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Thomas R. Dale

One Word More on Scott's Anonymity



Mr. Seamus Cooney in his "Scott's Anonymity--Its Motives and Consequences" (*SSL*, 10 (1973), pp. 207-219) presents a comprehensive survey of the various motives alleged or implied by Scott for maintaining the anonymity of the *Waverley* Novels from 1814 to 1827. Besides the many motives suggested in Scott's prefaces--some obviously playfully, others with some appearance of sincerity--Mr. Cooney points out another more potent motive, probably only partly realized by Scott himself. This is the psychological need for anonymity in the writing process itself. Scott, it appears, adopted a number of narrative personae different from his "real" self and felt that with disclosure of his authorship his novel-writing would come to an end. (Why this did not apply to the poems is not mentioned.) The intention of this note is to corroborate but modify Mr. Cooney's main point and to demonstrate that it is linked to another motive which he has perhaps too hastily dismissed.

The matter of Scott's personae is a large and complex one which has never been adequately analysed. For the present it is enough to say in corroboration of Mr. Cooney that Scott is concerned with identifying his story-teller in virtually all his works. In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* he carefully presents the old minstrel himself, "the last of all the bards," not only as the sole survivor of the medieval bards, but as a

parallel to himself--the modern bard who is writing his lay at the request of the noble lady (Harriet Scott, Countess of Dalkeith) and is about to establish his "lowly bower" close to her castle, just as Scott had settled at Ashiestiel in 1804. In *Marmion* the introductory epistles, though they include much undisguised autobiography, carefully emphasize various aspects of the author as poet and defend Scott's poetic practice in terms of different lines of criticism. Though the narrator is little emphasized in *The Lady of the Lake*, *Rokeby*, and *The Lord of the Isles*, perhaps because *Marmion* had established Scott's identity, *The Bridal of Triermain* (1813) presents a new narrator, the young lover Arthur. This is of course in keeping with some modifications of style intended to lead the critics and public into attributing the anonymously published work to a new author rivalling Scott himself. *Harold the Dauntless* (published, also anonymously, in 1817), in its introductory passages, returns to the autobiographic approach of the *Marmion* epistles--making a further problem for those who were reading *Tales of My Landlord* (1816) and puzzling over the identities of Peter Pattieson and Jedidiah Cleishbotham.

The narrative personae of the novels, whether implied in *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering*, and *The Antiquary*, or directly described as in *The Tales of My Landlord*, are also chosen with a view to variety and playful mystification as well as appropriateness to the story told. Scott indeed intended to disassociate the author of *Ivanhoe* (1820) from Peter Pattieson (and his editor Jedidiah Cleishbotham) of *The Tales of My Landlord* and from the Author of *Waverley*, but was dissuaded by his publishers. But his concern with personae continues even when anonymity is no longer possible. Chrystal Croftangry, the most fully developed of all the narrators, gives a detailed personal account of himself, with several significant correspondences to Scott's own life, to introduce the short stories and the two novels of *Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827, 1828). The last two novels, *Castle Dangerous* and *Count Robert of Paris* (1831), are somewhat perfunctorily assigned to Peter Pattieson and Jedidiah Cleishbotham.

Mr. Cooney (p. 218) refers to Scott's "more sober and complete self-embodiment in his personae" and feels that this is found in "the mature voice of the Author of *Waverley* as well as in the later self-portrayal of Croftangry." But this raises the question of what "self" Scott wished to embody, what aspects of his own personality he wished his readers to perceive then and later. That he was concerned is clear enough; the *Journal* alone is evidence of that. His careful hoarding and weeding out of letters and memoranda, his defense of his literary methods in several prefaces, and various passages in his

letters show that he wished to present himself, or, rather, certain aspects of himself, to posterity. If this intention is carefully considered, it leads to a further and very potent reason for the mask of anonymity.

Like anyone else in a public position and especially in the legal, political, and social world of Edinburgh at the time, Scott was necessarily aware of the importance of certain kinds of decorum in behavior--in both his ordinary overt activities and recreations. As he suggests in the opening chapter of *Waverley*, it might be thought indecorous for a member of a serious profession to write novels. Prospective clients might easily be shy of entrusting their affairs to a poet or novelist. The more a man wrote, the worse for his reputation, as he could hardly escape the charge of being too fully occupied with trivial labors. But though these considerations may originally have weighed somewhat with Scott, as Mr. Cooney indicates in his reasons 4 and 6, there can be no doubt that personal character was far more important. Not only Scott's image in the eyes of the world, but his own view of himself was what really mattered.

Now Scott's view of himself--his idealized vision of himself, one might call it--can be seen fairly clearly in his *Journal*, the autobiographical references in the introductions to the Magnum edition of the novels and poems, and some of the letters. It is not inconsistent with any of his previous self-revelations, but is more fully and vigorously expressed. It is that of an urbane, kindly, and humorous Christian Stoic, a man, in other words, capable of unembarrassed and fruitful relationships with all sorts and conditions of men, from common laborers and beggars to kings and queens; so self-confident and generous that envy, malice, and misrepresentation cannot perturb him; a practical philanthropist believing in basic Christian teaching, but eschewing sectarian conflict; public-spirited, capable of enduring any disaster without complaint, and, above all, one who can laugh at himself as well as at others. These are the traits celebrated by Lockhart; but they are fully supported by Scott's own utterances, most strongly in the later writings mentioned.

But this self-portrait is not the whole truth. It certainly represents what Scott was conscientiously striving towards throughout his life, striving successfully for the most part, but it omits, or only glances at what he was striving against. It is in these passing glimpses of the other side that a major motive for anonymity can be seen.

The gentle Stoicism Scott worked so hard to build up in himself and which he so emphasized in his *Journal* can be seen as his effort to control a savage pride which could at times

break out in furious anger. Lockhart (I, 242, in 1837 edn.) quotes an unidentified friend of Scott's writing at the time of his rejection by Williamina Belsches: "I now shudder at the violence of his most irritable and ungovernable mind."¹ His children in their correspondence, especially towards the end of his life, indicate clearly that "the Bart's" temper could be exceedingly difficult at times. There is no doubt that he could be both proud and angry, no doubt that he fought resolutely against this pride and anger throughout his life.

In his career as a poet, Scott experienced much to rouse both his pride and his anger. The unprecedented popular success of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Marmion* would have turned the head of a less sensible man, and the mixture of misdirected praise and irrelevant blame uttered by the critics could hardly fail to disconcert and irritate any perceptive human being. Familiar as he was with the absurd and destructive squabbles which blemished the careers of Dryden, Swift, and Pope, not to mention lesser authors, and aware of his own hot temper, Scott from the outset decided to shun controversy about his works. As he says in his preface (1830) to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*: "I resolved, if possible, to avoid those weaknesses of temper which seemed to have most easily beset my more celebrated predecessors." As the phrase "if possible" implies, the resolution must have involved considerable strain, with friends and partisans indignantly eager for him to annihilate his critics, while palpable absurdities of praise as well as blame greeted him in the journals whenever he published. He did attempt an answer in the prefatory epistles to *Marmion*, and gave sufficient evidence of his powers of critical repartee. In them he deals with the current critical attitudes to his work in true legalistic fashion, citing the best classical precedents for his use of the supernatural, identifying his work with the established genre of the medieval romance, and using the neoclassic doctrine of the "ruling Passion" to defend his own technique. But he obviously could not go on issuing such defensive manifestoes year after year. Only at long intervals thereafter did he reply to critics, or anticipate criticisms--as he does in the first chapter of *Waverley* and the prefatory material to *The Fortunes of Nigel*. These responses, too, are always either friendly or general enough to avoid any kind of personal offense. But this is part of the Stoic stance he had adopted, and cannot be taken as indicating a real insensitivity to criticism, or indifference to either critical or popular fame.

Two letters, brief as they are, reveal a little of the pride and anger so consistently and successfully repressed. One, dated 21 September [1817], is to W. B. Villiers, the author of

the anonymously published "Vision of Belshazzar," a poem which Scott had "caused to be inserted in the *Edinburgh Annual Register*." It praises the poem, disclaims any extraordinary powers of patronage, and goes on to comment on the desire for literary fame as follows:

I grieve I assure you for your acuteness of feeling. But if you knew what literary reputation is your aspirations after it would be far less fervent; and as to your turning a monk in this disappointment I believe the case would be singular since though the love of terrestrial beauty has sent many a man to the cloister you would certainly be the first victim to that of the Muses. I hope you will excuse me for smiling at such a fancy which if you had been reviewed some five hundred times struck up and struck down praised and parodied and flattered and back-bitten for fifteen years would appear to you as ludicrous as it does to me?

The sympathetic and gently humorous tone of this passage does not wholly conceal the underlying bitterness of the fifteen years in the limelight of criticism. The other is his confidential letter to James Ballantyne (3rd October, 1816) in response to a proposal relayed by Ballantyne from the publishers John Murray and William Blackwood. The publishers, on the advice of the critic William Gifford, had suggested that *The Black Dwarf* be rewritten for publication, and indicated that they would pay all the expenses of cancelling and reprinting.

Dear James,--My respects to the Booksellers & I belong to the Death-head Hussars of literature who neither *take* nor *give* criticism. I know no business they had to show my work to Gifford nor would I cancel a leaf to please all the critics of Edinburgh & London and so let that be as it is. I never heard of such impudence in my life. Do they think I dont know when I am writing ill as well as Gifford can tell me. It is good enough for them and they had better make up the £200 they propose to swindle me out of than trouble themselves about the contents.... I beg there be no more communications with critics. These *born idiots* do not know the mischief they do to me & themselves. I DO by God.³

The violence of this response is, to say the least, uncharacteristic, and the attitude expressed apparently inconsistent, even irrational. *The Black Dwarf* is, in fact, a badly proportioned work which presumably could have been improved by re-

writing. Scott was not wholly averse to rewriting or accepting suggestions, as the corrections in the proof-sheets of the novels show--many of them prompted by Ballantyne's observations. Even allowing for some additional circumstances to provoke unusual irritation, it seems extreme in Scott to write that he would not "cancel a leaf to please all the critics of Edinburgh & London." Nor can the anger be accounted for by the pride of a man determined to be independent of all influence and guidance. The reason for the reaction is implied in "Do they think I dont know when I am writing ill...?" He knew, he implies, well enough; but was unable or extremely unwilling to rewrite. As he mentions more than once (notably in the preface to *The Fortunes of Nigel*) he was unable to improve his work significantly by rewriting; indeed he often made it worse by self-consciously trying to follow a set pattern or predetermined plot. Thus, when he writes in conclusion, "Those *born idiots* (the critics) do not know the mischief they do to me & themselves," he is expressing a genuine concern, undoubtedly based on experience, that closer contact with critics, their rules, and prescriptions would be destructive of his work. In his lines to William Erskine, in the Introduction to Canto Third of *Marmion*, he had already suggested this:

For me, thus nurtured, dost thou ask
 The classic poet's well-conn'd task?
 Nay, Erskine, nay--On the wild hill
 Let the wild heath-bell flourish still:
 Cherish the tulip, prune the vine,
 But freely let the woodbine twine
 And leave untrimmed the eglantine.

.

Though wild as cloud, as stream, as gale,
 Flow forth, flow unrestrain'd, My Tale!

Pruning and training, following the advice of such conservative and censorious critics as Francis Jeffrey, Gifford, or John Wilson Croker, would destroy the "wild plants" of Scott's creation. Scott, bogged down in revisions and corrections, even if he himself felt them necessary, could lose his creative energy, tame the life out of his work and, of course, reduce his output drastically. The critics might well be harming themselves by their strictures on his writing simply by discouraging all that did not fit their patterns.

Thus it can be seen that Mr. Cooney's reason 9, "Anonymity is somehow essential to the fiction writer's role," is indeed valid for Scott, but has a wider significance than Mr. Cooney claims for it. The passage he quotes from the Introduction to

Chronicles of the Canongate: "...I felt some alarm that I might acquire those habits of jealousy and fretfulness which have lessened and even degraded the characters even of great authors..." may well have been an understatement and is certainly not explicit about the operation of praise and blame on the writing process, but it is not so obscure or ambiguous when it is linked to what has just been noted about the destructiveness of current criticism. Scott, as a man in the thick of the legal, political, literary, and social life of Edinburgh, did indeed see anonymity as essential to his role as a fiction writer. As a poet "five hundred times struck up and struck down praised and parodied and flattered and back-bitten for fifteen years," he could hardly wish to repeat the experience as a fiction writer. Anonymity at least allowed him to avoid all discussion of his work if he wished. The acknowledged author would have to reply to praise or blame or be accused of conceit, sullenness, hypocritical modesty, and half-a-dozen other unpleasant traits; and any kind of reply would be apt to lead to the controversies and literary squabbles he wished to avoid. Nor could he easily prevent the more serious consequences of having critics, especially those he knew personally and met frequently, discuss, advise, and pressure him into uncongenial or even detrimental revisions of his work.

This motive, too, is one that persisted long after others had faded in importance. The more novels he wrote, the more there were to criticize; and when the secret of the authorship became known there was bound to be a great flurry of questioning, criticizing, and commenting to which he would be virtually compelled to reply. Actually, when the secret did come out in 1827, Scott was assailed to some extent but was protected, partly because of public concern for his financial and domestic disasters, partly because he was too deeply involved in these problems and the immense burden of his work to pay much attention.

Contrary to Mr. Cooney's assertion that "Artistic reproaches, obviously, had no weight with him (Scott)," there is good reason to believe that Scott's concern about the effects of criticism on his work was an important motive for anonymity. He felt, and with good reason, that his best work was achieved spontaneously in the absence of critical pressures. He knew from reading and observation that critical controversy had been harmful to the lives and reputations of great authors, and from his own experience that he could not satisfy either his critics or himself by yielding to critical pressures--revising, recasting, rewording. The Stoic stance and the firm resolve to eschew controversy had not protected him adequately in his poetic career; but anonymity proved to be a strong defense to the

novelist. It was a serious matter to him, as the elaborate precautions against disclosure indicate.

Why then, it may be asked, did Scott not state this reason more clearly in his prefaces and comments after 1827, when the secret was out? Surely because he was still concerned with his image as the reasonable man, the happy Stoic. The prefaces for the Magnum edition (written 1829-1831) maintain almost the same urbane, gently humorous, mildly self-deprecatory picture of the author as the epistles in *Marmion* at the outset of his career. He could hardly wish to admit that he was sensitive to criticism and that he felt unequal to the task of improving his own work where it was weak or deficient. Nor could he say much about the absurdities of the critics and all their works without at once falling foul of them and injuring himself at a time when he was struggling to repay that mountainous debt. The implications of what he did write were enough; there was no need to say more.

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NOTES

¹ J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, (Edinburgh, 1837), I, 242.

² Sir Walter Scott, *Letters*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (London, 1933), IV, 517.

³ Scott, *Letters*, IV, 276-7.