The Newcomes and London's Artistic Bohemia: Art, Profession and Freedom

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1. Introduction

With the completion of *Pendennis* (1848-50), William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63) reached the zenith of his career in the early 1850s, which means not only that he was never more prominent in society and prolific in output but also that his decline had started. As a literary lion, he enjoyed the circle of London celebrities and access to quality clubs and salons while he was involved in the public controversy against the Dickens set on the 'Dignity of Literature.' In his creative life, he gave a series of public lectures on Augustan writers, which led to the publication of *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (1853). In parallel, he set out to write a historical novel set in the same period, which came out as *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.* (1852). Following them, he set his hand to the next novel on contemporary society, which ran for two years and became his longest work *The Newcomes* (1853-5). While he was thus engaged in several ambitious projects, however, his physical conditions were never secure. In 1849, illness caused him to disrupt the serialization of *Pendennis* for three months. In 1851, he alienated himself from Mrs Brookfield, his open passion while his wife is absent under medical care. His tours with his daughters to America and Europe during

1852 and 54 exhausted him and finally broke him down with a malarial fever. The winter of 1854 to 55 also found him occasionally ill from 'disorganized liver' to 'defective water-works'.(1) According to the recent biographer, D. J. Taylor, after 1849 Thackeray was 'not the same man. His illness, which had left him weak and spiritless, was probably as much a reaction to the strain of the past three years as an actual physical disease. Creatively, the fire had died down.'(2)

The Newcomes, the heaviest fruit of this critical period, has suffered from mixed assessments. From one point of view, such as Taylor's, the novel attests to the author's unmistakable deteriolation towards creative exhaustion and mental senility under the mask of maturity. While it is well-planned before launching, it lacks '[m]uch of *Vanity Fair*'s sparkle' which came from 'its air of spontaneous improvisation'; and while it tells the story of a young artist, partly based on the author's own apprentice years, it is rendered in 'Thackeray's deepening obsession with past time' and 'aching, effortless nostalgia'.(3) But from another point of view, senile aspects often conceal a profound philosophy. The novel has been praised for its wide perspective and mature insight in portraying English society. It is, for Gordon N. Ray, 'in some respects the richest, not only of Thackeray's books but of all Victorian fictions'; for Andrew Sanders, 'Thackeray's most deliberate, encyclopaedic, and considered attempt to picture the manners of the English middle and upper classes'; and even for Taylor, 'a study of social mobility, the tale of a family making its way into the upper reaches of Victorian society, rapidly shedding the

(1) Gordon N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom 1841-1863* (New York: Octagon, 1972), 234.
(2) D. J. Taylor, *Thackeray* (London: Vintage, 2011), 308.
(3) Taylor, *Thackeray,* 350.

hereditary baggage that might embarrass it, eager to contract the alliances that will sustain and enhance its position'.(4) The novel's notorious looseness is also revalued: Ray argues that Thackeray saw his effort in his well-made *Esmond* unrewarded, and chose to return to 'the comfortable pattern of serial improvisation'.(5) Juliet McMaster, admitting that the slow narrative pace in *The Newcomes* duly invited Henry James's well-known indictment of the 'loose baggy monster', contends that its 'cumulative rather than immediate' effect better serves the goals of the novel.(6) Sanders probably follows her argument in saying: 'It is a "loose baggy monster" because looseness, bagginess, and prodigious proportions were singularly appropriate to a delineation of the multifarious nature of Victorian culture'.(7)

Although its large canvas and complex 'multiplot' tend to dazzle the reader, it is not diffcult to see that Thackeray's primary focus in *The Newcomes* falls on the artist in society. Clive Newcome, the young hero of the novel, is an unmistakable successor to Arthur Pendennis and actually some years Pen's junior at Grey Friars. While Pen pursued letters, Clive sets his mind on painting, and later drawing, and thus to a certain extent reflects Thackeray's own career again. Pen is protected by his loving mother, guided by his worldly uncle, and finally united with an affectionate wife, but Clive misses his dead mother, enjoys his unworldly father's protection, and finds no enduring happiness in misguided

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(4) Ray, *Thackeray,* 237; Andrew Sanders, Introduction in William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Newcomes,* ed. Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), vii; Taylor, *Thackeray,* 351.

(5) Ray, *Thackeray,* 236.

(6) Juliet McMaster, *Thackeray: The Major Novels* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1971), 163-4.

(7) Sanders, Introduction, vii.

marriage. It is apparent that Thackeray tackles the old theme of the artist's progress again in a different field of art and with a darker mood, and reveals a deeper insight into the artist's position in modern society. In the followings, I would like to argue that this renewed attempt at the *Künstlerroman* extends from Thackeray's involvement in the 'Dignity of Literure' controversy, which is found to heavily hang on the assessment of London's bohemia, and that the novel contains a serious meditation on, and ultimately a vidication of, his own calling and bohemianism at the height of his career.

2. The dignity of literature and art

What is known as the 'Dignity of Literature' controversy began with a *Morning Chronicle* article on 3 January 1850, in which the editor questioned the effect of state patronage of writers based on a dialogue in the currently-serialized *Pendennis*.(8) As this review did not agree with Dickens's effort to support his successors by the literary fund, his disciple John Forster took up the glove and argued for the profession of literature. His claim was that men of letters did as much service to the state as other professions and yet failed to receive due respect due to 'the habitual disparagement of their professions' by some unsympathetic writers like Thackeray.(9) As Thackeray found himself the target of a personal attack, he immediately refuted Forster, admitting, somewhat sarcastically, his prejudice 'against running into debt, and drunkenness, and disorderly life, and against quackery and falsehood in my profession' yet denying his ill intention: 'my attempt was to tell the truth, and I meant to tell it not

(8) Leader to *The Morning Chronicle* (3 January 1850), 4.
(9) 'Encouragement of Literature by the State', *The Examiner* (5 January 1850), 2.

unkindly'.(10) Forster, however, did not withdraw his sword. He accused Thackeray in his reply of exhibiting the literary class 'generally responsible for the vices, instead of the vices as occasionally incident to the class', and maintained his claim that writers should be duly rewarded for their services to the state.(11)

In retrospect, this controversy might give an odd impression because both accuser and accused belonged to the same class of writership and neither had reason to degrade themselves. Indeed, they had differing views on the literary fund for supporting destitute writers, but they had reached their conclusions from different starting points: one had started with his own experience of bad society in London's literary bohemia and the other with his conviction that writers benefited the state. While Forster believed that if properly supported writers would devote themselves to writing, Thackeray knew that they would then abandon it. As a successful writer, he believed that need prompted hard work and that he could trust on the market and the public taste for the rest. Curiously, Thackeray seemed to follow the middle-class ideology of self-help and hard work while Dickens and his set wanted to secure the livelihood and status of a gentleman. Where Dickens and his set aspired for a higher status Thackeray found despicable snobbery, and where

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(10) 'The Dignity of Literature', *The Morning Chronicle* (12 January 1850). Reprinted in William Makepeace Thackeray, *Christmas Books, Rebecca and Rowena, and Later Minor Papers, 1849-1861* [vol. x of The Oxford Thackeray], ed. George Saintsbury, (London: Oxford UP, 1908), 586.

(11) '"The Dignity of Literature"', *The Examiner* (19 January 1850), 35. The whole process of this controversy has been much discussed, for example, in Craig Howes, '*Pendennis* and the Controversy on the "Dignity of Literature"', *Nineteenth-Century Literature,* 41/3 (1986), 269-98; Michael Lund, *Reading Thackeray* (Detroit: Wayne State UP), 1988, 59-78; Michael J. Flynn, '*Pendennis, Copperfield,* and the Debate on the "Dignity of Literature"', *Dickens Studies Annual,* 41 (2010), 151-89.

Thackeray reconciled himself with reality Forster found unforgivable disparagement. This gap partly stemmed from their opposing literary tastes, one realist and the other idealist, but also reflects the historical context of art and literature that was in transition from trades to professions.

The professions in this context are, as W. J. Reader asserts, 'very much a Victorian creation', and 'generally acceptable as occupations fit for gentlemen, and for that reason especially attractive to the rising middle class' while the trade was considered beneath them.(12) According to Harold Perkin, who discusses the expansion of professionalism in the early nineteenth century, the urbanization and improved living standards under the Industrial Revolution created a larger demand for the services of doctors, lawyers, writers and clergymen, and even quickened the entry of new professions such as civil engineers, architects, pharmacists and mechanical engineers. The profession of letters also came to demand the equal status.(13) Perkin describes the transition of the literary trade: 'It was no longer mainly a pastime for gentlemen like Dryden, Addison and Pope and a low-paid occupation for Grubb [sic] Street hacks like Defoe or Johnson, but a regular profession at which a Walter Scott, a Southey or a Cobbett could make a comfortable, sometimes a handsome living.'(14) This background accounts for Dickens's effort to save young writers from the mean trade and Forster's fight in defense of the dignity of literature. Forster's rhetoric––'Services done to the State by distinguished efforts in art, literature, and science, are as unequivocal, and at the least as

(12) W. J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 6, 23-4.

(13) Harold Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Routledge, 1969), 254-5.

(14) Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society,* 255.

important, as services done by professors of arms, law, divinity, and diplomacy'(15)––attests to his desire to elevate the status of literature to the level of other professions. And yet the presence of Thackeray and his debunking description indicates that the project was yet to be completed.

Interestingly, the art world was taking a similar path. Up to the eighteenth century, artists were regarded as artisans who took orders from their patrons and produced work to their satisfaction. With the advent of the industrial age, however, the old patronage system declined and was replaced by the market system, into which artists were released offhand to live on their own selling their works for an unknown mass of customers. The time was at the height of the Romantic cult of imagination and genius, which drove many self-confident youths to the small market of art to try their talent and very likely end up in destitute and bohemian life. According to Paula Gillett, the career of art at this time was not approved by parents for their sons for its economic precariousness,(16) and some of Thackeray's early works bore witness to the miserable conditons of artists which he had experienced in his youth.(17) But the situation, according to Gillett again, 'underwent a remarkable change during the 1850s' as many artists made a remarkable progress from modest living to riches and exactly fitted the Victorian image of the self-made man.(18) James Hamilton mentions the Artists' Benevolent Fund that 'had established itself fully and was . . . protecting "upwards of 300 artists"' by

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(15) 'Encouragement of Literature by the State', 2.

(16) Paula Gillett, *Worlds of Art: Painters in Victorian Society* (New Brunswick: Rutgars UP, 1990), 26.

(17) For Thackeray's early works on poor artists, see my 'Thackeray's Early Paris Tales, 1837-40: Rogues, Gamblers, Artists', *Journal of the Society of English and American Literature,* vol. 63 (March 2019), 49-67.

(18) Gillett, *Worlds of Art,* 26.

the mid-1840s.[19] Significantly, the economic success entailed a demand of due respect from society. Gillett cites the cases of successful artists trying to enter the fashionable world with much difficulty, and speaks for a Royal Academician in the 1840s: 'Other professions were upgrading themselves by means of qualifying examinations; would not the profession of painting experience similar improvement if the undeserving were filtered out by a test of general education. . . ?'[20] However, despite the numerous cases of individual social mobility among painters, the occupation of art remained outside the gates of respectability until the 1860s.[21] It was only in 1861 that 'painting was for the first time listed in the census report as a profession, recognition of the status change that would soon make the career acceptable to social classes that formerly would have considered it beneath them'.[22]

3. The profession of art in *The Newcomes*

It was in this context that Thackeray set *The Newcomes* in the art world of the 1830s and 40s, the heyday of bohemianism and the eve of professionalism in art. When young Clive pronounces his wish to pursue

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(19) James Hamilton, *A Strange Business: Making Art and Money in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2014), 87.

(20) Gillett, *Worlds of Art,* 31.

(21) Gillett, *Worlds of Art,* 32.

(22) Gillett, *Worlds of Art,* 43. Julie F. Codell makes a similar claim from a different angle for the professionalization of artists. According to her, increased interest in biographies in the mid-century provided artists with occasions to tell their own stories and consequently speak for their respectability while the concept of professionalism underwent a remarkable change to designate less social status than expertise of knowkedge; the artist and the professional met there. See Codell, *The Victorian Artist: Artists' Life Writing in Britain, ca. 1870-1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003).

art, his dream is objected to on the spot by his uncle: 'My dear Clive . . . there are degrees in society which we must respect. You surely cannot think of being a professional artist. Such a profession is very well for your young protégé: but for you––' (166)[23]. Clive refutes him, saying:

> 'We are no such great folks that I know of; and if we were, I say a painter is as good as a lawyer, or a doctor, or even a soldier. In Dr. Johnson's Life, which my father is always reading––I like to read about Sir Joshua Reynolds best: I think he is the best gentleman of all in the book. . . . Wasn't Reynolds a clipper, that's all! and wasn't Rubens a brick? He was an ambassador and Knight of the Bath; so was Vandyck. And Titian, and Raphael, and Verasquez?––I'll just trouble you to show me better gentlemen than them, Uncle Charles.'
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> 'Far be it from me to say that the pictorial calling is not honourable', says Uncle Charles; 'but as the world goes there are other professions in greater repute; and I should have thought Colonel Newcome's son––' (166)

This short passage contains the theme of the whole novel in epitome and deserves some glosses. Both Clive and Uncle Charles do not hesitate to call the pursuit of art *profession,* but put differing values on it: while Clive admits the unreserved value of a gentleman to the professional artist, Uncle Charles regards it beneath the social rank of the Newcomes. The Newcome family originated from a weaver in a northern village who came to London in the late eighteenth century. This first Thomas

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[23] William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Newcomes,* ed. George Saintsbury (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908), The Oxford Thackeray, vol. xiv. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Newcome worked for and later married into a cloth-making family, the Hobsons, and expanded the business to start a banking house in a London suburb. While he had twin sons with his present wife and married one of them to a descent of aristocracy, he had another son with his former wife, who went to India to become a military officer and begot the hero of the novel. So the Newcomes is a wealthy bourgeois family with a noble connection at present but a few generations back of a humble origin. Uncle Charles, whose sister married Clive's father, has good reason to esteem the present rank of the Newcomes and expect the appropriate choice of Clive, too. Clive, on the other hand, does not pay as much respect to the present social order of his family, partly because he is not worldly-minded and partly because he has been raised by the unworldly father in an Indian colony far from the metropolitan centre of vanity fair. Clive's refutation certainly proves his awareness of English rules of social distinction, but his rash reference to great names rather betrays his ignorance of delicate nuances in social life while Uncle Charles's remonstrance is based on concrete observation of the social network: he is suggesting that the world's reputation holds the profession of art beneath the colonel's son, if equal to his working-class friend (protégé) J. J. Ridley. In a way, this dialogue between the opposing standpoints reflects––or anticipates, from the perspective of the 1830s in which the scene is presumably set––the ongoing struggle on the part of artists to elevate their status to that of a respectable profession while the old prejudices remained unchanged.(24)

(24) Thackeray addresses the same kind of problem in literary profession between trade and gentlemanly pursuit in *Pendennis.* See Albert D. Pionke, *The Ritual Culture of Victorian Professionals: Competing for Ceremonial Status, 1838-1877* (Ashgate, 2013), 51-65. Pionke concludes that 'Pen does become a professional and a gentleman while writing his way to public recognition ↗

Colonel Newcome, unworldly yet sympathetic father to Clive, joins this debate in a curious manner. The above dialogue between Clive and Uncle Charles is immediately followed by the Colonel's comment: 'He shall follow his own bent. . . ; as long as his calling is honest, it becomes a gentleman; and if he were to take a fancy to play on the fiddle––actually on the fiddle––I shouldn't object!' (166). It sounds quite liberal––even in today's perspective––and surely speaks for the author's true sentiment, but it also betrays the Colonel's insensitiveness to the worldly rules of society. From earlier in the novel, the Colonel has been liberal enough to grant the title of a gentleman to the writers: 'Sir,' says he to Arthur Pendennis, 'I hope it is not your practice to measure and estimate gentlemen by such paltry standards as those. A man of letters follows the noblest calling which any man can pursue. I would rather be the author of a work of genius, than be Governor-General of India. I admire genius. I salute it wherever I meet it' (48). Dickens and Forster would have been flattered to hear this, and Thackeray might have been sincere about this remark, but in the novel the Colonel is doomed to a punishment for this kind of liberalism. Since Clive enters the art world and joins the company of his fellow artists, his bohemian lifestyle and society begins to arouse an increasing amount of distrust and displeasure among his family. Maria Newcome, wife of the Colonel's half-brother Hobson, opposes getting her and the Colonel's sons together any more as they used to on holidays. To the astonished Colonel, she adds: 'He [Clive] lives with artists, with all sorts of eccentric people. Our children are bred on *quite a different plan.* Hobson will succeed his father in the bank, and dear Samuel I trust will go into the church' (244). Although she holds no personal malice towards

↘ and financial independence, but, as Thackeray cautions the reader, "Mr. Pendennis's was an exceptional case"' (64).

her nephew, she thinks it inappropriate to associate him with her sons. Later, her husband supports her decision with so many words in his chat with his nephew Barnes:

> [S]ince he has taken this madcap freak of turning painter . . . there is no understanding the chap. Did you ever see such a set of fellows as the colonel had got together at his party the other night? Dirty chaps in velvet coats and beards? They looked like a set of mountebanks. And this young Clive is going to turn painter! . . . Confound it, why doesn't my brother set him up in some respectable business? . . . But a painter! hang it––a painter's no trade at all––I don't fancy seeing one of our family sticking up pictures for sale. I don't like it, Barnes. (245)

These words regarding the profession of art below trade must have upset the pursuers of art at the time, and the author himself, but Thackeray was aware that there were actually such voices as this. Colonel Newcome's tragedy is that he would not hear them or simply remained ignorant of them when he takes action to unite Clive and Ethel in matrimony. Ethel is daughter of the Colonel's half-brother and considered among the family to be an important piece in their ambition to strengthen their noble connection. Major Pendennis, the notorious man of the world, is astonished to hear the Colonel's plan to marry them: 'Nothing could show a more deplorable ignorance of the world than poor Newcome supposing his son could make such a match as that with his cousin. Is it true that he is going to make his son an artist? I don't know what the dooce the world is coming to. An artist! By gad, in my time a fellow would as soon have thought of making his son a hair-dresser, or a pastry-cook,

by gad' (302). The Colonel's humiliation culminates when he asks Barnes, brother of Ethel and now head of the family bank, to approve their match. Barnes politely delays his answer, uttering in his mind: 'Confound the young beggar! . . . What a fool his father is to give it [three or four thousand a year] away! Is he joking? No, he was always half crazy––the colonel' (679). Subsequently, Barnes takes advantage of the Colonel's candour and drives him to bankruptcy.

Throughout the novel, Clive's artistic career is always surrounded by the harsh voices of the world. As writer and artist himself, Thackeray had good reason to take sides with him and the Colonel who believed in the noble nature of his calling, but he was all too aware of the establishment's persistent prejudice against the vulgar trade of selling works to the market. This contradictory attitude precisely reflects the actual conditions of art and literature in the early nineteenth century which lay in suspense between vulgar trade and respectable profession and by chance aroused the 'Dignity of Literature' debate between the fellow writers. I take *The Newcomes* to be an extension of Thackeray's ernest reflection on the controversy, in which his depiction of his own calling was seriously questioned. The argument so far has revealed that, apart from the actual effort of writers and artists to promote themselves, the artistic calling is disdained in the novel by the aspiring bourgeois and that their objection to it when one member of their family chooses his career in that direction comes not so much from the creative engagement itself as from the wild company that entails it. It was exactly this kind of bohemian company depicted in *Pendennis* that provoked the Dickens set to start a controversy since it was considered to harm the dignity of literature––at lest from one point of view. Yet from another point of view, the same bohemians might present a pleasant picture of youths especially when it is tinged with

nostalgia.[25] Thackeray's revisit to the topos of bohemia in *The Newcomes* brings forward again the point of departure between those who defend art against it and those who defend art for it, which is the subject of the next section.

4. The realm of freedom

Considering the large amount of comments that Thackeray's literary bohemia has attracted, his artistic bohemia in *The Newcomes* has been unduly neglected. Robert A. Colby pays attention to the bohemian section in the novel which 'enable[d] Thackeray to relive vicariously the joy his own first vocation had brought him', but soon proceeds to the next stage of Clive's career indicating 'improvement of the artist's lot'.[26] In his book-length study of *The Newcomes,* R. D. McMaster spares a whole chapter for the art world in the novel, but rather dismisses the bohemian theme as a detractor from Thackeray's more serious treatment of Clive's training in Gandish's academy and choice of historical painting which are based on models to a certain extent.[27] The most detailed account of the artistic bohemia in *The Newcomes* so far is given by April Bullock, who analyses the three distinct bohemias represented in *Pendennis, The Newcomes* and *Philip* (1861-2). Bullock begins her discussion of *The Newcomes* by distinguishing its bohemia based on a back-room club from 'the lowest and least respectable representatives of journalistic hackdom' in *Pendennis,*[28]

[25] See my 'Pendennis and London's Literary Bohemia: Temporalizing the Timeless Topos', *Jinbun Ronkyu* 70/4 (Feb. 2021), 39-59.

[26] Robert A. Colby, *Thackeray's Canvass of Humanity: An Author and His Public* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1979), 373, 375.

[27] R. D. McMaster, *Thackeray's Cultural Frame of Reference: Allusions in* The Newcomes (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1991), 87-105.

[28] April Bullock, 'Thackeray's Young Men: Bohemia and Manliness in the ↗

and goes on to trace Clive's progression through that milieu from a bourgeois son to a young dandy to a gentleman-professional. For her, 'Bohemia's low haunts protected men's autonomy, providing an alternative to respectable society which was based on the repression of an idealized undomesticated masculinity and a subsequent loss of male independence'.(29)

As Bullock points out, and other commentators note, London's artistic bohemia is distinguished from its literary counterpart or Paris's *bohéme* for its mixed nature not only attractive to wild rogues and poor hangers-on but also open to middle-class professionals and gentlemen. The physical description of the artists' quarter in Soho or Bloomsbury reveals the proximity of the artists to the established classes metonimically: 'In walking through streets which may have been gay and polite . . . who has not remarked the artist's invasion of those regions once devoted to fashion and gaiety?' (214). The narrator––the grown-up Pen––goes on to delineate the lovable figure of the artist type who conceals 'a good kindly simple creature' under 'yonder terrific appearance of waving cloak, bristling beard, and shadowy sombrero' (215). The artist evoked here is not the type of 'a moody poet avoiding mankind for the better company' but 'a jolly little chap' who is ready to paint anything picturesque and loves 'his friends, his cups, feasts, merrymakings, and all good things' (215). The eulogy of the good-natured artist under the wild bearded mask continues:

> The kindest folks alive I have found among those scowling whiskeradoes. They open oysters with their yataghans, toast muffins on their rapiers, and fill their Venice glasses with half-and-half. If

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↘ Novels of William Makepeace Thackeray', *Victorian Institute Journal* 37 (2009), 173, 174.

(29) Bullock, 'Thackeray's Young Men', 174.

> they have money in their lean purses, be sure they have a friend to share it. What innocent gaiety, what jovial suppers on threadbare cloths, and wonderful songs after; what pathos, merriment, humour does not a man enjoy who frequents their company! Mr. Clive Newcome, who has long since shaved his beard, who has become a family man, and has seen the world in a thousand different phases, avers that his life as an art-student at home and abroad, was the pleasantest part of his whole existence. (215)

This is almost an unreserved praise. The points are (1) that the artists intended here do not care about conventional appearances or polite manners such as looking clean and eating quietly; (2) that they are instead used to gay fashion and wild behaviours; (3) that they are not dark and self-contained explorers but merry and sociable creatures fond of feasting and singing; (4) that they are usually penniless but turn generous once they get money; and (5) that they are basically good-natured. There is something remindful of a good breed about them instead of the rebellious spirit of revolutionaries that pervades Paris's *bohémes,* and that is why the wealthy bourgois's son like Clive feels at home with their company in spite of their class defferences.

The mixed gathering of this artistic bohemia is vividly depicted when Clive takes Pen to the artists' club named the Haunt in Soho, where 'painters, sculptors, men of letters, actors, used to congregate, passing pleasant hours in rough kindly communion, and many a day seeing the sunrise lighting the rosy street ere they parted' (316).

> Cheery old Tom Sarjent is surrounded at the Haunt by a dozen of kind boon companions. They toil all day at their avocations of art, or

letters, or law, and here meet for a harmless night's recreation and converse. They talk of literature, or politics, or pictures, or plays; socially banter one another over their cheap cups; sing brave old songs sometimes when they are especially jolly; kindly ballads in praise of love and wine; famous maritime ditties in honour of old England. . . .

Around Tom are seated grave Royal Academicians, rising gay Associates; writers of other Journals besides the *Pall Mall Gazette*; a barrister maybe, whose name will be famous some day; a hewer of marbles perhaps; a surgeon whose patients have not come yet, and one or two men about town who like this queer assembly better than haunts much more splendid. Captain Shandon has been here and his jokes are preserved in the tradition of the place. Owlet, the philosopher, came once and tried, as his wont is, to lecture, but his metaphysics were beaten down by a storm of banter. Slatter, who gave himself such airs because he wrote in the ––– *Review,* tried to air himself at the Haunt, but was choked by the smoke, and silenced by the unanimous poohpoohing of the assembly. Dick Walker, who rebelled secretly at Sarjent's authority, once thought to give himself consequence by bringing a young lord from the 'Blue Posts', but he was so unmercifully 'chaffed' by Tom, that even the young lord laughed at him. His lordship has been heard to say he had been taken to a monsus queeah place, queeah set of folks, in a tap somewhere, though he went away quite delighted with Tom's affability, but he never came again. (317-8)

Here is vividly portrayed the merry gathering of promiscuous company where men of different pursuits from artists to lawyers, writers to doctors,

scholars to lords get together after a day's work and discuss every kind of topic freely––that is, without polite manners or formal authorities––over wine and smoke. The passing reference to Captain Shandon is a disguised respect to his real-life model William Maginn (1794-1842), the prototypical bohemian and editor of *Frazer's Magazine* who presided over this kind of gatherings frequently held in taverns.(30) The rude humours and violent conducts of the homosocial company here may disgust some of today's refined readers, but there is no hint of cynical denunciation against them on the author's part. The narrator's eulogy of this bohemian culture and nostalgic lament of its disappearance can be taken at face value.

Although it is hardly imaginable that this kind of milieu has any positive effect on the aspiring artist's progress––and it is true that Clive and his friend J. J. Ridley make their way in the profession of art by growing out of the bohemian hell, touring around the Continent together and eventually taking to the diligent lifestyle––the bohemiam stage of their life still has broader significance than has been acknowledged. In the first place, the promiscuous nature of the bohemian quarter virtually annuls class distinction among its inhabitants that counts a great deal in the outside world, and therefore enables Clive and J. J. to work together and make success according to their talents. In the second place, the peripheral position of the bohemia in society allows its dwellers to follow their pursuits freely from the bourgeois values that predominate in the world. In this sense, the bohemian sections that occasionally appear in the novel bring in fresh air each time to the fictional world which is otherwise

(30) See my 'Pendennis and London's Literary Bohemia', 50-6; and 'The "Godfather" of Victorian Realism: William Maginn and the Cultural Conflict in the 1830s', in Hiroko Ikeda and Kazuo Yokouchi, eds., *Irish Literature in the British Context and Beyond* (Oxford: Peter Lang), 51-70.

stultified by the power politics and business wars that preoccupy the Newcome family. In the third place, the wild yet lively atmosphere of the bohemian gatherings can be counted on to nourish the inexperienced youths like Clive and J. J. to develop a rich outlook on the world which, in Clive's case, will help his art, if not successfully in historical painting, a great deal in drawing and caricature. This is true with the author as well, for his lively description of bohemian gatherings as well as higher society, which is rendered in the mixed style of gentlemanly prose and coarse vulgarism, attests to his wide knowledge of the mixed world inhabited by aristocrats, gentlemen, professionals, soldiers, merchants, foreigners, servants, hangers-on, swindlers and rogues that enriches his picture of English society. When he throws his artist hero into the sordid milieu of bohemians, he is not degrading the dignity of his own art but rather advocating it on the assumption that the dignity of literary realism as his fiction aspires after lies in getting involved in the mixed society rather than receiving pension and working for the state patronage.

5. Conclusion

As I have argued so far, Thackeray's *The Newcomes* conducts a slow yet elaborate continuation of the 'Dignity of Literature' controversy into which he was inadvertently involved. When he began his career some twenty years before, he was not particularly grateful for his hardship in Paris's and London's bohemias; he was rather grateful for having safely grown out of them and took cold attitudes to the remainders in the corrupt underworld. But as he established himself as successful writer and happened to see the success of Henri Murger's romantic depiction of *bohémes* beyond the channel, it seems that he began to soften his

attitudes and show his attachment to the old milieu he once knew. It was then that the Dickens set opened strictures on his cynical view of the literary fund and on his debunking portraits of hack writers in hard conditions. The occasion prompted him to review his own experience and compare the bohemian culture now and then. Then he discovered the bohemian club and its culture gone forever:

> The time is not very long since: though to-day is so changed. As we think of it, the kind familiar faces rise up, and we hear the pleasant voices and singing. There are they met, the honest hearty companions. In the days when the Haunt *was* a haunt, stage coaches were not yet quite over. Casinos were not invented: clubs were rather rare luxuries: there were sanded floors, triangular sawdustboxes, pipes, and tavern parlours. . . . Those little meetings, in the memory of many of us yet, are gone quite away into the past. Five-and-twenty years ago is a hundred years off––so much has our social life changed in those five lustres. (316-7)

This lamentation may sound strange to the present ear because we are aware that the bohemian culture has survived in changing forms through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries till today.(31) But in this passage Thackeray speaks out from behind the narrator's mask and tells his version of truth. Perhaps, it tells more about Thackeray's feeling than about historical change, but that will be further explored when his last completed novel, *Philip,* is discussed. For now all we can say is that when

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(31) For example, Richard Miller, *Bohemia: The Protoculture Then and Now* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977); Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (London: Tauris Parke, 2003).

he writes, 'Mr. Clive Newcome, who has long since shaved his beard, who has become a family man, and has seen the world in a thousand different phases, avers that his life as an art-student at home and abroad, was the pleasantest part of his whole existence' (215), he wrote an affectionate epitaph for the bohemia he once knew and would never see again.

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