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1

Introduction

We often misconstrue what we hear because we do not know who is speaking. We do not know how to take what we read until we know who is writing. James Joyce's famous dictum about authors 'refining themselves out of existence' suggests that the text somehow should speak for itself, but in nineteenth-century fiction, particularly in that of William Makepeace Thackeray, the narrative voice more often than not is palpably present. One could say that of all the characters in *Vanity Fair* the narrator is (or perhaps narrators are) the most interesting in the book. This is a proposition totally lost on the makers of movie versions of the novel whose only technique with which to introduce the narrator is clumsy voice-overs. But the voices of the speaking narrators and the (silent) voice of the author that stands behind them make all the difference in a reader's perception of the story and the characters. Biography helps us to construct the persona and voice that speaks the fiction.

The facts of Thackeray's life have been chronicled thoroughly in Gordon Ray's meticulous and massive biography,¹ and the bulk of manuscript documents relevant to his life's story are published in six volumes of Thackeray's correspondence and private papers.² In the last 20 years six additional book-length biographical reconsiderations of Thackeray's life have appeared, laying out the chronology of his life and writings in conventional ways.³ It seems unnecessary to do that again. But it does seem necessary and useful to attempt another portrait of Thackeray the writer. Our understanding of the writings is always influenced by our understanding of the writer – particularly, in Thackeray's case, our awareness of how his experiences

in sex, money and religion shaped the man and the voices in which he wrote.

William Makepeace Thackeray remains interesting today because he had a literary life. We know a good deal about him, but we care about him because he wrote *Vanity Fair*, *Henry Esmond*, *The Book of Snobs*, *The Paris Sketch Book* and a few other remarkable stories and books. His domestic life, his religion, his financial failures and successes, his aspirations as an artist, his accomplishments as a book illustrator, his brief and failed political life, his investments in railroads and mining ventures, his victimization by failed Indian banks, his sexual escapades, his tragic marriage and his forlorn passion for his best friend's wife all have the interest and appeal inherent to any person's life. But above that ordinary appeal what matters about Thackeray is his literary life.

Although Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* was remade into television serials in each of the last three decades of the twentieth century, Thackeray has become the least-known star novelist from the Victorian era. He is also the least understood and least appreciated major writer of the time. Where once he was thought the rival of Charles Dickens both in art and in popular appeal, his writings now attract less than one-tenth the critical attention and perhaps less than one-hundredth of the popular attention devoted to the author of *Pickwick Papers* and *Great Expectations*. Anthony Trollope was early thought to be a thoroughly second-rate imitator of Thackeray and soon after his death fell almost entirely from public view, but Trollope is now more often read, more often viewed in TV and movie adaptations, and more often written about than his erstwhile master. The Brontës and George Eliot, who appealed to the same general readership as did Dickens and Thackeray, enjoy far more attention in classrooms and living rooms than WMT. Yet any student of Victorian fiction would readily acknowledge that Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is one of the premier novels of the nineteenth century and that the author has equal claim to attention and standing with the writers who have now surpassed him in both general and academic appeal. No one hesitates to grant his superior claim to attention over Edward Bulwer, Charles Lever, Robert Surtees, Charles Read, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Meredith, to name a few of the most prominent 'second rung' novelists of those days.

There have been many attempts to explain Thackeray's 'fall from grace' in the public's – indeed, in the academy's – eyes. Some of these efforts place the blame on Thackeray, some on modern readers. Though I disagree with the assessment, against him it is said: He was wishy-washy in his morality, unimaginative in his plots, repetitious in his characters, unpleasant in his sneering satires, cloyingly sentimental in his nostalgias, maudlin in his cooings over babies and helpless women, vicious in his attacks on mothers-in-law, prejudiced and heartless in his portrayals of Blacks, Jews, the Irish and the French, and he was excessively sensitive and arrogant in person.⁴ It has even been suggested, unworthily, that his selfish ego and social pride were evidenced in his banishing his wife to mental institutions and then placing her under the even cheaper care of a family whom he paid but did not visit.⁵

Critics less hostile and yet not charitable to Thackeray suggest that his works fail to appeal to modern readers because the dense allusiveness and thick texture of his prose – composed of current things, events and persons long since forgotten – have made it too difficult to understand the nuances and subtleties of his writing. The topicality of his vision, they say, mingled though it is with wise and clever universal portraits of humanity, makes his prose both appealing and repelling. Some modern readers attracted to Thackeray's humorous exposé of human foibles, find themselves sadly puzzled by off-hand references to long forgotten divas, tradesmen, politicians, dancers, saddlers, grocers, watchmakers, bankers, pawnbrokers, old-clothesmen, inns, coachmen and socially homogeneous (i.e. segregated) sections of London whose character has long since changed. Some of that may be true, but puzzlement arising from the modern reader's lack of knowledge may instead reflect misguided expectations about Thackeray and his writings.⁶

In recent times some critics more friendly to Thackeray have opposed these criticisms by affecting to admire the rigor and sharpness of Thackeray's early works, written in days when his personal losses made him sufficiently lean and hungry to be unmindful of what he might lose by impolitic observations or heterodox opinions. These critics admire the young Thackeray as a picaro, who stands outside the mainstream, like the child in the fairy tale proclaiming the emperor's new clothes non-existent, revealing conventional



Figure 1.1 Self-portrait as narrator, *Vanity Fair*, 91

views to be sycophantic. According to this view, financial and social successes at mid-life spoiled the cub commentator and critic, drew his claws and incisors, and rendered the aging lion bland and non-threatening. Both the admiration and the disdain in this construction of Thackeray seem wayward, superficial and alien. They are the result of an unfortunate imposition of eccentric modern tastes on the body of Thackeray's distinctly Victorian yet distinctly individual achievements.⁷

Opinion about Thackeray's works has always been sharply divided between those who think of him as a dwindling Victorian light and those who still believe with Jane Welsh Carlyle, wife of the famous Victorian sage Thomas Carlyle, that 'Thackeray beats Dickens out of this world'. In the first group are many who claim to understand and agree with the justice of the author's declining reputation. They lament his failure 'to put his best foot forward', as Anthony Trollope put it.⁸ They believe that Thackeray was his own worst enemy, that he vacillated in his morality, his artistic commitment, indeed, in his religious and political beliefs, and that he squandered the good will of readers by violating the sense of realism in fiction which his early works did so much to establish.

From the beginning, however, another group of readers has understood Thackeray differently. They see a writer whose keen observation of the foibles of society was tempered by an equally sharp awareness of his own complicity in its human weaknesses. They see a man who distrusted certainty and righteousness because of the mischief frequently done in the name of virtue. To them Thackeray appears to prefer to admit doubts and to tolerate the

'sins' of others rather than to set himself up as the judge who knows (i.e. pretends to know) what the world needs. They see a writer whose voice is sometimes detached and ironic and other times marked by humility and compassion. And they find in these contraries and contradictions an attractive complexity. In Thackeray's hands the tangle of ordinary life is not grounds for confusion and defeat but for acknowledging our own aspirations and weaknesses in the aspirations and weaknesses of others. He neither idolized heroes nor dismissed villains; for they are, like ourselves, a mixed lot. These critics see in Thackeray a writer whose wisdom transcends the oversimplifications and trivialities of popular fiction.

Thackeray was both a man of his time and out of it. He exposed the corruption and self-indulgence of luxury, but he was a person who loved luxury and self-indulgence. He led the writers of his age in realistic portrayals of character and society, but he deliberately undermined the illusion of reality by reminding his readers periodically that by reading they were participating in a fictive world. Among the novels by Victorians, Thackeray's most effectively blur the seam between fiction and history. His heroes are ordinary men, his villains are human, his good women are selfish, his hardhearted women are kind and intelligent, his husbands are tyrants who do not know any better, his wives are victims who court victimization without realizing it, his puppets are made of flesh and blood. Only his mothers-in-law are irredeemably mean-spirited. His narrative voices, particularly those of the voice-overs or so-called intruding commentaries, draw readers effectively into the fictive world of his characters; yet the author never lets readers forget the real world of story-telling and the marketing of fiction. In short, Thackeray's views of society, psychology and the economic dynamics of novel writing and publishing are so complex that readers in search of simple satisfactions and coherent order are often puzzled and disappointed.

Consequently one must learn to read Thackeray. His fiction is as topically allusive as that of any Victorian writer. As his age and culture recede in time, becoming more and more alien, young readers find it increasingly difficult to read his works at all, let alone richly, thickly and with enjoyment. Thackeray's knowledge of history was tremendous and his view of his own time was richly entwined with his view of history. The fictional worlds from his imagination coexist

with the historical and contemporary worlds; the resulting emotional and intellectual soup is complex, subtle, thoughtful, and profoundly philosophical and moral. That many persons react badly or feebly to his works is not surprising, given the allusiveness of his prose and, more important, the sly cleverness of his narrative technique.

Furthermore, Thackeray's imitators have made his greatest accomplishments (realism and the ironic voice) passé for modern readers, who must learn what prose fiction was like for his contemporaries in order best to see the innovations of Thackeray's writing. The conventions of his time for both historians and novelists encouraged narratives that glossed the seamier side of life, offering either model behaviors to imitate or unfortunate episodes to avoid. History for historians, and individual lives for biographers and novelists, were progressions in which the lessons of the past helped to advance mankind by giving lessons to be learned and mistakes not to repeat. Life was a progress. One unfortunate result of such views is that they accidentally encouraged as normal and good what we now view, with the help of writers like Thackeray, as hypocrisy: moral fables predominated over detached or comic observations of ordinary life. At mid-century the Victorian public was not ready for the naturalism of an Edmund Gosse or the experimentation of a James Joyce, but a significant segment of society was ready to have common immoralities, domestic deceptions, and the injustices of conventional behavior acknowledged realistically and, indeed, irreverently. Modern writers have gone far in the directions first indicated by Thackeray, making some of his achievements seem tame.

Although his frequent references to things now forgotten may leave modern readers wondering if they have missed something, Thackeray was a consummate stylist, renowned from his day to this for the clarity and ease of his prose. The difficulty is not in his syntax or vocabulary, both of which are graceful and erudite. Nor is the problem primarily the unfamiliarity of the people, places and things in his fictional world. The main problem modern readers have in understanding and appreciating Thackeray's work is with the subtle complexity of voices, most successfully and dexterously played out in *Vanity Fair*, but inherent in the multiple pseudonymous works of his early years, and in the maddeningly deceptive voice of Arthur Pendennis, the narrator of the later works.

To know a person or a writer well is to know how to take what that person says. We allow our friends and close acquaintances a far wider range of voices than we allow strangers or persons with whom our relations are strained or hostile. The conventions of polite discourse and diplomatic exchange are narrow and highly controlled in order to diminish the chances of being misconstrued. Familiarity allows the relaxation of these narrow limits. A reader's reaction to a writer is controlled by the limits of sympathy and tolerance one is able to grant to the writer. Thackeray's writings address the reader in so many voices and with such confidence that conventional politeness between writer and reader is stretched.

That is not to say readers must surrender their critical faculties in order to understand Thackeray. The opposite is true. Naïve dependence on the reliability of the artist or narrator is sure to fail with Thackeray who speaks best to readers who have firm confidence in their own ability to sort through layers of irony and indirection, who delight in the ability of language to both hide and reveal the self-deceptions and attempted deceptions of others that every person practices with one degree or other of sophistication or self-knowledge. But Thackeray's prose demands that readers trust the showman, the writer, as a consummate practitioner in 'sleight of tongue', because, for his part, the author has trusted the reader implicitly to retain control over his or her own credulity and skepticism. Thackeray does not, for all his pretended intrusions and explanations and instructions, actually spell it out for the reader. He expects to be understood as an ironist.

Readers who view Thackeray as a weak, occasionally inept writer who reached, perhaps, a few peaks of creative genius but who also wallowed in the depths of mundane hackwork, tend not to trust the writer's voice. They will identify each deviance from expectation more quickly as an authorial failing than a controlled nuance demanding dexterity in the reader. In his early writings, Thackeray resorted to editorial footnotes – a kind of 'voice-over effect' – to explain some of his subtle ventriloquist efforts. *Catherine* and *Barry Lyndon* have frequently been remarked as failures of voice whose footnotes showed a faltering authorial hand. Many in Thackeray's early public, and indeed now, did not 'know' the speaker or trust the voice to be fluent and humorous and thus they failed to reach the reading that is subtle, sure and revealing.

Even in *Pendennis* the narrator interrupts himself to 'instruct' the reader on the limitations of the narrator's knowledge and on the readers' responsibilities to judge for themselves: 'We are not pledging ourselves,' the narrator protests, 'for the correctness of [Arthur's] opinions, which readers will please to consider are delivered dramatically, the writer being no more answerable for them, than for the sentiments uttered by any other character of the story: our endeavour is merely to follow out, in its progress, the development of the mind of a worldly and selfish, but not ungenerous or unkind or truth-avoiding man.'⁹ Is this sort of instruction necessary because Thackeray fears readers wish to be told explicitly what to think?

How can a writer of Thackeray's temperament and caution – with an ability to see more than one side to every issue – how can such a writer possibly tell readers explicitly what to think? Besides, as a humorist, Thackeray wants to be able to pretend to tell us what to think by asserting at times the very thing he wishes us to question. This is very tricky business. The next sentence following the one just quoted says, 'And it will be seen that the lamentable stage to which his [Arthur's] logic at present has brought him, is one of general scepticism and sneering acquiescence in the world as it is; or if you like so to call it, a belief qualified with scorn in all things extant.' It is the adjective 'lamentable' which seems to say the narrator is telling us what to think immediately after telling us that as a writer he is not telling us what to think. And the alternative to a state of 'general scepticism' is 'belief qualified with scorn', offered as the way the reader might put it.

Thackeray himself was 'guilty' of admiring 'general scepticism' and recognized his own 'belief qualified with scorn' as a natural and honest intellectual stance. But here he pretends that readers would not agree. And he is probably right. Victorians are frequently portrayed as anxious about their beliefs, repudiating disbelief, fearing that qualifications on belief might undermine security. So Thackeray puts his views in the mouth of Arthur (Pen) Pendennis, distances himself from them, warns the reader to judge for himself, suggests a critical stance for the reader to adopt. And then, in a totally different tack of his own, Thackeray the writer undermines Pendennis the narrator's position by showing 17 pages later that Pen is nursing this philosophical stance because it helps him to win and accept the woman, the money and the honors offered him by his worldly

uncle. 'Ah well,' one can almost hear the voice of Thackeray muttering in the background, 'Who is there whose position is *not* so constructed and massaged and developed? Who is there who has not found self-satisfaction in the set of beliefs professed, whatever the 'real' motive for holding them?'. What he actually wrote was:

When a man is tempted to do a tempting thing, he can find a hundred ingenious reasons for gratifying his liking; and Arthur thought very much that he would like to be in Parliament, and that he would like to distinguish himself there, and that he need not care much what side he took, as there was falsehood and truth on every side. And on this and on other matters he thought he would compromise with his conscience, and that Sadduceeism was a very convenient and good-humoured profession of faith.

Pendennis is no less a self-deceiver than his almost father-in-law, Francis Clavering, who must pay off his wife's first husband to keep him quiet. And Pendennis briefly conducts his life in the hope of benefiting from the same fortune that sustains the thoroughly disreputable Francis.

The narratorial voice or voices may well have been the prime strategy with which Thackeray negotiated the most practical difficulty of a writer in his position: one who depended on his pen for a livelihood but whose social and moral visions differed from those of a majority of his potential readers. Thackeray once confided in the atheist writer John Mitchell that he was determined 'not to martyrize himself with his public for the sake of his views', and yet Thackeray was also too committed to 'the truth as I see it' to compromise himself with the public. And so he raises questions and toys with them and pretends to have certain attitudes toward them, all the while undermining the reader's conventional surety and yet not insisting that the reader adopt any of the narrator's views. Few writers on Thackeray have credited his self-subversive prose, increasingly disdainful of simple answers, as a deliberate strategy serving a serious philosophical bent. The easier judgment is to believe his fictive powers failed him – a position that requires belief in a late resurgence of those powers in *Denis Duval*, the novel cut off unfinished at his death. That is to say, readers who preferred the more concrete, less reflective, narrative style of his early works find a return to it in his last novel. Thackeray had not lost his ability to do that sort of

thing; he had chosen to follow an inclination toward which, he came to realize, many readers were disinclined.

It is not likely that anyone will rehabilitate Thackeray's later works in the minds of young or casual readers, but the seeds of 'failure' in those works can be read in the successes of the early works, whose primary attraction for most readers lies in their keenly satiric view of society rather than in their self-mockery or subtle probing of self-consciousness. But Thackeray is a humourist not a satirist.¹⁰ The difference between satire and humor is as profound as the difference between the outside view and the inside view. The satirist exposes and prods from external viewpoints, using imposed moral and aesthetic judgments. The result is raucous laughter and bitter distrust of 'the other' who is the object of the satiric gaze. The humorist, on the other hand, explores and probes from within, explaining and making plausible every foible and flaw, and observing, with a wry grin, the ulterior motives behind every public act by tracing the negotiations each individual conducts between ethics and self-forgiveness and self-deceptions. The result is a sad laughter at our own shortcomings and a cautious distrust of 'the self' who is the object of the humorous insight. The humorist demonstrates that the differences between heroes and scoundrels and ourselves are as unstable as quicksilver. This view is compatible with the immortal Pogo's observation: 'We have met the enemy and it is us.'

The primary characteristic of Thackeray's vision is its distrust of human judgment, resulting in a profound compassion for 'sinners' and a deep suspicion of dogma and certainty, which prevented him from adopting for long any of the radical or righteous positions required in order to maintain satire. One result has been Thackeray's inability to maintain the admiration of dogmatic or insecure readers looking for uplifting, high-minded fiction, depicting the world as it ought to be – with evil always punished and good rewarded in the end. Similarly, indignant persons seeking an author who confirms their notion that the world is filled primarily by villains whom they love to hate will be disappointed by Thackeray's frequent discovery of human qualities in vain and hypocritical but not usually profoundly evil characters.

It is said, by those who apparently lack confidence in the young, that one must be at least forty to really appreciate Thackeray. If one supposes that satiric, judgmental laughter appeals to the young

more than the supposedly wiser, mild laughter of self-detection – if one supposes that the young lack the patience it may take to realize the complexities of life that deny us the pleasure of admiring heroes and hating villains – then perhaps there is an element of truth in this snobbery of older readers. But it could be said with equal injustice that older readers tend to shy away from writers who expose and explode the small comforting lies of conventional living. By this view it would take the vigor of youth to appreciate Thackeray's works.

For readers wanting the satisfying surety and direction of novelists like Dickens, Eliot or Trollope, Thackeray's endless deferral of certainty and slowness to form final judgments can easily be mistaken for vacillation or failure of nerve. Even those who greatly admire Thackeray may find they are as mistaken in their admiration as Charlotte Brontë was. In the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, she proclaimed Thackeray 'the greatest social regenerator of his age', conjuring a Carlylean vision of the hero as man of letters, but she was disappointed upon meeting him to find what to her steady gaze and narrow experience was a weak man with internal contradictions. Thomas Carlyle who knew him and his daughters and who liked him, also lamented what he took to be Thackeray's weakness as a person. Many readers have begun by admiring the clarity with which Thackeray exposed the vanities and hypocrisies that debilitate society and that hurt even those who succeed in their deceptions; but then they have become disappointed by Thackeray's lack of a positive agenda for reform. Thackeray, they conclude, may have been a keen observer of society's flaws, but he was no regenerator of the age, no hero as man of letters. Indeed, he was not, nor did he try to be. His genius lies not with the reformers of society but with the reformers of language and vision – an altogether greater undertaking.

Persons of strongly passionate views, like those whose simple understanding of others is based on too small an experience of life or too narrow a view of it, often make mistakes concerning the character of those who distrust certainty; for the ability to see both sides of an argument seems a rare gift, undervalued in the Victorian age, as perhaps also in ours. Even the novelist Anthony Trollope who is often mistakenly seen as Thackeray's closest and greatest imitator, failed utterly to understand and appreciate Thackeray's moral vision. Trollope, too, portrays the good in his evil characters and the

weaknesses of his 'heroes and heroines', and he begs the reader from time to time to postpone judgment of his characters, but it is because he knows them so well and is sure of the end and knows that he risks nothing, for the moment, in being fair. Thackeray, by contrast, defers judgment because, unlike the omniscient narrator of most Victorian fictions, he does not know the end and does not trust what he knows; he waits to find out rather than to reveal later something he already knows.

This *Literary Life of Thackeray* explores the view that the reader's portrait of the author influences the understanding of and appreciation for the literary texts, that the reader's sense of the character and voice of the one speaking determines how he or she takes what is said. I try to examine Thackeray's literary life in his personal life and in his fiction, reviews, essays and travel books, but I pursue the various arguments in these areas only far enough to establish the plausibility and critical value of the view. I have tried to include enough of the political, social, literary, artistic, religious and commercial life of Thackeray and his contemporaries to show the ways in which his life and literary output were both conventional and innovative.

Among the issues most recently opened by criticism of Thackeray's works are his attitudes toward gender, toward the position of women in the marriage market, and toward race, slavery and non-Anglos – particularly Frenchmen, Jews and Mediterranean Orientals. One could say that his fiction constitutes an analysis of the human pecking order. Thackeray's religious and philosophical views have been treated briefly by Geoffrey Tillotson in *A View of Victorian Literature* and best by Robert Colby in *Thackeray: A Canvass of Humanity*, but these areas remain otherwise virtually unexplored; yet I believe that a rich and sympathetic response to his narrative techniques derives from an understanding of his philosophical questionings and his religious agnosticism. A key to the importance of his determined deferral of judgment is found in *The Newcomes*: 'the wicked are wicked no doubt, and they go astray and they fall, and they come by their deserts: but who can measure the mischief which the very virtuous do?'. The biblical cadence combined with a definitely nonbiblical sentiment sharpens the bite of this idea. The fear of doing evil by trying to do good disarmed Thackeray's satire, his ire and his self-promotion. What he offers instead is infinitely more important, satisfying and disturbing – as I hope will become clear as we progress.

Thackeray was very conscious, from youth until death, of the importance both in real life and in fiction of the creation of self-portraits. In a letter home, written soon after he had abandoned college and while he was 'looking about himself' during a half-year's sojourn in Weimar, Germany, the young Thackeray complained:

Your letters always make me sorrowful, dearest Mother, for there seems some hidden cause of dissatisfaction, some distrust which you do not confess & cannot conceal & for which on looking into myself I can find no grounds or reason – Idleness irresolution & extravagance are charges wh. have been long laid against me, & to which I know I am still but too open – but I can say that tho' still idle & extravagant I am not so much so as when in England, for here I have more inducement to industry & less temptation to expense.¹¹

The difference between his mother's apparent view of him and his own leads to very different judgments. Of course here we have only the young Thackeray's view, but it rings true to many youths whose sense is that the mother hovers overbearingly, expecting the young to fulfill parental rather than personal goals. Thackeray certainly felt that, for he continued:

You seem to take it so much to heart, that I gave up trying for Academical honors – perhaps Mother I was too young to form opinions but I did form them – & these told me that there was little use in studying what could after a certain point be of no earthly use to me... that three years of industrious waste of time might obtain for me mediocre honours wh. I did not value at a straw[.]Is it because I have unfortunately fallen into this state of thinking that you are so dissatisfied with me[?] ... Mother mother would it not have been better to have consulted my inclinations & have fostered them than to have persevered in a system which was determined on long before the object of it had manifested any talents or desires for or against it. ... I know that the system you pursued you considered was the best... but I who was the object of it because now I am old enough to think & to act a little for myself am *thought* idle & ungrateful – because I consider it unsuited to me, & do what I can to pursue a different one –¹²

The battle of wills here revealed was to continue through his entire life. The mother whom he loved and resisted died one year

after the son. But his fiction and his letters are informed by his sensitivity to the private view, privileged by self knowledge and different from the external view, whether held by loving but domineering and therefore often disappointed parents or by the bitterest of enemies, including one's former friends. Two and a half years before he died, writing to his friend, the Revd Whitwell Elwin, Thackeray meditated a moral on the occasion of his having been blackballed from membership in the Literary Club:

All people dont like me as you do. I think sometimes I am deservedly unpopular and in some cases I rather like it. Why should I want to be liked by Jack and Tom?...I know the Thackeray that those fellows have imagined to themselves [is] a very selfish heartless artful morose and designing man -¹³

Indeed, each reader's assessment of Thackeray's writings is dependent upon the portrait from which emerges the writer's voice in the re-creative imagination of the reader. This book is written to influence the portrait of Thackeray which readers will create and take to Thackeray's writings. I hope that the character of Thackeray drawn in this book will help account for all the voices in his works, for Thackeray is among the most accomplished ventriloquists to have written the Queen's English. And his ventriloquism is not merely the showman's tricks to entertain a passing crowd. The voices and the roles which call them forth are endemic to Thackeray's views of society, of men and women, and of the writer's responsibilities to his vision and to his audiences. A simple mistake about the author or the narrator will cause the reader to misconstrue the voice, and hence the meaning, effect, and value of the prose.

In order to recognize the voice of a character who is speaking in a particular tone and with a particular style that provides evidence of a particular social, moral, political or aesthetic stance, the reader must develop a sense of the range of possibilities with which a given writer can be credited. If one is unwilling to grant the writer a particular voice, one will dismiss approximations to it as mistakes or inconsistencies.

Even when we know the writer's range of technique, we might still fail to grant his range of vision. Thackeray's movement through several social ranks, his view of social differences, when known to us, will affect our sense of what he is showing, what he is criticizing,

who and what he values. Similarly, his religious experiences and responses, his philosophical readings and meditations, his understanding of what can and cannot be known but might be believed will indicate to readers the range of meanings available both for his characters and for the central informing intelligence of his works. Thackeray's experiences and responses to aesthetic objects – paintings, music, plays, operas, sculpture and particularly novels, essays and short fictions by other writers – shaped his own notions of what is genuine and what is sham in appeals to emotional and aesthetic senses. The ironist depends on readers who share external standards of social, political, and moral right, by which the ironic rhetoric and presentation of events is judged. Without such shared standards, the rhetoric of irony is confusing or highly susceptible to misunderstanding, for the ironist's technique is to say what is meant by saying what is not meant.

It is the conclusion of this study that Thackeray's range in technique and vision was great and ample to support a nuanced and sophisticated response to his writings. It is more likely that what we do not like in Thackeray's writings is what we do not understand than that it was ill-conceived or badly represented.

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