

# Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon*

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**M**OST critics see *Barry Lyndon* (1844) as an interesting failure. I agree with this judgment, but it seems to me that, while the failure of the book has been adequately explained, something remains to be said about the failure of the novelist in this work, and the significance of that failure in Thackeray's career.

In writing *Barry Lyndon*, Thackeray, it is clear, was trying to write a novel about a rogue in the manner of his eighteenth-century predecessors. He had a deeper understanding of the eighteenth century than most of his contemporaries, and a more instinctive sympathy with it. Moreover he prepared himself to write this novel by painstaking research on eighteenth-century literature. But his age was inimical to the sort of ironies natural to rogue literature. The reading public was not prepared to accept them, and Thackeray, still uncertain of his role as a novelist, only half resented this. Hence the feeling of strain detectable in the novel: we can admire it as an exercise in irony, but we notice the novelist faltering. We are not constantly astonished and delighted by the effortless grace with which ironies are brought forth, as we are when we read its prototype, *Jonathan Wild the Great*.

There have been only two relatively brief periods in the history of modern English literature, during which great works about rogues have been written: one from about 1590 to 1610 or 1620 (Falstaff and *The Alchemist* both come into this period); the other from about 1720 to about 1760 (this one includes *Moll Flanders*, *The Beggar's Opera*, Fielding, and the pre-sentimental Smollett). Novels and plays about rogues, it seems to me, are likely to rise above a level at which mischief and squalor are enjoyed for their

own sakes, only when the author (whatever he thinks he is doing) manages to preserve a balance between moral and aesthetic impulses, between the import of an irony and its mystification process. To be able to do this, the author normally requires a cultural climate that encourages certain mental habits characteristic of the two periods I have mentioned. One of these is a free play of intelligence around matters relating to social class. The rogue seems to belong to two or more classes at once: he has affinities with the criminal and (by implication) lower classes; he parodies and brings into disrepute the middle or upper classes. Because of this, narrow class loyalties tend to upset the moral balance on which the ironies of rogue literature are based. Another of these mental habits is tolerance of literary artifice (mock-heroic being the most pronounced in this particular case). The ironic methods of rogue literature frequently require that rogues be depicted as morally perspicacious and, what's more, successful. An audience distressed by representations of wise and successful miscreants will not enjoy the most satisfying kinds of rogue literature. And finally, I suppose, the audience needs not to mind the posture of the satirist, who sits somewhere behind rogue literature, and whose business it is to assume an air of moral superiority. A certain urbanity is needed to forestall the question, "Who does he think he is?"

Thackeray was a Victorian: an uneasy Victorian, admittedly; one always reaching back in his imagination to the Regency, and the eighteenth century beyond; but nevertheless a Victorian in the most vital areas of his sensibility. He couldn't recover the spirit of the previous century (who indeed ever can?), its unique tone and moral equipoise. He was of his age especially in his relationship with his public. Much has been written both on the Victorian reading public and on Thackeray's narrative voice, the instrument with which he related himself to his public. It only needs me to make a few points, the chief of which is that Thackeray's narrative voice represents a greater effort on

his part to come to terms with his readers, than we find in Fielding or even in Sterne. Like most early Victorian novelists worth reading, he was at once delighted and irked, liberated and constricted by a peculiarly intimate relationship with his readers. And because most of those readers were members of the bourgeoisie, it was difficult for him to keep the balance between moral and aesthetic impulses, of which I have spoken. Their tastes in no way encouraged the free play of intelligence around matters relating to class. Many writers of the period were able to say wise things about class, but I can think of none with the wide-ranging entirely dispassionate eye of a Fielding. Moreover, the Puritan sensibility (here identifiable with the bourgeois sensibility) was offended by pronounced artifice in literature. William Empson suggests that Puritanism destroyed enjoyment of pure pastoral literature;<sup>1</sup> I think we may say it did the same to enjoyment of rogue literature, at least among the Victorian middle classes. And finally, this reading public was not one that encouraged satire. Peacock virtually gave up writing before Victoria came to the throne; Clough is a very minor talent; we have to wait for Wilde's generation before we get really effective satire. The Victorian sensibility, with its sense of guilt and loss, was made uncomfortable by the satirist's coolly superior posture. At his best, Thackeray is a moralist rather than a satirist.

Even in the Regency era, trying to exploit the ironies of the rogue tradition, Byron produced something different from traditional rogue literature, and less graceful (though fascinating). We feel that the ironies in *Don Juan* and elsewhere are less under the poet's control than he would like us to believe. If Byron found it difficult to preserve these ironies, we needn't be surprised that Thackeray found it even more so. He was clearly puzzled by the nature of the tradition. He was torn between his admiration for the eighteenth-century novelists and his desires to please his audience, between, that is, aesthetic impulses such as I have

mentioned, which were entirely his own, and moral impulses such as I have mentioned, which were his readers' but which, to complicate matters, by and large he shared.

Although Thackeray devoted much thought to rogues in literature, almost everything he says on the subject is curiously equivocal and evasive. There is often a smoke-screen of irony. In *Catherine* (1839-40), we find what seems to be an attempt to ignore the complexities of the tradition in favour of manly moral decisiveness:

We say, let your rogues in novels act like rogues, and your honest men like honest men; don't let us have any juggling and thimblorigging with virtue and vice, so that, at the end of three volumes, the bewildered reader shall not know which is which; don't let us find ourselves kindling at the generous qualities of thieves, and sympathizing with the rascalities of noble hearts. For our own part, we know what the public likes, and have chosen rogues for our characters, and have taken a story from the *Newgate Calendar*, which we hope to follow out to edification. Among the rogues, at least, we will have nothing that shall be mistaken for virtues. And if the British public (after calling for three or four editions) shall give up, not only our rascals, but the rascals of all other authors, we shall be content, — we shall apply to government for a pension, and think that our duty is done.<sup>2</sup>

*Catherine*, of course, was written to discredit the glamorization of vice and crime in sensational fiction. This passage is part of a denunciation of Bulwer Lytton's *Ernest Maltravers*, and other such works. That provides some justification for what we read, we might feel, but we can still complain that the fundamental irony of rogue literature is overlooked here. The essence of the rogue is that he is morally ambiguous: he *is* like honest men — or nominally honest men are like him. The satirical power of rogue literature is rooted in this fact. We are likely to state our complaint hesitantly, however, because we can't identify the narrative voice and what it says with Thackeray and his deepest convictions. There is irony and posturing at work here. Moreover, as Geoffrey Tillotson says, when Thackeray exclaims that rogues must act like rogues, "we misunderstand him unless we recognize that his definition

of a rogue keeps the rogue a member of the human race."<sup>3</sup> *Catherine*, in fact, is a good deal more complicated than Thackeray pretended. What we see in this passage is Thackeray's enthusiasm for verisimilitude (including moral verisimilitude) joining forces with his and his public's moralizing impulses, to override his awareness of the complexity of rogue literature. But the irony (and many things in the novel itself) bear witness that this awareness existed somewhere in his mind.

Thackeray exploited the literary research he had done for *Barry Lyndon* in *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (read as lectures in 1851). The author of *Vanity Fair* says some very surprising things about rogues and heroes here. At the same time, the irony is even more pronounced and puzzling. Sometimes, he seems astonishingly eager to share the tastes of his simplest readers:

I suppose, as long as novels last and authors aim at interesting their public, there must always be in the story a virtuous and gallant hero, a wicked monster his opposite, and a pretty girl who finds a champion; bravery and virtue conquer beauty; and vice, after seeming to triumph through a certain number of pages, is sure to be discomfited in the last volume, when justice overtakes him and honest folk come by their own. There never was perhaps a greatly popular story but this simple plot was carried through it: mere satiric wit is addressed to a class of readers and thinkers quite different to those simple souls who laugh and weep over the novel. I fancy very few ladies, indeed, for instance, could be brought to like "Gulliver" heartily, and (putting the coarseness and difference of manners out of the question) to relish the wonderful satire of "Jonathan Wild."<sup>4</sup>

This is far from straightforward however. Thackeray's attitude towards the standard novel story, as he sees it, seems at once affectionate and scoffing, his attitude towards eighteenth-century satirists at once censorious and admiring. Were their works "mere satiric wit" or "wonderful satire"? One thing only is firmly registered here: Thackeray's awareness that his audience differed from Swift's and Fielding's. But the irony (here felt chiefly in

the deliberate banality) conceals rather than reveals Thackeray's feelings about this.

That he did to some extent endorse popular taste becomes evident when he discusses *Tom Jones*:

I can't say that I think Mr. Jones a virtuous character; I can't say but that I think Fielding's evident liking and admiration for Mr. Jones shows that the great humourist's moral sense was blunted by his life, and that here, in Art and Ethics, there is a great error. If it is right to have a hero whom we may admire, let us at least take care that he is admirable: if, as is the plan of some authors (a plan decidedly against their interests, be it said), it is propounded that there exists in life no such being, and therefore that in novels, the picture of life, there should appear no such character; then Mr. Thomas Jones becomes an admissible person, and we examine his defects and good qualities, as we do those of Parson Thwackum, or Miss Seagrim. But a hero with a flawed reputation; a hero spunging for a guinea; a hero who can't pay his landlady, and is obliged to let his honour out to hire, is absurd, and his claim to heroic rank untenable. I protest against Mr. Thomas Jones holding such a rank at all. I protest against his being considered a more than ordinary young fellow, ruddy-cheeked, broad-shouldered, and fond of wine and pleasure. He would not rob a church, but that is all; and a pretty long argument may be debated, as to which of these old types — the spend-thrift, the hypocrite, Jones and Blifil, Charles and Joseph Surface — is the worst member of society and the most deserving of censure. (XXIII, 304)

When we remember that Thackeray had described *Vanity Fair* as "A Novel without a Hero" as early as March 1846,<sup>5</sup> it is tempting to believe that this passage was designed to satisfy his audience's prejudices more than his own convictions, that he was trying to persuade them his greatest novel was not what the subtitle announced it to be, to convince them he was a much more ordinary sort of chap than they suspected. There is a strain of dishonesty in the passage, I think, but there is more to it than that. Once again we have the irony to contend with, and if it's evasive, in a sense it's candid too. We can't pin down Thackeray's exact meaning, but he gives us clues to the full contents of his mind; nothing is excluded. For instance, though we may see it as a betrayal of artistic integrity, we can see the contention about authors' interests as shop talk, a

statement of practical disenchantment based on bitter experience — the unpopularity of *Barry Lyndon*, the sort of things people were saying about *Vanity Fair* (as late as the 1870s, Ruskin was still complaining that Thackeray “settled like a meat fly on whatever one had got for dinner and made one sick of it”).<sup>6</sup> Thackeray’s chief complaint, clearly, is not against rogues as such, but against rogues who are also heroes. Nevertheless, it is curious how fully he states the case against what he seems to be arguing: “then Mr. Thomas Jones becomes an admissible person,” he says, “and we examine his defects and good qualities, as we do those of Parson Thwackum, or Miss Seagrim.” The very archness of the language (the prim insistence on titles alone) cautions us to be careful in our response to what is said.

The play of irony was needed to stave off recognition of the literary rogue’s essential moral ambiguity, to hide the fact that the ironic potential of the rogue lies in his having things in common with the hero. Only irony can answer irony. It was the conflict of impulses in Thackeray’s mind that prevented his recognizing the potential of what he was attacking. In order to satisfy the essentially Victorian elements in his sensibility, crudely figured forth in the demands of the reading public, he had to limit his admiration for the eighteenth-century satirists and impose restrictions on what he might imitate from them. That the conflict was between aesthetic and moral impulses is revealed in Thackeray’s refusal at all to distinguish between errors “in Art and Ethics,” and in the implicit assumption that transactions between the two are simple and direct. He was shy of notions that suggest a complex relationship between art and ethics. I have said that he is more of a moralist than a satirist; he evidently found the very term “satire” disagreeable at times, suggesting as it does challenging complexities of irony, and preferred the looser and more genial term “humour” (hence the title of his lecture series, so odd to modern ears).

In *Barry Lyndon*, I believe, the complexities of the form he chose defeated Thackeray. Thinking of them as he did, he couldn't satisfy both art and ethics within the framework imposed by the form; indeed, the conflict between aesthetic and moral impulses prevented him from satisfying either consistently. He was unable thoroughly to exploit the rogue's moral ambiguity because his age was offended by such ambiguity. The reading public didn't want rogues and heroes confused and nor, ultimately, did Thackeray. His instinct for irony and the subtleties of satire got drowned in the flood of moral sentiment. That flood, moreover, lacking control, performed freakish tricks; moral sentiment appears where it has no right to appear.

George Saintsbury, whom most subsequent critics have echoed, identifies what is wrong with *Barry Lyndon*:

Thackeray does not seem to me either to have conceived clearly, or to have maintained steadily, his own attitude towards the story. There can be no doubt — in fact it is agreed — that he took *Jonathan Wild* in no slavish sense as a model. But in doing this he hampered himself enormously by making it an autobiography . . . Fielding is never 'out': he keeps his cue of sardonic showman infallibly and impartially towards every puppet on the stage — the great Jonathan, the divine Letitia, Mr. Bagshot, Miss Straddle, everybody. He never confuses himself with them: and you never confuse them with him. I do not find this always to be the case with Thackeray here. The History of the Princess is not, of course, a case in point — that is merely an 'inset' tale, according to the well-recognized eighteenth-century fashion. But was Mr. Barry Lyndon, either as Redmond Barry, as the Chevalier, or in his glory, exactly the person to moralize on the Seven Years' War, as he or his creator does in chapter iv?<sup>7</sup>

Sainbury sees the trouble. All we need question here is emphasis. The autobiographical form was not the root of the trouble. All the great rogues of literature moralize; all are social critics. It is an element of their moral ambiguity, a corollary of the device of "rogue-become-judge" described by William Empson.<sup>8</sup> No exception, Fielding's Jonathan Wild debates with the Count la Ruse (for instance) on whether it is better to be a thief or a prime minister (Bk. I, ch. v). The important thing is that the social criticism,



the moralizing, be held within the carefully balanced structure of the irony. This is more difficult in first-person novels, but it can be done (it is in *Lazarillo de Tormes*, for instance). The novelist has only to allow the rogue's moral ambiguity full play, so that you get double irony.

Thackeray often manages this in *Barry Lyndon*. There is this passage for instance:

In later times a vulgar national prejudice has chosen to cast a slur upon the character of men of honour engaged in the profession of play . . . They cry fie now upon men engaged in play; but I should like to know how much more honourable *their* modes of livelihood are than ours. The broker of the Exchange who bulls and bears, and buys and sells, and dabbles with lying loans, and trades on state secrets, what is he but a gamester? The merchant who deals in tea and tallow, is he any better? His bales of dirty indigo are his dice, his cards come up every year instead of every ten minutes, and the sea is his green table. You call the profession of the law an honourable one, where a man will lie for any bidder, lie down poverty for the sake of a fee from wealth, lie down right because wrong is his brief. You call a doctor an honourable man, a swindling quack, who does not believe in the nostrums which he prescribes, and takes your guinea for whispering in your ear that it is a fine morning; and yet, forsooth, a gallant man who sets him down before the baize and challenges all comers, his money against theirs, is proscribed by your modern moral world. It is a conspiracy of the middle classes against gentlemen — it is only the shopkeeper cant which is to go down nowadays. (pp. 128-29)

Here is displayed the standard ironic technique of the most successful rogue literature (we find it as far back as Robert Greene's pamphlets). It is effective because the joke cuts both ways, against gamblers and against members of the respected professions. We are not taken in by Barry's defence of gambling (we detect the ambiguity of "honour"), but we do admire his critical perspicacity, and find it plausible too, since it is assimilated to his haughty moral independence (another of the rogue's traditional characteristics). If this passage and others like it, though good, are not vividly memorable, it is because, in writing them, Thackeray was imitating without contributing very much himself. He had mastered the technique, but it was not one

designed to reflect Thackeray's mental geography or that of his age.

That is not to say he didn't believe in the social criticism thus expressed. Thackeray's voice lies somewhere behind such passages (the complaint about "shopkeeper cant" makes better sense in a Victorian context), but it is disguised to the point of alienation in a way uncharacteristic of Thackeray at his best. Too well disguised for him to be at ease: he was much happier addressing the reader himself or through a persona not unlike himself. His voice was certainly too well disguised for the readers of *Fraser's Magazine* who complained about the immorality of the story. Barry's contempt for bourgeois virtues and his general moral ambiguity obviously shocked them.

The trick was, in any case, too alien for Thackeray to keep up. He is always slipping into a different sort of social criticism. As Saintsbury suggests, Barry's moralizing about the Seven Years' War is quite simply too surprising. This is how it goes:

It is well for gentlemen to talk of the age of chivalry; but remember the starving brutes whom they lead — men nursed in poverty, entirely ignorant, made to take pride in deeds of blood — men who can have no amusement but in drunkenness, debauch, and plunder. It is with these shocking instruments that your great warriors and kings have been doing their murderous work in the world; and while, for instance, we are at the present moment admiring the 'Great Frederick,' as we call him, and his philosophy, and his liberality, and his military genius, I, who have served him, and been, as it were, behind the scenes of which that great spectacle is composed, can only look at it with horror. What a number of items of human crime, misery, slavery, to form the sum-total of glory! I can recollect a certain day, about three weeks after the battle of Minden, and a farm-house in which some of us entered; and how the old woman and her daughters served us, trembling, to wine, and how we got drunk over the wine, and the house was in a flame presently: and woe betide the wretched fellow afterwards who came home to look for his house and his children. (p. 71)

Some of this is good Thackeray (the end especially), but none of it is Barry Lyndon. The mistake lies not in the moralizing as such, but in its lack of ironical placement.

There is not even single irony, let alone the double irony needed to make this sort of thing work. The artifice of rogue literature is broken; Thackeray the moralist stands openly before us.

*The Luck of Barry Lyndon* was published serially in *Fraser's* in 1844; *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq.*, a revised version, was published in the *Miscellanies* of 1856. From the latter Thackeray omitted some of the extraneous and out-of-character commentary, but not all of it (the Seven Years' War bit was kept). Much of the commentary in the earlier version was inserted in response to the moral alarm caused in readers by the first few episodes. Thackeray seems half to have resented their complaints, half to have taken them to heart. This is nowhere better illustrated than in Fitz-Boodle's explanation of the moral, which concludes the earlier version. Barry comes to a miserable end that we can't help feeling he deserves. Thackeray's editor, however, chooses to attach the moral to his period of prosperity, and complains about the public's preference for "poetical justice":

Justice, forsooth! Does human life exhibit justice after this fashion? Is it the good always who ride in gold coaches, and the wicked who go to the workhouse? Is a humbug never preferred before a capable man? Does the world always reward merit, never worship cant, never raise mediocrity to distinction? never crowd to hear a donkey braying from a pulpit, nor ever buy the tenth edition of a fool's book? Sometimes the contrary occurs, so that fools and wise, bad men and good, are more or less lucky in their turn, and honesty is 'the best policy,' or not, as the case may be. (p. 310)

Since the demands of "poetical justice" have in fact been met, I don't think it too fanciful to see in this passage a covert rebuke directed against squeamish readers who worship cant, crowd to hear pious donkeys, buy fools' books, and so on. It is difficult to discover any other substantial reason for it. However, in having Fitz-Boodle appeal to verisimilitude, Thackeray puts himself in a position not very far from such readers. He permits an argument against the belief that art should tell obvious lies in order to support

morals, only to suggest that art ought to tell something like the truth. Simply by refusing to take cognizance of such things, Thackeray rejects the artificial ironies of rogue literature. He denounces stupid didacticism but leaves no room for the sort of witty fictions his eighteenth-century predecessors constructed, which were often, ultimately, just as moral as even he could wish, far more subtly moral than his audience were capable of appreciating. In one sense at least, Thackeray here sets his face against art.

And that is what is fundamentally wrong with *Barry Lyndon*. Thackeray lacked confidence in the *modus operandi* of the literary form he was using; he wouldn't accept its aesthetic validity. Barry is not allowed uninterruptedly to function as a vehicle for satire. Thackeray concurred with readers who saw his protagonist as corrupting, even if he resented having to make this just as clear as they wanted. He made it clear enough, even without the bits of commentary and reflection cut out in the second version. Because he is wicked, Barry is not allowed the rogue's full moral perspicacity. It flashes out occasionally, but most of the time he is, as Gordon N. Ray says, "a kind of moral idiot."<sup>9</sup> Because he is wicked, Barry has to be punished at the end of the novel and, what's more, degraded and diminished. (Contrast his end with Jonathan Wild's glorious farewell to the world.) As I have contended, the novel is spoiled by the conflict in Thackeray's mind between his admiration for the art of the eighteenth-century novelists, and his sympathy with the moral sensibilities of his own age.

Thackeray was aware of the novel's deficiencies and disliked it later in life. It seems to me, however, that its composition and failure served a valuable purpose for him. They were among the things that taught him he could not succeed as a novelist, could not find his own voice and a voice for his age, by trying narrowly to imitate the great works of the previous century. He had to find a form which could accommodate his and his public's moralizing instincts.

He found that form, I believe, in *Vanity Fair*. Traces of the rogue tradition linger there, and Becky Sharp may be seen as a sort of rogue,<sup>10</sup> but the feelings and expectations generated in the reader, the very way of apprehending what is presented, are different. For one thing, Becky is not the centre of the novel, not the chief focus of irony. More loosely conceived than the rogues of pure rogue literature, she is at the same time richer in possibility, and takes her place among the multitude of characters whose moral complexity is made to seem organic rather than imposed. Indeed, the ironies of the novel as a whole are either made to seem organic, or they are projected onto it from outside the action, in a not easily misunderstood manner, by the famous narrative voice. If we miss the moral and ironic balance of pure rogue literature, we enjoy the awareness of a complex moral world scarcely to be represented within the highly formal frame of rogue literature. The failure of *Barry Lyndon* closed a dead-end for Thackeray, and directed him onto more profitable paths.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>See *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935), ch. vii.
- <sup>2</sup>*Catherine*, ed. George Saintsbury (London: Oxford University Press, 1908), pp. 31-32.
- <sup>3</sup>*Thackeray the Novelist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), pp. 134-35.
- <sup>4</sup>*The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 276, in *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 26 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1885), vol. XXIII.
- <sup>5</sup>*The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945-46), II, 233.
- <sup>6</sup>*Fors Clavigera*, book III (1873), letter xxxi, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 38 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12), vol. XXVII.
- <sup>7</sup>*The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq.*, ed. George Saintsbury (London: Oxford University Press, 1908), pp. xi-xii.
- <sup>8</sup>*Some Versions of Pastoral*, p. 163.
- <sup>9</sup>*The Buried Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 28.
- <sup>10</sup>See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Epic Strain in the English Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), pp. 117-19; and Frank Wadleigh Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery* (Boston: Columbia University Press, 1907), II, 463-65.