

Thackeray as Artist

Contributed by Marco Graziosi
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I. CONCERNING THACKERAY'S DRAWINGS BY LEWIS MELVILLE Illustrated by five drawings of a Romantic Drama by Thackeray. WHEN, in July, 1833, Thackeray was acting as Paris correspondent of The National Standard and Journal of Literature, Science, Music, Theatricals, and the Fine Arts, a little paper first edited and subsequently purchased by him, he wrote to his mother: "I have been thinking very seriously of turning artist. I can draw better than I can do anything else, and certainly I should like it better than any other occupation, as why shouldn't I?" The last sentence seems to hint at some objections to such a profession, and, indeed, in the earlier years of the last century Bohemian life, such as that of a painter, was looked at askance by parents and guardians. Perhaps no objections were raised in this case, perhaps they were raised and over-ruled by an enthusiastic young man. Be this as it may, early in the following year, when The National Standard, etc., came to an untimely end, its editor remained in Paris to devote himself in all seriousness to the study of Art.

Even as a child Thackeray was fond of drawing, and at a very early age he used his pencil and his paint-box. He ornamented the leaves of the class-books he used at the Charterhouse with caricatures of his masters and his schoolfellows, and embellished with illustrations his copies of Don Quixote, The Castle of Otranto (in which there is an intensely amusing sketch of Manfred holding the door against Matilda), Robinson Crusoe, Joseph Andrews, and many other stories.* His skill was appreciated even in these early days, and many years later Thackeray, in a Roundabout Paper, referred to these youthful efforts, "O Scottish Chiefs, didn't we weep over you! O Mysteries of Udolpho, didn't I and Briggs (Minor) draw pictures out of you! Efforts feeble indeed, but still giving pleasure to ourselves and our friends. 'I say, old boy, draw us Vivaldi tortured in the Inquisition,' or 'Draw us Don Quixote and the Windmills, amateurs would say to boys who had a love of drawing." Many of the drawings done at school have been preserved, and a number were reproduced in the interesting volume entitled Thackerayana. At Cambridge Thackeray amused himself in a similar manner, and, inter alia, sketched some droll pictures descriptive of life at the University — The Mathematics Lecturer, The Classman, The Plodder, The Grinder, etc., and, by far the best, First Term, showing a student hard at work, and Second Term, showing the same student lying in the well of a sofa, the back of which is turned to the spectator, who can see only the cigar and the boots of the idler. These must not be confused with two other drawings, bearing the same titles and similar in subject, but not nearly so amusing, reprinted in the slim tome of Etchings done while at Cambridge, published by Sotheran in 1878. Of this latter collection those most worthy of mention are the plates Departure for Cambridge and Arrival from Cambridge. These were companion pictures, a favourite form indulged in by the artist, who, in Pendennis, gave Pen's Staircase — 1, A Little Dinner; and Pen's Staircase — 2, A Few Little Bills, which were quite in the style of his early vein. Soon after leaving Cambridge Thackeray went abroad, and he has recorded how it was his delight in those days to make caricatures for children, and how, when he re-visited Weimar more than twenty years later, he was touched to find they were remembered, and that several had been kept. Of the few that have been reprinted the best are a set of Legal Definitions (by One who may be called to the Bar). In the autumn of 1831 Thackeray was entered as a student at the Middle Temple, where he read with the special pleader and conveyancer, Taprell, and rented chambers at No. 1, Hare Court. He never took kindly to the study of law, as readers of Pendennis will assume, and when he came of age, in July, 1832, he gave up all pretence of reading for the Bar. Then began his connection with The National Standard. In this paper his first sketches appeared. They were fourteen in number, and included an illustration to The Devil's Wager (reprinted in The Paris Sketch-Book), and caricatures of Louis Philippe, Braham, Alfred Bunn, N. M. Rothschild, Sir Peter Laurie, and Crockford. The drawings were rough, and do not show the promise of some of his earlier work, but they were not entirely devoid of merit.

It was about this time that he wrote and illustrated half-a-dozen sets of nursery rhymes, entitled Simple Melodies, and the very amusing series of sketches depicting scenes from an imaginary melodrama, entitled The Bandit's Revenge, or, The Fatal Sword. These have never been reprinted in England, and are now reproduced to accompany this article. A less elaborate version of The Bandit's Revenge, entitled Vivaldi, appeared in a recent edition of Thackeray's Works. At first he drew only for the amusement of his friends. "If I had only kept the drawings from his pen which used to be chucked about as though they were nothing!" more than one person exclaimed to Anthony Trollope, who has told us of an album of drawings and letters which, in the course of twenty years, from 1829 to 1849, were sent by Thackeray to his life-long friend, Edward Fitz-Gerald, the translator of Omar. As time passed, however, he was persuaded that his work might have some pecuniary value, and eventually he sought to discover a market for his caricatures. He did find a Mr. Gibbs, who offered to dispose of them for him, but whether he was able to do so or not is unrecorded in the history of the house of Thackeray. When he settled down at Paris, he spent most of his days in the studios, at first studying with Brine, a well-known artist, and afterwards with Gros, a favourite pupil of the great David. What his masters thought is not known, but he reported himself satisfied with his progress, and thought, if he worked hard, in a year he might produce something at which it would be worth while to look; but, he wrote naively to his mother, it would require at least that time to gain any readiness with his brush! He devoted many hours to the picture-galleries, where now and then he copied a picture — a Watteau or a Lucas van Leyden ("a better man, I think, than Albert Durer, and mayhap as great a composer as Raphael himself"). Edinburgh Reviewer Abraham Hayward, writing of Vanity Fair in January, 1848, well remembered "ten or twelve years ago finding him day after day engaged in copying pictures in the Louvre, in order to qualify himself for

his intended profession."

In 1836 Thackeray published *Flore et Zéphyr*. Ballet Mythologique dédié à Flore par Théophile Wagstaffe, being a series of eight drawings with a pictorial wrapper. It is a delightfully amusing production, original in conception, unconventional in design, and clearly showing how thoroughly developed, even at that date, was Thackeray's sense of humour. Until recently *Flore et Zéphyr* was unattainable, for those few copies which are still in existence and have not been purchased by the great public libraries, are priceless; but, fortunately, Mrs. Ritchie has reprinted it at the conclusion of one of her delightful introductions to the Biographical edition of her father's works. Soon after Thackeray came to London on business connected with the starting of *The Constitutional* (and *Public Ledger*), a paper in which his step-father and himself were deeply interested as part-proprietors. During this visit, Seymour, the designer of *Pickwick*, committed suicide. It came to Thackeray's ears that the designs of the artist who took his place did not satisfy Dickens, and he made the now historic offer to illustrate the book. The offer was refused, and Thackeray always insisted on referring to it as "Mr. *Pickwick's* lucky escape." "Had it not been for the direct act of my friend who has just sat down, I should most likely never have been included in the toast which you have been pleased to drink; and I should have tried to be, not a writer, but a painter or designer of pictures," he said years later when, at a Royal Academy dinner, he responded to the toast of Literature with which his name and Dickens's were associated." That was the object of my early ambition; and I can remember when Mr. Dickens was a very young man, and had commenced delighting the world with some charming humorous works, of which I cannot mention the name, but which were coloured light green, and came out once a month, that this young man wanted an artist to illustrate his writings; and I recollect walking up to his chambers in *Furnival's Inn* with two or three drawings in my hand, which, strange to say, he did not find suitable. But for the unfortunate blight which came over my artistical existence, it would have been my pride and pleasure to have endeavoured one day to find a place on these walls for one of my performances. This disappointment caused me to direct my attention to a different walk of art, and now I can only hope to be 'translated' on these walls, as I have been, thanks to my talented friend, Mr. Egg." The *Constitutional* was a failure, and it went under in the summer of 1838, carrying with it Thackeray's patrimony, or all that remained after losses at cards, and the failure of an Indian bank in which a portion of it had been invested. The young man had just married, and it was important that money should be forthcoming. Literary work was offered in abundance and perforce accepted. Thereupon he abandoned the hope of becoming a serious painter, though to the end of his days he never ceased to practise the lighter vein of art. Indeed, from the time when he was a slim young man, covering with sketches every scrap of paper lying about, drawing was his principal amusement. All his life he preferred the pencil to the pen, and when he found the strain of literary composition irksome, he would turn with pleasure and a sense of relief to the drawing-board. "The sketches as they are given here are scarcely to be counted work," Mrs. Ritchie wrote in the preface to the volume of drawings published posthumously under the title of *The Orphan of Pimlico*. "The hours which he spent upon his drawing-blocks and sketch-books brought no fatigue or weariness. They were of endless interest and amusement to him, and rested him when he was tired. It was only when he came to etch upon steel or to draw for the engraver upon wood that he complained of effort and want of ease; and we used often to wish that his drawings could be given as they were first made, without the various transmigrations of wood and steel, and engraver's toil and printer's ink." But he was undoubtedly wise to give up painting. Even Henry Reeve, who was inclined to judge sympathetically, declared that he would willingly set him to copy a picture of Raphael, as far, at least, as the drawing went, but that the young artist, on his own confession, did not seem likely to get into a system of massive colouring.

An interesting problem not yet solved is what were Thackeray's earliest writings in *Fraser's Magazine*. A question equally interesting, and one which no one has yet attempted to answer, is what were his earliest drawings in that periodical. There is a note penned by an anonymous scribbler in the copy of *Fraser* for April, 1838, belonging to the London Library, ascribing a portrait of Sidney Smith to Thackeray. Of course the writer's authority for this statement is unknown, but it opens up a new field for speculation. The principal drawings in this magazine known to be by Thackeray are the five plates accompanying *The Yellowplush Correspondence*, and the four plates accompanying *Catherine*. In other fields Thackeray was as busy with his pencil as with his pen. He supplied twelve full-page illustrations to Douglas Jerrold's *Men of Character* (1838); and contributed two drawings to *The Anti-Corn Law Circular*, entitled, *Illustrations of the Rent-Laws: No. 1, Poles offering Corn; No. 2, The Choice of a Loaf*. The former have never been reprinted, but the latter are to be found in a volume of Thackeray's *Stray Papers*, edited by the writer of this article. In 1840 he made arrangements with Cunningham, the publisher of *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, to issue a series of "Sketches by Spec," but only No. 1. appeared: *Britannia protecting the Drama*. This drawing, signed with the famous spectacles, is not included in any edition of Thackeray's Works, though it is certainly worthy to take its place in the collection. *Britannia* is seated, holding a trident, surrounded by lionesses, a panther and a lamb, and at her feet is a bust of Shakespeare, lying on its side, as a personification of the drama. Underneath the sketch is the following quaint letterpress: — EXPLANATION OF THE HALLEGORY. This ladies and gentlemen is a Hallegory, and represents Britanny patronising hof the Drama — Look at the Drama laying at her feet & over it remark the Lioness is lifting hof her leg. That's Britanny — she's holding hof a pitch fork (as well she may in sich company) and the hanimals round about her why, they are the principal hactors. For some parts (especially for BLOODY TRAGEDY) they beat the Common Garden ones hollow, and that's why Britanny goes to Dury Lane. Look at the Lamb (hemblem of hinnocence!) has lying between the legs of the Panther, and thinking of the kind souls who got him of the situation. Britanny's caressing the lioness, for she's conspicuous for humanity, & theres no sich proof of kindness as being fond of the brute beasteses. The figure of

Britanny is taken from the reverse of that famous coin, the British Halfpenny, some people think it would apply to coins more valuable and is the very thing for the REVERSE of A SOVERING. The next important item in the artistic record of Thackeray's life is *The Paris Sketch-Book* (1840) with numerous sketches. This was followed by *Comic Tales and Sketches* (1841), a collection of stories that had appeared in various periodicals. In these volumes *The Yellowplush Correspondence* is furnished with five original plates in place of those which had accompanied it during its serial publication; some passages in the *Life of Major Gahagan* with four; and *The Professor* and *The Bedford Row Conspiracy* with one each. None of these have ever been reprinted, which seems strange, as they are among the best drawings ever executed by Thackeray, and the illustrations to *Major Gahagan* are delightful. The original volume is, of course, practically inaccessible; and it is, therefore, good news to learn that all these illustrations will be included in Messrs. Macmillan's edition of *Thackeray's Works* now in progress. There was also a pictorial title-page to *Comic Tales and Sketches*, wherein are portrayed the figures of Titmarsh, Yellowplush, and Gahagan, who, the author tells us, little thinking how the word spoken in jest was by and by to come true, "are supposed to be marching hand in hand, and are just on the very brink of immortality."

The verses which appeared in *The Nation* (1843), entitled *Daddy, I'm Hungry*, were accompanied by an illustration. Thackeray also sent to the same paper a second drawing — a stage coach, a royal mail, with a Highland driver and guard in plaids, but with no passengers, at which the country people are jeering. This sketch, the late Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, the editor of *The Nation*, informed the present writer, was not printed, because the controversy with which it was concerned was brought to a premature close by a decree of the government. It was not accompanied by any verses, he added, because it told its story so well. It is only necessary to give a list of the better-known works illustrated by the author: *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *The Virginians*, and *Philip* (with the assistance of the late Frederick Walker), *Mr. Perkins's Ball*, *Our Street*, *Dr. Birch and his Young Friends*, and *The Kickleburys on the Rhine* — some copies of each of these Christmas Books contained coloured plates; *The Ring and the Rose*, *The English Humourists*, *Lovel the Widower*, *The Four Georges*, and the *Roundabout Papers*. The number of drawings contributed by Thackeray to *Punch* was immense. Besides those familiar to readers of his collected works, there are a hundred or more which have never yet been re-printed. The curious will find them reproduced in the volumes of Messrs. Macmillan's editions of *Thackeray's Works*. Thackeray illustrated all the best of his burlesques, ballads, and tales which appeared in this periodical: *Miss Tickletohy's Lectures on English History*, *The History of the Next French Revolution*, *Wanderings of the Fat Contributor*, *Jeames's Diary*, *The Snobs of England*, *Love Songs*, *Prize Novelists*, *Travels and Sketches in London*, *Bow Street Ballads*, *Mr. Brown's Letters to a Young Man about Town*, and the *Discourses by Dr. Solomon Pacifico*. This list, however, covers but a portion of the contributions, which begins with an initial letter to *The Legend of Janbrahim-Herandee* (June 18th, 1842), ends with the illustration to *A Second Letter to an Eminent Personage* (Sept. 25th, 1854), and includes social cuts, thumb-nail sketches, initial letters, drawings accompanying his own writings, and even illustrations to the letterpress of other writers.

(To be continued.)

THACKERAY AS ARTIST II. THE ARTISTIC VALUE OF THACKERAY'S DRAWINGS BY LEWIS MELVILLE

Illustrated by six unpublished Nursery Rhymess, composed and drawn by Thackeray. As an artist Thackeray was always at his best when illustrating his own writings. As it has already been said, the chance of his making a success as a serious painter was extremely remote. But there has rarely been an artist who made his drawings so helpful to the text. Indeed, the characters are depicted as truly by the pencil as by the pen, and they tell the story together. Thackeray's drawing may not always have been correct, the perspective may occasionally have been wrong, and an arm may sometimes have borne a strong resemblance to a fin, but for quaint fancy and humour his illustrations have seldom been surpassed.

Take *Vanity Fair* and study the pictorial work from the initial *W*, at the beginning of Chapter I., to the "Finis" tailpiece, which shows the children shutting up the puppets in the box after the play is played out. Look at the illustration on the cover of the monthly parts and at that on the title page — the former portraying the jester, standing on a cask, haranguing the yokels who are looking up at him, open-mouthed; the latter portraying the jester, lying on the ground, weary and worn, looking into a glass which reflects a countenance that is anything but gay. Look at "Rebecca's Farewell" — little Laura Martin crying bitterly because dear, kind Amelia Sedley is leaving the school, and Becky hurling out of the carriage the copy of Johnson's Dictionary, to the dismay of Miss Jemima Pinkerton, who, good-natured soul, had presented her with it as a souvenir of the Academy on Chiswick Mall: the look on Becky's face clearly indicates that she has no desire to remember the existence of Miss Pinkerton or the Academy, where as a matter of fact she had been far from happy. Look at Becky showing off "Miss Jenny," the doll, to her father's rather dissolute Bohemian friends; or, all alone, building a house of cards that, we know full well, will sooner or later fall, after the fashion of such unstable edifices; or fishing and trying to entangle stupid, hulking, conceited Mr. Jos.; or as governess in the schoolroom, paying just so much attention to her charges as might be expected from a lady with her turn of mind. Why, the slender thread of the story of Miss Rebecca Sharp might be reconstructed from the drawings. Look at Dobbin and Cuff fighting (in a capital C); or at Miss Eliza Styles (better known under the patronymic of Captain Rawdon Crawley) reading a letter from his wife at Mr. Barnet's, saddler, Knightsbridge, near the barracks; or at Moss arresting Rawdon in Gaunt Square, while Moss's companion whistles for a hackney coach to convey the trio to the sponging-house in Cursitor Street. Glance at the tail-piece to Chapter IX. — a delightful sketch of that sad jester, Thackeray himself. Turn over the pages and, on the

eve of the battle of Waterloo, compare Becky slumbering tranquilly with Mrs. Major O'Dowd as Venus preparing the arms of Mars, her husband, who is sleeping heavily. Turn over more pages, and observe Miss Horrocks of the ribbons playing the piano with the sycophantic Hester by the side, all admiration, and then glance at Sir Pitt nursed by Hester, the ill-conditioned, bullying attendant.

If space permitted it would be possible to go through each of the novels and point out drawing after drawing delightful to regard. The Christmas Books owe more than half their charm to the plates. Take the portraits of Mr. Titmarsh and Mr. Mulligan of Ballymulligan, of Mr. Flam, of Mr. Larkins; of those famous literary lights, Miss Bunion and Mr. Hicks; of Miss Trotter, whose face is bright at the arrival of the hideous but wealthy Lord Methusalah; of Mr. Beaumoris, Mr. Grig and Mr. Flinders; and of a host of others all present at Mrs. Perkins's Ball. Our Street contained all sorts and conditions of people duly sketched by the author, from the inquisitive old lady looking out of the window to "the lady whom nobody knows"; from "the lion of the street," Clarence Bulbul, who wrote the Mayfair love-song, *The Cane-bottom'd Chair*, which appeared in the columns of *Punch*, to that of "the happy family," in which is depicted the happy home-life of the Fairfaxes. *The Rose and the Ring* has already delighted several generations of great and small children. The drawings were begun at Rome as *Twelfth Night* pictures for his children, and the whole was subsequently finished soon after in London. Thackeray revelled in this sort of work: all his life he loved to amuse children, and to his love for the "little 'uns" he has left this abiding memory. Consider the originality of the drawings, the fancy, the whimsicality, the sense of humour which inspired them, the insight into life which they show, the power of bringing a whole scene vividly before the observer. Cavillers say that Thackeray was no artist; but if this is not art, why, then, the boundaries of art should at once be enlarged!

Thackeray was under no misapprehension as to the value of his gift, and he was well aware of his limitations. For instance, when a man in all good faith said to him, "But you can draw," he instantly set him down in his mind as a snob and a flatterer; and when Mr. Corkran found him grumbling over a sketch of his own: "Look," said he, "now G (naming a famous artist), by a few touches, throwing some light or shadow here and there, would make this a picture. How it is I know not, but I certainly cannot do it at all." He frequently made fun of himself as a serious painter in his art criticisms in *Fraser's Magazine* and elsewhere; and in his very first paper on art, written in the form of a letter, he remarked: "I wish you could see my historical picture of Heliogabalus in the ruins of Carthage; or the full-length of Sir Samuel and his Lady, — sitting in a garden light, reading *The Book of Beauty*, Sir Samuel catching a butterfly, which is settling on a flower-pot." and, still laughing at himself, he wrote to Edmund Yates in the fifties: "You have a new artist on *The Train*, I see, dear Yates. I have been looking at his work, and I have solved a problem. I find there is a man alive who draws worse than myself!"

Thackeray realised his lack of technical skill as an etcher. He asked the late Henry Vizetelly, the founder of *The Pictorial Times*, to find him someone who, from his water colour sketch, would etch the frontispiece to *Notes of a Journey from Corn hill to Grand Cairo*. The task was entrusted to a young man named Thwaites, who subsequently put on the wood a number of drawings for Mrs. Perkins's Ball. Thackeray saw, however, that his originality was more valuable than an inferior hand's correctness of line. "I return the drawings after making a few alterations in them," he wrote to Mr. Vizetelly on one occasion. "Present Mr. Titmarsh's compliments to your talented young friend, and say M.A.T. would take it as a great favour if he would kindly confine his improvements to the Mulligan's and Mrs. Perkins's other guest's extremities. In your young gentleman's otherwise praiseworthy corrections of my vile drawings, a certain *je ne sais quoi*, which I flatter myself exists in the original sketches, seems to have given him the slip, and I have tried in vain to recapture it. Somehow I prefer my own Nuremburg dolls to Mr. Thwaites's superfine wax models." "You will not easily find a second Thackeray," Charlotte Brontë wrote in 1848 a propos of Thackeray as a draughtsman and illustrator. "How he can render, with a few black lines and dots, shades of expression, so fine, so real; traits of character so minute, so subtle, so difficult to seize and fix, I cannot tell — I can only wonder and admire. Thackeray may not be a painter, but he is a wizard of a draughtsman; touched with the pencil, the paper lives. And then his drawing is so refreshing: after the wooden limbs one is accustomed to see portrayed by common-place illustrators, his shapes of bone and muscle clothed with flesh, correct in proportion and anatomy, are a real relief. All is true in Thackeray. If Truth were again a goddess, Thackeray should be her high priest."

The praise is high. Whether it is too high time will show. His talent was of the Hogarth kind: and the works of Hogarth have not been adjudged valueless. Thackeray himself always declared that, although he was not a first-rate artist, he was not half so bad as the woodcutters made him appear. And an inspection of his drawings supports this view. Certainly, though he lacked academic correctness and technical mastery, the undeniable originality and humour of his sketches will secure for them a very long lease of life. They place him in the ranks of the caricaturists on a level with Leech and Doyle, and not far below Cruikshank, though, as far as imaginative power is concerned, he was the equal of the latter. Whatever may be the opinion of him as a draughtsman, few will venture to dispute his great merits as the illustrator of his own books.* Most of these volumes have found their way to the auction room, where they fetched very high prices. Ainsworth's *Latin Dictionary*, which Thackeray bought second-hand for a shilling, sold at his death for nearly five pounds, and recently changed hands at twenty-four pounds!

The Connoisseur. An Illustrated Magazine for Collectors. Vol VIII (January-April 1904), pp. 25-31, 152-5.