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BOOK REVIEWS


Miss Cusac proposes three major ideas about the Waverley Novels: that two-thirds of them have recognizable structures (some of them Aristotelian), that the hero of about half of them is active, and that the novels present a consistent social and moral philosophy. Although such studies as that of Francis R. Hart make it impossible to regard her as a pioneer, her thesis, different from Hart's and arrived at by different ways, is nonetheless a splendid one. I only wish it were more convincing.

The reasons why it is not are three: first, Miss Cusac's discussion is too abstract; second, some of her crucial concepts are inadequately defined; third, the philosophical vision she discovers in the novels is that of a suffocating bore.

The question of the hero's activity illustrates my first objection. Alexander Welsh gave too many of his days and nights to the examination of this issue to be justly ignored, yet Miss Cusac, by using a definition of the word "active" far more rarified than Welsh's, does exactly that. Although she arrived at her ideas before reading his book, she gives it a good deal of attention. It is disappointing, therefore, that her confrontation of him is a mere feint. For her, a hero is active if he controls his destiny, passive if he does not; hence it is unnecessary for her to match Welsh's lively interest in the hero's expression, deportment, gestures. The results are curious. Lovel, of *The Antiquary*, becomes an active hero, even though for nearly half the novel he simply isn't there; Frank Osbaldistone is also active, even though Rob Roy kills the villain while Frank looks on. Conversely, although I can understand why Ravenswood may be considered passive, I cannot forget the episode in which he rescues Lucy and her father by one of the most magnificently improbable feats of marksmanship in the Waverley Novels. (We seem to have forgotten Scott's enormous fondness for derring-do.) Admittedly Welsh may have gone too far in his conviction that an active hero must be observed in the process of being active, but Miss Cusac goes too far in the other direction.

(Nevertheless her categories are useful, in that they draw attention to Scott's fascination with the spectacle of young men of active tempera-

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ment caught in circumstances that deprive them of power. Small wonder
that Nigel, who, after all, does his best, protests his condition so
strenuously. Scott, by joining together what Miss Cusac would put
asunder, created tensions that add enormously to the interest of the
novels.)

My second objection concerns a rather free and vague use of im-
portant ideas. We are repeatedly informed that Scott's heroes must
adopt the "social and political status quo," the "accepted social struc-
ture", the "order of things", the "rational status quo", the "expectations
of society". Putting aside my feelings that depictions of Scott as a dreary
old Nanny nagging away about law, order, and proper behavior will
not lead to a rapid expansion of his audience, I remain in a quandary
as to where this status quo may be found. Where was it for Jeanie
Deans? As the protagonist of a comic romance she presumably "follows
the course implicitly approved by rational, civilized society". But is
her determination to go to London arrived at only by rational means?
And is her action in proving a tradition about the power of royal grace
to the lowest subject among the expectations of "rational civilized
society"? And if it is, could the world Scott depicts in The Heart of
Midlothian be described in these terms? Miss Cusac's interpretation of
Scott's social vision offers us little help in answering such questions as
these.

Another concept that suffers from Miss Cusac's failure to define
her ideas more accurately is that of "the eighteenth-century". By viewing
it solely as the century of "cosmic Toryism" and optimism, and by
insisting that Scott adhered to its values with an almost infatuated
fidelity, she has to perform needless (and largely unsuccessful) acts of
legerdemain in reconciling Scott's sense of history as tragedy with his
loyalty to his assumed intellectual background. Why? Wouldn't the
admirer of Johnson and the editor of Swift have responded to some
of that century's darker thoughts — including its fascination with the
wreckage of empires and its almost obsessive fear of the evils that flow
from prosperity? Miss Cusac's oversimplification of eighteenth-century
thought leaves Scott's tragic view of history unprovided with any im-
portant antecedent except Scott himself, and we are faced with the
paradoxical spectacle of a major historical novelist persistently and
energetically contradicting his personal vision of history.

Concerning Miss Cusac's interpretation of Scott's moral vision,
which I have already indicated, I only hope that it wasn't as dull as all
that. It is sometimes impossible not to feel that Scott's heroes are
being initiated into a lifetime of reading Lord Eldon's speeches. In all
fairness, Miss Cusac is here the victim of one part of the current "con-
ventional wisdom" that we should all be wary of — the odd idea that Scott rejected primitive man. He didn't. Surely Miss Cusac will agree that one of the most sensible acts in Rob Roy is the killing of Rashleigh. After the appointed guardians of the established order of things have suddenly discovered urgent business elsewhere, Rob does this good work, happily for the young man in the coach, who then goes on to marry a Catholic.

The good things in Miss Cusac's monograph occur when she exhibits the most genuine originality. Despite its occasional imprecision, her style is plain and unpretentious — a marked virtue. She is certainly correct in establishing mental events as true forms of action. Moreover, despite the majority opinion that Scott's heroes are psychologically static, she refreshingly insists that many of them do, in fact, grow. Her discussion of the final volume of The Heart of Midlothian rejects the padding theory and will help to keep an important question open. Finally, her treatment of structure as abstraction leads her to pay slight attention to the accepted view that the Scottish novels are superior to the rest. Here I suspect she is wrong, but it is well to be reminded how freely and naturally Scott's mind played over the different cultures of Europe.

It is all the more regrettable, then, that Miss Cusac adopted the practice of paddling back and forth between an excessively rationalistic Scott and an eighteenth century frozen in its complacency and optimism. There is some measure of truth to be discovered in this way, but there is another Scott entirely. He prized a brigand if he had some principle of loyalty in him; he celebrated the Cossacks; he laughed at Highlanders, not because they weren't "enlightened", but because their ferocity showed itself too frequently in their tongues rather than their dirks; he vituperated the "infidels of the Encyclopédie"; he denied with anxiety and some indignation Lady Louisa Stuart's accusation that he endorsed "the March of Intellect"; among all the historical periods accessible to his attention he ungratefully singled out the eighteenth century for special condemnation; he saw Europe as one vast Ellengowan rescued by primitive (and sometimes wretched) men from its self-destructive "polite" orders. Miss Cusac says that Scott repressed aspects of life represented by such figures as Rob Roy and Meg Merrilies, but it is obvious that it is we who have done the repressing.

The consequences of such over-simplification are predictable enough: a silly turning upside-down of much current critical opinion, changing into its opposite the view of Scott as a polite eighteenth-century man of letters. The way to prevent this is not to dispute the intensity of Scott's Romantic fever, but to discriminate among his
attitudes in order to determine why he accepted some aspects of Romanticism or the Enlightenment and rejected others. We might begin by remembering that the self-appointed spokesman for the Enlightenment in Scott’s time was Napoleon Bonaparte — a notable chastiser of unschooled primitives. But above all, we should remind ourselves that no one could have achieved Scott’s power over the European imagination had he been either a prosing schoolboy to the politer Augustans or a genteel forerunner of M. Homais.

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