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History, Religion and the Supernatural: the Failure of The Monastery

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> And each Member amongst us this Motto has got
> That for Tales of Hobgoblins of Ghosts and *what not*
> No Mortal in Britain is like Walter Scott.[1]

With this tag, a friend invited Scott to a dinner nearly a decade before the publication of *Waverley.*

The supernatural had always interested Scott, not only as a metaphysical puzzle but also as a traditional type of superstition, and as a revelation of mental states. His first publications were translations of German tales of the supernatural; the topic is everywhere in his literary criticism; he wrote a book on demonology and witchcraft, and the supernatural in various forms is a persistent streak in his fiction,[2] used with varying degrees of success. Its use is most pronounced in *The Monastery* and *The Bride of Lammermoor.* In the latter, the supernatural is almost an animate force, heavy with menace and essential to the novel's effect; in *The Monastery,* Scott's ineffective handling of the supernatural, his departure from the principles that he himself adumbrated, clearly and in some detail, provide the final indications of the disintegration of the book. The failure of the supernatural elements here is not the cause of the book's failure as a whole, which has more to do with its historical features than its supernatural ones. The interesting point is the fact that in this novel the supernatural elements do not succeed precisely because the historical ones do not, just as *The Bride of Lammermoor* is able to make effective use of the

[1] Quoted from Admiral Elliot's invitation to a Christmas party in 1805 in Coleman O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction* (Edinburgh and London, 1964), p. 111.

[2] Scott's interest in the supernatural is not by any means unique; D. W. Harding says that a greatly increased interest in all kinds of non-rational experience, the supernatural among them, is one of the distinguishing features of this period in English literature. "The character of Literature from Blake to Byron," *From Blake to Byron,* ed. Boris Ford, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1962), p. 37.

supernatural because its foundation in the social history of its period is remarkably firm.

The Monastery was Scott's first failure in a full-length novel. Scott himself soon realized it had failed, and he touched on the matter in the prefatory Letter to *The Fortunes of Nigel* two years later (WN, XIV, xvi-xvii)[3]; he discusses it in some detail in the Introduction to *The Monastery* in the collected edition. In the centery and a half since its appearance it has had few defenders.

Yet, as one reviewer said, "Cette pièce est mauvaise, mais c'est toujours le mauvais de Voltaire,"[4] a comment that was to be made again and again as the later and lesser novels marched year after year from Tweeddale. Though *The Monastery* is undeniably a very bad novel, it is still a Scott novel, and it has its rewards in isolated spots. "Even when Scott is furthest from reality—" wrote R. H. Hutton, "as in *Ivanhoe* or *The Monastery*—he makes you open your eyes to all sorts of historical conditions to which you would otherwise be blind."[5] The portrayal of the way of life that is pursued in the little tower of Glendearg is convincing, and has that easy air of undirected life that Scott so often achieved: the sense of having caught people living their lives quite unaware of the fact that they are in a novel and have a part to play in the economy of its structure. Christie of the Clinthill is also convincing, Scott's clear-eyed presentation of the Border mosstrooper as he must have been in fact, capable of passion and generosity but coarse, brutal, ignorant and sullen.

Another such character is Julian of Avenel, Christie's cruel and cynical leader, whose gentle birth simply implies a wider scope for his viciousness. His unscrupulousness makes him a Protestant, too; Scott was no lover of Roman Catholicism and firmly believed in the Reformation's goals, but he was not blind to the fact that changes in religious opinion such as that of Julian are hardly dictated by theological considerations. Julian covets the wealth of Kennaquhair, and so he supports the Reformation. He is the dramatization of a theme that imbues Scott's discussion of the Reformation in his *History of Scotland*: that the Reformation owed as much to greed, among Scottish peers and Protestant clerics alike, as it did to any desire for reform. The chief distinction between clerics and peers seems to be that the

[3] Dryburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels, 25 vols. (London: A. & C. Black, 1892-94). All references and quotations are from this edition.

[4] Quoted from *The London Magazine*, I (1820), 561, by James T. Hillhouse, *The Waverley Novels and Their Critics* (Minneapolis, 1936), p. 69.

[5] *Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1902), p. 104.

latter were more adept at gaining title to the monastic lands.[6] Julian of Avenel demonstrates the meaning in human terms of such a comment on the historical situation. Another strength is the portrayal of the two Glendinnings, Halbert and Edward, and their gradual development to maturity, a development which (particularly in the case of Halbert) carries on into *The Abbot* equally persuasively: the passionate stripling gradually becomes a man of some weight and consequence in the world, yet he never ceases to display the marks of the experience that have made him what he is. A similar development converts the gentle and sensible Mary into the bored and indulgent lady who is left by herself in the castle of Avenel, and who in turn pampers Roland Graeme.

Finally, though it is one of the things that destroys the novel as a whole, I confess to a real enjoyment of the White Lady's antics with the monks and one almost wishes Scott had continued the book in this vein; he might have produced a really amusing fantasy of the supernatural seen as comedy.[7] The picture of Father Philip, the sacristan, swimming down the Tweed astride a mule with an astral spirit behind him singing an inappropriately gay song is richly comic; so, too, is the sacristan's arrival at the monastery misquoting (a nice touch) the White Lady's song, and incapable, through exposure and terror, of rational speech. There is material here for a fine light-hearted farce. But here as elsewhere in the novel Scott falls between two stools: this all-too-substantial spirit has no place playing these games in a serious novel, and yet Scott refuses to drop his serious intention and simply allow his imagination to race, just as in *Montrose* he insists on completing a plot which has been all but officially superseded by the emergence of Dalgetty. The result is that the White Lady ducks the sacristan not just for fun but in order to recover a copy of the vernacular Bible: she is working for the Protestant side in the Reformation, or perhaps the implication is that God Himself, who presumably controls her actions at some level, is using this curious means of supporting the

[6] *The History of Scotland* (2 vols., London, 1829-30), II, 67-76.

[7] The supernatural seems often to appeal to the comic spirit in Scott: Mario Praz singles out the effect of the resurrection of Athelstane in *Ivanhoe* (*The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, trans. Angus Davidson, London, 1956, p. 55), and in the *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (intro. Henry Morley, London, 1885), there are frequent bits of drollery: "One old sorceress, indeed, attempted to strike a nail, given her by the devil for that purpose, into the head of the minister of Elfland; but as the skull was of unusual solidity, the reverend gentleman only felt a headache from her efforts" (p. 180) and so on.

Protestants.[8] Whichever it is, the conjunction of comically violent treatment of the sacristan with an apparently serious desire to help diffuse knowledge of the Bible has a bizarre effect.

It is not adequate in accounting for the novel's failure to say simply that the White Lady and Sir Piercie Shafton are disproportionately important in the action. Nothing could redeem Sir Piercie, but the White Lady in either a larger or a smaller role might have been defensible. An uncertainty of tone, then, and a disproportion in the roles of these characters are among the difficulties *The Monstery* presents. The opening of the novel is incredibly slow, and, as Thomas Seccombe memorably put it, "the chronology is abnormally vicious."[9]

All this is surely enough to wreck any novel. However, other Waverley novels—*The Antiquary, Guy Mannering*—have failings analogous to most of these and yet they do not impress one as disastrous in the way that *The Monastery* does. There is in *The Monastery* a deeper failing than any Scott had previously displayed, a spiritual and intellectual confusion which bears directly on the novel's structure. At bottom, the problem is that Scott biasses his portrayal of the clash which he wants to set at the core of his novel, and simultaneously asks the reader to take as literal truth supernatural phenomena to which in his stronger fictions he assigns a purely psychological and symbolic reality; and finally he undercuts even this by failing to take it seriously himself.

In his original conception, Scott tells us, the Reformation was at the heart of the book, which seems to have been intended to be a realistic portrayal of the Reformation as a historical turning-point rather like the '45. The two great forces of Catholicism and Protestantism were to be shown in a great struggle for the loyalties of the Scottish people, resulting eventually in a decision for Protestantism.

[8] The White Lady is unusual as an instance in which Scott associates a supernatural manifestation with the Protestant faiths. More commonly it is the Catholic "superstition" that is linked to the supernatural, as in the story of Bessie Dunlop, burned for a witch in 1576, whose familiar spirit, named Thome Reid, attempted to carry her off to Elfland, and consistently recommended the doctrines of Catholicism (*Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, pp. 122-30). The association of Catholic superstition and pagan superstition recurs in *The Abbot*: Magdalen Graeme also goes by the name of Mother Nicneven, the "gigantic and malignant female" of Celtic mythology. See Scott's Note 20 to the novel (WN, XI, 283, 438) and *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, p. 110.

[9] Thomas Seccombe *et al.*, *Scott Centenary Articles* (London, 1932), p. 109.

Structurally, it was to be an experiment, a departure from the pattern that had served so well in the portrayal of analogous conflicts in *Waverley* and *Old Mortality*. Scott intended to show the proponents of the two forces directly rather than through the medium of the passive or wavering hero. The plan was

> to conjoin two characters in that bustling and contentious age who, thrown into situations which gave them different views on the subject of the Reformation, should, with the same sincerity and purity of intention, dedicate themselves, the one to the support of the sinking fabric of the Catholic Church, the other to the establishment of the Reformed doctrines. It was supposed that some interesting subjects for narrative might be derived from opposing two such enthusiasts to each other in the path of life, and contrasting the real worth of both with their passions and prejudices. (Introduction; WN, X, vii)

The central characters in the original scheme were thus Henry Warden and Father Eustace, and as Ian Jack points out,[10] the great scene ought to have been the confrontation between the two of them. In fact, the scene is appallingly weak, and we remember such features, incidental in relation to the ostensible scheme, as Sir Piercie and the White Lady far more vividly than Warden and Father Eustace. In fact, the whole conflict between Protestant and Catholic seems to count for very little in the finished novel. Why should this be?

I suggest it is because the kind of novel Scott wanted to write, of which *Waverley* is a great example, requires, as an absolutely fundamental principle, that the author should feel passionately and very nearly equally about both sides, so that the novel portrays a difficult decision in the life of the nation with a real sense of the possibility and potential advantages of either side's victory. Scott loves Jacobites and Hanoverians nearly equally, and hates the extremists of *Old Mortality* nearly equally. But between Catholicism and Protestantism his mind is clear: there is almost nothing to be said for the Catholic side, and the Reformation is almost completely desirable. The result is that in *The Monastery* the outdated superstitions of Catholicism, already tottering from their own rottenness, collapse before a single hard thrust from the vigorous and largely admirable Protestants, and the conflict that was to fill the book is resolved by the total rout of popery. Nothing remains to be said. Into the vacuum in the centre moves the White Lady and Sir Piercie, whose prominence labels the novel a failure.

The evidence for this view of the novel lies largely in Scott's attitude to Catholicism. Scott has been praised for his religious

[10] *English Literature 1815-1832* (Oxford, 1963), p. 199.

moderation, and he is certainly sympathetic to many of the usual attendants of Catholicism. But these matters are relative. His writing generally suggests that his tolerance of Catholicism was less a positive tolerance than a failure to adopt the thorough-going bigotry that was perhaps more characteristic of his contemporaries. Certainly he nowhere displays the kind of imaginative sympathy or absorption that would allow him to treat Father Eustace with the kind of affection he extends to Fergus MacIvor, nor does he show even the kind of fascination with which he regards Burley in *Old Mortality.* It was remarkable, though, that Scott should have written of Catholicism with any sympathy at all; as Dame Una Pope-Hennessy notices, in Scott's youth the Catholic faith was a matter of private oratories and embassy chapels, but for the ordinary Briton it was hardly less remote than the practices of the Tibetan Lamas.[11] It does not seem surprising that Scott should have been staunchly anti-Catholic, and the genuine warmth with which he portrays a man like Edward Glendinning is a tribute to the disinterested penetration of his imagination. But he *was* anti-Catholic and at times intemperately so, and perhaps the kindest interpretation represents him as distinguishing between the ecclesiastical system and the individuals who are involved in it, and finds Scott generally sympathetic to certain kinds of persons who often are Catholics, while strongly opposed to the Catholic Church itself.[12]

Yet even this view seems to credit Scott with more tolerance than he demonstrated. Klaas Bos remarks, for instance, "On his Irish tour, he met with hospitality, and encountered civility everywhere, except for one O'Connell, who had the mistaken idea that Sir Walter was an enemy to the Roman Catholic claims for admission to seats in Parliament." But was O'Connell mistaken? Not if we judge by a letter to Southey of December 15, 1807, in which the nationalism in Scott's religion emerges clearly:

> And as for Catholic Emancipation — I am not, God knows, a bigot in religious matters, nor a friend to persecution; but if a particular sect of religionists are *ipso facto* connected with foreign politics — and placed under the spiritual direction of a class of priests, whose unrivalled dexterity and activity are increased by the rules which detach them from the rest of the world — I humbly think that we may be excused from intrusting to them those places in the State where the influence of such a clergy,

[11] *Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1948), p. 62.

[12] E.g., K. Bos, *Religious Creeds and Philosophies as Represented by Characters in Sir Walter Scott's Works and Biography* (Amsterdam, 1932), pp. 111, 115n.

> who act under the direction of a passive tool of our worst foe, is likely to be attended with the most fatal consequences. If a gentleman chooses to walk about with a couple of pounds of gunpowder in his pocket, if I give him the shelter of my roof, I may at least be permitted to exclude him from the seat next to the fire.[13]

His work and his biography are studded with hostile remarks: a monastery is "a fantastic monument of . . . the purple pride of fattened abbots."[14] He considers Catholic priests normally to be given to forgery and deceit; when Mrs. Radcliffe introduces Catholicism into *Udolpho* she has "at her disposal, monks, spies, dungeons, the mute obedience of the bigot, the dark and dominating spirit of the crafty priest — all the thunders of the Vatican, and all the terrors of the Inquisition."[15] Images thrown down from the niches of a church have "all fallen under the charge of idolatry, to which the superstitious devotion of the Papists had justly exposed them." (*Abbot,* Ch. 13; WN, XI, 112). Catholicism even when renounced has a poisonous influence: the Black Dwarf "had renounced the Catholic religion, but perhaps some of its doctrines continued to influence a mind over which remorse and misanthropy now assumed, in appearance, an unbounded authority." (*Black Dwarf,* Ch. 15; WN, V, 114) Such characters as Effie Deans and perhaps Allan M'Aulay end their unhappy lives in foreign cloisters, a fate—in a Scott novel—not much better than death. The most Scott seems able to allow is that many Catholics are good enough people who, either because of early training or unfortunate and rather abnormal needs, remain attached to a church for which little good can be said: it is better than no religion, but that is all. Still a Catholic is not in his eyes a bad man by definition, though Catholicism has its effects on even a good man: Edward Glendinning is the object of petty deceit at the hands of the monks in *The Monastery,* who lie to him about the Lady of Avenel's Bible (Ch. 9; WN, X, 71), and deceit is always shown as a feature of Catholicism (one notes how Father Eustace hides his own misadventures with the White Lady as well as hushing up what he considers is probably a scandal involving Father Philip, the sacristan). Scott respects and admires Edward, but his religion eventually makes a

[13] Bos, p. 117; Scott, *Letters,* ed. H. J. C. Grierson *et al.,* 12 vols. (London 1932-37), I, 400.

[14] J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (1837-38), 10 vols. (London and Edinburgh, 1839), IV, 41.

[15] "Essay on Romance" (1824), *Miscellaneous Prose Works,* 30 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1834-71), VI, 182-83; *The Lives of the Novelists,* (1821-24), ed. G. Saintsbury (London, 1910), p. 217.

liar out of him, too, in relation to another truth-loving boy, Roland Graeme (*Abbot,* Ch. 13; WN, XI, 116). Scott describes him with admiration, yet patronisingly; he is a good man aside from his religion:

> Bold and enthusiastic, yet generous and forgiving; wise and skilful, yet zealous and prompt, he wanted but a better cause than the support of a decaying superstition to have raised him to the rank of a truly great man. But as the end crowns the work, it also forms the rule by which it must be ultimately judged; and those who, with sincerity and generosity, fight and fall in an evil cause, posterity can only compassionate as victims of a generous but fatal error. Amongst these we must rank Ambrosius, the last abbot of Kennaquhair, whose designs must be condemned, as their success would have riveted on Scotland the chains of antiquated superstition and spiritual tyranny; but whose talents commanded respect, and whose virtues, even from the enemies of his faith, extorted esteem. (*Abbot,* Ch. 13; WN, XI, 116)

The failing in *The Monastery* which I am trying to define can be seen more clearly in the light of this description: it is clear that Scott cannot imagine the possibility that the Catholic Church could be the true one, or could represent a genuine alternative to Protestantism; more, he cannot believe in any really felt way that anyone else can think so either. Some of the novels, of course, are pre-Reformation, and in these the issue hardly arises. Catholicism is a *datum* of the period. But when a Protestant alternative is available, Scott does not hesitate. He can see that a stupid man, or an unreflective follower of family tradition, could be a Catholic, and indeed it is significant that, as Bos points out, for many of the Catholics in the Scotch novels their Catholic religion is intimately associated with their old noble families and with their Jacobitism: Protestantism "consists of steadfast belief in certain doctrines and articles of faith on which depends their salvation," while Catholic belief is "more often a loyal and chivalric sentiment clinging to a hereditary faith and a falling cause rather than any deep conviction of the value of particular tenets."[16] For Scott a Catholic's belief is based not upon reason but upon emotional attachments to the past, as in the cases of Diana Vernon and Flora MacIvor. An intelligent, rational Catholic, therefore, can hardly be sincere: he may be perverse, but he is likely to be, like Rashleigh Osbaldistone, crafty and iniquitous.

What confuses the reader is that the sentiments and the attitudes which to Scott's mind accompany Catholicism are attitudes that he *can* imaginatively comprehend and does value even when he percieves that they are outmoded and carry implications and consequences that he

[16] Bos, p. 113.

cannot support. Jacobitism is such a sentiment, and in *Waverley* we see how long, how agonizing is the moment of balance as Scott and Scotland slowly decide, once and for all, for King George and the English compromise over the faded heroics of the past. Scott's antiquarianism and his respect for tradition in general often associate themselves with Catholicism and give the effect of a tolerance for the religion which finds amazingly little direct support. This division between the religion and its accompaniments is very evident in his *History of Scotland,* in which he tells with some amazement of the abrupt removal of Catholicism: the wrenching up of the traditional form of worship dismays him, as the wrenching up of any tradition did, but he makes it quite plain that his objection is social and national rather than theological. He is similarly horrified to find the cathedrals destroyed (though the "idolatrous" statuary is another matter) and he tells with great pride the story of how Glasgow alone preserved its cathedral while adopting the Protestant faith as whole-heartedly as any other Scots.[17]

The result of Scott's attitude to Catholicism is that in *The Monastery* he cannot show the tension of the forces that make the Reformation, because he cannot penetrate the state of mind of the Catholics at all. The obvious contrast is with *Waverley,* where the conflict is real and moving because we can and do feel the emotions and attitudes that thrust each side onwards. Moreover, we all feel some of the emotions of both sides: we are all for progress and reason, like Talbot; we are all for family and adventure, like Fergus, and the tragic choice of *Waverley* is that we are forced to choose, to understand the implications of our choice, and to kill the people we love, with traits we value very much, as a necessary consequence of our choice. The insistent pressure to choose is the tragic dynamic of the novel. A similar effect seems to have been Scott's desire here, but it is thwarted by his lack of sympathy for one side of the conflict. The best he can do is Julian of Avenel, that demonstration of the more unlovely qualities of the Protestant cause, but Julian is nothing like enough.

I have mentioned Scott's distrust of Catholicism as a religion which paid its allegiance to a leader outside the country, a nationalist's distrust of Italian intrigue, and in fact Scott's religion is intimately involved with the national and social context that seems central to Scott's mind and imagination. The first step towards the love of God is, for Scott, respect for man. Only a misconception of the Christian life sets it against social life; true religion manifests itself in its harmony with man's love of his fellows, a love which for Scott is closely allied

[17] *History of Scotland,* II, 68, 74-76.

with national feeling. Religions like extreme Presbyterianism and Methodism, which insist on the primacy of individual experience, know no external check; they easily become egocentric, fanatical and disruptive. Scott was perfectly aware that religion, like many other things, could be formed and shaped to a considerable extent to agree with the individual's desires, and this pliability is perhaps one reason for his insistence that religion be seen in a social context. The early Scottish Protestants, he says, often interfered with civil government "in cases where they pretended that religion was connected with it (a connection easily discovered, if the preacher desired to find it)."[18] Towards Methodism he was lukewarm; he never trusted "enthusiasm" but he felt that such religions actually served to introduce some religious principles, however shallow, to "the millions of ignorant poor,"[19] and so it had a certain beneficial effect. Indeed it is by its effects that he often — perhaps usually — judges the quality of a religious creed, as it would no doubt be by the quality of his own life that he would desire the depth of his own belief to be judged. After Lochleven's steward Dryfesdale, in *The Abbot,* dies, George Douglas is asked by young Seyton about the dead man's religion. Douglas replies that Dryfesdale "spoke of lights he had learned among the fierce sectaries of Lower Germany; an evil doctrine it was, if we judge by the fruits." Young Seyton replies, "Amen!" (Ch. 33; WN, XI, 366)

Scott's general view of the world, then, is that of sober commonsense and social responsibility; it is in no way significantly extraterrestrial. Now against his down-to-earth assumptions we project another aspect of his mind, his intense interest in the supernatural. Like a good 18th-century Protestant, he is very skeptical; at the same time he finds "supernatural" phenomena striking and at times nearly credible. "Superstition," writes Bagehot with his usual easy exactness, "was a kind of Jacobitism in his religion."[20]

Scott's use of the supernatural is an extremely interesting aspect of his fiction, because it is in the supernatural that Scott accommodates a number of insights about human behaviour which it is unlikely he could have formulated consciously, insights which in fact were not clearly formulated at all until the blossoming of psychoanalytic thought nearly a century later. It is a situation similar to his sense of the profound significance of dreams in mental life.

[18] *History of Scotland,* II, 74.

[19] *The Lives of the Novelists,* p. 138.

[20] *Literary Studies* (1879), (2 vols., London, 1911), I, 159.

In general, like the douce Protestant he is, Scott denies that supernatural manifestations are genuinely supernatural, and believes that they can be explained naturally or psychologically. He does not, however, deny that the "supernatural" experience is a genuine and quite possibly a meaningful and instructive experience, nor that it is connected with the events of daily life and may comment upon or influence them. All he does deny is that such experience normally proceeds from supernatural causes (though he admits that possibility, in a universe ruled by an omnipotent God). A supernatural event is more likely to be

> a lively dream, a waking reverie, the excitation of a powerful imagination, or the misrepresentation of a diseased organ of sight; and in one or other of these causes, to say nothing of a system of deception which may in many instances be probable, we apprehend a solution will be found for all cases of what are called real ghost stories.

In fact, too genuine a feeling for the supernatural Scott takes to be a probable symptom of poor mental health: he has encountered, he says, tales of the supernatural from

> able, wise, candid, and resolute persons, of whose veracity I had every reason to be confident. But in such instances shades of mental aberration have afterwards occurred, which sufficiently accounted for the supposed apparitions, and will incline me always to feel alarmed in behalf of the continued health of a friend who should conceive himself to have witnessed such a visitation.[21]

This does not seem to be what such remarks often are, sheer bluster; Scott's nerves were apparently remarkably steady, and there are several accounts of Scott's personal encounters with various eerie matters, haunted chambers[22] and the like, in which he was not much distressed. One of the most striking is his tale, told to Basil Hall, of having arrived at a country inn to find it full:

> "No place to lie down at all?" said he. "No," said the people of the house — "none, except a room in which there is a corpse lying." "Well," said he, "did the person die of any contagious disorder?" "Oh, no — not at all," said they. "Well, then," continued he, "let me have the other bed. — So," said Sir Walter, "I laid me down, and never had a better night's sleep in my life."[23]

The real causes of "supernatural" events are natural: a long course

[21] Both quotations from *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft,* p. 286.

[22] Coleman O. Parsons, "Scott's Experiences in Haunted Chambers," MP, XXX (1932), 103-05.

[23] Lockhart, VII, 298.

of dissipation produces the "Blue Devils," as Scott calls *delirium tremens*; the laird's wife accuses a girl of witchcraft because the laird has paid her too much attention; a boy witch-finder is used to extort money from the frightened rich.[24] His attitude closely resembles that of Arthur Miller in *The Crucible.* Scott is always interested in the way societies work, in the way that religious and supernatural phenomena are used as cloaks for tawdry terrestrial ambitions, often as cloaks to hide their true motives from the participants themselves. Again, prosecution for witchcraft may be a small community's method of discouraging eccentricity. Viewed this way, witchcraft surely does exist, but as a subtle area of social and psychological interaction.

For the writer of fiction the implications are fairly clear. First, he cannot show the supernatural as genuinely extra-terrestrial in origin. But if he explains it in detail it becomes a cheap mechanical thrill: several years before the publication of *Waverley,* with its Bodach Glas, Scott was pointing out the fact that Walpole did not keep his supernatural occurrences sufficiently obscure to maintain belief.[25] Later in *The Lives of the Novelists,* he expressed a similar misgiving in relation to the "explained supernatural" of Mrs. Radcliffe. In his novels he occasionally stooped to the explained supernatural himself: in *The Highland Widow,* for instance, the clergyman takes his lonely road home through a "haunted" glen after seeing Hamish's execution at Dunbarton. As he thinks about the bogle, accounting for the legend to himself by the seasonal rising and falling of the burn, Elspat suddenly appears before him looking very like the bogle, which startles him considerably. But nothing more is made of the legend; there is no particular reason for the two to meet there rather than elsewhere; the incident underlines certain aspects of Elspat's character, but the incident is so forced that even this effect is not really achieved. Scott has simply gained a gratuitous thrill in a rather cheap way. (Ch. 5; WN, XIV, 452-55.)[26]

[24] These instances all occur in the *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft,* pp. 22-24, 245, 202-205. On pp. 222-28 he also gives an account of the Salem witches who drew the attention of Arthur Miller.

[25] "Life of Walpole," *Lives of the Novelists,* p. 200. This life was actually written as an introduction to an 1811 edition of *The Castle of Otranto,* according to a note signed by Scott in a copy of the edition now in the National Library of Scotland. See Parsons, p. 70.

[26] M. C. Boatright draws attention to another instance of the explained supernatural in the explanation of the "devil" in *The Black Dwarf* (Chs. 4, 10, 18; WN, V, 25, 72-73, 131); "Demonology in the Novels of Sir Walter Scott: A Study in Regionalism," *University of Texas Bulletin, Studies in English,* No. 14 (1934), 79.

The supernatural can only be treated, as Scott saw, by making its appearances as infrequent as possible, since recurrences weaken its effect. "Even in Hamlet," he wrote, "the second entrance of the ghost is not nearly so impressive as the first. . . ."[27] The supernatural is strengthened, however, by leaving its status a little vague, and by suggesting both that there are those, notably the Scots peasants, who take it literally, and others who interpret it more subtly; the supernatural is then presented in a fashion that tends to evoke the reactions of the peasant while there still remains a tacit understanding that these reactions are too simple and too superstitious.

It is a difficult and delicate balance to maintain, but Scott manages it on a number of occasions. The Bodach Glas is a good instance: Fergus believes in it, Waverley takes it as "the operation of an exhausted frame and depressed spirits, working on the belief common to all Highlanders in such superstitions." (*Waverley,* Ch. 59; WN, I, 364) Waverley's opinion is Scott's, yet the description of the spectre and Fergus's profound belief in its reality, his acceptance of his doom which manifests itself in his desire to clear up matters with Waverley, succeed in conveying something of the quality of Fergus's reaction.[28]

The great failure of the supernatural in *The Monastery* is that the White Lady is too definite and too frequent; there is nothing obscure about that curious Protestant Ariel, as Oliver Elton called her.[29] One must take her literally; there is repeated proof that she materially alters things. Bibles move from one place to another, three or four independent people encounter her, she gives Halbert a very tangible bodkin which various people handle, she raises a knight from the dead and removes all trace of the wound that killed him; she makes and unmakes graves, and so on. There is no way for any reader to see her as a purely psychological manifestation like the Blue Devils or the Bodach Glas; almost all the chief figures of the novel encounter the White Lady at one point or another.

At the same time Scott does not take her seriously, and the abbot and sub-prior in their interrogation of Sir Piercie make it evident that they do not believe in her either. And the peculiar interworking of

[27] "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition," *Foreign Quarterly Review,* I (1827), 63.

[28] Coleman O. Parsons has shown that the idea of the Bodach Glas has deep roots in Scottish family tradition; it presumably has the whole weight of Fergus's ancestry behind it, and it is no wonder that he takes it seriously. "The Bodach Glas in Waverly," *N & Q,* CLXXXIV (1943), 95-97.

[29] *Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1924), p. 47.

this facet of the novel with the politico-religious theme produces all manner of jarring little touches — for instances, at the end of *The Abbot* we are given to believe that Father Philip's uproarious ducking has had a fine influence on the sincerity and devotion of his religious belief. (Ch. 38; WN, XI, 425) Even if she did not engage in horse-play I doubt that one could believe in her in a novel purporting to explore seriously an actual historical and religious crisis in realistic historical terms.

The reason that she is so frequent and definite is that her original conception as a bit of supernatural trimming like the Bodach Glas or the Nymph of the Fountain in *The Bride of Lammermoor* had to be abandoned when Scott found that the conflict he had chosen to occupy the centre of his novel did not take fire in his imagination.[30] As a result, the White Lady becomes much more important than she was meant to be or should be. So does the tedious Euphuist, whose original role as a comic and affected period character cannot be extended without disaster. But this failure is a consequence of the failure of the central historical conflict. Fact, legend and history: without those Scott's imagination apparently loses its control.

The actual process by which the failure of the novel came about can perhaps be found in Scott's improvisatory methods of composition, though it might be argued that his relative inexperience in reconstructing scenes and events as remote from his own time as Reformation Scotland provided an insurmountable obstacle, and that the knowledge gained in writing *The Monastery* bore its real fruit in the sequel, *The Abbot.* However, such an argument encounters difficulty in accounting for the comparative success of *The Monastery's* immediate predecessor, *Ivanhoe.* Probably Scott began it with a number of notions jostling in his mind: Melrose Abbey, Tweedside scenes, a sprite in Fouqué's *Undine,* moss-troopers, Euphuism. These ought to have come together, melted and fused as he wrote, just as similar clusters of ideas had melted and fused before, by a process that can be traced in *The Heart of Midlothian.* But they did not fuse this time, and he drove on and on, the proportions going awry, finally throwing it out before the world with an embarrassed:

> If it isna weel bobbit
> We'll bob it again.

And so he did in *The Abbot,* a much better novel which followed *The*

[30] Ian Jack also sees the failure of the novel this way. *English Literature 1815-1832* (Oxford, 1963), p. 199.

Monastery almost at once. *The Monastery* remains interesting chiefly as the first of Scott's important failures, a failure of imagination, insight and control, and therefore, necessarily, of structure. It was an ominous indication of the future.[31]

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