

THACKERAY'S MAJOR NOVELS: A KIERKEGAARDIAN VIEW

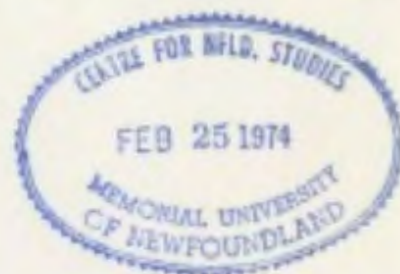
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THACKERAY'S MAJOR NOVELS: A KIERKEGAARDIAN VIEW

by



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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts,
Memorial University of Newfoundland,
1 August 1972.

ABSTRACT

A student of Thackeray will understand him best if he considers the man's fiction in conjunction with his personal biography before drawing conclusions. Certain philosophic patterns will then emerge that tend to make Thackeray look like a man of existentialist interests. His views about the chaotic nature of this world, the isolation in which individuals live out their lives, and the ambiguity of man's nature, make him sound almost Sartrian, while his acceptance of Divine Order and a loving God in the next world make this parallel impossible. Examined more closely, the approach that Thackeray finally adopts to life and fiction seems akin to that taken by Soren Aabye Kierkegaard, an ascetic Danish philosopher who lived at the same time as Thackeray. Kierkegaard maps out three stages of life which he sees as the steps to becoming a true Christian - the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage. Curiously, Thackeray's novels seem to follow a similar pattern: Vanity Fair lends itself readily to examination as an artistic exploration of the Kierkegaardian aesthetic stage; Pendennis, Henry Esmond and The Newcomes seem concerned with the same problems encountered by one in the ethical stage of life; and Philip seems to carry Thackeray even closer to Kierkegaard's religious stage, although because of the essential "inwardness" of the religious stage, this last must remain a matter for speculation rather

than proof. Turning from the themes of Thackeray's novels to an examination of his literary techniques, one discovers a further likeness to Kierkegaard. Both men make extensive use of irony and humour, especially in their adaptation of the ironic narrator for a didactic purpose, and in their constant repetition of a common theme, in Thackeray's case Vanitas vanitatum, the war cry of Vanity Fair.

Taken together these likenesses seem interesting material for a new view of Thackeray in Kierkegaardian existentialist terms, not to prove that the two men are identical, but simply to illustrate that philosophic affinities, not previously recognized, do exist, and make an interesting addition to the corpus of criticism already extant on the subject of Thackeray's life and writings.

This thesis has been examined and approved by:

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PREFACE

Perhaps the first point that should be made about this study of Thackeray and Kierkegaard is that so much has been left out. Indeed, I am painfully aware that the one-sidedness of my treatment of the subject leaves me open to the same kind of criticism that I have so generously doled out to several eminent Victorian scholars in the first chapter. Philosophers will undoubtedly feel that Kierkegaard has been neglected in this thesis through a superficial presentation which relies on the opinions of other critics rather than on original research into his philosophy. I must admit the charge and can say only that as the primary direction of the thesis is to Thackeray, not Kierkegaard, I feel that if any more space had been devoted to the existentialists, the literary balance of the treatment would be unsatisfactory. Thackerayan students may, however, make even more serious charges, for this presentation of Thackeray leaves out as much as it admits. Thackeray's talents as a humorist, for example, have been almost completely ignored in this thesis and there is a real danger that readers will come away with the impression that Thackeray must be a very dry and dull sort indeed in his religious preoccupation and general melancholy. That is not the case with Thackeray at all as would very quickly be demonstrated if discussion of some of Thackeray's

countless comic scenes had been included. Major Pendennis is worth a chapter of his own as an example of comic excellence used for a didactic end, as are Captain Costigan and 'the Fotheringay', Jos. Sedley, and countless others, particularly in the early works. Again I must answer that it is a question of balance. I feel that Thackeray's development was consistently away from the comic toward a more sensitive, sympathetic, and didactic kind of humour, and to spend more time on the comedy in Thackeray would be to risk losing the sense of the direction of his religious development. In the interest of preserving as much unity as possible, then, I have decided to emphasize Thackeray's serious side, leaving his comic side to be considered by others, as the side more commonly recognized and discussed. I can only hope that readers may forgive the omission.

Thackerayans may also feel that in Chapter V I have been very specific about the Kierkegaardian techniques of using ironic narrators, repetitious themes, and humour for didactic purposes, while I have given mostly generalizations about Thackeray's similar use of the same techniques. This, for two reasons: first, that many of the points had already been covered in the two previous chapters devoted almost completely to Thackeray's novels; and second, that much of the remaining evidence, particularly in the matter of ironic tone, is so integral a part of the general method throughout all Thackeray's writing that brief examples would tend to limit the scope of his irony

rather than to reveal its full implications, while lengthy examples would be impractical in a study of this length. Again it is a matter of balance. I trust that the generalizations will serve as a sufficient guide to readers who are familiar with Thackeray's writings, and as inspiration to others to read him in the original.

It should be emphasized that I have not intended to identify Thackeray with Kierkegaard, but simply to indicate that there are apparently philosophic similarities between the two which have not been noted previously. This thesis constitutes an exploration of those similarities with most conclusions remaining tentative. The main conclusion I have wished to draw is that, whether or not Thackeray is Kierkegaardian, he has certainly been abused by many scholars who see him as having no philosophy at all. I would propose that, within his own framework of interest and concern, Thackeray displays logical and consistent philosophic development such as is usually consistent with writers of the first order.

In the preparation of this thesis I have received much help from many people. I wish to thank Dr. D. Pitt, the Head of the Department of English at Memorial University, and the University Library staff who smoothed the path in many ways. One who deserves special thanks, too, is Mr. Leslie Mulholland of the University Philosophy Department who very kindly examined the sections pertaining to Kierkegaard and made many valuable

suggestions. I wish to thank also Mrs. Dallas Strange of the University staff who agreed to undertake the typing of this thesis. And most of all, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Alison Feder who has supervised my writing from the beginning and been most generous with her time, her books, and her good advice.

M.E.B.
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1 August 1972

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To define the art of Thackeray so that discussion neither moves too quickly from the novels into biography or philosophy nor is confined too narrowly in novelistic technique is a reasonable, but difficult and intriguing goal.

James H. Wheatley, Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction

At the height of the Victorian era, from the early 1840's until his death in 1863, William Makepeace Thackeray earned a tolerable fortune and a measure of fame from his writings, and was considered by many to be one of England's greatest novelists. Since then, however, definitive craftsmen like Henry James have so increased the artistic demands made of the novel form that the right of novelists like Thackeray to a front place in the annals of English literature has been challenged. His typically Victorian "baggy monsters" reveal so much structural looseness that it seems inordinately stubborn of them to survive, although if one measures a novel's life by the number of critics who comment on it, Thackeray's novels not only survive but seem as strong as in their youth. Thackeray has both defenders and detractors among his critics. Walter Allen would place him "in the second rank of our novelists";¹ W.C. Brownell reads "without

¹The English Novel (London: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 180.

finding a dull page";² F.R. Leavis speaks contemptuously of him as "a greater Trollope,"³ while Geoffrey Tillotson⁴ defends him against critics like J.Y.T. Grieg⁵ who finds much to criticize. And so the list grows. For our purpose, however, Thackeray's critics may be placed in two categories; those who evaluate his novels without reference to his biography, and those who examine his work in the light of his personal background. The first group will be reviewed only briefly, as Thackeray, perhaps more than any other English novelist, should be considered on the personal as well as the artistic level if the peculiar nature of his contribution to English literature is to be properly assessed. Thackeray's permanent value lies in the unique synthesis of his personal philosophy and his literary technique, a synthesis whose success is the more remarkable because it is not always deliberately conceived. Thus, those critics who limit themselves to discussions of Thackeray's ability or inability to complicate or resolve a plot, or of his ability to present characters at the artistically appropriate moment, or to use various techniques with force and economy, often view

²Victorian Prose Masters (New York: Kennikat Press, 1969), p.14.

³The Great Tradition (London: Penguin Books, 1962), p.31.

⁴Thackeray The Novelist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), pp. 276-277.

⁵J.Y.T. Grieg, Thackeray: A Reconsideration (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1967).

his achievements too narrowly. A constricted critical attitude to Thackerayan study leads to a type of evaluation which may sometimes be accurate but is more often misleading in that it tends to cloud the larger and more important critical issue of exploring the nature of the Thackerayan synthesis and defining precisely the nature of the relationship between Thackeray's philosophic outlook on life and his literary productions. This relationship should prove a source of great interest for modern students of Thackeray, for here his contribution to English letters is most nearly unique and from the point of view of academic scholarship, this approach to Thackeray's work does not seem to have been sufficiently investigated.

In some ways, Thackeray is the typical Victorian that Frank Swinnerton⁶ labels him. Some of his most obvious methods, - ironic tone, juxtaposition of authorial comment and character portrayal, remote perspective and panoramic viewpoint, - are the traditional techniques used by many social satirists who, like Thackeray, proclaim a didactic intention.⁷ They lead, however, to a different kind of revelation from what one might expect, perhaps even different in kind from what the writer intends, although if one recalls Thackeray's comment on his own

⁶Quoted by J.W. Dodds, "Thackeray in the Victorian Frame," Sewanee Review (1940), p. 478.

⁷Gordon N. Ray, Thackeray, Vol. I: The Uses of Adversity (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 385-386.

response to other novels his personal awareness of his achievement would seem likely: "All that I can remember out of books generally is the impression I get of the Author."⁸ Thackeray's writings not only reveal social ailments and suggest antidotes, but reveal as well, the man who makes the diagnosis. Thackeray's sensibility emerges, not "typically Victorian," but undated in many respects. One discovers a mind in tune with certain aspects of contemporary existentialist thought, a conscience much more scrupulous and Christian than might be expected of a "religious sceptic,"⁹ and a literary technique as sophisticated as Henry James's, although very different from it.

It follows, then, that a too limited critical view of Thackeray's work may mislead a student, bringing him to an irrelevant or erroneous conclusion about the real nature and value of Thackeray's achievement. Indeed, this has been the case with many otherwise reputable critics whose mistake has been to start from too narrow a critical base. Lord David Cecil, for example, may be right when he calls Thackeray "a very uncertain craftsman":

In his more conventionally-ordered books his hold on structure is very slack; he does not bother to weave the different strands of his theme together, loose ends

⁸Gordon N. Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II: The Age of Wisdom, p. 143.

⁹Ray, Thackeray, Vol. I, pp. 131-132.

dangle in the air; no careful revision has cut out the tufts of unnecessary material that have accumulated during the hurry of first writing. And he is almost always too long. With the mellowness of old age he has all its garrulity. He repeats himself. He underlines a point already printed glaringly red; he will bring in five illustrations of a point if anything too obvious on its first appearance.....Thackeray can be a bore.¹⁰

Elsewhere in this essay Cecil admires Thackeray but his critical approach, concentrating on form, leads him to conclude that Thackeray's uncertain craftsmanship spoils all the rest, for he finishes by saying that Thackeray's achievement, "in spite of all its originality, all its technical brilliance, is ultimatelydissatisfying. In the midst of Thackeray's subtlest melody, his richest passage of orchestration, there jars on our ears, faintly, a false note."¹¹

Nor is Cecil the most vehement critic. A number of hostile post-Jamesian critics are misled because of the nature of their critical method. They decry, among other things, one of the most obvious features of Thackeray's artistic method, his authorial presence in his novels. In examining Vanity Fair, Dorothy Van Ghent is confused by Thackeray's "inane and distracting" presence, in that, "two orders of reality are clumsily getting in each other's way: the order of imaginative reality, where Becky lives, and the order of historical reality, where

¹⁰Early Victorian Novelists (London: Constable and Co., 1934), pp. 95-96.

¹¹Ibid., p. 105.

William Makepeace Thackeray lives."¹² Percy Lubbock makes the same objection, stating the problem more fully:

When one has lived into the experience of somebody in the story and received the full sense of it, to be wrenched out of the story and stationed at a distance is a shock that needs to be softened and muffled in some fashion. Otherwise it may weaken whatever was true and valid in the experience; for here is a new view of it, external and detached, and another mind at work, the author's - and that sense of having shared the life of the person in the story seems suddenly unreal.¹³

Mrs. Van Ghent and Percy Lubbock consider it artistic weakness that the man Thackeray and his creations are so obviously and intimately related. Neither critic pauses to question why the technique, for it is a technique, is used. Indeed, they are like some of Thackeray's own self-righteously religious women, confident in the knowledge that in what they say they are following the letter of the law without realizing, or at least without admitting, that the law has a spirit too. These critics have, in effect, set up a law for the novel, an absolute ideal to which all novels must conform or be considered the worse for it. The ideal is essentially Jamesian and places great emphasis on form:

Form alone takes, and holds and preserves, substance - saves it from the welter of helpless verbiage that we swim in as in a sea of tasteless tepid pudding, and that makes one ashamed of an art capable of such degrad-

¹²The English Novel: Form and Function (New York: Harper & Row, Publ., 1967), p. 172.

¹³The Craft of Fiction (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), p. 88.

ations.....There is nothing as deplorable as a work of art with a leak in its interest; and there is no such leak of interest as through commonness of form. Its opposite, the found (because the sought-for,) form is the absolute citadel and tabernacle of interest.¹⁴

The point should be made quickly that James himself did not damn Thackeray as uncompromisingly as this passage would suggest, although his views on literary form were stringent and became ever more so as his own technique developed:

A picture without composition slights its most precious chance for beauty, and is moreover not composed at all unless the painter knows how that principle of health and safety, working as an absolutely premeditated art, has prevailed. There may in its absence be life, incontestably, as "The Newcomes" has life, as "Les Trois Mousquetaires," as Tolstoi's "Peace and War" have it; but what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean?¹⁵

Unfortunately, followers like Percy Lubbock who seem to neglect the spirit in which James expresses this view also neglect to answer his question about the artistic meaning of the Victorian novel. They seem to assume instead that any novelist who does not write like Henry James is somehow suspect, a critical view which reveals the pre-dispositions of the critics more than the deficiencies of Victorian authorship. Although

¹⁴Henry James, The Selected Letters of Henry James, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), p. 171.

¹⁵Quoted by Geoffrey Tillotson, Thackeray, The Novelist, Appendix II, pp. 296-297.

Thackeray does not lack form absolutely, his idea of it is different from James's. To criticize this difference, which is what Lubbock and Van Ghent seem to do at times, amounts to irrelevancy. Thackeray is not Jamesian. His artistic meaning is, in fact, quite different from that of the later novelist. So, to determine the permanent value of Thackeray's writings, a broad critical approach which will illuminate rather than obscure the meaning of his work is essential. Instead of seeing Thackeray's authorial presence in his writings as an intrusion and a weakness, one should examine it closely for it is a vital part of his autobiographical method.¹⁶ In this typically Thackerayan technique lies the solution to the twentieth-century debate about Thackeray's value. One could go so far as to say that if his method were not so distinctly autobiographical he might indeed belong in the second rank of our novelists. Without his presence, which performs an artistic function in his writings, there may be relatively little to attract a modern reader who can choose from among many admittedly keener craftsmen than Thackeray.

Thackeray's methods are autobiographical on two planes. In an obvious sense, he draws on his acquaintances and his own past experiences for source materials for his novels. In a

¹⁶This argument has been presented by several reputable Thackerayan scholars but is restated here as a point which cannot be over emphasized if current scholarship in the Victorian area is to advance effectively.

deeper sense, his literary creativity is the by-product of mental debate as he struggles to find a practical personal perspective from which to view his own life. One might even say that much of what he puts on paper is an overflow from his soul as he feels forced to identify his individual relationship to the universe in order to cope better with difficult daily problems. His novels make up a spiritual autobiography expressed in fictional terms. This description of Thackeray's work may seem extravagant at first, and certainly, to properly establish the links which lead to this conclusion, a closer examination of those biographical items commonly considered to have affected his moral sensitivity will be useful.

Many Thackerayan scholars have enumerated psychological and spiritual characteristics which may be traced to childhood influences. Mario Praz¹⁷ and Lionel Stevenson¹⁸ go back to the death of his father which occurred when Thackeray was only four. More important is the separation at age six from his mother who remained in India while he was sent to England to school. He was nine when she returned home with her second husband. Thackeray's school days were not particularly happy and the whole experience can be appropriately symbolized by one incident, the

¹⁷The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 193.

¹⁸The Showman of Vanity Fair (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), p. 153.

breaking of his nose, which permanently disfigured his face, just as his stay in boarding schools disfigured for a long time his attitude to public school education. The loss of his patrimony, "chiefly through the unwise trust that he and his kins- / folk reposed in the honesty of their fellowmen"¹⁹ forced him to earn his own living, which at twenty-two as a typical, classically-educated member of his social class, he was ill-prepared to do. He does not seem to have resented having to work but was confident in his ability to keep himself and a family too. However, his marriage in 1835 to Isabella Shawe was followed in 1839 by the death of his second child and a year later by the incurable insanity of his wife. Thus he was left, a young man not yet thirty, to bear all the domestic burdens involved in caring for the insane Isabella and two surviving baby daughters, while trying to eke out a living in a profession he had not chosen but which was forced upon him by the limitations of his education. He did not establish himself as a major literary figure until 1847 when he began to publish Vanity Fair in monthly numbers, and by this time he had become involved in a situation which was the source of intense mental and spiritual conflict. He had fallen in love with and was loved by the wife of an old schoolfriend, William Brookfield. She was a woman with as strong a sense of marital obligation as his own with the result that although apparently

¹⁹Ibid.

neglected by her husband she remained faithful to him. Both Thackeray and Jane Brookfield seem to have congratulated themselves on their integrity, but Thackeray suffered much emotional stress both during the ten-year period of their relationship and afterwards when they agreed that they must sever the hopeless connection. In addition to these domestic and emotional problems Thackeray had to cope with physical illness through much of his life. He suffered from a painful urethral stricture and was prone to recurrent attacks of a malarial type of fever which together caused him to be frequently bed-ridden, particularly in the last years of his life.

As a result of so many personal and domestic challenges, Thackeray felt a strong need for a personal philosophy which would sustain him, although there is little to indicate that he felt inspired to seek a philosophic panacea. James Hannay,²⁰ a contemporary of Thackeray's, writes of him that throughout his life he "followed the bent of his nature, as unconsciously developed by his experience." What actually constitutes this nature has been variously described. For Gordon Ray, one of the most astute and most devoted Thackerayan scholars of this century, the "picture emerges of a restless, insecure man, who despite his outer poise and polish was permanently uneasy...."²¹

²⁰Studies on Thackeray (New York: Kennikat Press, 1970), p. 61.

²¹The Buried Life (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 122.

Frank O'Connor claims that Thackeray's experiences led him to a "profound, melancholy realization of historical truth, a brooding awareness of the ultimate futility of all human endeavour."²² Mario Praz feels that he developed "a feeling of disillusioned detachment from life, the attitude of a puppet-showman who looks upon his own world as a half-serious melodrama."²³ There is a measure of truth in all these claims which may be supported by Thackeray's writings and a brief sampling of some of his expressed attitudes may be the most effective way to determine exactly how the "bent of his nature" led him through life. In Catherine, he speaks directly to his readers about his state of mental confusion:

My dear sir, when you have well studied the world - how supremely great the meanest thing in this world is, and how infinitely mean the greatest - I am mistaken if you do not make a strange and proper jumble of the sublime and the ridiculous, the lofty and the low. I have looked at the world, for my part, and come to the conclusion that I know not which is which.²⁴

This view indicates that Thackeray sees his world as an apparently chaotic universe which does not seem to conform to any natural order or system. Although Catherine is one of his earliest novels, he displays the same view of life in Vanity Fair where he deliberately chooses the metaphor of a country

²²The Mirror in the Roadway, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), p. 113.

²³The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, p. 194.

²⁴The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray, Vol. XX, Catherine: A Story, (London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1885), p. 158.

Fair to introduce a bustling world of disorderly activity. His Fair is a contentious place where there is "a great quantity of eating and drinking, making love and jilting, laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing and fiddling: there are bullies pushing about, bucks ogling the women, knaves picking pockets, policemen on the lookout, quacksand yokels.....and poor old rouged tumblers....."²⁵

When, in the text of the novel, the reader meets with the extremes represented by old Sir Pitt Crawley and Miss Horrocks on one hand, and the impulsive nobility of Rawdon in the face of his wife's infidelity on the other, one can easily see the world of Vanity Fair in the terms Thackeray used in Catherine, "a strange and proper jumble of the sublime and the ridiculous."

In the chaotic world of the Fair, as in Thackeray's real world, each individual is alone. In Pendennis Thackeray explores the theme of personal isolation fairly thoroughly in several digressive passages:

How lonely we are in the world! how selfish and secret, everybody!.....Ah, sir - a distinct universe walks about under your hat and under mine - all things in Nature are different to each - the woman we look at has not the same features, the dish we eat from has not the same taste to the one and the other - you and I are but a pair of infinite isolations, with some fellow islands a little more or less near to us.²⁶

²⁵Vanity Fair (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. xxi.

²⁶Pendennis, Vol. I (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1910), pp. 148-149.

In the same novel is perhaps one of the most famous of these passages, a paragraph which Gordon Ray considers "one of the most richly orchestrated passages of all Victorian prose."²⁷

Are you not awe-stricken, you, friendly reader, who, taking the page up for a moment's light reading, lay it down, perchance, for a graver reflection, - to think how you, who have consummated your success or your disaster, may be holding marked station, or a hopeless and nameless place, in the crowd - who have passed through how many struggles of defeat, success, crime, remorse, to yourself only known! - who may have loved and grown cold, wept and laughed again, how often! - to think how you are the same You, whom in childhood you remember, before the voyage of life began! It has been prosperous, and you are riding into port, the people huzzaing and the guns saluting, - and the lucky captain bows from the ship's side, and there is a care under the star on his breast which nobody knows of: or you are wrecked, and lashed, hopeless, to a solitary spar out at sea: - the sinking man and the successful one are thinking each about home, very likely, and remembering the time when they were children; alone on the hopeless spar, drowning out of sight; alone in the midst of the crowd applauding you.²⁸

In a world so disorderly, where attempts at any kind of sustaining communication are so apparently futile, the individual problem is complicated for Thackeray by a feeling that not only is it impossible to comprehend the lives and feelings of other people, but it seems impossible to control even one's own life:

Some call the doctrine of destiny a dark creed; but, for me, I would fain try and think it a consolatory one. It is better.....to deem oneself in the hands of Fate, than to think with our fierce passions and weak repentances; with our resolves so loud, so vain, so ludicrously,

²⁷Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 127.

²⁸Pendennis, Vol. II, p. 222.

despicably weak and frail; with our dim, wavering wretched conceits about virtue, and our irresistible propensity to wrong, - that we are the workers of our future sorrow or happiness.²⁹

But this view of man as a puppet, the victim of a malign or uncaring Destiny, is not Thackeray's whole view as will be seen later when Warrington and Colonel Newcome are discussed.

Thackeray believes that even though man may have no control over the external circumstances of his existence in many vital respects since he cannot know in advance what accidents may befall him, yet he can still control his life and circumstances on an individual level in the way he copes with them. He is close to Sartre when the latter states: "I form my projects partly on my experience of the use and potentiality of things, and allow for the unforeseeable."³⁰

It is in the quality of a man's actions that he defines himself as a man and achieves freedom, even though he may be a free man in a lost universe. Thus, Thackeray creates characters like Dobbin. Dobbin defines himself as a man by the quality of his behaviour, which is not perfect but is superior to the behaviour of the other characters in Vanity Fair. He acts heroically even

²⁹Pendennis, Vol. II, p. 222.

³⁰Jean-Paul Sartre as paraphrased by H.J. Blackham in Six Existentialist Thinkers (London: Routledge & Regan Paul Ltd. 1952), p. 133.

while he recognizes that his own heroism may be futile because of the nature of the world in which he performs. When he buys the piano for Amelia and lets her believe it is a present from George, and again when he marries her even though he is fully aware of her limitations, he rises above the external circumstances of his situation and in an individual way becomes heroic. In one sense, we may say that in recognizing the futility of his action before he acts and then consciously choosing to act in face of it, he is freed from its bondage. In the chapter on Vanity Fair, this view of man, introduced here to maintain continuity, will be explored much more fully.

Thackeray's attitude to the individual who seeks truth is complicated by the nature of man whom he sees as an essentially ambiguous creature, neither wholly good nor wholly bad:

I protest as I look back at the past portions of this history, I begin to have qualms, and ask myself whether the folks of whom we have been prattling have had justice done to them: whether Agnes Twysden is not a suffering martyr justly offended by Philip's turbulent behaviour, and whether Philip deserves any particular attention or kindness at all. He is not transcendently clever; he is not gloriously beautiful. He is not about to illuminate the darkness in which the people grovel, with the flashing emanations of his truth. He sometimes owes money, which he cannot pay. He slips, stumbles, blunders, brags. Ah! He sins and repents - pray Heaven - of faults, of vanities, or pride, of a thousand shortcomings! This I say - Ego - as my friend's biographer. Perhaps I do not understand the other characters round about him so well, and have overlooked a number of their merits, and caricatured and exaggerated their little defects.³¹


³¹Works, Vol. XI, The Adventures of Philip, Vol. II, pp. 349-350.

Although his feeling about man's ambiguity is well expressed in this late novel, Philip, the same idea can be seen in his writing as early as Catherine. In that novel he sets out resolutely to satirize the Newgate school of fiction by showing the sordid aspects of criminal life instead of glamourizing crime and brutality, but ends by bowing to his own view of truth which can not help but admit "how dreadfully like a rascal is to an honest man."³² The result is that the rascals in Catherine show more grey than black in their moral colouring.

In the face of these feelings about himself and his relationship to others, Thackeray sought antidotes which would make his life simpler, and like many other men, he examined religion to see if it might provide a solution. He felt unable to accept orthodoxy, however, and was disillusioned with the Christian religious system. He wrote to his mother early in 1846, "Who are Christians in the world? Priests and Aristocracy have killed the spirit of Christianity I think: the one by inventing curses, the other honor."³³ In a letter to Jane Brookfield in 1848 he expressed the same attitude when he adopted a sneering attitude to church ritual in describing the cathedral at Canterbury to her:

³²Catherine, p. 82.

³³The Letters and Private Papers of W.M. Thackeray, ed. Gordon N. Ray, Vol.II (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 233.

Fancy the Church quite full, the altar lined with pontifical gentlemen bobbing up and down, the dear little boys in white and red flinging about the incense pots, the music roaring out from the organ, all the monks & clergy in their stalls, and the Archbishop on his throne - O how fine! And then think of  our Lord speaking quite simply to simple Syrian people, a child or two may be at his knees, as he taught them that Love was the truth. Ah, as one thinks of it - how grand that figure looks and how small all the rest - But I daresay I am getting out of my depth.³⁴

In a much quoted letter to his mother, he gave full vent to his feelings about formalized religious belief in answer to her expressed fears over his refusal to follow her own very narrow Evangelical learnings:

Your orthodoxy is not your neighbour's - Your opinion is personal to you as much as your eyes or your nose or the tone of your voice. Objects in nature make quite a different impression upon you to what they do upon any other individual. Why be unhappy then about the state of another's opinion?..... It is awful presumption I think for any Bishop, Priest, layman or laywoman to say I have the true faith: I am right: Wo betide all who disagree with me.....If you had been born a Catholic - you know what a good one you would have been: and then you would have been wretched if I had any doubts about the martyrdom of Polycarp or the Invention of the Holy Cross - and there are thousands of anxious mothers so deploring the errors of their sceptical children - But the Great Intelligence shines far far above all mothers and all sons - the Truth Absolute is God - And it seems to me hence almost blasphemous: that any blind prejudiced sinful mortal being should dare to be unhappy about the belief of another; should dare to say Lo I am right and my brothers must go to damnation - I Know God and my brother doesn't.³⁵

³⁴Ibid., p. 406.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 205-207.

In all these comments and in countless others scattered through Thackeray's writings the attitudes which emerge most often tend to indicate that Thackeray's views are in sympathy with those of some existentialists. The chaotic nature of the world; the essential isolation of the individual; the need to create order out of the chaos through individual heroic activity which may not be rewarded in this life; the rejection of a systematic formula for life and the tendency to face circumstances subjectively as the need arises; the ambiguity of man's nature;³⁶ all these attitudes are central to the philosophic stance adopted by this century's most believable existentialists. Thackeray's views of man seem consistent with those paraphrased from Jean Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness by H.J. Blackham:

....I cannot change and cannot even properly know the image or opinion which another may entertain of me...³⁷

It is I who give meaning to my surroundings by my projects, and to the events which affect my projects: I create my situation and am responsible for it, and it is in this situation that I am free. When I separate myself in consciousness from what is there, I constitute not the world but its existence and meaning for me: it is by the independence and indifference of things and my capacity to separate myself from them and to act on them in order to change them for the sake of some project, a future end, that I have the liberty which I am.³⁸

³⁶See David E. Roberts, Existentialism and Religious Belief, ed. Roger Hazelton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 6-9.

³⁷Blackham, Six Existentialist Thinkers, p. 134.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 132-133.

The attitude that Sartre displays here regarding the relationship of the individual to the universe and the nature of individual freedom is akin to Dobbin's relationship to the other characters in Vanity Fair, and Warrington's to those in Pendennis. It is also consistent with Thackeray's use of the ironic narrator whose relationship to the characters in his novels has already been the subject of critics' attention and will be still further considered in Chapters III and V of this thesis. However, while Thackeray's opinions are sympathetic to these particular views of Sartre's, Thackeray differs from him in other important ways. Thackeray, for example, accepts the concept of a Supreme Being even while he recognizes the chaos of this world while Sartre, beginning and ending with the individual in a chaotic void, sees and accepts as a necessary part of his philosophy the full pessimistic implications of an unguided world. Thackeray's philosophy is not without hope. As noted in the letter quoted previously, Thackeray believes in a "Great Intelligence" even while he rejects orthodox, systematized expressions of the Christian faith. Thackeray is a fervent Christian, but his beliefs are "existentialist" rather than Evangelical or Anglican or Roman Catholic. In the same letter previously quoted he says to his mother:

Why do I love the Saviour? (I love and adore the Blessed Character so much that I don't like to speak of it, and know myself to be such a rascal that I don't dare) - Because He is all Goodness Truth Purity.....³⁹

³⁹Letters, Vol. II, p. 206.

The exact quality of Thackeray's Christian faith has been witnessed by others as well as himself, and there is one particularly well-expressed description of a walk taken with friends while in Edinburgh. It is recorded by one of them, Dr. John Brown, who seems to have been made a confidant by Thackeray on more than one occasion:

It was a lovely evening, such a sunset as one never forgets; a rich dark bar of cloud hovered over the sun, going down behind the Highland Hills, lying bathed in amethystine bloom; between this cloud and the hills there was a narrow slip of the pure aether, of a tender cowslip colour, lucid, and as if it were the very body of heaven in its clearness; every object standing out as if etched upon the sky. The north-west end of Corstorphine Hill with its trees and rocks, lay in the heart of this pure radiance, and there a wooden crane, used in the quarry below, was so placed as to assume the figure of a cross; there it was, unmistakable, lifted up against the crystalline sky. All three gazed at it silently. As they gazed, he gave utterance in a tremulous, gentle, and rapid voice, to what all were feeling, in the word "CALVARY!" The friends walked on in silence, and then turned to other things. All that evening he was very gentle and serious, speaking, as he seldom did, of divine things - of death, of sin, of eternity, of salvation: expressing his simple faith in God and in his Saviour.⁴⁰

In the epilogue to his two-volume biography of Thackeray, Gordon Ray summarizes many of the attitudes recognized here, although he does not seem to make enough of Thackeray's religious convictions which one feels are much more reflected in his writings than Ray indicates in this summary:

⁴⁰Gordon N. Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 171.

Thackeray saw life as a struggle. Human beings are weak and imperfect. Wickedness and folly often prevail; virtue and good sense are often borne down. Success is so largely dependent on luck, so little on moral worth, that it is the emptiest of accolades. Still, one's inevitable discontent can be mitigated to some extent by pursuing the satisfactions of private life; the cultivation of family affections, the contemplation of beauty, the enjoyment of such good things of the earth as food and wine. But as a member of so imperfect a race in so badly arranged a world, the only reasonable attitude is one of humility about one's self and charity towards others. "I can't but accept the world as I find it," Thackeray wrote in Esmond, "including a rope's end." Such a view of life may not make for cheerfulness, but it at least has the merit of enduring under the wear and tear of existence, since it is founded on realities rather than illusions.⁴¹

To get a more objective and accurate assessment of Thackeray's religious attitudes it may prove beneficial and necessary to move away from his own comments and those of his critics altogether and to compare Thackeray's ideas with those of people who recognized themselves as "existentialist Christians" as Thackeray did not. In fact, Thackeray probably never knew he was an "existentialist" at all, or heard the word "existentialism." For, although there seem to have been existentialists as long as there have been people, existentialism was only officially "born" as a formal philosophic phenomenon shortly after Thackeray's own birth. The man who brought existentialism "officially" into the world was born two years after Thackeray, in 1813, and died eight years before him in 1855. But in that short life span, Soren Kierkegaard formulated in his writings a comprehensive

⁴¹Ibid., p. 429.

life theory which has become the foundation for modern existentialist thought. It is with this man that Thackeray will chiefly be compared, for in spite of some obvious differences, it seems possible that a philosophic kinship of which neither man was aware can be established. And if this is so, the way lies open to an exploration of Thackeray's writings in terms of Christian existentialist thought, an approach not hitherto taken by Thackerayan scholars, even those who, unlike the Jamesian critics, quite rightly emphasize that much of his attraction is the peculiarly individual integration of the man's personality and philosophy with his literary technique. This comparison is not undertaken, however, with a view to proving that Thackeray is a Kierkegaardian existentialist Christian, but rather to indicate that certain affinities and similarities in philosophic directions, not previously recognized by Thackerayan scholars, do exist and should be further studied. The first step in this examination is to make some biographical and philosophical comparison, a task which may be more effectively handled in a separate chapter.

CHAPTER II

KIERKEGAARD AND THACKERAY

A fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics. The critic's task is to define the latter before evaluating the former.

Jean-Paul Sartre.

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard is very different from William Makepeace Thackeray. That he is a philosopher while Thackeray is a novelist is perhaps the most obvious difference, but there are others. One might contrast Kierkegaard's keenness as a classical scholar with Thackeray's mediocrity; Thackeray's extensive travel with Kierkegaard's lack of it; Kierkegaard's rejection of marriage with Thackeray's acceptance of the domestic role; and so on. The differences are superficial, however, and while the list might be extended much further, it is more important to examine those areas which seem most likely to provide valid grounds for a philosophical comparison and so establish a firm base for this thesis.

Until they are examined in the light of their consequences, some of the ways in which Kierkegaard and Thackeray are alike seem just as superficial as the differences just mentioned. Each man was, for example, very self-conscious about his physical appearance, a small vanity which seems unimportant until one

realizes that this self-consciousness went deep into each man's personality and was partially responsible for their sometimes using pseudonyms when writing for publication. Regis Jolivet describes Kierkegaard as being "of poor appearance," an impression confirmed by extant pencil sketches and portraits:

Thin, frail-looking, a little bent and giving the impression of being a hunchback, he knew he was ugly Nature had endowed him with an odd voice, very high-pitched, reminiscent of a eunuch's, with abrupt changes in its intonation. He described his own voice as "uncircumcized, not an evangelists's"; it is, he says, "a night-hoarseness like a seagull's cry, a dying voice like the benediction on a dumb man's lips."¹

At the other end of the scale, Thackeray's physique was a departure from the norm because of his great height and girth; he was well over six feet tall and weighed between fifteen and eighteen stone for most of his adult life. In contrast to his great size, was his almost baby-smooth complexion and a "bridgeless nose" which was disfigured as the result of a childhood fracture.² He was not ugly so much as conspicuous and all his life was very sensitive to personal comment.³

Both Thackeray and Kierkegaard for various reasons, some conscious, some unconscious, hid themselves behind fictitious personae when writing. Thackeray published his first efforts

¹Introduction to Kierkegaard (London: Frederick Muller Ltd.), p. 10.

²Ray, Thackeray, Vol. I, p. 279.

³See Ray's discussion of his quarrel with Dickens and Yates which was largely the result of Thackeray's sensitivity to personal comment, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 278, ff.

anonymously as "George Savage Fitzboodle," "Ikey Solomons, Jr.," "Michael Angelo Titmarsh" and "Charles James Yellowplush" and in his later novels when he felt sufficiently confident to publish in his own person, he still masked himself behind character-narrators who spoke his lines for him. Thackeray went so far at times as to disclaim any control over his writings. Lionel Stevenson recounts a conversation between Thackeray and the Reverend Whitwell Elwin in which the latter speaks of Thackeray's method as writing "by a sort of instinct, without marking the full import of your narrative as you go along."

"Yes," Thackeray replied, "I have no idea where it all comes from. I have never seen the persons I describe, nor heard the conversations I put down. I am often astonished myself to read it after I have got it on paper."⁴

This comment is in line with his response to criticism about the ending of Henry Esmond where the hero marries Lady Castlewood who has been a mother image to Henry through most of the novel. Mrs. John Brown demanded to know "Why did you make Esmond marry that old woman?" That old woman was Henry's senior by about eight years. But Thackeray's answer was typical when he denied controlling his characters. "My dear lady, it was not I who married them. They married themselves."⁵ Of Thackeray's use of narrator-commentators in his novels, Ray comments that "his chosen narrators were so much like himself that the necessity

⁴The Showman of Vanity Fair, p. 303.

⁵Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 188.

of keeping their remarks in character placed no check on his flow of commentary. Indeed, his successive masks operated rather as an encouragement, since they enabled him to disown direct responsibility for what he says....."⁶ As this whole subject is dealt with more fully in Chapter V, however, it may be sufficient at this point to indicate that Thackeray's use of narrators and pseudonyms closely parallels Kierkegaard's use of the nom de plume. Kierkegaard gives two explanations of his own usage, which have been incorporated into Jolivet's text.⁷ The first reason "is to present the pseudonyms as so many ways of bringing readers face to face with themselves."

Kierkegaard says:

I proclaim the truth.....and I place my readers in a situation where they have no alternative but to make it their own. Personality is only ripe when a man has made the truth his own whether it is Balaam's ass speaking or a laughing jack-ass with his loud laugh, an apostle or an angel.⁸

This explanation is comparable to Thackeray's view of himself as a lay preacher and with his concepts of the novel as a didactic tool. Lord David Cecil summarized this attitude in his description of the relationship between a Thackeray novel and the reader:

Here is no mere picture of Tom or Dick or Harry, he feels, here is a coherent and considered view of that common man of whom Tom and Dick and Harry are only individual examples. This is how Thackeray looked on his life, this is how I could look on my

⁶Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 373.

⁷Introduction to Kierkegaard, pp. 45-46.

⁸Ibid., p. 46.

life if I chose. And he is in consequence stirred to a more serious response than could be raised in him by the record of a mere particular instance.⁹

An even stronger statement of the same case comes from A.E. Dyson when he discusses Vanity Fair and states that "we are involved in the fate of the characters we laugh at, not distanced from them; it really matters to us to know what happens to them in the end."¹⁰ He develops the point further when speaking of Thackeray's satiric quality:

In the novel, he places both his readers and himself in Vanity Fair. We are all tainted with the Crawley hypocrisy, whether of Mrs. Bute or Miss Crawley, of Sir Rawdon or of Becky herself. Exactly here, however (and surely this is intended, too?), a further temptation is put in our way. To be all tarred with the same brush, and to be brought to realise that we are, can be a relief as well as a challenge. Need we really do more than the next man in the way of penance, if we have done no more than he in the way of guilt? To judge ourselves guilty, and read on, is less uncomfortable than setting about a wonderful mending of the world. All satirists suffer from this possible evasion of their challenge, but some perhaps suffer less than others--and a few might be tempted to take the same escape route themselves.¹¹

The second explanation that Kierkegaard gives for his use of pseudonyms is that they "symbolize" his "different affinities and his manifold possibilities" all of which he saw as so many "temptations," or excuses for escaping from the real task of becoming a true Christian, a goal which in his view

⁹Early Victorian Novelists, pp. 76-77.

¹⁰"Vanity Fair: An irony against heroes," Critical Quarterly, 6, 1964.

¹¹Ibid., p. 19.

demanded a singleness of vision and purpose. Jolivet writes:

Hence in order to rid himself of them he gives them a literary form. This constitutes for him the deliverance which he needs.....On this basis one can explain Kierkegaard's surprising assertion that the pseudonymous works contain not a word by him, not a single word. For a very long time, he says, his melancholy prevented him from being on familiar terms with himself. "It kept me far away from myself while I went off to discover an imaginary world, rather like the heir of a vast estate who is perpetually at the stage of being initiated into the field of possibilities."¹²

This explanation of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms seems to be consistent with those critical interpretations of Thackeray which emphasize the kinship between the man and his writing, a view that is of major importance for this thesis which sees all Thackeray's characterizations as extensions and explorations, in one way or another, of his own personality.

Both Thackeray and Kierkegaard felt convinced that they would die young, a similarity that one might dismiss as an eccentricity, except that it has personal and artistic consequences in each case. Kierkegaard lighted upon the age of thirty-three, the age Christ died, as the approximate time for his own death, and while he did not die until he was forty-two he spoke of himself at times as if he were dead. In so far as he had put aside the world he was dead to its claims and he yearned for the real thing which he felt was necessary if he was to succeed

¹²Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 46.

in the life task he had set himself.¹³ Although Thackeray's attitude to death did not have such obvious religious implications as did Kierkegaard's, there is much evidence that thoughts of death and eternity were his constant companions. From the time of his wife's insanity there are many indications that Thackeray has begun to put aside worldly ambition except in so far as it was necessary for him to carry out his duty to his daughters and other members of his family. He was only thirty-six when he wrote as from a great old age to William Edmondstone Aytoun: "And you, young man, coming up in the world full of fight, take counsel from a venerable and peaceable old gladiator who has stripped for many battles....."¹⁴ To Mrs. Procter he wrote when he was forty-one: "The laugh dies out as we get old you see."¹⁵ Thackeray knew he could improve his prospects for a long life by modifying his life-style somewhat to suit his doctor's directions. He might have tempered his excess of food, drink, late hours and tobacco, and he might have undergone surgical treatment to alleviate his condition, but he refused to do so, seeming to take the attitude of a man

¹³See Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, footnote No. 23, p. 42.

¹⁴Letters, Vol. II, p. 262.

¹⁵Quoted by Myron Taube, "Thackeray and the Reminiscental Vision", Nineteenth Century Fiction, Vol. XVIII, p. 252.

who sees little benefit in living in this world if he has a chance of living in the next. His attitude combines an air of world-weariness with a sense of personal sinfulness. Stevenson quotes him as saying, "I don't see that living is such a benefit, and could find in my heart pretty readily to have an end of it - after wasting a deal of opportunities and time and desire in vanitarianism."¹⁶ In The Virginians he describes Henry Esmond's last years:

He was not unhappy - to those about him most kind - most affectionate, obsequious even to the women of his family, whom he scarce ever contradicted; but there had been some bankruptcy of his heart, which his spirit never recovered. He submitted to life rather than enjoyed it.¹⁷

In commenting on this passage, Gordon Ray says that Thackeray was describing himself, and states that his attitude in his last ten years was one of "reconciliation to life."¹⁸ But perhaps the best description comes from one of Thackeray's contemporaries, James Hannay:

If Thackeray believed that life was often mean and wearisome, he also believed that eternity was better,

¹⁶The Showman of Vanity Fair, p. 196. The artistic influence of Thackeray's "other-worldliness" in Barry Lyndon and in Thackeray's Punch contributions entitled "Sketches and Travels in London" are treated by Myron Taube in "Thackeray and the Reminiscent Vision," Nineteenth Century Fiction, Vol. XVIII, pp. 247-259, while further discussion of the topic, in relation to his major work is undertaken later in this thesis.

¹⁷Gordon Ray, The Buried Life, p. 118.

¹⁸Ibid.

and he loved to dwell, though discreetly and reverently, on the hopes and feelings excited by that awful word.¹⁹

Thackeray's dislike of organized Christianity, described earlier, is akin to Kierkegaard's feeling when the latter speaks as he does so often in his writings of the sterility of Church ritual:

When I look at a number of particular phenomena in the Christian life it seems to me that Christianity, instead of giving men strength - yes, that compared to the pagans such individuals are bereft of their manhood by Christianity and are as geldings to the stallion.²⁰

Of the bourgeoisie, which is so much the concern of Thackeray, Kierkegaard too writes often, and always scathingly:

The bourgeois mind is really the inability to rise above the absolute reality of time and space, and as such is therefore able to devote itself to the highest objects, e.g. prayer, only at certain times and with certain words.²¹

Their ethics are a short summary of police ordinances; for them the most important thing is to be a useful member of the state, and to air their opinions in the club of an evening; they have never felt homesickness for something unknown and far away, nor the depth which consists in being nothing at all, of walking out of Nørreport with a penny in one's pocket and a cane in one's hand; they have no conception of the point of view (which a gnostic sect made its own) of getting to know the world through sin - and yet they too say: one must sow one's wild oats.....They have never even had a glimpse of the idea which is behind that saying, after one has forced one's way through the hidden and mysterious door into that "dark realm of sighs," which in all its horror is only open to foreboding -

¹⁹Thackeray (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1970), 1st publ. London, 1868, p. 82.

²⁰A Kierkegaard Anthology, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), p. 7.

²¹Ibid.

when one sees the broken victims of seduction and inveiglement, and the tempter's coldness.²²

This Kierkegaardian view of the bourgeois temperament may be compared to Thackeray's treatment of the middle-class characters in Vanity Fair and The Newcomes, those rather dull souls like Amelia, and petty, cruel ones like Barnes Newcome, and may also be likened to his complaint that since Fielding no novelist has been able to present people honestly because of the constraints placed upon him by the middle class audience for whom he is writing:

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 must drape him, and give him a certain conventional simper. Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art. Many ladies have remonstrated and subscribers left me, because, in the course of the story, I described a young man resisting and affected by temptation. My object was to say, that he had the passions to feel, and the manliness and generosity to overcome them. You will not hear - it is best to know it - what moves in the real world, what passes in society, in the clubs, colleges, mess-rooms, - what is the life and talk of your sons. A little more frankness than is customary has been attempted in this story; with no bad desire on the writer's part, it is hoped, and with no ill consequence to any reader. If truth is not always pleasant; at any rate truth is best, from whatever chair - from those whence graver writers or thinkers argue, as from that at which the story-teller sits as he concludes his labour, and bids his kind reader farewell.²³

This statement is much milder than that previously quoted from Kierkegaard, but that the two statements are in sympathy may be further supported by the tone which Thackeray adopts in his

²²Ibid., p. 9.

²³Pendennis, Vol. I, p. xviii.

artistic recreations of the middle class in all his novels, particularly the later ones, such as The Newcomes and Philip.

Both Kierkegaard and Thackeray display an ambiguity which critics consider variously as a weakness or a strength. Kierkegaard sees all of life in terms of making deliberate, conscious choices, an attitude accurately reflected in the apt title of one of his main works, Either/Or. While still quite young he said of himself, "I am a Janus bifrons; I laugh with one face, I weep with the other."²⁴ This is the same phrase that Henry Lewis is quoted as using to describe Thackeray. R.A. Colby, in Fiction with a Purpose,²⁵ writes in a tone which is so much in line with the argument presented here that it would be a loss not to include a large portion of his comment:

Lewis, already the student of psychology, exploring in his own novels the duality and contradictoriness of human character, found Thackeray's ambivalence a sign of his greatness. To him, Thackeray was not a mere "mocking Mephistopheles" as alleged by his detractors, but a "Janus Bifrons" endowed with the power to see things from opposing viewpoints. Furthermore, a certain "tendency to antithesis" in Thackeray's mind, he points out, makes him able to detect at once "a soul of goodness in things evil, as well as the spot of evil in things good".....Thackeray's acute sensitivity to the good in the worst of us and the bad in the best of us made for that urbanity of tone that some of his contemporaries took for mere pococurantism.

As with Wilde and Shaw later in the century, Thackeray disturbed readers by occasionally making his heroes and villains exchange roles or by questioning

²⁴Bretall, A Kierkegaard Anthology, p. 8.

²⁵Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967.

conventional notions of good and evil.....The main effect of Thackeray's mental legerdemain, however, is to awaken his readers' minds to the range of human possibility.²⁶

Having perhaps now indicated that there are sufficient grounds for a general comparison of Thackeray and Kierkegaard one may turn to examine more closely the earliest and most important features of the emotional climate which nurtured each man's philosophic growth. Here too one finds that there are many areas of likeness. Each man, for example, recognizes the strong and lasting influence of a parent, for Kierkegaard, his father; for Thackeray, his mother. Jolivet's summary in his Introduction to Kierkegaard seems to support Kierkegaard's own comments about his father:

His father.....was a powerful and durable force in his moral and spiritual life. In his Journal and his other works, Kierkegaard continually evokes the tortured figure of this old man, in whom the ardent and arid fervour of Moravian pietism was allied to a mysterious melancholy. It was by him that the young Soren was introduced to an absolute respect for duty, for a duty which was itself an absolute rather than a concrete multiplicity of individual duties, and was at the same time initiated into Christianity, but into a sombre, stern Christianity, in which sin assumed a catastrophic aspect and duty took on the form of drama. Certain of his father's sayings sank deep into his heart and caused him a kind of oppressive anxiety.....Thus Kierkegaard could note in the Journal that his father had filled his soul with anguish concerning Christianity. It is in the light of these childhood impressions that we must understand his affirmation, constantly repeated in so many different ways, that "Christianity with the terror removed is merely a Christianity of the imagination."²⁷

²⁶Fiction with a Purpose, pp. 170-173.

²⁷pp. 3-4.

Thackeray's mother would have approved Kierkegaard's thought that "Christianity with the terror removed is merely a Christianity of the imagination," although she might not have interpreted it exactly as he meant it, for her own Christianity was of the "terrible" variety. She was a strict and narrow Evangelical who, like Kierkegaard's Moravian father, had a very strong sense of duty, very little sense of humour, and a distinct propensity to melancholy. And, also like Kierkegaard's father, she felt morally obliged to try to force her stern religious views on her son. Both Thackeray and Kierkegaard disagreed with their parents' religious views, although neither discarded the parental influence completely. For Kierkegaard, religious disparity led to an "amicable separation"²⁸ from his father, which lasted until shortly before the latter's death in 1838 when the son was twenty-five. After this, Kierkegaard felt free to spend his life working out his own spiritual philosophy, a project made possible by his inheritance of the paternal fortune and made probable by the same paternal influence. Kierkegaard, while he rejected his father's orthodoxy, retained throughout his life a strong sense of personal duty, and a permanent sense of melancholy, which were both, like the money, a direct inheritance from his father.

For Thackeray, however, the matter of his mother's influence was far more complicated. She outlived her son by a year

²⁸Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 12.

and he was never 'free' of her direct influence.²⁹ She had been told at his birth that she could have no more children which made her only son particularly close to her, and made their later three-year separation while he attended school in England particularly cruel to both of them. Thackeray's mother became a dream-figure to him during this period while he became for her the object of maternal idolatry which would last all her life.³⁰ Their relationship was further complicated when Thackeray's young wife became insane and he was forced to depend on his mother to help look after his two baby daughters through much of their early childhood. In the face of the desertion by Isabella's mother in this period of domestic crisis, one can hardly wonder that Thackeray's naturally close feeling for his own mother was deepened by his sense of gratitude to a point where for all his life he was very reluctant to hurt her, as he invariably did when his religious views came up for questioning. J.Y.T. Grieg relates an incident which arose out of Thackeray's visit to Jerusalem in 1844 when he was engaged in writing the series of articles covering his travels "From Cornhill to Cairo," later published as Eastern Sketches:

²⁹All the material in this chapter regarding the influence of Thackeray's mother on him has been previously discussed by Gordon Ray, Lionel Stevenson and J.Y. Greig, among other biographers. It can also be substantiated by surviving letters which have been collected and published in a four volume edition by Gordon Ray (see Chapter I, footnote 33).

³⁰J.Y.T. Grieg, Thackeray: A Reconsideration, gives full discussion of this in Chapter II, "Mother and Son".

Unholy in appearance, it [Jerusalem] yet remained forever memorable because of its associations with the divine person of Jesus Christ, to whom Thackeray's devotion was at all time emotional, non-rational, rooted in childhood memories, but quite unshakable. This was the aspect of the Holy City that he found it hardest to represent in the book, but, of course, it was the only aspect of the Holy Land that his mother could conceive of.....

On the other hand, Jerusalem, as Thackeray saw it, was also the battleground of warring, intriguing, bribing sects, and the stage for 'deceits too open and flagrant', 'inconsistencies and contrivances too monstrous', 'grovelling credulity', 'sanctified grimaces', and all manner of other disgusting by-products of religious fanaticism and ecclesiastical hypocrisy; and all this excited in him that 'pert little satirical monitor' (his own phrase) which had a sharp eye for humbug, and which always threatened to overthrow that other daemon of his, the sentimental comforter. As usual, head and heart remained at variance, and Thackeray, uneasily turning over notes and memories of 'ten days passed in a fever' at Jerusalem, fell under the dominance now of the one and now of the other.³¹

He wrote to his mother that he was "gravelled with Jerusalem, not wishing to offend the public by a needless exhibition of heterodoxy: nor daring to be a hypocrite."³² Greig concludes:

This letter seems to have driven Mrs. Carmichael Smyth into something like a panic. She replied immediately with what, writing to his cousin, Charlotte Ritchie, he described as "a letter so full of terror and expostulation, and dread of future consequences for my awful heresy", that he cancelled what he had said about Jerusalem and began again.³³

³¹Ibid., pp. 24-25.

³²Ibid., p. 25.

³³Ibid., pp. 25-26.

One might be tempted to conclude from this incident that Thackeray's love for his mother tended to impede the development of his spiritual philosophy in that it made him hesitate to give full public vent to his feelings of scorn for the externals of religious practice, and perhaps by extension also slowed his development as a Kierkegaardian existential Christian.

While he was still very young, Kierkegaard made a comment in his Journal which reveals an attitude also characteristic of Thackeray through most of his life. He said:

I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and soul; wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me - but I went away - and the dash should be as long as the earth's orbit ----- and wanted to shoot myself.³⁴

This rather mournful outlook is common in Thackeray's pseudonymous narrators, and in his private life too, friends often spoke of his melancholy turn of mind. In his study of Kierkegaard, Regis Jolivet lists four different types of melancholy: the burden of heredity; the defeat of aestheticism; romantic sadness; and the feeling of sinfulness.³⁵ He says "Kierkegaard seems to have experienced them all....."³⁶ and the same claim may be made of Thackeray. The first classification, "the burden of heredity," refers to an inherited condition. Kierkegaard felt he had inherited a tendency to morbidity from his father, while Thackeray likened his own melancholy to his mother's pessimism. Kierkegaard's temperament was such that he contemplated his own melancholy and writes about it

³⁴Kierkegaard Anthology, p. 7.

³⁵Introduction to Kierkegaard, pp. 66-70.

³⁶Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 66.

in such a way that makes it certain "that he was constantly aware of its weight, and that it took root in the darkest depths of his physical constitution and made him struggle endlessly and without respite against 'the pale, bloodless, hard-lived midnight shapes' to whom he himself, he says, gave life and being."³⁷ Thackeray never described his melancholy so poetically, but there is ample evidence that he was frequently subject to it. John Brown writes of the time when Thackeray was presenting his popular lecture series on the "Four Georges":

We have seen a great deal of him; he comes and sits for hours, and lays that great nature out before us, with its depth and bitterness, its tenderness and desperate truth. It is so sad to see him so shut out from all cheer and hope.³⁸

At this particular time in Thackeray's life, it is likely that his melancholy was a byproduct of his religious outlook rather than romantic sadness and would probably have to be classified as Jolivet's "Defeat of Aestheticism" or "Feeling of Sinfulness" both of which are examined below. But first, a definition of Kierkegaard's expression, "Romantic Sadness," since Thackeray was also subject to this form of melancholy as, according to Kierkegaard, all men are prone to it. Jolivet's explanation is lucid and explicit when he speaks of romantic melancholy as "the awareness we have at times of the anxiety of nature, and also of the brevity of our own lives, ceaselessly threatened by natural death." He goes on to explain this rather esoteric passage more fully:

³⁷Ibid. pp. 67-68.

³⁸Stevenson, Showman of Vanity Fair, p. 325.

Nature, beautiful, young, and graceful, where life assumes a thousand shapes and teems in joy and happiness, nature yet contains a deep sadness, a kind of sigh which is the mark of a captive thing unable to breathe or find expression. In nature, everything is carefree. And yet, this same nature, is it life, or death? Brief, full of songs and flowers, but incessantly a prey to victorious death: such is the life of nature.

It is this feeling of the ambiguity of nature which forms the basis of romantic sadness. This malady, Kierkegaard observes in Either/Or, coupling it with the defeat of aestheticism, is very common nowadays, when everyone feels bound to wear his heart on his sleeve; it makes "all young France and Germany" lament. It is certain, indeed, that the Romantics made much of this kind of melancholy. But Kierkegaard for his own part constantly felt its grip, by virtue of his singular sensitivity to the sighing of creation, to the mute despair of things, the dialectical aspect and the uncertainty of the temporal; and by virtue also of his conviction that he was destined to have only a brief, tormented life.³⁹

The temporary nature of this melancholy is quickly admitted because "to remain there permanently would be to confuse true human sadness with 'childish whimperings'". Jolivet concludes for Kierkegaard:

There is only one sadness worthy of man, the sadness brought him by his awareness of eternity and his own state of sinfulness. And this does not have the effect of overwhelming man, but on the contrary of raising him above himself, by forcing him to adoration. By this means, confessing the infinite greatness of God, he finds within himself his true greatness.⁴⁰

This sadness is the "Feeling of Sinfulness" and should not be confused with the melancholy which Jolivet classifies as the

³⁹Introduction to Kierkegaard, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 70.

"Defeat of Aestheticism" which it resembles superficially and which results from "aestheticism," that is, "from a life dominated by the urge to enjoyment and pleasure, whose final defeat it marks."⁴¹ For the person caught by this latter type of melancholy, "conscience exists.....only as a higher degree of consciousness, which expresses itself in a disquietude that does not, in a more profound sense, accuse him, but which keeps him awake, and gives him no rest in his barren activity."⁴² This seems to describe the kind of melancholy which clouded Thackeray's attitude to his work and is more superficial than that described earlier by John Brown. It has been noted that Thackeray was forced to write for a living because he was trained to do nothing else, and as a result he felt chained to his desk. He would put off writing until his conscience would permit no further delay, spending the interim, particularly in his younger years, in a barren social round which he could not enjoy because he felt he should be working. Even when he did get down to work he complained that he could go but slowly. He writes to Mrs. William Ritchie that "I sit for hours before my paper, not doing my book, but incapable of doing anything else, and thinking upon that subject always, waking with it, walking with it, and going to bed with it. Oh, the struggles

⁴¹Ibid., p. 68.

⁴²Kierkegaard, quoted by Jolivet, p. 69.

and bothers - oh, the throbs and pains about this trumpery!"⁴³

In view of the intensely personal nature of his writing, less superficial one suspects than Thackeray realized, it is not surprising that his Pegasus was "restive, stubborn, slow"⁴⁴ and that some days he could write nothing but a few lines. He was writing always, whether or not he realized it, of his own state of mind, the status of his soul, his individual relationship to his world. His was not a glib or superficial literary talent. He was not as inventive as Dickens, but could only rework the themes which were part and parcel of his condition of mind. Thus when he complains in his last period to Elwin of being able to "repeat old things in a pleasant way" but having "nothing fresh to say" we can sympathize with him even while we surmise what he was unable to recognize, that his soul has passed through the stage of turmoil which Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic stage and is at least in the ethical stage of life, if not in the religious, conditions which are both characterized by "inwardness" and that melancholy that Jolivet classifies as the "feeling of sinfulness":

.....a melancholy which is bound up with the condition of humanity, corrupted by sin. To be precise, it is the feeling of inherited sin within us, every man's inability to become transparently pure in his own eyes. This melancholy exists even for those whose life is the calmest, the most peaceable, the most harmonious imaginable. As such it is a sign or at least a principle of perfection, since it induces us

⁴³Letters, IV, 292n.

⁴⁴Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 365.

to move on to the religious stage, not in order to be rid of it, but on the contrary to strengthen it and see it transformed into that anguish and despair which is the gateway to salvation.⁴⁵

Kierkegaard had difficulty convincing himself that his own melancholy was of this last kind, and it is a tenuous proposition to try to definitely categorize Thackeray's melancholy as "religious." The point may be best illustrated by reference to his writings, particularly those of his last period. Grieg mentions Thackeray's response in his lecture on "Charity and Humour" to a reviewer who had accused him of being 'a dreary misanthrope' who saw 'only miserable sinners round about him':

So we are; so is every writer and reader I ever heard of; so was every being who ever trod this earth, save One. I cannot help telling the truth as I view it, and describing what I see. To describe it otherwise than as it seems to me would be falsehood in that calling in which it has pleased Heaven to place me; treason to that conscience which says that men are weak; that truth must be told; that fault must be owned; that pardon must be prayed for; and that love reigns supreme over all.⁴⁶

This passage constitutes a succinct statement of Thackeray's religious conviction. It is a simple faith based on emotion rather than reason, which Thackeray arrived at in a manner which seems to correspond to the steps laid down by Kierkegaard as those necessary to becoming a truly existential Christian. Before proceeding further, however, time must be taken to describe this process in more detail, so that examination of

⁴⁵Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 70.

⁴⁶Thackeray: A Reconsideration, pp. 28-29.

Thackeray's writings in Kierkegaardian terms may be seen as meaningful and relevant as well as different from the traditional approaches taken by Thackerayan scholars.

The first stage, called the aesthetic, through which all men must pass, is characterized by pleasure. Kierkegaard writes:

See him in his season of pleasure: did he not crave for one pleasure after another, variety his watchword? Is variety, then, the willing of one thing that abides the same? Nay, rather it is the willing of something that must never be the same. But that is just to will the manifold, and a man with such a will is not only double minded but all at variance with himself, for he wills one thing and immediately after the opposite, because oneness of pleasure is disappointment and illusion, and it is the variety of pleasure that he wills. Change was what he was crying out for when pleasure pandered to him, change, change!⁴⁷

Jolivet concludes from this that an aesthetician needs change "since only that which has the freshness of immediacy can procure him pleasure."⁴⁸ But he adds that "the aesthetical tendency must not be reduced to mere sensualism. In fact it includes every attitude whose sole aim is pleasure, even if it is 'noble' and purely intellectual." Kierkegaard's conclusion according to Jolivet is that "to say that the moment is everything amounts to saying that it is nothing....For if the moment is everything, that is to say, if in the moment there is only the moment, it is as much as to say there is nothing

⁴⁷Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 124.

⁴⁸The rest of this paragraph is based on the same reference, pp. 125-127.

in it, since as an atom of time it is perpetually vanishing."

Kierkegaard describes the aesthetician's life as anarchic and disordered and doomed to eventual boredom:

Disgust gnaws at the pleasure-seeker. Enjoyment has a taste of death. Every aesthetician eventually longs for death. It is this which explains why although he is given up to a passionate search after the passing moment, which always deceives his hopes if only because it passes, the aesthetician lives really only in the past, by cherishing his memories. But for him memory is sadness and melancholy - the only element of inwardness which the aesthetic includes - for it consists of a past which is abolished and incapable of repetition. Hope is closed to him..... whoever lives on this plane is in despair, whether he knows it or not.⁴⁹

In order to become Christian, the individual must become aware of his own despair. Kierkegaard writes, "I counsel you to despair.....not as a comfort, not as a condition in which you are to remain, but as a deed which requires all the power and seriousness and concentration of the soul, just as surely as it is my conviction, my victory over the world, that every man who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the significance of life, however beautiful and joyous his life might be. Jolivet gives one view of Kierkegaardian despair:

Despair, then, is dialectical; it opens up divergent paths. Its value is not wholly negative, it may have some virtue. It embraces salvation and perdition, demoniacal pride and Christian humility, abandonment and choice, truth and untruth, time and eternity. It marks a frontier. Here all depends upon how one despairs. If one despairs "from the point of view of the finite," that is, if the despair fails to produce a rupture within the depths of the

⁴⁹Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 127.

soul and leads on the contrary to a spiritual hardening, one is lost. If despair forces the soul to gather up its last resources, to "despair in truth," absolutely, it awakens the soul to consciousness of its eternal validity and breaks the magic circle of the finite.⁵⁰

In The Sickness Unto Death (1849) this whole question is covered fully and it may be seen that to "despair in truth" is to move into Kierkegaard's "ethical stage" of life. Any individual in this stage has "morality as the chief principle of his conduct and the ultimate end of his activity" and "aims above all at obedience to duty."⁵¹ Blackham writes that "to live in the ethical is to commit oneself, to put oneself beyond fortune and misfortune by an infinite religious resignation."⁵² This resignation should not, however, be confused with passiveness, for the individual must constantly choose and be aware of the deliberation of his choices, which are often repetitive.

Jolivet paraphrases Kierkegaard on this point:

Ethical repetition is not mechanical. For the individual, the force of the moral life consists in the repetition with ever renewed spontaneity of gestures which from the outside appear uniform and impersonal. The ethicist is established upon the plane of generality, it is clear. But he must in some sense individualize repetition, and hence as it were stabilize the present. It is a question of seriousness, not a seriousness bestowed (or withheld) by one's temperament, but one which everyone can and must acquire, and which substitutes the peaceful and solid continuity of duration for the punctual, staccato time of the aesthetic.⁵³

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 130-131.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 134.

⁵²Six Existentialist Thinkers, p. 11.

⁵³Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 135.

Quoting from Either/Or, Jolivet continues:

In reality, much courage is needed to live not in differences but in the general. "When the ethical individual has completed his task, has fought the good fight, he has then reached the point where he has become the one man, that is to say, that there is no other man altogether like him; and at the same he has become the universal man. To be the one man is not in itself anything so great, for that everybody has in common with every product of nature; but to be that in such a way that he is also the universal man is the true art of living.⁵⁴

But for Kierkegaard, even this level is not sufficient for being a true Christian, for there are, in every man's life, occasions when adherence to an imminent duty or moral principle may become the source of conflict. In Kierkegaard's own life, he faced such a dilemma in his relationship with his fiancée Regina Olsen when, to marry her, which he equated with continuing to live in the ethical stage, became a temptation. Jolivet describes the situation very briefly:

He believed in good faith that he loved Regina Olsen, and for her part she was ready to marry him. Yet in fact he was forced to admit that in her he loved something other than herself, namely the Idea or God. Hence the drama which no recourse to the universal could resolve. Repetition, that is to say, in this case, the universal, counselled him to follow the custom and marry. But in his eyes this was impossible, for he could not marry Regina without deceiving her concerning the nature of his feelings. What was to be done? Reason or morality are defeated, and so the moralist too in his turn is led to despair and death.⁵⁵

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 138.

This necessitates a further leap, into the religious stage. Kierkegaard often refers to the Biblical incident where Abraham is called upon by God to sacrifice his son as an instance where ethical solutions are insufficient:

From the ethical point of view, Abraham is confronted with the absurd and the monstrous. Does the universal offer any means of resolving so dramatic a situation? Surely not. The ethical would condemn both God's command, declaring it to be impossible, unreal, illusory ("God's wisdom demands that....."), and the patriarch's obedience. And yet Abraham obeys and sets off with the knife and the wood for the sacrifice. He chooses the absurd. He denies the universal. In this way he passes from the ethical to the religious sphere. But if he has been obliged to make the transition, or rather the leap, it is precisely because within the ethical realm the problem he had to solve admitted of no solution.⁵⁶

The highest stage of existence is the religious stage and its relationship to the ethical stage is very well explained by Jolivet:

In contrast to the ethical of the pre-religious stage, which made religion subordinate to itself as one of its own elements, the religious takes the ethical into its service and gives it new validity. The fact remains that the religious realm cannot be reduced to the moral, for it is the realm of the infinite, of the "prodigious," to which one can attain only by virtue of the "absurd," outside all rational principles. The "absurd" here defines faith not only as belief in mysteries which are above reason - and even, according to Kierkegaard, contrary to reason - but also as hope justified by no tangible or rational reason.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 138.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 143.

In contrast to the ethical stage where emphasis is placed on "living in the general," the religious attitude, as illustrated in the case of Abraham, places emphasis on man's individuality. Kierkegaard sees that one deficiency of the ethical life is that it tends to make man forget "that he is and must be an Individual, subject to his own personal duties and endowed with a responsibility which is inalienably his own."⁵⁸ The individual nature of the religious life may be seen in the emphasis it places on man's relationship to God, and on faith, sin, suffering, and love as paradoxical elements which make up that life. Sin and suffering are crucial aspects of the Kierkegaardian religious stage. The ethicist cannot cope with either, for the ethical attitude "finds the meaning of life in the joy of action, in the conviction that open-hearted obedience to duty must bring happiness."⁵⁹ The ethicist must despair, must abandon himself completely to God, in the face of the existence of sin, must make, if possible, the leap into the religious stage. Kierkegaard emphasizes that man must recognize sin as a state of man's nature, not merely as a wrong act that man commits. Jolivet summarizes this view in these words:

.....sin itself, is the state of man, not only in
in that he is a particular sinner who has committed

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 136.

⁵⁹Ibid.

such and such actual sins, but of man as such, that is, as a son of Adam. This is why every man must confess himself a sinner and be aware of his guilt, as Kierkegaard says "as a totality" - not only of his guilt which is accidental and personal, but of sin, which is valid for the whole of existence and the whole of the human race, so that to be born means to become a sinner. Suffering and anguish are bound up with this consciousness; within the religious, it is the highest form of existential pathos.⁶⁰

Kierkegaard believes that one aspect of sin is "the refusal to take Christ as the measure of the self":

This is why there is no sin except in relation to God. Any other conception leaves us at the aesthetic level; wrongdoing will be, if one will, an aberration or an accident, but not a "disobedience defying God's commandments." In short then it can be said that in its very essence sin is "against God." That is the fundamental teaching of Christianity, and of Christianity alone. That is why "the consciousness of sin is the conditio sine qua non of Christianity; if one could be exempted from it, one could no longer become a Christian. And the proof that it is the supreme religion is precisely that no other has expressed with such profundity and such elevation the significance which the fact of being a sinner has for man."⁶¹

Kierkegaard states that "the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith."⁶² Abraham in showing himself willing to murder his son Isaac, would not be counted a virtuous man in the ethical interpretation of living according to moral principles; he acted according to the moral principle of faith which is the key to

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 147.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 148.

⁶²Ibid.

life in the religious stage. Kierkegaard points out, as a vital part of his whole analysis of the kinds of life, that "faith always brings us face to face with the paradoxical and the absurd, and involves us in risking everything, like a man far out at sea, alone in a frail skiff with seventy thousand fathoms beneath him, miles and miles away from all human help."⁶³ Suffering must be the lot of man in the religious stage, "for it means the defeat of the reason and its natural clearness, passionate hope in the total absence of reasons for hope, conflict, sometimes bloody conflict, with the world."⁶⁴ It should be noted that the suffering need not be physical but may be simply the state of passively accepting God in faith, a difficult challenge. Kierkegaard writes explicitly of the need for suffering in the religious stage:

In connection with aesthetic or ethical existence, suffering plays an accidental role; it may be absent, and the mode of existence may still be aesthetic or ethical, or if it gains here a deeper significance, it is as a transitional phase. Not so here, where suffering is posited as something decisive for a religious existence, and precisely as a characteristic of the religious inwardness; the more the suffering the more the religious existence - and the suffering persists.⁶⁵

In spite of the fact that the religious stage is only definable in terms of sin and suffering, Kierkegaard sees Christianity as a religion of love and hope:

⁶³Ibid., p. 150.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 151.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 151-152.

.....one finds peace in the forgiveness of sins, when the thought of God does not remind us of sin, but of forgiveness, so that the past does not recall to us the full extent of our guilt, but the full extent of our pardon.⁶⁶

Jolivet expands this idea for his readers:

It is very evident nevertheless that faith in forgiveness cannot abolish the sense of sin and the suffering which accompanies it for the hero of faith, since by definition the sense of forgiveness is also the sense of sin. To feel and to believe that one is forgiven is at the same time to know and to feel that one is a sinner. But the anguish of sin is as it were dissipated by the joy of forgiveness and the peace it brings. Or rather, the sense of sin only increases the joy and the peace of the forgiveness, in the absolute conviction that God is love.⁶⁷

The implications of this philosophy are stern and far-reaching in man's daily life, and it will be seen that if one hopes to fit Thackeray into a Kierkegaardian frame both his life and writings must be considered. It should be remembered at this point that it is not proposed to identify either the men or their philosophy, but merely to demonstrate that a philosophic kinship is more likely than critics have hitherto considered. Indeed there are too many critics who feel that Thackeray had no philosophy at all and it is hoped that this may answer their views, at least in part. Henry James's father was wrong when he said to Emerson that "Thackeray could not see beyond his eyes, and had no ideas"⁶⁸ as was Roscoe in his later

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 163.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 163-164.

⁶⁸Quoted by Gordon Ray, Thackeray, Vol.II, p. 119.

evaluation: "It is curious how independent he is of thought; how he manages to exist so entirely on the surface of things."⁶⁹ Even Thackeray thought little of his own intellectual ability and claimed to have no head above his eyes⁷⁰ but this is not to say he held no philosophy. Throughout his writings there is abundant evidence that his characters are representative of the Kierkegaardian aesthetic and ethical stages and that the same view of man which is central in Kierkegaard's thought is also the view which Thackeray presents in his major writings. It can even be argued that Thackeray may have come to Kierkegaard's religious stage, although the particular "inwardness" of this last stage makes it a difficult position to define from his fiction, and to illustrate its likelihood it will be necessary to turn from his writings to an examination of the last years of his personal biography.

The remainder of this thesis will consist of a closer examination of Thackeray's major writings and personal life in light of Kierkegaard's three stages, with the aesthetic stage being the first and easiest to illustrate. Thackeray's most widely read novel, Vanity Fair, can be interpreted as a thorough even if unconscious, artistic exploration of Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage, for every character in the book is an aesthete at least for a time. This view is supported by Thackeray's

⁶⁹Geoffrey Tillotson, Thackeray the Novelist, p. 180.

⁷⁰Quoted by Gordon Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 119.

expressed intentions for the novel, although his choice of words is different from what Kierkegaard's would have been.

He writes to his mother:

What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world (only that is a cant phrase) greedy pompous mean perfectly self-satisfied for the most part and at ease about their superior virtue.⁷¹

It is the task of the next chapter to determine how well he succeeds.

⁷¹Letters, Vol. II, p. 309.

CHAPTER III

VANITY FAIR: AN ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION OF KIERKEGAARD'S AESTHETIC STAGE OF LIFE

The subject matter of Vanity Fair is comprehensible to a child of fourteen: its tone can be caught only by the disenchanted.

Brigid Brophy. Don't Never Forget.

Vanity Fair has been examined from many different points of view since it began serial publication in January, 1847, and one might do well to examine some of the directions recent criticism has taken before turning to examine the novel as a study in Kierkegaardian aestheticism. Some critics have chosen to ignore Thackeray's definition of the book as a novel without a hero and have chosen Dobbin¹ or Becky² for that role, or have decided that Becky and Amelia³ should share the limelight. Other commentators have turned away from individual characters and named "the panorama of life"⁴ or "society"⁵ as the protagonist. It has also been said that the novel revolves around

¹J.H. Wheatley, Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1969), p. 84.

²Frank O'Connor, The Mirror in the Roadway, p. 116.

³A.E. Dyson, Critical Quarterly, 6 (1964), pp. 11-31.

⁴Lord David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists, p. 80.

⁵Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, p. 93.

the narrator, variously identified as Thackeray himself, thinly disguised,⁶ or as a character objectively conceived like all the other characters in the book.⁷ Depending largely on the vantage point from which they begin their search for unity in Vanity Fair, critics have come to widely divergent conclusions about the novel. Arnold Kettle says that it is about "the difficulties of personal relationships, particularly marriage relationships in nineteenth century, upper-class English society."⁸ G. Armour Craig writes that "what Thackeray does then exhibit within the domain of the Fair is the impossibility of self-knowledge and in the fullest sense, dramatic change."⁹ For A.E. Dyson, "Vanity Fair is surely one of the world's most devious novels, devious in its characterization, its irony, its explicit moralising, its exuberance, its tone."¹⁰ Bernard Paris calls the book "a novel of disenchantment" in an essay which deserves attention if only because of the novelty of his interdisciplinary approach.¹¹ He thinks that Vanity Fair lacks

⁶Ibid., p. 109. See also pp. 125-126.

⁷Ann Wilkinson, "The Tomeavesian Way of Knowing the World: Technique and Meaning in Vanity Fair," ELH, Vol. XXXII (1965), pp. 371-387.

⁸Twentieth Century Interpretations of Vanity Fair, ed. M.G. Sundell (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 18.

⁹Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁰Critical Quarterly, 6 (1964), p. 12.

¹¹"The Psychic Structure of Vanity Fair," Victorian Studies (June, 1967), pp. 389-410.

"organic unity" and resorts to a psychologically-oriented analysis to "make sense of the novel's inconsistencies."¹² This approach reveals "Vanity Fair's vision of human values, human nature, and the human condition to be defective. All of the value systems and solutions in the novel are neurotic. The novel's conclusions about human nature are drawn exclusively from neurotic characters."¹³ Paris goes on to say that, "Since many people are more or less neurotic, they {the novel's conclusions} have wide applicability, but they by no means do justice to the potentialities of the species. The novel is highly successful in portraying the characters and fates of individual men, but it fails in its effort to depict the nature and condition of Man."¹⁴ Paris's essay is interesting but is limited in value because of the extreme narrowness of his approach which is closely tied to Karen Horney's psychological theories on personality types. Gordon Ray's approach to Vanity Fair is not subject to particular theories of psychology as is Paris's but it does look beyond the book to Thackeray the man when trying to determine the sources of unity in the novel. Ray feels that Vanity Fair came about as a result of Thackeray's "pausing in the middle of the journey to sum up what life had meant to him thus far,"¹⁵ that the story "emerged in his mind as he thought

¹²Ibid., p. 399.

¹³Ibid., pp. 407-408.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 408.

¹⁵Thackeray, Vol.I, p. 388.

back over his experience and tried to comprehend it,"¹⁶ and that "Thackeray found most of the material for his cruel and penetrating analysis of universal egoism through self-examination."¹⁷ These comments seem to provide an appropriate introduction to the present evaluation of Vanity Fair, and seem to supplement a passage written by Lord David Cecil about Charlotte Bronte which one feels could have been used to describe Thackeray as well:

Her range is confined to the inner life, the private passions. Her books are before all things, the record of a personal vision.....She is our first subjective novelist, the ancestor of Proust and Mr. James Joyce..... Fundamentally, her principal characters are all the same person; and that is Charlotte Bronte.....The world she creates is the world of her own inner life; she is her own subject.¹⁸

Cecil felt that, unlike Miss Bronte, Thackeray tried to write from the standpoint of universal, "impersonal truth"¹⁹ but the purpose of this Chapter is to illustrate that Vanity Fair, just as much as the writings of Miss Bronte, is "the record of a personal vision"; that he, like Proust and Joyce to whom he also has been compared, is "a subjective novelist"; and that his principal characters are also "all the same person," and that person is William Makepeace Thackeray, a man whose philosophic orientation is existentialist.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 407.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 420.

¹⁸Early Victorian Novelists, pp. 110-112.

¹⁹Ibid.

Very few critics have considered Vanity Fair as an existentialist statement. Ann Wilkinson does call the novel "a kind of existential document,"²⁰ but does not develop her point as fully as one might hope, while D.H. Stewart develops an existentialist approach in "Vanity Fair: Life in a Void,"²¹ but comes to conclusions quite different from those drawn in this study. Stewart writes:

Vanity Fair challenges us not by its infinity but by its gospel. The world is a bald fact; interest and diversity appear only through the multitude of ethical, human responses to it. What Thackeray saw clearly were the ethical implications of bourgeois reality, which have been examined systematically and made central recently in our thinking largely by Marxists and existentialists. Thackeray, it seems, was either indifferent to or unaware of both the social theory and the systematic philosophical inquiry of his time. All he had was a comfortable, if not comforting, emulsion of eighteenth-century thought which enabled him to hold in his head all at once Swift, Fielding, and Goldsmith.....Perhaps a firmer commitment to consistent ideas might have saved Thackeray from the flaccid resolution of dilemmas that impairs much of his later work, but in Vanity Fair his commitment is not merely sufficient but prophetically right.²²

Stewart sees three implications in Thackeray's refusal or inability to write according to a definite system:

It means first that the moral center of the book is not a principle that can be formulated; it is precisely the evolving situation in which conventional moral principles are repeatedly reversed and inverted so that one never reaches a resolution.....The second thing that the existential rather than metaphysical orientation

²⁰ELH, Vol. XXXII (1965), p. 382.

²¹C.H. Stewart, "Vanity Fair: Life in the Void," College English, XXV, pp. 209-214.

²²Ibid., pp. 210-211.

means for Vanity Fair is that everything is rooted in and defined by its history. Existentialists celebrate an acute consciousness of looking backward from the vehicle of time that hurls them into an unknown future. Thackeray's vision is similar but restricted, for his "reminiscential method" generally minimizes our sense of the future.....The existential tendency means a third thing in Vanity Fair. It means that Thackeray's infamous "ambivalence" becomes essential to the book's power.²³

Although Stewart's existential examination of Vanity Fair is valuable, he unfortunately makes too little of Thackeray's essentially Christian religious tone, that tone which pervades the novel even when Thackeray is discussing the least Christian of his characters. Stewart asks:

Having read Vanity Fair, how is one "edified" or "instructed"? Toward what course is one moved? Unanswerable questions, I think; for Thackeray never challenges with ideas. There is no metaphysical concern. Above and beyond particulars, there is only an emptiness - abhorrent alike to the Christian and the pagan idealists of our own time.²⁴

This view can only be the result of an imperceptive reading of the novel for Thackeray makes quite plain that part of his purpose is to try to bring his readers to active realization in their own lives of the precept he considers basic to a meaningful Christian life - the precept of brotherly love. To choose only one example from Vanity Fair, Thackeray portrays old Miss Crawley as pitiful because she is unable to make that religious commit-

²³Ibid., pp. 211-213.

²⁴Ibid., p. 211.

ment which would signal her departure from Kierkegaard's "aesthetic stage," and warns his readers away from a like fate:

.....how peevish a patient was the jovial old lady; how angry; how sleepless; in what horrors of death; during what long nights she lay moaning, and in almost delirious agonies respecting that future world which she quite ignored when she was in good health. -----Picture to yourself, O fair young reader, a worldly, selfish, graceless, thankless, religionless old woman, writhing in pain and fear, and without her wig. Picture her to yourself, and ere you be old, learn to love and pray!²⁵

It is difficult to reconcile this comment, which is but one of many bearing the same message in the novel, with Stewart's interpretation of the novel as an artistic representation of "life in the void." In Vanity Fair, Thackeray does emerge as an existential writer, but he is a Christian existentialist who presents this world as a state of "void" but does not leave men bereft of hope, as Stewart seems to indicate. The last passage of Vanity Fair despairs of true happiness in this world, but does not preclude happiness in the next:

Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?²⁶

One of the main points that Thackeray wants to bring out in this novel is that one must not be satisfied with this world, and must guard against seeing its vanities or even its most honest pleasures as ultimate goals. Thackeray says everywhere in the

²⁵Vanity Fair, pp. 119-120.

²⁶Ibid., p. 668.

novel, by implication in his ironic tone and in his fictional examples, that each individual must fight against the chaos of the moral void which the Fair of this world represents and try in an individual way to become an active living human motivated by the Christian precept of love. To miss this message is to see the novel in Jamesian terms, artistically instead of didactically oriented. Thackeray never lost sight of his own moral purpose in Vanity Fair although what his didactic intention was has become clouded by years of irrelevant criticism. In The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, Mario Praz seems to be moving back to a proper critical orientation from which to begin Thackerayan evaluation in that passage where he talks about Thackeray's "preaching vocation" and writes that "It is indeed possible, remembering certain episodes in Thackeray's life, to imagine, in him, a secret life dominated by a profound sense of religion."²⁷ Other critics too have identified the religious factor in Thackeray's life and work and recognized it as important, although some, like A.E. Dyson, are not quite sure how important. In speaking of Becky's moral nature he says:

Again and again Thackeray reminds us that we, too, belong to Vanity Fair. To condemn Becky easily is a fortiori to condemn ourselves; how are we to make any judgment without resorting to hypocrisies deeper and more shameful than her own? The imaginative power of Thackeray's vision forces the reality of this

²⁷p. 213.

dilemma upon us; some further dimension must be sought before we can be sure that we have the right. Should it be the religious dimension, perhaps, to which the word 'vanity' directs us? Or the political one, to which the whole analysis of class and money appears to point?.... Perhaps Thackeray never did decide how far the poison at work in Vanity Fair is a social sin, which decisive social action might remove, and how far it is a personal flaw, an ineradicable vanity in the heart of man.²⁸

One of the very best assessments of the didactic nature of Vanity Fair is contained in an essay by Ann Wilkinson:

The process of reading this novel involves a constant questioning in the reader's mind, despite the apparent "safeness" of these scenes removed from our immediate view, as to what in fact happened and why. A good deal of reconstructive energy and imagination are required of the reader in a way that is not necessarily implied for the narrator, who is after only telling a story. The aesthetics of this novel require, then, that the reader be aroused to the responsibility of himself asking the moral questions and focusing on the issues that surround each character. In this way this work of art fulfills Coleridge's description of a work of art that it changes the quality of the imagination: as we become aware of the barriers to our perception of the facts here, we become aware that we need a new way of assessing motivations. Our reading then becomes an action, in the sense that it is active participation in the moral chaos of this fictional world. In fact, then, the novelist's responsibility is fulfilled not by way of the pronouncements of the narrator, but by way of arousing in the reader a moral energy and a moral questioning that may be far more beneficial than a mere pronouncement of rights and wrongs on the part of either the narrator or the author.²⁹

This passage does not directly identify the Thackerayan morality as Christian although it does lend itself to an existentialist reading in its conscious involvement of reader and novel, but that the

²⁸Critical Quarterly, 6 (1964), p. 23.

²⁹ELH, Vol. XXXII (1965), p. 387.

moral ethic is Christian as well as existentialist should, however, become more evident as we apply the Kierkegaardian formula for becoming a real, existentialist Christian.

Critics have commonly pointed out that the title of the novel, Vanity Fair, is reminiscent of Bunyan's town of Vanity in Pilgrim's Progress, with perhaps one of the best discussions of the subject being a brief essay by Joseph E. Baker called "'Vanity Fair' and the Celestial City."³⁰

Vanity Fair is compared to both St. Augustine's City of God and Bunyan's town of Vanity in such a way that it is but a short step from Baker's discussion to Kierkegaard's philosophy. Very early in the essay Baker quotes a book by Albert Mordell³¹ in which the latter states that in Pilgrim's Progress, "Bunyan wants to show us that to do good is so difficult that we must labor with an effort in that direction, and that we must be conscious of sin continually."³² Baker feels that this view of Pilgrim's Progress is consistent with his own view of Vanity Fair for he says that "Allowing for difference of expression, the total meaning of Bunyan's allegory is not far different from the profoundest implications of Thackeray's novel."³³ That the

³⁰Nineteenth Century Fiction, No. 2 (September, 1955), pp. 89-98.

³¹Dante and the Waning Classics (1915).

³²Quoted in Nineteenth Century Fiction, No. 2 (September, 1955), p. 91.

³³Ibid.

moral ethic is Christian as well as existentialist should, however, become more justifiable than ever, a notion further supported by Baker's comments when he compares Vanity Fair to the City of God:

Both authors present a picture of life as it would be without the spiritual. To take this for "man as he is" constitutes a profound misunderstanding. Critics have often discussed Thackeray as if he meant to give us in Vanity Fair a complete record of human life; for the very breadth and scope of the novel tempt the reader to forget that Thackeray's own view of life has even greater breadth and scope than this picture.³⁴

It is precisely this error which is made by D.H. Stewart³⁵ when he explores Vanity Fair's potential as an existential statement but ignores the novel's religious undertones.

Turning from the main title of Thackeray's novel, one sees the sub-title which identifies Vanity Fair as "A Novel Without a Hero," although many readers and commentators on the novel have refused to take it literally. In any exploration of the novel in Kierkegaardian terms, however, the sub-title must be accepted at face value, for Kierkegaard has little time for the traditional concepts of heroism. Mario Praz would seem to be unconsciously supporting a Kierkegaardian interpretation of the sub-title when he speaks of Thackeray's whole view of man:

The hero, for Thackeray, is not an exceptional man; he is, rather, a man just like other men who only 'in

³⁴Ibid., p. 93.

³⁵"Vanity Fair: Life in the Void"; see discussion on Stewart on pp. 60-61 of this thesis.

the presence of the great occasion' is capable of showing his superiority over other men; when the critical moment is over, he falls back into normality, into mediocrity. Thackeray's conception of the hero, therefore, is relative, not absolute.³⁶

This attitude is obvious in Thackeray in those public lectures where he shows the human weaknesses which lie beneath the immortal reputations of men like Dean Jonathan Swift, and comes through even more strongly in his treatment of the military and nobility in The Four Georges. He indicates his vantage point quite early in the series in his talk on George the First:

We are with the mob in the crowd, not with the great folks in the procession. We are not the Historic Muse, but her Ladyship's attendant, tale-bearer - valet de chambre - for whom no man is a hero; and, as yonder one steps from his carriage to the next handy conveyance, we take the number of the hack; we look all over at his stars, ribbons, embroidery; we think within ourselves, O you unfathomable schemer!.....What traitor's head, blackening on the spikes on yonder gate, ever hatched a tithe of the treason which has worked under your periwig?³⁷

The artistic implications of this view are many and varied, as may be seen on examination of the characters in Vanity Fair. They are all, with the possible exception of Dobbin, aestheticians in the truest sense of the Kierkegaardian phrase, and unheroic in our interpretation.

Of all the characters in Vanity Fair, none has excited more comment than Rebecca Sharp. H.J. Blackham's passage on the aesthetic stage might have been written particularly for her:

One who lives in the aesthetic, plays emotionally and imaginatively with all possibilities, renounces nothing, commits himself as little as possible in vocation, marriage, belief, enjoys a literary interest

³⁶The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, pp. 224-225.

³⁷The English Humourists and The Four Georges (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1912), p. 316. Lectures first given from 1851 to 1856.

in all faiths and customs and relationships, comes and goes in his wishes and desires of the moment, and is subject to fortune and misfortune.³⁸

It might be argued that Becky is really very committed to her social climbing except for one small passage written about the period when she has achieved that highest position on the social ladder in being one of the company presented at the court of George IV:

Her success excited, elated, and then bored her. At first no occupation was more pleasant than to invent and procure (the latter a work of no small trouble and ingenuity, by the way, in a person of Mrs. Rawdon Crawley's very narrow means) - to procure, we say, the prettiest new dresses and ornaments; to drive to fine dinner-parties, where she was welcomed by great people; and from the fine dinner-parties to fine assemblies, whither the same people came with whom she had been dining, whom she had met the night before and would see on the morrow.....Becky's former acquaintances hated and envied her: the poor woman herself was yawning in spirit. "I wish I were out of it," she said to herself. "I would rather be a parson's wife, and teach a Sunday School, than this; or a sergeant's lady and ride in the regimental waggon; or, oh, how much gayer it would be to wear spangles and trousers, and dance before a booth at a fair!"³⁹

This lack of commitment to a chosen course is the most obvious characteristic of the Kierkegaardian aesthetic and one recalls the earlier quotation in Chapter II on this subject:

Change was what he was crying out for when pleasure pandered to him, change, change!⁴⁰

³⁸H.J. Blackham, Six Existentialist Thinkers, p. 10.

³⁹Vanity Fair, p. 483.

⁴⁰For full quotation see p.45 of this thesis.

Becky herself seems to feel that only a substantial bank account stands between her and virtue, but when one sees her as Kierkegaardian aesthetician, the comments of Dorothy Van Ghent seem more attuned to those of critics who believe her when she says, "I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year.....":

Here she is as true to herself psychologically as is Moll Flanders; but she is more complex than Moll, and we know perfectly that, at this promising stage in her career, the sigh is only casual fantasy - arising chiefly out of boredom with the tedious business of cultivating the good graces of people much less intelligent than herself - and that if the "snug sum" were offered, she would not really exchange her prospects for it, for her temperament is not at present to be satisfied with snugness.⁴¹

With Becky, indeed, all of life is but a casual affair. Thackeray comments on the nature of her religious feelings:

It may, perhaps, have struck her that to have been honest and humble, to have done her duty, and to have marched straightforward on her way, would have brought her as near happiness as that path by which she was striving to attain it.⁴²

She never comes to that stage of Kierkegaardian despair which might signal her entrance into the ethical stage where one lives according to moral principle. Dorothy Van Ghent thinks that Becky is happy in all her life-styles but one feels that the last described phase of her life, "hanging about Bath and Cheltenham" must be less than satisfying to her:

⁴¹The English Novel: Form and Function p. 173.

⁴²Vanity Fair, p. 404.

.....a very strong party of excellent people consider her to be a most injured woman. She has her enemies. Who has not? Her life is her answer to them. She busies herself in works of piety. She goes to church, and never without a footman. Her name is in all the Charity Lists. The Destitute Orange-girl, the Neglected Washerwoman, the Distressed Muffinman, find in her a fast and generous friend. She is always having stalls at Fancy Fairs for the benefit of these hapless beings.⁴³

Becky has, then, turned to religion in the end, but Thackeray makes it plain by his ironic tone that this last appearance is, like her earlier ones, simply a role, and her religious fervour but a pose. Becky appears to be living according to Christian principles but the public display which attends her charity gives the lie to the true nature of her actions and exposes her, to the end of the book, as an aesthetician.

It is easily demonstrated that Thackeray considered Becky to be lost to Christianity. But, he seems just as critical of those women in the novel who consider themselves moral and Christian or are considered so by others in the Fair. Mrs. Bute Crawley, one of the loudest trumpeters of her own Christianity, is hypocritical and avaricious in the extreme, while Lady Southdown, indefatigable writer of pamphlets on Christian morality, is satirized savagely. Even Lady Jane, who is perhaps the most innocent of the group of uncharitable Christians becomes self-righteous when faced with Becky's presence in her home:

⁴³Ibid., p. 667.

"I have been a true and faithful wife to you, Sir Pitt," Lady Jane continued, intrepidly; "I have kept my marriage vow as I made it to God, and have been obedient and gentle as a wife should. But righteous obedience has its limits, and I declare that I will not bear that - that woman again under my roof: if she enters it, I and my children will leave it. She is not worthy to sit down with Christian people. You - you must choose, sir, between her and me....."⁴⁴

One is tempted to wonder with Becky how much of this speech has been prompted by Christian conviction and how much by human jealousy over a diamond clasp presented to Becky earlier by Sir Pitt. Certainly Lady Jane displays none of that compassion for the reputedly fallen woman that Christ displayed in his encounter with Mary Magdalene, but then, it must be admitted that there is little evidence to indicate that Becky is repentant. She refuses even to acknowledge that she is guilty, although we know from Thackeray that she is when he writes of her later adventures with Major Loder:

.....this pair went into the rooms together, and Becky saw a number of old faces which she remembered in happier days, when she was not innocent, but not found out.⁴⁵

In Kierkegaardian terms, none of the women in Vanity Fair is innocent, not even Amelia to whom the epithet is most commonly applied. When one looks beneath the surface of her helplessness one finds petty jealousy and un-Christian selfishness directed

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 527-528.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 626.

toward both family and friends. And she remains that way to the end of the book.

Perhaps the most difficult character in the novel to relate to Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage is Major Dobbin. He is the character most commonly held up by critics as the novel's true Christian, and admittedly, in his commitment and constant, conscious choices, he comes closer to the Kierkegaardian definition than any of the other characters. But, for most of the novel he seems engaged in the worship of false gods, George first and then Amelia. It is only in the last section of the novel, after he confronts Amelia with her selfishness, that Dobbin begins to display artistically the awareness demanded by Kierkegaard of an existentialist, and to the end of the novel it perhaps remains a matter for conjecture whether this is identifiable with true Christian awareness. Of the Christian existentialist, Kierkegaard writes:

Since existence consists in movement, 'the difficulty facing an existing individual is how to give his existence the continuity without which everything simply vanishes'. The answer is: 'The goal of movement for an existing individual is to arrive at a decision, and to renew it'. The thinker gives himself stable ethical reality by forming and renewing himself in critical decisions which are a total inward commitment (decisions, for example, as to vocation, marriage, faith). 'Through having willed in this manner, through having ventured to take a decisive step in the utmost intensity of subjective passion and with full consciousness of one's eternal responsibility (which is within the capacity of every human being), one learns something else about life, and learns that it is quite a different thing from being engaged, year in and year out, in piecing together something for a system.'⁴⁶

⁴⁶H.J. Blackham, Six Existentialist Thinkers, pp. 8-9.

In some respects Dobbin's life movements do have the continuity demanded in this description. He does commit himself and repeatedly renew his commitment, from the time he takes the decision to be George's friend, until his own marriage to Amelia in the last chapter. Nor does he seem to be completely blind to the weakness and general unworthiness of those to whom he has committed himself. Seeing the absurdity of such a commitment but still choosing it makes him appear existentialist, although not necessarily Kierkegaardian. He tries repeatedly to keep George from gambling and to keep him faithful to Amelia, and after George's death he tells Amelia nothing of the clay feet possessed by her idolized husband. He tolerates Amelia's clinging selfishness, and permits himself to be used almost to the end. Ironically, it is the re-entrance of Becky Sharp which sparks Dobbin's only rebellion. In a scene reminiscent of that between Lady Jane and Sir Pitt mentioned above, Dobbin demands that Rebecca be asked to leave the household. Amelia balks at his demand and fifteen years of patient devotion come to an end in a speech which unfortunately seems to contain echoes both of self-congratulation and self-pity:

Have I not learned in that time to read all your feelings, and look into your thoughts? I know what your heart is capable of: it can cling faithfully to a recollection, and cherish a fancy; but it can't feel such an attachment as mine deserves to mate with, and such as I would have won from a woman more generous than you. No, you are not worthy of the love which I have devoted to you. I knew all along that the prize I had set my life on was not worth the winning; that I was a fool, with fond fancies, too; bartering away my all of

truth and ardour against your little feeble remnant of love. I will bargain no more: I withdraw. I find no fault with you. You are very good-natured, and have done your best; but you couldn't - you couldn't reach up to the height of the attachment which I bore you, and which a loftier soul than yours might have been proud to share. Good-bye, Amelia! I have watched your struggle. Let it end. We are both weary of it.⁴⁷

This passage reveals that Dobbin is not completely the 'spooney' that contemporary readers labelled him, but neither is his outburst evidence that he is a Kierkegaardian Christian. A better indication of his charitable nature, compatible with Christian spirit, would perhaps be illustrated by his return to Amelia at her request, after this statement about her which the reader is inclined to accept as an accurate assessment of his recognition of her lack of character. He marries her because she needs him, although all the novel's clues point to his having lost his need of her. Even Amelia notes the difference in Dobbin as their daughter Jane replaces her in his affection. In the final scene of Vanity Fair the Colonel takes up the child,

.....of whom he is fonder than of anything in the world - fonder even than of his History of the Punjaub.

"Fonder than he is of me," Emmy thinks, with a sigh. But he never said a word to Amelia that was not kind and gentle; or thought of a want of hers that he did not try to gratify.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Vanity Fair, p. 649.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 668.

There is nothing here of the subjective intensive passion envisioned by Dobbin in his rejection speech, and he seems to have given up all thought of such a relationship with Amelia in favour of one which seems more that of a parent and child, a view which is consistent with the immature responses made by Amelia to most of the adult situations in which she finds herself. Dobbin does appear to be living according to Christian principles in this last section of the novel, without any evidence of the public display that attends Becky's Christianity, described in this same passage of the book. But the reader is forced to conjecture whether Dobbin has reached that stage of religious development characterized by commitment and 'inwardness', or whether he is only motivated by the general rules of conduct considered proper for an English gentleman in his situation. It may be that the only sin of which Dobbin feels guilty is being the son of a grocer, for there was certainly some idolatry of George's superior social standing in Dobbin's original commitment to his school friend, and if this is so, Dobbin cannot qualify as a Christian. Kierkegaard talks about escaping from existence "into the aesthetic and the intellectual," and while this does not seem likely in Dobbin's case, it is a point which should be considered if only to be dismissed. Becky is obviously an aesthetic, but is Dobbin another, only disguised as the intellectual of the following passage?

One who lives in the intellectual, claims to rise above the world of change and chance, to regard and judge everything from the point of view of the eternal, with detachment, to put everything in its place in the system, coordinated and understood. 'One does not live any more, one does not act, one does not believe; but one knows what love and faith are, and it only remains to determine their place in the System.'⁴⁹

One feels that this description might fit the narrator of Vanity Fair rather than Dobbin, but it is difficult to determine from the outside whether Dobbin should be left in this limbo, or whether he has made that leap into the ethical stage, where one also lives according to principle:

To live in the ethical is to commit oneself, to put oneself beyond fortune and misfortune by an infinite religious resignation, to cut short protracted deliberation and the endless approximation process of research in order to take the intellectual decisions necessary to live and to become something definite; and the elaboration of this something definite is the aesthetic in its right place, subordinated to the ethical in the thinker's existence in so far as he makes himself a work of art.⁵⁰

As stated previously, one feels intuitively that the latter description fits Dobbin better, but the methods of proof must needs be indirect because of the essential 'inwardness' of what is to be demonstrated.

Perhaps the problem can be best solved by examining the whole novel from a different viewpoint. Critics commonly talk

⁴⁹H.J. Blackham, Six Existentialist Thinkers, p. 10.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 11.

about the sources of unity in Vanity Fair and usually decide that Becky and Amelia are intended to be the poles around which the novel revolves, with Becky the more interesting of the two. These comments of Dorothy Van Ghent are typical:

He cannot bear to allow the wonderfully animated vision of Becky's world to speak for itself, for its meaning is too frightening; he must add to it a complementary world - Amelia's - to act as its judge and corrector.....We assume that, in Thackeray's plan, the compositional center of the book was to be the moral valence between the two worlds. But there is no valence between them, nothing in either to produce a positive effect of significance on the other. The only effect is negative: the Amelia-plot pales into a morally immature fantasy beside the vivid life of the Becky-plot.⁵¹

Interestingly, the reading of Becky's character given by Mrs. Van Ghent is existentialist in tone:

She is a morally meaningful figure because she symbolizes the morality of her world at its greatest intensity and magnitude. The greediness that has only a reduced, personal meaning in Mrs. Bute Crawley, as she nags and blunders at old Miss Crawley's death-bed, acquires, through Becky's far more intelligent and courageous greed - as she encounters international techniques for the satisfaction of greed with her own subtle and knowing and superior techniques - an extensive social meaning. The corruption that, in old Sir Pitt, has meaning at most for the senility of a caste, becomes, in Becky's prostitution and treason and murderousness, the moral meaning of a culture. For Becky's activities are designed with intelligent discrimination and lively intuition, and they are carried through not only with unflagging will power but with joy as well. By representing her world at its highest energetic potential, by alchemizing all its evil but stupid and confused or formless impulses into brilliantly controlled intention, she endows her world with meaning. The meaning is such

⁵¹The English Novel: Form and Function, pp. 175-176.

as to inspire horror; but the very fact that we conceive this horror intellectually and objectively is an acknowledgement of Becky's morally symbolic stature.⁵²

In existentialist terms this is a truly brilliant interpretation of Becky's dramatic and artistic function in Vanity Fair. One can only regret that Mrs. Van Ghent put Amelia as Becky's polar opposite instead of Major Dobbin. One of the reasons given by Mrs. Van Ghent for Becky's stature in the novel is her mobility: "Becky herself is a member of no particular class and confined to no particular 'block'.....she is more mobile than any of the other characters, because of her freedom from caste, and thus is able to enter into a great variety of class relationships."⁵³ But neither is Dobbin confined to any particular class. He is only the son of a grocer but he proves able to rise above any circumstances in which he finds himself by reason of his positive and purer view of the world. That he does not stoop as Becky does is a matter of conscious choice, not chance, which seems to be the only force directing all Becky's activity. He is just as solitary a character as Becky although in a different way. She is able and willing to manipulate people by reason of her shallow moral nature and still remain aloof from them; Dobbin is forced to remain aloof from people around him because no one understands the real depths of his moral vision - no one that is, but Becky, who recognizes

⁵²Ibid., pp. 176-177.

⁵³Ibid., p. 178.

in him an adversary she cannot control and so she does not try. In Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, Wheatley states that Becky loses out to Dobbin because with his big hands and feet, his lisp, and his general lack of good appearance, "he is stripped of any idea of himself that Becky could manipulate."⁵⁴ In Wheatley's view, "To be true and honest, in Vanity Fair, is to give expression to the inner self,"⁵⁵ and this Dobbin does at the end, while Becky is still assuming roles. It seems, then, a justifiable proposition to name Becky and Dobbin as poles of artistic tension in Vanity Fair, with Amelia and everyone else in the book, including the narrator, fitting somewhere between the moral extremes which they represent. Viewed in this way, the novel becomes a struggle between the aesthetic and the ethical, and one may now further propose that the novel is an artistic expression of a like struggle going on in the mind of the author Thackeray. Thackeray hates Becky, but there is no denying that she is a seductively attractive character for most readers, as the aesthetic is a seductively attractive path for most people. Thackeray loves Dobbin, but honesty compels him to make that character stern although loving, and the 'gnarled oak' image associated with Dobbin throughout Vanity Fair, while strong and trustworthy, can hardly be considered seductive. To follow Dobbin's path is difficult,

⁵⁴J.H. Wheatley, Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, p. 84. See also, A.E. Dyson, op. cit. for a similar view.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 79.

for Christian commitment is difficult. It is, as Kierkegaard points out, "a radical cure" which one puts off as long as possible.⁵⁶ Dobbin alone, of all the characters in Vanity Fair is impervious to Becky's wiles and charms, and it seems an indication of Thackeray's didactic intention that the final confrontation in the novel should be between these two, with Dobbin bearing Amelia away from the false Becky who is peddling a false Christianity from her booth at the Fair. The claim has been made that Becky gives up Amelia to Dobbin and that he would never have won her had not Becky revealed George's faithlessness just before he died, but this is not so. Thackeray makes it clear that Amelia had written to Dobbin to return to her before she knew about George's note to Becky and this knowledge about her dead husband confirmed the rightness of her decision but did not initiate it. This letter to Dobbin constituted a rejection of Becky, for Dobbin had made it plain that he would not tolerate her presence and had punctuated the point by his own earlier departure from Amelia. As mentioned, his conduct should be contrasted with that apparently hypocritical behaviour of Lady Jane, who proved her lack of commitment by submitting to Sir Pitt's support of Becky rather than taking the harder course of leaving him as she threatened. Dobbin suffers in leaving the weak woman to whom he has devoted

⁵⁶Robert Bretall, A Kierkegaard Anthology, p. 6.

his life, but, as a matter of pride, principle or religion, will not let himself be further compromised by Becky's presence and influence in the household. That Dobbin is not so artistically effective as Becky, one is now tempted to attribute to the facts of Thackeray's personal spiritual struggle. It would seem to be possible and plausible to suggest that while Thackeray was able to identify the aesthetic stage as attractive but spiritually unprogressive, and was also able to recognize the necessity of leaving it behind in favour of the leap into the ethical, he had at the time of writing Vanity Fair not yet assimilated the full implications of living on this higher level completely into his own personality and so could not artistically realize the potential of a character like Dobbin. This view seems even more plausible when one thinks of the much greater degree of artistic success he achieves with "ethical" characters like Colonel Newcome only a short time later. Even in Pendennis, the old Major, while just as thorough an aesthetician as Becky, is unable to seduce the reader as Becky could, for the conflict has been resolved in Thackeray's own mind and this character is placed in a proper position, obviously below Warrington, who has reached the ethical stage.

If one accepts the proposition that Rebecca and Dobbin are artistic creations for two opposing approaches to life which were struggling for dominance in Thackeray's personal

life, an interpretation which would be dear to psychologists,⁵⁷ one will also want to examine other characters in the novel to see if perhaps they too are potential Thackerays seeking room to grow. Among all the others, the figure of the narrator most deserves attention. He is, after all, the figure in the novel most clearly associated with his creator, Thackeray, and just exactly what his role is in the novel has long been a favourite subject of critics' discussion. Lord David Cecil identifies the narrator as Thackeray and is disconcerted that Thackeray repeatedly extolls the characters as narrator and then lets them behave less heroically than we expect in subsequent scenes. The answer is that no critic should be permitted to identify the character of the narrator as Thackeray the man, much as he may resemble him at times. The narrator is no more Thackeray and no less Thackeray than Dobbin or Rebecca may be, so that Cecil has no right to expect the narrator to have any special source of truth. Thackeray's view of life is that everything outside himself can only be partially understood and his responses are invariably subjective. In his opinion, human nature is inconsistent, is chaotic, and always the ideal is far from the real. Thackeray the man or Thackeray the narrator can attribute whatever degree of idealism to people he wishes

⁵⁷See, for example, Bernard Paris's essay in which he uses Karen Horney's psychological theory to account for many inconsistencies in Vanity Fair.

and if they do not live up to his expectations, it is a matter beyond his control. Deification of mortal creatures can be a deliberate method of imposing order on one's existence. It does not change the actions of the persons so deified, but it can add spiritually to the life of the person who deifies. Thackeray says, in effect, in the character of narrator, "Here is what I would like these people to be" and then, "But, this is what they really are - men not angels." He is not blinded by having put on his rose-coloured glasses, but it does make the world a more pleasant place. Thus the narrator of the novel is like Dobbin, who although he knows Amelia is not an angel endows her with those qualities and treats her as if she truly qualifies for such treatment. Thus an added dimension in Dobbin's spiritual life makes Amelia's physical life more pleasant, to the mutual contentment of both. Amelia is still selfish and immature, but Dobbin is able to be satisfied until her narrow responses threaten his larger moral position, his relationship to the eternal and his knowledge of his personal Christian duty. Thus there is the confrontation about Becky in which truth forces Dobbin to make a larger spiritual response and leave Amelia. A similar large spiritual response later permits him to return, indeed forces him to return when she needs him.

It was earlier stated that all the characters in Vanity Fair are to some degree extensions of Thackeray's own person-

ality. The exception to this statement is Amelia. One is inclined to accept the comments of those critics who see her as an artistic re-creation of Thackeray's own child-like wife, Isabella, with fragments of his mother and Jane Brookfield added to the mixture. In short, one is tempted to let Amelia represent all those female forces in Thackeray's life with which he could not cope, or could not understand, but still loved. Grieg seems to have expressed this view particularly well in Thackeray: A Reconsideration:

Although Thackeray may well have believed that it was only kindly memories of the 'poor little woman' that he was using for the novel, yet in fact, not being able to stand back and reshape 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', he was mingling these memories with others not so kindly; and to make matters worse, he was trying to give solidity to the character by importing certain traits from two other women to whom he was emotionally in bondage, his mother and Jane Brookfield. It was all very well to draw on several originals for Becky. His own relationship to these originals was cool, intellectual, properly 'distanced'; and so he could reshape what he borrowed into a coherent and living personality. But the same method would not work when he was borrowing from Isabella, Jane, and his mother, since from none of these could he withdraw to the proper 'distance' for artistic creation. The result was that Amelia became one thing one moment and another another, according to his mood and the real woman he was thinking of.⁵⁸

The only part of this passage which is not acceptable is that which places Rebecca far from Thackeray. The real reason that Becky works artistically and Amelia does not, is that the

⁵⁸p. 108.

former is familiar to Thackeray. She is a potential "self" to him; he is able to see in his own life the attractions of the path she represents and he can imagine himself becoming like her in the quest for material things in worldly London. She represents what Kierkegaard calls a "temptation" which must be resisted.⁵⁹ Amelia, on the other hand, is not part of him. She is made up of bits and pieces of his wife, his mother, and Jane Brookfield, all of whom he loves but cannot fully understand, with the result that he is unable to make Amelia's nature clear to the reader any more than it is clear to himself.

John Lester refers in his essay⁶⁰ to Thackeray's "retrospective vision" and his "reminiscent manner," and one is reminded of a statement by Gordon Ray which puts the whole discussion into focus. Near the end of the first volume of his biography he writes that Thackeray "understood with Kierkegaard that if life must be lived forward, it can only be understood backwards." The problem with Amelia is that Thackeray is still living with her and is unable to look back on her and comprehend her. Indeed the same statement may be made of the

⁵⁹See discussion in Chapter II on Kierkegaard's use of nom de plumes as ways of realizing his various potentials.

⁶⁰"Thackeray's Narrative Technique", PMLA, Vol. LXIX, No. 3 (June, 1954), pp. 392-409.

whole of Vanity Fair. It is an exploratory novel, one in which Thackeray explores his own personality, and many of the problems he is unable to solve here he solves in his later novels, as his spiritual philosophy develops more confidently in the direction which, unknown to Thackeray, Kierkegaard was setting on paper a few short miles across the Channel in Denmark.

It was mentioned in the description of Kierkegaard's three stages in the second chapter, that the principle of duty is central to life on the ethical level, while as one moves to the religious stage the concept of suffering is emphasized. In the novels after Vanity Fair these two themes are more and more emphasized by Thackeray as well, leading one to conjecture whether Thackeray's artistic vision might not have been moving logically in the same direction as Kierkegaard's philosophy. After Vanity Fair Thackeray never permits characters like Rebecca Sharp to dominate in his writing, although they still remain attractive, which makes one feel that Thackeray's life perspective has changed, changing in its turn his artistic focus. For a closer examination of this theory, one should examine the major writings after Vanity Fair, particularly Pendennis, Henry Esmond, The Newcomes and Philip. In these novels, Thackeray's leap from the aesthetic stage is much more clearly described than in Vanity Fair because it is seen much more plainly by the author.

CHAPTER IV

THACKERAY AND THE ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS STAGES OF LIFE: THE THEMES OF DUTY AND SUFFERING IN THE NOVELS AFTER VANITY FAIR

".....those who bear the jewel of faith are not so easily recognizable, because in their outward appearance they bear a striking resemblance to a class of people which is bitterly despised by faith and infinite resignation alike - they bear a close resemblance to the narrow bourgeoisie."

Kierkegaard: Fear and Trembling

Having written in Vanity Fair a novel about "a set of people living without God in the world," Thackeray turned next to writing and thinking about how people who need God are to recognize their need and find Him. In Vanity Fair, Dobbin is Thackeray's only attempt to present a man who tries to live by the values of eternity, and there is no exploration of how he became that way. After Vanity Fair, however, Thackeray is concentrating in every one of the major novels on how people become like Dobbin and where they go from there. James Wheatley writes that "Thackeray did not cease to be a satirist, but he does seem to have accepted a responsibility to 'build into' his works more of his vision, to embody in characters and their actions more of the assumptions of Vanity Fair."¹ Wheatley

¹Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, p. 96.

claims that this later group of novels forms a "secular prayer," borrowing Kenneth Burke's phrase, "because they are secular and not-so-secular 'prayers' for the purification of the world."² Two developments in Thackeray's personal life help account for this change: his relationship with Jane Brookfield was becoming more intimate and his feelings for her had approached the point where they caused him moral conflict. He wrote in 1853 to his friend, Kate Perry, of his temptations regarding his friend's wife when the whole affair was nothing but a painful memory:

Many and many a time a friend of mine whispers me (he is represented in pictures with horns and a tail), "My good friend a quoi bon all this longing and yearning and disappointment; yonder gnawing grief and daily nightly brooding? A couple of lies and the whole thing might be remedied. Do you suppose other folks are so particular?" Behold there are 4 children put their innocent figures between the devil and me; and the wretched old fiend shirks off with his tail between his hoofs.³

The whole time was one of great emotional trial for him, as he records in Henry Esmond in 1851-52:

At certain periods of life we live years of emotion in a few weeks - and look back on those times as on great gaps between the old life and the new. You do not know how much you suffer in those critical maladies of the heart, until the disease is over and you look back on it afterwards. During the time, the suffering is at least sufferable. The day passes in more or less of pain, and the night wears away somehow. 'Tis only in after days that we see what the danger has been - as a man out a-hunting or riding

²Ibid., p. 98.

³Ray, Letters, Vol. IV, p. 437.

for his life looks at a leap, and wonders how he should have survived the taking of it.'⁴

His deteriorating physical condition characterized by frequent severe pain may also have been responsible for his increased interest in eternal, spiritual values. His experiences seem to have led him along a Kierkegaardian path, for his ever-increasing emphasis on the importance of Duty in the novels after Vanity Fair almost exactly parallels Kierkegaard's concept of the primacy of duty in the ethical stage of life. Of suffering, too, he wrote much after Vanity Fair and the passage quoted from Henry Esmond is typical. His study of pain seems to have taken him even closer to Kierkegaard's religious stage, and the Kierkegaardian concept that belief must come through suffering seems to be working in all the novels from Pendennis to Philip.

Thackeray made his intentions for Pendennis clear from the beginning. In the drawings which he made for the covers of the serial sections, Arthur Pendennis is standing between two women: one with her children around her, represents the home and domesticity, while the other who is surrounded by demons represents the temptations of the great world. The novel tells the story of Arthur's choice of the ethical life over the aesthetic. The aesthetic stage which has been examined in Vanity Fair is here represented by Blanche Amory, a worldly vixen who is not nearly so attractive or complex as Rebecca Sharp, and by Major

⁴Henry Esmond (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1906), p. 154.

Pendennis, Arthur's uncle, who is also easily recognized as a devotee of material comforts and social prestige. The ethical stage is well illustrated in the characterization of Laura Bell whom Pen finally marries, and by Warrington, his room-mate, who counsels Pen throughout the novel, finally becoming godfather to his and Laura's children. For most of the novel Arthur follows the path indicated by his worldly uncle as most practical, and pursues wealth and nobility almost as assiduously as the older gentleman. This leads him into an engagement to Blanche Amory which he tries to justify to Warrington who knows that money, not love, has prompted his action. Arthur takes the attitude that his lack of commitment to a worthier cause is justifiable because commitment often ends in failure.

I see men who begin with ideas of universal reform, and who, before their beards are grown, propound their loud plans for the regeneration of mankind, give up their schemes after a few years of bootless talking and vainglorious attempts to lead their fellows; and after they have found that men will no longer hear them, as indeed they never were in the least worthy to be heard, sink quietly into the rank and file, - acknowledging their aims impracticable, or thankful that they were never put into practice. The fiercest reformers grow calm, and are fain to put up with things as they are: the loudest Radical orators become dumb, quiescent placemen: the most fervent Liberals, when out of power, become humdrum Conservatives, or downright tyrants or despots in office. Look at Thiers, look at Guizot, in opposition and in place! Look at the Whigs appealing to the country, and the Whigs in power! Would you say that the conduct of these men is an act of treason, as the Radicals bawl, - who would give way in their turn, were their turn ever to come? No, only that they submit to circumstances which are stronger than they, -

march as the world marches towards reform, but at the world's pace.....and compelled finally to submit, and to wait, and to compromise.⁵

Arthur applies the same argument to religious commitment which he claims leads to persecution:

Make a faith or a dogma absolute, and persecution becomes a logical consequence; and Dominic burns a Jew, or Calvin an Arian, or Nero a Christian, or Elizabeth or Mary a Papist or Protestant; or their father both or either, according to his humour; and acting without any pangs of remorse, - but on the contrary, with strict notions of duty fulfilled.⁶

Warrington's answer is simple and direct:

Why, what a mere dilettante you own yourself to be, in this confession of general scepticism, and what a listless spectator yourself! You are six- and-twenty years old, and as blase as a rake of sixty. You neither hope much, nor care much, nor believe much. You doubt about other men as much as about yourself. Were it made of such pococuranti as you, the world would be intolerable; and I had rather live in a wilderness of monkeys and listen to their chatter, than in a company of men who denied everything.⁷

Pendennis next tries to justify his lack of commitment because of what he sees as his own insignificance in the eyes of God:

We set up our paltry little rods to measure Heaven immeasurable, as if, in comparison to that, Newton's mind, or Pascal's, or Shakespeare's, was any loftier than mine; as if the ray which travels from the sun would reach me sooner than the man who blacks my boots. Measured by that altitude, the tallest and the smallest among us are so alike diminutive and pitifully base, that I say we should take no count of the calculation, and it is a meanness to reckon the difference.⁸

⁵Pendennis, Vol. II, p. 245.

⁶Ibid., p. 247.

⁷Ibid., pp. 247-248.

⁸Ibid., p. 249.

Again Warrington counters Pen's argument by showing the other side of the coin; that, instead of reducing the individual's significance in the eyes of God, it is just as easy to do the opposite:

.....if even by common arithmetic we can multiply as we can reduce almost infinitely, the Great Reckoner must take count of all; and the small is not small, or the great great, to his infinity.⁹

Arthur has no answer to this argument, but still dodges the right decision. At this point, the narrator steps in, summarizes the young man's position and laments over it:

Friend Arthur was a Sadducee, and the Baptist might be in the Wilderness shouting to the poor, who were listening with all their might and faith to the preacher's awful accents and denunciations of wrath or woe or salvation; and our friend the Sadducee would turn his sleek mule with a shrug and a smile from the crowd, and go home to the shade of his terrace, and muse over preacher and audience, and turn to his roll of Plato, or his pleasant Greek song-book babbling of honey and Hybla, and nymphs and fountains and love. To what, we say, does this scepticism lead? It leads a man to a shameful loneliness and selfishness, so to speak - the more shameful, because it is so good - humoured and conscienceless and serene. Conscience! What is conscience? Why accept remorse? What is public or private faith? Mythuses alike enveloped in enormous tradition. If, seeing and acknowledging the lies of the world, Arthur, as see them you can with only too fatal a clearness, you submit to them without any protest further than a laugh: if, plunged yourself in easy sensuality, you allow the whole wretched world to pass groaning by you unmoved: if the fight for the truth is taking place, and all men of honour are on the ground armed on the one side or the other, and you alone are to lie on your balcony and smoke your pipe out of the noise and the danger, you had better have died, or never have been at all, than such a sensual coward.¹⁰

⁹Ibid., p. 249.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 250.

Immediately after this debate Pen becomes engaged to Blanche Amory, or rather, to her fortune, for he knows she is fickle and spiteful and unlikely to make a good wife. A time of trial ensues during which Arthur discovers that he really loves Laura who has loved him from the outset. Another unexpected turn of events leaves Blanche penniless and so more undesirable than ever, but Pen unhappily decides that he must honour his engagement, in what appears initially to be a gentleman's response to the Victorian code of honour. Thackeray, however, goes to great pains to point out that Pen's sufferings have aroused his conscience and his decision is based on an honest acceptance of what he conceives to be his ethical duty. He recognizes that he must take responsibility for his actions and commit himself to a more positive path than he has followed so far:

"Here it ends," thought Pen; "this day or tomorrow will wind up the account of my youth; a weary retrospect, alas! a sad history, with many a page I would fain not look back on! But who has not been tired or fallen, and who has escaped without scars from that struggle?" And his head fell on his breast, and the young man's heart prostrated itself humbly and sadly before that Throne where sits wisdom, and love, and pity for all, and made its confession. "What matters about fame or poverty?" he thought. "If I marry this woman I have chosen, may I have strength and will to be true to her, and to make her happy! If I have children, pray God teach me to speak and to do the truth among them, and to leave them an honest name. There are no splendours for my marriage. Does my life deserve any? I begin a new phase of it; a better than the last may it be, I pray Heaven!"¹¹

¹¹Ibid., p. 359.

Having brought Arthur to this stage of humility, Thackeray sees fit to rescue him by having Blanche desert Pendennis for a wealthier suitor. This leaves him free to marry Laura, a right decision which Thackeray praises to the last page. James Wheatley presents an excellent discussion of Pen's moral discoveries in these last pages of the novel, outlining the process our hero goes through before he is worthy of his prize:

After the repeated shock of collapsing illusions, Pen has grown to underestimate life, to leave out of account its highest values. But there is a higher plane of "underestimating" life, through resignation and renunciation, which Pen's mother had known all about and which he must experience before he can rightfully estimate life. Pen's sweet sadness, as it turns out, has been premature, derived from the repeated loss of mere illusions. Only when he can give up his truest desire will he have earned the right to the view of life he had assumed. There is accordingly the counter-movement toward a scene perhaps indebted to a different kind of opera, in which Pen's friend Warrington, Laura, and Pen himself resign, in turn, their hopes for bliss. Warrington loves Laura, but is hopelessly married, and so tells Pen that Blanche's history frees him of any gentlemanly obligation to carry out his engagement to her, for Warrington knows that Pen would propose to Laura if free of Blanche. Laura, who loves Pen, advises him to keep his promise to marry Blanche, and Pen chooses Laura's advice. Because this scene re-enacts the frustrated love affair between Laura's father and Pen's mother, both of whom are now dead, the ultimate decision here is "otherworldly" in the extreme. This is the most serious form of the seeming defeat in the book, as each character in turn testifies to the transcendental and objective nature of generosity and love in the midst of the wreck of his hopes.¹²

¹²James Wheatley, Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, pp. 112-113.

Throughout his discussion, Wheatley emphasizes Thackeray's concern with spiritual values in the novels after Vanity Fair, and would seem to support the present interpretation of Thackeray as a potential existentialist. Wheatley refers to this group of novels as "tyro" novels, seeing the hero as a tyro through whom "Thackeray is ultimately celebrating life on earth as he understands it."¹³

Wheatley's view, like Geoffrey Tillotson's,¹⁴ is that Thackeray's work can be best appreciated when taken as a whole instead of seen in its parts. The whole is coherent, cohesive, and complete, particularly when related to Thackeray's personal frame of mind as he constructed the various parts. Not all critics see Thackeray this way, however, and Pendennis is one of the novels which has been particularly attacked for artistic weaknesses. Thackeray was interrupted in writing this novel by a near fatal illness, so that after Chapter 36, publication had to be suspended for three months. Gordon Ray notes that during his convalescence Thackeray "somehow lost the mood and perspective that had hitherto informed Pendennis"¹⁵ and with other critics he feels that the last part of the novel is weaker than the first. Ray, however, also sees it as fortunate for the novel that throughout the thirty-six chapters of the novel written before Thackeray's

¹³Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁴Thackeray the Novelist, p. 2.

¹⁵Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 116.

illness, the theme of the cover design appears only intermittently. Ray does admit, however, that "even the latter half of the novel (Chapters 37-75) has a sort of unity, since most of its episodes are illustrations of Thackeray's avowed theme, Pen's wavering between the demands of the sentimental and the practical life."¹⁶ Where Ray, however, underestimates the importance of the theme of Pendennis, critics like Wheatley and Tillotson see that it is important, not only for the individual work, but as an indication of the direction in which Thackeray was moving philosophically:

What was implicit becomes explicit; what was a thematic element becomes an emphasis. In Thackeray's case, at least, there is this "opening out": the exposure of the implicit, the branching off into new emphases, together with the discovery and refinement of artistic techniques that embody the thematic expansion.¹⁷

In obviously promoting and repeating his theme Thackeray is revealing his personal state of mind after his illness. His suffering does seem to have altered his perspective, and it may have temporarily weakened his artistic powers, but it also seems to have advanced apace his personal moral development, and may have been influential in bringing him that much closer to the stage of religious commitment necessary for Kierkegaardian Christianity. One feels that if Ray had pursued further the line of thought that he started in his first comments on Pendennis he might have

¹⁶Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁷Wheatley, Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, p. 95.

come closer to what is really at the heart of the novel:

"Desiring to present in Pendennis, as in all his other major fictions, "that strange and awful struggle of good and wrong which takes place in our hearts and in the world," Thackeray naturally dramatized this struggle in terms of the central conflict in his own life. "May God Almighty keep me honest and keep pride and vanity down," he had written to his mother from London just as he was beginning Pendennis. "In spite of himself a man gets worldly and ambitious in this great place: with everybody courting & flattering. I am frightened of it and my own infernal pride and arrogance."¹⁸

Perhaps the last half of Pendennis is not satisfactory artistically to Ray and Jamesian critics for the same reason that Amelia in the earlier novel does not work for the reader. It was noted in the study of Vanity Fair that Thackeray had emotional difficulty in analysing his relationships with Jane Brookfield, Isabella, and his mother and this is reflected in his presentation of Amelia who is based in part on each. Similarly, in Pendennis the reader is given an artistic description of Thackeray's moral condition at the time of writing, which if somewhat weak artistically, is nonetheless true psychologically and indicative of the author's philosophic position after a bout of illness and suffering, while the memory is still perhaps too fresh for easy assimilation into artistic terms. Gordon Ray does talk about Thackeray's philosophic view at the time he was writing Pendennis but unfortunately equates Thackeray's position

¹⁸Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 109.

with Arthur's in Chapter 61.¹⁹ He ignores the fact that Arthur turns from the path he has promoted in this debate with Warrington and does not see his decision to accept Blanche in her reduced financial position as a religious decision which is not at all 'practical' in worldly terms. In fact, Pen's decision to honour his engagement to Blanche seems a conscious rejection on his part of both the scepticism, the Sadduceeism of Chapter 61, and of worldly values. Indeed, a better summary of Thackeray's moral position at this time is contained in a letter to his mother where he admits that he feels he must come finally to personal religious commitment:

I feel persuaded that there is an awful time coming for all of us. What a good martyr you would make and what a fat worldly cowardly one I should be! And yet though with a great deal of trembling puffing & hesitation I think I would have the tooth out after all.²⁰

In this passage Thackeray seems to be balking a little at what he nonetheless recognizes as a necessary and difficult step. Increasingly he seems to realize, as Kierkegaard did, that "belief can be purchased only at the cost of profound sufferings, and that its value is exactly in proportion to these sufferings."²¹ Artistically, this translates into a greater concern, in the last half of Pendennis, with physical and emotional pain. Arthur is made to undergo physical illness as well as emotional and

¹⁹See Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 120.

²⁰Ibid., p. 121.

²¹Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 58.

moral turmoil before he recognizes the path he must choose. And even after he has chosen, the commitment seems difficult to sustain:

"And what sort of a husband would this Pendennis be?" many a reader will ask, doubting the happiness of such a marriage and the fortune of Laura. The querists, if they meet her - are referred to that lady herself, who, seeing his faults and wayward moods - seeing and owning that there are better men than he - loves him always with the most constant affection. His children or their mother have never heard a harsh word from him; and when his fits of moodiness and solitude are over, welcome him back with a never-failing regard and confidence. His friend is his friend still, - entirely heart-whole.....we perceive in every man's life the maimed happiness, the frequent falling, the bootless endeavour, the struggle of Right and Wrong, in which the strong often succumb and the swift fail: we see flowers of good blooming in foul places, as, in the most lofty and splendid fortunes, flaws of vice and meanness, and stains of evil; and knowing how mean the best of us is, let us give a hand of charity to Arthur Pendennis, with all his faults and shortcomings, who does not claim to be a hero, but only a man and a brother.²²

Nor is Pendennis the only character in the novel who suffers. Helen Pendennis is held up in this novel as a religious woman, and what the reader sees most of is her suffering especially after she sins against Arthur by doubting the nature of his relationship with Fanny. Indeed, she is made to die before Arthur is well settled in life, although Thackeray reconciles her to her son just before the end. At this stage in his writing career one feels that Thackeray has advanced morally to that stage where he sees the equation between religion and suffering,

²²Pendennis, Vol. II, p. 394.

and sees the need for individual commitment and resignation, but he is still unable to cope with them artistically. Compared to Thackeray's later novels, there is relatively little exploration of this topic in Pendennis, for Helen's pain is for the most part off-stage, and when it threatens to dominate the last part of the novel she dies. Arthur's pain, while real, is brief, and his final union with Laura clouds the reader's remembrance of what has gone before. One must turn to Henry Esmond to compare Rachel with Helen and Henry with Arthur to see more clearly the moral direction that Thackeray is following as his personal experiences mold and develop his private philosophy.

Henry Esmond is to some extent a repetition of the story of a young man who chooses the ethical path over the aesthetic. The aesthetic stage of life is embodied in Beatrix Esmond, the most beautiful of all Thackeray's heroines, made that way perhaps in recognition of the seductiveness of the aesthetic way. There are several clear statements of her moral outlook in the novel, but perhaps the best way to describe Thackeray's moral response to her is to repeat her own self-assessment given years later in The Virginians where she appears as an old, fat, red-nosed Baroness of the same school as old Lady Crawley in Vanity Fair although admittedly more individualized than the latter. Henry Esmond's grandson, Harry Warrington, is relating the family history from the time of their removal to Virginia and the Baroness is impressed by the lad:

.....and more than once, in the course of his story, Madame Bernstein found herself moved to a softness to which she had very seldom before allowed herself to give way.....Save once, faintly, in very very early youth, she had felt no tender sentiment for any human being.....She longed after him. She felt her cheeks flush with happiness when he came near. Her eyes greeted him with welcome, and followed him with fond pleasure. "Ah, if she could have had a son like that, how she would have loved him!" "Wait," says Conscience, the dark scoffer mocking within her, "wait, Beatrix Esmond! You know you will weary of this inclination, as you have of all. You know, when the passing fancy has subsided, that the boy may perish, and you won't have a tear for him; or talk, and you weary of his stories.....²³

And this indeed proves to be the case before the end of the novel. But The Virginians also reveals that Henry of the earlier novel always remembered Beatrix and his passion for her although he turned from her to Rachel the "ethicist," in the last chapter of Henry Esmond and never saw Beatrix again. It is only after reading the two novels as a sequence that the whole extent of Henry's suffering because of Beatrix can be properly assessed.

From the beginning of Henry Esmond, there is little doubt about Rachel's moral position reflected in the description of her beauty as austere and her nature as jealous. There can be no half-measures for Rachel for she believes in total commitment, first to her Lord, then to her children, and finally to Henry. Always her commitment seems to cause her suffering: her husband turns from her when her beauty is dimmed by small-pox; her daughter resents her, rejects her teaching, and comes to disgrace before

²³The Virginians (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1884), Vol. I, pp. 140-141.

her eyes; her son is likewise frivolous and committed to selfish pleasures, finally marrying, outside Rachel's religion, a girl she would never have chosen for him. Only Henry responds to Rachel as she wants, and this response causes as much pain as her family's rejection. She discovers while her own husband is still alive that she loves Henry, a sin according to her moral code. She handles the situation honestly but at the cost of much personal suffering. Her relationship with Henry, who is eight years her junior, is fraught with complications from the outset. It is he who unwittingly brings the small-pox to Castlewood from the village, which indirectly makes him responsible for her loss of her husband's love. If she had not lost that love she might not have loved Henry, and so not have sinned in her own opinion against her marriage oath. If she did not love Henry she would not have suffered so much as he pursued his hopeless love for Beatrix, her careless daughter who thinks nothing of the love which would have been so precious to the mother. Rachel at this time is a widow and free to accept Henry's love, except that he sees her as a mother, which is how the reader sees her practically to the last page when Henry announces that he has married her. The union has nothing of the passion that one could envision in a romantic union. While tender, it is as austere as a religious commitment can sometimes be. Rachel's husband is now dead, her daughter is living a dubious life in France, and her son's wife's family have alienated Frank from her, ironically

because of religious differences. Henry writes:

.....I found my mistress one day in tears, and then besought her to confide herself to the care and devotion of one who, by God's help, would never forsake her. And then the tender matron, as beautiful in her autumn, and as pure as virgins in their spring, with blushes of love and "eyes of meek surrender," yielded to my respectful importunity, and consented to share my home. Let the last words I write thank her, and bless her who hath blessed it.²⁴

The love between Rachel and Henry is treated as spiritual, and is obviously approved by Thackeray, for he blesses their union with a child, the symbol of fruitfulness. Unlike the union of Arthur and Laura, the element of suffering seems more pronounced in this union and the mood seems one of religious resignation, a turning from the world instead of the beginning of a new life as seems the case in Pendennis.

The marriage between Rachel and Henry seems the culmination of a lot of thought by Thackeray on the subject of marriage in general. In all his writings he denounces the familiar custom of the "marriage of convenience" wherein practical considerations take precedence over romantic ones. In Henry Esmond, however, he seems to say that romance is not enough either. If he describes the hardness of Beatrix in selling herself to the highest bidder, he likewise recognizes that the blind adoration that Henry has for Beatrix in much of the novel is not the solution

²⁴Henry Esmond, pp. 426-427.

and must likewise be denied. Indeed Thackeray's repetitions on the theme of marriage bring him very close to Kierkegaard who discusses the same subject more philosophically in "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage,"²⁵ a long essay which has been ably summarized by T.H. Croxall.²⁶ Here Kierkegaard denounces the marriage of convenience as immoral because based on temporal considerations instead of eternal ones. Romantic love, however, is not exempt from criticism:

Romantic love thinks itself eternal, and so it is, in so far as it is noble and brings out the best. But this estimate of eternity rests upon things temporal - the beauty and attractiveness of the girl, for example, the external trials it faces, and so on. It has not yet undergone those hard tests of life which prove whether our feet are planted on eternity or not.²⁷

Thus, Rachel is united to Henry only after the loss of her beauty, after the difference between her moral nature and Beatrix's has been demonstrated, and after she has overcome her acquiescence to the social stigma attached to Henry's bastardy which had barred him previously from several 'marriages of convenience'. In accepting Henry, an "outsider" in society, Rachel rejects society, just as he does in marrying his "mother"

²⁵Either/Or (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), Vol. II, pp. 3-157.

²⁶Kierkegaard Commentary (London: James Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1956), pp. 116-120.

²⁷Ibid., p. 116.

against conventional practice.²⁸ According to Kierkegaard, "the only way to honour and elevate 'immediate' love into married love is by religion, for there love finds the true eternity it could not find in either of the two forms of reflected love, the sensual or the "marriage of reason."

Married love is the true love for Kierkegaard, "so strong that when lovers enter upon it they feel as if it had existed from all eternity and was fixed by necessity. Yes, this is what it is, for all true love is a unity of freedom and necessity, and in the necessity the individual finds his freedom. True love evokes a transfiguring and an idolization which last throughout life.....There is, then, beauty in Marriage. It is not the spurious beauty of idle aesthetic; it is the 'beauty of holiness' and of duty."²⁹ Throughout the novel, Henry Esmond, Henry's application to duty has been in the nature of a total commitment rather than a series of tasks which he feels he should perform. He has devoted himself to the family at Castlewood at great personal, social and financial cost in a way which has been obviously a promotion of eternal values over temporal ones. He gives up his birthright to land, title and fortune, out of love for Rachel, Frank, and Beatrix, and one feels that

²⁸For a discussion of this marriage between Henry and Rachel, the "mother-figure", see Gordon Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 192, among others.

²⁹Croxall, Kierkegaard Commentary, pp. 117-120.

his union with Rachel, spiritual as it is in mood, is but the forerunner of the rewards he will receive in the next world whose values he has always made his own in this one. The removal of Rachel and Henry from England to the new world of Virginia may also be easily incorporated into this text, for the United States represented for Thackeray at this time, as for many Englishmen, a freedom from the duplicity of Society and a chance for personal honesty, a value which, it was felt, was more difficult to live by in England. Henry and Rachel seem to embody in their acceptance and practice of Christian values the Kierkegaardian ethical concept of 'living in the general'. Although the circumstances of their marriage make them very particular and individual, they nonetheless ~~become~~ become universal examples, which Kierkegaard considers the "true art of living" in the ethical stage.³⁰

Thackeray considered Henry Esmond his best work and certainly spent more time polishing it than any other of his novels. It seems to have been for Thackeray an artistic exploration of several religious questions. The introduction of the Jesuit character, Father Holt, is the most obvious attempt to cope with two topics he has shown but little interest in in his previous works, namely, the role of clergy in politics and conversion to the Roman Catholic Church. Young Henry is very much drawn by Father Holt's arguments for Catholicism, which might

³⁰ See page 48, Chapter II, of this thesis.

be considered a reflection of Thackeray's own consideration of Catholicism during this period. It is a matter of biography that Thackeray followed Newman's journey to the Catholic Church with great interest and admired the latter, although he concluded that he would not himself follow the same path.³¹ Henry Esmond's marriage at the end of the novel to Rachel, a mother-figure, has also been the subject of much comment, and it is interesting to note that instead of seeing Freudian implications in the Oedipal union one might see religious implications instead. Henry's marriage to the stern, spiritual Rachel might become a symbolic recognition on Thackeray's part of his personal acceptance of his own mother's stern religious commitment, even though their commitments are not identical in form. The rejection of Beatrix with her surface beauty and attractiveness would then correspond to his rejection of the elaborate ceremonies of Rome. The suggestion is rhetorical, of course, for any answer would have to be speculative, but in terms of the novel's organization, such a reading seems plausible and attractive. Certainly, Thackeray never wrote another novel like Henry Esmond but his later novels still display an increased concern with spiritual values. His next major novel, The Newcomes, is more religious in tone than anything he has written previously and it is easy to imagine that Colonel Newcome in the later novel is very much

³¹See Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, pp. 121-122, 226-227.

like Henry Esmond after his removal to Virginia.

Corresponding to the more severely religious tone of The Newcomes is the increased amount of suffering which the principal characters must undergo. Thackeray's repetition of this theme has been progressively more insistent. In Vanity Fair, Amelia's pain is passive and self-indulgent while Dobbin's is kept off-stage; in Pendennis, Arthur, Laura, and Helen all suffer but our awareness of their pain is dulled by the happiness of the union in the end; in Henry Esmond there is open exposure to suffering but the artistic treatment concentrates on Rachel, the secondary character, rather than on Henry whose pain is obscured for the reader by the nobility of his behaviour in the face of it. The Newcomes is still another study of a youth on his way through life who is saved by the trials he suffers, and it is interesting that in this novel, while Thackeray emphasizes the pain undergone by the secondary character, Colonel Newcome, he also concentrates on the pain of the hero, Clive, to the extent of denying him the happy ending of Arthur and Laura, and the spiritual serenity found by Henry and Rachel. Clive fades away into story land where the reader is told to imagine what ending he will for him, although Thackeray then relents by imagining in his role as narrator that Ethel and Clive will be happily united after all.

Colonel Newcome's character is established in the first chapter and sustained to the end of the novel. He has suffered ill-treatment from his family in his youth and later lost the

hand of his beloved because his social status was lower than that of another suitor. As a result of his experiences, however, he has developed firm religious convictions which he defends strongly throughout The Newcomes. His first public exhibition of these firm principles, defending his son's innocence against the bawdy songs of a tavern drunk, seems as much prompted by allegiance to his concept of what constitutes an English gentleman, as by Christian spirit. On the next occasion, however, his statement seems almost an echo of the Lord's Prayer. His son Clive has poured wine over an unruly and insulting guest and is being counselled to apologize:

"We ought to be ashamed of doing wrong.....We must go and ask Barnes Newcome's pardon, sir, and forgive other people's trespasses, my boy, if we hope forgiveness of our own." His voice sank down as he spoke, and he bowed his head reverently.³²

Colonel Newcome's moral code is always described simply and straightforwardly, so that he appears child-like and innocent and is described so by both his son, Clive and the narrator-character Pendennis. His simplicity is further emphasized by his relationship with the children in the novel, and with Laura whose religious nature has been established in Pendennis and is reinforced in The Newcomes:

She had been bred to measure her actions by a standard, which the world may nominally admit, but which it leaves for the most part unheeded. Worship, love, duty, as taught her by the devout study of the Sacred Law which interprets and defines it - if these formed the outward

³²The Newcomes (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1884), Vol. I, p. 185.

practice of her life, they were also its constant and secret endeavours and occupation. She spoke but very seldom of her religion, though it filled her heart and influenced all her behaviour. Whenever she came to that sacred subject, her demeanour appeared to her husband so awful that he scarcely dared to approach it in her company, and stood without as this pure creature entered into the Holy of Holies. What must the world appear to such a person? Its ambitions, rewards, disappointments, pleasures, worth how much? Compared to the possession of that priceless treasure and happiness unspeakable, a perfect faith, what has Life to offer?³³

And yet, Thackeray realizes that the possession of faith, however strong, does not negate the possibility of sin, a concept he shares with Kierkegaard who felt that one could only, finally, define one's religion in terms of one's guilt, repentance, and renewal, all of which can only be the result of recognition of one's sinful nature:

Repentance is the necessary form of love for God: if I do not love God thus, I do not love Him absolutely from the depths of my being; every other way of loving the absolute is an error.³⁴

And so, Thackeray shows Colonel Newcome giving way to wrath and becoming vindictive against his enemy:

Now this gentleman could no more pardon a lie than he could utter one. He would believe all and everything a man told him until deceived once, after which he never forgave. And wrath being once aroused in his simple mind and distrust firmly fixed there, his anger and prejudices gathered daily. He could see no single good quality in his opponent; and hated him with a daily increasing bitterness.³⁵

³³Ibid., Vol. II, pp. 162-163.

³⁴Introduction to Kierkegaard, Jolivet, p. 139.

³⁵The Newcomes, Vol. II, p. 188.

Before the end of the novel, however, Colonel Newcome, humbled by the recognition that his self-righteousness was prompted sometimes by worldly considerations rather than religious ones, repents and decides to put aside the world completely. Unlike Laura who is able to live unworldly in the world, Colonel Newcome becomes a public symbol of all those Christian values he has promoted in the novel, even during the period when he had himself lost the proper religious perspective. Pendennis summarizes the mood of the last part of the novel when he describes the old man shortly before his death:

I thought of the psalm we had heard on the previous evening, and turned to it in the opened Bible, and pointed to the verse, "Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholdeth him." Thomas Newcome seeing my occupation, laid a kind, trembling hand on my shoulder; and then, putting on his glasses, with a smile bent over the volume. And who that saw him then, and knew him and loved him as I did - who would not have humbled his own heart, and breathed his inward prayer, confessing and adoring the Divine Will, which ordains these trials, these triumphs, these humiliations, these blessed griefs, this crowning Love?³⁶

Just as Colonel Newcome's faith reaches out to touch Pendennis in this passage, so it reaches out to touch others in the novel. Only he and Laura are able to reach Ethel while she is in the aesthetic stage of her life:

Ethel clung always to his affection. She wanted that man, rather than any other in the whole world, to think well of her. When she was with him, she was the amiable and simple, the loving impetuous creature of old timesWorldliness, heartlessness, eager scheming, cold flirtations, marquis - hunting and the like, disappeared

³⁶Ibid., Vol. II, p. 453.

for a while - and were not, as she sat at that honest man's side.³⁷

Ethel finally does change permanently, but not until she has suffered in her own life, and been influenced by the sufferings of others, like Colonel Newcome, and his son, Clive.

All the main characters in The Newcomes come to self-knowledge through pain and each in his individual way recognizes a need for personal commitment based on eternal rather than temporal values. Ethel commits herself to the care of her brother's children; Clive commits himself to the protection of his wife and child from his mother-in-law, Mrs. MacKenzie; and Colonel Newcome commits himself to a life of penance and prayer in the Grey Friars as atonement for the well-intentioned wrongs he has committed. These three finally come together at the death-bed of the old Colonel and when he announces his own death and recognition of the Master with the schoolboy's phrase, "Adsum", the reader feels that everyone else present has likewise recognized His Presence and their need of Him in their own lives. Certainly Thackeray seems to have felt that any further tale-telling would be anticlimatic, for he leaves the reader at this point, with the shortest summary to account for the ends of his minor characters. As stated earlier, he refuses to unite Clive and Ethel in the pages of the novel, and one feels this is done

³⁷Ibid., p. 186.

so that the emphasis of the book may be on the sufferings involved in personal commitment rather than on the rewards it brings. James H. Wheatley makes this same point in talking about Thackeray's consideration of questions regarding Fate and religious belief during this period of his life:

With a slight darkening of the novels after Pendennis, produced by the increasing opposition of the world, comes a compensating insistence on various sorts of transcendental victory over the world of time. Timelessness had always been connected to Thackeray's ideas of virtue (Colonel Dobbin was admirable not least for his constancy) but there is an increasing emphasis on, and recurrence of, the timeless that culminates in Colonel Newcome's dying word, "Adsum!" ("Present!" or "Here!"). Compared to The Newcomes, the earlier Pendennis is a relatively happy book, showing the world full of prizes of the sort that the seekers themselves desired.....But in The Newcomes, the announcement of Clive's marriage to Ethel is reserved for a mocking postscript.....In the story itself, the prizes include a great many "blessed griefs," a position that is probably better theology and that also marks a slight shift in Thackeray's emphases, as though he had become more aware of the transcendental nature of his morality.³⁸

Again, he comments in his later discussion of The Newcomes on the direction Thackeray's thoughts were leading him:

By various thematic routes, all the major characters are meant to have arrived at this scene united in their ability to participate in Colonel Newcome's final moment of triumph over the world.³⁹

There can be little doubt that Thackeray's personal feelings about the importance of eternal values lie behind his artistic

³⁸Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction, pp. 102-103.

³⁹Ibid., p. 115.

expression of these themes in the novels after Vanity Fair.

By the time Thackeray comes to write Philip he seems to have moved still closer to Kierkegaard philosophically, and realizes that it is not enough that a man put aside the world literally as Colonel Newcome has done, or at least recognizes that this is not a very practical solution for many people who would nonetheless like to be saved. A man must put aside the world while yet living in it. Thackeray, however, does not seem to want everyone to be like Laura, whose religion rarely moves her to action and whose tranquillity is so emphasized that the reader is very little aware of pain in her, although one is told she feels very deeply. In Philip, Thackeray presents a character who is completely unlike any of his previous heroes. The first obvious difference is that Philip, unlike Arthur or Clive, pays very little attention to social etiquette, a feature which immediately distinguishes and alienates him from those of his social peers who live by and for this world. Also, unlike Thackeray's previous heroes, Philip fights for the woman he loves over all obstacles placed in his way. In Pendennis, Arthur is rewarded with Laura's hand at the end of the novel with the approval of all concerned; in Henry Esmond, Rachel and Henry establish a marital bond based on spiritual considerations as much as on passion; in The Newcomes, Clive accepts the social principles by which Ethel lives and does not try to win her once she has explained her position, but goes instead to the Continent

to mourn his loss. In Philip, however, that young man rages and storms over the inanity of a society that would promote marriages of convenience in the name of familial duty. He refuses to accept the social code and practically carries off his bride. Thackeray makes clear, however, that Philip's independence is not due to boorishness, and again in this novel uses Laura as a yardstick. Narrator Arthur Pendennis states:

Before my wife this lion of a Firmin was as a lamb. Rough, captious, and overbearing in general society, with those whom he loved and esteemed Philip was of all men the most modest and humble. He would never tire of playing with our children, joining in their games, laughing and roaring at their little sports. I have never had such a laughter at my jokes as Philip Firmin.....And it has been said that no man could admit his own faults with more engaging candour than our friend.⁴⁰

In this novel, too, Thackeray carries the adventures of his hero beyond his wedding day, describing the trials of Charlotte and Philip and recognizing that it is only by reason of the strength of their commitment that they are able to survive. Throughout Philip there is a strong emphasis on suffering and for the first time Thackeray really describes the pain of the hero front-on for the reader. Long after Philip's and Charlotte's first trials are over, the memory of the pain is for both still like a living thing and they wonder how they have survived. For Thackeray, the reason for their survival lies in their faith, their love,

⁴⁰Philip (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1884), Vol. II, pp. 179-180.

their acceptance of pain and their observance of what they see as eternal Duty. Philip acknowledges his dependence on God well before the last chapter:

I say I am grateful for what happened; and look back at the past not without awe. In great grief and danger maybe, I have had timely rescue. Under great suffering I have met with supreme consolation. When the trial has seemed almost too hard for me it has ended, and our darkness has been lightened. Ut vivo et valeo - si valeo, I know by Whose permission this is, - and would you forbid me to be thankful? to be thankful for my life; to be thankful for my children; to be thankful for the daily bread which has been granted to me, and the temptation from which I have been rescued? As I think of the past and its bitter trials, I bow my head in thanks and awe. I wanted succour, and I found it.⁴¹

In some sense, Philip may be the most religious of Thackeray's heroes, in so far as the whole story of his life is a tale of commitment and constant renewal, repetition, and reinforcement of commitment, in the face of external obstacles. It will have to be considered whether Thackeray did not finally choose Philip's way, which is close to Kierkegaard's in some respects. Philip, more than any one of Thackeray's earlier heroes, seems most capable of making the Kierkegaardian leap from the ethical to the religious stage of life. All the "good" characters before Philip live according to their moral principles and obey the precepts demanded by Christian Duty, but only Philip, among all of them, seems to realize fully that there is conflict even in living according to Duty. Conflict seems to be the key

⁴¹Ibid., Vol. II, p. 241.

to Kierkegaard's views regarding the difference between the ethical and religious stages of life, with the religious stage bearing the paradoxical characteristics of faith and sin. Philip's sin is vanity, as it is the sin of most of Thackeray's heroes, but there is a variation on the theme in this novel. While Philip is unduly proud of his own social rank and tends to look down on those beneath him, as in the case of Mr. Mugford, his employer, he never deigns to look up to those higher than himself in social rank, and so, perhaps, does not forfeit the reader's affection for him. Philip must learn humility before the book ends and one of the paths the lesson takes involves Philip's financial support of his scoundrel father. Philip sees his father as his spiritual burden, to be carried, as he thinks, to his death. Ironically, he sees an Abraham-Isaac situation in their relationship:

My patriarch has tied me up, and had the knife in me repeatedly. He does not sacrifice me at one operation; but there will be a final one some day, and I shall bleed no more.⁴²

There is a basic conflict here in which Philip has to choose between his duty to his father as a loving son, and his duty to his wife and family as husband and provider. As in the original Abraham-Isaac situation, the ethical stage of life offers no solution.⁴³ As Abraham asserted his faith in God in choosing

⁴²Ibid., Vol. II, p. 284.

⁴³See the previous discussion of this topic in Chapter II, pp. 49-53.

the absurd in his decision to kill his son, so does Philip choose the absurd in backing his father's endless, foolish ventures, knowing them to be just that, thus expressing indirectly his faith in Providence. Somehow, he hopes, in the presence of his own despair, there will come a solution, the father's knife will be stayed before the son is completely bankrupt. The angel of mercy who stays the fateful hand is Little Sister, frequently referred to as an angel in the book, who performs the traditional Christian act of love in sacrificing herself out of her love for her friend, Philip. Even after her sacrifice, however, Philip must undergo further trials and punishment. He is not permitted to prosper until he has completely eradicated his human vanity. His most difficult act is to accept charity from Mr. Mugford whom he unjustifiably has scorned as inferior, and to accept it in the proper spirit of Christian humility:

"Amen!" said Philip, with a grasp of the honest fellow's hand.⁴⁴

But Philip's religious resignation does not mark the end of his involvement with life as is the case with Colonel Newcome. To the end of the book, our hero is forever challenging the society of which he is a member, standing up for his individual beliefs, and winning quixotic victories, in the face of what it seems must be certain defeat.

Up to this point, discussion of the place of Duty, Suffering, Faith, and Love, has been largely confined to the novels

⁴⁴Philip, Vol. II, p. 352.

themselves. Further proof from Thackeray's own life may strengthen the arguments given so far. Philip's situation in this novel is reminiscent of Thackeray's personal real-life situation. All of Thackeray's life was lived in a state of conflict and paradox and as this had such direct implications in his writings some attention should be paid to this subject before concluding the chapter. As a very young man he was torn in his relationship with his mother when his conflicting religious views came in the way of his love and gratitude; he was later torn in his relationship with Jane Brookfield when his concept of marital duty came in the way of his love for her; and he was torn finally in his relationship with his children. From the time of Isabella's insanity Thackeray felt constantly challenged by opposing duties, narrow familial duty against a larger form of Christian charity. All his natural feelings as a father told him that his first duty was to provide for his practically motherless children and he wrote movingly in his diary while they were still infants:

O Lord God - there is not one of the sorrows or disappointments of my life, that as I fancy I cannot trace to some error crime or weakness of my disposition. Strengthen me then with your help, to maintain my good resolutions - not to yield to lust or sloth that beset me: or at least to combat with them & overcome them sometimes.

Above all O Gracious Father, please to have mercy upon those whose well-being depends upon me. O empower me to give them good and honest example: keep them out of misfortunes ^{w^h} result from my fault: and towards them enable me to discharge the private duties of life - to be interested in their ways & amusements, to be cheerful & constant at home: frugal & orderly if possible. O give me your help strenuously to work out the vices of

character wh have born such bitter fruit already.....
 My heart feels very humble & thankful for God's
 kindness towards these beautiful children, and I
 do humbly pray that I may be kept in a mood for
 seriously considering & trying to act up to my duty
O God, O God give me strength to do my duty.⁴⁵

Despising the Victorian fashion of finding wealthy husbands to look after one's daughters, Thackeray felt he must set aside sufficient funds to ensure their financial independence after his death. He felt this would be their best chance for happiness in that they would not be forced to make personal decisions on the basis of their social, economic circumstances. He felt guilty that his store of savings was so small as he looked back on his youth and realized how he had squandered so much which could be put to much better use now. He, subsequently, set himself to replace it as quickly as he could by turning to public lectures, which proved profitable. He wrote to his mother: "If I can work for three years now, I shall have put back my patrimony and a little over - after thirty years of ups and downs."⁴⁶ Of the later immediate success of the Cornhill magazine, Stevenson records:

This almost hysterical jubilation revealed much more than merely his satisfaction with an enlarged income. It marked the release from a deep inward shame that had gnawed him for twenty years. At last he had made a resounding success, and in the very same sphere in which he had lost the bulk of his patrimony.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Ray, Letters, Vol. II, pp. 30-32.

⁴⁶Lionel Stevenson, The Showman of Vanity Fair, p. 358.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 364.

Thackeray's anxiety about his daughters' financial welfare was increased by his own steadily deteriorating health which lent an urgency to his determination to accumulate money. But, set against this belief in familial duty, was a belief in a larger Christian duty, to be charitable towards his fellow man. Throughout his life Thackeray was noted for his generosity to those in need. Just as he would set aside money for his daughters, someone would come along whose need was greater and he would soon have less money in his pocket than before. Lionel Stevenson chronicles many instances of his charity:

Thackeray kept a sort of "revolving fund" to meet the frequent crises among his Grub Street acquaintances; the memory of his own days of indigence made him particularly considerate toward them.⁴⁸

Again:

London was full of anecdotes about the devices he invented for conveying ten-pound notes without humiliating the recipients.⁴⁹

Gordon Ray, too, discusses his charitable habits:

The demands upon his compassion were formidable indeed.....A glimpse of misery was enough to set his benevolence to work.....As he became known for his soft-heartedness, applications poured in upon him from all sides. His purse or his services as a lecturer were in constant requisition by those eager to help indigent writers or their families. On the streets, at his clubs, even in his home the stream of applicants seemed unending.....We may well credit Dr. Brown's tribute to this aspect of Thackeray's

⁴⁸The Showman of Vanity Fair, p. 302.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 373.

character: "he was a faithful friend. No one, we believe, will ever know the amount of true kindness and help, given often at a time when kindness cost much, to nameless, unheard of suffering."⁵⁰

"Softheartedness seems to me better than anything,"⁵¹ he once wrote to Mrs. Brookfield, although this admission should not be considered a confession of weakness:

A man is seldom more manly than when he is what you call unmanned - the source of his emotion is championship, pity and courage; the instinctive desire to cherish those who are innocent and unhappy, and defend those who are tender and weak.⁵²

To the end of his life he was extremely sensitive to the needs of his "fellow-sinners." Forster writes that "there was to the last in him the sensibility of a child's generous heart, that time had not sheathed against light touches of pleasure and pain."⁵³ Gordon Ray takes the same view:

He had an acute sensitivity that kept him uneasily conscious of everything happening around him, a rawness of nerve that did not allow him to cushion himself against the encounters of everyday intercourse with the dullness of perception that protects the ordinary human being."⁵⁴

This sensitivity, however, led him into social conflict as well as social compassion, and was the root cause of his celebrated

⁵⁰Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, pp. 350-352.

⁵¹Quoted by Gordon Ray, The Buried Life, p. 124.

⁵²Written by Thackeray in defence of Richard Steele's sentimentalism. Quoted by Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 147.

⁵³Quoted by Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 424.

⁵⁴Ray, The Buried Life, pp. 120-121.

controversy with Charles Dickens and the Yates group.⁵⁵ He had to struggle constantly to keep his too easily outraged sense of moral propriety under control and it was not until 1862, a year before his death, that he was able to state the problem and finally face it:

.....he showed himself capable of a most penetrating analysis of the difficulties into which he had been led by the painful sensitivity of his nature. He could not protect himself from being hurt, he reflected, but he could at least prevent himself from making matters worse by an intemperate reply. And from this time on it was more in sorrow than in anger that he entertained the "queer, sad, strange, bitter thought....."⁵⁶

The last years of Thackeray's life are characterized by his conflicting views regarding the ambiguous nature of life. On the one hand he recognizes the need to 'fight the good fight', but on the other, he recognizes that he himself has moved beyond life. In some sense he has put aside the world, and one feels that Colonel Newcome in Grey friars is an accurate portrayal of Thackeray's moral mood in this last stage. At least, one feels that he would love to be able to justify this position, as a characteristic Kierkegaardian "knight of infinite resignation" whose condition is that of resignation to life rather than active involvement in it. To the end, however, Thackeray felt he must,

⁵⁵For a detailed account of this controversy, which arose out of Thackeray's response to what he considered a personal attack on his personality, character and appearance in a published review on him, see Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, Ch. 9, 10, 13.

⁵⁶Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 404.

like Philip in that novel, participate in life even while he might not really feel interested in doing so. There are many indications in his diaries and letters that his view of life in his last years is 'other-world' oriented. His first impulse when he moved into the Palace Green house, his symbol of worldly success, was to pray in his private diary:

'I pray Almighty God that the words I write in this house may be pure and honest; that they be dictated by no personal spite, unworthy motive, or unjust greed for gain; that they may tell the truth as far as I know it; and tend to promote love and peace among men, for the sake of Christ our Lord.'⁵⁷

Of his illness, he wrote in the same period, "I am well. Amen. I am ill. Amen. I die. Amen always,"⁵⁸ an expression of stoicism which is hardly likely from a man with zest for the things of this world. Although actively involved in this world, he had yet put aside worldly things. His mother seems to have recognized the change for Ray writes of this time, "They remained united.....by what one sensitive observer described as 'the silent converse.....of deeds, not words,.....and, better still, the silence in his soul, which he kept in the midst of busy life, and which was known to her.'"⁵⁹ In The Buried Life, Ray

⁵⁷Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 397.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 367.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 399. Ray quotes Blanche Warre-Cornish, "An Impression of Thackeray in His Last Years," Dublin Review, CL (January 1912), pp. 24-25.

summarizes Thackeray's ambivalent resignation in terms which would perhaps lend themselves to an existentialist interpretation:

"There are two ways of regarding the alteration that took place in Thackeray's attitude towards life as he grew older. His later point of view may be considered either as a surrender or as a victory. Thackeray himself regarded it as a victory though his assurance was troubled by uneasy twinges of doubt."⁶⁰

His response to life at this period was direct and emotional. He felt he must cling to faith and hope and live by the precepts of love and truth. Joyce Cary writes of Thackeray's humility in this period, although he does not point out the religious basis for it:

Thackeray was a strong and wise man. When in his letters he describes himself as weak and procrastinating, we have the measure of his strength, in what he expected of himself. He saw and grimly accepted a treacherous and insecure world where indeed there were love and goodness, but no security for either.⁶¹

Of his concern for truth one finds many comments, none perhaps better than Bernard Shaw's whose praise of Thackeray is made in typical rancorous tones:

Thackeray told "the truth in spite of himself. He may protest against it, special plead against it, exaggerate the extenuating circumstances, be driven into pessimism by it; but it comes raging and snivelling out of him, all the same, within the limits of his sense of decencyhe tells you no lies."⁶²

⁶⁰p. 119.

⁶¹Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 430.

⁶²Ibid., p. 428.

This emphasis on the need for openness led in Thackeray's last years to a great interest in moral hypocrisy, an evil which he feared in himself disguised as vanity, and which he abhorred in others. Trollope writes:

There was more hope that the city should be saved because of its ten just men, than for society, if society were to depend on ten who were not snobs. All this arose from the keenness of his vision into that which was really mean. But that keenness become so aggravated by the intenseness of his search that the slightest peck of dust became to his eyes as a foul stain.⁶³

Ray compares Thackeray's last interests with Dickens's preoccupation with crime at the time and decides that "Thackeray's musings were not so bloody":

Yet his preoccupation with moral evil made him ponder throughout his career those men and women "on whom, quite in their early lives, dark Ahrimanes has seemed to lay his dread mark: children yet corrupt, and wicked of tongue; tender of age, yet cruel.....I can recall such, and in the vista of far-off, unforgotten boyhood, can see marching that sad little procession of enfants perdus." In particular he was curious in his later life about scoundrels of "respectable exterior, not committed to jail yet, but not undiscovered"; "men whose lives are a scheme, whose laughter is a conspiracy, whose smile means something else, whose hatred is a cloak." "How do men feel," he inquired, "whose whole lives.....are lies and subterfuges? What sort of company do they keep, when they are alone?"⁶⁴

But perhaps the best word on the subject comes from Thackeray himself who sees the need for religion and acknowledges in a conversation with a clergyman his secular commitment to point

⁶³Thackeray, p. 82.

⁶⁴Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 379.

people towards religion through his writings:

I want, too, to say in my way, that love and truth are the greatest of Heaven's commandments and blessings to us; that the best of us, the many especially who pride themselves on their virtue most, are wretchedly weak, vain, and selfish, and to preach such a charity at least as a common sense of our shame and unworthiness might inspire to us poor people. I hope men of my profession do no harm who talk this doctrine out of doors to people in drawing-rooms and in the world. Your duty in church takes them a step higher, that awful step beyond Ethics which leads you up to God's revealed truth. What a tremendous responsibility his is who has that mystery to explain! What a boon the faith that makes it clear to him!⁶⁵

All these expressed views have direct implications for Thackeray's writing and as one turns to examine his literary techniques several bundles of facts seem to merge into a comprehensible form. From the material already presented certain conclusions may be made, as follows. In his last years, Thackeray was a religious man, although it is impossible to decide from his writings whether or not he reached Kierkegaard's religious stage. This last quotation to the Reverend Sortain would, however, certainly indicate that he is aware of a level above the Ethical, and in his writings he seems increasingly to be trying to push past this level to a new moral comprehension. In the preceding chapters discussion has been confined to the results of Thackeray's moral search in terms of the themes he most emphasized - duty and suffering in the midst of love. It remains to discuss the implications of his views for the literary tech-

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 368-369.

niques he used. This would have to include first and foremost the place of the narrator in the novel, a subject introduced briefly in the discussion of Vanity Fair which must be dealt with more fully. As all his techniques have been the subject of critical comment, however, the subject is large enough to deserve separate attention in a new chapter.

CHAPTER V

KIERKEGAARDIAN ELEMENTS IN THACKERAY'S

LITERARY TECHNIQUES

CONCLUSION

His was a Cervantean nature and a Cervantean talent, a blend in which two strains are most clearly marked: the dark thread of disillusion and the bright one of faith; the oblique glance at men as they are and the vision of what they might be; the mocking and the reverent.

Chauncey Wells. "Thackeray and the Victorian Compromise."

There are three main points to make regarding Thackeray's handling of plots in his novels. The most obvious is that all his plots are very similar, a feature which may be accounted for in two ways. He repeats the same theme, reworked with variations, because his subject is always partially himself. His novels consist of his musings upon his own past, present, and hopes for the future. Many critics consider this a weakness and Thackeray himself was heard to complain of having nothing new to say.¹ In the Kierkegaardian view, however, this one-sidedness is more likely to be a sign of strength than a creative flaw. If one's message is eternal and not temporal, it should always remain the same. Kierkegaard wrote of Socrates that he "showed both his

¹Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 371. Also pp. 372-373. Also Lord David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists, p. 75.

honour and his pride by one thing: he always said the same things about the same theme."² Croxall quotes Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript to explain this point more fully:

We can generally find opportunity to penetrate a man's mind and see whether he is spiritual, or merely out for sensation, by noting the way he assesses an author's 'richness' or 'poverty'. If a priest could continue for a whole year preaching on one and the same text, keeping himself ever fresh by the luxuriance of new expositions, he would in my opinion be unique. But a listener seeking mere sensation would only find him boring.

A reader filled with mere curiosity says, 'This is the same again.' And perhaps our pseudonymous author replies, 'May it really be as you say, for such a judgment is a compliment!'

As regards Tivoli - entertainments and New Year literary presents, it holds good for the catch-penny artists, and those who are caught by them, that change is their highest law. But as regards 'truth in the inward parts' lived out in existence; as regards an incorruptible joy which has nothing in common with that craving for diversion which characterised those who are bored with life, the very opposite is true. The law is, 'the same, yet changed, yet still the same.'³

If one believes that Thackeray's intentions are didactic, the 'eternal' nature of his message is also easy to accept, and so, in existentialist terms, his creativity lies in his ability to resist change for the sake of novelty in the name of his higher goals. He saw novel-writing in these terms:

²Quoted by T.H. Croxall, Kierkegaard Commentary, p. 76.

³Ibid., p. 77.

What I mean applies to my own case & that of all of us--who set up as Satirical-Moralists-- and having such a vast multitude of readers whom we not only amuse but teach. And indeed, a solemn prayer to God Almighty was in my thoughts that we may never forget truth & Justice and kindness as the great ends of our profession. There's something of the same strain in *Vanity Fair*. A few years ago I should have sneered at the idea of setting up as a teacher at all, and perhaps at this pompous and pious way of talking about a few papers of jokes in *Punch*--but I have got to believe in the business, and in many other things since then. And our profession seems to me to be as serious as the Parson's own.⁴

There can be little doubt that Thackeray saw his message as eternal, but to emphasize the point, it may be practically demonstrated by the two further comments to be made about his handling of plots. He rarely uses direct, dramatic scenes; and, in his late novels particularly, he never allows suspense to build up in the reader. Many critics consider that when Thackeray uses the indirect scene, (one, that is, which is reported to us after the fact by the narrator or another character in the book, instead of being presented directly), he is weakening his novel as an art-form. Percy Lubbock's comment is typical:

Right and left in the novels of Thackeray one may gather instances of the same kind - the piercing and momentary shaft of direct vision, the big scene approached and then refused.⁵

⁴Quoted by Geoffrey Tillotson, Thackeray the Novelist, pp. 224-225.

⁵The Craft of Fiction, p. 105. This topic is also discussed by John Lester, "Thackeray's Narrative Techniques," PMLA, (1954), p. 402, and by Lord David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists, pp. 88-89.

Lubbock completely ignores, in a typically Jamesian way, that Thackeray's goal is didactic and for his purpose the indirect scene is more likely to be effective than the dramatic scene that Lubbock favours. Thackeray does not encourage the reader to become caught up in the illusionary world that he is presenting in the novel, but to remain firmly rooted in the real world. Thackeray wants the reader to retain his own identity and not become submerged in the life of any character in the book. Percy Lubbock recognizes that this is the result of Thackeray's technique, but apparently refuses to recognize the reason for it:

And so his book, as one may say, is not complete in itself, not really self-contained; it does not meet and satisfy all the issues it suggests. Over the whole of one side of it there is an inconclusive look, something that draws the eye away from the book itself, into space.⁶

Lubbock, like so many other critics who also fall wide of the mark, does not recognize that Thackeray does not care if the reader shares the life of the people in the novel, as long as he looks at them, and puts what he sees in a proper moral perspective. Ideally, the reader will look beyond the book, examine his own life, see himself more clearly, and act. Thackeray's later novels are almost meditations, - it is no accident that Praz calls Philip a sermon⁷.....; they are meant to be read slowly, reflectively, and always with one's Self in mind. Many critics have recognized

⁶Ibid., p. 115.

⁷The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, p. 115.

this relationship between the novel and the reader although not all see it in existentialist terms. Juliet McMaster writes:

His novels are certainly about Amelia, Becky, Arthur Pendennis, Clive Newcome, and the rest; but they are also about, and in no superficial way, our response to these characters and to the world they live in. His authorial presence is his strategy to elicit this response. And the moral experience of the novel is largely a matter of the reader's decision as to where he wants to place himself among the various attitudes dramatized for him in the author's commentary.⁸

Again she says:

It was part of both his moral and artistic purpose to force the reader, during the act of reading, to make comparisons from one world to the other; to bring to bear his knowledge of one on the evaluation of the other.....⁹

A.E. Dyson makes the same point when he says that "we are involved in the fate of the characters"¹⁰ as does Sr. Mary Corona Sharpe when she says that "the pain felt by the reader of Vanity Fair is that of uncertainty: who is the ultimate victim of the narrator's mockery? And the reader justly senses that in some way he is."¹¹

His purpose is identical to Kierkegaard's, when Jolivet says of the latter:

⁸Thackeray: The Major Novels, (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 8-9.

⁹Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰Critical Quarterly, 6 (1964), p. 14.

¹¹"Sympathetic Mockery: A Study of the Narrator's Character in Vanity Fair," ELH, Vol. 29 (1962), pp. 332-333. For further discussion of the relationship between writer and reader, and Thackeray's didactic intentions, see R. Las Vergnas, William Makepeace Thackeray: l'homme, le penseur, le romancier (Paris: Champion, 1932).

Often indeed he draws no conclusion, and this deliberately, for it is for the reader to conclude, that is to say, to exist. All this is bound up for him with his argument concerning "indirect communication," which in his view was both a necessity deriving from the primacy of the subjective and a "tendency in his nature." The existential, the subjective, the individual, the spiritual, the religious, cannot be directly communicated to another person, for all experience is isolated in its individuality. The person communicating remains within himself, and so also must the recipient. Consequently what Kierkegaard writes is not written to reveal himself to other men, but to reveal other men to themselves.¹²

Thackeray's refusal, particularly in his later novels, to allow suspense to build up, is a further indication of his didactic intention, and done for the reason just outlined. Thackeray wants the reader to keep a respectable distance from the world of the novel. He sees it merely as a tool in a grander scheme of things, and irrelevant except in so far as it helps the reader in his self-evaluation. Thackeray does not see the novel as an art-form like a sculpture which one admires externally wondering the while at the craftsmanship of the creator. He sees it existentially, as Kierkegaard sees his own writings. Croxall explains this idea very well in reference to Kierkegaard:

If, instead of burying our contemplation exclusively in a single object before us, and studying the object in its own self, we proceed to trace its bearings upon other things and the consequences which follow from it in the light of other knowledge - when we view one thing in the light which it casts upon another, we use 'reflexion'. The result of such objective consideration can be stated in a direct manner without reference to the

¹²Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 110.

reflecting person. But once a religious man or Christian weighs up or reflects upon religion, the results reflect back upon the reflector. 'What about yourself?' the reflections seem to say. This is what Kierkegaard means by double reflexion. Suppose a person wants to communicate to others what he has personally appropriated by double reflexion, how shall he do so? Not directly, because others have to acquire truth in the same personal way. He can only help them indirectly by trying to stimulate them to a similar personal appropriation of the truth; not only reflected upon, but reflected back upon oneself. 'If the subject who exists in the isolation of his inwardness wishes to communicate himself; that is, if he both wants to keep his thinking to himself in the inwardness of his subjective existence, and yet at the same time wants to communicate himself to others, he must use indirect communication.' Such a form of communication presupposes no results and no finality.¹³

There is an open-endedness which seems similar to this in all of Thackeray's writing. Like Kierkegaard's characters, his people wander through novel after novel, showing their faces in unexpected places, reminding the reader of the endless possibilities of life, and through their presence reinforcing and repeating previously presented themes. In fact, as Thackeray grows older, his novels become less and less like the Jamesian ideal. Trollope calls these writings his "vague narratives" and sees their value clearly:

The mind of the man has been clearly exhibited in them. In them he has spoken out his thoughts, and given the world to know his convictions, as well as could have been done in the carrying out any well-conducted plot.¹⁴

¹³Kierkegaard Commentary, p. 17.

¹⁴Thackeray, p. 138.

If one sees Thackeray's purpose in novel-writing as Kierkegaard saw his own purpose in life, "to present the truth as I discover it,"¹⁵ one can easily understand why his writings become increasingly discursive. As his experience of life increases, he has more to offer the reader. Ray summarizes Thackeray's position quite well;

No novelist has had a firmer grasp on the hard facts of individual existence. To him, as to Tolstoy, reality was "a thick, opaque, inextricably complex web of events, objects, characteristics, connected and divided by literally innumerable unidentifiable links--and gaps and sudden discontinuities, too, visible and invisible." Profoundly aware of "the streamingness of experience," he avoided wherever he could the delusive short-cut of abstraction. Like Newman, he knew that persuasiveness is most readily achieved by being "simply personal and historical." Faithful to the process by which we all arrive at lasting decisions in life, he devoted himself in his fiction to accumulating countless concrete details which taken together insensibly form his readers' impressions and opinions. Hence his "allusive irrelevancy" and "half-suggestion"; hence his habit of working "by diffusiveness; by a thousand touches scattered through a thousand pages." This was the way in which he conveyed "as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality," which he conceived to be the sine qua non of great fiction.¹⁶

This is in line with the comment that Jolivet makes of Kierkegaard:

"His thought takes nourishment from his life and expresses its various phases. It has its own logic therefore, the living, experiential logic of a soul seeking not for an abstract, naked truth, but for its own truth. It assumes the form of a drama,

¹⁵Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 111.

¹⁶Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, pp. 426-427.

played out within Kierkegaard's heart."¹⁷

As Thackeray sees more of life he becomes more aware of complexity. The best answers are not simple ones. For him, as for the existentialist, life is ambiguous. The only truth he can grasp is its uncertainty and man is caught up in the uncertainty. Roberts stated this directly many years after Thackeray illustrated the point in his writings:

.....existentialism regards man as fundamentally ambiguous. This is very closely linked to its predominant stress on freedom. It sees the human situation as filled with contradictions and tensions which cannot be resolved by means of exact or consistent thinking. These contradictions are not due simply to the present limitations of our knowledge, and they will not be overcome merely by obtaining further scientific information or philosophical explanation because they reflect the stubborn fact that man is split down the middle - at war with himself. He is free, yes; he is conscious of responsibility, of remorse, of guilt for what he has done. Yet his whole life is enmeshed within a natural and social order which profoundly and inevitably determines him, making him what in fact he is.¹⁸

This view may answer the charge made against Thackeray that in his novels he reveals himself as an indecisive moralist.¹⁹ He tells the truth as he sees it, as the existentialist sees it, which is through the eyes of uncertainty:

¹⁷Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 111.

¹⁸David E. Roberts, Existentialism and Religious Belief, ed. Roger Hazelton (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 8.

¹⁹Geoffrey Tillotson, Thackeray the Novelist, pp. 244 ff.

"Not always doth the writer know whither the divine Muse leadeth him. But of this be sure - she is as inexorable as Truth."²⁰

The existential thinker or novelist does not demand final answers to the questions he asks about life:

.....according to Kierkegaard, objective uncertainty becomes subjective truth as soon as it is embraced with full and passionate sincerity. Faith, in this sense of adherence to what is uncertain or absurd if looked at objectively, becomes wholly legitimate as soon as the act of adherence takes place with the ardour of total sincerity.²¹

Truth may itself be a contradiction. Roger Hazelton states that "the genuinely existential thinker.....regards contradiction as not merely the Alpha but the Omega; thought must not only begin here but must return to the given ambiguity of the human situation, and do so continually. In the end moreover, thought cannot get beyond it."²² In Thackeray's writing this 'uncertain' Truth translates into ambivalence in his handling of plots, characters, theme, and point of view. Lionel Stevenson writes that "he was actuated, to be sure, by a reforming purpose, having become solemnly convinced that both the social system and the religious dogmas of his time and his nation were stupid and cruel; but his missionary zeal was brightened with laughter, and his sharpest satire gave way to unexpected gleams of tolerance."²³

²⁰The Newcomes, Vol. I, Ch. X, p. 137.

²¹Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 55.

²²Existentialism and Religious Belief, p. 9.

²³The Showman of Vanity Fair, p. 153.

This attitude is obvious in Thackeray from his earliest writings: his inability to present his villains as black as he intends to in Catherine; his presentation of Major Pendennis who ought to be despicable but retains a worldly charm to the end; his last-minute refusal to do away with the rogues in The Newcomes in favour of banishment instead; all of these point to a tolerance which is accountable in terms of his approach to writing and to life. In his lecture on "Charity and Humour" he explains this tolerance as he tells why he feels so unsympathetic to Dean Jonathan Swift:

.....I revolt from the man who placards himself as a professional hater of his own kind; because he chisels his savage indignation on his tombstone, as if to perpetuate his protest against being born of our race - the suffering, the weak, the erring, the wicked, if you will, but still the friendly, the loving children of God our Father.....Heaven help the lonely misanthrope! be kind to that multitude of sins, with so little charity to cover them!²⁴

Juliet McMaster makes this same point, when she quotes Chesterton's view of Thackeray:

Chesterton, who has an unerring instinct in singling out what is great in Thackeray, so describes his place among Victorian moralists: 'The one supreme and even sacred quality in Thackeray's work is that he felt the weakness of all flesh. Wherever he sneers it is at his own potential self.....He stood for the remains of Christian charity. Dickens, or Douglas Jerrold, or many others might have planned a Book of Snobs; it was Thackeray, and Thackeray alone, who wrote the great subtitle, "By One of Themselves."²⁵

The point of view in all of Thackeray's novels is that of a fellow-sinner who sees himself ironically:

The clue to his art is the complete and covering irony through which his whole view of life is filtered. It is an irony softened by a sad and wistful humanity, sharpened at times by an indignation against meanness and cruelty and affectation, but warmed too by a sense of man's hidden nobility and by the gentle melancholy that comes with the ironist's perception of the gulf between man's expansive dreams and his puny successes.²⁶

²⁴"Charity and Humour," The English Humourists and The Four Georges, p. 272.

²⁵Thackeray: The Major Novels, p. 18.

²⁶John W. Dodds, "Thackeray in the Victorian Frame," Sewanee Review, Vol. 48 (October, 1940), pp. 474-475.

Irony, satire, and humour are the distinguishing features of Thackeray's style. Lord David Cecil says that "Thackeray can be dramatic and pathetic and comic and didactic; but pathos, drama, comedy and preaching alike are streaked with the same irony.....If Thackeray is out to expose, the irony is bitter: if to illustrate those domestic affections which he thought the most amiable of human impulses, it is almost dissolved in sentiment. But it is always present - always we are sensible of the unique Thackerayan irony....."²⁷ Of this mixture in Thackeray's irony John Blackwood writes with obvious sincerity shortly after Thackeray's death:

He used to tell such stories in a pitying half-mocking way in which it was impossible to say how much was sincerity and how much sham. But when he dropped that vein, and spoke with real feeling of men and things that he liked, the breadth and force of his character came out, and there was no mistake about his sincerity. None of the numerous sketches I have read give to me any real picture of the man with his fun and mixture of bitterness with warm good feeling. I have stuck in this note. Writing about old "Thack" has set me thinking about him, and all the scenes we have had together. I feel so truly about him that I am frightened to give a wrong impression of him to one who did not know him.²⁸

All Thackeray's contemporaries are aware of his irony and humour, and aware that its source is didactic. Two comments by James Hannay will illustrate this:

His humour and satire.....rested on moral soundness and truthfulness.....²⁹

²⁷Early Victorian Novelists, p. 89.

²⁸Quoted by Geoffrey Tillotson, Thackeray The Novelist, p. 227.

²⁹Studies on Thackeray, p. 57.

His humour, in its earliest and most festal form, was always moral and intellectual in the objects on which it employed itself--was always the humour of a thinker - and always suggests a tacit reference to the serious and sorrowful side of life, which gives an acid to its flavour piquant as that of the Attic olive.³⁰

In his lectures on the English humorists Thackeray defines the term 'humour' for his readers:

The humorous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness," he wrote "--your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture--your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. To the best of his means and ability he comments on all the ordinary actions and passions of life almost. He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher, so to speak. Accordingly as he finds, and speaks, and feels the truth best, we regard him, esteem him--sometimes love him."³¹

This is in complete agreement with Kierkegaard's view that "From the Christian point of view, everything, absolutely everything, should serve for edification."³² Kierkegaard has much to say about irony and humour and links them to the ethical and religious stages. They do not identify the Christian however, as he makes very clear in the Postscript:

Humour is not really different from irony, but really different from Christianity; and both differ from Christianity in the same way. They get stuck in Recollection, Humour is seemingly different from irony..... Seemingly, humour gives to existence greater meaning than irony does, but yet Immanence intrudes and is,

³⁰Ibid., p. 39.

³¹Quoted by Ray, Thackeray, Vol. II, p. 142.

³²Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, p. 109. Note 29. Cf. The Sickness unto Death, p. 3.

'more' or 'less', a negligible quantity over against Christianity's qualitative decisiveness. Humour therefore becomes the last terminus a quo in the matter of defining Christianity. Humour, when it uses Christian terminology (Sin, Forgiveness of Sin, Atonement, God in time, etc.), is not Christianity, but a kind of heathen Speculation which has got to know all about Christianity. It can come deceptively near to Christianity.....³³

And yet, Kierkegaard uses irony and humour extensively in his writings, other than his religious writings. While they do not identify a man as a Christian, neither, apparently do they prevent him from becoming one. It may be a necessary exercise at this point, to compare Thackeray's use of irony with Kierkegaard's and there is no better area in which to do this than in a discussion of their use of narrators, those characters considered by many to be closest to the authors themselves.

It was stated in Chapter III that critics who identify Thackeray, the narrator of the novel, with Thackeray, the private individual, are beginning from a false premise.³⁴ Thackeray's use of the narrator is, in fact, ironic, and tied to role-playing. In a new book on Thackeray's major novels, Juliet McMaster makes the point about role-playing explicitly:

That relation with the narrator is not a passive one where he tells and we listen -- it is a two-way affair,

³³Quoted by Croxall, Kierkegaard Commentary, p. 201.

³⁴For a good general discussion of the role of the narrator in the English novel, see Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

in which we must often disagree vigorously with what we are told, and always think for ourselves.....the author has been quite explicit in the pages of the novel itself about the fact that he plays roles.³⁵

The result of Thackeray's role-playing is that he approaches Kierkegaard in the latter's use of the ironic narrator:

For irony was to him [Kierkegaard] not merely a form of rhetoric but an essential element of his thought and one closely linked with his existential concept of subjectivityIf one considers truth as existing only in subjectivity, one should consider the individual bound to such truth. The individual's speech - which Kierkegaard called the "phenomenon" - should then be identical with his meaning - which he called the "essence". But irony permits the speaker to separate the phenomenon from its essence, that is, to tell an untruth without betraying his subjective authenticity. In fiction, this would mean merely that the speaker becomes what Wayne Booth has more recently called an "unreliable narrator." But this unreliable narrator may yet convey his truth because, as Kierkegaard tells us, "the ironic figure of speech cancels itself.....for the speaker pre-supposes his listeners to understand him, hence through a negation of the immediate phenomenon, the essence remains identical with the phenomenon."³⁶

In this discussion of Kierkegaard's concept of irony one cannot help but notice how close he is to Thackeray:

Kierkegaard thought of irony not only as a device of stating seriously something which is not seriously intended, or stating as a jest something which is meant seriously, but also, in metaphysical terms, as a liberation of the individual.....Freedom in this sense permitted man to negate the actual, putting himself above it, and to distance himself from himself,

³⁵Thackeray: The Major Novels, pp. 36-37.

³⁶Edith Kern, Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 9.

thereby reflecting upon himself as if he were a third person. Irony understood in this manner became to Kierkegaard "subjectivity of subjectivity" and thereby an intrinsic element of poetry and fiction (CI, 260). For in the freedom of such subjectivity raised to the second power, Kierkegaard the author could attain that "indirect form" which, in his view, alone was capable of rendering the "elusiveness," the paradox, and the dialectic of existence.....When mastered, irony could evoke life in its immediacy and paradox without the interference of abstract analysis and thought.³⁷

Thackeray once wrote to his daughters that "writing novels isthinking about one's self"³⁸ and like Kierkegaard, he writes about his 'Self' ironically in order to discover the truth about it. He examines himself as a third person in his own characters. In The Repetition, Kierkegaard states that "the individual has manifold shadows, all of which resemble him and from time to time have an equal claim to be the man himself."³⁹ However, no one of these 'shadows' is the total man. They remain "possibilities" and are isolated from one another. Even in their shadow world they cannot enter into true communication with each other, - thus the disparities between Thackeray's narrators' and characters' views and actions as well as the lack of communication among the characters themselves.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

³⁸ Ray, Letters, III, p. 645. Quoted by Helen McMaster, Thackeray: The Major Novels, p. 51. See also Bernard Paris's psychological interpretation of Vanity Fair for a different version of Thackeray's involvement of his Self in his novels. Footnote No. 11, p. 57 of this text for complete reference.

³⁹ Edith Kern, op. cit., p. 57.

For Kierkegaard, the purpose of irony in fictional writing is to "deceive a person into the truth."⁴⁰ Truth, he sees as religious truth, possible only through faith, yet ironically, easiest to express through poetry and fiction, through "deceits:"

As he writes in "The Point of View of My Work as an Author," the problem of his entire authorship was "how to become a Christian." His own inward truth was thus a striving and a quest for that faith which was to ground his Self transparently in the Power which constituted it. It was a disquieting paradox of his life that in actuality he not only was a poet but also lived "a poet's existence." Moreover, as the existential individual he felt that existential truth could best and most "essentially" be expressed in "indirect form," that is, aesthetically. Hence his whole being seemed to opt for the aesthetic, while at the same time he had to reject it as something to be overcome, something inferior to ethics and even more so to religion.⁴¹

At this point one is tempted to ask if this same kind of religious mood may have been partially responsible for Thackeray's repeated attempts to give up the writing of fiction. In the last ten years of his life he sought appointments which would have brought financial security for his daughters and a greater degree of personal anonymity. The question is rhetorical, but is it possible that Thackeray, like Kierkegaard, saw his life moving along "aesthetically" and recognized the need to leap out of it into a higher existence? Kierkegaard was extremely conscious of the difficulty of making the leap into the religious life and often

⁴⁰Edith Kern, op. cit., p. 22.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 21.

felt that he had not himself reached his goal. He was wary of the poetic life, which seems very like the life that Thackeray was living:

This poetic life is always sinful for the Christian, for it consists of dreaming instead of being, of having only an aesthetical imaginative relation to the true and the good, instead of a real relation. "A poet-existence as such," Kierkegaard writes, "lies in the obscurity which is due to the fact that a beginning of despair was not carried through, that the soul keeps on shivering with despair and the spirit cannot attain its true transformation. This poetic ideal is always a sickly ideal, for the true ideal is always the real. So when the spirit is not allowed to soar up into the eternal world of spirit it remains midway, and rejoices in the pictures reflected in the clouds and weeps they are so transitory. A poet-existence is therefore, as such, an unhappy existence, it is higher than finiteness and yet not infiniteness.....The poet, then, is in despair, even though he has the idea of God and even a deep need for religion - because he enjoys his torment, while God's demand, as he knows, is that he should abandon it, that he should humble himself beneath his torment as the believer does; that is to say, if one prefers it, that he should adopt it instead of exploiting it."⁴²

That Thackeray could have been living in this 'twilight' region between the finite and the infinite seems supported by the sentimentality throughout his writing which increases as he grows older. The only argument against it would be that he is aware of his own sentimentality and uses it just as he uses irony and humour, to guide the reader toward self-examination. As Gordon Ray says in The Buried Life, Thackeray reveals his inner self in using this technique - it is one evidence of the subjectivity of his truth.

⁴²Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, pp. 73-74.

Thackeray, he says, "does not shield the vulnerable spots in his personality by maintaining a careful objectivity."⁴³ He shows himself openly, for all to examine. In this sense he is very like Kierkegaard who, in rejecting an ordinary married life, made the decision to become a living embodiment of his own beliefs, in devoting his whole life to the act of becoming Christian as he understood it.

In summary then, it is not possible to prove that Thackeray was a Kierkegaardian existentialist Christian because of the essential "inwardness" of this state. It is, however, possible to state that in many areas there seem to be philosophical affinities between the two men. Thackeray's experience leads him along many of the same paths taken by Kierkegaard. Although it cannot be proven that he followed them as far as Kierkegaard did, this possibility should not be set aside. It is entirely possible that he never committed all his views to paper, recognizing this as an unnecessary and an aesthetic exercise to be abandoned in favour of "Becoming" instead of "talking about becoming" Christian. Kierkegaard had difficulty in justifying to himself the time he spent in writing down his views, which was like an intellectual exercise and as such, remote from "existence." Joseph E. Baker states what one feels may well be the case with Thackeray, that he "was a great thinker but never wrote philosophy."⁴⁴

⁴³p. 124.

⁴⁴"Vanity Fair and the Celestial City," NCF, No. 2 (September, 1955), p. 94.

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