Scott: Ballad Novelist?

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THE VIEW of Scott to be considered here is that stated concisely by Dr F. R. Leavis in the second footnote under the fifth page of *The Great Tradition:*

> Scott was primarily a kind of inspired folklorist, qualified to have done in fiction something analogous to the ballad opera: the only live part of *Redgauntlet* now is 'Wandering Willie's Tale' and 'The Two Drovers' remains in esteem while the heroics of the historical novels can no longer command respect. He was a great and very intelligent man; but, not having the creative writer's interest in literature, he made no serious attempt to work out his own form and break away from the bad tradition of the eighteenth-century romance. Of his books, *The Heart of Midlothian* comes the nearest to being a great novel, but hardly *is* that: too many allowances and deductions have to be made. Out of Scott a bad tradition came. It spoiled Fenimore Cooper, who had new and first-hand interests and the makings of a distinguished novelist. And with Stevenson it took on 'literary' sophistication and fine writing.

One must always read Dr Leavis with scrupulous care and I take it that the phrase, 'the *creative* writer's interest in literature' is so phrased as to make allowance, for instance, that in his editions of Swift and Dryden and in his long pioneer appreciation of Jane Austen, quite apart from his work as a folklorist in collecting ballads, Scott had at least the *critical* or *scholarly* writer's interest in literature. Though 'literary' sophistication would always be a bad thing with Dr Leavis, literary sophistication without the inverted commas would perhaps often, or always, be a good thing: fine writing, without or with inverted commas, would probably always be a bad thing. The 'bad tradition of eighteenth-century' romance probably suggests mainly Mrs Radcliffe, whose gift of picturesque description Scott very much admired, and from which he learned: it would not of course include a small masterpiece, in a sense very much in a tradition analogous to ballad opera, Miss Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent.*

But what interesting chiefly is about this passage is that the description of Scott's influence should leave out a much greater writer of prose fiction than either Fenimore Cooper or Stevenson, Thomas Hardy. There is an excellent essay by Donald Davidson on 'The Traditional Basis of Thomas Hardy's Fiction'. (Davidson is one of the few members of the original Fugitives group of Nashville, Tennessee, who could be said to remain even today an unreconstructed rebel.) In this he comments:

He wrote as a ballad-maker would write if a ballad-maker were to have to write novels . . .[1]

He grew up in a Dorset where fiction was a tale told or sung . . . Young Thomas played the fiddle at weddings and in farmer's parlors . . . At one notable harvest home he heard the maids sing ballads. Among these Hardy remembered particularly 'The Outlandish Knight' — a Dorset version of the ballad recorded by Child as 'Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight'.[2]

Davidson also makes the shrewd remark that 'Hardy was born early enough . . . to receive a conception of art as something homely, functional, and in short traditional (p. 13). The same could be said of Scott; his essays on the novelists (mainly very minor ones) of the age preceding his still make lively reading: but in these essays Scott is interested himself in how far a work of fiction is plausible, readable, exciting, decent, not, even in his very shrewd remarks about Jane Austen, in the novel as an art-form. What interests him about Jane Austen is how, with hardly any 'story', in his sense, with characters who are very ordinary, and to whom he himself feels socially superior, she can yet grip his attention. He recognises and salutes in her a conscious art, at which he himself does not aim, and which he feels he could not achieve, but the critical vocabulary of his age does not permit him to put the case in these terms.

Donald Davidson quotes some important sentences from Hardy, with which Scott would probably have agreed:

The writer's problem is, how to strike the balance between the uncommon and the ordinary, *so as on the one hand to give interest, on the other to give reality.*

[1] *Hardy, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Albert J. Guérard, 1963 (in the Twentieth Century Views Series, ed. Maynard Mack), p. 12.
[2] Ibid, p. 13.

In working out this problem, *human nature must never be abnormal, which is introducing incredibility. The uncommonness must be in the events, not in the characters . . .*

A story must be *exceptional enough to justify its telling.* We taletellers are all Ancient Mariners and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests (in other words, the hurrying public) *unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman.*[1]

It would be impossible to find a more honest and direct statement of the principles on which the tale-teller works.

The story-teller's gift, which Scott and Hardy so eminently possess, is quite a different thing from the gift of constructing a plot. E. M. Forster has a very funny passage about *The Antiquary,* a novel which he clearly nevertheless enjoys very much, in which he shows how Scott — apart from the business of the missing heir, uncertain of his own identity, which is of course a folklore theme — has no binding unity of structure in this novel, and yet keeps us reading: a little excitement and mystery; character comedy; humours of a small town; the pathos of the fisher-folk: the tone and the kind of interest perpetually changing when change is needed. Like Hardy, Scott is unabashed in his use of coincidence, and in manipulation of a story to produce an exciting scene when one is needed.

Davidson notes of Hardy that, 'with certain important exceptions', his characters are

'fixed or non-developing characters. Their fortunes may change but they do not change with their fortunes . . . But we have forgotten a truth that Hardy must have known from the time when, as a child, he heard at the harvest home the ballad of the outlandish knight. The changeless character has as much aesthetic richness as the changeful character. Traditional narrative of every sort is built upon the changeless character'.

In fact, Donald Davidson thinks that it is a defect in modern fiction that it is obsessed with the developing character, and does not satisfy the 'insatiable' 'human desire for the changeless character . . . Perhaps all is not well with a literary art that leaves the role of Achilles to be filled by Pop-Eye'.[2]

[1] Ibid, p. 17. Present author's italics throughout.

[2] The quotations in this paragraph are from pp. 19–20 of 'The Traditional Basis of Hardy's Fiction'.

Davidson does not himself bring out the parallels with Scott implied in his description of Hardy (who, of course, does not come into Dr Leavis's great tradition of the English novel — though Dr Leavis very much admires Hardy's poetry — any more than Scott does). But Davidson does point to a desire in the human mind, a desire not so much for a 'criticism of life' as for a story unlike life, though with living people in it ('The uncommonness', wrote Hardy again, 'must be in the events, not in the characters') which the novelists of Dr Leavis's 'great tradition', except Conrad, who always tells a very exciting story (and whose characters, as in *Nostromo*, do tend to be static characters), do not satisfy in the same way. When I was comparing Donald Davidson's view of Hardy with Dr Leavis's view of Scott it occurred to me as ironic that part of the fascination, the 'aesthetic richness' in Davidson's phrase, of Dr Leavis's *oeuvre* as a whole is that he himself *does* satisfy 'the human desire for the changeless character'. The thought occurred to me ironically, but also respectfully: and I wondered, in fact, whether a character like Dr Leavis's, so splendidly all of a piece from beginning to end, might not be more at home, in a fictionalized version of it, in a novel by Scott or by Hardy rather than in a novel by George Eliot or Henry James.

Another parallel between Scott and Hardy that also occurred to me is that though the prose styles of both have been much criticized, for clumsiness, prolixity, an over-abundance of sometimes pedantic and not obviously relevant antiquarian or literary allusion, yet both styles are admirable working instruments for the kind of job the story-teller, as distinct from the novelist consciously working on the novel as an art form, has to do. Scott's style was attacked from the beginning: a character in Peacock, for instance, complains that it has no 'sentences' in it, and I think it is Dr Donald Davie, who much admires Scott, who says that it can be enjoyed, as writing, only by a Scotsman. E. M. W. Tillyard, on the other hand, in his book on the epic strain in the English novel, praised what one might call its functional quality, its flexibility and variety to suit the matter in hand.

I must admit that when, forty or more years ago at Aberdeen Grammar School, I had to do *Old Mortality* as a set English text, I *did* find Scott heavy going: I much preferred the ' "literary"

sophistication and fine writing' of Stevenson, or perhaps not so much these as his pace and economy in narrative; and Stevenson, after all, at his best, say in *Kidnapped* and even in *The Master of Ballantrae,* is writing for boys not men (or perhaps for the boy in men?). Scott puts boy readers off by the extraordinary leisureliness with which he sets character and scene in the first fifty pages or so of novels which are, in fact, full of the sort of excitement that ought to appeal to a boy, like *Rob Roy* or *Redgauntlet* or *Waverley* or *Old Mortality* itself. It was not till about fifteen years ago, when I was spending a wet summer in Skye, in the house of my cousin, a schoolmaster, who had inherited a complete set of Scott's novels from my grandfather, that I began to find a positive relish in this leisurely approach. Scott himself, like his own Jonathan Oldbuck, was an antiquarian, a collector not only of ballads but of traditionary anecdotes (anecdotes, I mean, handed down by word of mouth), an extraordinary lover of precise topographical detail and of facts about the manners and customs of his youth.

The Scots, perhaps, compared to the English, are slower, more rambling, more willing to explore by-paths, both in thought and speech; when telling an anecdote they are often more interested in laying out the background in detail than in rapidly coming to the point. Yet, if in some ways more wordy, in other ways they can be more concise than the English, because of a certain formal, latinate element which remains even in their ordinary speech: for the English colloquial, 'Can you well me the way to . . .?' the Scots-English colloquial is, 'Can you direct me to . . .?' Scott can, as Tillyard pointed out, be remarkably concise when concision is called for. But these interminably leisurely openings do root the rapid and exciting episodes, when these begin to happen, in a solid sense of social and historical reality. In one's patient middle age, one realizes that, though Scott is often breaking all the rules and precepts for effective and economical composition, one is listening to a living voice; a voice echoing other living voices.

Let me give a rather comic example of Scott's traditionary sense from one of his notes at the end of *Old Mortality*: Note G: about Claverhouse:

> It is said by tradition that he was very desirous to see and be introduced to a certain Lady Elphinstoun, who had reached the advanced age of

one hundred years and upwards. The noble matron, being a stanch Whig, was rather unwilling to receive Claver'se (as he was called from his title), but at length consented. After the usual compliments, the officer observed to the lady that having lived so much beyond the usual term of humanity, she must in her time have seen many strange changes. 'Hout na, sir', said Lady Elphinstoun, 'the world is just to end with me as it began. When I was entering life, there was ane Knox deaving us a' wi' his *clavers,* and now I am ganging out, there is ane Claver'se deaving us a' wi' his *knocks*'.

'Clavers' signifying, in common parlance, idle chat, the double pun does credit to the ingenuity of a lady of a hundred years old.

One's first reaction is to think that it does credit rather to Scott's ingenuity, in inventing a highly improbable anecdote for the sake of a neat pun. His entertaining footnotes to Croker's edition of Boswell, the most splendid of which records Lord Auchinleck's description of Dr Johnson as 'an auld dominie, wha kept a schule, and ca'ed it an acawdemy' have been thought to be purely of his own invention. But I think the footnotes there, and the anecdote here, though it is most unlikely that either are historically true, are probably traditionary: they were stories Scott had heard in his youth. The phrase, 'It is said by tradition . . .', is important. There are many traditionary tales that are not true but are generally believed. In different ages, they can attach themselves to different personages. In Lord Stanhope's *Conversations with Wellington,* there is an anecdote about a Roman lady who sat in the nude for Canova, and was asked how she could bear it: 'It was quite comfortable, there was a warm fire in the room'! Exactly the same story is told about Marylin Monroe, posing in the pink nude for a photograph on a calendar. The Opies record how the playground rhyme

> Lottie Collins lost her drawers,
> Won't you kindly lend her yours,

became with the passage of time

> Jessie Matthews lost her drawers,

and Jessie Matthews, if the rhyme still survives, has probably been replaced by some other attractive young actress whose name fits the metre, say Glenda Jackson.

Scott may have been humorously aware of his own weakness for the fake-antique. Perhaps he was rather getting at himself in the

page in *The Antiquary* where Jonathan Oldbuck thinks he has found the remains of a Roman earthwork and Edie Ochiltree says to him: 'I mind the biggin' o't'. His wonderful sense of the Scottish past was not properly a trained historian's sense (*Tales of a Grandfather* remains the most readable of all introductions to Scottish history, but at no time could it have been used as a school textbook): the truth of the past was rather for him the memory of stories told to him in his youth, all the better if they were tall stories, and remembered when he began to write his novels, perhaps 'remembered with advantages'. Professor James Kinsley has referred to Burns as not only a great poet in his own right, but a kind of one-man museum of traditional Scottish folk-song and balladry: Scott is similarly a kind of one-man museum of traditionary tales.

It is very difficult, when dealing with a really great writer — even a great writer, like Scott or like Hardy, whose greatness is more a product of nature than of conscious art — to abstract the notion of style from the notion of the effect achieved, however little consciously aimed at. Nobody would wish for instance to elide the prosaisms and circumstantialities of Wordsworth; nobody would wish to rob Coleridge, in *Biographia Literaria,* of his endless digressions; and the more we read Hardy, whether in verse or prose, the more we realize that that conglomerate, pudding-stone style, the odd juxtapositions of pedantries and provincialisms, the feeling, sometimes, in the poems of the poet's corner of a country newspaper, the — deliberately, or undeliberately? — hold-all, unselective vocabulary, are all part of Hardy's genius. Scott wrote too much, and, in the latter part of his life, wrote as a drudge, his own stern taskmaster: he can be flat and threadbare. But, at his best, because he listened to living voices, he speaks to us with a living voice. Even the pedantries (like Hardy's repeated references to Aeschylus and Shakespeare) are living. True ballads are simple in diction, limited in the kind of episode and character they use; but the village tale-teller (not that Scott was not much more than this) likes to use long words and display his learning.

Taking Scott merely as a ballad-novelist, he is much more consistently successful at being that than Dr Leavis allows; and I also think that he is something more than that. Dr Leavis rightly describes him as 'intelligent', where I think the right word for

Hardy might be 'wise'. Scott's practical and social experience of life was, after all, very much wider than Hardy's: he was as much at home in the town as in the country, he knew and responded to men and women of every social class, he had a very sharp eye for the differences of manners in different classes and regions, not mainly for the uniformity of manners in one class and one region. He had sharp psychological penetration. His romantic feeling for the Jacobite past was balanced by a shrewd and canny sense that it was, indeed, in his own time, the 'end of an auld sang:' he knew that the Scottish future lay, as it were, with Bailie Nicol Jarvie rather than with Rob Roy MacGregor.

In *Redgauntlet,* for instance, though Redgauntlet himself is a magnificently romantic character, Prince Charles, the Young Pretender, is not. He is not an historically accurate character, even if in fact, at the period of *Redgauntlet,* Prince Charles had not yet become the brutal and drunken sot that he was in his last years. But he is not made at all like the Prince Charlie of history. He is made more like his own grandfather, James II. He is cold, he is obstinate, preferring his own self-will (a self-will not even based on love, for he is weary himself of the treacherous mistress whom his followers beg him to give up) to the best-informed advice of men who are risking their lives for him. He feels no gratitude, and sees no reason why he should; out of mere duty, his subjects owe him everything: he owes them nothing. Yet, extremely unattractive as this character is, Scott gives him a cold and sober dignity and a truly princely distance and authority. Scott, in these passages, is writing the true novel rather than the ballad novel; and it would not be wholly fantastic to compare this portrait of a repellent, self-frustrating and yet strangely formidable character with George Eliot's Grandcourt or Henry James's Osmond. It is, of course, on a much smaller scale. But in itself it is perfectly done, and it is a kind of character that has no exact precedent in previous English fiction and that owes very little either to the Prince Charlie of legend or the Young Pretender of history.

'Wandering Willie's Tale', as Dr Leavis rightly sees, is on the other hand a pure prose ballad, though fusing different elements (the comic and the supernatural) of the Border ballad tradition. But, re-reading *Redgauntlet* as I do once a year or so, I cannot at all agree that it is the only living thing in an otherwise dead narrative.

Scott's powers of exciting story-telling, and of convincing depiction, through dialogue, of all sorts and conditions of men, the old lawyer, the drunken sea-captain with his tragic memories, the law-crazed Peter Peebles, the hen-pecked Provost who would be a Whig if he could with his domineering Jacobite wife, Redgauntlet himself, perhaps a figure rather than a character, but what a dominating and impressive figure; Quakers and smugglers, were perhaps seldom better employed than here.

It is because the people in the novel as a whole are real people that 'Wandering Willie's Tale', the prose ballad, in which the characters are the token characters of ballad, is so impressive. It contributes nothing to the straight narrative line in a novel which, for pure construction, sustained suspense, and satisfactory climax, is one of the novels that shows us that Scott could, when he wanted to, construct a proper plot as well as tell an exciting episodic story. Yet the novel seems to pivot on 'Wandering Willie's Tale': in the sense that it gives of the traditionary folk feeling about the Redgauntlet family, in its peculiar concentration contrasting so strangely with the easy pace of narration elsewhere. It gives the fable behind the story, the meaning behind the action, it is the hinge on which the doors swing, and open, and finally shut. It is of course (Dr Leavis is quite right there) a small masterpiece in itself: but it is even greater read in the context of the structure, and of the rich and various social texture, of *Redgauntlet* as a whole.

In some ways, *Old Mortality,* one of the most popular of Scott's novels in his own time, is also the most ballad-like. Willa Muir, in her excellent book, *Living With Ballads,* speaks of two characteristics of the true ballad as being the use of token character, and the strictly functional use of scenery and property. Swords are for killing with, horses are for falling off, rivers are for fording and drowning in, castles are for beseiging, jousts are for knights to prove themselves in, woodlands are places where young women go to be seduced by outlaws or demon lovers, and so on. *Old Mortality* stumbles twice at the threshold, in Jedediah Cleishbotham's intolerably facetious preface, and in the preliminary chapter about the character Old Mortality, who used to go about tending the graves of the martyrs of the Covenant. Even when the story does get started, the detailed account of the Game of the

Popinjay shows too much of Scott the antiquary and not enough of Scott the ballad-maker. And certain jokes, like the joke about Lady Margaret's account of the disjeune she gave Charles II are repeated, perhaps, rather too often. But the key token characters, Claverhouse with his calm and courteous ruthlessness, Sergeant Bothwell, the wild, drunken ranker of Royal blood, reckless and heartless yet carrying with him always the letters of a woman whom he had truly loved, Cuddie Headriggs, the eternal Sancho Panza, Jenny Dennison, the incorrigible flirt who, when she marries, becomes something of a shrew, the grey mare who is the better horse: above all the wild, tormented figure of Balfour of Burleigh, lurking in his cave, plunging in the end murderously to his death in the water, these linger in the imagination, like the images out of a ballad.

They have the truth of tribal memory which is perhaps deeper than the truth of psychology. The hero, Henry Morton, is Scott's typical hero as the moderate man, but with the very special and scrupulous courage a moderate man needs in extreme times: tempted a little perhaps by Balfour, whose life he saves, by Claverhouse, who saves his life, at once horrified by the fanaticism of the Covenanters when they have power and moved almost to squander his own life by their staunchness under torture, sane and generous, he is not an exciting character, but he is a token of Scott's own sanity and generosity when he contemplated Scottish history. And the episode when Morton returns, toughened by the wars in Europe, and is seen by his loved one, who has perpetually been putting off her marriage to a generous and noble suitor, and when Morton is taken to be a ghost, is very ballad-like too: 'And the Lowlands of Holland have twined my love and me'. I have sometimes thought that *Old Mortality* is a better book to think about and remember than actually to re-read: but it does bear re-reading, every year or two, and, of course, with the affection of retrospect one begins to enjoy even the *longueurs*. The images return, like the images of a ballad, out of memory: but the prose, so uneven, yet so flexible, and at moments so oddly *tactfully* flexible, can recreate them too.

It does not matter to me very much, personally, whether Scott was in the 'great tradition' or not. What one might finally say is that there is an odd affinity, for all the obvious differences,

between him and Jane Austen. She knew a small and compact world perfectly, and she was compact of art and judgement: Scott knew a much more various world, of places, of classes, of people, of regions, of traditions, and in that world his judgement was more tolerant than hers, and perhaps in some ways ultimately more charitable. His experience had enabled him to know the wisdom in folly, the romance of the pedestrian, and the good in bad men. She always judges and places, he presents and refrains from judgement: in that respect, if in no other, he rather than she is Shakespearian.

Both were the last great British writers of fiction to be absolutely confident about their social positions, about their moral standards, about their religious beliefs — so confident that these things do not have to be very elaborately articulated, or argued about, or for.

Scott, of course, as David Daiches has pointed out, had an historical sense, a sense of the tug of the necessity of change against one's sentiments for what is being changed, that Jane Austen did not possess: she is a 'classic' — in a variety of connotations of that word — simply because she took it for granted that her world, though a very imperfect world, and demanding constant discriminatory and ironic criticism, was more or less *the* world: because, except for the intrusions of vulgarity on gentility, of assertiveness on politeness, she was hardly aware of any large-scale possibilities of drastic social and political change. Scott had a wide-ranging sense of all the forces that make for change in society, which is why, I suppose, a Marxist critic like George Lukacz so much admires him. He was a more emotional person than Jane Austen, and often, in his life and in his writing, romantically silly in a way she was not. He will not have the sort of centenary year that Dickens had. But I re-read him, as I grow older (I can re-read even *Anne of Geierstein*) with growing affection, between occasional yawns. As Johnson said of Goldsmith: 'Sir, he was a very great man'.