

THACKERAY'S THE NEWCOMES AND THE ARTIST'S WORLD

The Newcomes (1853-5), a novel written in Thackeray's middle age, is without question a bitter work in tone. Professor Gordon Ray has called it "an inquiry into the nature of 'respectability' as the governing code of the upper and middle classes of Victorian England."¹ "Inquiry" though it may be, it is hardly one conducted in a scientific or objective spirit. On the contrary, Thackeray lashes out with such fury against this code that he sometimes blinds us to the book's other prevailing sentiment; for this is also a work of nostalgia. Interspersed with the denunciations of social mores are passages that reveal a deep longing for a world outside the limits of "respectability," a world Thackeray associates with art and artists. In describing this ideal world, Thackeray, for once, allows no irony to enter; and the one-sided picture here is especially significant, because it is unique in his fiction. Clearly, Thackeray is dealing with a subject too dear to be seen with detachment. The failure of his own career in art seems to have made that sphere all the more attractive to him. Indeed, it became the embodiment of that elusive, intangible happiness which he, like the heroes of his novels, was always seeking and losing.

For a time, Thackeray had thought of putting his own art school training and modest talents to professional use. He set out in earnest to do so in 1833,² but met with little success. Over the next few years, the uncertain progress of his career caused him much anxiety and frustration. We can sense the trepidation with which, in 1837, he submitted some drawings to the Committee of the Water Colour Society and wrote in the accompanying letter,

I fear very much that my skill in the art is not sufficiently great to entitle me to a place in your Society, but I will work hard and, please God, improve. Perhaps also the waggish line which I have adopted in the drawings may render them acceptable for variety's sake. There is no man, I think, except [William Henry] Hunt who amuses himself with such subjects...and here I leave the business...trusting in Heaven; and pretty indifferent about failure, because I don't think I deserve success as yet.³

Although his artistic endeavours would eventually be confined to the illustration of his own fiction, Thackeray, throughout his life, maintained a special relationship with the world of artists. Much has been written already about his friendships with John Leech and Richard Doyle, Thackeray's fellow staff members at Punch.⁴ But he enjoyed, in addition, a wide acquaintance among painters of several schools, from