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PETER F. MORGAN

Scott as Critic

Scott's critical views are expressed in comments scattered throughout his works: in his editions of Dryden and Swift, his lives of the novelists, his many reviews, the introductions to his novels and poems, and casually and frequently throughout his letters and journals. Having gathered a number of these comments together, it is a difficult problem to analyse them. However, they can be separated according to primary relevance to author, style, subject and audience.

I

Scott views the author in three ways: as man of feeling, as conscious artist, and as responsive and responsible citizen. He agrees with Wordsworth that poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." He declares, "the only pleasure in writing is to write whatever comes readiest to the pen" (L. VIII, 190). And he observes: "He wrote from impulse never from effort and therefore I have always reckoned Burns and Byron the most genuine poetical geniuses of my time" (J, 1825. p. 96).

On this basis Scott makes the Wordsworthian assertion that "There is something about all the fine arts of soul and spirit which like the vital principle in man defies the research of the most critical anatomist" (J, 1825, p. 5). So he depicts as standing against the artist with his warm, spontaneously flowing feelings the cold, calculating, thoughtful critic, like Jeffrey in his "theatre of Anatomy" (L. IV, 156), with such authors as Swift and Smollett in their anatomical moods. The distinction between emotional artist and reflective critic is elaborated upon and

given personal form in Scott's comparison between David Hume the philosopher and John Home the dramatist:

David Hume was no good judge of poetry; had little feeling for it; and examined it by the hackneyed rules of criticism; which, having crushed a hundred poets, will never . . . create . . . a single one. John Home's disposition was excursive and romantic—that of David, both from nature and habit, was subtle, sceptical; and he, far from being inclined to concede a temporary degree of faith to la douce chimère, was disposed to reason away even the realities which were subjected to his examination. The poet's imagination tends to throw a halo on the distant objects—the sophistry of the metaphysician shrouded them with a mist which . . . not only obscured but dwarfed their real dimensions. The one saw more, the other saw less, than was actually visible (MPW. XIX, 328).

Scott in general considers metaphysics to be a nut not worth the cracking, and moral philosophy a millstone. In his view literary criticism tends to betray their baneful influence.

The kind of literary critic Scott prefers would be untheoretic, sincere, careless, modest, generous, good-tempered, judicious, gentlemanly like himself in his own articles. As he writes of Lockhart, recommending him for the editorship of the Quarterly Review: "He has a great stock both of classical and miscellaneous information a turn of composition as fluent as it is forcible and elegant, perfect good temper and the feelings of a gentleman which go far in my idea of a critic" (L. IX, 336).

Scott refers often to the lack of premeditation, the carelessness and the rapidity of his own creative writing. He describes his poems as "the hasty production of [fortunate] impulses" (L. III, 344-345). He acknowledges that "no man that wrote so much ever knew so little what he intended to do when he began to write" (L. IV, 292). He pens his novels in the "hab tab at a venture stile of composition" (J. 1827, p. 196).

Thus Scott stresses his thoughtlessness as an author. Though in the area of emotion he allows for the softer feelings, he emphasises the buoyant militancy of the tone of his own poetry. He calls himself "a soldier's lover" (L. V, 99). He looks forward to contributing to the Minstrelsy "a kind of Romance of Border Chivalry in a Light Horseman sort of stanza" (L. XII, 231). Scott describes himself as writing poetry variously in a "Cossack . . . blustering . . . dashing . . . swingeing . . . thumping" manner (L. III, 157, 176; IV, 388; VII, 438; XII, 349). He belongs to "the Death-head Hussars of literature who neither take nor give criticism" (L. IV, 276). Finally, he declares forthrightly that
"if there be anything good about my poetry or prose either it is a hurried frankness of composition which pleases soldiers sailors and young people of bold and active disposition" (J. 1825. pp. 186-7).

Such enthusiasm takes a toll, and helps to colour Scott's picture of the writer in general. Involved in the "feverish trade of poetry" (L. IV, 380), the writer pays for his "ecstatic visions by the sad reality of a disordered pulse" (L. XI, 105). His "variation of spirits" (L. XI, 117-118) brings him close to madness: Scott illustrates this in Ben Jonson, Boswell and Ritson. In Scott's view the writer is not only prone to ill health both physical and mental, but he is also marked by immaturity. Burns and Byron are the children "of impulse and feeling" (MPW. XVII, 250), and "Monk" Lewis is "a child of high imagination" (Lockhart, Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott [Edinburgh, 1837-38], I, 295). It may be added that at one moment Scott reveals that his own life has been "a phantasmogeria [sic] of grotesque imaginations" (L. V, 232). These views of the character of the artist are like that put forward by Wordsworth in "Resolution and Independence." Their social implications will be discussed later.

In Scott's eyes the artist's fluctuating feelings and powerful imagination are restrained by other gifts which link him closely to the world around him. He possesses sympathetic insight into human psychology, situation and history, and the power of acute observation of external nature.

As a social being, the artist's enthusiasm is tempered by his possessing the qualities of a gentleman: "good sense, good taste, and good morals" (PW. XI, 13). The moral censor is constantly on guard as he writes; moreover, he writes prudently, in order to achieve a healthy and happy relationship with his public. Scott observes generally that "every judicious author will use liberty with prudence" (MPW. VI, 312).

Equally powerfully operative is the conscious artistic faculty of judgment, involving selection and discrimination among material and technique. Scott assures Maturin, of all people, that "the redundancies of a powerful fancy can be brought within the rules of a more chastened taste" (L. XII, 338).

Thus Scott presents the writer as man of feeling—spontaneous, careless, buoyant, feverish, childlike—as against the critic. At the same time, the writer is a conscious artist and citizen, observant of the world and gentlemanly in his attitudes towards it.
II

Scott's critical vocabulary as applied to style may be divided according to its closeness to his views of the writer as man of feeling and as conscious artist. From feeling springs the highly admired primitive simplicity, ranging from "true Ballad simplicity" (L. I, 161) to "the simplicity of the true sublime" (Dryden. V, 92) in Milton and in Homer. With feeling also are associated freedom, wildness, originality, richness, intensity, warmth and softness (as against "the French epopee, which of all styles of poetry is the most uniformly stiff and freezing" [Dryden. XIV, 141n]), sweetness and nervous strength (Campbell unites "the sweetness of Goldsmith with the strength of Johnson" [MPW. XVII, 268]), and variety, like that of Burns and the "terrorific mixture" in Webster's Duchess of Malfi (L. II, 541).

Some of these values are of course capable of being artificially contrived. For example, Scott seeks variety in adapting Coleridge's "mescolanza of measures" in "Christabel" to "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" (PW. VI, 24). Also, the originality of genius becomes Scott's own more and more painfully conscious quest after novelty in order to satisfy the insatiable fiction-reading public.

There is certainly an easy transition from emotional states to the artistic categories of the sublime and the pathetic which Scott uses and which he elevates at the expense of the satiric. Satire itself is critical, and cannot be the product of the artist as man of feeling. However, Scott recognizes the greatness of the kind as the product of the conscious artistry of Swift, Molière and Dryden. Thus it presents him with a major critical problem.

Scott points out at eloquent length that satire is potentially dangerously destructive:

... unless angels were to write satires, ridicule cannot be considered as the test of truth. The temptation to be witty is just so much the more resistless, that the author knows he will get no thanks for suppressing the jest which rises to his pen. As the public becomes used to this new and piquant fare, fresh characters must be sacrificed for its gratification. Recrimination adds commonly to the contest, and those who were at first ridiculed out of mere wantonness of wit, are soon persecuted for resenting the ill usage; until literature resembles an actual personal conflict, where the victory is borne away by the strongest and most savage, who deals the most desperate wounds with the least sympathy for the feeling of his adversary (MPW. VI, 250).

In the light of this view Scott objects strongly to personal satire, the "mauvaise plaisanterie" of Boswell (L. XI, 117) and Blackwood's
Magazine, though with Lockhart's *Peter's Letters* he looks forward to "a volume of more respo[n]sible cast of which the characters ought to be manliness justice & generosity qualities which make praise worth having and censure dreaded" (L. VI, 89). In the same gentlemanly spirit he urges Lockhart to "drill Hunt as he deserves [over his Byron] without descending to his own stile of Billingsgate" (L. X, 392).

Though Scott thus objects to the personality and the nihilistic tendency of satire, yet he is obliged to justify it as an essential part of the work of Swift, Molière and Dryden, which he greatly admires. He overcomes the major satirical problem presented by *Gulliver's Travels* by classifying it with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a romance, whose success follows from the author grounding on "extraordinary postulates" (MPW. XVIII, 254) a logically coherent and psychologically convincing superstructure. Further, these works, unlike the unbounded German fantastic species of composition, extract from their "exaggerant fictions" "philosophical reasoning and moral truth" (MPW. XVIII, 292). Scott also takes up the problem of *Gulliver's Travels* in his life of Swift. He admires the work greatly on account of its "bold and irregular fictions . . . hardy and satirical morality . . . natural and minute narrative" (Swift, I, 342n). Thus satire is only one of its "general attractions" (327); the fourth voyage is forcefully set on one side as being not only misanthropic but also improbable.

For Scott Molière's satire is legitimate because moral. He fights against vice and folly "by means of wit and satire, without any assistance derived either from sublimity or pathos" (MPW. XVII, 206). He writes to the understanding, and belongs to a class of genius, not eccentric or enthusiastic, but possessing only more remarkably qualities which other men possess. This view is like that of Wordsworth put forward in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

In discussing Dryden, Scott escapes from his critical dilemma over satire by appealing to "honourable and just feeling" (Dryden, IX, 202), and to nature:

In [the] skilful mixture of applause and blame lies the nicest art of satire. There must be an appearance of candour on the part of the poet, and just so much merit allowed, even to the object of his censure, as to make his picture natural (Dryden, I, 243).

Scott recognizes that Dryden, with Molière, satisfies the understanding and the fancy but not the heart. In spite of his own predilection towards the view of the artist as man of feeling, nevertheless for these qualities he places Dryden next to Shakespeare and Milton.
SCOTT AS CRITIC

In this survey of Scott's views of satire we are moving from the man of feeling to the conscious artist. The same movement can be traced when Scott asserts such values as those of clarity, conciseness (of his own octosyllabics as against the heroic measure of Pope), polish, refinement (as against coarseness), and restraint. Moreover, the artist has to make a deliberate effort to achieve unity of effect, on which Scott especially insists in his comments on the drama and the novel. For example, in Tom Jones he admires "The felicitous contrivance, and happy extirication of the story, where every incident tells upon and advances the catastrophe; while, at the same time, it illustrates the characters of those interested in its approach" (MPW. III, 104).

The writer needs a consciousness of more than one kind of art to achieve a musical harmony and a pictorial "keeping" (MPW. III, 332) and chiaroscuro. The last is important; "lights and shadows" are "necessary to give effect to a fictitious narrative" (WN. VII, 6). Fielding "painted life as it was, with all its shades, and more than all the lights which it occasionally exhibits, to relieve them" (MPW. III, 108). Contemplating Old Mortality Scott writes that "there are noble subjects for narrative during that period full of the strongest light & shadow" (L. IV, 293), and he observes of Bulwer's Polham, "the light is easy and gentlemanlike the dark very grand & sombrous" (L. XI, 45). Still using the pictorial analogy, to the highly finished work of Richardson Scott prefers the sketches of Fielding, imaginatively suggestive as they are.

Scott is still in this area of conscious artistry when he refers to writing as ornament, sometimes as mere ornament. He admits that "the majesty of history is . . . injured . . . by the ornaments of poetical fiction" (L. III, 234); in particular, "the fate of [Nelson] is almost too grand in its native simplicity to be heightened by poetical imagery" (L. XII, 384).

A portion of Scott's critical vocabulary follows from his insistence on the importance of feeling. This insistence leads to a tension in his view of satire which he sees as potentially destructive of feeling and proceeding from the understanding rather than from the heart. Nevertheless, the satirical achievement in the work of Swift, Molière and Dryden is unassailable. From satire feeling is excluded, but in less debateable literary areas feeling accommodates itself to conscious artistic manipulation.

III

Turning from author and style, Scott believes that the subject of art is nature and human nature. The artist penetrates to the essence and
grasps the distinctive in what he views. It is the hold on "the minute and distinguishing features of truth" (WN. IV, 224) which Scott admires in Defoe and Richardson. This quality is discussed theoretically in relation to poetry: "In order to produce a picturesque effect... a very intimate knowledge of the subject described is an essential requisite." "Circumstances" should be selected "which, though individual and so trivial as to escape general observation, are precisely those which in poetry give life, spirit, and, above all, truth to the description." Such circumstances are "those natural touches of reality which ought to enliven and authenticate the poem" (L. XII, 383).

In line with this view of the artistic hold on reality, in history Scott admires "old Pitscottie" because in his pages "events are told with so much naïveté and even humour and such individuality as it were that it places the actors and scenes before the reader" (L. VIII, 48). Scott also admires Wenlocke's Restoration narrative because "it lets you at once into all the minute and domestic concerns of a period so interesting" (L. VII, 68). The distinctiveness which Scott admires is not only one of history, but also of "locality" (L. I, 146) and nationality. This last is a basis for his praise of Maria Edgeworth and Fielding.

In Scott's view artistic veracity implies morality: "an accurate picture of human nature... can never be truly presented, without conveying a lesson of instruction" (Dryden. XIV, 134n). Scott is equally opposed to overt didacticism, though deviating from subject to style, when he insists "that the direct and obvious moral to be deduced from a fictitious narrative, is of much less consequence to the public, than the mode in which the story is treated in the course of its details" (MPW. III, 35).

IV

Turning in the direction of his audience, Scott sees a basic community of interest between the literary genius and the society to which he belongs, both actual and ideal. As he publicly urges upon Byron:

Nature, when she created man a social being, gave him the capacity of drawing that happiness from his relations with the rest of his race, which he is doomed to seek in vain in his own bosom. These relations cannot be the source of happiness to us if we despise or hate the kind with whom it is their office to unite us more closely. If the earth be a den of fools and knaves, from whom the men of genius differs by the more mercurial and exalted character of his intellect, it is natural that he should look down with pitiless scorn on creatures so inferior. But if, as we believe, each man, in his own degree possesses a portion of the ethereal flame, however smothered by unfavourable circum-
stances, it is or should be enough to secure the most mean from
the scorn of genius, as well as from the oppression of power, and
such being the case, the relations which we hold with society,
through all their gradations, are channels through which the
better affections of the loftiest may, without degradation, extend
themselves to the lowest (MPW. XVII, 359-360).

In Scott’s eyes the present system of relationship works so perfectly
that he can only think of two distinguished men of letters in difficult
circumstances: these are Coleridge and Maturin. In arguing (un-
successfully) against the establishment of a Royal Society of Literature
Scott aligns men of letters such as himself with the polite world as
against mere academic pedants:

few men who have acquired some reputation in literature would
chuse to enroll themselves with the obscure pedants of universi-
ties . . . most respectable doubtless and useful in their own way—
excellent judges of an obscure passage in a Greek author—under-
standing perhaps the value of a bottle of old port—connoisseurs
in tobacco and not wholly ignorant of the mystery of punch
making but certainly a sort of persons whom I for one would
never wish to sit with as assessors of the fine arts . . . to one
who has lived all his life with gentlemen and men of the world
to mingle his voice with men who have lived entirely out of the
world and whose opinions must be founded on principles so
different from our own would be too very pleasing situation
(L. VI, 400).

As this passage suggests, Scott himself prefers “the conversation of
men of the work-day world to the allspice society that is made up of
authors critics and admirers” (L. VIII, 26). He writes facetiously of
“playing at ladies and gentlemen a game to which I have been partial
all my life” (L. IX, 500). And he believes that Johnson showed bad
taste in leaping “over the little differences and courtesies which form
the turnpike gates in society, and which fly open on payment of a
trifling tribute” (L. XI, 115). Moreover, knowledge of the world was
an advantage from the merely literary point of view which Fielding
and Smollett possessed over the secluded Clara Reeve, learned in books
alone.

With such a comfortable view of the place of the man of letters
in society Scott can easily scorn the judgment of the hostile critic and
the exclusive clique: “Nothing is more valueless than the opinion of
literary people of London coteries although it is unnecessary to tell
them so” (L. IX, 290). The rider here is indicative of Scott’s social
cautions. He also relies on the sympathetic interest of the individual
reader and on the approbation of the judicious few. Scott’s reader
plays an active role, in the willing suspension of disbelief, to use
Coleridge’s phrase, and in imaginative involvement with what the artist presents: "It is often in the slight and almost imperceptible touches that the hand of the master is shewn, and that a single spark, struck from his fancy, lightens with a long train of illumination that of the reader" (Quarterly Review, Oct. 1816, p. 183). Scott says that he would be content to please one such responsive reader. He "would rather please one man of feeling and genius than all the great critics in the kingdom" (L. IV, 28). He gives this view classical authority when he asserts, "Laudari per virum laudatum is indeed a greater treat than the applause of numbers can afford" (L. XII, 217). Finally, turning away from self, "it is impossible that a man of Lord Byron's genius should not often feel the want of that which he has forfeited the fair esteem of those by whom genius most naturally desires to be admired and cherished" (L. IV, 203).

In spite of the exclusive movement of these last few quotations, Scott, in accordance with his view of the basic harmony between the man of letters and his society, himself generously wants to please all its members. He writes for "the general class of readers" (WN. IV, 386). With Croker in his Battle of Talamona as well as with Pope he appeals to "the general feelings of mankind" (L. XII, 404), as against "the high-flying critics" (L. XII, 319).

In this catholic spirit Scott appreciates qualities in all the segments which make up society, particularly as they comprise the theatrical audience. "The better ranks" make an important contribution because of the refining influence which they bring (L. XII, 317). The "middle classes" unquestionably provide "the most valuable part of an audience; because, with a certain degree of cultivation, they unite an unacknowledged energy of feeling" (Dryden, IV, 250). Though Scott does not seem to admire the contemporary plebs, he looks back regretfully to the popular audiences of the past which came to the theatre not to criticise, but to admire. He looks back to the unique good taste of the Greek audience, mingled with its enthusiasm and religious awe. And he looks back to the "rough and manly spirits" of "the good old time," the audience of the Elizabethan popular theatre, which "came prepared with a tribute of tears and laughter, to bursts of pathos, or effusions of humour" (Dryden, IV, 229-230).

The aim of the modern writer is to please not only himself, as Scott does, but also the public, as Scott hopes to do. It is often merely to please, to satisfy the public’s imperious demand for novelty. After all, the novel itself is "a mere elegance, a luxury contrived for the . . . gratification of that half love of literature, which pervades
all ranks in an advanced stage of society" (MPW. III, 108). Scott
avers that "it is better to be stately than tedious" (L. III, 205), and
he quotes approvingly, "tout genre est permis hors le genre ennuyant"
(L. V, 61).

This view of the artist as entertainer has an important corollary in
the view of the artist's own occupation. His work should be an enter-
tainment to himself as well as to the public. Scott frequently recom-
mends literature as an agreeable diversion from the real business of life,
as a "respectable amusement" (L. IV, 491). Literature "can only be
gracefully executed as an occasional avocation" (L. IV, 204-205). For
example, "in a clergyman literary talent is always graceful" (L. IV,
467). With such an opinion Scott elaborately cautions a distant cor-
respondent

against an enthusiasm which, while it argues an excellent dis-
position and a feeling heart, requires to be watched and re-
strained, tho' not repressed. It is apt, if too much indulged, to
engender a fastidious contempt for the ordinary business of the
world, and gradually to unfit us for the exercise of the useful
and domestic virtues, which depend greatly on our not exalting
our feelings above the temper of well-ordered and well-educated
society. No good man can ever be happy when he is unfit for
the career of simple and commonplace duty, and I need not add
how many melancholy instances there are of extravagance and
profligacy being resorted to, under pretence of contempt for the
common rules of life (L. II, 278).

In Byron especially "It is a cruel pity that such high talents should
have been joined to a mind so wayward and incapable of seeking con-
tent where alone it is to be found in the quiet discharge of domestic
duties and filling up in peace and affection his station in society"
(L. IV, 203).

Among Scott's poetic contemporaries, the acknowledged eccen-
tricity of Wordsworth is reconcilable with his being "a fine manly
high principled man" (L. III, 468), that is, a gentleman. On the
other hand, the eccentricity of Byron led him away from the possibility
of achieving historical distinction as a man of action, in the direction
of the pathological extravagance of Hoffman, the insanity of a Rou-
seau or a Shelley.

Thus for the modern author literature is ideally a pastime rather
than a maddening preoccupation. He entertains both himself and the
public. Yet as well as entertaining he provides solace and a
momentary escape from the ills of human existence. His object is to
"alleviate for a time the more unquiet feelings of the mind" (J. 1825,
p. 101). In this spirit Scott writes of the "delightful dreams" of the
theatregoer (MPW. VI, 306), "the magic illusions of romance" (MPW. III, 322) and "the seducing mazes of fictitious narrative" (MPW. III, 2). Late in life he himself wishes that he could "wander back through the mazes of Mrs. Radcliffe's romances" (L. XI, 406), and he enjoys "the sleeping-waking kind of thing," that is, The Tempest and A Midsummer Night's Dream (L. IX, 403).

The aim of the author is thus to please and soothe. At the same time, he has a moral responsibility and power. Though sceptical of "the omnipotence of literary talent" (MPW. III, 453), Scott sees with Wordsworth that "the vulgar must be taught what they are to admire" (L. III, 177)—with the implication that such teaching might be fruitful.

Scott pays a good deal of attention to Dryden as a great author in the social context. He sees him not as the creature of his age, nor as an aloof genius like Milton, but, with Shakespeare, as involved in a process of interaction: "he alternately influenced and stooped to the national taste of the day" (Dryden. I, 4). Like Scott himself, he "professedly lived to please his own age" (190); from a hostile point of view, he "sacrificed to the Belial or Asmodeus of the age" (449). The improvement of general manners which took place with the Revolution of 1688 coincided with an improvement in Dryden's own taste. Nevertheless, Scott suggests that the inferior elements in Dryden's work, for example, his coarseness, like that of Swift, can be attributed to the age, whereas his outstanding contribution was through his "regenerating taste" (41) to "further the reformation of taste and poetry" (21). In this way he was—almost religiously—"a light to his people" (526).

Scott felt that specific cultural benefits flowed not only from the work of Dryden but also from Swift who, like all great writers, brought forward the improvement of the language. Benefits in society at large resulted from the general reaction to the social criticism of Johnson in Scotland. Scott felt that Basil Hall might make a similar contribution in what he wrote concerning America, and that Maria Edgeworth had given humanity and dignity to the image of the Irish. He emulated her in behalf of his own countrymen in Waverley. Scott's first novel is thus an epitome of his critical attitudes, being intended as expressive of feeling, historically descriptive, entertaining, and socially corrective.

Scott sees an essential harmony between author and society. He dismisses the hostile critic and the unfriendly coterie in favour of the involved reader and the judicious friend. But, on the theoretical
ground of the essential harmony, Scott wishes to please them all; and in the wake of this desire he constructs an imaginary audience to which all classes make a valuable contribution. The author pleases himself and his audience: he soothes their cares. At the same time, he exerts a genial moral influence, so that in a sense even the unpretentious Scott agrees with Shelley that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

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