

DRAMATIC FORM IN THE CENTRAL NOVELS OF W. M. THACKERAY

VANITY FAIR, PENDENNIS, ESMOND, AND THE NEWCOMES:

A STUDY IN THE ELEMENT OF DRAMATIC FORM IN THE

CENTRAL NOVELS OF W. M. THACKERAY

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: The paper which follows develops from the premise that by examining what has been termed Thackeray's moral uncertainty in Vanity Fair in the context of his narrative technique we discover a marked concern by Thackeray with the problem of freeing himself from his story while at the same time knowing and telling it; and that in fact this concern is a concern with a rudimentary dramatic form and is common to Pendennis, Esmond, and The Newcomes, as well as Vanity Fair, and that these four novels can be read as different solutions to this problem which achieve varying degrees of success.

PREFACE

Thackeray's novels are now almost invariably associated with debilitating sentiment, ineffectual and perverse cynicism, relaxed garrulity and, worse, moral uncertainty. The reason for these pejorative associations clearly rests on a critical tendency to bring the facts of Thackeray's life and personality to bear on his novels. Certainly by his most obvious method of telling his stories and by their content, his novels offer more than the ordinary temptation to approach them in this way. It is unfortunate. Once we have started in this critical direction we are taken further away from them as self-contained works of art, and further away from any accurate understanding of the techniques involved in them as such.

The direction of the discussion of Vanity Fair, Pendennis, Esmond, and The Newcomes — what I have called the four central novels — which follows grows out of the critical position that Thackeray's novels, like other works of art, must first be judged in terms of themselves within their precise limits as self-contained artistic creations. This position is consonant with my thesis that Thackeray's central novels grow out of a concern for a rudimentary dramatic form which shows itself in his attempt to free himself from the novels. On this basis it has not been my concern to defend or to attack Thackeray, but rather to

judge what he had done with his material. His novels stand on their own, and those pejorative biographical associations, where they persist, must be seen as aspects of Thackeray's narrative technique, and their success or failure, as part of this technique, can be assessed in terms of Thackeray's art and artistic goals.

I have used the Tillotson Riverside Edition of Vanity Fair throughout for reference and quotation. Since there are at present no definitive texts for Pendennis, Esmond or The Newcomes, and since in novels of this length it is necessary to make some sort of marginal notation, my choice of editions has been limited to the best of those available on the book market.

I am indebted to Professor Graham Petrie for his instructive remarks on form in the English novel during the course of the last two years, and more particularly for his generous advice and encouragement during the writing of this paper.

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D. McD.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	iii
I Moral Uncertainty in <u>Vanity Fair</u>	1
II <u>Vanity Fair</u> and <u>Pendennis</u> : The Two Voices	9
III <u>Esmond</u> : The Voice of the Actor	41
IV <u>The Newcomes</u> : The Voice of the Historian	70
V Conclusion: Thackeray's Voices in Retrospect	91
Bibliography	95

CHAPTER I

MORAL UNCERTAINTY IN VANITY FAIR

"Yours is a very modest and convenient sort of calumny. You leave me under the weight of an accusation which, after all, is unsaid. What is it?"¹

Nowhere is the confusion between Thackeray and his art more evident than in the matter of his handling of moral issues in Vanity Fair, and consequently nowhere is there more need to maintain a distinction if we are to understand his art. The confusion stems from the fact that Thackeray is a self-confessed social moralist and yet at crucial junctures in the novel apparently loses courage and leaves us uncertain as to his moral position.

It is difficult to overlook the fact that Thackeray does see himself as a social moralist. He builds Vanity Fair, Pendennis, and The Newcomes around a moral criticism of society. Vanity Fair is obviously directed to expose the vanity, snobbery, and hypocrisy involved in getting on in society. Pendennis presents the moral problems faced by a young man going out into society for the first time, and The Newcomes gradually focuses on the evils of the social marriage market.

¹W. M. Thackeray, Vanity Fair (Boston: Riverside Editions, 1963), Ch. LXVI, p. 646.

In Vanity Fair he says:

But my kind reader will please to remember, that this history has "Vanity Fair" for a title, and that Vanity Fair is a very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbugs and falsenesses and pretentions. And while the moralist, who is holding forth on the cover (an accurate portrait of your humble servant), professes to wear neither gown nor bands, but only the very same long-eared livery in which his congregation is arrayed: yet, look you, one is bound to speak the truth as far as one knows it, whether one mounts a cap and bells or a shovel-hat; and a deal of disagreeable matter must come out in the course of such an undertaking.²

He adds that he is 'desirous to show up and trounce his villians', not from mere mercenary motives but because he has a real hatred of them which he must express. After pointing out Becky's behaviour at Queen's Crawley, he says:

Such people there are living and flourishing in the world — Faithless, Hopeless, Charityless: let us have at them, dear friends, with might and main. Some there are, and very successful too, mere quacks and fools: and it was to combat and expose such as those, no doubt, that laughter was made.³

It is equally difficult to overlook Thackeray's apparent moral uncertainty. It appears as moral evasiveness in the scene in which Rawdon confronts Becky and Lord Steyne in the little house in Curzon Street. In the sequence which leads to the scene it is clear that Lord Steyne has contrived, with Becky's acquiescence, to remove her 'watch-dogs'. Little Rawdon is sent to White Friars under the patronage of Lord

²Ibid., Ch. VIII, p. 80.

³Ibid., Ch. VIII, p. 81.

Steyne, and Briggs is made housekeeper at Gauntly Hall, which is one of Steyne's many country houses. When Rawdon becomes suspicious he too is disposed of. Becky leaves Gaunt House alone on the evening of the charades since Wenham, Steyne's toady, has offered to walk home with Rawdon. On the way Rawdon is confronted by the sheriff's men, and taken to Moss's spunging house in Cursitor Street until he can settle his debts. When he writes to Becky she refuses his request for immediate aid on the grounds that she is ill, and that Lord Steyne cannot lend her money until the next morning. The scene of Rawdon's unexpected return to Curzon Street in the evening is well known.

Rawdon heard laughter within - laughter and singing. Becky was singing a snatch of the song of the night before; a hoarse voice shouted "Brava! Brava!" - it was Lord Steyne's.

Rawdon opened the door and went in. A little table with a dinner was laid out - and wine and plate. Steyne was hanging over the sofa on which Becky sat. The wretched woman was in a brilliant full toilette, her arms and all her fingers sparkling with bracelets and rings; and the brilliants on her breast which Steyne had given her. He had her hand in his, and was bowing over to kiss it, when Becky started up with a faint scream as she caught sight Rawdon's white face. At the next instant she tried a smile, a horrid smile, as if to welcome her husband: and Steyne rose up; grinding his teeth, pale; and with fury in his looks.⁴

Lord Steyne attempts a smile but his mouth twitches nervously, and he fails to carry it off. Becky insists that she is innocent but when she asks Steyne to confirm her innocence he screams furiously, sensing a trap:

⁴Ibid., Ch. LIII, p. 515.

'You innocent! Damn you You innocent! Why every trinket you have on your body is paid for by me. I have given you thousands of pounds which this fellow has spent, and for which he has sold you. Innocent, by --! You're as innocent as your mother, the ballet-girl.⁵

Becky tries to deceive Rawdon when he asks for her keys to confirm Steyne's accusation about money, but he finds her little desk and forces her to open it. In it is a bank note, 'quite a fresh one', for a thousand pounds from Lord Steyne.

It is at this point that we notice a certain moral ambiguity. As Becky sits alone thinking in the now deserted house on Curzon Street, Thackeray comments:

What had happened? Was she guilty or not? She said not; but who could tell what was truth which came from those lips: or if that corrupt heart was in this case pure? All her lies and schemes, all her selfishness and her wiles, all her wit and genius had come to this bankruptcy.⁶

In the face of such evidence it is tempting to argue that, since Thackeray is obviously in his own eyes a social critic, the apparent moral uncertainty which afflicts his handling of crucial judgments such as that involving Becky and Lord Steyne is the result of a certain weakness of resolve, a certain lack of courage in Thackeray as writer, that prevents him from being true to his creative vision. Dorothy Van Ghent argues that in Vanity Fair the order of historical reality

⁵Ibid., Ch. LIII, p. 515.

⁶Ibid., Ch. LIII, p. 517.

where Thackeray lives breaks in on the order of imaginative reality where Becky lives, in Thackeray's use of the convention of the 'omniscient author', because he is not morally in harmony with his created imaginative world as a result of the 'spiritual incoherency' of the Nineteenth-century,⁷ and his moral fearfulness.⁸ Kettle, bothered by this moral uncertainty, and seeking its causes, argues in the same direction. He feels that throughout the whole novel our impression of the characters and their world is confused by Thackeray's comments, and adds:

It is not so much the sense of these comments as their tone that is disastrous. It is an ambiguous tone. In the worst of senses it is vulgar. Thackeray's attitude to nearly all his main characters — and especially Amelia and Becky — is ambiguous, and the ambiguity does not arise from subtlety, a sense that the whole truth can never be told, that there is always a complicating factor in every judgment; it comes from pusillanimity, from a desire to expose illusions and yet keep them.⁹

Greig echoes the same charge when he says that Thackeray demands the right to comment on his characters and their world but is afraid to speak too openly in his own person.¹⁰

Ann Wilkinson is aware of the mistaken direction of these comments when she says:

⁷D. Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function (Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 139.

⁸Ibid., p. 142.

⁹A. Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel, 1, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 165.

¹⁰J. Y. T. Greig, Thackeray: A Reconsideration (Toronto: Geoffrey Camberledge, 1950), p. 182.

With the traditional assumption that the writer and the narrator are the same we have no choice but to see Thackeray as incompetent and dishonest, or at least dismayingly two-sided in his personality — an artist who can create a scene, let us look in on it, and then beg off when a crucial question of the nature of a character is urgently raised.¹¹

Dorothy Van Ghent's comments, though they are perceptive in recognizing moral uncertainty as a key problem in Vanity Fair, are a case in point. She begins with an assumption about Thackeray's narrative technique, measures his apparent moral uncertainty against this technique, the method of the 'omniscient author', and finds a solution to the resulting problems in the 'spiritual inconsistency' of the Nineteenth-century and Thackeray's moral fearfulness. If, instead, we examine Thackeray's apparent moral uncertainty in terms of narrative technique, the conclusions which we reach about this technique and moral uncertainty are rather different, and have the merit of being arrived at within the limits of Vanity Fair as a self-contained artistic creation. In the first place it becomes only too clear that Thackeray is not totally the 'omniscient author' — this in fact is only one of his roles. In the second place, and consonant with this, it becomes gradually apparent that in Vanity Fair he is concerned with the problem of how he can detach himself as story teller from his story while knowing and telling it, which is essentially the problem of how he can achieve dramatic

¹¹Ann Wilkinson, "The Tomeavesian Way of Knowing the World", ELH, XXXII (1965), 377.

form. It becomes clear that the solution to this problem which he proposes in Vanity Fair shapes the narrative technique and the form of the novel, and that moral uncertainty is part of this solution.

What in fact I want to maintain is that this concern with dramatic form, with freeing himself from his story while knowing and telling it, which we first become aware of in examining moral uncertainty as part of Thackeray's narrative technique in Vanity Fair, is a concern common to Pendennis, Esmond, and The Newcomes as well. These four novels I think can be read as three specific solutions — the solution is the same in Vanity Fair and Pendennis — to the problem of dramatic form. Thackeray obviously is never aware of the final solution to dramatic form in the sense that the story is told totally from within, in the way that James tells his story through Strether in The Ambassadors. In the perfection of dramatic form achieved in this novel, as Lubbock points out, it is

as though the reader himself were at the window, and as though the window opened straight into the depths of Strether's conscious existence. The energy of his perception and discrimination is there seen at work. His mind is the mirror of the scene beyond it, and the other people in the book exist only in relation to him; but his mind, his own thought of them, is there absolutely, its restless evolution is in full sight.¹²

It is doubtful whether Thackeray even has a clear impression of all the factors involved in such a solution to dramatic form in the novel.

¹²P. Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 146.

But then I do not wish to maintain that the element of dramatic form actually achieved is very strong or very sophisticated in the four central novels. Certainly it is not in Pendennis or in Vanity Fair where it appears in the same way and throws into harsh relief the problem of moral uncertainty. I am only interested in maintaining that dramatic form is a conscious concern which Thackeray returns again and again to consider and to experiment with, with more consistency and success where he finds a unified solution in advance, in Esmond and The Newcomes, and with less success in Vanity Fair and Pendennis where he attempts to solve the problems of dramatic form amid the urgency of telling his story, and that this concern with dramatic form shapes the narrative technique and the form of the novels and reveals itself there. And it is to Thackeray's experiment with dramatic form in Vanity Fair and Pendennis that I turn now.

CHAPTER II

VANITY FAIR AND PENDENNIS: THE TWO VOICES

In Vanity Fair and Pendennis Thackeray is less clearly concerned with the problem of dramatic form than in Esmond and The Newcomes. His primary interest is in telling his story, and he seems to have no initial concern with the problem of how he can free himself from his story while knowing and telling it. This is most certainly the case in Vanity Fair. In this novel we sense that he is attempting to free himself from his story while he writes, and he does not specifically attempt to establish a definite relation to it until the Pumpernickel sequence almost at the end of the book. In Pendennis he does establish some constant relation to the novel almost from the start by seeing himself specifically as Pen's friend and biographer. Here again, however, as in Vanity Fair, if he is concerned with dramatic form in advance, he certainly has no specific solution to the problem before he begins to write. It is as though he becomes aware of the problem from certain insights which he gains as he writes, and attempts to evolve a solution as he tells his story in essentially a non-dramatic convention. That he is aware of the need for some sort of dramatic form in both novels can be seen in the sort of solution which he gradually evolves in

them. It becomes gradually apparent that he attempts, quite literally, to free himself from his story while knowing and telling it, by the unsophisticated device of two personae and two voices used simultaneously in both novels. The one knows all about the story and uses this omniscience to tell it. The other, more realistically, is bound by the limits of human knowledge and human mobility in time and space. The first, of course, is the persona and voice of the 'omniscient author', and this is the persona and voice that is most often mistakenly seen to be the only one in both books. The less obvious persona and voice, the one gradually introduced into both novels as they progress, we can call the 'narrator historian'.¹ If the use of the persona and voice of the 'omniscient author' tends to involve Thackeray in his story in both novels, the use of the persona and voice of the 'narrator historian' is a counter balance which he gradually evolves to free himself and to throw the story off to make it function on its own. The persona and voice of the 'narrator historian' works consistently to assert that it is a particular individual with a particular relation to a group of characters and a sequence of events which have their own separate and real existence, and in doing so accepts the fact that it cannot know everything about them.

We can see the method of the two personae and the two voices

¹This I think is consistent with the position taken by Ann Wilkinson in "The Toveyvesian Way of Knowing the World", ELH XXXII (1965), 380, though she calls this second persona the 'gossip' and her argument is directed to different conclusions.

when we look closely at Vanity Fair and Pendennis. The persona and voice of the 'omniscient author' is certainly the most obvious. Thackeray obviously finds the method of this persona congenial in telling his story. He does not need to account for his knowledge of his story. He knows all the details necessary to tell his story, and he can tell us them in the order that will best allow us to understand this story. If he has not accounted for some important detail he can backtrack to explain it, and he can look ahead and give us clues as to what may happen and can judge his characters' present circumstances in terms of how they are ultimately to be placed. This method gives him a highly fluid way of bringing the world of his story and its characters quickly to life, and a way of capturing our interest and retaining it. It allows for a growing intimacy and trust between the writer in this persona and the reader which can be used to carry the story over uneven ground.

Thackeray's use of this persona is seen everywhere in Vanity Fair and Pendennis. We see it in his development of Joseph Sedley when he says:

Being an invalid, Joseph Sedley contented himself with a bottle of claret, besides his madeira at dinner, and he managed a couple of plates full of strawberries and cream, and twenty-four little rout cakes, that were lying neglected in a plate near him, and certainly (for novelists have the privilege of knowing everything), he thought a great deal about the girl upstairs. "A nice, gay, merry young creature," thought he to himself.²

²Vanity Fair, Ch. III, p. 31.

We see Thackeray using the method of this persona in his treatment of Amelia. He notes:

I know where she kept that packet she had — and can steal in and out of her chamber like Iachimo — like Iachimo? No — that is a bad part. I will only act Moonshine, and peep harmless into the bed where faith and beauty and innocence lie dreaming.³

It appears too in his development of Becky when he says:

If, a few pages back, the present writer claimed the privilege of peeping into Miss Amelia Sedley's bed-room, and understanding with the omniscience of the novelist all the gentle pains and passions which were tossing upon that innocent pillow, why should he not declare himself to be Rebecca's confidante too, master of her secrets, and seal-keeper of that young woman's conscience?

Well then, in the first place, Rebecca gave way to some very sincere and touching regrets that a piece of marvellous good fortune should have been so near her, and she actually obliged to decline it.⁴

We see the same method, less obviously, in his treatment of George.

The bills were up in the Sedley house, where he had passed so many, many happy hours. He could see them as he walked from home that night (to the Old Slaughter's, where he put up when in town) shining white in the moon. That comfortable home was shut, then, upon Amelia and her parents: where had they taken refuge? The thought of their ruin affected him not a little. He was very melancholy that night in the coffee-room at the Slaughter's; and drank a good deal, as his comrades remarked there.⁵

³Ibid., Ch. XII, p. 114.

⁴Ibid., Ch. XV, p. 148.

⁵Ibid., Ch. XVIII, p. 174.

We see it in casual touches like that dealing with Mrs. Bute Crawley.

"My girls' singing after that odious little governess's, I know is unbearable," the candid rector's wife owned to herself.⁶

It appears rather awkwardly in the Brighton sequence, when Thackeray says:

In the course of the evening Rawdon got a little family-note from his wife, which although he crumpled it up and burnt it instantly in the candle, we had the good luck to read over Rebecca's shoulder;⁷

and when he notes in connection with the Rawdon Crawleys' life in London:

The novelist, it has been said before, knows everything, and as I am in a situation to be able to tell the public how Crawley and his wife lived without any income, may I entreat the public newspapers which are in the habit of extracting portions of the various periodical works now published, not to reprint the following exact narrative and calculations — of which I ought, as the discoverer (and at some expense, too), to have the benefit.⁸

We see the method again, less awkwardly but equally obviously, when Thackeray says, speaking of Miss Crawley:

I wonder whether she knew that it was not only Becky who wrote the letters, but that Mrs. Rawdon actually took and sent home the trophies — which she bought for a few francs, from one of the innumerable pedlars who immediately began to deal in relics of the war. The novelist, who knows everything, knows this also.⁹

⁶Ibid., Ch. XIX, p. 179.

⁷Ibid., Ch. XXV, p. 238.

⁸Ibid., Ch. XXXVI, p. 351.

⁹Ibid., Ch. XXXIII, p. 318.

In Pendennis Thackeray's use of the method of the 'omniscient author' persona and voice is equally evident, though the second voice speaks out more strongly against it. In keeping with the stronger presence of the second voice, there are fewer admissions of omniscience. In the Preface, written after the story was completed, he speaks of it as 'a sort of confidential talk between writer and reader.'¹⁰ Developing the character of Blanche Amory he says:

As novelists are supposed to know everything, even the secrets of female hearts, which the owners themselves do not perhaps know, we may state that at eleven years of age, Mademoiselle Betsi, as Miss Amory was then called, had felt tender emotions towards a young Savoyard organ-grinder at Paris.¹¹

We see Thackeray openly in the persona of the 'omniscient author' when he says:

The story-teller turns from this group to his young audience, and hopes that one day their eyes may all shine so.¹²

Largely, however, the use of this persona and voice is more subdued in Pendennis. It appears in his presentation of Pen as he leaves Clavering for London.

As the coach, whirls through the night away from the friendly gates of home, many a plan does the young man cast in his mind of future life and conduct, prudence, and peradventure success and fame. He knows he is a better man than many

¹⁰W. M. Thackeray, Pendennis, I (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd.), 1962, p. xv.

¹¹Ibid., I, Ch. XXIII, p. 229.

¹²Ibid., II, Ch. LXXV, p. 377.

who have hitherto been ahead of him in the race: his first failure has caused him remorse, and brought with it reflection.¹³

We notice it in the comment immediately preceeding a digression:

In the meanwhile the reader, more lucky than Captain Costigan will have the privilege of being made acquainted with the secret which was withheld from that officer.¹⁴

We see it in the catalogue of Laura's private thoughts about her life as an aged Dowager's companion,¹⁵ and of the reasons for Major Pendennis' dissatisfaction with life.¹⁶

Thackeray's use of this persona and voice appears, too, in the recurring instances of excision and commentary that appear in the novel. We see this use of the 'omniscient author' voice in his handling of the meeting between Pen and his mother on the occasion of his father's death. He says:

What passed between that lady and the boy is not of import. A veil should be thrown over these sacred emotions of love and grief. The maternal passion is a sacred mystery to me.¹⁷

We find this voice used this way again when he notes:

But as we do not like to see a good woman unjust, we shall not say a word more of the quarrel which now befell between

¹³Ibid., I, Ch. XXVIII, p. 282.

¹⁴Ibid., II, Ch. LXV, p. 289.

¹⁵Ibid., II, Ch. LXVI, p. 293.

¹⁶Ibid., II, Ch. LXVII, p. 310.

¹⁷Ibid., I, Ch. II, p. 20.

Helen and her adopted daughter, or of the bitter tears which the poor girl was made to shed.¹⁸

We find the appearance of this voice in excision alone, when Thackeray remarks:

We are not going to enter into the early part of Lady Clavering's history;¹⁹

and again when he begins:

Let us be allowed to pass over a few months of the history of Mr. Arthur Pendennis's lifetime, during the which, many events may have occurred which were more interesting and exciting to himself, than they would be likely to prove to the reader.²⁰

We find the voice of the 'omniscient author' persona in the insistent commentary which surrounds and expands the personalities of the characters. Of Major Pendennis he thinks:

It can't be said that Mr. Pen's new guide, philosopher and friend, discoursed him on the most elevated subjects, or treated the subjects which he chose in the most elevated manner. But his morality, such as it was, was consistent. It might not, perhaps, tend to a man's progress in another world, but it was pretty well calculated to advance his interests in this.²¹

Commenting on Miss Fotheringay he notes:

¹⁸ Ibid., I, Ch. XXVII, p. 282.

¹⁹ Ibid., I, Ch. XXIV, p. 236.

²⁰ Ibid., I, Ch. XXXVI, p. 361.

²¹ Ibid., I, Ch. IX, p. 89.

It will have been perceived that Miss Fotheringay, though silent in general, and by no means brilliant as a conversationalist when poetry, literature, or the fine arts were concerned, could talk freely and with good sense, too, in her own family circle. She cannot justly be called a romantic person: nor were her literary acquirements great.²²

This voice appears frequently in a more expansive comment designed to extend the meaning of a particular situation into a general truth.

Speaking of Mr. Smirke's hopeless love for Mrs. Pendennis he says:

Thus, O friendly readers, we see how every man in the world has his own private griefs and business, by which he is more cast down or occupied than by the affairs or sorrows of any other person. While Mrs. Pendennis is disquieting herself about losing her son . . . — while the major's great soul chafes and frets, inwardly vexed as he thinks what great parties are going on in London . . . — Mr. Smirke has a private care watching at his bedside.²³

This comment is interesting because while it reveals Thackeray's use of the voice of the 'omniscient author' persona at one level, it reveals a way in which it appears in both Vanity Fair and Pendennis at a more subtle level. Throughout both novels Thackeray uses this voice to shape our opinions of the characters by affixing epithets to them. Thus, when he speaks of 'the Major's great soul' worrying about missed parties, he implies ironically that the Major is a man of shallow interests. The

²²Ibid., I, Ch. XII, p.116.

²³Ibid., I, Ch. XVI, p. 148.

epithets, 'poor', 'poor old', 'wretched', and 'horrid' have the same function in Vanity Fair. He speaks of Amelia's return from her honeymoon to 'the same little bed from which the poor girl had gone to his'.²⁴ A much more complex fusing of epithet and comment reveals the voice of the 'omniscient author' persona shaping our opinion of Dobbin, Amelia, George and the Osbornes, when Dobbin attempts to plead George's case with the desperately amorous and aging Miss Osborne.

When any strong emotion took possession of Mr. Dobbin, and after the first word or two of hesitation, he could speak with perfect fluency, and it was evident that his eloquence on this occasion made some impression upon the lady whom he addressed.

"Well," said she, "this is — most surprising — most painful — most extraordinary — what will papa say? — that George should fling away such a superb establishment as was offered to him, — but at any rate he has found a very brave champion in you, Captain Dobbin. It is of no use, however," she continued, after a pause; "I feel for poor Miss Sedley, most certainly — most sincerely you know. We never thought the match a good one, though we were always very kind to her here — very. But Papa will never consent, I am sure. And a well brought up young woman you know, — with a well-regulated mind must — George must give her up, dear Captain Dobbin, indeed he must."

"Ought a man to give up the woman he loved, just when misfortune befel her?" Dobbin said, holding out his hand. "Dear Miss Osborne, is this the counsel I hear from you? My dear young lady! you must befriend her. He can't give her up. He must not give her up. Would a man, think you, give you up if you were poor?"

²⁴Vanity Fair, Ch. XXXVIII, p. 377.

This adroit question touched the heart of Miss Jane Osborne not a little. "I don't know whether we poor girls ought to believe what you men say, Captain," she said. "There is that in woman's tenderness which induces her to believe too easily. I'm afraid you are cruel, cruel deceivers," — and Dobbin certainly thought he felt a pressure of the hand which Miss Osborne had extended to him.

He dropped it in some alarm. "Deceivers!" said he. "No, dear Miss Osborne, all men are not; your brother is not."²⁵

Thackeray's use of the persona and voice of the 'omniscient author' is perhaps most clearly seen in the opening sequences of Vanity Fair and Pendennis, where he describes Amelia and Becky leaving Miss Pinkerton's school in Chiswick Mall, and Major Pendennis's arrival at his club in Pall Mall. We do not see either scene directly. He stands between us and the scenes to show us what he sees and knows. Both scenes have already happened and are in the past. He shows us the arrival of the Sedley coach at the iron gate of Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies. He notes Miss Jemima's rednose peeping over the geranium pots at the window, and takes us into the drawing room to see the reaction of the Misses Pinkerton to the arrival. We learn that Miss Jemima is less important than her sister Miss Barbara, who has actually met Johnson. We are shown the letter which Miss Barbara Pinkerton had addressed to Miss Sedley's mother, and learn something of Miss Sedley's character. In the persona of the 'omniscient author'

²⁵Ibid., Ch. XXIII, p. 216.

Thackeray chats to us informally about school mistresses' letters, and tells us that the tributes paid in this one are, contrary to custom, deserved. We are told that Amelia, though not a heroine in the conventional sense, is gentle, guileless, and goodnatured. Miss Rebecca Sharp, Miss Sedley's friend, obviously is not, as becomes apparent in her parting struggle with Miss Barbara Pinkerton. We realize then why she has been refused a dictionary, and this realization is confirmed by her magnificent parting gesture as she drives away in the Sedley coach.

In the role of the 'omniscient author' in Pendennis Thackeray uses the same method to tell his story. He shows us the fastidious Major Pendennis arriving at his club on a morning in the full London season. We are told that the major is a man of habit, and we are given details about his reactions to any interruption of his routines. We are told the thoughts of Glowry the surgeon as he watches Major Pendennis perform his morning ritual with his mail. We are shown the disturbing contents of two of these letters and the Major's reaction and thoughts on reading them. The whole scene is gracefully sketched in and all the details necessary to understand its meaning are provided.

Indeed, we learn as much about Major Pendennis in this one fully realized picture as we are to learn about him in the rest of the book. He is a man whose life is formed by social custom of the highest sort. What we do not realize so clearly at first is that we have also

learned a great deal about the Major's sister-in-law Helen Pendennis and her son Arthur, and yet we have not even seen them.

While these two scenes illustrate clearly Thackeray's power in the persona of the 'omniscient author', and the strength of his method of telling his story in this role, they also reveal the weakness in the method. What he has presented us with is essentially two pictures caught in his mind. He calls them up from his mind and shows them to us as he knows them and sees them. We see what he sees. Rather than seeing the actual movement of people immediately before us as in a play and from which we must draw our own conclusions, we are given two still cameos, and their action, despite its gestures, is frozen and their meaning explained by a mind other than our own. By his method in the persona of the 'omniscient author' Thackeray can only give us cameos of this sort, and despite their apparent completion they are, and must remain, incomplete in themselves. Without Thackeray's presence in the persona of the 'omniscient author' at our side to animate them and explain them, they have no meaning of their own, — and indeed no real existence of their own.

Though Thackeray never fully articulates his dissatisfaction with the method of the 'omniscient author' he is aware of some of its weaknesses. Speaking of the method of the 'omniscient author' as 'a confidential talk between writer and reader' he admits that it 'must often be dull and flag', and complains that:

in the course of his volubility, the perpetual speaker must of necessity lay bare his own weaknesses, vanities, peculiarities.²⁶

He obviously feels that the method of the 'omniscient author' puts too much strain on him to sustain the illusory world of his story, and that he cannot always sustain the illusion. He is aware, too, perhaps with the commentary of the 'omniscient author' in mind, that in this persona he exposes too much of himself as William Makepeace Thackeray.

Whatever the precise reason for his dissatisfaction, it is obvious that he is dissatisfied with the method of the 'omniscient author'. When we look closely at the narrative technique in both novels, we can see his effort to free himself from his story. It manifests itself in the gradual introduction of a second persona, a second voice. This is the voice of the 'narrator historian', and it consistently claims that it does not know all about the story, and implies that the world of the story has its own existence and its characters their own volition.

Though this is not a strong voice in Vanity Fair, because Thackeray does not see the need for it until his story has been started, and then cannot do without the dominant voice of the 'omniscient author', we do hear it, and can see the direction that it tends to. This voice is not to be confused with the playful technique of dubitatio employed by the

²⁶Pendennis, I, p. xv.

voice of the 'omniscient author' to tease the reader's anticipation. When Thackeray in the voice of the 'omniscient author' says,

I am not prepared to say that Joe's heart did not thump at this little involuntary, timid, gentle motion of regard on the part of the simple girl;²⁷

or,

I don't know why this young lady took the opportunity of leaving home when Pen was coming thither, or whether he was the more piqued or relieved by her absence,²⁸

it is obvious that he does know how Joe felt, and why Laura left home at Pen's arrival, but disclaims this knowledge both to make the reader anticipate, and to allow the reader to participate with him in telling the story. When the voice of the 'narrator historian' disclaims knowledge it is because this persona, limited by the extent of its human knowledge, does not know, and it thus stresses the reality of the world which it attempts to describe. We see this when Thackeray in the voice of the 'narrator historian' says:

I fear the gentleman to whom Miss Amelia's letters were addressed was rather an obdurate critic He was seen lighting his cigar with one, to the horror of Captain Dobbin, who, it is my belief, would have given a bank-note for the document;²⁹

and when he writes:

²⁷Vanity Fair, Ch. IV, p. 33.

²⁸Pendennis, I, Ch. XXXVI, p. 363.

²⁹Vanity Fair, Ch. XIII, p. 115.

There they met, I don't know whether Miss Crawley had any private feeling of regard or emotion upon seeing her old favourite.³⁰

It is the voice of the 'narrator historian' working to establish the separate reality of the world of the story which notes:

She lingered about London whilst her husband was making preparations for his departure to his seat of government: and it is believed made more than one attempt to see her brother-in-law, Sir Pitt Crawley.³¹

This voice comments again on Becky with the same effect :

I have even been informed, that at Paris she discovered a relation of her own, no less a person than her maternal grandmother The present historian can give no certain details regarding the event.³²

We hear this voice again in the comment:

Whether my Lord really had murderous intentions towards Mrs. Becky, as Monsieur Fiche said . . . is a point which has never been ascertained.³³

In the persona of the 'narrator historian' Thackeray is not a military man, and so cannot report directly on the battle of Waterloo. Nor can he give first hand accounts of the grand social evenings in London society, so is forced to fancy them.

³⁰Ibid., Ch. XXV, p. 244.

³¹Ibid., Ch. LXIV, p. 618.

³²Ibid., Ch. LXIV, p. 626.

³³Ibid., Ch. LXIV, p. 629.

We hear the voice of the 'narrator historian' in Pendennis too, and here again it works towards freeing Thackeray from his story, and implies the separate existence of the world and the events which it reports. The 'narrator historian' persona cannot tell the contents of Captain Costigan's letter to Major Pendennis because he has never seen the letter. In this persona Thackeray implies that thoughts cannot be known if they have not been told to someone else, when he says:

These thoughts may have passed in Miss Laura's mind, though she did not, she could not, confide them to Helen. ³⁴

No one knows Major Pendennis's suffering in ministering to Lady Clavering's wants, because he never confessed them. No one can ever know Pen's most personal secrets because he 'was not a man to have this kind of secret and tell it'. ³⁵

This emphasis by Thackeray in the persona of the 'narrator historian' on confession as a source of information makes us aware of another way in which he attempts to free himself from his story, and tries to throw it into its own credible existence to function on its own. He attempts to reveal who he is in this persona, and how he has obtained his information about the world and the characters of his story. This matter of justifying his information reveals why the persona of the 'narrator historian' is less limited in knowledge about the world of the

³⁴Pendennis, II, Ch. XLI, p. 32.

³⁵Ibid., II, Ch. XLVI, p. 90.

story, and the limits of this knowledge more precisely defined in Pendennis than in Vanity Fair. It reveals, too, why Thackeray's efforts to free himself from his story in Pendennis are more coherent. From the beginning of the story in Pendennis we know who the persona of the 'narrator historian' is, and what his precise relation to the world of the story is. Though we see him only indirectly reflected in the comments which he makes about Pen, and in his relationship with the world of the story, he emerges as a polished man of society who has known Pen and is familiar with Pen's world. He knows Captain Costigan and Bob Freeny. He has been to the opera and watched the dancers performing for Lord Steyne. He has admired Cutts the singer just as Pen has. He has talked with Pen's old school fellows from Grey Friars to gain information about Pen's past. He has a copy of Pen's prize poem, and he can reproduce samples of Pen's early literary work as a journalist. He has been to Clavering St. Mary and seen the Pendennis Coat of Arms on a memorial tablet in the old church. At a point removed from Pen's world in time and space he has set out to write Pen's biography as a kindly friend. As he writes, he orders his story and confirms it with details from his own experience in Pen's world, and with information which he has got from Pen. He says:

All this narrative is taken from Pen's own confessions, so that the reader may be assured of the truth of every word of it.³⁶

³⁶Ibid., I, Ch. XIX, p. 189.

He speaks of often having heard Pen exclaim on his mother's goodness.³⁷

He tells us that he has heard Pen comment on his feelings about his broken love affair with Miss Fotheringay,³⁸ and he speaks of Pen's memories of the effigies in the old church at Clavering St. Mary.

We find the same attempt by Thackeray in Vanity Fair to reveal who he is as the persona of the 'narrator historian', and how he has obtained his information about the world of his story. Both attempts are less coherent in Vanity Fair than in Pendennis, and Thackeray's solution for freeing himself from his story by the persona of the 'narrator historian' is less easily understood, as a result. At the source of the problem is the fact that Thackeray does not establish his precise relation to his story in the persona of the 'narrator historian' early enough. When we study the way he has obtained his information about the world of the story in this persona this becomes clearer. He speaks of Amelia telling him about her father's recovery from the depression brought on by financial ruin.³⁹ He tells us that Dobbin has described how Amelia looked on the day of her wedding.⁴⁰ He has seen the picture that Dobbin keeps hidden under the lid of his desk thinking it to be a good likeness of Amelia.⁴¹ He has seen George Osborne's writing desk in his room in the house in Russell Square. He

³⁷Ibid., I, Ch. II, p. 12.

³⁸Ibid., I, Ch. XIV, p. 127.

³⁹Vanity Fair, Ch. XVII, p. 163.

⁴⁰Ibid., Ch. XXII, p. 207.

⁴¹Ibid., Ch. XLIII, p. 421.

has talked to Becky about her presentation at Court.⁴² Tom Eaves, Toady, Wagg, and Wenham supply him with gossip and stories about London society. When he notes:

Whether my lord really has murderous intentions towards Mrs. Becky, as Monsieur Fiche said . . . is a point which has never been ascertained,⁴³

he implies that he relies on the gossip of others as well. So too does his comment:

And knowing what early hours his family kept, and that it would be needless to disturb their slumbers at so late an hour, it is on record, that Major Dobbin treated himself to half-price at the Haymarket Theatre that evening.⁴⁴

He certainly shows his awareness of gossip, and his willingness to repeat it, if not believe it, in the catalogue of opinions which he gives about how the Rawdon Crawleys manage to live the life they do.

Though he encounters Amelia and Dobbin in Pumpernickel, he relies heavily on the gossip which Tapeworm gives him about their past lives. He emerges, too, in keeping with his sensitivity to good gossip, as a reader of the social columns, and is not above using their information in his story.

This diverse and dubious range of information which Thackeray

⁴²Ibid., Ch. LI, p. 487.

⁴³Ibid., Ch. LXIV, p. 629.

⁴⁴Ibid., Ch. LVIII, p. 568.

uses as the persona of 'the narrator historian' to explain how he knows the story, and to establish its reality, does nothing to define precisely his exact relation to the story in this persona, and who he is as this persona; and both failings weaken his attempt to separate the persona of the 'narrator historian' from that of the 'omniscient author', and ultimately his attempt to free himself from his story. As this persona, he emerges as a rather ambiguous man of society, and a frequenter of the same shadowy peripheral social regions as Tom Eaves. He is at the same time the historian of the lives of a group of people in the upper ten thousand of Regency London, a society man interested in a good story, and a retailer of dubious and shabby social gossip. In all of these roles he has a wide network of informants and thus is suspiciously like the persona of the 'omniscient author'. In none of these roles, has he any definable center of interest for his story, as has the 'narrator historian' persona in Pendennis. His naked intrusion into the story in the Pumpernickel sequence⁴⁵ seems a belated effort to put himself into some definable relation to the central characters in his story; but the effort comes too late to help us define the persona of the 'narrator historian' as distinct from that of the 'omniscient author' when we read the early chapters for the first time.

⁴⁵Ibid., Ch. LXII.

To confirm his use of the persona and voice of the 'narrator historian', and to strengthen his attempt to free himself from his story, and his effort to make it function on its own, Thackeray works to establish the historical reality of the two worlds presented in Vanity Fair and Pendennis. We can see Thackeray clearly working in Vanity Fair to give the world of the novel a historical reality and its own existence separate from himself as the 'omniscient author'. He speaks of his story both as a memoir and a history. He enforces this idea by relating his characters and the world of the novel to historical events when he says:

Meanwhile matters went on in Russell Square, Bloomsbury, just as if matters in Europe were not in the least disorganized. The retreat from Leipsic made no difference in the number of meals Mr. Sambo took in the servants' hall I don't think poor Amelia cared anything about Brienne and Montmirail , or was fairly interested in the war until the abdication of the Emperor.⁴⁶

Bloomsbury stands in an even more intimate relation to Europe with Napoleon's second campaign however. Amelia is worrying about George's fidelity,

when in the month of March, Anno Domini 1815, Napoleon landed at Cannes, and Louis XVIII fled, and all Europe was in alarm, and the funds fell, and old John Sedley was ruined.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Ibid., Ch. XII, p. 112.

⁴⁷Ibid., Ch. XVIII, p. 169.

Amelia follows George to Waterloo. He dies there on Mont St. Jean, and her son is born in the old city not long after. More subtly Thackeray links his story with history by suggesting that it is well known fact. Speaking of the awful pause in the cannonade on the final day of the battle of Waterloo he says:

All of us have read of what occurred during that interval. The tale is in every Englishman's mouth; and you and I, who were children when the great battle was won and lost, are never tired of hearing and recounting the history of that famous action.⁴⁸

He speaks of Lord Steyne's residence in Hampshire

of which we all remember the wonderful furniture which was sold at my Lord's demise by a late celebrated auctioneer.⁴⁹

He assumes that

everybody knows the melancholy end of that nobleman, which befel at Naples two months after the French Revolution of 1830: when the most Honourable George Gustavus, Marquis of Steyne, Earl of Gaunt and of Gaunt Castle . . . — died, after a series of fits, brought on, as the papers said, by the shock occasioned to his Lordship's sensibilities by the downfall of the ancient French monarchy.⁵⁰

Thackeray stresses the historical reality and separateness of his story in another way. He calls on his readers to verify the reality

⁴⁸Ibid., Ch. XXXII, p. 314.

⁴⁹Ibid., Ch. XLVII, p. 452.

⁵⁰Ibid., Ch. LXIV, p. 629.

of the events in his story from their experience. Speaking of old Sedley after his ruin he says:

My beloved reader has no doubt in the course of his experience been waylaid by many such a luckless companion. He takes you into the corner; he has his bundle of papers out of his gaping coat pocket; and the tape off, and the string in his mouth, and the favourite letters selected and laid before you; and who does not know the sad eager half-crazy look which he fixes on you with his hopeless eyes?⁵¹

Describing the Sedleys in poverty he says:

You and I, my dear reader, may drop into this condition one day: for have not many of our friends attained it? Our luck may fail: our powers forsake us: our place on the boards be taken by better and younger mimes — the chance of life roll away and leave us shattered and stranded. Then men will walk across the road when they meet you — or, worse still, hold you out a couple of fingers and patronize you in a pitying way.⁵²

Thackeray stresses the separate reality of Vanity Fair in a variety of other ways. Early in the story he stresses his separateness from the characters and thus enforces their historical existence. After a catalogue of Becky's mischievous comments on life at Queen's Crawley, he remarks to the reader:

That she might, when on her knees, have been thinking of something better than Miss Horrocks's ribbons, has possibly struck both of us;⁵³

⁵¹Ibid., Ch. XX, p. 189.

⁵²Ibid., Ch. XXXVIII, pp. 373-74.

⁵³Ibid., Ch. VII, p. 80.

and he emphasizes the implied separation, again with reference to Becky's conduct, and adds:

Otherwise you might fancy it was I who was sneering at the practice of devotion, which Miss Sharp finds so ridiculous; that it was I who laughed good-humouredly at the reeling old Silenus of a baronet— whereas the laughter comes from one who has no reverence except for prosperity, and no eye for anything beyond success.⁵⁴

He uses a rhetorical question to stress Dobbin's independence of action with Amelia, when he says:

Why did he not take her in his arms, and swear that he would never leave her? She must have yielded: She could not but have obeyed him;⁵⁵

and he apostrophizes Dobbin to the same end with a despairing,

Poor Dobbin; poor old William! That unlucky word had undone the worth of many a year.⁵⁶

Apologizing for his dreary account of Amelia's solitary imprisonment with her aged father, and the lack of 'some cheerful or humourous incident to enliven it', he confesses that he, as

the historian, has no such enlivening incident to relate in the narrative of Amelia's captivity.⁵⁷

With the same effect he admits that as historian he can give 'no certain details' regarding a rumoured meeting between Becky and her maternal

⁵⁴Ibid., Ch. VIII, p. 81.

⁵⁵Ibid., Ch. LVIII, p. 565.

⁵⁶Ibid., Ch. LXVI, p. 642.

⁵⁷Ibid., Ch. LVII, p. 553.

grandmother in Paris.⁵⁸ He emphasizes this separation between himself and the historical reality of Vanity Fair with other subtle touches. Speaking of Amelia's journey along the Rhine, he says:

I like to dwell upon this period of her life, and to think that she was cheerful and happy.⁵⁹

Commenting on the gossip which Sir Pitt has heard about Becky's conduct during her married life, he concludes:

As I have no doubt that the greater part of the story was false and dictated by interested malevolence, it shall not be repeated here.⁶⁰

When we turn to Pendennis we find the same basic effort by Thackeray to emphasize the historical reality of the story, and thus to provide it with the completeness and independence which underlies dramatic form. He cajoles the characters as individuals with their own power of action and their own separate existence. Speaking of Pen's love affair with Blanche Amory, he says:

But oh, you silly Pendennis, if you wanted this one, why did you not speak? Perhaps neither party was in earnest. You were only playing at being in love.⁶¹

He stresses his separation from Pen when he says:

⁵⁸Ibid., Ch. LXIV, p. 626.

⁵⁹Ibid., Ch. LXII, p. 601.

⁶⁰Ibid., Ch. LXIV, pp. 618-9.

⁶¹Pendennis, I, Ch. XXV, p. 247.

We are not pledging ourselves for the correctness of his 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 . . . man.⁶²

As the 'faithful historian;' he is bound to tell us certain facts about Blanche.⁶³ He says that it is not his business

to enquire too closely into the by-gones of our characters, except in so far as their previous history appertains to the development of this present story.⁶⁴

He notes that Sir Francis Clavering's friend Bob Freeny must be spoken of with respect because he is a dead shot.⁶⁵ Lady Rockminster's social scheming with Major Pendennis cannot be revealed in detail, because 'her ladyship (now, of course, much advanced in years) is still alive'.⁶⁶ He speaks of himself as Pen's biographer, and implies that Pen or members of his family are still alive when he says:

And here let us speak very tenderly and in the strictest confidence of an event which befell him, and to which he never liked an allusion.⁶⁷

⁶²Ibid., II, Ch. LXI, pp. 249-50.

⁶³Ibid., I, Ch. XXV, p. 245.

⁶⁴Ibid., I, Ch. XXV, p. 246.

⁶⁵Ibid., II, Ch. XLIV, p. 54.

⁶⁶Ibid., II, Ch. LXXV, p. 376.

⁶⁷Ibid., II, Ch. LIII, p. 154.

By the complex of devices with which Thackeray attempts to establish the persona and voice of the 'narrator historian' in an attempt to free himself from his story, and to give its world a separate existence of its own in Vanity Fair and in Pendennis, he has in a sense begun the inversion of the traditional relation of the 'omniscient author' to his story which leads to complete dramatic form. In these two novels, in his use of this persona, the sensitive recording mind and the seeing eye are no longer outside the world of the story in the void and unaccountable, and no longer does the world of the story depend entirely on an informing inscrutable presence there for its existence. Now the world of the story has its own real existence and the sensitive recording mind and seeing eye, if they are not yet part of a voice which speaks from the world of the story, at least have some tangible relation to this world.

Even when we look at Thackeray's use of this persona and voice in its most favourable light, as a separate solution to dramatic form, we realize that it fails. We still listen to Thackeray as the 'narrator historian' persona tell his story removed from the world of his story by time and space. We do not see and hear him thinking and talking in the immediacy of the world of the story as he interacts with it, and as he records what he sees and feels and thinks, in the way for example, Strether does. Pen's biographer and the gossipy historian of Vanity Fair have been in the world of the story, but even then we realize they were not present in the actions which they record. Pen's

biographer has talked to Pen about his love affair with Miss Fotheringay long after it has ended, and Amelia's wedding ribbons are faded long before Dobbin tells the gossipy historian about the wedding. And both story-tellers tell their histories at a further remove in time and space than this. Thackeray's use of this persona and voice fails in another way. This persona still does not know enough of the details to tell the story. The details which it does know are trivial and incidental in Vanity Fair. As the reflective meditating mind which gives significance to the world and events of the story, it is ultimately displaced in both novels by the persona of the 'omniscient author'.

And of course this is merely looking at the method of the 'narrator historian', and in the final analysis this must be seen within the context of Thackeray's larger narrative technique. The voice of the narrator historian does not tell the story alone. Thackeray begins to tell his story in both novels in the voice of the 'omniscient author' and he can never reject it, because he has not provided a way for the persona of the 'narrator historian' to know all the details necessary for telling his story. He finishes by telling the story with two voices since neither alone is sufficient to free him from the story and to achieve dramatic form; and together they add uncertainty and confusion to failure, and we are in a sense at our point of beginning, moral uncertainty and the two voices.

It is the method of the two voices which we see sharply focused in the famous confrontation scene in the little house in Curzon Street. In the sequence which leads up to the scene it is the persona of the 'omniscient author' who tells the story. We are told about Steyne's schemes to remove little Rawdon and Briggs. The growing intimacy between Steyne and Becky on the evening of the charades at Gaunt House is implied. We are told about the disturbing rumours which Rawdon has heard about his wife and Steyne. We are told of Rawdon's defensive behaviour and his arrest. We are told about his growing suspicion and anger in the spunging house in Cursitor Street after his arrest. Rawdon's confused mental state is confided to us as he hastens home through the evening darkness after his premature release by Lady Jane. Though it is not at first apparent, it is still this voice which describes the scene that is revealed when Rawdon throws open the door of the brightly lit drawing room. It tells us how Rawdon's white face impresses Becky, and at the same time how Becky and Steyne appear to Rawdon. It notes that the brilliants on Becky's breast are a gift from Steyne and that Steyne suspects a trap. — It informs us how Becky admires her victorious husband, and it traces her thoughts as she is left alone with the sunshine beginning to pour into the rooms. It is precisely at this point that the voice of the second persona interposes with the questions, "What had happened?"

Was she guilty or not?"⁶⁸ It is a crude and altogether unsophisticated manoeuvre. But Thackeray is caught for a single instant in the act of attempting to free himself from his story, and we see his method illuminated almost as brightly as the objects in the room in Curzon Street. It is only for an instant, but in this instant we see him in the persona and voice of the 'narrator historian' accepting the limited knowledge and point of view of this persona to emphasize the separateness of the world of the story. The manoeuvre does not work of course. It is too sudden, too poorly prepared for, and in the final analysis too confusing. There are too many points of view. On the one hand we have the overview of the 'omniscient author' persona which can in turn give us the point of view of any of the characters, and on the other hand we have the point of view of the 'narrator historian' persona with his vision and knowledge limited by human capabilities. Too many eyes see the world of the story, and too few of them are in it. We end by seeing this world from the point of view of the 'omniscient author' whose vision we are forced to accept; and this persona is remarkably like William Makepeace Thackeray. The persona of the 'narrator historian' cannot assert its point of view or its method in the presence of this other persona, and unless we are sensitive to Thackeray's problem, it fades into a mere tactic to avoid taking a

⁶⁸Vanity Fair, Ch. LIII, p. 517.

moral position.

The method of the two voices ultimately will not serve, either as a method by which Thackeray can free himself from his story and gain a rudimentary dramatic form, or as a satisfactory method for telling his story in Vanity Fair and Pendennis. The voice of the 'narrator historian' justifying his knowledge of the world of his story serves only to bring on the dreaded question of authenticity in those areas of the story where the voice of the 'omniscient author' is heard alone. And the voice of the 'omniscient author' once admitted cannot stop talking and telling all,⁶⁹ and ultimately destroys any gains which the other voice works to establish. Thackeray is right in sensing that he needs the two personae and two voices. He needs the one that knows enough to tell the story and that at the same time can reflect upon it to give it meaning, and he needs the other which is in the real world of the story; but they cannot exist together as separate entities. They must be fused, and this in a sense takes us into his experiment with dramatic form in Esmond.

⁶⁹D. Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 139.

CHAPTER THREE

ESMOND: THE VOICE OF THE ACTOR

Esmond at first seems an entirely different sort of novel than Vanity Fair and Pendennis. It has as its setting the England of Queen Anne's reign rather than the almost contemporary Nineteenth-century society of the two earlier novels. It no longer has at its center that quality of social criticism which informs these two novels, and though it deals with the problems faced by a young man going out into society for the first time, as does Pendennis, the emphasis is on the individual rather than social ills, and the tone of the novel as a whole is more serious and the mood more sombre. The most interesting difference in Esmond, however, is that Henry Esmond the dispossessed fourth Viscount of Castlewood tells the story, in fact the story of his own life. It is precisely when we examine this difference in terms of narrative technique that we see the way that Esmond represents a logical development of the earlier novels.

When we examine this matter of Esmond's relation to his story, we realize that Esmond, like Vanity Fair and Pendennis is another solution to the problem of how the author knows and tells his story while at the same time remaining free from it, — another solution to what I have called the problem of dramatic form. The solution

which Thackeray offers to this problem in Esmond is more consistent and more sophisticated than in either Vanity Fair or Pendennis. He obviously plans his solution in advance, and he seems to have capitalized on the insights gained in working with the problem as he wrote the two earlier novels.

As I have suggested, the difficulty with his solution for achieving dramatic form in Vanity Fair and Pendennis was that the two distinct voices which he used there could not exist together as separate voices. The voice of the 'narrator historian' persona in attempting to justify its knowledge of the real world of the story, in order to give this world its own separate existence, only served to bring on the fatal question of the authenticity of Thackeray's knowledge of his story in those areas of the novel where the voice of the 'omniscient author' persona was heard alone. At the same time, once the voice of the 'omniscient author' persona was admitted to the story, it dominated the voice of the 'narrator historian' persona. In fact, once the voice of the 'omniscient author' persona was admitted, it made the voice of the 'narrator historian' persona sound like moral uncertainty in Thackeray. The difficulty, too, with the persona of the 'narrator historian', particularly in Vanity Fair, was that it could not know the details necessary to tell the story because it had not been prepared for in advance; and in both novels, in the presence of the 'omniscient author' persona remarkably like Thackeray, it could not function as the center

of consciousness — the reflective mind which meditated on the story to give it significance. Most seriously of all, however, in terms of achieving full dramatic form, it was apparent in the final analysis that the persona of the 'narrator historian' was removed from the world of the story in time and space as distinctly as the persona of the 'omniscient author'.

Thackeray's solution to the problem of achieving dramatic form in Esmond can be seen as a resolution of these difficulties in Vanity Fair and Pendennis. He realizes, I think, that in Esmond he needs the dramatic value of each of the two personae in these two novels. He needs the persona of the 'narrator historian' with a character distinct from his own as William Makepeace Thackeray and credibly related to the world of the story to act as narrator. He needs, also, a persona with the value of the 'omniscient author' to act as the center of consciousness — the reflective mind which meditates on the story to give it significance. Vanity Fair and Pendennis have clearly proved that the two cannot exist together as separate voices without confusion, and even then, because of his inevitable association with the persona of the 'omniscient author', Thackeray is still involved too closely in his story. His solution in Esmond is remarkably simple and efficient. He fuses the two personae and their two voices by introducing the narrator in character clearly related to the world of the story, and has him tell the story. Thackeray has found a way to know and tell his story while

appearing not to be part of it at all. The novel which is Esmond's story is complete in itself and independent of Thackeray, and thus has attained a rudimentary dramatic form. But it also has the potential for a more sophisticated type of dramatic form as we shall see later.

That Henry Esmond telling his own story has the functional value of the 'narrator historian' persona of Vanity Fair and Pendennis is immediately clear. From the title page of the book we know that he is a Colonel in the service of her Majesty Queen Anne, and that the story which we are to read is his memoir. We realize from the preface that this memoir is being arranged by his daughter Rachel Esmond Warrington. From the Esmond genealogy which she includes with his memoirs we know the date of his birth and his peculiar relation to the family. We realize from the date of her preface, and from her comments, that she is bringing together his memoirs a hundred years after his birth and for the benefit of his descendants. It is she, clearly, and not Thackeray, who sets the story we are to read and the central character we are to meet in their historical perspective, and she fills out this perspective by her preparatory commentary. She tells us where the Castlewood estate is situated in Virginia, and when her father first occupied it. She tells us that 'after a long and stormy life in England' he lived in peace and honour in Virginia. She speaks of his generosity and hospitality, and of the veneration in which he was

held by his family. She speaks of him as a noble gentleman, and tells us that he bred her children from their infancy ' in the practice and knowledge of Truth, and Love, and Honour'. Describing her father she says:

My father was of a dark complexion, with a very great forehead and dark hazel eyes, overhung by eyebrows which remained black long after his hair was white. His nose was aquiline, his smile extraordinarily sweet. . . . He was of rather low stature, not being above five feet seven inches in height But small as he was, he had a perfect grace and majesty of deportment, such as I have never seen in this country, except perhaps in our friend Mr. Washington, and commanded respect wherever he appeared.¹

She speaks of her father's quickness and agility. She gives us some insight into the possessiveness of her mother's relation with her father, not without a touch of bitterness, and reveals that it was only after her mother's death that she began to know her father well. She gives us an impression of her father's public deportment and an insight into his personality, when she says:

Though I never heard my father use a rough word, 'twas extraordinary with how much awe his people regarded him He was never familiar, though perfectly simple and natural; he was the same with the meanest man as with the greatest, and as courteous to a black slave-girl as to the Governor's wife. No one ever thought of taking a liberty with him (except once a tipsy gentleman from York, and I am bound to own that my papa never forgave him): he set the humblest

¹W. M. Thackeray, The History of Henry Esmond, Esquire (New York: Modern Library, 1950), pp. xxxii-iii.

people at once on their ease with him, and brought down the most arrogant by a grave satiric way, which made persons exceedingly afraid of him.²

She gives us further insight into his personality when she reports:

They say he liked to be the first in his company; but what company was there in which he would not be first;³

and when she repeats Lord Bolingbroke's remark to her:

"Were your father, madame . . . to go into the woods, the Indians would elect him Sachem".⁴

Certainly Rachel Esmond Warrington's portrait of her father is biased by filial devotion, but this only adds to its authenticity; and its authenticity is enhanced by the fact that it comes from within the world of the book. It gives us an initial definition of the mind which is to unfold the story and of the point of view from which we are to look at the story.

This initial definition is strengthened by Henry Esmond's own introduction to his story. In his discussion of history we are impressed with the accuracy of the portrait that his daughter has given us of him. He emerges as a mixture of formality and common sense. He writes with a formal measured style which can rise gracefully to classical allusion and yet is touched with the pungency of idiomatic speech. His

²Ibid., pp. xxxiv-v.

³Ibid., p. xxxv.

⁴Ibid., p. xxxv.

thought too traces the same curve. He is aware of classical convention in tragedy and history, and yet can see that the formality of historical convention is not fitted to describe the affairs of common people.

Speaking of Louis the Fourteenth he says:

I have seen in his very old age and decrepitude the old French King Louis the Fourteenth, the type and model of Kinghood — who never moved but to measure, who lived and died according to the laws of his Court-marshal, persisting in enacting through life the part of Hero; and, divested of poetry, this was but a little wrinkled old man, pock-marked, and with a great periwig and red heels to make him look tall — a hero for a book if you like, or for a brass statue or a painted ceiling, a god in a Roman shape, but what more than a man for Madame Maintenon, or the barber who shaved him? ⁵

Thinking of Queen Anne in the same way, he says:

I wonder shall History ever pull off her periwig and cease to be court-ridden? Shall we see something of France and England besides Versailles and Windsor? I saw Queen Anne at the latter place tearing down the Park slopes, after her stag-hounds, and driving her one-horse chaise — a hot, red-faced woman, not in the least resembling that statue of her which turns its stone back upon St. Paul's and faces the coaches struggling up Ludgate Hill. She was neither better bred nor wiser than you and me. ⁶

This balance of formality and informality in his thought and his characteristic mode of expression reveals that quality of cynicism which Rachel speaks of in her father. It reveals, too, something of that deeper sombreness and unforgiving bitterness in his personality which

⁵Ibid., p. 21.

⁶Ibid., p. 22.

her anecdote about his reaction to the drunken gentleman from York illuminated. As he thinks about the function of history and its traditional conventions, we gradually see the reason for his republicanism and for the underlying quality of sadness which permeates his memoirs. The Castlewoods have been deluded and betrayed by their adulation of the unworthy Stuarts. He has seen too much of life and too much of the empty pursuit of greatness to entertain any longer illusions about the sanctity of loyalty to the great, or about the great who squander loyalty. He has come to accept almost dispassionately that kings like common men are both good and bad. He realizes that the highest goodness resides in the ordinary actions of everyday existence which are motivated by a sense of duty rather than in the empty and futile pursuit of greatness. It is essentially this philosophy which shapes his conception of the function of history when he says:

In a word, I would have history familiar rather than heroic; and think that Mr. Hogarth and Mr. Fielding will give our children a much better idea of the manners of the present age in England, than the Court Gazette and the newspapers which we get thence.⁷

It is this conception of history and the personality which it springs from which are to shape Esmond's story as he records it in his memoirs.

⁷Ibid., p. 22.

When we look at this opening section of Esmond made up of Rachel's preface and Esmond's introduction, we can see clearly how Thackeray has taken precautions for his novel to be complete in itself and independent in a way that neither of the two earlier novels could be. Esmond has the dramatic value of the 'narrator historian' persona of Vanity Fair and Pendennis; but he has also the value of the 'omniscient author' persona in these novels. We have a strong impression of him in the role of narrator as a character distinct from William Makepeace Thackeray. We have a definite conception of the psychological forces and the cultural exposure which have shaped his personality. We see clearly his precise relation to the world of his story, and we understand how he has knowledge of his story. We know his reason for telling his story. And we realize that his is to be the mind that knows the story and gives it significance. The 'mind that knows the story and the eye that sees it' are no longer unaccountable, or to be confused with William Makepeace Thackeray's. By using this device of the narrator in character Thackeray has dealt with the look of incompleteness and the sense of dependency which the dominant persona of the 'omniscient author' gave to Vanity Fair and Pendennis. Speaking of Thackeray's use of the narrator in character in Esmond, Lubbock notes:

He takes the first step, and he picks up the loose end I spoke of, and he packs it into this book; and thence forward we see precisely how the narrator stands towards the story he unfolds. It is the first step in the

dramatization of picture.⁸

Thackeray's use of Esmond as the narrator in character is the first step in giving dramatic form to his novel. But, as I noted, his method has the potential for a more sophisticated type of dramatic form. Esmond as the narrator in character tells the story, but the story in fact deals with his own life. This is significant for the higher dramatic form that I have in mind. As I pointed out earlier, the most serious weakness with the two personae in Vanity Fair and Pendennis in terms of dramatic form was that both were removed in time and space from the immediate world of the story which they narrated. Both novels depended on a presence outside the story and ultimately we had the impression of listening to a narrator tell a story about a drama somewhere behind him in time and space. This is not the case in Esmond. Since Esmond tells his own story he is both the narrator in character removed from the immediate world of the story, and the character at the center of events. By having Esmond tell his own story and by having him most often speak about himself as he would speak about another person, Thackeray gives us the impression that Esmond the narrator in character fades into the background and leaves himself as the actor involved in the events of his life as they happen. Whether Thackeray

⁸P. Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), p. 126.

has Esmond usually speak of himself in the third person because he is attempting to reproduce the convention of the historical memoir, or because he has precise insight into full dramatic form is difficult to decide and not really essential to my argument here. The point is that as Esmond's story unfolds we have the impression of him as the sensitive recording mind immediately involved in the events of his life as they develop. Instead of the impression that we are listening to the inscrutable persona of the 'omniscient author' or the narrator in character tell us about a drama already behind them in time and space, we now have the impression of immediate dramatic enactment before us from which we construct our own meaning as we observe.

Esmond is always at the center of his world as the central character in his own story, and we watch him in the immediacy of each event in his life as he reacts to it, and as he simultaneously records his subjective responses to it apparently from within the world of the story. In such a way we see Esmond's first impression of Castlewood. He begins the journey there in the early morning riding on a pillion following Lord Viscount Castlewood and ^{the} dark figure of Father Holt with his companion Monsieur Blaise telling him terrifying stories. On the third day at evening they come to 'a village standing on green with elms round it' and are greeted by the people. They pass on to a grand house and Henry sees 'many gray towers with vanes and the windows flaming in the sunshine.' He notices 'a great

army of rooks, wheeling over their heads' and flying off towards the woods behind the house. When they come to the house they pass 'under an arch into a courtyard with a fountain in the center'. Many men come to attend them and they stare and whisper as they notice Esmond, and he has a sense of shame about his past.⁹ We share his wonderment as he meets his god-father's wife, the lady Viscountess. Her face is daubed with white and red up to the eyes, and the paint gives it an unearthly glare.¹⁰

We see Esmond again at the center of another scene. He is a lonely and apprehensive child reading in the Yellow Gallery of Castlewood, a tiny figure sitting under the family portraits by Van Dyck as he awaits the charity of the new Lord Castlewood. We see his delight and wonder as he is greeted by the Lady Castlewood, 'the most charming object he had ever looked on', her golden hair shining in the sun, her dazzling bloom, her lips smiling, and her eyes beaming with kindness. We see his encounter with Lord Castlewood, and hear that fat gentleman's great laugh as he discovers his wife with her new adorer. We share Henry's feeling of silliness as he is discovered in his attitude of humility. We see his impression of Beatrix's solemn scrutiny with her large pair of suspicious eyes. We see the smile which shines over her face, as beautiful as a cherub's, as she puts out her tiny

⁹The History of Henry Esmond, Bk. I, Ch. III, pp. 45-47.

¹⁰Ibid., Bk. I, Ch. III, p. 48.

hand to welcome him. We share 'the delightful pang of gratitude, happiness, affection' which fills his heart as he slowly realizes that he has been accepted by the new Lord and Lady Castlewood and their daughter.¹¹

Always we have the impression of Esmond in the midst of a scene. We look at it through his eyes and its meaning is filtered to us through the emotional colouration which it takes on in the process. We see him watching the departure of Lord Mohun after Mohun has offended Lord Castlewood.

Lord Castlewood stood at the door watching his guests and his people as they went out under the arch of the outer gate. When he was there, Lord Mohun turned once more, my Lord Viscount slowly raised his beaver and bowed. His face wore a peculiar livid look, Harry thought. He cursed and kicked away his dogs, which came jumping about him — then he walked up to the fountain in the center of the court, and leaned against a pillar and looked into the basin. As Esmond crossed over to his own room, late the chaplins, on the other side of the Court, and turned to enter in at the low door, he saw Lady Castlewood looking through the curtains of the great window of the drawing-room overhead, at my Lord as he stood regarding the fountain. There was in the court a peculiar silence somehow . . . the sky bright overhead; the buttresses of the building and the sundial casting shadow over the gilt momento mori incrimed underneath; the two dogs, a black greyhound and a spaniel nearly white, the one with his face up to the sun, and the other snuffing amongst the grass and stones, and my Lord leaning over the fountain, which was bubbling audibly.¹²

¹¹Ibid., Bk. I, Ch. I, pp. 26-28.

¹²Ibid., Bk. I, Ch. XIV, p. 199.

It is Esmond's mind which registers the objective correlatives of impending doom — the disparity between the peculiar silence and the bright sky, the shadow of time across the gilt momento mori, Viscount Castlewood's restrained and formal salute of farewell, his savage kicks at his dogs, his brooding silence beside the fountain, and Lady Castlewood's face at the window — and it is our mind which reads their meaning through Esmond's record of them in the immediacy of the scene.

It is only gradually we come to realize that for all its look of immediate dramatic enactment, Esmond falls short of perfected dramatic form. We come to see that our impression that Esmond is the sensitive recording mind at the center of the unfolding events in his life, dramatically interacting with them and recording his thoughts and the emotional contours of his environment in the immediacy of each experience, is largely only an impression which grows out of Thackeray's method of having Esmond tell his own story. The scene in which Esmond returns to Castlewood after a term at Cambridge is instructive in understanding this when we compare it with a scene from The Ambassadors, as Loofbourow does.¹³

The old room had been ornamented and beautified not a little to receive him. The flowers were in the window in a china vase; and there was a fine new counterpane on the bed . . .

The children, who are always house tell-tales, soon

¹³J. Loofbourow, Thackeray and the Form of Fiction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 200-03.

made him acquainted with the little history of the house and family. Papa had been to London twice. Papa often went away now Many gentlemen came to stop with papa, and papa had gotten a new game from London, a French game, called billiards. . . papa did not care about them learning, and laughed when they were at their books; but mama liked them to learn, and taught them; and "I don't think papa is fond of mama," said Miss Beatrix, with her great eyes. She had come quite close up to Harry Esmond by the time this prattle took place . . .

"You shouldn't say that papa is not fond of mamma," said the boy, at this confession. "Mamma never said so; and mamma forbade you to say it, Miss Beatrix."

'Twas this, no doubt, that accounted for the sadness in Lady Castlewood's eyes, and the plaintive vibrations of her voice. Who does not know of eyes, lighted by love once, where the flame shines no more! — of lamps extinguished, once properly trimmed and tended? Every man has such in his house. Such mementoes make our most splendid chambers look blank and sad; such faces seen in a day cast a gloom upon our sunshine. So oaths mutually sworn, and invocations of Heaven, and priestly ceremonies, and fond belief, and love, so fond and faithful that it never doubted but that it should live for ever, are all of no avail towards making love eternal: it dies, in spite of the bans and the priest: and I have often thought there should be a visitation of the sick for it, and a funeral service, and an extreme unction, and an abi in pace. It has of course, like all mortal things — its beginning, progress and decay. It buds and it blooms out into sunshine, and it withers and ends. Strephon and Chloe languish apart; join in a rapture: and presently you hear that Chloe is crying, and Strephon has broken his crook across her back. Can you mend it so as to show no marks of rupture? Not all the priests of Hymen, not all the incantations to the gods, can make it whole!

Waking up from dreams, books, and visions of college honours, in which for two years Harry Esmond had been immersed, he found himself, instantly, on his return home, in the midst of this actual tragedy of life which absorbed and interested him more than all his tutor had

taught him.¹⁴

The scene which Loofbourow chooses to compare with this is Strether's first private interview with Madame de Vionnet.

She occupied, his hostess, in the Rue de Bellechasse, the first floor of an old house to which our visitors had had access from an old clean court . . . he found himself making out, as a background of the occupant, some glory, some prosperity of the First Empire, some Napoleonic glamour, some dim lustre of the great legend; elements clinging still to all the consular chairs and mythological brasses and sphinxes' heads . . . the world of Chateaubriand, of Madame de Staël, even of the young Lamartine, had left its stamp of harps and urns and torches . . . across the room, he made out the great Revue; but even that familiar face, conspicuous in Mrs. Newsome's parlours, scarce counted here as a modern note. . .

She was seated, near the fire, on a small stuffed and fringed chair, one of the few modern articles in the room. . . one of the windows, at a distance, stood open to the mildness and stillness, out of which, in the short pauses, came the faint sound, pleasant and homely, almost rustic, of a splash and a clatter of sabots from some coach-house on the other side of the court. Madame de Vionnet, while Strether sat there, wasn't to shift her posture by an inch. "I don't think you seriously believe in what you're doing," she said; "but all the same, you know, I'm going to treat you quite as if I did."¹⁵

Loofbourow's comparison of the two passages is perceptive. On the one hand we have perhaps Thackeray most complete achievement in dramatic form and, on the other, an illustration of James' perfected dramatic form. The temptation to equate them is strong, and Loofbourow does

¹⁴The History of Henry Esmond, Bk. I, Ch. XI, pp. 154-56.

¹⁵H. James, The Ambassadors (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1959), pp. 146-147.

so. Speaking of Esmond he notes:

Here, as in The Ambassadors, the sequence progresses from a factual setting of the scene, executed with an impersonal objectivity, to an evocation of the narrator's emotional experience The allusive range of the prose is amplified in the long reflective paragraph which has the same commenting, interpretive, and assimilative quality as the development of Strether's reminiscent associations in James' novel.¹⁶

He continues, comparing both novels more directly:

What is especially striking is how James and Thackeray agree in varying the specificity of the narrative point of view, and in combining subjective responses with objective drama. Like the sequence in The Ambassadors, the passage from Esmond moves in several dimensions, exploring simultaneously the narrator's subjective experience and the configuration of external event.¹⁷

And he concludes by noting that 'Esmond's allusive reminiscences parallel Strether's historical associations'.¹⁸ Loofbourow of course is right in one sense. Thackeray here is at his very best in creating dramatic form and appears to match James. We must recognize, however, that it is only appearance. The weakness of Loofbourow's comparison is revealed in his last comment. While Esmond's allusive reminiscences parallel Strether's historical associations, they are not the same, and it is in recognizing the difference that we see the limits of Thackeray's achievement in dramatic form. Both sequences give

¹⁶J. Loofbourow, Thackeray and the Form of Fiction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 203.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 203-4.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 204.

way, to 'a profounder exploration of the narrator's interior consciousness', but in Esmond the narrator is ultimately distinguishable from the observer and the unfolding interior consciousness, in a way that he is not in The Ambassadors. It is Strether's mind that traces the soft contour of historical association which clings to Madame de Vionnet's room, and we follow the delicate tracing of his thought as it unfolds. While it is the young Esmond who broods on broken marriages and decaying love, it is the aging narrator removed from the scene by time and space who gives his richly sombre thought to the boy returned from university to discover a domestic tragedy. The thought of ^{the} aging narrator cannot fuse with that of the observing boy in the way that the impersonal narrative voice in James' novel quite naturally is heard as the manifestation of Strether's unspoken thought. The boy Esmond has not the rich repository of thought and experience to give to the scene which he reflects upon in the way that the mature Strether has. The difference is a small one, but it is of the greatest significance in the matter of achieving dramatic form.

We see this limitation in Thackeray's method again and again once we have understood it. We have the impression of the immediacy of dramatic enactment as Esmond confronts a scene as the sensitive recording presence and absorbs and reflects the scene and is affected by it in turn, and then, suddenly, as the scene must be enriched by

the meditating mind of Esmond the observer, we are aware of the foreign voice. It is still Esmond's, but it is not Esmond the observer's. It is the voice of the mature and cultured Esmond thinking back to his early experience and enriching it with the wealth of his mature reflection.

We see this effect as Esmond returns from the 'Vigo Bay Expedition' and goes on the 29th of December to Winchester to meet Rachel at the cathedral. We listen to the impersonal narrative voice which might be Esmond's thoughts recording the scene:

There was scarce a score of persons in the Cathedral beside the Dean and some of his clergy, and the choristers, young and old that performed the beautiful evening prayer. But Mr. Tusher was one of the officiants, and read from the eagle in an authoritative voice, and a great black periwig: and in the stalls, still in her black widow's hood, sat Esmond's dear mistress, her son by her side, very much grown, and indeed a noble-looking youth, with his mother's eyes, and his father's curling brown hair, that fell over his point de Venise — a pretty picture such as Vandyke might have painted.¹⁹

It is then that we notice the voice of the mature Esmond, outside the scene and distinct from the thoughts of Esmond the observer, enriching the scene with his reflection:

Monsieur Rigand's portrait of my Lord Viscount, done at Paris afterwards, gives but a French version of his manly, frank, English face.²⁰

But the effect is quickly concealed. We are immersed in the dramatic

¹⁹The History of Henry Esmond, Bk. II, Ch. VI, p. 280.

²⁰Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. VI, p. 280.

immediacy of the impressions of the scene again as they are refracted through Esmond's mind. We see Frank's excited recognition of Esmond and Rachel's warning finger raised to Frank, and we share Esmond's yearning in that suspended instant as he waits for the moment of reconciliation. The prayers drag on unheard, and then the procession of ecclesiastics moves out of the inner chapel. A moment of awkward speech follows and then Esmond's response overflows in a passage which evokes spoken words and unspoken thoughts:

She gave him her hand, her little fair hand; there was only her marriage ring on it. The quarrel was all over. The year of grief and estrangement was passed. They never had been separated. His mistress had never been out of his mind all that time. No, not once. No, not in the prison; nor in the camp; nor on shore before the enemy . . . Brighter eyes there might be, and faces more beautiful, but none so dear.²¹

Frank breaks in with a joke about Tusher. The invitation to supper at Walcote House follows the conversation with Tusher and they begin to walk home. Frank has gone ahead to warn Beatrix. We hear Rachel's joyful exultation as Esmond hears it, and we see her as she appears to him:

"And to-day, Henry, in the anthem, when they sang it, 'When the Lord turned the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream,' I thought, yes, like them that dream — them that dream. And then it went, 'They that sow in

²¹Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. VI, p. 282.

tears shall reap in joy: and he that goeth forth and weepeth, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him'; I looked up from the book, and saw you. I was not surprised when I saw you. I knew you would come, my dear, and saw the gold sunshine round your head. "

She smiled an almost wild smile as she looked up at him. The moon was up by this time, glittering keen in the frosty sky. He could see, for the first time, now clearly, her sweet careworn face.²²

And as his thoughts probe the significance of the moment, we are aware of that other voice of the mature Esmond slowly imposing itself on Esmond's meditation to enrich it, and then modulating imperceptibly to leave us with an impression of the younger Esmond's thoughts alone.

As he had sometimes felt, gazing up from the deck at midnight into the boundless starlit depths overhead, in a rapture of devout wonder at that endless brightness and beauty — in some such a way now, the depth of this pure devotion (which was for the first time, revealed to him) quite smote upon him, and filled his heart with thanksgiving. . . . Not in vain — not in vain has he lived — hard and thankless should he be to think so — that has such a treasure given him. What is ambition compared to that, but selfish vanity? To be rich, to be famous? What do these profit a year hence, when other names sound louder than yours, when you lie hidden away under the ground, along with idle titles engraven on your coffin? But only true love lives after you Non omnis moriar — if dying, I yet live in a tender heart or two

"If — if 'tis so, dear lady," Mr. Esmond said, "why should I ever leave you?"²³

²² Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. VI, p. 285.

²³ Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. VI, p. 286.

We notice this effect, too, when the party arrives at Walcote House. Our first impression is of Esmond's thoughts and sensations as he enters. The festive supper table is spread, there are lights everywhere, and an atmosphere of love and forgiveness pervades the house. Young Lockwood stands out in the Castlewood livery of tawny and blue. Rachel presses Esmond's arm as they pass into the hall. Her face is lighted with joy and her eyes beam with welcome for the prodigal returned. Laughter and noisy conversation fill the room. Suddenly, in the darkened staircase leading from an open gallery above, Beatrix appears,

a wax candle in her hand, and illuminating her . . . the light falling indeed upon the scarlet ribbons which she wore, and upon the most brilliant white neck in the world. ²⁴

The impression we receive is refracted through Esmond's mind, and, as his mind begins to unfold his subjective response to the event, we are aware that it is modulated briefly by the mind of the mature Esmond remembering Beatrix's beauty.

Esmond had left a child and found a woman, grown beyond the common height; and arrived at such a dazzling completeness of beauty, that his eyes might well show surprise and delight at beholding her. In hers was a brightness so lustrous and melting, that I have seen a whole assembly follow her as if by an attraction irresistible. ²⁵

²⁴Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. VII, p. 290.

²⁵Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. VII, p. 290.

The use of the first person 'I' here in conjunction with the intrusion of the mature Esmond emphasizes the limitation of Thackeray's method in terms of full dramatic form. As I have pointed out, Esmond speaks of himself as a younger man most often in the third person; indeed he does so so consistently that we think of the younger Esmond as a separate character, and have the impression that we are watching him involved in the immediacy of dramatic action. Occasionally, however, he lapses into the use of the first person, and under closer scrutiny we see that this happens in two distinct ways. This reflection on Beatrice shows one way it happens. The reflection of the younger Esmond at heightened moments brings a sudden keen recollection to the mind of the older man, and he is prompted to interject it without reference to the younger man at the center of events. We find this effect in the midst of the young Esmond's reflection on Beatrice as a child.

It was but three years before that the child, then but ten year old, had nearly managed to make a quarrel between Henry Esmond and his comrade, good-natured, phlegmatic Thomas Tusher, who never of his own seeking quarreled with anybody: by quoting to the latter some silly joke which Harry had made regarding him — (it was the merest idlest jest, though it near drove the two old friends to blows, and I think such a battle would have pleased her).²⁶

²⁶ Ibid., Bk. I, Ch. XII, p. 179.

In the same way, and with the same effect of reminding us of the mature Esmond as narrator, the reflection of the younger Esmond at heightened moments gives rise to mature reflection in the mind of the older man, and he is prompted to interject it in his own voice. We hear this voice in the younger Esmond's reflection on broken marriage:

I have often thought there should be a visitation of the sick for it, and a funeral service, and an extreme unction and an abi in pace.²⁷

It appears again in the reflection on the futility of ambition, though it is more effectively fused with the voice of the younger man:

But only true love lives after you Non omnis moriar -- if dying, I yet live in a tender heart or two.²⁸

We hear it clearly in connection with the death of Lord Castlewood:

But fortune, good or ill, as I take it, does not change men and women. It but develops their character. As there are a thousand thoughts lying within a man that he does not know till he takes up the pen to write, so the heart is a secret even to him (or her) who has it in his own breast.²⁹

And we hear it again in this way, growing out of the younger Esmond's reflection on his hopeless love for the selfish Beatrix:

²⁷Ibid., Bk. I, Ch. XI, p. 156.

²⁸Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. VI, p. 286.

²⁹Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. I, pp. 227-8.

And who does not know how ruthlessly women will tyrannize when they are let to domineer? and who does not know how useless advice is? I could give good counsel to my descendants, but I know they'll follow their own way, for all their grandfather's sermon. A man gets his own experience about women, and will take nobody's hearsay; nor, indeed, is the young fellow worth a fig that would.³⁰

The second way in which Esmond slips into the use of the first person appears with less frequency and less consistency. He occasionally speaks of himself within the world of the story as 'I' and with the same effect of emphasizing the distinction between himself as the mature narrator and himself as the actor at the center of events. Chapter headings such as 'I Prepare to Leave Castlewood' show this sort of reference to himself. The most striking example of it, however, occurs in the scene at his mother's grave. He says:

I took a little flower of the hillock and kissed it, and went my way, like the bird that had just lighted on the cross by me, back into the world again. Silent receptacle of death; tranquil depth of calm, out of reach of tempest and trouble! I felt as one who had been walking below the sea, and treading amid the bones of shipwrecks.³¹

We sense here that the event is so sharply remembered that past and present are one. We find the mature Esmond betraying himself awkwardly when he is forced to speak of himself with others in the world of the story. He says;

³⁰ Ibid., Bk. III, Ch. II, pp. 449-50.

³¹ Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. XIII, p. 371.

From Portsmouth we put into Plymouth, and took in fresh reinforcements. We were off Finisterre on the 31st of July, so Esmond's table book informs him.³²

Esmond slips into speaking of himself in the first person with increased frequency in the last chapter of the novel, but there it may be part of a calculated effort to suggest a decrease in the time gap between Esmond as actor and Esmond as narrator.

Esmond has the look of dramatic enactment. It comes so close to complete dramatic form that, measured against it, Vanity Fair and Pendennis pale into crude experiments indeed. But once we have become aware of the intrusion of the mature Esmond, we see all too clearly the precise limits of Thackeray's achievement, and we realize the way in which the novel falls short of full dramatic form. Certainly Thackeray has freed himself from his book, while still being able to know and tell his story. The book functions on its own and Thackeray is nowhere in evidence. His story, however, for all its look of completeness, is incomplete, no longer in the sense that it depends for its meaning on a mind outside the book, but, rather, in the sense that it depends on a mind removed from the immediacy of the events by time and space.

Esmond depends for its meaning on an overt narrator, — the

³²Ibid., Bk. II, Ch. V, p. 266.

narrator in character, who gave the novel its rudimentary dramatic form. Perhaps its failure to achieve full dramatic form, paradoxical as it may seem, is just this simple. Thackeray works to make the narrator in character known before the story begins. By having him tell us his own story and speak most often about himself as the actor at the center of events as he would speak of a different character, Thackeray creates the impression that we are observing immediate dramatic enactment and listening to the simultaneous responses of the actor at the center of events. But it will not do. At any isolated moment in the story, even the last, the narrator is distinguishable from the actor and observer at the center of the world of the story, and we realize ultimately that we have been listening to the voice of the actor removed from the world of the story rather than watching him actively involved in it.

But Thackeray's failure is more basic than this. Certainly the time span in Esmond works against him. Some segment of a lifetime must always separate the thought processes of the mature Esmond from those of the younger Esmond at the center of events, — and time involves change. Of course a definite limiting of the segment of time involved, in the way that James, for instance, limits it in The Ambassadors, would seem fundamental to dramatic form. But I think Thackeray's failure goes deeper than this. He is not quite clear in his own mind about the relation between narrator and dramatic form,

despite the look of dramatic form which Esmond achieves. His rather awkward insertion of Esmond in the first person into the story would seem to point to this. He does not see that to achieve complete dramatic form the narrator must be banished from the novel. The narrator must be replaced by an impersonal narrative voice which remains apart from the sensitive recording mind at the center of events, and yet modulates entirely imperceptibly into the complex thought processes of this mind. This solution, which is essentially that of James in The Ambassadors, is essential to achieving full dramatic form in the novel. It has two distinct advantages over the solution which Thackeray's method in Esmond presents, and they measure the distance by which Thackeray falls short of full dramatic form. It creates an impression of dramatic simultaneity in the subjective responses of the observing recording mind at the center of events and the report of these responses. And these reports are never suspect. The observer's environment and thought processes are revealed unaware. By just so little Thackeray falls short of dramatic form. It is unfortunate. He returns seriously to examine his relation to his story, and to the problem of dramatic form once again, but in The Newcomes, which I turn to now, he does not see the final step to be taken in achieving complete dramatic form. In fact, this last solution again shows his lack of understanding about the relation of narrator to dramatic form, and takes him further away

from it.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEWCOMES: THE VOICE OF THE HISTORIAN

The Newcomes is clearly a reworking of ideas and techniques from the three earlier novels. In it we find again the almost contemporary Nineteenth-century social setting of Vanity Fair and Pendennis, and, as in these two novels, a central social criticism which acts as a moral and philosophical core for yet another story of a collection of people in Regency England, — in this case the respectable Newcome family. More importantly, we recognize again Thackeray's concern to achieve dramatic form, in his effort to make his story complete and independent, and we see his solution to this problem as an outgrowth of his earlier solutions. It is almost immediately apparent, however, that there is no gain in Thackeray's conception of dramatic form in the novel. He does not see the final step implicit in Esmond which must be taken to achieve complete dramatic form. Instead of working to create a method of telling his story without a narrator in character, he turns in The Newcomes to create yet another narrator in character, and this narrator is weaker in terms of creating dramatic form than Esmond, though it is not at first apparent. In

fact, because of this narrator, despite Thackeray's increased facility in freeing himself from his story, The Newcomes represents a marked falling off in dramatic form from Esmond.

To create dramatic form in The Newcomes Thackeray sets out as in Esmond to establish the narrator as a character and to relate him to the world of the story. We meet this narrator, and learn something of his relation to his story early in the novel, when he says:

It was in the days of my youth, then, that I met one or two of the characters who are to figure in this history.¹

This comment by the narrator is followed directly by his account of his meeting with Clive and his father, Colonel Newcome, in the 'Cave of Harmony'. We learn that Clive has been a friend and younger school-fellow of the narrator's in the past. The narrator tells us that Clive 'is to be the hero of the following pages',² and a little later announces that he is the chronicler of Mr. Clive Newcome's history.³ In the scene in the 'Cave of Harmony', we learn that the narrator at this period in his life is a young man of fashion in London, and moves easily in a

¹W. M. Thackeray, The Newcomes, I, (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1965), Ch. I, p. 6.

²Ibid., I, Ch. II, p. 13.

³Ibid., I, Ch. IV, p. 36.

social circle made up of university wits and men of letters. We learn later, with some surprise, that as the nephew of Major Pendennis,⁴ he is Arthur Pendennis from the earlier novel; and this is confirmed in his second meeting with Clive and Colonel Newcome, where we learn that he is living with George Warrington in Lamb Court, Temple, and is working in a desultory way as a journalist.⁵

By this rather devious technique of using an established character from an earlier novel as narrator, — a character with a suitable vocation and an established social circle, — and by firmly establishing his relation to the world of the Newcome family, Thackeray is able to free himself from his story. He is able to make it complete and independent and thus gives it a basic dramatic form. And we sense that he attempts to give the story a more sophisticated dramatic form, as he did in Esmond. He shows Pen at the center of events and attempts to create the impression that the story is told from within with dramatic simultaneity. We certainly see Pen directly in the center of events. We see him at Charles Honeyman's apartments observing the meeting between Clive and his uncle.⁶ We catch several glimpses

⁴Ibid., I, Ch. IV, p. 36.

⁵Ibid., I, Ch. IV, p. 39.

⁶Ibid., I, Ch. XII, p. 135.

of him observing the guests at Sir Brian Newcome's dinner at the house in Bryanstone Square.⁷ We see him with Clive visiting the Floracs at their hotel in Jermyn Street.⁸ We watch him as he observes Clive's conversation with Ethel at Lady Fareham's party.⁹ He and his wife appear at Barnes Newcome's dinner,¹⁰ and we see them discuss the events of the evening later.¹¹ We see him break in on Ethel's conversation with Colonel Newcome.¹² We find him talking to Colonel Newcome about Barnes' dishonest letter.¹³ He is involved directly in Highgate's elopement with Barnes' wife, Lady Clara.¹⁴ He is caught up in the problems of Clive's unsuccessful marriage. The impoverished and broken Colonel Newcome stays with the Pendennises, and Pen is present at the Colonel's death in Grey Friars.

Though Thackeray contrives strenuously to achieve the same

⁷Ibid., I, Ch. XXIV, pp. 252-55.

⁸Ibid., II, Ch. XL, p. 16.

⁹Ibid., II, Ch. XLI, p. 32.

¹⁰Ibid., II, Ch. XLVIII, p. 116.

¹¹Ibid., II, Ch. XLIX, pp. 121-23.

¹²Ibid., II, Ch. LII, p. 155.

¹³Ibid., II, Ch. LIII, p. 173.

¹⁴Ibid., II, Ch. LXVII, p. 214.

sort of sophisticated dramatic form as in Esmond, and by the same method, he fails. And his failure, I think, is caused by a basic confusion in his conception of his narrators; and this confusion makes The Newcomes the least satisfying of the four central novels, in terms of narrative technique, even though it is more advanced in dramatic form than Vanity Fair and Pendennis. Thackeray's confusion arises from the fact that he thinks Esmond and Pen are comparable narrators. Certainly they appear to be. Both are established as characters distinct from William Makepeace Thackeray, and both, in much the same way, are related to the world of their respective stories. Both are historians. It is in considering their function as historians that we see precisely how they differ and come to realize that Pen is a weaker narrator than Esmond in terms of creating dramatic form. Esmond as the narrator in character tells his own history. Pen as the narrator in character tells the history of his friend Clive Newcome. The difference is slight, but it is the significant factor in the very different degree of dramatic form that the two novels attain.

When we look at both narrators closely in terms of their respective stories, this difference which Thackeray overlooks becomes clear. Since Esmond as the narrator in character tells his

own history, he is not only the narrator in character removed from the immediate world of his story in time and space ; he is also the character at the center of events in his own story, and, as such, a character about whom he has complete knowledge, and about whom he can speak as though he were speaking about a different character. We are left with the impression that we are watching the story unfold dramatically. Granted the impression is dispelled at times, and is finally seen to be only an impression, but as the story unfolds, Esmond as the narrator in character, like the dramatist, can fade into the background and leave his actor to perform on stage. Esmond of course is both dramatist and actor. Pen is not. As the narrator in character removed from the immediate world of the story in time and space, he can never fade into the background to leave himself as the actor on stage as Esmond does. Since he tells the story of Clive Newcome he is not also the character at the center of events. Clive is. Pen must remain removed from the world of the story where Thackeray has initially placed him as the narrator in character. Thackeray's attempt to show Pen directly at the center of events not only shows his confusion about Pen as narrator, but his confusion about the whole matter of the relation of narrator to dramatic form. From the way that he shows Pen at the center of events, it is obvious that

he wants to use him as a center of consciousness inside the world of the story to give the story a sense of dramatic enactment of the sort Esmond had. It is equally obvious that Pen operates as a center of consciousness outside the immediate world of the story, and in fact must be outside as historian, since Thackeray has placed him there initially, and since the whole world of the story depends on him being there. It gradually becomes clear that Thackeray really only needs to relate Pen to the world of the story to confirm his knowledge as historian outside the world of the story, but, in a confused way, insists also on showing him directly there is an attempt to give a sense of dramatic enactment to the story. The attempt is both confusing and hopeless, since Pen is really outside the world of the story. It is this confusion about Pen as the narrator, I think, which ultimately causes the disturbing time perspectives which distort the narrative technique of The Newcomes.

Despite Thackeray's attempt to make Pen the actor at the center of events, he emerges as a sort of chorus to the drama in¹⁵ his role of the historian shaping his account of Clive and the Newcome family, and commenting on them. He stands between us and the dramatic enactment of the story, which he has witnessed in part, and describes what he has seen or what he guesses happened. Indeed,

¹⁵Ibid., I Ch. XXV, p. 264.

he confirms this relation to his story by saying in his first appearance:

It was in the days of my youth, then, that I met one or two of the characters who are to figure in this history, and whom I must ask leave to accompany for a short while, and until, familiarized with the public, they can make their own way.¹⁶

We see Pen clearly in the role of the historian in his frequent attempts to order the material in his story. Attempting to decide how much background to provide for his story, he says:

If we are to narrate the youthful history not only of the hero of this tale, but of the hero's father, we shall never have done with nursery biography. . . . I shall ask leave to say, regarding the juvenile biography of Mr. Clive Newcome, of whose history I am the Chronicler, only so much as is sufficient to account for some peculiarities of his character, and for his subsequent career in the world.¹⁷

We see him shaping his story again when he says:

The biographer of the Newcomes has no need (although he possesses the fullest information) to touch upon the Duchess's doings further than they relate to that most respectable English family.¹⁸

We are aware of Pen in this role again when he notes:

We do not propose to describe at length or with precision the circumstances of the duel which ended so unfortunately for young Lord Kew.¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid., I, Ch. I, p. 6.

¹⁷Ibid., I, Ch. IV, p. 36.

¹⁸Ibid., I, Ch. XXXVI, p. 390.

¹⁹Ibid., I, Ch. XXXVII, p. 402.

He is very obviously the historian removed from the story when he says, speaking of Charles Honeyman:

But, as he is a connection of the most respectable Newcome family, surely he is entitled to a page or two in these memoirs.²⁰

We see Pen ordering his history again when he says:

All this time we are keeping Mr. Clive purposely in the background. His face is so woe-begone that we do not care to bring it forward in the family picture. His case is so common that surely its lugubrious symptoms need not be described at length.²¹

Clive's sorrow leads Pen to more excision:

Clive wrote to say it was a very pleasant tour, but I think I should not have liked to join it. Let us dismiss it in this single sentence. . . . Suppose this part of Mr. Clive's life were to be described at length in several chapters, and not in a single brief sentence, what dreary pages they would be!²²

Pen reveals his role as biographer in his frequent expressions of concern for the friends that he is writing about. We notice this effect when he says of Colonel Newcome:

I protest it is with pain and reluctance I have to write, that the good old man was in error — that there was a wrong-doer, and that Atticus was he.²³

²⁰Ibid., II, Ch. LXIV, p. 69.

²¹Ibid., II, Ch. LIII, p. 160.

²²Ibid., II, Ch. LVI, p. 194.

²³Ibid., II, Ch. LXVII, p. 307.

We see it again when he says:

I am bound to add (and I do so during Mr. Clive Newcome's absence from England, otherwise I should not like to venture upon the sentiment), that some men concur with the ladies' opinion of Mrs. Clive.²⁴

It appears clearly when he says:

If I make my readers confident in Mr. Clive's private affairs, I ask my friend's pardon for narrating his history in their behoof.²⁵

And we see the effect again in connection with Colonel Newcome.

Pen says:

I have of late had to recount portions of my dear old friend's history which must needs be told, and over which the writer does not like to dwell.²⁶

If we are aware of Pen in the role of the historian removed from the world of his story in his appearances to shape the way it unfolds, and to express concern for his friends, we are even more aware of him in this role in his frequent intrusions to justify his knowledge of his story. Unlike Esmond, who, as the historian of his own life, is omniscient, Pen as the historian of Clive and the Newcome family has limited knowledge. He must continually be at pains to justify the events in his story. I have already suggested that Pen's appearance directly in the events of the

²⁴Ibid., II, Ch. LXV, p. 282.

²⁵Ibid., II, Ch. LXXIII, p. 352.

²⁶Ibid., II, Ch. LXX, p. 331.

story is a misdirected effort to this end. We see his intrusion to justify his knowledge most clearly when he is faced with reporting things which as the historian he cannot know. Speaking of the meeting between Clive and Ethel in the train carriage en route to Brighton he says:

That a biographer should profess to know everything which passes, even in a confidential talk in a first-class carriage between two lovers, seems perfectly absurd; not that grave historians do not pretend to the same wonderful degree of knowledge — reporting . . . private interviews between monarchs and ministers, even the secret thoughts and motives of those personages, which possibly the persons themselves did not know. All for which the present writer will pledge his known character for veracity is, that on a certain day certain parties had a conversation, of which the upshot was so and so. He guesses, of course, at a great deal at what took place; knowing the characters, and being informed at some time of their meeting.²⁷

He not only reveals himself here as the historian, but gives us some insight into his method as the biographer of the Newcomes. We find the same thing again when he says:

All this story is told by one, who, if he was not actually present at the circumstances here narrated, yet had information concerning them, and could supply such a narrative of facts and conversations as is, indeed, not less authentic than the details we have of other histories. How can I tell the feelings of a young lady's mind; the thoughts in a young gentleman's bosom? — As Professor Owen or Professor Agassiz takes a fragment of a bone, and builds an enormous forgotten monster out of it . . . — so the novelist puts this and that together.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., II, Ch. XLI, pp. 33-4.

²⁸ Ibid., II, Ch. XLVII, pp. 92-3.

This comment leads into his sequence of imagined scenes between Clive and Ethel in the garden of the Hotel de Florac. He emphasizes his distance from the world of the story in time, when he says that his record is written

maturely and at ease, long after the voyage is over whereof it recounts the adventures and perils,²⁹

and goes on to comment on his method by noting:

Also, no doubt, the writer of the book, into whose hands Clive Newcomes's logs have been put, and who is charged with the duty of making two octavo volumes out of his friend's story, dresses up the narrative in his own way; utters his own remarks in place of Newcome's; makes fanciful descriptions of individuals and incidents with which he never could have been personally acquainted.³⁰

He concludes by again drawing a comparison between the method of the historian and his own, and explains that where he has recorded dialogue which he could not have heard or motives which have not been confided in him he has used his fancy, and that he has filled in his narrative with the use of

stray papers, conversations reported to him, and his knowledge, right or wrong, of the characters of the persons engaged.³¹

We see Pen using this historical imagination when he is faced

²⁹Ibid., I, Ch. XXIV, p. 224.

³⁰Ibid., I, Ch. XXIV, pp. 244-45.

³¹Ibid., I, Ch. XXIV, p. 245.

with guessing Barnes Newcome's unspoken reaction to Colonel Newcome's proposal on behalf of Clive. Pen says:

Since in our character of historians we take leave to explain gentlemen's motives as well as record their speeches and actions, we may thus interpret.
"Confound the young beggar!" thinks Barnes then.³²

We see the effect also, when he notes:

Whether the fair lady tried her wiles upon Colonel Newcome the present writer has no certain means of ascertaining; but I think another image occupied his heart.³³

He guesses about Ethel's return home after the quarrel with Kew:

She had had such a jolly evening! Such famous fun, and, I dare say (but how shall a novelist penetrate these mysteries?), when her chamber door was closed, she scolded her maid, and was as cross as two sticks.³⁴

He guesses about Barnes' letter:

If we were in the secret of Sir Barnes Newcome's correspondence, and could but peep into that particular letter to his grandmother, I dare say we should read that he had seen the Colonel.³⁵

He speculates about Colonel Newcome:

If my gentle reader has had sentimental disappointments, he or she is aware that the friends who have given him most sympathy under these calamities have been persons who have had dismal histories of their own at some time of their lives, and I conclude Colonel Newcome in his

³²Ibid., II, Ch. LI, p. 144.

³³Ibid., I, Ch. XXIII, p. 237.

³⁴Ibid., I, Ch. XXXIII, p. 362.

³⁵Ibid., II, Ch. LII, p. 157.

early days must have suffered very cruelly in that affair of which we have a slight cognisance, or he would not have felt so very much anxiety about Clive's condition.³⁶

He imagines the scene in Farintosh's house in Mayfair after the news of Lady Clara's elopement bursts upon the town.³⁷

Pen's attempts to justify his knowledge of the story by reference to the reports of the characters serve to emphasize his distance from the immediate world of the story. After describing Colonel Newcome's homily on forgiveness, he says:

I have heard his son tell the simple story years afterwards, with tears in his eyes.³⁸

We have the odd impression that as the historian he is at two removes from the actual world of the story. He has talked with Clive about Ethel in her youth.³⁹ Clive has given him droll accounts of the young disciples at Gandish's.⁴⁰ He has received reports about Mrs. Mack's tyranny from Clive.⁴¹ He has learned from a conversation with Mrs. Newcome why the Newcomes are interested in Rosey.⁴²

³⁶Ibid., II, Ch. LII, pp. 157-58.

³⁷Ibid., II, Ch. LIX, p. 227.

³⁸Ibid., I, Ch. XIV, p. 150.

³⁹Ibid., I, Ch. X, p. 109.

⁴⁰Ibid., I, Ch. XVIII, p. 185.

⁴¹Ibid., I, Ch. XXIV, p. 254.

⁴²Ibid., I, Ch. XXIV, p. 247.

Major Pendennis has given him an account of the Dorking family.⁴³ He has heard Henschman tell the story of Farintosh's betrothals at his clubs.⁴⁴ His wife has given him full reports of the flight of Lady Clara,⁴⁵ and of Ethel's quarrel with Farintosh.⁴⁶ But always we have the impression that he is reporting a report of the actual event. And it is this impression which ultimately destroys the dramatic value of those instances where he appears directly in the world of the story. Even when he appears there we see that he is only another sort of historian reporting on the actual drama which goes on behind him.

We find another sort of evidence that Pen as the historian is beyond the immediate world of the story, in fragmentary clues which point to the fact that he knows the whole story, and that it is already in the past, at any point in its development. Early in the story he says:

Mr. Clive Newcome, who has long since shaved his beard, who has become a family man, and has seen the world in a thousand different phases, avers that his life as an art-student at home and abroad was the pleasantest part of his whole existence.⁴⁷

⁴³Ibid., I, Ch. XXVIII, p. 302.

⁴⁴Ibid., II, Ch. LIX, p. 231.

⁴⁵Ibid., II, Ch. LIX, p. 233.

⁴⁶Ibid., II, Ch. LIX, p. 242.

⁴⁷Ibid., I, Ch. XVII, p. 177.

We notice the same effect again quite clearly when Pen says:

Let us disdain surprises and coups-de-theatre for once; and tell those good souls who are interested about him; that there is a Good Spirit coming to the rescue of our young Lord Kew.⁴⁸

We find him barely able to restrain himself from telling us that

Ethel is really going to turn out to be good, when he says:

Ethel is very wrong certainly. But recollect, she is very young. She is in other people's hands;⁴⁹

and again:

In fine, I hope there was a good excuse for the queen of this history... otherwise, I say, we would have another dynasty.⁵⁰

We notice his relief when he can at last tell us of Ethel's goodness:

And now it was that my wife told me, what I need no longer keep secret, of Ethel's extreme anxiety to serve her distressed relatives.⁵¹

And Pen admits clearly that he has had full knowledge of the story

from the beginning, when he says:

I disdain, for the most part, the tricks and surprises of the novelist's art. Knowing, from the very beginning of our story, what was the issue of this Bundelcund Banking concern, I have scarce had patience to keep my counsel about it.⁵²

⁴⁸Ibid., I, Ch. XXXI, p. 342.

⁴⁹Ibid., II, Ch. XLV, p. 75.

⁵⁰Ibid., II, Ch. XLV, p. 79.

⁵¹Ibid., II, Ch. LXXVI, p. 384.

⁵²Ibid., II, Ch. LXX, p. 331.

We find the same sort of confession when he insists on stressing the fact that, as a character in the story, he has less information than he has as the historian. He writes:

"And who is poor dear Mrs. Mason?" asks Mr. Pendennis, as yet but imperfectly acquainted with the history of the Newcomes. ⁵³

He notes:

During the period which had elapsed since the Colonel's last canvassing visit and the issuing of the writs now daily expected for the new Parliament, many things of great importance had occurred in Thomas Newcome's family — events which were kept secret from his biographer, who was . . . occupied with his own affairs. ⁵⁴

And he includes a footnote explaining his ignorance of Mrs. Mackenzie's actions at the time of the story, in the light of his full knowledge now as the historian removed from the world of the story, and seeing it enclosed and complete. ⁵⁵

Ultimately The Newcomes must be seen as a falling off from Thackeray's realization of dramatic form in Esmond, and his effort to make Pen the historian in character a wrong turning in terms of full dramatic form. Once we are fully aware that Pen, despite Thackeray's confused attempt to show him directly at the center of events, is really removed from the immediacy of the world of the story, and recording a history which is already complete, the possibility of any real dramatic form disappears. Certainly the novel marks an advance over Vanity Fair and Pendennis. It shows Thackeray's grasp of the method for

⁵³ Ibid., II, Ch. LX, p. 248.

⁵⁴ Ibid., II, Ch. LXIX, p. 319.

⁵⁵ Ibid., II, Ch. LXXIII. p. 355.

making his story complete and independent, and his facility in effecting it. But I am measuring The Newcomes against the more sophisticated dramatic form that Esmond achieves, and the complete dramatic form that it points to. Once we see Pen outside the world of the story, between it and us, we are no longer watching dramatic enactment, and no longer listening to the reports and emotional responses of the actor involved in this enactment. We are at two removes from the actual drama, listening to the voice of the historian speaking about it.

When we look at The Newcomes as a whole we realize, that it not only marks a falling off from Thackeray's achievement in dramatic form in Esmond, but it also reveals weaknesses in his method which throw into question both his precise understanding of the nature of dramatic form, and the ultimate value of the sort of dramatic form which he achieves in his novel as an advance to full dramatic form. The Newcomes, which pushes his method to its logical conclusions, clearly reveals these weaknesses. When we look at this method in the last novel, we see that it leads into a sort of futile circularity rather than out towards full dramatic form. We realize that we are watching an author like Thackeray struggling with the same basic problems that Thackeray himself struggled with

in Vanity Fair and Pendennis. We realize, as we watch Pen struggling to clarify his relation to his story, that Thackeray has only managed to push his problems onto someone else without really solving them. Indeed, we realize that they are insoluble, because Thackeray does not see the sort of narrator which he needs to achieve full dramatic form. He does not see the solution of the impersonal narrative voice, — not unlike that of the 'omniscient author' persona — used to unfold the thoughts, perceptions, and actions of the actor at the center of events. He does not see that there is a way to make the narrator omniscient and thus to give him the power to know all the details necessary to tell the story. He binds Pen so closely in the role of the historian that he cannot tell the story until his knowledge is expanded by the power of historical guessing, and this power when granted serves only to undermine the strenuous efforts which Thackeray has taken to establish the reality of the story and Pen's relation to it. Scenes like Colonel Newcome's appearance at Mrs. Newcome's literary party,⁵⁶ and Ethel's conversations with Clive in the garden of the Hotel de Florac⁵⁷ begin to appear with increasing frequency, and

⁵⁶Ibid., I, Ch. VIII, pp. 79-88.

⁵⁷Ibid., II, Ch. XLVII, pp. 94-111.

without any specified point of view from which to see them. Pen can tell thoughts which have never been externalized, and know emotions which have never been expressed. More seriously, however, Thackeray does not realize that Pen as the historian in character conflicts with the presentation of dramatic enactment, and so he attempts to place Pen both inside and outside the world of the story.

The futility and confusion of Thackeray's method focus sharply in the conclusion to the novel. He gives us the occasion of his inspiration for Clive's story. He speaks of the characters fading into Fable-land, and confesses that he hardly knows whether they are true or not. Then quite suddenly he gives the responsibility for the story back to Pen.⁵⁸ In doing so he reveals his confusion about the point of view in the novel, and further violates the reality of the story. But I think this conclusion can be read in another way. I think it is an admission of the futility and confusion of his method as a solution to that full dramatic form which Esmond came so close to. If he does not understand the reason for his failure he has a solution for it close at hand. He pushes his story belatedly into a Fable-land where technical considerations are of no moment. In

⁵⁸Ibid., II, Ch. LXXX, p. 421.

doing so he commits that 'terrible crime' that James speaks of in commenting on Trollope's novels.⁵⁹ He rejects the truth of his art, which he had worked so seriously to establish in his technical experimentation with dramatic form in the four central novels.

⁵⁹H. James, "The Art of Fiction", in L. Edel, ed., The Future of the Novel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 6.

CONCLUSION

THACKERAY'S VOICES IN RETROSPECT

In tracing the element of dramatic form in Thackeray's four central novels, which, as I have pointed out, was first suggested by the problem of moral uncertainty in Vanity Fair, I have purposely considered the individual novels in terms of different voices because I think this indicates justly enough the limits both of his conception and his realization of dramatic form. His conception of dramatic form is limited to an awareness of the need to free himself from his story. He senses, rightly enough I think, that by using the convention of the 'omniscient author' he becomes loosely associated with this author, and that his story is too dependent on this author for its meaning. In order to free himself from his story and to make it complete, he works to have a specific narrator clearly related to the story in some way tell it for him. Essentially he attempts to characterize the center of consciousness — the reflective mind which knows and meditates on the story to give it significance — and to move this mind into the world of the story, or at least to relate it to this world. This

is what is happening as he writes Vanity Fair and Pendennis. It gives rise to the two voices and the problem of moral uncertainty, because the voice of the mind that knows the story remains distinct from the voice of the narrator that Thackeray would like to tell the story. He creates a synthesis of the two voices in Esmond and The Newcomes by introducing the mind that knows each story in character to tell the story, and establishes the relation of Esmond and Pen to the world of the story. And he succeeds, within the limits of his conception of dramatic form, in making each story complete and independent of himself.

Thackeray never really moves beyond this basic conception of dramatic form, though he creates the illusion of higher dramatic form in Esmond. He does not see that, in the final analysis, the creation of a narrator in character is antagonistic to full dramatic form. Unless this narrator can talk about himself as Esmond does in the immediacy of dramatic action, we see only the narrator on stage in front of us, and hear his voice telling a story about a drama somewhere behind him in time and space. Even in Esmond this voice breaks in on us, in this case as the voice of the actor. Thackeray never sees, as James does, even after his fortunate stroke in Esmond, that what is needed is to depersonalize the narrator and to have him talk about a central observing character, through whose eyes we see the world of the story from within, in

such a way that we see him in dramatic interaction with events, and at the same time have the impression that we watch the unfolding of his thoughts in the immediacy of this action.

By creating a narrator in character to tell his story for him Thackeray makes an initial advance in dramatic form, but it is ultimately a wrong turning out of the way that leads to full dramatic form. It takes him back to his initial problem in only slightly altered terms. This is painfully evident in The Newcomes where we watch another author, in this case Pen, struggle with the problem of telling his story and at the same time giving it an existence of its own. Pen, like Thackeray, is concerned to give his story some sort of dramatic form, and predictably he moves to solve his problem in the same way as Thackeray. He introduces himself as the reflective mind in character into his own story. And of course it cannot work as a solution since he is also outside telling his story, and he cannot talk about himself as Esmond does because the story is not about himself. The result is that terrible confusion of time perspectives which distorts the story and negates any gains achieved by the basic dramatic form which Thackeray gives to the novel.

The Newcomes is a fitting conclusion to my study of the element of dramatic form in the four central novels. Its difficulties illuminate the method and the precise limitations of Thackeray's search for

dramatic form in the central novels. And it serves to remind us that in Vanity Fair, Pendennis, Esmond, and The Newcomes, despite Thackeray's search for dramatic form, we have not watched dramatic enactments but, rather, listened to a series of memorable voices — the unseen story teller's, the gossip's, Esmond's, and Pen's — mutations of a single eloquent voice.

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