The Ravages of Time: The Function of the Marmion Epistles

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Although Marmion (1808) has consistently maintained a prominent position in any evaluation of Sir Walter Scott's poetry, the epistles which introduce each canto of the work have suffered a curious neglect. To be sure, it is usually admitted that they are fine poems in themselves, but their striking contrast in tone and content to the narrative tale is seen as only an annoying interruption. As Southey wrote to Scott, upon his first enthusiastic reading of the poem:

The introductory epistles I did not wish away, because, as poems, they gave me great pleasure; but I wished them at the end of the volume, or at the beginning—any where except where they were. My taste is perhaps peculiar in disliking all interruptions in narrative poetry. When the poet lets his story sleep, and talks in his own person, it is to me the same sort of unpleasant effect that is produced at the end of an act; you are alive to know what follows, and lo—down comes the curtain, and the fiddlers begin with their abominations. The general opinion, however, is with me in this particular instance.¹

George Ellis, to whom the fifth epistle is addressed, still expressed to Scott his honest disappointment by comparing the epistles to the device of the old minstrel in The Lay of the Last Minstrel, remarking that

the personal appearance of the Minstrel, who though the last, is by far the most charming of all minstrels, is by no means compensated by the idea of an author, shorn of his picturesque beard, deprived of his harp, and writing letters to his intimate friends. These introductory epistles, indeed, though excellent in themselves, are in fact only interruptions to the fable; and accordingly, nine out of ten have perused them separately, either after or before the poem—and it is obvious that they cannot have produced, in either case, the effect which was proposed—viz., of relieving the readers' attention, and giving variety to the whole. Perhaps, continue these critics, it would be fair to say that Marmion delights us in spite of its introductory epistles...²

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In his important article on the poem in The Edinburgh Review, Scott's friend Francis Jeffrey passed a similar judgment, finding that "the place of the prologuing minstril is but ill supplied, indeed, by the epistolatory dissertations which are prefixed to each book of the present poem," and that "there is too much of them about the personal and private feelings and affairs of the author." 3

These criticisms were by no means isolated. Of the fourteen contemporary reviews of Marmion, ten objected strongly to Scott's decision, and even Lockhart, certainly a sympathetic critic, could only apologize for their inclusion, while hastily praising their inherent qualities. In fact, Lockhart tries to substantiate his excuse by maintaining that the introductions were originally intended to be published separately, in 1807, as "Six Epistles From Ettrick Forest." 4 But this claim has since been found to have been the result of misinformation, and we know further that Scott wrote all but the first of the epistles concurrently with the Marmion narrative.5 Besides, the more obvious and important fact is their presence, and it is more the critical task to determine and analyze their function in the poem than merely to question or excuse their inclusion. Most modern commentators have avoided the problem by simply ignoring the epistles, but the only fair presumption to make is that Scott intended them as part of his work and of its effect, and it is the shape and scope of that intention that we should try to examine.

It may be useful to begin by recalling Ellis' comparison of the "framing" devices in the Lay and in Marmion—the old minstrel and the author himself. In the former poem, Scott has not only compensated for narrative vagaries by introducing the minstrel, but has provided a focus for the entire work. For the minstrel is both part of the past, as its last survivor ("The last of all the Bards was he, / Who sung of Border chivalry"), and its witness, as the link of tradition between past and present. By the minstrel's vivid recreation of the past—of "those, who, else forgotten long, / Liv'd in the poet's faithful song"—time is suspended ("The present scene, the future lot... / In the full tide of song were lost"), and history and legend are fused through the memory and imagination of the minstrel as well as the art of the poet, Scott himself. But this interplay of history and legend, of time

3. The Edinburgh Review, XII, 23 (April, 1808), 2, 35.
and art, is further used by Scott, whose minstrel becomes the point of contrast between the comfortable life at Newark castle and the romantic age at Branksome. Remembering that "the description of scenery and manners was more the object of the author than a combined and regular narrative," 6 the effect of that description, both on the minstrel’s audience and on Scott’s, is the poem’s purpose. As Coleridge remarked:

Dear Sir Walter Scott and myself were exact but harmonious opposites in this—that every old ruin, hill, river, or tree called up in his mind a host of historical or biographical associations; ... whereas, for myself, ... I believe I should walk over the plain of Marathon without taking more interest in it than in any other plain of similar features. 7

Coleridge hints here at what has become the thesis of Scott’s most perceptive modern critics—Lukács, Dichtes, Cockshut and others—in their current (and overdue) revaluation of his major novels. Here in the early Lay, Scott’s historical interest, his sense of the passage of time and of its effect on individuals and their relationships, both personal and social, becomes the deeper center of concern in the poem, and this through the agency of the minstrel. But the substitution for the minstrel by letters to Scott’s friends in Marmion hardly justifies Ellis’ conclusion that their purpose lies in “relieving the readers’ attention, and giving variety to the whole.” Indeed, Scott’s more personal presence in the poem would seem to indicate a more intense confrontation with the broader themes we see at work in the Lay.

The first Introduction, addressed, as are the next three, from Ashiel, Ettrick Forest, opens with a couplet expressive of the poet’s state of mind:

November’s sky is chill and drear,
November’s leaf is red and seal.

Now all of nature is under “the sad influence of the hour,” but “To mute and to material things / New life revolving summer brings.” Juxtaposed with the eternal renewal in nature is “my country’s wintry state.” The brevity and finality of human life—even for those as glorious as Nelson, Pitt or Fox—is stressed. It is only through the poet’s art that human achievement can transcend time:

How on the ancient minstrel strain
Time lays his palsied hand in vain;


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And how our hearts at doughty deeds,
By warriors wrought in steely weeds,
Still throb for fear and pity's sake.

And by mingling romantic images with his description of "the mighty chiefs" of contemporary Britain, Scott subtly blends "this high theme" with "the vision of enchantment's past":

Warm'd by such names, well may we then,
Though dwindled sons of little men,
Essay to break a feeble lance
In the fair fields of old romance.

Scott sees his effort to revive chivalry, therefore, as the traditional task of the poet 'such legends to prolong.' But the more personal theme, slowly emerging, is suggested in the opening of the First Canto, whose expansive panorama of Norham castle and the arrival of Marmion, is set by the same Tweed by which the poet meditates, though now made timeless through romance.

If, then, eternity exists not in man but in the memory of him, the second epistle relates this theme to Scott's own life. The lament of the "lonely Thorn" for the time passed in the "three hundred years" since Marmion would have walked the same ground is linked to the poet's own lament on the loss of his youth—"all silent now":

Ah, happy boys! such feelings pure,
They will not, cannot, long endure;
Condemn'd to stem the world's rude tide,
You may not linger by the side;
For Fate shall thrust you from the shore,
And Passion ply the sail and oar.
Yet cherish the remembrance still,
Of the lone mountain and the rill;
For trust, dear boys, the time will come,
When fiercer transport shall be dumb,
And you will think right frequently,
But, well I hope, without a sigh,
On the free hours that we have spent
Together on the brown hill's bent.

There remains only a feeling—"Whispering a mingled sentiment, / 'Twixt resignation and content"—whose consolation is memory.8 Associated by memory with the poet's own youth, romance involves, ulti-

mately, the search for a lost time, both personal and historical, by means of the imagination, whose permanence is linked with nature’s own. The realization of loss and the desire for renewal, then, have emerged as the frame of reference within which the tale of Marmion is to be viewed—a tale whose narrative and thematic concerns turn on deceit, disillusionment, guilt, defeat and death.

The third epistle reiterates this fusion of personal and historical change, while again allowing the imagination (“that secret power”) to recall personal time through timeless legend:

Thus while I ape the measure wild
Of tales that charm’d me yet a child,
Rude though they be, still with the chime
Return the thoughts of early time;
And feelings, rous’d in life’s first day,
Glow in the line, and prompt the lay.

The poet’s intensity increases with the fourth epistle, which juxtaposes “our youthful summer” and “the winter of our age.” Time, with its accompanying sense of loss, seems now but “the recollection of a dream.” Yet the reader is given a sense of the actual passage of time beyond the poem itself, when Scott notes that a year has passed since he first began Marmion. Again, consolation is sought in memory: “To thee, perchance, this rambling strain / Recalls our summer walks again.” And in the following Canto, the narrative progress is suspended, while Marmion (and Scott) look down from Blackford Hill on Scotland—“then and now.” These may well have been the passages for which Leslie Stephen called Scott “the poet of association,” and defined his gift as “not so much in showing us the past as it was when it was present; but in showing us the past as it is really still present.” Historical description becomes the landscape of memory.

This conjunction of scenes in epistle and narrative—interacting with each other across the years—is the occasion for the fifth introduction, written at Edinburgh, to which the tale itself then journeys. The move is from country to city, from solitude to society—the physical reassurance required by time. There is the momentary joy of reunion:

Not here need my desponding rhyme
Lament the ravages of time,
As erst by Newark’s riven towers,
And Ettrick stripp’d of forest bowers.

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But the changes scarred by time in the city, which the narrative, with its brilliant description of Holyrood, will underscore, recall the poet to reality, from which he retreats into romance:

Truce to these thoughts!—for, as they rise
How gladly I avert mine eyes,
Bodings, or true or false, to change,
For Fiction's fair romantic range,
Or for tradition's dubious light,
That hovers 'twixt the day and night:
Dazzling alternately and dim,
Her wavering lamp I'd rather trim,
Knights, squires, and lovely dames to see,
Creation of my fantasy,
Then gaze abroad on rocky fen,
And make of mists invading men.
Who loves not more the night of June
Than dull December's gloomy noon?
The moonlight than the fog of frost?
And can we say, which cheats the most?

Faced with the Romantic paradox of the reality of the imagination, Scott again declares the transcandence of time by art, even as the poem itself traces its sad declines. The glory of the past, though it may live only in legend, assumes a new reality in the imagination. His is "a tale of Flodden Field, / And not a history"—time may have destroyed Scotland's history, but the poet's art, in turn, can obliterate time and restore his country's past glory.

Yet it is strange that Scott prefaces the last and climactic Canto of his poem ("The Battle") with an epistle so disproportionate in tone. The narrative action, shifting past and present tenses, projects an immediacy of bloody and heroic defeat, while the Introduction merely describes Christmas festivities. But taken as a whole, this last section perfectly mirrors the passage of time by its ironic contrast: the heroic past reduced to holiday traditions. Scott intimates this very contrast by his mention, in the epistle, of earlier and ruder celebration of the feast ("traces of ancient mystery"), which have evolved into merely quaint ceremonies. And his insistence on his nationalistic motives further reveals the two aspects of his art—personal and public. The conclusion of the poem once again puts the desired perspective upon the battle, whose real scene "Time's wasting hand" has effaced, but which the poet has brought to life. And in this sense, the puckish L'Envoy invokes the notion of wish-fulfillment—for the reader and for Scott—which has formed the basis for the poem's composition.
We can see, then, in these introductions a developing series of variations on the theme of the relationship between time and the imagination. But the epistles also function stylistically as a contrast to the narrative cantos. The former's relaxed octosyllabic couplets and conversational diction are set over against the varied ballad measure and romantic tone of the narrative, so that the sense of relativity is dramatically conveyed.

With the superior narrative skill displayed in the tale of *Marmion*, it is perhaps understandable that its initial audience might have wished to pass over the introductory epistles in its haste to finish the story, and that its later audience, given the scant attention paid in recent years to Scott's poetry, might ignore them in favor of perfunctory praise or comment. Yet in a poem written, as Scott himself said, with "a good deal of care, by one by whom much care was seldom bestowed," *Marmion* takes on an added and crucial dimension when read as an interplay between narrative and epistles—an interplay which indicates that the poem as a whole is an effort of the imagination to redeem time, thereby becoming a poem about the workings of the imagination which produced it. Furthermore, such a reading of the poem helps to contradict a prevalent opinion about Scott's poetry in general, first stated fully by Hazlitt:

He is communicative and garrulous; but he is not his own hero. He never obtrudes himself on your notice to prevent your seeing the subject. What passes in the poem, passes much as it would have done in reality. The author has little or nothing to do with it. The force of his mind is picturesque, rather than moral.

For too many years, critics shrugged a smug dismissal of Scott as the sad hack or the outdated Augustan. Fortunately, this bicentennial year finds a wider interest in and genuine appreciation of his significance in the development of English literature. But, though his importance may rest finally with his novels, his "great theme"—that probing, desperate, noble, impossible effort to understand the men we have become—did not suddenly appear, as many readers seem to suppose it did, in *Waverley*, but is present, haltingly perhaps, in his early

poems. And once we realize its influence, these poems—Marmion especially—should assume a new character, and shed new light on our understanding of Scott and of his place in the history of our imaginations.12

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12. This article was written many months before the appearance of John Pikoulis' excellent article, "Scott and 'Marmion': The Discovery of Identity" (Modern Language Review, LXVI [Oct. 1971], 738-50), and I am pleased to note our essential agreement on the poem's achievement and importance. Whereas my article concentrates more narrowly on the relationship between epistles and cantos, his treats the poem more broadly within the generic context of romance.