

Thackeray as a Critic of Fiction

The largest and most consistent body in Thackeray's critical legacy is his criticism of fiction. At the same time it represents that part of his criticism which, in my opinion, has preserved much of its original freshness down to the present day and contains many critical judgments which have been fully confirmed by posterity. This is of course not very surprising, since criticism of fiction was undoubtedly the sphere for which Thackeray as critic was best endowed, cultivating as he did the art of fiction himself, and with remarkable success, and being excellently prepared for his critical task by his uncommonly extensive reading in this particular sphere of literature, a fact shown, *inter alia*, by the great number of fiction writers in the list presented in my first chapter. What may seem surprising, however, is the fact that by far the greatest part of his criticism of fiction is concerned with the productions of writers who represent a creative approach either greatly differing from or even opposite to his own, and that fiction of the type he himself cultivated does not stand in the foreground of his critical interest. This fact ceases to surprise us, however, when we consider on the first hand the situation in English literature in the first half of the 1830s, when Thackeray started working as literary critic, and on the other his own position in that literature when he began to publish his own imaginative works.

At the beginning of the 1830s, as is generally accepted, English literature found itself in a stage of temporary interregnum, when no great authors appeared to assume the place of the giants of the Romantic period and to satisfy the demands of the substantially increased reading public, nursed upon Scott's novels and Byron's poetry, and craving for more literary nourishment of this kind. The situation did not escape the notice of enterprising publishers, who began to publish any new novel or poem offered to them, regardless of its artistic quality. The outcome was the flooding of the book market by literary trash, both fiction and poetry. As far as fiction is concerned, most of the authors of this sort of "literature" were imitators of Scott, some of them being his successors in a direct line (the historical novelists), while others were not so immediately indebted to him, imbibing rather the whole spirit of the Romantic movement and seeking for inspiration in an exclusive milieu of exotic lands, the criminal underworld, the idealized world of the highest social classes, adventures of various kinds, and so forth. It was in a way a relapse into Romanticism on a large scale, but a degenerate Romanticism, inferior from the point of view of art and purely escapist in character. Besides the main products of this pseudo-Romantic revival — historical romance, the so-called Newgate and Silver-Fork novel and the novel of adventure — two new modes appeared in this and especially in the following decade, when the popularity of the older varieties was on the wane, the novel *à la thèse* and the Christmas story, which were certainly written with a more serious purpose, but were predominantly cultivated by inferior writers, some of whom had excelled in the previous literary fashion and simply adopted the new one as the former lost its popularity.

By the time Thackeray started to work as a professional literary critic, he was already a connoisseur of romantic fiction and a highly critical one at that. As the records of his reading show, he definitely overcame his youthful predilection for fiction of this type during his study at Cambridge, and from the time he left the University up to the last few years of his life (when his early enthusiasm for romances to a certain extent revived) he never read this type of fiction with uncritical eyes. And when he began to cultivate the art of fiction himself (though at first in minor forms), his critical opinion of fiction based on a creative approach greatly differing from or opposite to his own became even more clearly and sharply defined. Here he was indeed on firm ground, as is more than amply proved by the unambiguous and consistent attitude he assumed, as a professional critic, in his sharp critical campaign not only against the products of the pseudo-Romantic revival, but also against the other two literary fashions just referred to which he encountered in the course of his critical career.

Not long after the beginning of the new outburst of Romanticism, however, another great writer, Charles Dickens, appeared on the English literary scene alongside Thackeray and began to lay the foundations of the nineteenth-century realistic novel, which we may indeed see as a revival and adaptation to new conditions of an already existing form. Similar developments, against a similar literary background, may be observed in the immediately preceding period in Germany, where Goethe was producing his great novels and in Thackeray's time in France, where Balzac and Stendhal were beginning to write. Especially in the 1830s but also in the first half of the following decade this revived literary form was still in its infancy and the writers cultivating it were not regarded by their contemporaries as representing a literary movement in any way remarkably different from the preceding firmly established Romantic School.

Thackeray, though one of the founders himself, certainly shared this attitude of his contemporaries, especially as a critical reader, but also as a critic. He came to the literary and critical scene with an uncommonly good knowledge of the realistic fiction produced especially in England and France in the preceding periods and of course perfected and extended it during the whole of his literary and critical career, yet he was obviously not able to orientate himself unerringly among the intermingling literary movements of his own time, particularly those of Germany and France. He began to study German literature at a period which marked a transition, in the sphere of fiction, from the novel of the romantic type to that of the realistic, but which was at the same time strongly influenced by the reverberating echoes of the preceding periods of the *Sturm und Drang* and Classicism and must have therefore seemed very perplexing to the young student not yet experienced in evaluating literature. He was of course not so confused as to be unable to discern most of the retrogressive and some of the progressive phenomena in the German literature of his time, as I have shown in my study on his aesthetics, yet he failed to do full justice to Goethe's fiction, as we have seen in the second chapter, and persisted in this attitude throughout his whole critical career.¹ He was apparently even more

¹ Besides *Wilhelm Meister*, he found also *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* objectionable predominantly on moral grounds (see *Works* XI, 857). As far as *Werther* is concerned, he

at a loss when following the complicated literary situation in France, though again not to such an extent as to be unable to assess correctly some of the more eccentric productions of *L'École romantique*, as we shall see later. His revolt against romantic excesses in literature led him too far, however, and he not only condemned the whole Romantic movement in France and almost all the contemporary output of French fiction (as I have shown in more detail in my study on his criticism of French literature), but also erroneously classified Balzac as a representative of the Romantic movement, as we have seen, entirely failing to recognize in him a great genius in the form which he himself cultivated. As far as Dickens is concerned, Thackeray undoubtedly realized that a new quality had appeared in English fiction with this novelist's arrival on the literary scene, yet even the creative approach of this great contemporary of his did not entirely correspond to the demands he himself laid upon fiction, as we have already partly seen. Further, as I shall point out later, Thackeray considered Dickens to be tainted by one of the literary fashions of his time, and to have been the initiator of another.

It is clear that Thackeray's relationship to the new realistic novel was by no means so well-defined as his attitude to the fiction of the romantic type. One of the reasons why he devoted relatively so little attention to realistic fiction may have been this very fact, though this must remain mere guesswork, for Thackeray never stated his reasons himself. He might not even have realized, as we from our historical perspective are enabled to do, that his attitude to the new realistic novel in any way differed from that to be expected from one of the acknowledged founders of the revived form, for most of his critical judgments sound very categorical. Whatever his reasons might have been, however, the fact remains that while he reviewed, burlesqued and parodied a fairly great number of the products of the current literary fashions, yet of the realistic novelists of his time he chose for criticism only Dickens (and that only a very small part of his work) and besides Dickens, only two minor French novelists. Of the realists representing the preceding epoch in the development of the novel in England, he paid critical attention to Fielding's works and, in the 1850s, enlarged the scope of this part of his criticism by including most of the other English 18th-century novelists.

There is yet another very important matter which must be pointed out before I start analysing his criticism. Although throughout this introduction I have several times used the terms "romantic" and "realistic", Thackeray did not classify the novelists he assessed in any such definite categories. He was certainly much concerned with the question of whether they depicted life as it really was, or presented their own conceptions and ideals as to how it ought to be, but he did not denote any representative of the current literary fashions as

commented mainly on its moods of despondency, pessimism and unmanly sentimentality and on its laying too much stress upon *Sehnsucht nach der Liebe*, making it a favourite book of the sentimental young lady Matilda from the *Memoirs of Mr. Charles J. Yellowplush* and of the executioner Gregoire, Schneider's famulus in *The Story of Mary Ansel* (see *Works* I, 259 and II, 147), parodying its despondency in Pen's first novel *Walter Lorraine*, and later writing a satirical poem ("Sorrows of Werther", published in November 1853 in the *Southern Literary Messenger*), in which he ridiculed the romantic love of this famous hero and presented the vigorous Charlotte as the only wholesome element in the story. For his other comments on the novel see *Letters* I, 312, *Works* VI, 561, XII, 517, Gulliver, op. cit., p. 204, etc.; for Frisa's analysis of his relationship to it see op. cit., pp. 10-13.

a "romanticist" (though he did occasionally use the terms "romantic" and especially "romance") or as a "realist", and he did not apply the latter term, either, to the representatives of the realistic novel, adhering throughout his criticism to a terminology predominantly derived from the Neoclassicist legacy in this field. The term "realistic" or "realism" was in fact never used by him at all. He could not of course adopt it in the period of his professional criticism when it was little known in England or any other European country, but he did not use it even in the 1850s, when it gradually gained wide currency, either for characterizing his own creative approach, or that of the writers he criticized in this later period. In order not to impute to him terms he never used, I have therefore decided to classify the fiction criticized by him from his own point of view and not from mine. The various literary fashions are in any case represented in his criticism by writers who could not all be accurately pigeon-holed as "romanticists" or "realists". As his criticism suggests, he was well aware that their approach to reality combined both romantic and realistic elements — either the former (and that in the majority of cases) or the latter predominating — but he was more interested in those aspects of creative method which made these writers in his eyes the representatives of the various fashionable modes. His criticism of them will therefore be discussed in several separate sub-chapters according to the various types of fashionable fiction, while the first part of this whole chapter is reserved for his attitude to the inadvertent progenitor of the pseudo-Romantic revival, Sir Walter Scott.

One exception to this procedure will be made, however, in considering his criticism of the realistic novelists, though only in terminology, for in the heading of this particular sub-chapter I do use the term "realistic", even if Thackeray himself does not. I have presumed to adopt this term in his name because I wanted to make a clear distinction between the writers discussed under this heading and those considered in the earlier sub-chapters, since the creative approach of the latter — including Dickens — does essentially differ from that of the cultivators of various fashionable modes and is in my opinion basically realistic. The main criterion for classification remains, however, the same, as Thackeray himself treated these particular authors differently from the fashionable novelists. Although in assessing the contemporary realistic novelists he takes notice of the "fashionable" traits in their fiction (in the novels of Bernard and Reybaud, and in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*), such traits do not stand in the foreground of his interest (apart from the single exception of Dickens's novel) and he is more concerned with these writers' general creative approach. In his evaluation of the 18th-century English novel Thackeray's critical interest is of course concentrated exclusively upon the latter aspect.

1. Thackeray as a Critic of Sir Walter Scott

Thackeray did not pay detailed critical attention to Scott until the second half of the 1840s, when he wrote his two burlesque continuations of *Ivanhoe*, but almost since his first acquaintance with the books of this early favourite of his until the end of his life he referred to Scott's creative approach and works in numerous marginal remarks. These of course show much more clearly than his burlesques that even if he did not accept Scott uncritically, there was much

he could genuinely admire in his novels. As we have seen in the second chapter, he highly appreciated Scott's contribution to the liberation of English and European literature and art from the fetters of dogmatic Classicism. He rightly saw in Scott the founder of the historical novel and regarded the appearance of his Waverley novels as a great advance upon "that feeble entertainment of which the Miss Porters, the Anne of Swanses, and worthy Mrs. Radcliffe herself, with her dreary castles and exploded old ghosts, had had pretty much the monopoly".¹ In one such remark he included Scott among the greatest writers of world literature whose best characteristic was their love for mankind, in another he highly appreciated the fact that Scott belonged to those great writers (naming beside him Fielding and Cervantes) who did not thrust forward their own persons in their novels (in this he is very near to Hazlitt).² Till the end of his life he had some special favourites among Scott's novels (preferring those which did not end with death and confessing that he had never dared read Scott's "lugubrious" novels *The Pirate*, *The Bride of Lammermoor* or *Kenilworth*³), and also favourites among Scott's characters. He greatly admired some of Scott's heroes,⁴ though he of course perfectly realized that the male characters he created for his own historical novels were of a different pattern. His Barry Lyndon, for instance, was created as a deliberate opposite to the Scott hero, as the following comment shows:

"Had it [i.e. Barry's autobiography — LP] been that of a mere hero of romance — one of those heroic youths who figure in the novels of Scott and James, — there would have been no call to introduce the reader to a personage already so often and so charmingly depicted. Mr. Barry Lyndon is not, we repeat, a hero of the common pattern" (*Works* VI, 245n.).

Although he found most of the female characters of Scott (as of Shakespeare and other writers) "pretty much the same" and drawn "from one model" — that of "an exquisite slave" such as most men want — "a humble, flattering, smiling, child-loving, tea-making, pianoforte-playing being, who laughs at our jokes however old they may be, coaxes and wheedles us in our humours, and fondly lies to us through life",⁵ he selected one special favourite from among them. Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*, whose unfortunate destiny moved his boyish heart and later became one of the impulses inspiring him to his burlesque continuations of this novel, one of the purposes of which was to redress the wrong committed against this enchanting heroine by her creator.⁶ In his lifelong faithful love for

¹ *Works* XIII, 548.

² See *Works* VI, 607 and Gulliver, op. cit., p. 203; for Hazlitt's views see *Comic Writers*, p. 174.

³ See *Works* XVII, 431; see also VI, 322. But he did read them after all, for he refers to *Kenilworth* in *Works* VII, 383 and to the characters of Amy Robsart and Leicester in *Works* XII, 597. Florac refers to the characters from *The Bride of Lammermoor* (see *Works* XIV, 353).

⁴ As he later confessed (see *Works* XVII, 602), his special favourites were the Baron of Bradwardine (whose name he used for his satirical portrait of Scott in the *Book of Snobs*) and Fergus Mac-Ivor from *Waverley*, Sir Brian de Bois-Guilbert from *Ivanhoe*, Quentin Durward and his uncle, Saladin and the Scottish knight from the *Talisman*, Claverhouse from *Old Mortality* and Major Dalgetty from *A Legend of Montrose* — mostly secondary characters who are really vivid and lifelike.

⁵ *Works* VIII, 324.

⁶ For his declaration of love for Rebecca see especially *Works* XVII, 608. For some other references to this character outside his burlesques see *Works* IV, 278, VIII, 110, XVII, 151—152, XII, 30, XIV, 159, 696.

Rebecca, Thackeray approaches the standpoint of Hazlitt, Belinski and even the Chartist reviewer Frost, who appreciated this "beautiful and high-souled" heroine as, "perhaps, the finest conception of a female character which ever emanated from the pen of Walter Scott".⁷ In other marginal comments Thackeray generously praised Scott's ability to create lifelike personages (in this being near especially to Jeffrey and Hazlitt and differing from Carlyle⁸), and his splendid narrative art.⁹ With the exception of one remark, in which he critically referred to Scott's financial transactions which in his opinion proved the novelist "to be a rogue",¹⁰ and one comment and one episodic character (Baron of Bradwardine in the *Book of Snobs*) in which he criticized Scott's servile attitude to the King,¹¹ Thackeray also highly appreciated the novelist's personal character.¹² How greatly he estimated Scott in spite of all his criticism was perhaps best revealed by the following remark of his, pronounced in private conversation and recorded by Merivale:

"A popular novelist, in the presence of a loved friend of Thackeray, one day justified something he had said, or done, or written, by remarking, 'Sir Walter Scott said, or did, or wrote, so-and-so'. 'I do not think', answered Thackeray, 'that it becomes either you or me to speak of Sir Walter Scott as if we were his equals. Such men as you or I should take off our hats at the very mention of his name'."¹³

There was one essential point, however, in which Thackeray, certainly since the early 1830s, but especially from the second half of the decade, could not find himself in agreement with his favourite, and that was Scott's approach to the depiction of history. It is true that he perfectly realized that Scott's history was a resurrected past, filled with living people (in this he was near to the evaluation of Carlyle and Hazlitt¹⁴) and that it thus fulfilled not only Scott's own purpose of exhibiting before the eyes of his readers their "fathers as they lived",¹⁵ but also what both Scott and Thackeray expected from history as a science and what Thackeray characterized as "the expression of the life of the time; of the manners, of the movement, the dress, the pleasures, the laughter,

⁷ For the quotation from Frost see *An Anthology of Chartist Literature, Izdatel'stvo literaturi na inostrannikh jazikakh*, Moskva 1956, p. 320. For Hazlitt's views see *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 101; for Belinski's see *Spisy (Works) II, Stati a recense (1840-1842)*, SNKLHU, Praha, 1959, p. 414.

⁸ For Jeffrey's views see *Jeffrey's Literary Criticism*, ed. with Introduction by D. Nichol Smith, Henry Frowde, London, 1910, pp. 92-95, 101; for Hazlitt's see *Comic Writers*, pp. 174-175, *The Spirit of the Age*, pp. 109-110; for Carlyle's see *Essays* IV, 74, 75. Hazlitt had, however, also some reservations regarding Scott's method of creating characters (see especially *Comic Writers*, p. 174 and *The Spirit of the Age*, pp. 99-100).

⁹ See e.g. *Works* VII, 302, VI, 393 (on characters), III, 389, XIII, 790, XVII, 597-598 (on narrative art).

¹⁰ *Letters* I, 460 (this remark refers to the exchange of pamphlets between Lockhart and A. Ballantyne in 1838 and 1839 concerning Scott's financial transactions; see *Letters* I, 460n.).

¹¹ See *Works* XIII, 787 and IX, 271.

¹² See *Works* XIII, 805, *Letters* III, 634. Thackeray knew much about Scott's life from Lockhart's biography, as well as from Ticknor's recollections, to which he listened in the United States (see James Grant Wilson, op. cit., I, 93). For his references to some events in Scott's life see *Works* I, 317, VIII, 36, XVII, 359.

¹³ Op. cit., p. 235.

¹⁴ For Carlyle's views see *Essays* III, 81-83, etc. and his essay on Scott. For Hazlitt's see *English Poets*, p. 206 and *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 107.

¹⁵ Preface to Lodge's *Illustrious Personages*, quoted by Margaret Ball in *Sir Walter Scott as a Critic of Literature*, The Columbia University Press, New York, 1907, p. 132.

the ridicules of society".¹⁶ This kinship between the two writers' ideas as to what a serious historical work should be like was pointed out by Margaret Ball:

"He wished, as Thackeray did later when he proposed to write a history of the Age of Queen Anne, to use in an avowedly serious book the material with which he had stored his imagination; and he believed he could present it with a vivacity that was not characteristic of professional historians."¹⁷

Thackeray positively appreciated, too, Scott's endeavour to make history not only living, but also familiar — if not in the novelist's above-mentioned fictitious "heroic youths", then at least in his portraiture of the historical royal personages, as Thackeray points out in the following comment, strongly reminding us of a similar statement of Belinski:

"The royal personages who figure in the Scott romances are among the most charming, if not real, of the characters which the delightful novelist has introduced to us. He was, if we mistake not, the first romantic author who dealt with kings and princes familiarly. Charles and Louis are made to laugh before us as unconcernedly as schoolboys: Richard takes his share of canary out of the cup of Friar Tuck; and the last words we hear from James are, that the cocky-leeky is growing cold. What is it that pleases us in the contemplation of these royal people so employed? Why are we more amused with the notion of a king on the broad grin, than with the hilariousness of a commoner? That mingling of grandeur and simplicity, that ticklish conjunction of awe and frivolity, are wonderfully agreeable to the reader; and we are all charmed to know how heroes appear in the eyes of their *valets de chambre*" (*Works* V, 459).

Thackeray realized, too, that Scott strongly felt the value and significance for his own time of past manners, opinions and ideals, presenting his depiction of the past as a lesson for his own contemporaries, and the younger writer also learned from his predecessor so far as to pronounce in his own historical novels a judgment upon the period in which he himself lived. But he did not regard the lesson offered by Scott as profitable and wholesome for Scott's time or for his own, differing thus substantially from Carlyle, who, on the one hand, rebuked Scott for having "no message whatever to deliver to the world", but, on the other hand, praised him for carrying his readers back "to rough strong times, wherein those maladies of ours had not yet arisen". Thackeray did not see in feudal monarchy, as Carlyle did, an ideal social institution in which society was sound at heart, all men animated by one great idea and everything permeated by religion in which, "as in the life-centre of all, lay the true health and oneness".¹⁸ His attitude to the Middle Ages and its depiction by Scott was much nearer to that of Hazlitt, who characterized Scott as a *laudator temporis acti* and dissociated himself from the novelist's opinion that it was a fine thing to return in imagination to the good old times, "when in Auvergne alone there were three hundred nobles whose most ordinary actions were robbery, rape and murder", when the castle of each Norman baron was a stronghold from which the lordly proprietor issued to oppress and plunder the neighbouring districts, and when the Saxon peasantry were treated by their gay and gallant tyrants as a herd of loathsome swine", begging for his own part to be excused and insisting that he "had rather live in the same age with the author of *Wav-*

¹⁶ *Works* XIII, 543; see also II, 92—93, 98, 182, 194—195, III, 397—398, VI, 340—341, XIII, 14, *Contributions*, 78, 101.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁸ For the quotations see *Essays* IV, 54, 56, III, 15; see also III, 30, IV, 165.

erley and *Blackwood's Magazine*".¹⁹ Thackeray's own attitude to the Middle Ages found expression, besides his burlesque continuations of *Ivanhoe*, especially in his unfinished historical novel *The Knights of Borsellen*, in which he presented an unembellished and harshly realistic picture of the practices of the plundering barons mentioned by Hazlitt, in his *Miss Tickletoby's Lectures on English History*, in *A Legend of the Rhine*, *Barbazure* and in numerous marginal comments which are in several cases addressed directly to Scott. Of these the following is perhaps the most convincing:

"As far as I can get at the authentic story, Saladin is a pearl of refinement compared to the brutal beef-eating Richard — about whom Sir Walter Scott has led all the world astray.

When shall we have a real account of those times and heroes — no good-humoured pageant, like those of the Scott romances — but a real authentic story to instruct and frighten honest people of the present day, and make them thankful that the grocer governs the world now in place of the baron?" (*Works* IX, 166).

One of such remarks shows that even though he recognized Scott's merit in founding the historical novel, he did not regard his general influence upon the further development of literature, art, history and religion as entirely beneficial. He evaluates an exhibition at St. James's Street as containing only imitations of no originality and honesty of thought, and proceeds:

"The twelfth-century revival in Mr. Crockford's bazaar, forsooth! with examples of every century except our own. It would be worth while for some one to write an essay, showing how astonishingly Sir Walter Scott has influenced the world; how he changed the character of novelists, then of historians, whom he brought from their philosophy to the study of pageantry and costume; how the artists then began to fall back into the middle ages and the architects to follow; until now behold we have Mr. Newman and his congregation of Littlemore marching out with taper and crosier, and falling down to worship St. Willibald, and St. Winnibald, and St. Walberga the Saxon virgin" (*Works* II, 621–622).

To the name of Scott in this quotation he adds the following footnote:

"Or more properly Goethe. *Götz von Berlichingen* was the father of the Scottish romances, and Scott remained constant to that mode, while the greater artist tried a thousand others" (*Works* II, 622n.).

As we have seen in the second chapter, Thackeray's own conception of history found its best expression in his novel *Esmond*, in which he created a historical novel of a new type having no precedent in the works of any other historical novelist of his time or of the immediate past, including Scott. The relationship between his conception and that of the founder of the historical novel was very convincingly summed up by Loofbourow:

"For Thackeray, the 'glorious Scott cycle of romances' was fabulous legend; they provided *Esmond* with poetic inspiration rather than historical method. In *Esmond*, history is substance, not accident — romance and mock-epic are modes of perception that qualify but do not efface ordinary human event — the past is relevant fact, as well as an artistic image."²⁰

There were some other aspects of Scott's creative method which Thackeray criticized in his marginal comments, notably the tendency to display historical lore in the detailed descriptions of the historical milieu, battles and tournaments,

¹⁹ For the quotations see *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 32; see also *ibid.*, pp. 99, 111, 114.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 106; see also *ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

as well as the cavalier treatment of some historical facts and personages.²¹ In his critical attitude to Scott's antiquarianism Thackeray is very near to Jeffrey, who was troubled by this aspect of Scott's creative approach, and especially to Carlyle, who pointed out that romance-heroes could not continue to interest the reader by their slashed breeches, buff-belts or antiquated speech, for "all manner of jerkins and costumes are transitory", but "simply and solely, in the long-run, by being men", for "man alone is perennial".²²

All these critical reservations of Thackeray as to Scott's creative approach, as well as his attitude to chivalric romance in general, found their expression first in his earlier satirical continuation of *Ivanhoe*, *Proposals for a Continuation of "Ivanhoe"*, published between August and September 1846 in *Fraser's Magazine*, and then in his enlarged version of the *Proposals*, published in 1850 in book form under the title *Rebecca and Rowena*. In these burlesques the main shafts of Thackeray's satire are aimed against Scott's idealized depictions of the Middle Ages, though the significance of these works is by no means exhausted by those aspects in which this purpose of Thackeray finds its fulfilment. Avowedly polemizing with Scott on the unsatisfactory conclusion of the novel and the poetic "injustice" inflicted upon his beloved heroine Rebecca, he juxtaposes to Scott's embellished pictures of the illusorily resurrected "Gothic" past his own unadorned and often revolting depictions of the arrogance, despotism and cruelty of the savage Christian warriors (including the "ideal monarch", King Richard the Lion-hearted, whom he presents as "the royal butcher"²³), of horrible massacres and frightful reprisals perpetrated by the crusaders upon the "infidels", and of the hard life of the serfs at *Ivanhoe's* castle. He desists, however, from presenting a depiction elaborated down to the smallest detail, for he is obviously aware that it would tend to be naturalistic, and makes use of suggestion instead, in the art of which he was by that time a great master. For this purpose he uses his authorial comments, as for instance the following, concerning his depiction of the battle at Chalus:

"I just throw this off by way of description, and to show what *might* be done if I chose to indulge in this style of composition, but as in the battles which are described by the kindly chronicler of one of whose works this present masterpiece is professedly a continuation, everything passes off agreeably; the people are slain, but without any unpleasant sensation to the reader; nay, some of the most savage and bloodstained characters of history, such is the indomitable good humour of the great novelist, become amiable, jovial companions, for whom one has a hearty sympathy — so, if you please, we will have this fighting business at Chalus, and the garrison and honest Bertrand of Gourdon, disposed of, the former according to the usage of the good old times, having been hung up, or murdered to a man, and the latter killed in the manner described by the late Dr. Goldsmith in his *History*" (*Works* X, 531).²⁴

Thackeray's satire in his continuations of *Ivanhoe* has, however, a much wider range. Besides satirizing chivalrous ethics in presenting the crusade as a scene of butchery, he aims his satirical weapons at all the other conventional romance motifs exploited by Scott in his novel and summed up by Loof-

²¹ See e.g. *Letters* I, 178, *Works* III, 355n., XVI, 114, 430.

²² For Jeffrey's views see op. cit., p. xix; for the quotations from Carlyle see *Essays* IV, 77.

²³ *Works* X, 531.

²⁴ See also *Works* X, 488, 513, 528.

hourow — “the blond heroine and her dark anti-type, the courageous hero, the humble squire, the knightly combat ethic, the mystique of chivalric love”, and makes his parody double-edged by satirizing at the same time “the stylized Victorian versions of these ideal roles”.²⁵ The quoted scholar evaluates *Rebecca and Rowena* as “a decisive departure from Thackeray’s earlier chivalric burlesques”, having in mind *A Legend of the Rhine*, in which Thackeray “does not alter conventional romance patterns: the heroine and the hero are blond, the villain dark, the hero warlike, the conventional code of knightly combat shapes the action; the story parallels the conventions it mocks rather than developing divergent structures”:

“*Rebecca and Rowena*, on the other hand, purposefully inverts the formal romance relationships and creates a nascent pattern of its own.”²⁶

As my purpose is different from that of Loofbourow, I shall pay more detailed attention to this pattern, which he only briefly summarizes. As this scholar has rightly emphasized, in Thackeray’s burlesques dark Rebecca is the heroine, while the blond Rowena is a character in whom Thackeray satirizes “the ‘civilized’ brutality beneath the mask of feminine etiquette” and thus “definitely caricatures the irreproachable Victorian lady”. In contradistinction to Scott’s idealizing conception, Thackeray depicts Rowena as a hateful, prim and cold-hearted woman, who henpecks her husband, while the latter, as the quoted scholar has it, is “a mutation of the romance hero, pacific and introverted instead of aggressive and conformist”.²⁷ King Richard is in Thackeray’s depiction a butcher, as we have seen, and at the same time a buffoon, as Loofbourow points out, and Robin Hood is a stout elderly protector of the private property of the rich, which had formerly been the object of his robberies. A further target for satire is the tendency of Scott and his imitators to abuse their privilege of placing their characters among real historical personages by bringing them on the spot when anything important is going on and making them play in all such events a decisive role. In his burlesques Thackeray makes Ivanhoe the main initiator of Magna Charta and the instrument of the abduction of Prince Arthur, explicitly pointing out in one of his comments that “it is the custom and duty of all gentlemen of that profession [i.e. heroes of romance — LP] to be present on all occasions of historic interest, to be engaged in all conspiracies, royal interviews, and remarkable occurrences”, and adding that even his Ivanhoe “would certainly have rescued the young Prince, had he been anywhere in the neighbourhood of Rouen, where the foul tragedy occurred”.²⁸ Thackeray of course himself made use of the above-mentioned privilege in his own historical novels, placing historical characters among his fictitious ones and making the latter take part in real historical events (Barry Lyndon in the Seven Years’ War, Esmond in the Marlborough campaigns, George Warrington in General Braddock’s expedition against Fort Duquesne and both brothers in the American War of Independence), but he never abused this privilege by forcing his heroes to perform feats violating all the laws of probability and

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁷ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 39, 41.

²⁸ *Works* X, 545.

making them instruments of decisive turns in history or of any momentous decisions of his historical personages.

Another aspect of Scott's creative approach which Thackeray satirizes is the tendency (typical of many romance writers) to exaggerate the physical prowess and the suffering of the heroes. His method is a further exaggeration which exceeds all bounds of probability and verges upon the grotesque — Ivanhoe kills over two thousand men in the battle, King Richard flings away the culverin to the distance of three hundred yards, "as though it had been a reed",²⁹ Ivanhoe lies in a delirium for six years. Thackeray does not miss any opportunity, either, to inveigh against the conventional scheme on which the plot of *Ivanhoe* and of the romance in general is based, consisting of surprising events, dark intrigues, interferences of chance and fortune, hair-breadth escapes and striking contrasts. He compares historical romances to Christmas pantomimes, for, in both, the characters miraculously overcome adverse circumstances, persons seemingly dead revive, heroes solve difficult situations by hiding or appearing in disguise and everything concludes with a general happy-end. This conventional scheme is deliberately used by him in the burlesques with the purpose of demonstrating its absurdity and his method is again that of exaggeration: in the third chapter he depicts Ivanhoe's death, but in the next his hero is still alive and lies in fever for six years so that Rowena can marry again in the meantime; Ivanhoe visits his castle disguised as a monk and is not recognized even by his wife, etc. The conventional happy-end of romance is satirized by Thackeray in the following comment upon Ivanhoe's second marriage to Rebecca:

"Married I am sure they were, and adopted little Cedric, whose father had drunk away all his fortune; but I don't think they had any other children, or were subsequently very boisterously happy. Of some sorts of happiness melancholy is a characteristic, and I think these were a solemn pair, and died rather early" (*Works X*, 493).

One of the targets of his satire is also the decorative descriptive element in Scott's novels, the detailed presentations of the historical milieu, costumes, armour and the like, as well as of battles, tournaments and sieges. He again uses suggestion, pointing out that he has no space for such minute details and referring his readers to the original source:

"Single combats, or combats of companies, scaladoes, ambuscadoes, rapid acts of horsemanship, destriers, catapults, mangonels, and other properties of the chivalric drama, are at the use of the commonest writer; and I am sure, my dear sir, you have too good an opinion of me to require that these weapons should be dragged out, piece by piece, from the armory, and that you will take my account for granted" (*Works X*, 479).³⁰

The last object of Thackeray's satire is Scott's cavalier treatment of historical facts and especially the anachronisms which he and his imitators committed — Thackeray's heroes, for instance, smoke cigars.

As follows from our analysis, Thackeray in his two satirical continuations of *Ivanhoe* attacks all the more vulnerable aspects of Scott's creative approach, as well as the faults of the authors of historical romances in general. His criticism is entirely just, for he attacks only those qualities of Scott's style and method which are this novelist's undoubtedly weak points. This has also

²⁹ *Works X*, 513.

³⁰ See also *Works X*, 471, 478, 524—527, 559, 566.

been appreciated by Clapp, who evaluates these burlesques (together with *Barb-azure*) as deserving "to be reckoned among the good little things of criticism",³¹ even though he believes that Thackeray relies in them rather upon his feelings than his reason. I do not think, however, that this rebuke is entirely justified, for if Thackeray was to grasp accurately the above-discussed qualities of Scott's creative approach, his critical attacks had to be carefully thought out — mere feeling would not have made his critical shafts hit their target with such a precision. What should be especially emphasized is also the fact that the criteria upon which Thackeray's criticism is based are in this case of an almost purely aesthetic character and in perfect harmony with his whole aesthetic creed. And what should be praised in addition is the form and style in which the burlesques are written, which splendidly suit and fulfil Thackeray's purpose — to be uncompromising in his criticism, and yet to preserve the note of good humour which is so telling a testimony that Thackeray never lost the fond recollection of Scott as one of the greatest benefactors of his childhood.

2. Thackeray's Criticism of the Historical Romance after Scott and Other Fashionable Literary Modes

As I have suggested in the preceding sub-chapter, Thackeray's satirical continuations of *Ivanhoe* had a wider range than that suggested by their titles. Although they were in the first place directed against the creative approach of the father of the historical romance, Sir Walter Scott, they at the same time attacked all the characteristic aspects of this *genre* in general, and thus indirectly, too, the numerous imitators of Scott who cultivated it in Thackeray's time and, mostly lacking Scott's genius, produced historical romances degraded to the lowest artistic level or lacking any artistic value whatever. Thackeray was indeed perfectly aware that out of Scott "a bad tradition came",¹ as Dr. Leavis expressed it in our own time, and that this tradition spoiled not only many second-rate writers of fiction, but also some who had, as the same scholar has pointed out, the makings of distinguished novelists, such as for instance Cooper. As the records of his reading show, Thackeray began to adopt a critical attitude towards Scott's imitators, as well as towards the producers of fashionable romances of all the other types (criminal romances, novels of adventure, and the so-called Silver-Fork novels) as early as the end of the 1820s and the beginning of the following decade, most probably influenced in this by Maginn's critical attacks and Carlyle's harsh judgments upon these literary modes (though it was not until 1838, in his essay on Scott, that Carlyle definitely showed, as Kathleen Tillotson has it, "that imitation of Scott was a dead end"²). As the critical comments on Bulwer, Disraeli and Cooper pronounced by Thackeray in this early period of his life show, he must have been in sympathy, too, with the following statement of Hazlitt:

³¹ "Critic on *Horsback*", p. 297.

¹ *The Great Tradition*. George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad. New edition, Chatto & Windus, London, 1962, p. 6n.

² Carlyle's essay "Sir Walter Scott" was first published in the *London and Westminster Review* in 1838 and then reprinted in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, where Thackeray read it in December 1839. For the quotation from Kathleen Tillotson see *op. cit.*, p. 154.