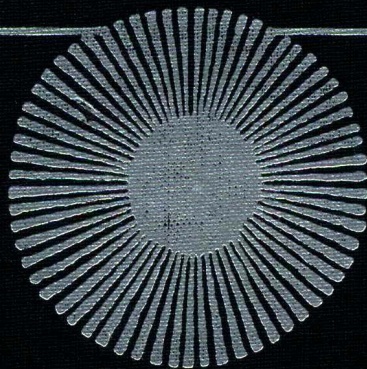


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HAROLD BLOOM

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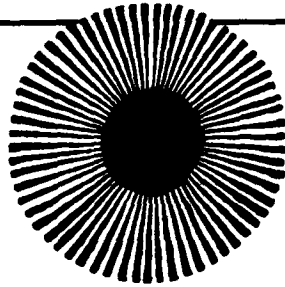
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# WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

1811–1863

William Makepeace Thackeray was born on July 18, 1811, in Calcutta, where his father worked as a collector for the East India Company. In 1817, after his father's death, he was sent to school in England, where his mother and her new husband joined him in 1819. Thackeray attended the Charterhouse School, where he was not happy, and in 1829 entered Trinity College, Cambridge, where he formed a close friendship with Edward FitzGerald. In 1830 he left Cambridge without a degree and traveled in Germany, where he met the aging Goethe. After returning to London in 1831, Thackeray briefly studied law at the Middle Temple, and in 1834 purchased the *National Standard*, a weekly paper which ceased publication a year later. Thackeray next became an art student, first in London, then in Paris (1834–35). By this time he had lost almost his entire inheritance, probably because of the collapse of the Indian agency-houses, and between 1834 and 1837, while living in Paris, he supported himself by working as a journalist.

In 1836 Thackeray published *Flore et Zephyr*, his first book. In that same year he married Isabella Shawe, who gave birth to a daughter, Anne, after they had returned to London in 1837. Once in London Thackeray began to write for *Fraser's Magazine* and other journals, including the *Morning Chronicle*, the *New Monthly Magazine*, and the *Times*. To *Fraser's* he contributed *The Yellowplush Correspondence* (1837–38), with which he first gained a large readership; *Catherine* (1839–40); *A Shabby Genteel Story* (1840); *The Great Hoggarty Diamond* (1841); and *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (1844). His first full-length volume, *The Paris Sketch Book*, appeared in 1840.

In 1840, after having given birth to a second and third daughter, Thackeray's wife suffered a mental breakdown and became permanently insane. Thackeray first placed her in the care of a French doctor, then in a private home in England, and sent his children to his mother's home in Paris, where they remained until 1846. In 1842 Thackeray began contributing to *Punch*, which published not only his essays and humorous sketches, but also his caricatures. *The Irish Sketch Book* (1843), with a preface signed for the first time with Thackeray's name, rather than with one of several humorous pseudonyms he had previously used, was followed by *The Snobs of England* (later republished as *The Book of Snobs*), which had appeared in *Punch* in 1846–47.

Thackeray's first important novel, *Vanity Fair*, appeared in monthly installments in 1847–48, with illustrations by the author. It was followed by *Punch's Prize Novelists* (1847), a collection of parodies of leading contemporary authors, and by several other important novels: *The History of Pendennis* (1848–50), *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852), and *The Newcomes* (1853–55). In 1852–53, and again in 1855–56, Thackeray went on lecture tours of the United States, where his novel *The Virginians* (1857–59) is partly set. His lectures on the *English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*, first delivered in 1851, were published in 1853, while those on the *Four Georges*, first delivered in 1854–55, appeared in print in 1861.

In 1859 Thackeray became the first editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*, for which he wrote *Lovel the Widower* (1860), a story; the *Roundabout Papers* (1860–63), a series of essays; *The Adventures of Philip* (1861–62), his last complete novel; and *Denis Duval* (1864), an unfinished novel published after his sudden death on Christmas Eve of 1863. Thackeray's daughter, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, published *Chapters from Some Memoirs* in 1894. Thackeray's *Letters and Private Papers*, edited by Gordon Ray, were published in 1945–46.

## Personal

Thackeray has very rarely come athwart me since his return: he is a big fellow, soul and body; of many gifts and qualities (particularly in the Hogarth line, with a dash of Sterne superadded), of enormous *appetite* withal, and very uncertain and chaotic in all points except his *outer breeding*, which is fixed enough, and *perfect* according to the modern English style. I rather dread explosions in his history. A *big*, fierce, weeping, hungry man; not a strong one. *Ay de mi!*—THOMAS CARLYLE, Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson (Sept. 9, 1853)

I breakfasted this morning with Fowler of Lincoln to meet Thackeray (the author) who delivered his lecture on George III in Oxford last night. I was much pleased with what I saw of him—his manner is simple and unaffected: he shows no anxiety to shine in conversation though full of fun and anecdote when drawn out. He seemed delighted with the

reception he had met with last night: the undergraduates seem to have behaved with most unusual moderation.—LEWIS CARROLL, *Diary*, May 9, 1857

My conviction was, that beneath an occasional affectation of cynicism, there was a tenderness of heart which he was more eager to repress than to exhibit; that he was no idolater of rank in the sense in which Moore was said dearly to love a lord, but had his best pleasures in the society of those of his own social position—men of letters and artists; and that, however fond of “the full flow of London talk,” his own home was the centre of his affections. He was a sensitive man, as I have seen on more than one occasion.—CHARLES KNIGHT, *Passages of a Working Life*, 1863, Pt. 3, Ch. 2

I saw him first, nearly twenty-eight years ago, when he proposed to become the illustrator of my earliest book. I saw him last, shortly before Christmas, at the Athenæum Club,

when he told me that he had been in bed three days—that, after these attacks, he was troubled with cold shiverings, “which quite took the power of work out of him”—and that he had it in his mind to try a new remedy which he laughingly described. He was very cheerful, and looked very bright. In the night of that day week, he died.

The long interval between those two periods is marked in my remembrance of him by many occasions when he was supremely humorous, when he was irresistibly extravagant, when he was softened and serious, when he was charming with children. But, by none do I recall him more tenderly than by two or three that start out of the crowd, when he unexpectedly presented himself in my room, announcing how that some passage in a certain book had made him cry yesterday, and how that he had come to dinner, “because he couldn’t help it,” and must talk such passage over. No one can ever have seen him more genial, natural, cordial, fresh, and honestly impulsive, than I have seen him at those times. No one can be surer than I, of the greatness and the goodness of the heart that then disclosed itself.—CHARLES DICKENS, “In Memoriam,” *Cornhill Magazine*, Feb. 1864, p. 129

### General

There is a man in our own days whose words are not framed to tickle delicate ears: who, to my thinking, comes before the great ones of society, much as the son of Imlah came before the throned Kings of Judah and Israel; and who speaks truth as deep, with a power as prophet-like and as vital—a mien as dauntless and as daring. Is the satirist of *Vanity Fair* admired in high places? I cannot tell; but I think if some of those amongst whom he hurls the Greek fire of his sarcasm, and over whom he flashes the levin-brand of his denunciation, were to take his warnings in time—they or their seed might yet escape a fatal Ramoth-Gilead.

Why have I alluded to this man? I have alluded to him, Reader, because I think I see in him an intellect profounder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognized; because I regard him as the first social regenerator of the day—as the very master of that working corps who would restore to rectitude the warped system of things; because I think no commentator on his writings has yet found the comparison that suits him, the terms which rightly characterise his talent. They say he is like Fielding: they talk of his wit, humour, comic powers. He resembles Fielding as an eagle does a vulture: Fielding could stoop on carrion, but Thackeray never does. His wit is bright, his humour attractive, but both bear the same relation to his serious genius, that the mere lambent sheet-lightning playing under the edge of the summer-cloud, does to the electric death-spark hid in its womb. Finally; I have alluded to Mr. Thackeray, because to him—if he will accept the tribute of a total stranger—I have dedicated this second edition of *Jane Eyre*.—CHARLOTTE BRONTË, “Preface” to *Jane Eyre*, 1847

In Dickens, the lower part of “the World” is brought into the Police Court, as it were, and there, after cross-examination, discharged or committed, as the case may be. The characters are real and low, but they are facts. That is one way. Thackeray’s is another and better. One of his books is like a Dionysius ear, through which you hear the World talking, entirely unconscious of being overheard.—JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, Letter to C. F. Briggs (Feb. 15, 1854)

Thackeray finds that God has made no allowance for the poor thing in his universe;—more’s the pity, he thinks;—but ‘tis not for us to be wiser: we must renounce ideals, and accept

London.—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “Literature,” *English Traits*, 1856

Mr. Thackeray is, as a novelist, so pointed and unmistakable a contrast to Mr. Dickens, that it is interesting to find them writing at the same time. Thackeray is as little of an idealizer as it seems possible to be, if you write novels at all. He cuts into conventionalism so daringly, that you fear sometimes, as when he gives you a novel without a hero, that he goes too far, and puts in peril the essence of his Art. If he does idealize, it is not in the manner of Dickens, but in one strikingly different. He selects characters as Dickens selects characteristics. But he depends for success not on the power of his personages to evoke sympathy, negative or positive, but on their strict correspondence with fact. It cannot, perhaps, be said that he, any more than Mr. Dickens, reaches the Shakspearian substratum of character. His eye is that of an artist. It has been trained to take in the whole aspect of the outer man, not only in the minutiae of his dress, but in the whole monotonous circumstance of his every day life. His popularity is the most powerful evidence to which one could easily point, of the capacity residing in the exhibition of bare, or even repulsive fact, to interest mankind. It is said that Thackeray abandoned the career of an artist, because, according to his own avowal, he could only caricature. He felt the absence of the higher idealizing power. His novels exhibit the radical qualities which would have distinguished his pictures. It is not emotionally that we regard them. They call forth no glow of admiration, no warm, loving sympathy, no wonder, no reverence. He makes his appeal to sterner, colder powers, to reflection, to the cynic’s philosophy, to contempt. It may be better, higher, more noble and self-denying, in him, to do so; but the fact is patent. And its inevitable consequence has been and will be, a popularity not so wide, a command over the heart not so great, as those of men who permit fancy to lay on color, and imagination to heighten life. (. . .)

If it were asked what one aspect of life Mr. Thackeray has distinctively exhibited, the answer could be given in one word,—the trivial aspect. The characters he draws are neither the best of men nor the worst. But the atmosphere of triviality which envelopes them all was never before so plainly perceivable. He paints the world as a great *Vanity Fair*, and none has done that so well.

The realism of Thackeray can hardly fail to have a good effect in fictitious literature. It represents the extreme point of reaction against the false idealism of the Minerva Press. It is a pre-raphaelite school of novel writing. And as pre-raphaelitism is not to be valued in itself, so much as in being the passage to a new and nobler ideal, the stern realism of Thackeray may lead the way to something better than itself.—PETER BAYNE, “The Modern Novel: Dickens—Bulwer—Thackeray,” *Essays in Biography and Criticism*, 1857, pp. 389–92

It is Thackeray’s aim to represent life as it is actually and historically—men and women, as they are, in those situations in which they are usually placed, with that mixture of good and evil and of strength and foible which is to be found in their characters, and liable only to those incidents which are of ordinary occurrence. He will have no faultless characters, no demigods—nothing but men and brethren. And from this it results that, when once he has conceived a character, he works downwards and inwards in his treatment of it, making it firm and clear at all points in its relations to hard fact, and cutting down, where necessary, to the very foundations. (. . .) Mr. Thackeray, I believe, is as perfect a master in his kind of art as is to be found in the whole series of British prose writers; a man

in whom strength of understanding, acquired knowledge of men, subtlety of perception, deep philosophic humour, and exquisiteness of literary taste, are combined in a degree and after a manner not seen in any known precedent.—DAVID MASSON, *British Novelists and Their Styles*, 1859, pp. 248–49

Thackeray's range is limited. His genius is not opulent, but it is profuse. He does not create many types, but he endlessly illustrates what he does create. In this he reminds a traveler of Ruysdael and Wouvermann, the old painters. There are plenty of their pictures in the German galleries, and there is no mistaking them. This is a Ruysdael, how rich and tranquil! this is a Wouvermann, how open and smiling! are the instinctive words with which you greet them. The scope, the method, almost the figures and the composition are the same in each Ruysdael, in each Wouvermann, but you are not troubled. Ruysdael's heavy tree, Wouvermann's white horse, are not less agreeable in Dresden than in Berlin, or Munich, or Vienna. And shall we not be as tolerant in literature as in painting? Why should we expect simple pastoral nature in Victor Hugo, or electrical bursts of passion in Scott, or the "ideal" in Thackeray?—GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS, "The Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Aug. 1862, p. 423

Thackeray, like Sterne, looked at every thing—at nature, at life, at art—from a sensitive aspect. His mind was, to some considerable extent, like a woman's mind. It could comprehend abstractions when they were unrolled and explained before it but it never naturally created them; never of itself, and without external obligation, devoted itself to them. The visible scene of life—the streets, the servants, the clubs, the gossip, the West End—fastened on his brain. These were to him reality. They burnt in upon his brain; they pained his nerves; their influence reached him through many avenues which ordinary men do not feel much, or to which they are altogether impervious. He had distinct and rather painful sensations where most men have but confused and blurred ones. Most men have felt the *instructive* headache, during which they are more acutely conscious than usual of all which goes on around them,—during which every thing seems to pain them, and in which they understand it because it pains them, and they cannot get their imagination away from it. Thackeray had a nerve-ache of this sort always. He acutely felt every possible passing fact, every trivial interlude in society. Hazlitt used to say of himself, and used to say truly, that he could not enjoy the society in a drawing-room for thinking of the opinion which the footman formed of his odd appearance as he went upstairs. Thackeray had too healthy and stable a nature to be thrown so wholly off his balance; but the footman's view of life was never out of his head. The obvious facts which suggest it to the footman poured in upon him; he could not exempt himself from them. As most men say that the earth *may* go round the sun, but in fact, when we look at the sun, we cannot help believing it goes round the earth,—just so this most impressible, susceptible genius could not help half accepting, half believing the common ordinary sensitive view of life, although he perfectly knew in his inner mind and deeper nature that this apparent and superficial view of life was misleading, inadequate, and deceptive. He could not help seeing everything, and what he saw made so near and keen an impression upon him that he could not again exclude it from his understanding; it stayed there, and disturbed his thoughts.

If, he often says, 'people could write about that of which they are really thinking, how interesting books would be!' More than most writers of fiction, he felt the difficulty of abstracting his thoughts and imagination from near facts which would

make themselves felt. The sick wife in the next room, the unpaid baker's bill, the lodging-house keeper who doubts your solvency; these, and such as these,—the usual accompaniments of an early literary life,—are constantly alluded to in his writings. Perhaps he could never take a grand enough view of literature, or accept the truth of 'high art,' because of his natural tendency to this stern and humble realism. He knew that he was writing a tale which would appear in a green magazine (with others) on the 1st of March, and would be paid for perhaps on the 11th, by which time, probably, 'Mr. Smith' would have to 'make up a sum,' and would again present his *little account*. There are many minds besides his who feel an interest in these realities, though they yawn over 'high art' and elaborate judgments.

A painfulness certainly clings like an atmosphere round Mr. Thackeray's writings, in consequence of his inseparable and ever-present realism. We hardly know where it is, yet we are all conscious of it less or more. A free and bold writer, Sir Walter Scott, throws himself far away into fictitious worlds, and soars there without effort, without pain, and with unceasing enjoyment. You see, as it were, between the lines of Mr. Thackeray's writing, that his thoughts were never long away from the close proximate scene. His writings might be better if it had been otherwise; but they would have been less peculiar, less individual; they would have wanted their character, their flavour, if he had been able, while writing them, to forget for many moments the ever-attending, the ever-painful sense of himself.

Hence have arisen most of the censures upon him, both as he seemed to be in society and as he was in his writings. He was certainly uneasy in the common and general world, and it was natural that he should be so. The world poured in upon him, and *inflicted* upon his delicate sensibility a number of petty pains and impressions which others do not feel at all, or which they feel but very indistinctly. As he sat he seemed to read off the passing thoughts—the base, common, ordinary impressions—of every one else. Could such a man be at ease? Could even a quick intellect be asked to set in order with such velocity so many data? Could any temper, however excellent, be asked to bear the contemporaneous influx of innumerable minute annoyances? Men of ordinary nerves, who feel a little of the pains of society, who perceive what really passes, who are not absorbed in the petty pleasures of sociability, could well observe how keen was Thackeray's *sensation* of common events, could easily understand how difficult it must have been for him to keep mind and temper undisturbed by a miscellaneous tide at once so incessant and so forcible.

He could not emancipate himself from such impressions even in a case where most men hardly feel them. Many people have—it is not difficult to have—some vague sensitive perception of what is passing in the minds of the guests, of the ideas of such as sit at meat; but who remembers that there are also nervous apprehensions, also a latent mental life among those who 'stand and wait'—among the floating figures which pass and carve? But there was no impression to which Mr. Thackeray was more constantly alive, or which he was more apt in his writings to express.—WALTER BAGEHOT, "Sterne and Thackeray" (1864), *Collected Works*, ed. Norman St. John-Stevas, 1965, Vol. 2, pp. 304–6

Let me see—have we exchanged a word about Thackeray since his Death? I am quite surprised to see how I sit moping about him: to be sure, I keep reading his Books. Oh, the *Newcomes* are fine! And now I have got hold of *Pendennis*, and seem to like that much more than when I first read it. I keep hearing

him say so much of it; and really think I shall hear his Step up the Stairs to this Lodging as in old Charlotte St. thirty years ago. Really, a great Figure has sunk under Earth.—EDWARD FITZGERALD, Letter to George Crabbe (Jan. 12, 1864)

Now, the great merit of Thackeray I take to be, that he *has* reflected—with lucid beauty, with admirable sense, and taste, and impartiality—the whole range of the characteristic English society of his age. He is not a fashionable novelist, though he introduces persons of fashion; nor a military or clerical novelist, though he introduces soldiers and clergymen. His roll of books, like the Bayeux tapestry, gives us the whole generation—men of wit, business, war, art; women beautiful and plain, loving and hateful, clever and stupid. There are types and occupations, no doubt, which he has not meddled with. But such abundant material exists in his books to show what kind of man is an English gentleman of the nineteenth century, that his omissions are of little importance. By the reality with which he painted, he has taught us to divine for ourselves what he did not paint.

Let it be remarked, too, that this admirable fidelity to nature, enlivened with a humour never grotesque, and tinged with a sentiment never maudlin, is wholly Thackeray's own. Many have imitated him, but he imitated nobody. None of the thousand moods or fashions of our modes of our schools of thinking are repeated in his books—even in the earliest of them. He deals neither in Wertherism, Byronism, nor Carlyleism; the French "literature of despair" rolled harmlessly as passing thunder over his head. He worshipped no side of life or thought exclusively; *Ivanhoe* did not fascinate him with chivalry, nor *Wilhelm Meister* with art; nor did the modern realism of fiction destroy his sympathy with romance. His strong intellect kept its independence from the beginning; his strong moral nature did justice from the beginning. Faithfully, and regardless of all sentimental whimpering, he laid bare the selfishness, meanness, and servility of the age. But with equal truth, he brought on the stage noble and kindly characters like Colonel Newcome, Ethel Newcome, and Henry Esmond. Severe upon society as society, he had the strongest faith in human nature; and his own great heart beat responsive to all that was generous in history, or fiction, or the world of his time.

The independence and originality of Thackeray's character as a writer makes it difficult to indicate the sources of the culture by which his genius was formed. The writers of his own age who got the start of him in popularity taught him nothing; but in his youth the genius of Sir Walter Scott towered over Europe, and it is certain that he was deeply influenced by Sir Walter. They had a good deal in common, especially a sound worldly shrewdness tempered by kindness of a homely character, and by humour of that robust sort which finds food for itself in the daily incidents of life. They both had a strong respect for society even while laughing at its prejudices, and never allowed the literature to which their lives were devoted to usurp superiority over other interest. The resemblance between them, however, was rather moral than intellectual. Sir Walter had a general influence over Thackeray, no doubt, as himself the real father of the truthful and natural novel of the nineteenth century; but he had no special influence, and the character of his genius was very different. Thackeray was without Scott's feudal sympathies, and had far less romance and historical feeling; neither was his imagination so various as that of Scott—which created such diverse characters as Rebecca and Jeannie Deans—nor his vein of poetry so rich. In one point the late writer had an advantage—he wrote a better

style. The prose of Scott is cumbrous, and apt to be verbose; whereas Thackeray's English is one of his greatest merits. It is pure, clear, simple in its power, and harmonious; clean, sinewy, fine and yet strong, like the legs of a racehorse. Style is a gift born with a man, but its character is greatly modified by his education and experience. One sees very distinctly in Thackeray's style, as in his way of thinking and feeling about things, the English public-school and university man—the tone of one born and bred in the condition of a gentleman. The facts of his birth and education coloured his thought and his style, just as Scott's was coloured, even more decidedly, by the family traditions of his ancient border-race. He was never zealous for the classics; but the classics form a man who has been nourished on them, whether he is conscious of it or not. We none of us remember taking in our mother's milk, but we know what it has done for us for all that. Thackeray was saturated with Horace, especially the lyrical part of the *Venusian*; he was also very fond of Montaigne, and intimate with him. In fact, Latin writers, French writers, and the English writers of the eighteenth century, seem to have constituted his favourite reading. Yet he was always more a man of the world than a man of books; and if we allow much influence over the formation of his style to the sources just indicated, we may also see in it a certain conversational ease and grace, which is not a result only of reading, and which is the direct opposite of the detestable style, formed upon newspapers, of so many inferior men. To hit the right mean between a bookishness which is too stiff and a colloquialism which is too loose, is one of the rarest achievements in literature, and one that more than any other secures to an author the position of a classic. No English novelist approached this standard in Thackeray's time so nearly as he, and perhaps no previous novelist except the incomparable Fielding.—JAMES HANNAY, *Studies on Thackeray*, 1864, pp. 8–14

When the great master of English prose left us suddenly in the maturity of his powers, with his enduring position in literature fairly won and recognized, his death saddened us rather through the sense of our own loss than from the tragic regret which is associated with an unaccomplished destiny. More fortunate than Fielding, he was allowed to take the measure of his permanent fame. The niche wherein he shall henceforth stand was chiselled while he lived. One by one the doubters confessed their reluctant faith, unfriendly critics dropped their blunted steel, and no man dared to deny him the place which was his, and his only, by right of genius.

In one sense, however, he was misunderstood by the world, and he has died before that profounder recognition which he craved had time to mature. All the breadth and certainty of his fame failed to compensate him for the lack of this; the man's heart coveted that justice which was accorded only to the author's brain.—BAYARD TAYLOR, "William Makepeace Thackeray" (1864), *Critical Essays and Literary Notes*, 1880, p. 134

Thackeray was a *master* in every sense, having as it were, in himself, a double quantity of being. Robust humor and lofty sentiment alternated so strangely in him, that sometimes he seemed like the natural son of Rabelais, and at others he rose up a very twin brother of the Stratford Seer. There was nothing in him amorphous and unconsidered. Whatever he chose to do was always perfectly done. There was a genuine Thackeray flavor in everything he was willing to say or to write. He detected with unflinching skill the good or the vile wherever it existed. He had an unerring eye, a firm understanding, and



abounding truth.—JAMES T. FIELDS, "Thackeray," *Yesterdays with Authors*, 1871, p. 35

Of course I took the greatest delight in Thackeray's lectures, though not always disposed to assent to his critical judgment of the English humorists, but, with the entranced audience, yielded myself to the charm of his unaffected and spirited manner of delivery, to his close analysis of character, to his humane and generous sentiments, to his pathetic turns of thought, and, with profound relish, to his clear, sweet, and simple English, in the use of which I can scarcely think he has had his equal. It was all so different in style and matter, to my taste, from the writings of another noted novelist of the day, whose popular readings of his own stories I attended once or twice, with little comparative interest. Indeed, I feel about Dickens's novels pretty much as the exiled French king did about the merry exhibition, in the anecdote already related—that they are all very well for once, with no little power of momentarily affecting our sympathies, though with some mental reservation, but feeling no more desire to see them again than I should wish to renew my fictitious tears, when taken unawares, over the exaggerated pictures of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. On the other hand, I experience an ever new delight in reading again and again whatever Thackeray has written. Nor do I believe that Thackeray himself regarded Dickens as in any sense a rival, though he would naturally refrain from giving expression to any dissent from the overwhelming popular estimate of his contemporary's writings. But time has already settled, in part at least, the question between the novels of these famous authors. It may be doubted whether any grave English judge would now think of taking a story of Dickens to the bench with him for perusal in the intermission of business; while Thackeray's are books to recur to in the study and in moments of languor when nothing else seems fitted to furnish the longed-for entertainment. He has sometimes been severely commented upon by very loyal English critics for his ridicule and unsparing denunciation in his lectures upon the *Four Georges*. But see how later history takes his part.—GEORGE LAMB, "Recollections of Thackeray," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Jan. 1877, pp. 259–60

About Mr. Thackeray I had no clear notion in any way, except that he seemed cynical; and my first real interest in him arose from reading M. A. Titmarsh in Ireland, during my Tyne-mouth illness. I confess to being unable to read *Vanity Fair*, from the moral disgust it occasions; and this was my immediate association with the writer's name when I next met him, during the visit to London in 1851. I could not follow his lead into the subject of the Bullers, (then all dead) so strong was my doubt of his real feeling. I was, I fear, rather rough and hard when we talked of *Vanity Fair*; but a sudden and most genuine change of tone,—of voice, face and feeling,—that occurred on my alluding to Dobbin's admirable turning of the tables on Amelia, won my trust and regard more than any thing he had said yet. *Pendennis* much increased my respect and admiration; and *Esmond* appears to me the book of the century, in its department. I have read it three times; and each time with new wonder at its rich ripe wisdom, and at the singular charm of *Esmond's* own character. The power that astonishes me the most in Thackeray is his fertility, shown in the way in which he opens glimpses into a multitudinous world as he proceeds. The chief moral charm is in the paternal vigilance and sympathy which constitute the spirit of his narration. The first drawback in his books, as in his manners, is the impression conveyed by both that he never can have known a good and sensible woman. I do not believe he has any idea whatever of such

women as abound among the matronage of England,—women of excellent capacity and cultivation applied to the natural business of life. It is perhaps not changing the subject to say next what the other drawback is. Mr. Thackeray has said more, and more effectually, about snobs and snobbism than any other man; and yet his frittered life, and his obedience to the call of the great are the observed of all observers. As it is so, so it must be; but "O! the pity of it! the pity of it!" Great and unusual allowance is to be made in his case, I am aware; but this does not lessen the concern occasioned by the spectacle of one after another of the aristocracy of nature making the ko-tow to the aristocracy of accident. If society does not owe all it would be thankful to owe to Mr. Thackeray, yet it is under deep and large obligations to him; and if he should even yet be seen to be as wise and happy in his life and temper as he might be any day, he may do much that would far transcend all his great and rising achievements thus far; and I who shall not see it would fain persuade myself that I foresee it. He who stands before the world as a sage *de jure* must surely have impulses to be a sage *de facto*.—HARRIET MARTINEAU, *Autobiography*, ed. Maria Weston Chapman, 1877, Vol. 2, pp. 60–61

His knowledge of human nature was supreme, and his characters stand out as human beings, with a force and a truth which has not, I think, been within the reach of any other English novelist in any period. I know no character in fiction, unless it be Don Quixote, with whom the reader becomes so intimately acquainted as with Colonel Newcombe. How great a thing it is to be a gentleman at all parts! How we admire the man of whom so much may be said with truth! Is there any one of whom we feel more sure in this respect than of Colonel Newcombe? It is not because Colonel Newcombe is a perfect gentleman that we think Thackeray's work to have been so excellent, but because he has had the power to describe him as such, and to force us to love him, a weak and silly old man, on account of this grace of character.

It is evident from all Thackeray's best work that he lived with the characters he was creating. He had always a story to tell until quite late in life; and he shows us that this was so, not by the interest which he had in his own plots,—for I doubt whether his plots did occupy much of his mind,—but by convincing us that his characters were alive to himself. With Becky Sharpe, with Lady Castlewood and her daughter, and with *Esmond*, with Warrington, *Pendennis*, and the Major, with Colonel Newcombe, and with Barry Lyndon, he must have lived in perpetual intercourse. Therefore he has made these personages real to us.

Among all our novelists his style is the purest, as to my ear it is also the most harmonious. Sometimes it is disfigured by a slight touch of affectation, by little conceits which smell of the oil;—but the language is always lucid. The reader, without labour, knows what he means, and knows all that he means. As well as I can remember, he deals with no episodes. I think that any critic, examining his work minutely, would find that every scene, and every part of every scene, adds something to the clearness with which the story is told. Among all his stories there is not one which does not leave on the mind a feeling of distress that women should ever be immodest or men dishonest,—and of joy that women should be so devoted and men so honest. How we hate the idle selfishness of *Pendennis*, the worldliness of *Beatrice*, the craft of *Becky Sharpe*!—how we love the honesty of Colonel Newcombe, the nobility of *Esmond*, and the devoted affection of Mrs. *Pendennis*! The hatred of evil and love of good can hardly have come upon so many readers without doing much good.

Late in Thackeray's life,—he never was an old man, but towards the end of his career,—he failed in his power of charming, because he allowed his mind to become idle. In the plots which he conceived, and in the language which he used, I do not know that there is any perceptible change; but in *The Virginians* and in *Philip* the reader is introduced to no character with which he makes a close and undying acquaintance. And this, I have no doubt, is so because Thackeray himself had no such intimacy. His mind had come to be weary of that fictitious life which is always demanding the labour of new creation, and he troubled himself with his two Virginians and his Philip only when he was seated at his desk.—ANTHONY TROLLOPE, *An Autobiography*, 1883, Ch. 13

Thackeray had a quarrel with himself and a quarrel with society; but his was not a temper to push things to extremes. He could not acquiesce in the ways of the world, its shabbiness, its shams, its snobbery, its knavery; he could not acquiesce, and yet it is only for born prophets to break with the world and go forth into the wilderness crying, "Repent!" Why affect to be a prophet, and wear camels' hair and eat locusts and wild honey, adding one more sham to the many, when after all the club is a pleasant lounge, and anthropology is a most attractive study? Better patch up a truce with the world, which will not let one be a hero, but is not wholly evil; the great criminals are few; men in general are rather weak than wicked; vain and selfish, but not malignant. It is infinitely diverting to watch the ways of the petty human animal. One can always preserve a certain independence by that unheroic form of warfare suitable to an unheroic age—satire; one can even in a certain sense stand above one's own pettiness by virtue of irony; and there is always the chance of discovering some angel wandering unrecognised among the snobs and the flunkies in the form of a brave, simple-hearted man or pure-souled, tender woman. Whether right or wrong, this compromise with the world is only for a few days. Heigh-ho! everything hastens to the common end—*vanitas vanitatum*. (. . .)

Thackeray had not the austerity and lonely strength needful for a prophet; he would not be a pseudo-prophet; therefore he chose his part—to remain in the world, to tolerate the worldlings, and yet to be their adversary and circumventer, or at least a thorn in their sides.—EDWARD DOWDEN, "Victorian Literature," *Transcripts and Studies*, 1888, pp. 168–71

Personally, he scarce appeals to us as the ideal gentleman; if there were nothing else, perpetual nosing after snobbery at least suggests the snob; but about the men he made, there can be no such question of reserve. And whether because he was himself a gentleman in a very high degree, or because his methods were in a very high degree suited to this class of work, or from the common operation of both causes, a gentleman came from his pen by the gift of nature. He could draw him as a character part, full of pettiness, tainted with vulgarity, and yet still a gentleman, in the inimitable Major Pendennis. He could draw him as the full-blown hero in Colonel Esmond. He could draw him—the next thing to the work of God—human and true and noble and frail, in Colonel Newcome. If the art of being a gentleman were forgotten, like the art of staining glass, it might be learned anew from that one character.—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, "Some Gentlemen in Fiction," 1888

It is precisely because Thackeray, discerning so well the abundant misery and hollowness in life, discerns also all that is not miserable and hollow, that he is so great. He has neither the somewhat bestial pessimism of M. Zola, nor the fatuous gaiety of M. Ohnet. Like any classic, he stands the test of

experience, of psychology. We have mentioned together Swift, Addison, and Steele; we might take Lucretius, Virgil, and Horace. Each has left a picture of patrician life, glittering and tedious. Lucretius, contrasting the splendour without and the gloom within; Virgil, the restlessness and haste with the placid peace of the country; Horace, content to let it all go by, neither envying nor despising. Something of each, again, is in Thackeray: an English classic not less true and real than the classic Romans.

Most of the disputes about Thackeray's art, in the strict sense of art, are occupied with the personal note in his novels: with the intrusion, as some call it, of his personality. Art, we are told, is impersonal; and we believe it. But if that imply that no novel should reflect its author's spirit, then no artistic novel has yet been written. It is a question of words: each writer has his manner of work and habit of mind; let him follow those faithfully, and the result will be good, if he be an artist. Who wishes away Fielding's enchanting chapters between the books of *Tom Jones*? Or who wishes to find essays by Flaubert between the chapters of *Madame Bovary*? Each follows his own way, and there are many ways in art. Thackeray's reflections and discussions do not spoil his story, because they are not mere moralising, which the reader might do for himself. Whenever a reader stops, and says to himself, that the writer might have credited his readers with wits enough to see such and such a thing, without being shown it, then the writer has been superfluous. A sentence instead of a word, a chapter instead of a page, are unpardonable sins: but who can say, that he could have done Thackeray's reflections for himself? And they do not occur in the course of actual narration: Rawdon Crawley confronts Lord Steyne, Lady Castlewood welcomes Esmond at Winchester, without any dissertation from Thackeray. At least, let us call these passages of personal meditation a wrong thing done exquisitely; beyond that we refuse to go.—LIONEL JOHNSON, *Academy*, March 7, 1891, p. 227

Another great name here somewhat woefully misrepresented is that of Thackeray; whose "White Squall" is now and then rather too provocative of such emotions as nature's might provoke in the digestive economy of a bad sailor. To make the gorge rise at it is hardly the sign or the property of elegance in verse: and if indecency, which means nothing more than unseemliness, is very properly considered as a reason for excluding from elegant society the most brilliant examples of the most illustrious writers ever touched by so much as a passing shade of it, the rule should be applied equally to every variety of the repulsive and the unbecoming—not by any means only to matters of sexual indecorum and erotic indelicacy. To none of the other selections from the lighter work of the same illustrious hand is any such objection or suggestion applicable: but not one of them shows Thackeray at his very best as a comic poet.—ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE, "Social Verse" (1891), *Studies in Prose and Poetry*, 1894, pp. 106–7

It is true that Thackeray did not entirely escape the fate which seems to fall on every satirist of being carried too far in his onslaught upon hypocrisy and attacking some things which are in no way deserving of censure. His detestation of humbug was so intense that he seems to forget that there is some of it which we could scarcely do without. Indeed, were all descriptions of humbug to be swept off the face of the earth at once, the very best Christians would be at each other's throats in half an hour. He blamed the writers of the day for being too mealy-mouthed in their descriptions of character. "Since the author of *Tom Jones* was buried, no writer of fiction among us has been

permitted to depict to his utmost power a *Man*." We do not know whether Thackeray had temporarily forgotten that it pleased Fielding to put his hero, in an episode of which Colonel Newcome afterwards spoke with just severity, into a position so disgraceful that no subsequent writer to our knowledge had ventured to reproduce it, until M. Octave Mirabeau presented a still more repulsive picture in his extremely powerful and intensely disagreeable novel, *Le Calvaire*. Thackeray himself did not venture to go so far into the life of his man, but only set himself to lop off all possible heroic attributes. Indeed Pendennis, who was to be the real Man without any unnatural decoration, is in reality a very innocent person, with plenty of faults no doubt, but these chiefly of the kind that arise from weakness of character. We are not, indeed, sure that Thackeray's philosophy might not be reduced to a belief that feebleness is the distinguishing characteristic of the male of the human species: but this is by no means a striking view, especially when it is the central figure of a book, ordinarily distinguished as the hero, who is chiefly marked by the peculiar instability which distinguishes him from the stronger figures around him. If Pendennis is the natural man, to what class does George Warrington or Captain Strong belong? or even Major Pendennis, all of whom have at least sufficient strength and individuality to follow out their own objects as seems good in their eyes? Why should we see anything more characteristic of the real man in the wavering figure to which our attention is chiefly directed?

However, Thackeray's desire to represent an unvarnished picture of man as he really is, did not prevent him, as we have already seen, from giving to his next work a central figure which does not fall below the heroic level. Henry Esmond, with all his virtues, is quite as real as Arthur Pendennis. We will not, however, add to what we have already said about this noble figure save as the centre of a very wonderful production. *Esmond* is beyond doubt the first of Thackeray's novels as a work of art. There is something in the exquisite finish and harmony of this book which we can only express by the epithet, artistic; it is a pure combination of perfect taste and perfect workmanship which puts it in a separate class, in which many of the greatest literary works have no claim to rank. The genuine literary artist is not common; Balzac might be cited as a specimen, and George Eliot in her early works: and perhaps, without going quite so high, we might say that we have at present a literary artist of high excellence in Mr. R. L. Stevenson. As a composition *Esmond* is almost without a flaw. The details of the execution are all worked out in the same masterly manner, and the language is perfect. We may take as one instance of the exquisite finish of the minor points the little explanation of Esmond's prejudice against Marlborough. He is, of course, a man with views of his own concerning his contemporaries whom he judges according to the light in which they present themselves to him, and, as it happens, he is the opponent of the great general and a merciless critic of his conduct. This is natural enough, but there is a yet further light of reality communicated by the revelation in the footnote added by Esmond's daughter, which tells us how Marlborough had spoken of him as having "the hang-dog look of his rogue of a father." Esmond, himself, did not know that this was the origin of his prejudice and that these few words which he had possibly forgotten, had an influence on his whole life. It is like some of the stray touches in Shakespeare,—when Stephano wonders how Caliban came to speak his language, or Sir Toby prays that "the spirit of humours intimate reading aloud" to Malvolio,—mere by-strokes of the pencil, which a less perfect workman would have utterly neglected, but which have a

wonderful effect in realising the scene in the minds of both author and spectator.—MARGARET OLIPHANT, *The Victorian Age of English Literature*, 1892, Vol. 1, pp. 290–93

Thackeray's readers were and are limited by the limitations of his subjects, by nothing else. He did much that Scott did not attempt and that Dickens could not ever have conceived; but for every million that can understand Scott and Dickens there are probably only a thousand that can understand Thackeray. His minute observation of the upper classes of his day is lost on persons to whom those classes are not familiar, partly because such persons do not recognize what he is dealing with, and partly because they are not interested in the questions with which he is most preoccupied. Indeed, of all great novelists Thackeray is the narrowest, not because the range of his vision is confined to the upper classes, for these viewed comprehensively form a complete microcosm and in many ways exhibit the problems and possibilities of life better than any other class; but because, accepting the upper classes as the world, he views them from one position only, and his view of them is extremely partial. Only a few of his characters he knows from the inside; all the rest he knows from the outside only. Men who were clients of the world or its victims, who were struggling with it or hostile to it—these men Thackeray knew from the inside. But the world itself, which for him meant the aristocratic class as a body—he was familiar with its aspect, but he never understood its spirit. Major Pendennis and his nephew, Rawdon Crawley, George Osborne, and Colonel Newcome—he knew these as if each of them were himself. Lord Steyne, Lord Bareacres, and Sir Pitt Crawley he knew merely as a vigilant witness. Hence the narrowness of his view as compared to Scott and Dickens. Hence he seems such a dwarf when placed beside them. And his narrowness of view finds another expression of itself in the fewness of his types of character. It has been well said, for instance, that he could draw but two women—the bad and the good, Becky Sharp being the prototype of the one and Amelia Sedley of the other.

All this, however, is mentioned merely to show why Thackeray's appeal to the world must have always been comparatively limited, and limited not only to the upper classes, but *among* them. Whether in process of time the number of his readers is diminishing, I repeat I am unable to say. A more important question is whether the interest with which he is read now is as fresh and vital as that with which he was read originally. I should say it was not; and I should say so for this reason, that as compared with Scott and Dickens he lacked the qualities by which the vitality of his work could be perpetuated. He lacked their extraordinary breadth and their extraordinary variety; he lacked the qualities that made them so peculiarly and so comprehensively national. They each gave us a nation—a nation which still lives; Thackeray gave us a fragment of a generation, which already is almost past.—W. H. MALLOCK, "Are Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray Obsolete?," *Forum*, Dec. 1892, pp. 512–13

The charge of cynicism which it was at one time usual to bring against Thackeray has been again and again repelled by those who knew him best, who gladdened in his sunny humour and loved him for his ardent friendship and unobtrusive generosity. That he was the truest of friends, and the brightest and most genial of talkers in a small circle of intimate companions, is incontestable. But, on the other hand, certain of his admirers have misrepresented him almost as thoroughly as have his detractors. They have spoken of him as if he had been some tender sentimentalist with meekness ever in his heart and honey ever on his tongue. He was not only a bitter satirist in his

writings; his scorn of humbug, or of what he deemed humbug, repeatedly broke out in fierce or taunting speech and in speech which was not always justified. The letter which he wrote to Mr. Edmund Yates, in the course of the quarrel in which Dickens was involved, would alone prove how roughly, not to say brutally, he could assert himself against anyone who crossed his path. To talk of him as a "gentle censor" is to talk twaddle. His heart was worthy of his intellect; when he loved, he loved with exquisite tenderness; but he regarded the mass of mankind with a half-laughing, half-pitiful sense of their wickedness and weakness, and at times with impatient contempt. That is the prevailing impression left by his novels, despite occasional passages, sometimes beautiful and touching, sometimes verging on the mawkish, in which the words are the words of the optimist.

There are, no doubt, some who have otherwise shown themselves to be sound judges of literature, who regard Thackeray's view of life as somewhat narrow, and his moralising as often cheap and tedious. They hold that his genius was in a measure misapplied to the study of things paltry and sordid; that he was a great master of words, rather than a great imaginative writer; that as a satirist he was repetitive to weariness, and brooded persistently over follies and foibles which it had been wiser to pass by with a smile. They say, with truth, that he lacked the charm of the born storyteller, and too often sank the artist in the preacher. None the less, he remains a master in some ways unexcelled.

It is the veriest truism to repeat that in all the range of fiction there are no men and women more keenly studied, more vividly portrayed, more consistently developed, than Thackeray's greatest creations. Becky Sharp and Major Pendennis and Beatrix Esmond seem wellnigh as secure of immortality as Falstaff and Rosalind. No novelist has treated the story of a youthful, ill-starred love with more delicate insight and touching sympathy than this so-called cynic. And no novelist since Fielding has written such admirable English. Of Thackeray, far more justly than of Macaulay, it might have been said, "Where did he get that style?" There is none more original, as there is none more attractive, in the kingdom of English prose. It has the ease of the happiest talk, and the grace, the finish, the verbal sparkle and glow of perfect literary art. His so-called ballads have the charm that belongs to the wholly or half-playful exercises, the recreations in rhyme, of a supreme literary craftsman. They are not verses of society; they are either too richly humorous, or too sharply satiric, or too deeply coloured by feeling. Through them, as all through his prose, mirth glides by the easiest transitions into sadness, mockery trembles into tenderness, to the strain of boon good-fellowship succeeds the irrepressible reminder that all below is vanity. Carelessly as they seem to have been penned, they abound in happy rhymes and turns of phrase, they show the hand of the writer born to work in metre no less than in prose. "The White Squall" is a really wonderful *tour de force* of vivid, rattling description and novel, dexterous rhyming; there is the true martial note in the rough swinging verses of *The Chronicle of the Drum*; and as for the Irish Ballads, they seem bound to amuse till the drying up of the fountain of laughter. Since Burns wrote the "Ordination," no more telling, mirth-provoking bit of satire has been done in rhyme than the immortal "Battle of Limerick"; and where could there be found a more delicious revel of vocables, all honeyed by the Milesian usage, than in Mr. Moloney's account of the ball that was given to the Nepaulese ambassador? As for the serious pieces, we should think little of the head or heart of the man who ever read the ballad of "Bouillabaisse" unmoved by its exquisite

tenderness, unstirred by its brave good-feeling. "Piscator and Piscatrix," slight as it is, shows how charmingly, with what a delicate interplay of sympathy with humour, Thackeray could, had he chosen, have cast a love idyl into verse. And the "Age of Wisdom" would of itself prove that he could give words the true singing flight, would of itself make us wish that this great master of prose had taken his lyric gift more seriously. —WALTER WHYTE, "William Makepeace Thackeray," *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, ed. Alfred H. Miles, 1894, Vol. 10, pp. 319–22

I am distinctly conscious of being indebted to Thackeray for having led me out of the "moon-illuminated magic night" of German romanticism (in which I once revelled) and accustoming me, by degrees, to a wholesomer, though less poetic, light. Vividly do I remember the distaste, the resentment, with which as a youth of twenty I flung away *The Virginians* at the chapter where Harry's calf-love for Maria is satirized. Like a sting to the quick was to me the remark about his pressing "the wilted vegetable" with rapture to his lips, or was it his heart? The delicious, good-natured ridicule with which the infatuation of Pen for Miss Fotheringay is treated in *Pendennis* hurt and disgusted me. I felt as if the author were personally abusing me. For I was then at the age when Pen's madness seemed to verge more nearly on sublimity than on foolishness. Accordingly I had a low opinion of Thackeray in those days.

But for all that, I could not help reading him; and, truth to tell, I owe him a debt of gratitude which it would be difficult to over-estimate. He saved me from no end of dangerous follies by kindling in me a spark of sobering self-criticism, which enabled me to catch little side-glimpses of myself, when I was on the verge of committing a *bêtise*. He aroused in me a salutary scepticism as to the worth of much which the world has stamped with its approval. He blew away a good deal of that romantic haze which hid reality from me and prevented me from appraising men and things at their proper value. Though no crude Sunday-school moral is appended to *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes* or *Vanity Fair*, he must be duller than an ox to the subtler sense who does not feel in the pervasive atmosphere of these books a wholesome moral tonic. And who can make the acquaintance of Colonel Newcome without having the character of the man stamped on his very soul and feeling a glow of enthusiasm for his nobleness, uprightness and lofty sense of honor? It is because he is so touchingly human, so pathetically true, that he makes so deep an impression. And as for Clive and Rose and the Campaigner, their fates have an educational worth beyond a hundred sermons. Though Thackeray does not often scold his bad and questionable characters (as does, for instance, Dickens), and though he permits an occasional smile to lurk between the lines at Becky Sharp's reprehensible cleverness, there is nowhere any confusion of moral values; and the voice that speaks has a half paternal cadence of genial wisdom and resignation. —HJALMAR HJORTH BOYESEN, "The Great Realists and the Empty Story-Tellers," *Forum*, Feb. 1895, p. 727

It was of the organ-builder that I had Thackeray's books first. He knew their literary quality, and their rank in the literary world; but I believe he was surprised at the passion I instantly conceived for them. He could not understand it; he deplored it almost as a moral defect in me; though he honored it as a proof of my critical taste. In a certain measure he was right.

What flatters the worldly pride in a young man is what fascinates him with Thackeray. With his air of looking down on the highest, and confidentially inviting you to be of his company in the seat of the scorner he is irresistible; his very



confession that he is a snob, too, is balm and solace to the reader who secretly admires the splendors he affects to despise. His sentimentality is also dear to the heart of youth, and the boy who is dazzled by his satire is melted by his easy pathos. Then, if the boy has read a good many other books, he is taken with that abundance of literary turn and allusion in Thackeray; there is hardly a sentence but reminds him that he is in the society of a great literary swell, who has read everything, and can mock or burlesque life right and left from the literature always at his command. At the same time he feels his mastery, and is abjectly grateful to him in his own simple love of the good for his patronage of the unassuming virtues. It is so pleasing to one's vanity, and so safe, to be of the master's side when he assails those vices and foibles which are inherent in the system of things, and which one can condemn with vast applause so long as one does not attempt to undo the conditions they spring from.

I exulted to have Thackeray attack the aristocrats, and expose their wicked pride and meanness, and I never noticed that he did not propose to do away with aristocracy, which is and must always be just what it has been, and which cannot be changed while it exists at all. He appeared to me one of the noblest creatures that ever was when he derided the shams of society; and I was far from seeing that society, as we have it, was necessarily a sham; when he made a mock of snobbishness I did not know but snobbishness was something that might be reached and cured by ridicule. Now I know that so long as we have social inequality we shall have snobs; we shall have men who bully and truckle, and women who snub and crawl. I know that it is futile to spurn them, or lash them for trying to get on in the world, and that the world is what it must be from the selfish motives which underlie our economic life. But I did not know these things then, nor for long afterwards, and so I gave my heart to Thackeray, who seemed to promise me in his contempt of the world a refuge from the shame I felt for my own want of figure in it. He had the effect of taking me into the great world, and making me a party to his splendid indifference to titles, and even to royalties; and I could not see that sham for sham he was unwittingly the greatest sham of all.

I think it was *Pendennis* I began with, and I lived in the book to the very last line of it, and made its alien circumstance mine to the smallest detail. I am still not sure but it is the author's greatest book, and I speak from a thorough acquaintance with every line he has written, except the *Virginians*, which I have never been able to read quite through; most of his work I have read twice, and some of it twenty times.

After reading *Pendennis* I went to *Vanity Fair*, which I now think the poorest of Thackeray's novels—crude, heavy-handed, caricatured. About the same time I revelled in the romanticism of *Henry Esmond*, with its pseudo-eighteenth-century sentiment, and its appeals to an overwrought ideal of gentlemanhood and honor. It was long before I was duly revolted by *Esmond's* transfer of his passion from the daughter to the mother whom he is successively enamoured of. I believe this unpleasant and preposterous affair is thought one of the fine things in the story; I do not mind owning that I thought it so myself when I was seventeen; and if I could have found a Beatrix to be in love with, and a Lady Castlewood to be in love with me, I should have asked nothing finer of fortune. The glamour of *Henry Esmond* was all the deeper because I was reading the *Spectator* then, and was constantly in the company of Addison, and Steele, and Swift, and Pope, and all the wits at Will's, who are presented evanescently in the romance. The intensely literary keeping, as well as quality, of the story I

suppose is what formed its highest fascination for me; but that effect of great world which it imparts to the reader, making him citizen, and, if he will, leading citizen of it, was what helped turn my head.

This is the toxic property of all Thackeray's writing. He is himself forever dominated in imagination by the world, and even while he tells you it is not worth while he makes you feel that it is worth while. It is not the honest man, but the man of honor, who shines in his page; his meek folk are proudly meek, and there is a touch of superiority, a glint of mundane splendor, in his lowliest. He rails at the order of things, but he imagines nothing different, even when he shows that its baseness, and cruelty, and hypocrisy are wellnigh inevitable, and, for most of those who wish to get on in it, quite inevitable. He has a good word for the virtues, he patronizes the Christian graces, he pats humble merit on the head; he has even explosions of indignation against the insolence and pride of birth, and purse-pride. But, after all, he is of the world, worldly, and the highest hope he holds out is that you may be in the world and despise its ambitions while you compass its ends.

I should be far from blaming him for all this. He was of his time; but since his time men have thought beyond him, and seen life with a vision which makes his seem rather purblind. He must have been immensely in advance of most of the thinking and feeling of his day, for people then used to accuse his sentimental pessimism of cynical qualities which we could hardly find in it now. It was the age of intense individualism, when you were to do right because it was becoming to you, say, as a gentleman, and you were to have an eye single to the effect upon your character, if not your reputation; you were not to do a mean thing because it was wrong, but because it was mean. It was romanticism carried into the region of morals. But I had very little concern then as to that sort of error.

I was on a very high æsthetic horse, which I could not have conveniently stooped from if I had wished; it was quite enough for me that Thackeray's novels were prodigious works of art, and I acquired merit, at least with myself, for appreciating them so keenly, for liking them so much. It must be, I felt with far less consciousness than my formulation of the feeling expresses, that I was of some finer sort myself to be able to enjoy such a fine sort. No doubt I should have been a coxcomb of some kind, if not that kind, and I shall not be very strenuous in censuring Thackeray for his effect upon me in this way. No doubt the effect was already in me, and he did not so much produce it as find it.—WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, "Thackeray," *My Literary Passions*, 1895

And now to come to Thackeray. Assuredly he is very far inferior to Balzac in genius. Nor has he Balzac's talent. He has not that grasp of principles, that faculty of co-ordination, that power of generalization, which Balzac possessed in such ample measure. But he had naturally a great deal in common with Balzac: originality of intellect, perspicuity of observation, a warm and potent instinct—if I may so speak—of practical life, of all its conditions, and of all its contrasts. Like Balzac, too, he possessed a certain divinatory power, a sort of gift of moral second sight. Mrs. Ritchie, in her fascinating book, which all the world has just been reading, *Chapters from Some Memoirs*, tells us that, "he sometimes spoke of a curious uncomfortable feeling he had about some people, as if uncomfortable facts in their history were actually revealed to him," a feeling which was afterwards, not unfrequently, justified. It is a curious gift and a note of the highest genius.—WILLIAM SAMUEL LILLY,

"The Humourist as Philosopher—Thackeray," *Four English Humourists of the Nineteenth Century*, 1895, p. 51

I admire Thackeray's style, and the pathetic quality in his writings; in this he never faltered. I like his sardonic melancholy. Thackeray, in a passing mood, might quite well have said: 'Who breathes must suffer, and who thinks must mourn, and he alone is blest who ne'er was born.'

He shows knowledge of human nature and much acquaintance with life—not a wide acquaintance, but complete within its limits. The vernacular of his Fokers and his Fred Bayhams is classical, and so is their slang.—FREDERICK LOCKER-LAMPSON, *My Confidences*, 1895, p. 302

But there are two ends, according to the proverb, to some if not all subjects; and it is not seldom asked whether there was not a decline as well as a growth of Thackeray's powers, and whether anything but *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes*, and *Esmond* can be considered to present that power at its height. It is impossible not to observe, in passing, what a genius that must be as to which it is matter of dispute whether anything has to be added to such a literary baggage as that of the four books just enumerated. The least of them would be a passport to and a provision for eternity; and we are inquiring whether the gentleman has any more titles and any more luggage than all four. Let me only say that I am more and more convinced that he has: that he has others even besides *The Four Georges*, *The English Humourists*, and the *Roundabout Papers*, which even his most grudging critics would in the same good-natured manner allow. I have never quite understood the common depreciation of *The Virginians*, which contains things equal, if not superior, to the very finest of its author's other work, and includes the very ripest expression of his philosophy of life. For though indeed I do not approve a novel more because it contains the expression of a philosophy of life, others do. So, too, the irregularity and formlessness of plot which characterised most of Thackeray's work undoubtedly appear in it; but then, according to the views of our briskest and most modern critics, plot is a very subordinate requisite in a novel, and may be very well dispensed with. Here again I do not agree, and I should say that Thackeray's greatest fault was his extreme inattention to construction, which is all the more remarkable inasmuch as he was by no means a very rapid or an extremely prolific writer. But if both these faults were infinitely greater than they are, I should say that the perfect command of character and the extraordinary criticisms of life which *The Virginians* contains save it, and not merely save it, but place it far above almost everything outside its writer's own work.—GEORGE SAINTSBURY, "Thackeray," *Corrected Impressions*, 1895

*Barry Lyndon* (1840) should have been enough, alone, to prove that an author of the first class had arisen, who was prepared to offer to the sickly taste of the age, to its false optimism, its superficiality, the alternative of a caustic drollery and a scrupulous study of nature. But the fact was that Thackeray had not, in any of those early sketches to which we now turn back with so much delight, mastered the technical art of story-telling. The study of Fielding appeared to reveal to him the sort of evolution, the constructive pertinacity, which had hitherto been lacking. He read *Jonathan Wild* and wrote *Barry Lyndon*; by a still severer act of self-command, he studied *Tom Jones* and composed *Vanity Fair*. The lesson was now learned. Thackeray was a finished novelist; but, alas! he was nearly forty years of age, and he was to die at fifty-two. The brief remainder of his existence was crowded with splendid work; but Thackeray

is unquestionably one of those writers who give us the impression of having more in them than accident ever permitted them to produce.

Fielding had escorted the genius of Thackeray to the doors of success, and it became convenient to use the name in contrasting the new novelist with Dickens, who was obviously of the tribe of Smollett. But Thackeray was no consistent disciple of Fielding, and when we reach his masterpieces—*Esmond*, for instance—the resemblance between the two writers has become purely superficial. Thackeray is more difficult to describe in a few words than perhaps any other author of his merit. He is a bundle of contradictions—slipshod in style, and yet exquisitely mannered; a student of reality in conduct, and yet carried away by every romantic mirage of sentiment and prejudice; a cynic with a tear in his eye, a pessimist that believes the best of everybody. The fame of Thackeray largely depends on his palpitating and almost pathetic vitality; he suffers, laughs, reflects, sentimentalises, and meanwhile we run beside the giant figure, and, looking up at the gleam of the great spectacles, we share his emotion. His extraordinary power of entering into the life of the eighteenth century, and reconstructing it before us, is the most definite of his purely intellectual claims to our regard. But it is the character of the man himself—plaintive, affectionate, protean in its moods, like April weather in its changes—that, fused with unusual completeness into his works, preserves for us the human intensity which is Thackeray's perennial charm as a writer.—EDMUND GOSSE, *A Short History of Modern English Literature*, 1897, pp. 352–54

A writer is as great as his finest work—Thackeray takes his place in Literature as the author of *Esmond*, *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *Barry Lyndon*, *The Newcomes*, *Rebecca and Rowena*, and *The Roundabout Papers*—and I believe his name will stand to future ages as that of the most representative Englishman of Letters of our age, and as that of the greatest master of fiction since Henry Fielding.—LEWIS MELVILLE, *The Life of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 1899, Vol. 2, p. 250

Thackeray took no print from the romantic generation; he passed it over, and went back to Addison, Fielding, Goldsmith, Swift. His masters were the English humourists of the eighteenth century. He planned a literary history of that century, a design which was carried out on other lines by his son-in-law, Leslie Stephen. If he wrote historical novels, their period was that of the Georges, and not of Richard the Lion Heart. It will not do, of course, to lay too much stress on Thackeray, whose profession was satire and whose temper purely anti-romantic.—HENRY A. BEERS, *A History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century*, 1901, pp. 397–98

If, then, we find that in all great walks of life—in the Church, in war, in commerce, and in diplomacy—Mr. Thackeray has nothing but abuse and sneers for success; if we find that he loves to portray the ludicrous and the discreditable only, is it unfair to say that he is the Apostle of Mediocrity? Mediocre ways of life, mediocre thoughts, mediocre inclinations (mis-called passions), mediocre achievements—these, if not positively enjoined, as they sometimes are, are in effect all that is left to one who takes Mr. Thackeray for his guide. For the rest, never had a mean gospel so doughty an Apostle.—WALTER FREWEN LORD, "The Apostle of Mediocrity," *Nineteenth Century*, March 1902, p. 410

Thackeray possessed in a greater measure than any other English writer the *style coulant*, which Baudelaire ascribed in dispraise to George Sand. His words flow like snow-water upon

the mountainside. He could no more restrain the current of his prose than a gentle slope could turn a rivulet back upon its course. His sentences dash one over the other in an often aimless succession, as though impelled by a force independent of their author. The style, as employed by Thackeray, has its obvious qualities and defects. It is so easy that it may be followed by the idlest reader, who willingly applies to literature the test of conversation. The thread of argument or of character is so loosely held that it need not elude a half-awakened attention. On the other hand, the style must needs be at times inaccurate and undistinguished. The solecisms of which he is guilty, and they are not few, may readily be forgiven. It is more difficult to pardon the frequent lack of distinction, especially as in *Esmond* Thackeray proved that he could write, if he would, with perfect artistry. But the method of his more familiar books seems the result less of artifice than of temperament. He seldom gives you the impression that he has studied to produce a certain effect. An effect is there, of course, facile and various, but beyond his management. He is so little conscious of his craft, that he rarely arrives at the right phrase, thus presenting an obvious contrast to Disraeli, who, often careless in composition, yet sowed his pages with pearls of speech which time cannot dim. But how little do we take away from the ease of Thackeray beyond a general impression of gentlemanly ease!

From this it follows that he possessed no economy of speech. He never used one word, if a page and a half could adequately express the meaning, and at all save his high moments you miss a controlling hand, a settled purpose. Nor is this remarkable, when you recall the shifts and starts in which he did his work. He was of those who write better anywhere than in their own house. He would carry his unfinished manuscript to Greenwich with him, and write a chapter after dinner, or he would go off to Paris, and compose as he went. "I should never be at home," he told Elwin, "if I could help it. . . . I write less at home than anywhere. I did not write ten pages of *The Newcomes* in that house at Brompton. . . . This"—meaning a hotel—"is the best place to work in."

While Thackeray left the words to look after themselves, he confesses himself the humble slave of his own characters. "Once created," said he, "they lead me, and I follow where they direct." He devised his actors as by instinct, and without realising the full meaning of the drama in which they played their part. "I have no idea where it all comes from," he told Elwin. "I have never seen the people I describe, nor heard the conversations I put down. I am often astonished myself to read it when I have got it on paper." It is not strange, therefore, that he regarded the personages in his own dramas as quite outside himself. "I have been surprised," says he, "at the observations made by some of my characters. It seems as if an occult power was moving the pen." And it was precisely this externality which linked Thackeray and his characters in the bonds of acquaintance. Had they been the deliberate and conscious creations of his brain, they would have been at once more and less familiar to him. He would have remembered precisely where the strings lay which pulled the figures; but he could not have said, "I know the people utterly—I know the sound of their voices." He would not have seen Philip Firmin in a chance visitor; he would not have recognised the drunken swagger of Captain Costigan, when he met him, years after his creation, in a tavern. We may be quite sure that he never encountered Sir Francis or Beatrix Esmond, for these he made himself; but the majority of his characters grew without his knowledge, and even against his will. "That turning back to the old pages," he murmurs in a passage of genuine lament,

"produces anything but elation of mind. Would you not pay a pretty fine to be able to cancel some of them? Ah, the sad old pages, the dull old pages!"

It was this fatality, this frank obedience to his own puppets and his own pen, which explains the frequent formlessness of Thackeray's work. But though he permitted most of his books to write themselves, it must not be thought that his style was uniformly hazardous. Despite its occasional inaccuracy, despite its loose texture, it has many shining qualities. It is graphic, various, and at times eloquent. It is easy to recall a hundred passages which would entitle Thackeray to a high place among the writers of English. The Waterloo chapters of *Vanity Fair*, much of *Esmond*, Harry Warrington's first visit to England, Denis Duval's journey to London,—these, to name but a few, are touched by the hand of a master, who need fear comparison with none. Even where Thackeray's prose is least under control, it inspires no more than his own regret that he did not write "a completely good book." For it is always the prose of a man of letters.

Now, in Thackeray's time scholarship was not fashionable. Neither Dickens nor Bulwer (save in his last novels) give you a sense of literary allusion. But Thackeray, in his most careless mood, suggests the classics or hints at the eighteenth century. As he wrote rather as an essayist than as a novelist, as his style was a sincere, untrammelled expression of his mind, he reveals his literary preferences by a thousand light touches. His reading, if not wide, was deep. He was perfectly familiar with both the Augustan ages. Horace he knew best of all, and quoted most constantly. Nothing pleases him better than to allude in a phrase to his favourite poet. "Nuper—in former days—I too have militated," thus he writes in *The Roundabout Papers*, "the years slip away fugacius;" and again, "to-morrow the diffugient snows will give place to Spring." Above all, he loved the Augustan doctrine of an easy life. The contemner of Swift naturally found Juvenal a "truculent brute," but he felt a natural sympathy for the satirist of Venusia, who timidly avoided unpleasant themes, and who, had he lived in the nineteenth century, would have been a man about town, and have haunted the very clubs to which Thackeray himself belonged. And when he chose to express himself in verse, he echoed with skill and fidelity both the manner and the philosophy of Horace.—CHARLES WHIBLEY, *William Makepeace Thackeray*, 1903, pp. 234–38

## Works

### VANITY FAIR

I brought away the last four numbers of *Vanity Fair*, and read one of them in bed, during the night. Very good, indeed, beats Dickens out of the world.—JANE WELSH CARLYLE, Letter to Thomas Carlyle (Sept. 16, 1847)

In forming our general estimate of this writer, we wish to be understood as referring principally, if not exclusively, to *Vanity Fair* (a novel in monthly parts), though still unfinished; so immeasurably superior, in our opinion, is this to every other known production of his pen. The great charm of this work is its entire freedom from mannerism and affectation both in style and sentiment,—the confiding frankness with which the reader is addressed,—the thoroughbred carelessness with which the author permits the thoughts and feelings suggested by the situations to flow in their natural channel, as if conscious that nothing mean or unworthy, nothing requiring to be shaded, gilded, or dressed up in company attire, could fall from him. In a word, the book is the work of a gentleman, which is one

great merit; and not the work of a fine (or would-be fine) gentleman, which is another. Then, again, he never exhausts, elaborates, or insists too much upon anything; he drops his finest remarks and happiest illustrations as Buckingham dropped his pearls, and leaves them to be picked up and appreciated as chance may bring a discriminating observer to the spot. His effects are uniformly the effects of sound wholesome legitimate art; and we need hardly add that we are never harrowed up with physical horrors of the Eugène Sue school in his writings, or that there are no melodramatic villains to be found in them. One touch of nature makes the whole world kin, and here are touches of nature by the dozen. His pathos (though not so deep as Mr. Dickens') is exquisite; the more so, perhaps, because he seems to struggle against it, and to be half ashamed of being caught in the melting mood: but the attempt to be caustic, satirical, ironical, or philosophical, on such occasions, is uniformly vain; and again and again have we found reason to admire how an originally fine and kind nature remains essentially free from worldliness, and, in the highest pride of intellect, pays homage to the heart.

*Vanity Fair* was certainly meant for a satire: the follies, foibles and weaknesses (if not vices) of the world we live in, were to be shown up in it, and we can hardly be expected to learn philanthropy from the contemplation of them. —ABRAHAM HAYWARD, "Thackeray's Writings," *Edinburgh Review*, Jan. 1848, p. 50

You mention Thackeray and the last number of *Vanity Fair*. The more I read Thackeray's works the more certain I am that he stands alone—alone in his sagacity, alone in his truth, alone in his feeling (his feeling, though he makes no noise about it, is about the most genuine that ever lived on a printed page), alone in his power, alone in his simplicity, alone in his self-control. Thackeray is a Titan, so strong that he can afford to perform with calm the most herculean feats; there is the charm and majesty of repose in his greatest efforts; he borrows nothing from fever, his is never the energy of delirium—his energy is sane energy, deliberate energy, thoughtful energy. The last number of *Vanity Fair* proves this peculiarly. Forcible, exciting in its force, still more impressive than exciting, carrying on the interest of the narrative in a flow, deep, full resistless, it is still quiet—as quiet as reflection, as quiet as memory; and to me there are parts of it that sound as solemn as an oracle. Thackeray is never borne away by his own ardour—he has it under control. His genius obeys him—it is his servant, it works no fantastic changes at its own wild will, it must still achieve the task which reason and sense assign it, and none other. Thackeray is unique. I can say no more, I will say no less.—CHARLOTTE BRONTË, Letter to W. S. Williams (March 29, 1848)

*Vanity Fair*, by W. M. Thackeray, one of the most brilliant of English magazine-writers, is an attempt, somewhat after the manner of Fielding, to represent the world as it is, especially the selfish, heartless, and cunning portion of it. The author has Fielding's cosy manner of talking to his readers in the pauses of his narrative, and, like Fielding, takes his personages mostly from ordinary life. The novel, though it touches often upon topics which have been worn threadbare, and reproduces many commonplace types of character, is still, on the whole, a fresh and vigorous transcript of English life, and has numerous profound touches of humanity and humor. Sir Pitt Crawley, a sort of combination of Sir John Brute, Sir Tunbelly Clumsy, and Squire Western, is a very striking piece of caricature; but though exceedingly ludicrous, is hardly natural. George Osborne, Dobbin, and Amelia are characters almost literally

true to nature, and are developed with consummate skill and fidelity. Mr. Osborne, we fear, is too fair a representative of the English man of business of the middle class,—selfish, arrogant, purse-proud, cringing to superiors, and ferocious to inferiors, rejoicing in a most profound ignorance of his own meanness and cruelty, and ever disposed to rise on the ruin of his neighbours. That disposition in English society, of every class, to trample on the one immediately beneath it, and to fawn on the one immediately above it, Thackeray felicitously represents in this portrait and in other characters. Nothing can be more edifying than Mr. Osborne's conversations with his son George, on his intimacy with men of rank who fleece him at cards, and on his duty to break off a match with Amelia after her father has become bankrupt. But the finest character in the whole novel is Miss Rebecca Sharp, an original personage, worthy to be called the author's own, and as true to life as hypocrisy, ability, and cunning can make her. She is altogether the most important person in the work, being the very impersonation of talent, tact, and worldliness, and one who works her way with a graceful and effective impudence unparalleled among managing women.

Of all the novels on our list, *Vanity Fair* is the only one in which the author is content to represent actual life. His page swarms with personages whom we recognize at once as genuine. It is also noticeable, that Thackeray alone preserves himself from the illusions of misanthropy or sentimentality, and though dealing with a host of selfish and malicious characters, his book leaves no impression that the world is past praying for, or that the profligate have it. His novel, as a representation of life, is altogether more comprehensive and satisfying than either of the others. Each may excel him in some particular department of character and passion, but each is confined to a narrow space, and discolors or shuts out the other portions of existence. Thackeray looks at the world from no exclusive position, and his view accordingly includes a superficial, if not a substantial whole; and it is creditable to the healthiness of his mind, that he could make so wide a survey without contracting either of the opposite diseases of misanthropy or worldliness.—EDWIN P. WHIPPLE, "Novels of the Season," *North American Review*, Oct. 1848, pp. 368–69

In this book the artist—and he was an eminently great artist—seemed to have endeavored to drive mankind to their own unaided struggles, taking away from them all good examples and leaving them to conclude that nothing is real but folly and perfidy. (. . .)

In the literature of fiction there is not to be found a picture drawn more artistically than Rebecca Sharp. She was of the sort upon whom it suited the author to exert his consummate powers. He painted her to the life, with pretended reluctance to evil, suspected, yet not fully known to be persuasible to consent, demanding risk, high pay, so that the pursuit, of which, if easy, a bold lover would weary, acquired the eagerness which must not be allowed to abate. No woman could better understand the trick, as sung by the shepherd in Virgil, of casting her apple and then fleeing to the covert of willows:

Malo me Galatea petit lasciva puella;

Et fugit ad salices; et se cupit ante videri.

It is a sad commentary on the powerlessness and the hopelessness of a poor young woman without other gift than mere virtue to obtain success that appears to attend upon insidiousness and fraud. It would have been a good sight to see the lifting of such a one, even though slowly and through difficulties, where so many thousands of poor girls do rise



through toil and patient waiting. In default of this the next best would have been to drive her to the frustration of every dishonorable purpose that had tempted her from the path of rectitude. Better than both of these, for the highest purposes of instruction, would have been pictures of young women who endured temptation and outrage without expecting and without receiving reward except such as came from the testimony of a good conscience and of suffering for the sake of Him who ennobled suffering and put it above successes, victories, and triumphs. For had there not lived in such a career Agnes and Afra, Rose and Eulalia, Lucy and Blandina? If such as these be outside of the art of the novelist, then surely he may hold up to our view young girls such as Richardson presented with generous sympathy to the public of his day. Alas! the eyes of that public were yet moist with tears when the profligate Fielding made them laugh both at them over whom they had wept and at themselves. It was such a joke to imagine it possible for as poor a girl as Pamela to marry a rich, hardened bachelor and reform him after marriage, or for another like Clarissa to endure such trials and yet continue spotless in her virtue! No, no; Rebecca Sharp must be what she was, have a better time than even Amelia Sedley, and thus be made to exhibit that virtue is worth not even as much as a semblance that is suspected and almost known to be false. Satire, indeed! Satire upon the men in highest society, for of the two from this class whom he exhibited one was a heartless profligate, the other a loathsome brute; satire even upon marriage, for the couple who were truest to each other were the O'Dowds, whose rudeness was sufficient to make all of both sexes feel like keeping away from marriage altogether, if this is to be considered a fair illustration of its most honorable estate.—RICHARD MALCOLM JOHNSTON, "The Extremity of Satire," *Catholic World*, Feb. 1886, pp. 688–90

#### ESMOND

Thackeray I saw for ten minutes: he was just in the agony of finishing a Novel: which has arisen out of the Reading necessary for his Lectures, and relates to those Times—of Queen Anne, I mean. He will get £1000 for his Novel. He was wanting to finish it, and rush off to the Continent, I think, to shake off the fumes of it.—EDWARD FITZGERALD, Letter to Frederick Tennyson (June 8, 1852)

Of our late Editor's works, the best known, and most widely appreciated are, no doubt, *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes*, and *Esmond*. The first on the list has been the most widely popular with the world at large. *Pendennis* has been the best loved by those who have felt and tasted the delicacy of Thackeray's tenderness. *The Newcomes* stands conspicuous for the character of the Colonel, who as an English gentleman has no equal in English fiction. *Esmond*, of all his works, has most completely satisfied the critical tastes of those who profess themselves to read critically. For myself, I own that I regard *Esmond* as the first and finest novel in the English language. Taken as a whole, I think that it is without a peer. There is in it a completeness of historical plot, and an absence of that taint of unnatural life which blemishes, perhaps, all our other historical novels, which places it above its brethren. And, beyond this, it is replete with a tenderness which is almost divine,—a tenderness which no poetry has surpassed. Let those who doubt this go back and study again the life of Lady Castlewood. In *Esmond*, above all his works, Thackeray achieves the great triumph of touching the innermost core of his subject, without ever wounding the taste. We catch all the aroma, but the palpable body of the thing never stays with us

till it palls us. Who ever wrote of love with more delicacy than Thackeray has written in *Esmond*? May I quote one passage of three or four lines? Who is there that does not remember the meeting between Lady Castlewood and Harry Esmond after Esmond's return. "Do you know what day it is?" she continued. 'It is the 29th December; it is your birthday! But last year we did not drink it;—no, no! My lord was cold, and my Harry was like to die; and my brain was in a fever; and we had no wine. But now,—now you are come again, bringing your sheaves with you, my dear.' She burst into a wild flood of weeping as she spoke; she laughed and sobbed on the young man's heart, crying out wildly,—'bringing your sheaves with you,—your sheaves with you!'

But if *Esmond* be, as a whole, our best English novel, Colonel Newcome is the finest single character in English fiction. That it has been surpassed by Cervantes, in *Don Quixote*, we may, perhaps, allow, though *Don Quixote* has the advantage of that hundred years which is necessary to the perfect mellowing of any great work. When Colonel Newcome shall have lived his hundred years, and the lesser works of Thackeray and his compeers shall have died away, then, and not till then, will the proper rank of this creation in literature be appreciated.—ANTHONY TROLLOPE, "W. M. Thackeray," *Cornhill Magazine*, Feb. 1864, pp. 136–37

If I could possess only *one* of his works, I think I should choose *Henry Esmond*. To my thinking, it is a marvel in literature, and I have read it oftener than any of the other works.—JAMES T. FIELDS, "Thackeray," *Yesterdays with Authors*, 1871, p. 16

Of Thackeray's works certainly the most remarkable and perhaps the best is *Esmond*. Many novelists following in the wake of Scott have attempted to reproduce for us past manners, scenes, and characters; but in *Esmond* Thackeray not only does this—he reproduces for us the style in which men wrote and talked in the days of Queen Anne. To reproduce the forgotten phraseology, to remember always not how his age would express an idea, but how Steele, or Swift, or Addison would have expressed it, might have been pronounced impossible of accomplishment. Yet in *Esmond* Thackeray did accomplish it, and with perfect success. The colouring throughout is exquisite and harmonious, never by a single false note is the melody broken. Of his writings in general perhaps the most noticeable characteristic is the hatred they express for all sorts of false pretences, sham sentiment, and unreal professions. He is never wearied of directing his scathing satire against 'whited sepulchres of all descriptions. "Call things by their right names; do not gloss over the villany of Lord Steyne because he is a lord; do not condone George Osborne's selfishness because he is handsome; don't pretend to be what you are not, and do not let false shame make you conceal what you are," is the burden of his message. To his scorn and hatred of vice and meanness he added sincere love and admiration of all that is true, and good, and honourable. A large-hearted, thoughtful man, the temptations and trials and sorrows of humanity affected him deeply. His pathos is as touching and sincere as his humour is subtle and delicate. His numerous "asides" to the reader are full of "that sad wisdom which experience brings," in striking contrast to those of Dickens, who, when he leaves his story to indulge in moralising, is generally trite and feeble. In a characteristic passage Thackeray apologises for the frequency of his casual reflections. "Perhaps of all novel-spinners now extant," he says, "the present writer is the most addicted to preaching. Does he not stop perpetually in his story and begin to preach to you? . . . I say *peccavi* loudly and heartily," he adds, but there was no need of this expression of repentance, whether sincere