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A Picaresque Historical Novel: Ireland in W.M. Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon*

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The article is an examination of the construction of Ireland in Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon*. This relatively unstudied Thackeray text, simultaneously a rogue narrative and a historical novel, was written in the early part of the 1840s, and contains a curious mixture of common English stereotypes of Irishness, and a portrait of the Protestant Ascendancy in the 18th century. The novel is primarily interesting as an attempt to dramatize some of the effects of British imperialism in Ireland resulting from the imposition of a British class regime on Ireland.

Readers of Thackeray will easily conclude that the superficial moral of *Barry Lyndon* (1845), that "honesty is *not* the best policy",¹ is a recurrent theme in his novels. The career of Barry is not that different from the career of Becky Sharp: both are largely unrepentant rogues with some superior qualities, at least when it comes to intrigue. Thackeray's early novels rehearsed a picaresque version of social satire, projecting a world of universal social corruption that accommodates broadly two categories of characters: rogues and dupes, lesser or greater. At the same time, *Barry Lyndon* is a species of historical novel, in which a substantial amount of historical reference is used in a carefully constructed attempt to set Barry's picaresque adventures against a variety of historical developments in 18th century Europe, and Ireland in particular.

Barry Lyndon was never studied or treated as one of Thackeray's major works, and perhaps that explains in part why it received very little attention from postcolonial studies and Irish studies, although it should be a very interesting text for both, for a variety of reasons. It was written at a time when Irish politicians, and Daniel O'Connell in particular, demanded a repeal of the Union. Published in 1844, the novel appeared at the point in

¹ W.M. Thackeray, *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 310.



history just before the English-Irish relations were going to be dramatically redefined by the Famine. Another Irish context was that the novel was conceived in part as a parody of the conventions of the adventure novels by Irish novelists such as Samuel Lover and Charles Lever, in which the exploits of high-spirited and big-hearted Irish soldiers were celebrated, so that it appeared to some critics that Thackeray's intention was to undermine the simple sentimental stereotypes of Irishness entertained by such novelists.² The question of the relationship between the picture of Ireland in the novel and the fact that its writer was an Englishman should certainly attract the interest of postcolonial critics. In the context of Thackeray's entire oeuvre, *Barry Lyndon* is only one among several of his works with an Irish theme: another is *The Irish Sketch Book* (1843), a travel narrative, and yet another is *Pendennis*, his 1849 novel in which fictitious Irish characters are prominently featured in the depiction of the London literary scene. And finally, *Barry Lyndon* was one of the very novels with an Irish theme by a major mid-Victorian novelist; the English Victorian novelists usually allowed Ireland to occupy only the margins of representation, as an area of the United Kingdom too problematic to be brought to the narrative foreground. In this regard, *Barry Lyndon* is in fact one of the very few English mid-Victorian novels actually set in the colonial space, a precursor to more direct treatment of empire in, for instance, the work of Kipling or Conrad. However, my objective in this article is to examine a specific problem in the novel's construction of Irishness: the effect of the interplay of its picaresque and historical subtexts. Any consideration of *Barry Lyndon* as an "Irish" novel needs to pay attention to the fact that the portrayal of Ireland and the Irish in this novel is a function of social satire that comes with the rogue narrative as well as of historical interpretation that inevitably comes with the genre of historical novel.

In the world of *Barry Lyndon* there is very little narrative concern with peasantry or the middle classes, and the narrative eye is on the past and present aristocracies in Ireland. The novel deals with one of Thackeray's favorite themes—that of social mobility within a class system defined by patrician notions of distinction. Thackeray's novel tells the story of how a member of the dispossessed Irish aristocracy cons his way into the ranks of British aristocracy in the second half of the 18th century, only to be stripped of the winnings of his machinations at the end of the novel. The rogue's peregrinations are a structural requirement of the picaresque: Barry traverses the social space up and down, near and far, showing in the process moral corruption and social stagnation everywhere he goes—and indeed Barry's exploits call attention to the wretched state of colonial Ireland, the horror of European wars, the state culture of espionage permeating Fredrick's

² See Robert A. Colby, "Barry Lyndon and the Irish Hero," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 30 (1996): 109-130. In addition, Thackeray's story was loosely based for incident on the career of an adventurer by the name of Andrew Robinson Storey. Also, while traveling in Ireland Thackeray read the autobiography of an Irish highwayman, Captain James Freeny, and critics often claim that Barry Lyndon's autobiographical narrative style closely resembles that of Captain Freeny.





Prussia, etc. As Barry seeks to regain his family's possessions and status, he launches a process of reinventing himself that simultaneously involves two different tracks of identity and transformation—the class and the national ones. The story takes Barry from the still fresh family memories of the British elimination of the old Irish aristocracy to mid-18th century European wars in which he takes part as a soldier of fortune to the fulfillment of his ambition to be incorporated into the world of British aristocracy to return to Ireland during the heyday of the Protestant Ascendancy. The Irish theme of the novel is thus inseparable from its class theme, and its class theme is dramatized primarily in terms of the fortunes of the aristocracy in Ireland in the 18th century.

A Picaresque Historian

Since *Barry Lyndon* combines the genres of rogue narrative and historical novel, the representation of Ireland and the Irish is a curious mixture of stereotype and historical detail. Dashing, daring, double-dealing, tale-spinning, whisky-drinking, Barry embodies a series of stereotypes about Irish men that were widely circulated in England in Thackeray's time, deeply embedded as they were in popular prejudice. Thackeray would probably be surprised at the psychological complexity Barry received in Stanley Kubrick movie adaptation of the novel, which completely evacuated the picaresque comedy from the novel, overemphasizing in turn its social and psychological realism, and reinterpreting Barry as a tragic hero. But the meticulousness of historical detail with which Kubrick framed his reading of the novel is not out of place. After all, Thackeray's novel is awash in historical reference, as Barry shows up in a series of military, literary, and political period vignettes, with George III, Jonathan Swift, and Edmund Burke in cameo roles in the narrative background.

This interweaving of the fictional and the factual is done in the manner of the historical novel, reminiscent of the works of Walter Scott, and foreshadowing Thackeray's own *Henry Esmond*, one of the most carefully constructed historical novels of the Victorian era. The characters' fortunes, and Barry's in particular, are directly shaped by momentous historical events, such as the English wars of conquest in Ireland, British legislation discriminating against Irish Catholics, the revolt of the Whiteboys, the Seven Years' War, the American revolutionary war, etc. The often casually presented historical detail appears as part of Barry's immediate experience, to which he reacts in stride going this way or that, and this profusion of historical reference parallels some, though not all, of the defining moments in the turbulent history of Ireland in the 18th century. Barry slips in and out of different national contexts, so that the novel can certainly be said to be simultaneously about Irish, British, maybe even Prussian, and certainly about European history. However, the frame is Ireland—Barry's peregrinations begin and end in Ireland. This frame is defined by a history of the dispossession of the Irish aristocracy by the English from the 16th through the 18th century, which leaves Barry's family much reduced in status,





and by a modernization of British aristocracy at the end of the 18th century, in which Barry fails to maintain the aristocratic status he obtained by marrying Lady Lyndon.

On the other hand, Barry as a narrator refuses to assume the authority of a historiographer, and all the big historical events are presented by him as well-known but mind-boggling facts, most often without much reflexive effort. Speaking of his participation in the Seven Years' War for instance, Barry abdicates any explanatory attempt: "It would require a greater historian and philosopher than I am to explain the causes of [that war];" instead he promises not to "trouble my reader with any personal disquisitions regarding the matter" (67), and that promise not to analyze holds true of most of the novel. Yet this withdrawal from analysis does not mean that Barry withholds any sort of commentary, or that the novel does. In fact, the novel programmatically advocates a very specific perspective on historical events, which is referred to in a chapter title as the "near view." The aim of this near view is primarily to de-romanticize the heroic notion of history (usually defined in terms of power politics, court politics, powerful and charismatic men, and great events, and the whole pageantry of it):

and while we are at the present moment admiring the 'Great Frederick,' as we call him, his philosophy, and his liberality, and his military genius, I, who have served, 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 that sum-total of glory. (71)

On a closer look, "behind the scenes of [the] great spectacle,' history is a nightmare. A reluctant commentator who occasionally engages in dismantling "the lies of the world" (120), Barry takes the stance of a picaresque historian. In the 16th century, the Spanish picaresque started out as an anti-romantic mode that sought to dismantle the literary conventions and the political ideology of the chivalric romance. In a similar spirit, Barry writes as a picaresque historian when he refuses to give "any romantic narrative of the Seven Years' War" (101), and criticizes "gentlemen [who] talk of the age of chivalry" (71) when they talk of the war. At this point, Barry provides a look from below, speaking as a common soldier divided from the military elite by the barrier of class; but even later on, when he can claim with more success the appellation of gentleman, his narrative continues to provide unflattering close-ups of the governing elites of Europe.³ Since Barry is defined primarily in his relation to aristocratic elites, whether as a dispossessed outsider or an impostor insider, he is not concerned in the novel with other social groups or forces. He has little to do with the fledgling middle classes of Ireland, and the peasantry he registers only when they rise in violent uprisings, and even then from afar. But from his

³ Later, in *Henry Esmond*, Thackeray employed the same trope of writing history based on the experience of a first-hand witness whose social status is lower than the status of his characters.



position of aristocratic dispossession (no matter how constructed his link to the old Irish aristocracy is) and from his position of aristocratic pretension he can take a close look at the aristocratic world. Which also means that Barry's claim of historiographic incompetence is in part disingenuous: we do get glimpses of the big picture (as Barry sees it), allusive, fragmentary, and very subjective as they are, but certainly critical of aristocratic politics. Significantly, the novel grounds the authority of the demystifying function of the "near view" in Barry's marginalized position on the grand stage of European history – because he takes part in all these events as an Irishman with no actual stake in the wars waged (except his wages as a mercenary), he is more sensitive to the actual horror, crime and misery behind the aristocratic ideologies and practices of war.

A problem with Barry's account of any situation, Ireland included, is of course that we have to take his word for it. To Barry's dramatic talent, displayed in numerous picaresque escapades, Thackeray adds a talent for narrative self-dramatization, creating a narrator who vis-à-vis one of his early experiments in fabrication boasts of "a fluency that almost made [him] believe in the stories he invented" (79). Thackeray early in the novel undermines the reliability of Barry's narration early by affixing a footnote by the "editor" of the story, that "with respect to the Irish principality claimed by him, it is known that Mr. Barry's grandfather was an attorney and maker of his own fortune" (8). In retrospect we know that Barry was just one in a series of Thackeray's unreliable narrators.⁴ However, there is also no reason to suppose that his editors were any more reliable. To say the least, the "editor" of this novel is not so much a coherent authorial viewpoint for rehearsing moral judgment over Barry's fabrications and actions, as an instrument of introducing yet further instability into the very business of judging. The editor most often assumes the exaggerated tone of politely defending English audiences against the elaborately persuasive constructions of Barry's narrative, and thus he effectively functions as a stereotype of "English" rationality patiently and politely exposing the "Irish" disposition to invention. But if both Barry and the editor are constructed as stereotypes (English stereotypes about the Irish and about how the English cope with the folly of the Irish), that does not mean that the novel downplays the significance of invention in Barry's narrative. Barry's account of his family history is deliberately and emphatically inflected by a measure of invention; in particular, Barry's claim of descent from the kings of Ireland is undermined both by his status as a picaresque character and narrator, and by the general casting of Ireland as a culture given to myth-making. Since Thackeray's novel was the work of an Englishman writing for an English audience, no character of his could criticize things Irish

⁴ In the context of Thackeray's fiction, Barry is a characteristic narrator, which means ironic, self-contradicting, and entertaining, and his presumably Irish penchant for fibbing constitutes a great part of his appeal. Barry's narratorial playfulness sets him apart in the context of moralizing 19th century fiction (which is continually referenced in the novel), just as his picaresque histrionics makes him marginal to the (dominant ideologies of) Englishness in the same way Becky Sharp will later function in *Vanity Fair*.





with the same authority that for instance some 70 years later Stephen Dedalus will have when speaking of the “broken lights of Irish myth”⁵ – that is, when alluding to the same nostalgia for a mythical glorious past interrupted by the English conquest of Ireland. Moreover, Barry’s frequent ideological identification with the British ruling elite in Ireland, opportunistic and inconsistent as it is, necessarily erodes still further the legitimacy of the novel’s satire of Irish invention. However, in a small but important episode the novel signals that historical myth-making is widely practiced; when soldiering in Europe Barry meets a German scholar who “knew a great deal more about Ireland than [he] did” (90), and who disposes of some Irish as well as English foundation myths as historically unfounded. While the German scholar does not give a detailed account of the fallacies of these foundation myths, his very presence in the text is a cipher of the important divide between national myth-making and the possibility of a critical historiography.

As a character, Barry is a picaresque hero in that he remains unreconstructed – the nature of Barry’s adventures is essentially episodic, without any teleological drift into *Bildungsroman* territory. Barry certainly does not get any better over the course of the narrative; indeed, some critics suggested that he gets much worse.⁶ At the very least there is a constancy to his roguery, and he avails himself freely of his talent for imposture at fifteen in Dublin as he does later throughout Europe, while his conduct in the European war is scarcely less revolting than his treatment of his wife. True enough, Barry seems to be able to make progress in worldly knowledge, which means that he gets to know more of rogues and dupes; but his worldliness is of a picaresque tunnel-vision kind, that is, he remains subject to a basic premise of picaresque narratives, which is that no one is exempt from getting conned, and, appropriately, he is finally duped and outmaneuvered himself.

The Irish society that circumscribes Barry’s adventures in the novel is constructed as a static picaresque arena of stagnation and corruption. This is given an explanation in the manner of a historical novel: from the very first pages the present state of Ireland is associated with the effects of a series of English incursions over the centuries, which in turn rendered Irish history (represented in Barry’s narrative by his family) into a history of discontinuities and dispossessions. The novel depicts the Irish society as it evolved under British rule in the 18th century as both Malthusian, in that its economy is one of scarcity, and Hobbesian, in that in it individual interest overrides any idea of social cohesion, leading to constant strife. Barry is a thorough individualist, or as Joseph F.

⁵ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Bedford Books: Boston, 1993, p.159.

⁶ See for instance, Gordon N. Ray, in *Thackeray. The Uses of Adversity 1811-1846*. London: Oxford University Press, 1955. Ray states that Thackeray “desired to bring out the terrible change worked on the as yet plastic character of a young man by adherence to false standards of gentlemanliness,” and he quotes the view of George Saintsbury that Barry transformed “from the not ‘ungenerous scapegrace of the early chapters, and the not altogether hateful picaro of the middle ... into the unmitigated and even cowardly scoundrel at the end,’” 345).





Connelly remarked, “Barry is loyal only to himself”;⁷ in this light, it is impossible to regard him either as a proponent of British imperialism or as a precursor of Irish nationalism. Barry’s education in the ways of roguery begins in his teenage years in Ireland, where “everyone [he] knew was bitter poor” (16), a simple statement of the kind of conclusion about the state of Ireland reached by Jonathan Swift early in the century. Barry is first duped by an entire ensemble of relatives into thinking he killed an English officer in a duel, then he is off to Dublin under the fake identity of a wealthy Irish squire, only to be cheated there out of his modest possessions by a pair of confidence artists, who ironically earned his trust by warning him that Dublin is a place “where rogues and adventurers of all countries abound” (52), but who were themselves tricked into believing that he is wealthier than he actually is. All this back and forth roguery in the early part of the novel suggests a society of scarcity in which money is hard to get by and no price is too high to get it. Running away from his Irish creditors Barry enlists in the British Army, and while he effectively becomes an exile his roguery continues to be represented in the novel as part of his Irish cultural baggage formed under British colonial rule. Importantly, it is not only Ireland that appears in the picaresque light in the novel, but all of Europe. Speaking of his skill as a gamester at courts around Europe, Barry observes: “What you call fair play would have been a folly. [...] None but men of courage and genius could live in a society where everyone was bold and clever” (136), meaning a society where everyone competed in daring deception. Earlier, telling a Prussian captain the story of an Irish soldier who outwitted his Prussian officers into letting him go back to Ireland, Barry gives the title of the “cleverest nation in the world” to the Irish (82).

English or Irish? Barry Lyndon and the Protestant Ascendancy

Barry’s Irishness is a complex affair, perhaps hybrid but certainly unstable. Superficially, his national identity seems to parallel the changing rhetoric of national identity that characterized the politics of the Protestant landowners in Ireland in the 18th century. His background is relatively untypical for the Anglo-Irish elite: according to Barry’s account of his family history, he is born into an Irish gentry family of Anglo-Norman descent dispossessed on several occasions from the 16th century to the 18th at the hands of the English invaders. His father’s conversion from Catholicism to Anglicanism will later pave the road for Barry’s attempt to work his way into the British aristocracy (such cases were not unknown in early 18th-century Ireland, though they were by no means the main source of staffing the Protestant land-owning elite). Throughout the novel, Barry’s identity vacillates between “Irish” and “English,” in relation to how others see him or how he wishes

⁷ Joseph F. Connelly, “Transparent Poses: *Castle Rackrent* and *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon*,” *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 19:2 (1979), p. 41.





to be seen. His parents eloped to England to get married, and continued to live there for a while; after his father died, his mother took him back to Ireland where people started calling her the “English widow,” and Barry the “English Redmond.” By the “English” in “English Redmond,” Barry’s Irish acquaintances register the fact of his residence in London (presumably as an index of social distinction). But this metaphorically charged name can also be seen as a reminder that Ireland belongs to that part of the world dominated by the English red, as well as an indication that Barry is identified with English rule. As an exiled adventurer in Europe, Barry is sometimes perceived as an English gentleman, sometimes as an Irish gentleman, mostly depending on his own opportunistic representation of himself. To his enemies among the English aristocracy, he is known as the “insolent Irish upstart” (271), and the “Irish Bluebeard” (276), the latter on account of his abusive treatment of his wife. In a telling example of colonial discourse, Lady Lyndon refers to him as Caliban: the very choice of the name squarely suggests that Lady Lyndon acknowledges that she belongs to the ranks of the colonizers, while Barry belongs to the native and the colonized. Because of Caliban’s status in Shakespeare’s play as not quite human, Lady Lyndon’s identification of Barry with Caliban also means that she intends to attach an irreducible difference to him, and to explain his villainy as a consequence of his racial otherness.

In one of many episodes of assumed identity, young Barry calls himself an “Englishman,” adding to himself that “he never knew a true Tory gentleman of Ireland who did not wish he could say as much” (51). In Barry’s understanding at this point, being “English” in Ireland is conceived as a matter of political ideology and social status. There is no implication of ethnic descent in this usage—what Barry has in mind here of course is neither the category of the “Old English,” meaning the descendants of Anglo-Norman invaders, nor the category of the English in Ireland, by which at the beginning of the 18th century the Anglo-Irish landowners still often described themselves in view of their English connections and origins—which changed as the rise of Irish Protestant patriotism over the course of the century redefined the national imagination of the Protestant landowning elite to the point of its adoption of the term “Irish”—which happened for complex reasons as the oligarchy tried to consolidate its power in Ireland while developing a mistrust of the English policies on Ireland. What Barry means by being English is an active identification with and appropriation of “Englishness” as a marker of the special privileges of the Protestant elite in Ireland over the rest of the population of Ireland. As he entertains these sentiments presumably around 1760, when Protestant Patriotism was actually in full swing, his espousal of Englishness at the expense of Irishness appears a throwback to the pre-patriotism days of the Protestant landed elite.⁸ At the same time young Barry entertains anti-English sentiments too, aware as he is of the family history of

⁸ In historiography the term Protestant patriotism is conventionally used to describe the attitudes of the landowning episcopalian elite regarding Irish/English relations.



dispossession at the hands of the English. Later on, after his marriage to Lady Lyndon makes him take possession of an Irish estate and thus qualify for the social, economic, and political membership in the Ascendancy, his early resentment of the English, fostered by the memories of dispossession, is supplemented by mistrust of the metropolitan English intentions regarding Ireland characteristic of the Ascendancy. However, throughout the novel Barry, like his mother, never questions the fact of British rule; his attempt to work his way into the British aristocracy speaks of his fascination with the metropolitan world; he stands for the Westminster parliament in an attempt to extend his political influence in the metropolitan world; even his intended audience is an English rather than an Irish audience.

While Barry habitually claims Englishness to legitimate his status, he is never fully deracinated, and in some situations he refers to himself as Irish, as he does emphatically on meeting his uncle for the first time (“I am an Irishman”—115). If Barry’s declarations in conversations with other characters are pragmatically ambivalent, so is his Irish ideology when he writes of matters Irish. Not endowed with great eloquence when it comes to political commentary, and an opportunist to boot, Barry still inscribes his autobiographical narrative with an interesting array of views on Ireland. Claiming staunch Anglicanism (“If I have any principle, it is respect for the Establishment, and a hearty scorn and abhorrence of all other forms of belief,” 265), he writes at the same time of his practicing and supporting religious tolerance and even reconciliation. A propos of his socializing with the Catholic priest of his parish, he states that it earned him the reputation of “a dangerous leveller among his neighbours” (250), meaning among the Protestant gentry of Ireland. Invoking his family history and his experiences abroad (most notably, the Seven-Year War, which was impossible to explain in religious terms), Barry laments the importance of religious factionalism in Irish life, and seems in his narrative to often be on the verge of proposing a non-religious concept of Irish identity, though it never quite happens. The account of his family history with which the book opens emphasizes the traumas of Irish Catholic gentry and nobility from the 16th century on, but his own father converted to Anglicanism for the dual benefit of usurping his Catholic brother’s estate (which was possible under the British penal laws discriminating against Catholics) and marrying an Irish gentry woman who was Anglican. The friendship between Barry and his Catholic uncle – whom his father dispossessed – emerges in this context as a peculiar figure of national reconciliation, a sort of pact between differently dispossessed generations of the dispossessed. Barry and the Chevalier share the same grievance generated by the usurpation of their family lands by an Englishman named Lyndon during Elizabeth’s reign, and they also share the same goal of getting the estates back. When later Barry decides to lay siege to Lady Lyndon, he does so in revenge for being called “a low Irish blackleg,” but also because marrying her would mean reacquiring his family’s property, which she “unjustly held,” since “unjust confiscations in the time of Elizabeth and her father” (181).

This desire to rectify historical injustice is thus depicted not simply as a matter of restoring the old state of affairs, but also as a function of English social and racial condescension





– Barry is in some way a product of the British practices of subjection and exclusion. His occasional anti-English sentiment is originally informed by the political memory of historical grievances that connect him to the Irish Catholic gentry of the past. After his marriage to Lady Lyndon, who belongs to the ranks of the Anglo-Irish landowning elite (which usurped and supplanted the Catholic gentry), Barry is co-opted, though not too smoothly, into the social world of the Protestant Ascendancy. For his curious combination of loyalty to the monarchy and the Anglican Church on the one hand and a persistent mistrust of English interests in Ireland on the other hand, Barry superficially appears to invoke the sentiments often associated with Protestant patriotism in the 18th century. The tradition of Irish Protestant political practice from Swift to Grattan was characterized, in the words of Parick McNally, by “a patriotic philosophy designed to defend the rights of the Irish Parliament, the Church of Ireland, the Irish economy and the rights of the Irish Protestants to be treated as equals with their English brethren”.⁹ Indeed, Barry resembles a Protestant patriot in that he adopts a language of equal privilege and legitimacy for the Irish Protestant elite, and in that he laments the effects of British rule on Irish society in general; in practice, however, he remains largely uninterested in Irish politics during the crucial period of Protestant patriotism from 1782 to 1800, when the political goals of the Protestant patriots were first realized, with the constitutional changes that led to the establishment of Grattan’s parliament, and then dashed, with the Act of Union that had a powerful impact on the political and national imagination of both the Protestant Ascendancy and the disenfranchised Catholic majority, and that marked the end of the era of Protestant patriotism. So, if Barry shares some Protestant patriot sentiments, his espousal of an Irish identity never amounts to a full-fledged version of Protestant Irish patriotism, and certainly not a politically articulate one. It is especially curious that the legislative arrangement of relative independence for the Irish Parliament in 1782 is only indirectly referred to in Barry’s narrative, even though one of Barry’s aims is Irish peerage (which would have placed him in the Dublin parliament). Not to mention that Barry makes no reference to the revolutionary period of the 1790s, when another Protestant Irish leader, Wolfe Tone, redefined the politics of national identity in Ireland by proposing a united Irish identity (beyond religious factionalism), as well as a separatist policy regarding Ireland’s relations with Britain. Thackeray’s construction of Barry’s political/national hybridity can be seen for all these reasons as an index of Barry’s antiquated political philosophy—far from being a separatist, and a little less far from being a Protestant patriot, Barry’s political views are principally informed by a nostalgia for “an old Ireland” of the “good old times and usages” (41),¹⁰ and by a historically belated attempt to join the

⁹ Patrick McNally, “‘The Whole People of Ireland’: patriotism, national identity and nationalism in eighteenth-century Ireland,” in *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender, Space* (edited by Scott Brewster, Virginia Crossman, Fiona Becket and David Alderson). London: Routledge, 1999, p. 39.

¹⁰ The nostalgia for the Irish aristocratic past finds another expression in his nostalgia for pre-1789 Europe.



ranks of the aristocracy the way he fantasizes it once was—a gallant elite of gamblers. This makes him in effect marginal to the main currents of Irish politics and of Irish/English relations, even as he seems to embody some of the social qualities that Louis MacNeice identified as the chief characteristics of the Ascendancy mentality: “nothing but an insidious *bonhomie*, an obsolete bravado, and a way with horses”.¹¹ In other words, Barry’s nostalgic aristocratic taste does overlap to some extent with the flamboyant aspects of the aristocratic culture of the Ascendancy, but he generally lacks its political focus.

On returning to Ireland from his European and English exploits, equipped with Lady Lyndon’s economic and social capital, Barry asserts that he “gave the fashion to Dublin, [...] a beggarly, savage city in those days,” and he goes on, “and, since the time there has been a pothole about the Union, and the misfortunes attending it, I have been at a loss to account for the mad praises of the old order of things, which the fond Irish patriots have invented” (249). The timeframe here is significant. In an “editorial” footnote Barry’s autobiography is dated to the year 1800, that is the year of the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland, which put an end to the Dublin parliament. Barry “gave the fashion” to Dublin in the 1780s, during the golden age of Protestant patriotism, so that the “fond Irish patriots” and the “Irish party” of which Barry speaks on this occasion refer to the Protestant oligarchy of the 1780s, and its pride in the social order epitomized by its relatively independent political institutions, and by its attempt to create a stately aristocratic culture centering in Dublin. Barry however comes to Dublin as a snobbish cosmopolitan familiar with the fashionable circles of England and Europe, and he regards with feigned bafflement the pride of the patriots in Dublin’s greatness and fashionable society. While he obviously enjoys taking his place in Dublin as a member of the Protestant oligarchy, he also foregrounds the poverty of the Irish capital, which he describes as “the Warsaw of our part of the world: there was a splendid, ruined, half-civilized nobility, ruling over a half-savage population” (249). These words of class condescension could be taken as evidence of the power of a particularly English culture of classism of which Barry is a sort of by-product. Yet, they could also be taken as a succinct statement of the condition of Ireland under British rule. The mention of Warsaw, the capital of Poland divided among its imperialist neighbors, instills Barry’s words with an unspoken, but clear indictment of internal European imperialism: Dublin and Warsaw can be understood as analogous examples of disastrous effects of foreign rule on national life in 18th century Europe. Barry continues his description of Dublin:

The College, the public buildings, and the great gentry’s houses were splendid [...] but people were in a state more wretched than any vulgar I have ever known: the exercise of their religion was only half-allowed to them; their clergy was forced to be educated out of the country; [...] there was a Protestant nobility, and in the towns, poor,

¹¹ Quoted in R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1792*. London: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 168.



insolent Protestant corporations, with a bankrupt retinue of mayors, aldermen, and municipal officers, all of whom [...] had the public voice in the country; but there was no sympathy and connexion between the upper and the lower people of the Irish. To one who had been bred so much abroad as myself, this difference between Catholic and Protestant was [...] striking. (249-50)

Here Barry first acknowledges the showpiece accomplishments of the Ascendancy culture in Dublin (Trinity College, government buildings, homes of the gentry), but then calls attention to the poverty of the ordinary people. From there, the focus of commentary shifts from Dublin to Ireland, and Barry lists the reasons, as he sees them, for the devastating fragmentation and polarization of Irish society: religious discrimination against Catholics, class and religious tension between Protestant aristocracy and Catholic peasantry, creation of an insular Protestant urban middle class anchored in the religiously exclusive structures of administration created by English-imposed laws. I have quoted the above passage at length because it repeats to a great extent Thackeray's own views on Ireland from *The Irish Sketch Book* published a few years earlier, in the conclusion to which he asserts that it is hard to have "an opinion about Ireland," because there are two irreconcilable truths to it, one Catholic and the other Protestant. Earlier in that book he wrote, not without some condescension, that "[w]hat you want here is not a Catholic or Protestant party, but an Irish party",¹² as if the sectarian division was merely the result of internal power struggles. But later in the conclusion to the book he acknowledged that the division of Irish society was generated by "our laws," meaning British rule:

wretched as it is, the country is steadily advancing [...] and let us hope that the *middle class*, which this prosperity must generate (and of which our laws have hitherto forbidden the existence in Ireland, making there a population of Protestant aristocracy and Catholic peasantry), will exercise the greatest and most beneficial influence over the country. Too independent to be bullied by priest or squire—having their interest in quiet, and alike indisposed to servility or to rebellion; may not as much be hoped from the gradual formation of such a class, as from any legislative meddling? It is the want of the middle class that has rendered the squire so arrogant and the clerical and political demagogue so powerful; and I think Mr. O'Connell himself would say that the existence of such a body would do more for the steady acquirement of orderly freedom, than the occasional outbreak of any crowd, influenced by any eloquence from altar and tribune. (376-77)

This could have been written by almost any English liberal essayist or politician from the 1840s; the passage resonates very much with a realization that British laws and British rule are largely responsible for the polarization and stagnation of Irish society. More

¹² W.M. Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, in *The Yellowplush Papers, etc.* London: Caxton Publishing House, n.d., p. 288.





desirable than a violent revolution and more effective than legislative reform, the rise of an ideologically and economically independent Irish middle class would go a longer way towards the “steady acquirement of orderly freedom”—the phrase could have been authored by T.B. Macaulay, and is generally not incompatible with the Whig view of history. Thackeray proffers here the political culture of liberal gradualism that he associates with the middle class as the most appropriate solution to the problems of Ireland, one which he even believes would be reconcilable with the political agenda of the most prominent Irish politician at the time, Daniel O’Connell, whose political activism brought about Catholic Emancipation. In the early 1840s, just as Thackeray was writing *The Irish Sketch Book* and *Barry Lyndon*, O’Connell campaigned for the repeal of the Act of Union. Thackeray’s Irish travel book exudes a sense of doubt about the effectiveness of the Union to resolve the Irish question, even though it does not in any way address openly the ponderous questions of legislative and political arrangements between Ireland and Britain: in other words, it does not directly tackle the question of Irish home rule, let alone independence. Thackeray’s evocation of the rise of the middle class as the solution to Irish problems raises all kinds of questions of how civil harmony can be accomplished in a country so deeply divided as a consequence of imperialism, and these questions are left unanswered. But even as Thackeray is reserved in this respect as a “writer of light literature” befuddled by the enormity of the problem, he still acknowledges the profoundly detrimental effects of British imperialism on Irish society.

An unreconstructed aristocrat

As I have noted before, Barry wants to enter the ranks of the British aristocracy ruling over Ireland, even though he also holds a grudge against it, and even though he occasionally becomes a critic of it. His co-optation is never complete. Sometimes Barry takes a great deal of pride in his aristocratic tastes: for instance, when it comes to his favorite occupation of gambling, Barry sees himself as a defender of the old ways of the aristocracy threatened by the ideological offensive of the middle classes. On the other hand, after marrying Lady Lyndon and assuming patrician status in England, where he is often treated with suspicion, he boasts that he “opened the eyes” of the middle class of the small town of Hackton to “their degradation” at the hands of a local aristocrat. So he chooses to annoy the English aristocracy by mixing socially with the middle class. Similarly, when in Ireland, he builds social, class, and religious bridges by socializing freely with Catholics. Again, there is no purity of ideological motive here—Barry’s actions are never without a pragmatic purpose. Shortly after bragging of “instruct[ing]” the commoners of Hackton in social rebellion, and after reaping the benefit of their support in elections, he is ostracized from patrician circles on account of his treatment of his stepson. Still determined to make an appearance at a local event, he complains about having to mix with “your apothecaries, wine-merchants, attorneys, and such scum as are allowed to





attend our public assemblies” (273). Representing dispossession as well as privilege Barry’s class attitudes remain throughout the novel a contradictory mixture of egalitarianism and unreflexive snobbery.

The writer of *The Irish Sketch Book* and *Barry Lyndon* viewed Ireland largely as he viewed England, as a society profoundly structured by a hierarchical class regime, which several years later he will name and analyze in *The Book of Snobs* (1846-47), a satirical taxonomy of snobbish culture. For Thackeray, snobbery was an attitude of class obsequiousness towards the classes above and class arrogance towards the classes below, which was stimulated by patrician mechanisms of social promotion, and which created a myriad of cultures of snobbery at different levels of the social hierarchy. This culture spread throughout both metropolitan and colonial society, so that it was found throughout “this Empire on which [...] the sun never sets”.¹³ Barry too strives for social distinction within the English system of social capital. Furthermore, what brings Barry down, the fundamental flaw of his hubris, is his attempt to beat the English aristocracy at their game without being aware of the fact that the rules of the game are changing. The examples of this failure proliferate. A central thing that Barry fails to appreciate is that the idea of aristocracy he strives to emulate is being antiquated—the pleasure-pursuing gallant is giving way to the business-minded capitalist landowner. This process was perhaps best researched by David Cannadine, who claimed that somewhere between 1780 and 1820 the upper classes in Britain remade themselves. Estates were amalgamated, possessions internationalized, and a new British upper class emerged, rather than solely English, Scottish, Irish, or Welsh. Agriculture remained the main source of income for the landowning elite, but it was rationalized and made more efficient. Mineral wealth found on the estates of the aristocracy became a new and important source of revenue for the class, as well as large infrastructural projects such as canals. The expansion of towns often filled aristocratic coffers, and was sometimes even managed by the patricians themselves. The patrician grip on the armature of the state was no less firm than before; in fact, it became more elaborate with the growth of the personnel of government. The territorial consolidation, argues Cannadine, was accompanied by “a formidable concentration and consolidation of political power in the hands of the landowning classes”.¹⁴ Significantly enough, Barry takes part in most of these processes: he takes over the Lyndon estates in England and Ireland, purchases mines in Cornwall and his ancestral estates in Ireland, hopes to attain Irish peerage, runs for the Westminster parliament. He fails miserably—he does not seek to manage his properties prudently (he boasts of having “little of that base spirit of economy” [240], in contrast to his aristocratic rivals the Tiptoffs), wastes a tremendous amount of money, devastates the resources of his English estate, and in addition to

¹³ W.M. Thackeray, W.M. *The Book of Snobs*, in *Contributions to “Punch.”* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900, p. 305.

¹⁴ David Cannadine. *Aspects of Aristocracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, p. 21.





frittering away his economic capital, he fails to network successfully with the British elite. In this regard, it could be said that Barry has a Quixotic touch in that he is uniquely unequipped to come to terms with the drifts of historical change, prefiguring in that way the Quixotic disorientation of Henry Esmond or Colonel Newcome in Thackeray's later novels.

In his own terms Barry fails gallantly—spending tremendous fortunes in style, trying to outdo in conspicuous consumption the British patricians who are not really trying hard to spend extravagantly. His ostentation proceeds from adherence to an older hedonistic aristocratic paradigm, which is certainly on the wane. The full scope of his failure becomes obvious when he realizes that he is inferior to the British aristocracy even in the one skill he believed himself unrivalled in—trickery: “even I could not stand against these accomplished gamesters” (246). At the height of his fortune he starts losing money at card play and betting, but the master stroke of trickery of which he is the dupe is the piece of intrigue orchestrated by Redmond Quin, his wife and her relatives, the result of which is Lady Lyndon's escape from his tyranny and a legal arrangement barring him from using her and her son's property. Trying to beat the aristocracy at its own game, he finds himself beaten at his.¹⁵

But while Barry is a failure at playing an aristocrat, the very status of play in the novel is an interesting affair. Play in the meaning of gambling is featured in the text as part of an 18th century aristocratic habitus (“an institution of chivalry”), which Barry overdoes. Much as this is an indication of Barry's failed modernity, Thackeray also uses it to satirize mid-19th century middle-class attitudes to making money. Middle-class proscription of play as an immoral way of making money Barry expressly ridicules, suggesting that the morality of speculation or any kind of capitalist enterprise is similarly flawed because similarly dependent on chance and not effort (“The broker of the exchange who bulls and bears [...] what is he but a gamester? The merchant who deals in tea and tallow, is he any better?”). Though Barry's denunciation of “a conspiracy of the middle classes against gentlemen” (129) resonates with the frustrated pathos of observing the rise of a new class and its ideology, it also exposes a contradiction between the practices of capitalism and the middle-class ideology of self-help. In this regard, transcending the Irish question and the class question, Barry points to a fundamental ethical problem of capitalism when it comes to the middle-class ideologies of the acquisition of wealth, suggesting in the process that all capitalism is a gaming practice. Another form of playing in the novel is the picaresque one, comprising Barry's great talent for acting, conning, and intrigue that helps him move swiftly up the social hierarchy. Barry is featured as a master player who

¹⁵ Parenthetically, let me point out that Redmond Quin occupies the very margins of the narrative, but he possesses the social understanding Barry lacks. Quin is an updated version of Barry's, bearing his name and enjoying the privileges of being a sort of his social protégé and disciple. Quin is structurally necessary to the uncompromising view of the social world as one of picaresque deception.





perceptively recognizes and skillfully manipulates codes of behavior of different social groups. Also, he relishes the very act of playing. Writing his memoirs in old age, Barry nostalgically contrasts the lavishness and playfulness of the society of his youth with the selfish thrift and ennui of the modern society presumably dominated by the middle classes. He was “Irish enough by birth to reckon silver the least part of any game”¹⁶ – these words which describe Kipling’s *Kim* certainly testify to the power of a British stereotype about the Irish; but they also capture the ethos of Barry Lyndon, another player in a different kind of game. Needless to say, Barry’s love of play for play’s sake is at odds with both the remaking of the aristocracy and the thrift and the morality of the advancing middle classes. As a result, his marginal habitus occupies a place outside the ideological orders of both the new patrician elite and the rising middle classes, which in turn becomes a foothold for a characteristically Thackerayean version of social satire.

But while Barry’s identity is playful and even critical, he does not achieve self-reflection: unlike Kipling’s *Kim*, another inhabitant of plural ethnic identities, who asks himself repeatedly “Who is *Kim*?”, Barry does not even raise that kind of question, let alone try to answer it – he merely performs identities as he sees fit. [Not that *Kim* expressly answers his own question, but at least he raises it.] Barry’s identity is a very picaresque affair, a function of pragmatic impulse. But this picaresque Irish identity is basically restricted: regardless of all the easy performance, the stratagem, and the trickery, the basic assumption of the text is pessimistic as it imagines some circumstances as unchangeable, such as the British rule in Ireland, and some boundaries as uncrossable, such as the class and religious divisions in Ireland. This is very much a consequence of the novel’s rehearsal of the picaresque, which, as Michael McKeon extensively argued, is a conservative mode because its brand of social criticism privileges emphasis on stagnation at the expense of imagination of change.¹⁷ Suggestions to the contrary in the novel are not altogether missing, and small changes are not imagined as unlikely – some of Barry’s actions figure possibilities of alleviating sectarian divisions, and Barry’s being dispatched into folk legend at the end of the book version of the novel signifies that the novel understood the power of the popular imagination to transmute and reinvent history. But overall the novel’s concern with the aristocracy only offers a limited view of the condition of Ireland in the 18th century – Ireland appears to Thackeray, as an Englishman writing in the early 1840s, as a country stuck between a not yet antiquated imperial order and a not yet emergent order whose contours he cannot even begin to discern.

¹⁶ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*. London: Penguin, 1989, p. 84.

¹⁷ See Michael McKeon. *The Origins of the English Novel*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

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PIKARSKI POVIJESNI ROMAN: IRSKA U ROMANU *BARRY LYNDON* W.M. THACKERAYA

Ovaj esej se bavi slikom Irske u romanu *Barry Lyndon* W.M. Thackeraya.

Taj tekst, kojim se kritika relativno malo bavila, istodobno pikarska pripovijest i povijesni roman, napisan je početkom 1840-ih, te sadrži neobičnu mješavinu čestih onovremenih engleskih stereotipa o irskosti, ali i interesantan portret anglo-irske protestantske zemljoposjedničke elite u 18 stoljeću. Roman je prvenstveno interesantan kao pokušaj da se učinci britanskog imperijalizma na irsko društvo promotre kroz dinamiku klasnog sustava koji je britanska vladavina nametnula Irskoj.

