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RACISM AND SLAVERY IN THACKERAY'S *THE VIRGINIANS**

The very act of writing or speaking about race is fraught with difficulty even when one attempts to go about it in a critical and self-critical manner. For one thing, there is the risk of repeating in one's own approach the stereotypical features and debilitating consequences of one's objects of investigation. Indeed it is at present virtually impossible to write or say anything on the topic of race that is not in some way objectionable or embarrassing.

Dominic LaCapra, *The Bounds of Race*, 1991

In the years 1852–53 and 1855–56 William Makepeace Thackeray lectured in the United States. His tours were organized by James T. Fields, the well known Boston publisher and Thackeray's friend. They took him through New England to New York, Washington, down south to Charleston and New Orleans, and up the Mississippi River to St. Louis. He became acquainted with both the North and the South of the country. Upon returning from his second American tour, Thackeray engaged himself briefly and unsuccessfully in politics, seeking a seat in Parliament, which he did not win. During the political campaign, he expressed concerns about his silence as a writer in several letters: "Shall I ever write a book again?", he asked in January of 1857, and in February he complained: "Just as the novel-writing faculty is pretty well used up..."¹. But shortly after the defeat, "with an apparent revival of cheerfulness", he began the actual writing of

* This paper was first presented at the Southern Studies Forum Workshop of the European Association for American Studies Conference on *The Configuration of Race in the South* at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge on September 7, 1995.

¹ *The Two Thackerays. Anne Thackeray Ritchie's Centenary Biographical Introductions to the Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, New York 1988, AMS Press Inc., p. 494.

The Virginians, "the conception of which dated from his American visit", while the execution of which can perhaps provide some clues as to why William Thackeray lost the parliamentary election in 1857 and at no other time achieved much in the field of politics.

The Virginians, "a loosely constructed, awkwardly plotted and inconsistently narrated book"² is a story of twin brothers, the only sons of a wealthy family of Virginia tobacco planters descended from the English aristocracy, who return to Britain to look for their ancestors and the ancient family home. Initially, one of them is believed to have been killed in the French and Indian War. A studious, well read and serious young man, he is miraculously revived and brought to London just in time to rescue his brother, who has lost a fortune at cards and is in prison for debts. Despite their temperamental differences, the brothers share the function of the main character throughout the novel's three volumes. Thackeray seems to hesitate in favoring one over the other, as if he himself found it difficult to choose between a thoughtful intellectual and a bon vivant's elusive smile. In a similar way, the novel is suspended between Great Britain and America, both in its treatment of the times in which the action takes place – the twenty years preceding the American Revolutionary War, and in its presentation of the sentiments of the times in which the book was written, the mid-19th century, when questions of slavery and racism dominated the social and political scenes in America and in the Mother Country alike.

The opening image of the novel is that of two crossed swords used in the American War of Independence, hanging on the library wall in the home of a famous American writer. "The one sword was gallantly drawn in the service of the king, the other was the weapon of a brave and honored republican soldier. The possessor of the harmless trophy has earned for himself a name alike honored in his ancestors' country and in his own, where genius such as his has always a peaceful welcome"³. J. A. Sutherland points out in *Thackeray at Work*, in Chapter 5 entitled "*The Virginians*. The Worst Novel Anyone Ever Wrote" that Thackeray was trying to appeal to both British and American publishers and readers in the hope of selling his book on both sides of the Atlantic⁴. If when writing

² D. A. Thomas, *Thackeray and Slavery*, Athens 1993, Ohio University Press, p. 140.

³ W. M. Thackeray, *The Virginians*, New York 1904, Charles Scribner's Sons (Kensington Edition), p. 1. Subsequent references in this essay are to this edition.

⁴ J. A. Sutherland, *Thackeray at Work*, University of London 1974, The Althone Press, p. 100: "The lectures on the *Four Georges* which provided material for the '56 lecture tour (and much of *The Virginians*' English background) exist in two versions: there is the manuscript text from which Thackeray addressed his American audience and the text printed for British readers in 1861. The differences are striking and systematic. The lectures which

about the Revolutionary War he had to be careful not to offend either the British or the American audience, in dealing with the issue of slavery he was forced to take into consideration the possible reactions of three groups of prospective readers: the British, the Northerners, and the Southerners.

Slavery provides one of the main themes in *The Virginians*. There are several scenes presenting life on the large Virginian plantation. However, what Thackeray has to say about slavery in a figurative sense is of far greater significance than his views concerning the relationship of blacks and whites itself. He perceived the human condition as one of bondage, and often made statements about the ties that constrain human beings. Besides the actual state of ownership of black people by the whites, in *The Virginians* Thackeray dwells on such instances of enslavement as the political and economic dependence of colonies on the metropolis, individuals bound to the pursuit of money, children to domineering parents, and spouses to one another, of men conscripted into the army, compelled to honor codes and drinking, men and women addicted to cards and other forms of gambling. As one critic has remarked, it was a subject he found too fascinating to ignore. Slavery has "always been more than an economic institution; in Western culture it has long represented the ultimate limit of dehumanization, of treating and regarding a man as a thing"⁵. A resounding image from Thackeray's early childhood epitomizes this condition; it is the image of Napoleon imprisoned at St. Helena, a man enslaved and dehumanized by his own insatiable ambitions and historical circumstance. The ship Thackeray was voyaging on from India to England in 1816 stopped at the exiled emperor's island, and the writer recounted the incident later in his lectures on the Four Georges, with which he toured America in 1855-56: "My black servant took me a long walk over rocks and hills until we reached a garden, where we saw a man walking. 'That is he', said the black man: "that is Bonaparte! He eats three sheep every day and all the little children he can lay hands on!"⁶

In *The Buried Life. A Study of Relation Between Thackeray's Fiction and His Personal History*, Gordon N. Ray draws attention to the fact that Thackeray, as well as Dickens and Kipling experienced brutality at an early age. "All, in Kipling's word's 'knew the worst too young'; but Thackeray was the most defenceless of the three. Kipling had a companion in his sister, and Dickens was a mature and self-reliant eleven, when they were

the Americans heard contain prominent diatribes against old-world royalty, aristocracy and the rank system generally, many of these references are toned down or removed altogether for English readers".

⁵ D. B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, Ithaca 1966, Cornell University Press, p. 29.

⁶ D. A. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

first introduced to the cruelties and meannesses of life; Thackeray faced his ordeal alone when he was barely six"⁷. His only recourse at the time, with his mother still away in India, must have been the childhood memories of life in his father's, the British proconsul's mansion in Calcutta, "with a retinue of sixty or seventy servants", where "two native attendants were devoted to his exclusive service". For Thackeray, the happiness and security of childhood, the early deprivation of which made them all the more significant in his life, were associated with the condition of being waited upon by servants of another race. His emotional attitude towards the native people of India, and thus perhaps to all people of color, must have also been affected by the fact that he had an Indian half-sister, Sarah Blechynden. When his father married in 1810, Ray tells us, "he pensioned off his mistress and illegitimate child". Richmond Thackeray also provided an annuity for his unlawful daughter. "In 1841 she died; since her financially struggling half-brother was the residuary legatee of annuities under his father's will, her death unexpectedly helped to free William Thackeray from immediate economic worry in the agonizing year after discovering his wife's insanity"⁸.

As a result of humanitarian pressure, Britain banned the African slave trade in 1807. America introduced a similar measure in 1808. The growing British antislavery movement led to the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1834. After several compromises over extension of slavery in the newly admitted states, and a wave of black insurrections, in mid-19th century the United States as a nation was growing increasingly divided over the abolitionist question.

In the opening paragraph of her chapter on *The Virginians*, Deborah A. Thomas says: "Yet Thackeray actually appears to have given a significant amount of thought to the topic of slavery in this work. In fact, the motif of slavery provides at least a small element of order in an otherwise disorderly book"⁹. Rather than search for order in *The Virginians*, however, it might perhaps be more illuminating to think of the novel in terms of Bakhtinian unfinalizability, where disorder and fragmentation are the primary states, whereas order and integrity require justification. The assumption that everything has a meaning which could be discovered if only one knew the code might lead to semiotic totalitarianism¹⁰. Himself confused in his feelings about slavery and eager to please divided audiences, Thackeray had

⁷ G. N. Ray, *The Buried Life A Study of the Relation Between Thackeray's Fiction and His Personal History*, Cambridge, Mass. 1952, Harvard University Press, p. 13.

⁸ D. A. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

¹⁰ G. Moroson, C. Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Prosaics*, NTSU Press 1984, p. 98.

to modify his artistic design of *The Virginians* in the course of writing the book. He had originally meant to set it primarily in Virginia, but an angry American reader wrote to *Harper's*, where the novel was serialized, "denouncing *The Virginians* as literally sacrilegious" because George Washington, "the father of his country", was introduced as a character in it. "Immediately after this incident Thackeray left the American affairs and the American setting out of his novel for 600 pages"¹¹.

Issues concerning black slavery in the American South are approached with caution. At the outset Thackeray makes a statement which offends our sensibilities today but was meant to appease his contemporaries.

The question of slavery was not born at the time of which we write. To be the proprietor of black servants shocked the feelings of no Virginian gentleman; nor, in truth, was the despotism exercised over the negro race generally a savage one. The food was plenty; the poor black people lazy, and not unhappy. You might have preached negro emancipation to Madam Esmond of Castlewood as you might have told her to let her horses run loose out of her stables; she had no doubt that the whip and the corn-bag were good for both¹².

He seems to express opinion only when he expects it to be of no consequence. For example, he condemns the Guinea slave trade, which had already been illegal for fifty years. George, the sensitive brother, quarrels bitterly with his mother as she orders little Gumbo beaten for falling asleep on his master's bed; Harry, a soldier at heart, introduces the plantation blacks to military training. Gumbo, the illustrative servant, is portrayed in a stereotypical way. He is faithful to his master to the point of offering to sell himself again in order to liberate Harry from prison; he falls in love easily, and fervently praises the Lord, he is a born entertainer and a liar.

Whereas black slavery, through its presence as well as through its absence as a topic in the book, was designed to play a particular role in *The Virginians*, racism seems to be an issue that surfaces regardless of the author's intentions. For the most part, it is directed not at blacks but at the American Indians. The word 'race' appears only on two occasions in the entire text. In volume 3 Thackeray writes with reference to events in Canada: "The great supremacy of the two races must be tried there ere long"¹³. The conflicting sides are the French and the British; the word 'race' is introduced in its eighteenth century usage denoting a class of people or a family¹⁴. In the second volume we read:

Every theatre had its footman's gallery: an army of the liveried race hustled around every chapel-door [...] – that noble race of footmen is well nigh gone. A few thousand of them

¹¹ J. A. Sutherland, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

¹² *The Virginians*, vol. I, p. 35.

¹³ *Ibidem*, vol. III, p. 101.

¹⁴ Ch. Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race*, London 1971, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 2.

may still be left among us. Grand, tall, beautiful, melancholy, we still behold them on levee days, with their nosegays and their buckles, their plush and their powder. So have I seen in America specimens, nay camps and villages of Red Indians. But the race is doomed. The fatal decree has gone forth, and Uncas with his tomahawk and eagle's plume, and Jeames with his cocked hat and long cane, are passing out of the world where they once walked in glory¹⁵.

Here 'race' also signifies a group of people. However, a fruitful discussion of the association so matter of factly made between footmen and Native Americans may be facilitated if we turn to contemporary notions of race and racism.

In his essay for Henry Louis Gates's, „Race”, *Writing and Difference*, Tzvetan Todorov defines racism as “a type of behaviour which consists in the display of contempt or aggressiveness toward other people on account of their physical differences (other than those of sex) between them and oneself”¹⁶. Uncomfortable with the phrase ‘display of contempt or aggressiveness’, Gates “would say that ‘racism’ exists when one generalizes about the attributes of an individual (and treats him or her accordingly). Such generalizations are based upon a predetermined set of causes and effects thought to be shared by all members of a physically defined group who are also assumed to share certain ‘metaphysical characteristics’”. Gates emphasizes that “the racist’s error is one of thought, not merely or only of behaviour”¹⁷.

Thackeray’s letters from America contain numerous racist observations concerning the Southern Blacks. “How fond you would both be of the little blackies – they are the dearest little imps. I have been watching them all day, about pumps, crawling in gutters, playing in sunshine. I think I shall buy one and bring it home”¹⁸. “If one of these imps would remain little, I think I would buy him and put him into buttons as a page for the young ladies. No, we won’t buy a black imp, but we’ll be home in June, please God”¹⁹. He carefully refrained from writing in this way in *The Virginians*. Since such treatment of the American blacks could hurt his interests, Thackeray’s rhetoric of racism became directed at the American Indians. They are depicted as “cruel, bloody, murderous, red-skinned villains”²⁰. The incident of George’s captivity during his campaign with General Braddock provides many examples of such attitude: “those who fell never rose again. The tomahawk did its work upon them”²¹, “the hardy old tutor... grieved for his dear pupil who lay under the savage Indian knife”²².

¹⁵ *The Virginians*, vol. II, p. 73.

¹⁶ *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. H. L. Gates, Chicago–London 1986, The University of Chicago Press, p. 23.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 404.

¹⁸ *The Two Thackerays...*, p. 490.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 493.

²⁰ *The Virginians*, vol. II, p. 261.

²¹ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 160.

²² *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 160.

They are such cruel villains, these French and their painted allies, that we do not think of showing them mercy. Only think, found but yesterday a little boy scalped but yet alive in a lone house, where his parents had been attacked and murdered by the savage enemy, of whom – so great is his indignation at their cruelty – our General has offered a reward of 5 I. for all the Indian scalps brought in.²³

Though the French and Indians are cited side by side, the atrocities of the war are attributed almost exclusively to Native Americans. Clearly, targeting his racist anxieties at the American Indians seems most affordable to Thackeray, although other nations are not altogether spared. A little opera singer, the acquaintance with whom almost spoils Harry's reputation, is French. Her mother, when Harry refuses to pay her debts, "retired breathing vengeance against the Iroquois: no Turk or Persian, she declared, would treat a lady so"²⁴. Elsewhere in the text we find the following dialogue:

"What a horrid, vulgar old woman that is; don't you think so?"

"What woman?" asked the young man.

"That German woman – my Lady Yarmouth – to whom all the men are bowing and cringing"²⁵.

But the Indians serve his purpose best because they are distant, other and quite defenceless²⁶. Unlike the French or Germans, they are not in the position to engage in literary or business relations with a British author.

To return to Virginia, this is how George talks about the way the half-Indian woman who saved his life was received on his family plantation:

They hardly gave her a welcome. I won't say what suspicions they had regarding her and me. The poor wretch fell to drinking whenever she could find means. I ordered that she should have food and shelter, and she became the jest of our negroes, and formed the subject of the scandal and tittle-tattle of the old fools in our little town²⁷.

Driven by anger and envy, the British characters address their American relatives as if they were Indians, thus illustrating the contemporary critical view that racism is based on habits of thought rather than physical characteristics. "Whereas racism is a well-attested social phenomenon, 'race'

²³ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 150.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 375.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 31.

²⁶ In his article "The Color of Politics in the United States", included in Dominic LaCapra's *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1991, Michael Goldfield describes Nathaniel Bacon, the leader of Bacon's Rebellion of 1676: "himself a member of the colonial elite and certainly a racist with respect to Indians, the logic of events had forced him to declare freedom for all the black and white servants and slaves who would follow him" (p. III) Perhaps the history of Indian racism in the South is older than that of black racism.

²⁷ *The Virginians*, vol. II, p. 295.

itself does not exist", says Tzvetan Todorov in the already quoted essay²⁸. "Sot, you little tobacconist! Sot, you Cherokee!", Mr William says to his cousin Harry²⁹. "Infernal young Choctaw! Is he teaching Fanny the war-dance?", he asks on another occasion³⁰. Fanny's mother, Lady Castlewood, reprimands her: "You double idiot! What are you going to do with the Huron? You don't want to marry a creature like that, and be a squaw in a wigwam"³¹. Soon Fanny comes to her senses: "She knew her station better. She did not want to be scalped by wild Indians, or eat up by bears"³². In Mr Walpole's epistolary account of Harry's visit to London he writes the following:

The Norfolk folk had been entertaining me on Tuesday with the account of a young savage Iroquois, Choctaw, or Virginian. [...] The Iroquois has been at Turnbridge, too – not cheating perhaps, but winning vastly. [...] The Huron took his hand off his tomahawk at this pacific rejoinder³³.

Fanny, Harry's American wife displays animosity towards his former British fiancée, Maria. Observing this, the narrator reacts: "I sometimes would remonstrate with Madam Harry, and ask her was she a Red Indian, that she tortured her victims so?"³⁴

In *The Virginians*, the most American of Thackeray's novels, racism and slavery find diverse manifestations. These are not only expressive of antagonisms between physically different people in particular historical contexts, but reflective of Thackeray's personal attitudes shaped by his childhood experiences, as well as the social and political atmosphere of the times he wrote in, in order not only to satisfy his ambitions but to make a living and protect his family's interests. In the maze of multiple, often conflicting forces operating upon him, Thackeray attempted to meet them all without committing himself to a single one. That, as he learned in 1857, is not the way to go about winning political campaigns.

²⁸ *Race Writing and...*, p. 370.

²⁹ *The Virginians*, vol. I, p. 21.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 179.

³¹ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 180.

³² *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 217.

³³ *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 121.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, vol. III, p. 334.

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RASIZM I NIEWOLNICTWO W POWIEŚCI THACKERAYA *THE VIRGINIANS*

The Virginians [1857], jeden z rzadziej omawianych utworów Thackeraya, jest zarazem jego najbardziej „amerykańską” powieścią. Dotyczy życia na plantacji tytoniu w Virginii w drugiej połowie osiemnastego wieku, w okresie walk kolonii o niezależność od Wielkiej Brytanii. Sposób, w jaki Thackeray przedstawia Amerykanów i ich czarnych niewolników, a także ich przyjęcie w Anglii, stanowi wyraz jego stosunku do kwestii rasizmu. Brak zdecydowanego stanowiska autora wobec rasizmu i niewolnictwa miał na celu pozyskanie czytelników i nabywców powieści zarówno w Wielkiej Brytanii, jak i na północy oraz południu Stanów Zjednoczonych w okresie wzmożonych konfliktów rasowych poprzedzającym wojnę domową w USA.