mr. Batchelor's eyes and
ears are uncommonly quick, and note a number of things which less observant persons would never regard or discover; but out of this room, which I occupied for some few days, now and subsequently, I looked forth as from a little ambush upon the proceedings of the house, and got a queer little insight into the history and characters of the personages round about me" (chap. 3). The growing rivalry between Lady Baker, Lovel's mother, and his mother-in-law Mrs. Bonnington, as witnessed by Mr. Batchelor, promises excitement:

There was one point on which the two ladies agreed. A very wealthy widower, young still, good-looking, and good-tempered, we know can sometimes find a dear woman to console his loneliness, and protect his motherless children. From the neighbouring Heath, from Wimbledon, Roehampton, Barnes, Mortlake, Richmond, Esher, Walton, Windsor, nay Reading, Bath, Exeter, and Penzance itself, or from any other quarter of Britain from which your fancy may please to travel, families would come ready with dear young girls to take charge of that man's future happiness; but it is a fact that these two dragons kept all women off from their ward. An unmarried woman with decent good looks, was scarce ever allowed to enter Shrubland's gate. If such an one appeared, Lovel's two mothers sallied out, and crunched her hapless bones. (Chap. 3)

With the entrance of an additional contestant this stage really becomes a household arena:

Here was Lovel, this willing horse; and what a crowd of relations, what a heap of luggage had the honest fellow to carry! How that little Mrs. Prior was working, and scheming, and tacking and flattering, and fawning, and plundering to be sure! And that serene Elizabeth, with what consummate skill, art, and prudence had she to act, to keep her place with two such rivals reigning over her! ... Why, Elizabeth Prior, my wonder and respect for thee increase with every hour during which I contemplate thy character! How is it that you live with those lionesses, and are not torn to pieces? (Chap. 3)

Mr. Batchelor's general attitude of bemusement toward what he observes in this house in Shrublands, his looking on the situation as "an intricate problem," as "secrets of the house" to be unraveled, suggests gossipy interest rather than deep emotional involvement. "The great satirist has not yet exhausted himself, but he is beginning to choose rather trivial motives for his puppets," reads one of the few reviews that Lovel had. This reviewer observed accurately, if with some disappointment, that in this late story Thackeray had descended from "the stern realities of great evil" to the "petty pleasures and small sins" of life.26 If no neglected masterpiece, Lovel can be enjoyed in the spirit in which Thackeray undoubtedly in-
tended it—as the sport and recreation of a relaxed but by no means dry brain. That he could still address himself to "the stern realities of great evil" is attested by the next serial he composed for *Cornhill, The Adventures of Philip*, but at this time, as he wrote afterward to his friend Charles Lever, "I sang purposely small: wishing to keep my strongest suit for a later day." The main reason was a professional one: Trollope had accepted his invitation, and with *Framley Parsonage* on hand to open the first issue of *Cornhill Magazine*, Thackeray felt obliged in the name of editorial diplomacy to allow the author of *Barchester Towers* "all the honours of Violono Primo."  

Under these circumstances one understands why Thackeray should appear here to be "shadow-boxing with himself," as a modern critic complains. Another way to put it is that he allows himself more than the usual freedom to talk about his story rather than to get on with it, and that consequently his creations become objects of inquiry rather than full-bodied characters—images projected upon a mental screen rather than palpable substances. The spotlight and the attentions of the men of the story (including Mr. Batchelor) center on Elizabeth Prior, of meek and prim exterior, behind which, it is suggested, lurk hidden depths and a calculating nature. Of obscure parentage and rather seedy background (a former dancer in "The Rose and the Bulbul" at the Prince's Theatre, it is rumored), she is a kind of transmogrification of Becky Sharp. She shares with her more glittering predecessor a fluency in French along with a refined manner and, like her, moves into genteel society through governessing, but goes Becky one better by marrying her wealthy employer, winning out over other candidates more to the manor born.  

We have to take for granted the charm that Miss Prior exerts on all the men who fly into her orbit, for she remains a furtive and enigmatic personage. We see her only through the susceptible eyes of Mr. Batchelor, who admits to being an easy touch: "Pooh! I say, women will make a fool of me to the end. Ah! ye gracious Fates! Cut my thread of life ere it grow too long. Suppose I were to live till seventy, and some little wretch of a woman were to set her cap at me? She would catch me—I know she would" (chap. 4). Mr. Batchelor retains an infatuation for Miss Prior from an earlier acquaintance, which he mistakenly believes is reciprocated, and thus becomes more involved in the marriage game going on about him than he had intended. Eventually he loses out to his friend Lovel, but his affectionate nature makes him unusually forgiving. Confronted with what looks like evidence of cold opportunism and
deceit on this governess's part (in a letter to another suitor that comes his way), rather than expose her, he justifies her: "In that dismal, wakeful night . . . I had thought her character and story over, and seen to what a life of artifice and dissimulation necessity had compelled her. I did not blame her. In such circumstances, with such a family, how could she be frank and open? Poor thing! poor thing!" (chap. 6). He gives his blessing to the engagement of Lovel and Elizabeth: "Miss Prior, I am delighted that my old friend should have found a woman of good sense, good conduct, good temper—a woman who has had many trials and borne them with a great patience—to take charge of him and make him happy. I congratulate you both. Miss Prior has borne poverty so well that I am certain she will bear good fortune . . ." (chap. 6).

"Lovel, I think, does not have any thoroughgoing partisans," George Saintsbury has remarked, but it is not to be dismissed. This slightest of Thackeray's stories somehow teases us into thought. Ending with the conventional wedding bells, it still leaves us uncertain as to Lovel's future with his young bride, reminding us of Thackeray's apprenticeship in the Parisian Théâtre Ambigu-Comique. "We may hear of LOVEL MARRIED some other day, but here is an end of LOVEL THE WIDOWER," reads the epilogue. "Valete et plaudite, you good people, who have witnessed the little comedy. Down with the curtain; cover up the boxes; pop out the gas-lights. Ho! cab! Take us home, and let us have some tea, and go to bed. Good night, my little players. We have been merry together and we part with soft hearts and somewhat rueful countenances, don't we?" The nearest Thackeray ever got to the sequel hinted at was in a letter to a friend where he described his heroine as "a woman without a vice, but without the least heart" and spoke of his intention to carry her up the social ladder, "making her husband an Earl by her exertions." He thought too of having her first love turn up, "some low cad . . . for whom she has retained a sneaking affection through life while caring for nobody else." What remains is an amusing jeu d'esprit in which Thackeray undermines even the authorial omniscience he had previously been at pains to defend: "Do we know anybody? Ah! dear me, we are most of us very lonely in the world," sighs Mr. Batchelor near the conclusion, putting himself in the solipsistic state of the ordinary reader rather than in that of the confident Manager of the Performance of Vanity Fair who "knows everything." More to his purpose, Mr. Batchelor's soft heart and readiness to "pardon humanity" leave us with a certain glow of benevolence shining through a naughty world of scheming, deception, and self-serving.
In January 1861 Thackeray moved up to “Primo Violono” position in *Cornhill* with what was to prove his last completed novel, *The Adventures of Philip On His Way Through The World Showing Who Robbed Him, Who Helped Him, And Who Passed Him By*. A modern fable whose title echoes the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, this presumably was the “strongest suit” that he was holding back until the conclusion of *Framley Parsonage*.³² The story of *Philip* is a rather intricate, if not a particularly absorbing, one, an indication that Thackeray could still concoct a plot and busy himself with the techniques of narration when he set his mind to them, despite his scorn for “story-making incidents, surprises, love making, &c.” However, even while immersed in “novel spinning,” he enjoys his jokes about it. Though dependent upon the usual sources, such as letters and reports by eyewitnesses or friends, he gives up his old pretense that his story is taken entirely “from the life.” “I could not, of course, be present at many of the scenes which I shall have to relate as though I had witnessed them; and the posture, language, and inward thoughts of Philip and his friends, as here related, no doubt are fancies of the narrator in many cases,” he admits; “but the story is as authentic as many histories, and the reader need give only such an amount of credence to it as he may judge that its verisimilitude warrants” (chap. 3). So he turns the hoary “founded on fact” device upside down by casting doubt instead on what is received as truth.

In a similar perverse mood Thackeray’s customary teasing of his readers for their hankering after escapism takes on a new twist: “He with whom we have mainly to do is a gentleman of mature age now walking the street with boys of his own. He is not going to perish in the last chapter of these memoirs—to die of consumption with his love weeping by his bedside, or to blow his brains out in despair, because she has been married to his rival, or killed out of a jig, or otherwise done for in the last chapter but one,” he hastens to assure his readers very early in the story. “No, no; we will have no dismal endings. Philip Firmin is well and hearty at this minute, owes no man a shilling, and can enjoy his glass of port in perfect comfort. So, my dear miss, if you want a pulmonary romance, the present won’t suit you. So, young gentleman, if you are for melancholy, despair, and sardonic satire, please to call at some other shop” (chap. 2). He implicitly joins forces with the author of *Guy Livingstone* (a current favorite mentioned in one of the Roundabouts)³³ in upholding the hearty hero against the sickly one. In this era of the sensational novel, moreover, the “tragic” ending rather than the happy one is associated with sham sentimentality.
Even when Philip's economic situation is temporarily at low ebb, the author immediately deprives his readers of suspense: "As yet there was not only content with his dinner, but plenty therewith; and I do not wish to alarm you by supposing that Philip will ever have to encounter any dreadful extremities of poverty or hunger in the course of his history. The wine in the jug was very low at times, but it never was quite empty. This lamb was shorn, but the wind was tempered to him" (chap. 16).

Although he had spoken of his readers' demands for "new characters" in one of his essays, we find Thackeray in his penultimate novel still dredging up "scraps, heeltaps, odds and ends of characters" from the past. "I have exhausted all the types of character I am familiar with, and it's very difficult to strike out anything new," he had confessed to his friend the Reverend Elwin after the completion of The Newcomes. Instead he chose to put his familiar types through fresh inversions. Through his hero Philip, for example, we get a glimpse of the penny-a-liner phase of his early career rather than of the budding novelist, as with Pendennis, or of the apprentice artist, as with Clive Newcome. Arthur Pendennis, cut out of Lovel the Widower, returns once more to chronicle the tribulations of Philip Firmin, like Clive Newcome a friend and schoolfellow, but by now Pen has evolved from neophyte to mentor. The filial devotion central to all Thackeray's domestic novels here has turned to gall, and in place of the overmothering or overfathering of Pendennis and The Newcomes, we are presented in Philip with a monstrously selfish father and a much put-upon son.

For two of the principal characters in the new novel Thackeray went back to a much earlier uncompleted magazine tale, A Shabby Genteel Story. Readers of this tale had been introduced to Caroline Gann, "an innocent young woman in love with Brandon," and to this lover George Brandon, "a young gentleman, in love with himself." In tone it belongs among Thackeray's "comicalities and whimsicalities," an updating of the Cinderella story in the form of a burletta, but a serious note is intruded. "I should like to know how many such scoundrels our universities have turned out; and how much ruin has been caused by that accursed system which is called in England 'the education of a gentleman,'" moralizes the author in connection with this false Prince Charming: "My friend Brandon had gone through this process of education, and had been irretrievably ruined by it—his heart and his honesty had been ruined by it, this is to say; and he had received, in return for them, a small
quantity of classics and mathematics—pretty compensation for all he had lost in gaining them!” (chap. 2). The hapless Caroline, browbeaten and kept in the shade by her stepmother and stepsisters, is all too easy a prey to the blandishments of this “rescuer,” but the outcome of this seaside romance was kept in suspense, the story breaking off just at the point where Caroline elopes with Brandon, lured by a delusive promise of marriage. “God bless thee, poor Caroline!” the author takes abrupt farewell of her. “Thou art happy now, for some short space at least; and, here, therefore, let us leave thee.” Dire things were presumably in store for this Margate Cinderella, and in fact when Thackeray resurrected the torso for his Miscellanies in 1857, he appended to it this advertisement: “It was my intention to complete the little story, of which only the first part is here written. Perhaps novel-readers will understand, even from the above chapters, what was to ensue. Caroline was to be disowned and deserted by her wicked husband: that abandoned man was to marry somebody else: hence, bitter trials and grief, patience and virtue, for poor little Caroline, and a melancholy ending—as how should it have been gay?” So readers were prepared for The Adventures of Philip, in which we meet the erstwhile rake George Brandon now matured into the respectable Dr. Firmin, Philip’s father, and his cast-off Caroline Gann, reincarnated as the saintly Little Sister, who, as fate wills it, nurses young Philip in illness, and becomes something of an adopted mother to him.

The elegant scamp was a type that fascinated Thackeray from his beginnings as a writer. Ordinarily we might have expected George Brandon, if not to reform, at least to mellow with time, but in The Adventures of Philip this university “gentleman” has graduated into one of the most infamous scoundrels Thackeray ever conceived. From one digression in Philip it becomes obvious that Thackeray was still pondering the “diversities and fluctuations of crime” that had preoccupied him as far back as Catherine. We learn in a flashback that Brandon-cum-Firmin after he left the university “had lived in a wild society, which used dice and cards every night, and pistols sometimes in the morning. . . . When this century was five-and-twenty years younger, the crack of the pistol-shot might still occasionally be heard in the suburbs of London in the very early morning; and the dice-box went round in many a haunt of pleasure. . . . Now, the times are changed. The cards are coffined in their boxes. Only sous-officiers, brawling in their provincial cafés over their dominos, fight duels” (chap. 5). If The Adventures of Philip is a falling off in some respects, it takes on significance as
Thackeray's final exploration of civilized evil. Here too he extends inquiries begun in his essays. "Ogres in our days need not be giants at all," he observed in one of the Roundabouts that appeared concurrently with Philip. "In former times and in children's books, where it is necessary to paint your moral in such large letters that there can be no mistake about it," continues this essay, "ogres are made with that enormous mouth and ratelier which you know of, and with which they can swallow down a baby, almost without using that great knife which they always carry." But no longer. "They are too cunning nowadays. They go about in society, slim, small, quietly dressed." Such an ogre is Dr. Firmin, physician to nobility, member of learned societies, married to wealth and status, as registered in the consciousness of Arthur Pendennis, with his "very white false teeth, which perhaps were a little too large for his mouth, and these grinned in the gaslight very fiercely. On his cheeks were black whiskers, and over his glaring eyes fierce black eyebrows, and his bald head glittered like a billiard-ball" (chap. 1).

From outlawry Thackeray had moved up through his various "annals of human folly" to the kind of crime that is practiced within the confines of the social code. One leading theme in Philip is sounded in the title of another Roundabout paper: "On Being Found Out." As he reminds readers in a paper that appeared shortly after the conclusion of Philip, not all sinners are caught: "I will assume, my benevolent friend and present reader, that you yourself are virtuous, not from a fear of punishment, but from a sheer love of good; but as you and I walk through life, consider what hundreds and thousands of rascals we must have met, who have not been found out at all. In high places and in low, in Clubs and on 'Change, at church or the balls and routs of the nobility and gentry, how dreadful it is for benevolent beings like you and me to think these undiscovered though not unsuspected scoundrels are swarming!" Thackeray's readers had already been in the company of one—"undiscovered" to society, that is, but revealed for what he is to his son Philip and to Philip's friend Arthur. So in his continuous probing of the "refinement" of crime, Thackeray progressed from verdicts of outright guilt to those of "not proven."

From its opening chapter, entitled "Dr. Fell" (suggesting an antipathy on the part of the narrator that is deep seated but unaccountable), to hints of Dr. Firmin's shady past, to evidence throughout the tale of his furtiveness and slipperiness, the reader of Philip finds himself wrapped in a thickening moral miasma. "Some of us have more serious things to hide than a yellow cheek
behind a raddle of rouge, or a white poll under a wig of jetty curls,” declares the Preacher of Cornhill in one of his most trenchant papers. “You know, neighbour, there are not only false teeth in the world, but false tongues: and some make up a bust and an appearance of strength with padding, cotton, and what not? while another kind of artist tries to take you in by wearing under his waistcoat, and perpetually thumping, an immense sham heart.”

Pendennis, as narrator of Philip, anticipates this thought in distinguishing between “gentlemen with rough coats and good hearts, like Dr. Goodenough; gentlemen with superfine coats and superfine double-milled manners, like Dr. Firmin, and hearts—well, never mind about that point . . .” (chap. 6). In essays and novel alike, Thackeray probes moral evil more insidious than the humbug and deceit that he had so expertly anatomized heretofore. The false gentleman Dr. Firmin and his former accomplice the “Reverend” Tufton Hunt are not merely “rascals enough,” but, it is strongly hinted, have lived in a “state of convulsive crimes.” What we do know is that Hunt, posing as a clergyman, aided Brandon in his seduction of Caroline by performing a fake marriage ceremony. Dr. Firmin, morally if not legally guilty of bigamy—having deserted Caroline and married the wealthy woman who becomes Philip’s mother in order to gain access to her estate—is likened by Pen to Captain Macheath with his Lucy and Polly.

To Pen, moreover, Dr. Firmin is that most sinister of villains—an unregenerate one. He is unimpressed by the doctor’s humbling before his wronged son: “And am I a traitor to both of them [Caroline and Mrs. Firmin]. Yes; and my remorse, Philip, my remorse!” says his father in his deepest tragedy voice, clutching his hand over a heart that I believe beat very coolly,” reports Pen as witness of the incident (chap. 12). Far from making good to Philip for having cast doubt on his son’s legitimacy through his previous “marriage,” he compounds the wrong by dissipating his wife’s estate (to which he has gained possession illegally) through various fraudulent enterprises, impoverishes Philip as a result of his extravagances, and climaxes his infamy by forging Philip’s name to a bill. The coup de grace comes when Dr. Firmin “forgives” his son for failing to acknowledge the forged bill. The rationalization of sin was among the moral topics that Thackeray interested himself in at this time. “Do you imagine there is a great deal of genuine right-down remorse in the world?” he asks the readers of Cornhill in an essay that coincided with an episode of Philip. “Don’t people rather find excuses which make their minds easy; and endeavour to prove
to themselves that they have been lamentably belied and misunderstood?”

As *Philip* was drawing to its close, Thackeray opened out his mind to his readers as to a proper disposition of its villain. In one of the Roundabouts he confided that he had considered drowning Dr. Firmin along with his one-time crony, now attempted blackmailer, at sea on their way to America, but relented. “Thou ghastly lying wretch, thou shalt not be drowned; thou shalt have a fever only; a knowledge of thy danger; and a chance—ever so small a chance—of repentance.” He throws out a question to his readers, but leaves the answer open: “I wonder whether he did repent when he found himself in the yellow-fever in Virginia? The probability is, he fancied that his son had injured him very much, and forgave him on his death-bed.” All we learn of Dr. Firmin’s demise in the novel is that he dies of the fever in Virginia three months after remarrying presumably another prosperous lady. We are left to puzzle over another unanswered query posed in one of the Roundabout Papers: “Is conscious guilt a source of unmixed pain to the bosom which harbours it? Has not your criminal, on the contrary, an excitement, an enjoyment within, quite unknown to you and me who never did anything wrong in our lives?” Dr. Firmin has much in common with his prototype Don Juan. He may be taken as Thackeray’s illustration of high-class evil at its most depraved—intransigent, unrepentant, and relishing itself.

If Dr. Firmin exemplifies at their most extreme what Thackeray referred to at the end of *Pendennis* as “flaws of vice and meanness, and stains of evil” in high places, his seduced and abandoned victim represents the “flowers of good” blooming in “foul places” or at least in very drab ones. By contrast with Philip’s father who robs him, and with others who pass him by on his way through the world, “meek little Caroline . . . pale, freckled, thin, meanly dressed” (as she is represented in *A Shabby Genteel Story*), emerges in the sequel as the supreme good samaritan, revealing an unsuspected inner strength. Her filial devotion is tested like Philip’s, but her sacrifice takes the form of standing by her failure of a father (the henpecked oil merchant’s clerk of *A Shabby Genteel Story*, now a widower) even after her eyes have been opened to his pretensions and self-delusions, her admiration now diminished to compassion. Her moral courage is brought out more fully on two occasions when by the whirligigs of fate she has opportunity to protect her former betrayer. She is reliably informed that her marriage to Brandon is valid before the law as long as she believed it to be a true
ceremony, even if his own intentions were dishonorable. Nevertheless she testifies that she knew she was being deceived, realizing that to assert her rights would render Philip illegitimate. In the most “sensational” episode of the novel, her experience as a nurse enables her to stupefy the unscrupulous Reverend Tufton Hunt with chloroform in order to retrieve a paper that would have incriminated Dr. Firmin and disgraced Philip. So Caroline stoops to duplicity for good purposes, in antithesis to her “husband,” who conceals evil intentions under a benevolent exterior. First as nurse to Philip in one of his boyhood illnesses, then as benefactress in moments of crisis, Dr. Firmin’s illegal wife, rather than his legal one, proves the true mother to Philip. Characteristically her death comes while she is ministering to a patient. The world of Philip is generally a harsh one, inhabited by “rascals . . . who have not been found out at all,” but the serene presence of the Little Sister reminds us that there are also those who “are virtuous, not from a fear of punishment, but from a sheer love of good.”

“Philip’ did not have the success it deserved. To me it seems to contain some of the wisest and most beautiful things my father ever wrote,” asserted Anne Thackeray in the course of introducing it to a new generation. As with Thackeray’s late fiction in general, it is to be relished more for its digressions than for its story. His last completed novel offered full vent to his tendency both to moralize and to “egotise,” as his daughter also reminds us: “I can remember his saying how much of his own early life was written down its pages.” Its opening chapter gives us further glimpses of the Charterhouse of his boyhood and of the theatrical entertainments that enthralled him from his adolescence on. In Philip’s marriage with the shallow Charlotte Baynes, Thackeray to an extent relives his own (but leaves Philip at the end in a marital haven that was never his), and with Mrs. Baynes we are treated to still another version of his own mother-in-law. Apart from domestic life, the profile of Philip stands out as possibly the most candid self-appraisal on record of the author as a young man:

... Mr. Philip, in some things, was as obstinate as a mule, and in others as weak as a woman. He had a childish sensibility for what was tender, helpless, pretty, or pathetic; and a mighty scorn of impos- ture, wherever he found it. He had many good purposes, which were often very vacillating, and were but seldom performed. He had a vast number of evil habits, whereof, you know, idleness is said to be the root. Many of these evil propensities he coaxed and cuddled with much care; and though he roared out peccavi most frankly when charged with his sins, this criminal would fall to peccation very soon
after promising amendment. What he liked he would have. What he disliked he could with the greatest difficulty be found to do. He liked good dinners, good wine, good clothes, and late hours; and in all these comforts of life he indulged himself with perfect freedom. He hated hypocrisy on his own part, and hypocrites in general. He said everything that came into his mind about things and people; and, of course, was often wrong and often prejudiced, and often occasioned howls of indignation or malignant whispers of hatred by his free speaking. (Chap. 6)

The rude belligerence displayed by Philip in parts of the novel that have made him somewhat less than endearing to readers can be taken as an aspect of Thackeray's own youthful character that he was making apology for. Hence this comment on Philip as fledgling journalist on the Pall Mall Gazette has a special pertinence. "His style was coarse, his wit clumsy and savage. Never mind characterising either now. He has seen the error of his ways, and divorced with the muse whom he never ought to have wooed" (chap. 16).

The Adventures of Philip ends with a reunion of the families of Thackeray's three autobiographic novels. It looks like literary endogamy with hints of marriages in the offing between Philip's children and those of Pen and Clive, and readers might well have been led to expect still more of "those Pendennises, Newcomes, and so forth." However, Thackeray intended this idyll not as prologue but as epilogue and farewell: "Dance on the lawn, young folks, whilst the elders talk in the shade! What? The night is falling: we have talked enough over our wine; and it is time to go home? Good-night. Good-night, friends, old and young! The night will fall: the stories must end: and the best friends must part." This was not, however, quite the end, though Thackeray was in his grave by the time the readers of Cornhill read the last story from his pen.46

We have seen Thackeray attempting various new twists and turns in his Cornhill fiction, but with Denis Duval he did a complete about-face. The period is one he had dealt with before—the eighteenth century of the times of the American Revolution—but the Cinque Ports setting is different and the viewpoint is that of an Englishman of Alsatian ancestry. In his last novel Thackeray can be said really to have honored his readers' requests for "some new characters," with not one holdover from previous novels to be found in its cast of characters. The wholesome, rather outgoing hero, moreover, is a kind of narrator that Thackeray's readers had become unaccustomed to. "I tell you I would like to be able to write a story which should show no egotism whatever—in which there
should be no reflections, no cynicism, no vulgarity (and so forth),” he had assured them in “De Finibus,” one of the last of the Roundabouts, “but an incident in every other page, a villain, a battle, a mystery, in every chapter.”47 With its relentless pace, starting with the flight of Denis’s ancestors from religious persecution under Louis XIV, and tapering off with a battle at sea, Denis Duval fulfills this prescription almost too well. The narrator arouses us to a high pitch of excitement at once. “Around her little cradle a double, a triple tragedy was about to be enacted,” he anticipates in recounting the birth of Agnes Saverne, who was to become his wife. “Strange that death, crime, revenge, remorse, mystery, should attend round the cradle of one so innocent, and pure—as pure and innocent, I pray Heaven now, as upon that day when, at scarce a month old, the adventures of her life began” (chap. 2). “As I survey it now, the curtain is down, and the play is long over; as I think of its surprises, disguises, mysteries, escapes, and dangers, I am amazed myself,” he shudders out loud shortly afterwards. “What a destiny it was! What a fatal tragedy was now about to begin!” (chap. 3). Accordingly, in the hurly-burly of the eight chapters that Thackeray lived to complete we are drawn into a world of smugglers, pirates and highwaymen; plunged at the outset into the midst of a family feud whose consequences affect all the principal characters; witness the escape of Agnes’s harassed mother and the infant Agnes in a storm, a duel followed by a violent death, the funeral of Madame de Saverne, the shooting of a bandit by Denis, all manner of espionage activities, and the outbreak of war. We get, in short, “plenty of fighting, escaping, robbery, and rescuing,” to quote from another of the Roundabouts.48

“We do not claim to rank among the military novelists. Our place is with the non-combatants,” wrote Thackeray at the beginning of a chapter of Vanity Fair. “When the decks are cleared for action we go below and wait meekly. We should only be in the way of the manoeuvres that the gallant fellows are performing over head” (chap. 30). We can appreciate then what an effort of imagination must have gone into the creation of a hero like Denis who joins His Majesty’s Navy and just as his narrative is interrupted is about to engage in battle against the fleet of John Paul Jones as midshipman aboard the Serapis under Captain Pearson.49 The original manuscript indicates besides that to “write a story with no egotism whatever . . . in which there should be no reflections” required special negative capability on Thackeray’s part. A draft of the first chapter that was eventually scrapped opens: “Is it Fate w’th impels the man,
or is it man who brings the fate down on him?” This query, appropriate enough as an epigraph to Thackeray’s work, was apparently not deemed suitable coming from Denis, a man more of action than of thought. Also rejected were other dicta that would have had too familiar a ring to Thackeray’s devotees: “We spake anon of the fruit of the tree w'h our first mother ate and w'h caused the downfall of our race. Yes but the tree was there; and the first fruit hung tempting within reach. No tree, no temptation, it might have been, had Wisdom not ordained otherwise. I knock my head against that tree often & often”; “As for the Chevalier de la Motte, he always preferred to think he had no more control in the matter of existence than Punch has in the show. He is a puppet ruled by hands under the curtain. And if he kills his wife & the beadle, flings his baby out of a window, and is fetched up to Tyburn at last; it is all on account of Monsieur Fate behind the Curtain. Is this so?”

Thackeray had second thoughts about making Denis himself a ventriloquist’s dummy.

In the first version Denis also is rather rambling and discursive. One discarded passage represents him in his anecdotage, musing half aloud from an armchair that once belonged to a doctor of his acquaintance: “As I lean back in the comfortable arms (not unmindful that the generation in which I belong is the next to be called) I hold on to the past w'h was present once to my faithful old study companion.” Burke once sat in this chair, the narrator recalls, and its owner also knew Garrick, whom he liked to talk about. The good doctor’s sons took part in the great wars of the century, and here he sat and read their letters. And so Denis leads into his preamble: “Good readers, if you will listen to a story of the old times, I will relate one, w'h must have come to pass when this old chair was new.”

Gone are the maundering and the name dropping in the tale as it was published. Denis now begins his narrative in the brisk good spirits that characterize it throughout: “To plague my wife, who does not understand pleasantries in the matter of pedigree, I once drew a family tree of my ancestors, with Claude Duval, captain and highwayman, sus. per coll. in the reign of Charles II, dangling from a top branch. But this is only my joke with her High Mightiness my wife, and his Serene Highness my son. None of us Duvals have been supercollated to my knowledge. As a boy I have tasted a rope’s end often enough, but not round my neck.” He does not linger long over family history: “... the persecutions endured by my ancestors in France for our Protestant religion, which we early
received and steadily maintained, did not bring death upon us, as
upon many of our faith, but only fines and poverty, and exile from
our native country.” His few moral observations are apt, shrewd,
and terse: “At my early age I could only be expected to obey my
elders and parents, and to consider all things were right which were
done round about me. . . . Of course, being a simple little fellow, I
honoured my father and mother as became me—my grandfather
and mother, that is—father being dead some years” (chap. 4);
“That habit I had of speaking out everything that was on my mind,
brought me, as a child, into innumerable scrapes, but I do thank­
fully believe has preserved me from still greater” (chap. 5). “On the
matter of church I am not going to make any boast. That awful
subject lies between a man and his conscience. I have known men of
lax faith pure and just in their lives, as I have met very loud­
professing Christians loose in their morality, and hard and unjust
in their dealings” (chap. 6). “Monsieur mon fils,” Denis interrupts his
narrative at one point, “if ever you marry, and have a son, I hope
the little chap will have an honest ma n for a grandfather, and that
you will be able to say, ‘I loved him,’ when the daisies cover me”
(chap. 6), and the rest of his readers give ready assent. In his
openness and candor this able seaman steers a middle course be­
tween the naïfs and windbags of Thackeray’s early fiction and the
melancholics and skeptics of the later.

I shall not attempt to tell the story of the battle of the 23rd. Sep­
tember, which ended in our glorious Captain striking his ow n col­
ours to our superior and irresistible enemy. Sir Richard [Pearson]
has told the story of his disaster in words nobler than any I could
supply, who, though indeed engaged in that fearful action in which
our flag went down before a renegade Briton and his motley crew,
saw but a small portion of the battle which ended so fatally for us. It
did not commence till nightfall. How well I remember the sound of
the enemy’s gun of which the shot crashed into our side in reply to
the challenge of the captain, who hailed her! Then came a broadside
from us—the first I had ever heard in battle.

At this crucial moment of Denis Duval’s baptism by fire his tale
comes to a sudden halt, and so Thackeray was spared to the end the
task of military reporter that heretofore he had ducked so adroitly.
We take leave of his wise, ingenuous, and likeable hero with
genuine regret. We are especially sorry to lose the thread of a story
that “breaks off as his life ended—full of vigour, and blooming
with new promise like the apple-trees in the month of May,” as
Frederick Greenwood, Thackeray’s successor in the editorial chair
of Cornhill, wrote.57 His greatest rival, Dickens, was prompted to
say in one of the obituary tributes: “In respect of earnest feeling, far-seeing purpose, character, incident, and a certain living picturesqueness blending the whole, I believe it to be much the best of his works.” Whether or not one is inclined to go as far as Dickens in praise, it cannot be disputed that Thackeray’s half-told tale, in its incisiveness, dramatic sweep, and narrative drive, reveals his mastery purely as a literary artist, if not his full intellectual strength.

Thanks to the pains that Thackeray took with Denis, its development was not left so much to conjecture as was Dickens’s own aborted Edwin Drood. In his eulogy, Dickens himself pointed out that “by reason of the singular construction of the story, more than one incident usually belonging to the end of such a fiction is anticipated in the beginning, and thus there is an approach to completeness in the fragment.” We know virtually from the outset that, though they endure the ordeals of separation, Denis and Agnes are happily married at the time when the story is being written. We are led to expect rough times ahead: “But this dearest and happiest season of my life... was to come to an abrupt ending, and poor Humpty Dumpty having climbed the wall of bliss, was to have a great and sudden fall, which, for a while, perfectly crushed and bewildered him” (chap. 8). Denis’s parting with his mother as he is about to go to sea looks ahead both to storms and to a safe haven: “... When I was in my bed she came and knelt down by it, and with tears rolling down her furrowed face, offered up a prayer in her native German language, that He who had been pleased to succour me from perils hitherto, would guard me for the future, and watch over me in the voyage of life which was about to begin. Now, as it is drawing to its close, I look back at it with an immense awe and thankfulness, for the strange dangers from which I have escaped, the great blessings I have enjoyed” (chap. 8). Thackeray’s last letter to his publisher also foretells the end of sorrows: “Dear Smith.—I was just going to be taken prisoner by Paul Jones when I had to come to bed. If I could get a month’s ease I should finish the eight numbers handsomely with the marriage of Denis and Agnes, after the capture of Toulon by the English. ‘The Course of True Love’ I thought of as a pretty name.”

We have some more idea of what was in store for Denis from the detailed notes Thackeray left behind that indicate that he still relished historical research fully as much as the challenge of spinning a rattling yarn. Among these notes is a chronology of the principal events of the novel. Excerpts from such sources as the Annual Register, the Gentleman’s Magazine, records of criminal trials, and Sussex
Archaeological Collections (for notices of smuggling operations in that area) attest to his "conscientious effort to keep as near truth in feigning as possible," in Greenwood's words.54 Thackeray is known also to have visited Winchelsea, where most of the early episodes take place, both to get the feel of the region and to investigate its past in local archives. This background contributes to the authenticity of the seaside atmosphere and pins the events of the story down to time and place. Although the hero and heroine of Denis Duval apparently are completely fictitious, the nefarious Weston family, whose involvement in smuggling is alluded to, came out of the Sessions Papers, and a true trial and execution for treason recorded in the Annual Register for 1781 gave Thackeray the basis for the mysterious Chevalier de la Motte. In the novel he becomes the adulterous lover of Agnes's mother, the murderer of her father, as well as the spy of historical record.

In a Roundabout essay recalling his earlier reading of Dumas and Scott, Thackeray admitted to a lingering relish for novels that are "strong, 'hot with' . . . plenty of fighting; and a villain in the cupboard, who is to suffer tortures just before Finis."55 The Chevalier presumably was to fulfill this role, for we know from the Annual Register that he was betrayed by his accomplice Henry Lütterloh (also introduced in Denis Duval), and was eventually condemned to be hanged, drawn, and quartered for conspiring to sell British naval secrets to the French. However, the account of the trial of the Chevalier also states that "throughout the whole of this trying scene [he] exhibited a combination of manliness, steadiness, and presence of mind," that "his deportment was exceedingly genteel, and his eye was expressive of strong penetration," preparing us for the ambivalent figure we encounter fitfully in the story as it has come down to us. In the dramatic episode of the funeral of Agnes's mother, the Countess de Saverne, concluding with the Chevalier "weeping and crying that the curse—the curse of Cain was upon him," (chap. 5),56 we recognize that here is no mere "villain in the cupboard." "I had the queerest feelings towards that man," Denis confesses, unaware at the time of the past of the Chevalier who has befriended him. "He was a perfect fine gentleman when he so wished: of his money most liberal, witty (in a dry cruel sort of way)—most tenderly attached to Agnes. Eh bien! As I looked at his yellow handsome face, cold shudders would come over me . . ." (chap. 6).

From these hints we are led to anticipate a character of power and dark fascination, perhaps the ultimate "refinement of cruelty" in
Thackeray's annals of civilized infamy. There can be no doubt that the paths of Denis and this tragic noble were destined to cross. In the last chapter that Thackeray wrote, Denis, who at this point had inadvertently become privy to the cloak-and-dagger escapades that de la Motte is engaged in, recalls: "The Chevalier, who had once been neutral, and even kind to me, was confirmed in a steady hatred against me, and held me as an enemy whom he was determined to get out of his way" (chap. 8). In addition to enduring much both by land and sea, through being caught up in the American and French Revolutions, Denis, we gather, was also to feel the wrath of the vengeful de la Motte, who was not above trying to pander off his ward Agnes on the rascally Lütterloh. But eventually the spirit of charity was to assert itself, with Denis forgiving his enemy at the scaffold: "Except my kind namesake, the captain and the admiral, this was the first gentleman I ever met in intimacy," reads one unpublished fragment, "a gentleman with many a stain—nay, crime to reproach him but not all lost I hope and pray. I own to having a kindly feeling towards that fatal man." With his "sneaking kindness" toward a man who had done so much to make his life wretched, Denis teaches us to "pardon humanity." We can also see in Denis's rise from his tradesman origins Thackeray's final incarnation of his ideal of a natural gentility. Furthermore, his moral integrity, maintained despite corrupt "first associates," demonstrates "flowers of good blooming in foul places." Clearly Thackeray had in mind much more than the "picturesque affair" that Henry James labeled this torso of a novel. James missed here the sophistication and high comedy of Thackeray's novels of manners that look forward to his own; but this serious adventure story, for a modern reader, links Scott and Captain Marryat to Stevenson and "Captain Conrad."

At the beginning of one of his essays, Thackeray describes himself as he "sits under Time, the white-wigged charioteer, with his back to the horses, and his face to the past, looking at the receding landscape and the hills fading into the grey distance," and appropriately the manuscript of Denis Duval contains a sketch of the hero reading in an armchair, the figure of Father Time with his scythe hovering in the background. The Roundabout Papers in their backward glance bridge the gulf between the two eras that Thackeray had witnessed. One of his early unsuccessful ventures into journalism concluded with good wishes "To the young Queen [for] a long reign and a merry one: to the People—the Franchise, with
Lord Durham for a minister”; at the apex of his career he is able to congratulate the middle-aged Queen’s son Prince Albert Edward on the occasion of his wedding to the Princess Alexandra. “I am sure hearty prayers were offered outside the gate as well as within for that princely young pair, and for their Mother and Queen,” Thackeray wrote in celebration of this event. “The peace, the freedom, the happiness, the order, which her rule guarantees, are part of my birthright as an Englishman, and I bless God for my share. Where else shall I find such liberty of action, thought, speech, or laws which protect me so well?” Some of the music performed at this wedding had been composed by the late husband of the Queen, moving Thackeray to remember Prince Albert as a patron of arts and learning as well as a model of integrity. “And as we trace in the young faces of his many children the father’s features and likeness,” he concluded his eulogy, “what Englishman will not pray
that they may have inherited also some of the great qualities which won the Prince Consort the love and respect of our country?’ That could not be said about any of the four Georges.

“The good-natured reader who has perused some of these rambling papers has long since seen . . . that the writer belongs to the old-fashioned classes of this world, loves to remember very much more than to prophesy,” aptly wrote the Preacher of Cornhill. His “rambling papers” gave him opportunity to review the period in which he came of age, obviously an improvement morally and politically over the Regency that had called forth his most biting satire. Here also he reviewed the literary calling that brought him both money and celebrity. Along the way significantly are commemorated the deaths of noted authors—of Scott earlier in the century (“Be a good man, my dear!” his alleged dying words to Lockhart, come to this devoted reader’s mind), of Thomas Hood, a fellow writer for *Punch* memorialized by his children in time to be recalled by Thackeray in *Cornhill*, of Washington Irving and Lord Macaulay, “the Goldsmith and Gibbon of our time,” in Thackeray’s words, both of whom died in 1859. The most poignant of these papers, perhaps, in view of its ironic prefiguring of Thackeray’s own literary fate, is “The Last Sketch,” his hail-and-farewell to Charlotte Bronte on the posthumous publication of a fragment of a novel in progress. “The trembling little hand was to write no more. The heart newly awakened to love and happiness, and throbbing with maternal hope, was soon to cease to beat,” read his tribute in part; “that intrepid outspeaker and champion of truth, that eager impetuous redresser of wrong was to be called out of the world’s fight and struggle, to lay down the shining arms, and to be removed to a sphere . . . where truth complete, and right triumphant, no longer need to wage war.”

“Yesterday is gone—yes, but very well remembered; and we think of it the more now we know that To-morrow is not going to bring us much,” writes the narrator of *The Adventures of Philip* (chap. 6). These words might well have served as epigraph to these “little Essays which have amused the public and the writer,” as Thackeray referred to them in a letter to his readers upon his relinquishing the “thorny cushion” of the editorial chair of *Cornhill*. The Roundabouts add up to a diary of the heart arresting time in its course, very much like one he describes: “Here are the records of dinners eaten, and gone the way of flesh. The lights burn blue somehow, and we sit before the ghosts of victuals. Hark at the dead jokes resurging! Here are the lists of the individuals
who have dined at your own humble table. The agonies endured before and during these great entertainments are renewed, and smart again.”64 The Roundabout Papers recapture transient pains and pleasures both, but in the midst of the roving, the holidaying, the party-going and playgoing, beyond his visions of “pantomime, pudding, and pie,” Thackeray occasionally caught glimpses of eternity. “Look, through the windows jewelled all over with saints the light comes streaming down from the sky, and Heaven’s own illuminations paint the book!” he exclaimed in an Antwerp cathedral. “A sweet touching picture indeed it is, that of the little children assembled in this immense temple, which has endured for ages, and grave teachers bending over them. Yes, the picture is very pretty of the children and their teachers, and their book—but the text? Is it the truth, the only truth, nothing but the truth?”

This epiphany came inevitably to him as an animated illustration, and it is equally characteristic that it should end with a question mark. So too he saw life as an ever continuing work in progress, as in the plangent coda to “De Finibus”:

So you are gone, little printer’s boy, with the last scratches and corrections on the proof, and a fine flourish by way of Finis at the story’s end. The last corrections? I say those last corrections seem never to be finished. . . . That turning back to the old pages produces anything but elation of mind. Would you not pay a pretty fine to be able to cancel some of them? Oh, the sad old pages, the dull old pages! Oh the cares, the ennui, the squabbles, the repetitions, the old conversations over and over again! But now and again a kind thought is recalled, and now and again a dear memory. Yet a few chapters more, and then the last; after which behold Finis itself come to an end, and the Infinite begun.

About a week before he was found dead in his bed on the morning of Christmas Eve, 1863, Thackeray had confided to his daughter Anne that his children were his only reason for going on living.66 So, much profit and occasional joy as it had provided him, he did not regret his leaving of Vanity Fair. Neither did he ask to see the distant scene, but we can detect in his preoccupation with “the battle of life, with its chances, perils, wounds, defeats, distinctions,” some concern for the future judgment—moral and literary: “And so we meet and part; we struggle and succeed; or we fail and drop unknown on the way”; “Ah, friend! may our coin, battered and clipped, and defaced though it be, be proved to be Sterling Silver on the day of the Great Assay!”67 In his lament on the untimely passing of Charlotte Brontë, he made his plea for all—writers, artists, ordinary men—with regrets over what has been left un-
done: "Is there record kept anywhere of fancies conceived, beautiful unborn? Some day will they assume form in some yet undeveloped light? If our bad unspoken thoughts are registered against us, and are written in the awful account, will not the good thoughts unspoken, the love and tenderness, the pity, beauty, charity, which pass through the breast, and cause the heart to throb with silent good, find a remembrance too?" He was about to be "found out" by posterity, and he was uncertain of the verdict.

1. See above, p. 57

2. Thackeray's contract with Smith, Elder at first called for serial publication of "one or two novels of ordinary size," with rights to book publication afterward, for which he was to be paid £350 per month, the most generous offer he ever received. "I am not going to put such a document as this into my wastepaper basket," he is reported as saying. The offer of the editorship came from Smith as an afterthought and brought Thackeray an additional £1,000 per year. For details of the agreement, see Gordon N. Ray, The Age of Wisdom (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), pp. 293–94. Further background is supplied by Spencer L. Eddy, Jr., The Founding of the Cornhill Magazine, Ball State Monograph no. 19 (Muncie, Indiana, 1970).


9. "On A Lazy Idle Boy," Works, 12:167. This was the first of the Roundabout Papers, appearing in the opening number of January 1860. The reference is to the village in the Grisons where the martyr Lucius, founder of the Church of Saint Peter, Cornhill, lies buried.


15. "Strange To Say, On Club Paper," Works, 12:434. This is the opening paragraph of the last essay that Thackeray published in Cornhill (November 1863). Although not, strictly speaking, part of the Roundabout Papers, it appears with them in his collected works.


18. "The Notch On The Axe—A Story A La Mode," Works, 12:368. Saintsbury conjectured that here Thackeray was once again parodying Bulwer, this time his supernatural tale A Strange Story.

19. "Thorns In The Cushion," Works, 12:214. In the first chapter of Lovel the Widower, the narrator, Mr. Batchelor, makes fun of the affectation of Bessy Prior's mother in referring to the vaudeville theater where her daughter dances as an "academy."
20. "On A Chalk-Mark On The Door," Works, 12:279. The society doctor Dr. Firmin corresponds in a farfetched way to "the unprincipled Earl." "The atrocius General" could be either Charlotte Baynes's vicious mother (called "La Générale"), who tries to keep her daughter and Philip apart when she learns that he has been disinherited by Lord Ringwood, or her henpecked husband, General Baynes, who goes along with her machinations, against his better judgment.


23. It was given a private performance on 24 and 25 March 1862 as part of the housewarming celebration when Thackeray moved with his two daughters into his last home at 2 Palace Green. Among those taking part were Thackeray's younger daughter Minny as Mrs. Bonnington, and Thackeray himself in the mute role of Mr. Bonnington. The prompt copy of this version is in the British Museum.


25. The original autograph MS, virtually intact, is in the Morgan Library. It is the least revised of the manuscripts that I have examined, but there has been some tinkering with the passage in chap. 1 that reads: "Though I am a steady and confirmed old bachelor (I shall call myself Mr. Batchelor, if you please, in this story; and there is one far-faraway who knows why I will NEVER take another title). . . . " The MS originally read "one I know far far away who knows that I will NEVER, etc." Parts or the MS, incidentally, are written on the backs of Cornhill rejection slips. In his study of Thackeray's revisions, Strokes of the Great Clock (Athens: University of Georgia Press, forthcoming) (chap. 7), which I had the opportunity to read in typescript before this book went to press, Edgar Harden finds substantial alterations of various kinds on the proof sheets at Yale and Huntington.


27. 15 October 1861, unpublished, but partially quoted in Ray, The Age of Wisdom, p. 303. The original is in the Houghton Library.


29. Introduction to Lovel the Widower, Oxford Thackeray, 20:x.


32. Framley Parsonage still had two more numbers to go, but once it had finished its run, The Adventures of Philip headed off almost every issue of Cornhill through June 1862, when, with two more installments left, it yielded place to George Eliot's Romola.

33. See above, p. 430. Thackeray's reference seems to be to Lawrence's later Sword and Gown (1859), in which the narrator protests in defense of his promulgation of the "physical force" doctrine: "Modern refinement requires that the chief character shall be made interesting in spite of his being dwarfish, plain-featured, and a victim to pulmonary or some more prosaic disease. . . . Let our motto still be 'Forward': we have pleasures of which our grandsires never dreamt, and inventions that they were inexcusable in ignoring." Guy Livingstone itself, incidentally, has a "dismal" ending, the hero dying in his prime.


35. In chap. 1 of the original MS there is lined out a reference to Lovel's meeting Arthur at his university. As Edgar Harden points out (Strokes of the Great Clock, chap.
7), there is evidence in this part of the MS that Thackeray at first intended for Pendennis to be the narrator, but changed his mind.


37. "Ogres," *Works*, 12:314. This essay appeared in the issue of August 1861, along with chap. 17–18 of *Philip*, by which time the hero has been deserted by his father.


40. "De Finibus," *Works*, 12:373. Its original appearance was in the August 1862 issue of *Cornhill*.

41. Ibid.


43. Here is an instance where Thackeray utilized his legal knowledge to give credibility to what seems on the surface a strained plot device and turns a melodramatic situation into a case of conscience. The much-maligned ending of *Philip*, in which the hero's inheritance is restored through the discovery of a lost will found in a carriage, is based on a true eighteenth-century case that Thackeray recorded in his notebook for *The Virginians* and apparently had thought of using in the earlier novel.

44. Thackeray's physician, Sir Henry Thompson, contributed an article, "Under Chloroform," to the April 1860 number of *Cornhill*. This episode from *Philip* is quoted at length above, p. 104.


46. With the conclusion of *Philip*, Thackeray fulfilled his contractual obligation to Smith, but in the letter announcing his resignation as editor, he wrote: "Whilst the present tale of *Philip* is passing through the press, I am preparing another, on which I have worked for intervals for many years past, and which I hope to introduce in the ensuing year" ("To Contributors and Correspondents . . . 18 March, 1862," *Letters*, 4:260). In his note to this letter, Gordon Ray identifies the announced new tale as "The Knights of Borsellen," a historical romance placed in the period of Henry V on which Thackeray worked intermittently but never actually completed. Why Thackeray came to substitute *Denis Duval*, or how he persuaded Smith to agree to a historical tale after he had completed the two modern ones stipulated in his agreement, is not known. The name Duval has been used by Thackeray in one of his Christmas books, *Dr. Birch and His Young Friends*, for the school bully young Duval dubbed "the pirate of Birch's," in obvious reference to the notorious seventeenth-century renegade numbered facetiously by Denis among his ancestry.


49. Denis narrates the tale in retirement. In his letter to the readers of *Cornhill* (see above, n. 46) Thackeray reminded them of the first of the Roundabout Papers, "On A Lazy Idle Boy," in which he had likened himself to a sea captain, and carries on the naval image: "Those who have travelled on shipboard know what a careworn, oppressed, uncomfortable man the captain is. Meals disturbed, quiet impossible, rest interrupted—such is the lot of captains. This one resigns his commission. I had rather have a quiet life than gold-lace and epaulets: and deeper than did ever plummet sound I fling my speaking trumpet" (*Letters*, 4:259). With special aptness, *Denis Duval* can be called Thackeray's *Tempest*.

50. The rejected version of chap. 1 is preserved with most of the autograph MS (lacking parts of chaps. 6 and 7, and all of chap. 8) in the Morgan Library. For a careful analysis of the stages of revision of the opening chapter, see John Sutherland, *Thackeray at Work* (London: Athlone Press, 1974), chap. 6.

51. "Notes on Denis Duval," *Cornhill Magazine* 9 (June 1864): 655; *Works*, 12:555. This memorial appeared after the conclusion of *Denis*, which ran in four numbers of *Cornhill*, beginning with the previous March.


54. "Notes on Denis Duval," *Works*, 12:555–68. These are excerpts from the notebook in the British Museum that has never been published in full. Portions are reprinted in Sutherland, *Thackeray at Work*, "Appendix One: The Local Plans for Denis Duval."


56. This episode is quoted above, p. 105.


58. The Constitutional, 1 July 1837 (announcement of termination of the paper); *Mr. Thackeray's Writings for the "National Standard" and "Constitutional,"* p. 297


66. In a letter dated 1 May [1864] to Anna Smith Strong Baxter reporting her father's death, and its aftermath, Anne Thackeray wrote: "What we like to think about is a little expedition with Papa a week before Christmas. We went to the Temple Church together & then walked in the garden with all the sunsetting—and he was so well and in such good spirits—Just at the last week he was very sad & he said to me that if it was not for us he did not want to live much longer. But he was not near so ill as we had often seen him & Monday he was well again we thought. . . . It is almost more dreadful to think of these last days than of those which came after" (Maude Morrison Frank Correspondence, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University).


68. "The Last Sketch," *Works*, 12:186–87. This thought was prompted by a recent visit to the studio of the late Charles Robert Leslie, a favorite artist of Thackeray's, whose painting of Titania and the fairy forest from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* lay on the easel uncompleted. "Some day our spirits may be permitted to walk in galleries of fancies more wondrous and beautiful than any achieved works which at present we see," this memorial essay continues, "and our minds to behold and delight in masterpieces which poets and artists' minds have fathered and conceived only." Thackeray then proceeds to his tribute to Charlotte Brontë.