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Some Notes on
Sir Walter Scott

By

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SOME NOTES ON SIR WALTER SCOTT¹

IX the spring of 1917 I was compelled, for reasons not unconnected with public affairs, to spend a considerable time in bed, and, in the pleasant idle weeks of convalescence, I amused myself with carrying out a plan which I had long contemplated. I had been in the habit of reading some of the Waverley novels every year, but on this occasion I re-read carefully what I considered the best—*IVaverley*, *Old Mortality*, *G-uy Manner'uiy*, *The Antiquary*, *Rob Roy*, *The Bride of Lammermuir*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, and *Redyautnet*. Then I read my favourites among the voluminous works of Alexandra Dumas, the Valois and D'Artagnan cycles ; then Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame* and *Les Miserable.?*; and I concluded with half a dozen of Balzac. After that I tried to marshal my thoughts, and one very clear conviction stood out in my mind. Obviously each of those four masters of fiction had special qualities in which he excelled the others ; Dumas in glitter and speed, Victor Hugo in an imaginative intensity akin to poetry, Balzac in his disentangling of the web of human society. But I had a clear conviction that Scott was the greatest; he left upon me more than the others the impression which the great classical writers leave, of seeing things on a grander scale, of clarifying life, of observing justly and interpreting nobly, of possessing that 'stellar and undiminishable something' which was Emerson's definition of greatness. I am in many ways abundantly prejudiced, and as a fellow-Borderer I am altogether prejudiced in favour of Sir Walter the man ; but I hope I am willing to judge Sir Walter the writer with an impartial mind. So for what it is worth I present you with this conclusion.

Others have thought the same, but not many have attempted a reasoned justification of their preference. I could wish that some of our younger scholars would turn their admirable critical talent to the prose of Sir Walter Scott. He has been far too much taken for granted, as if he were a statue in a public place. I well understand that to a modern critic there may be more attractive topics than a reputed classic, and that he may prefer to study writers who have

¹ A paper read to the English Association, Oct. 26, 1923.

a definite effect of attraction or repulsion upon contemporary work. But after all a critic can only show his true mettle in dealing with masterpieces, and when they have said their say about Shakespeare I would like to see them turning to Scott. I believe that criticism to-day in this country is in a healthy state, for it eschews both anarchy and formalism and labours to find a just canon. I believe that in such a critical mood Scott would fare well, and that at his best he will stand the test of the most searching examination and the most austere standards.

It is curious how rarely he has been made the subject of serious criticism. His encomiasts have been eloquent and sincere like Ruskin, his detractors have been eloquent and sincere like Thomas Carlyle, but he has been praised and blamed in a spirit of rhetoric rather than of science. The really penetrating criticism of Scott could be collected in a very slim volume. The best is perhaps his own, or Lockhart's; or his friend Lady Louisa Stuart's; admirable, too, is that of a contemporary, J. L. Adolphus, whose *Letters to Richard Heber on the Waverley Novels*, published by Mr. Murray in 1821, deserve to be better known. Walter Bagehot wrote of him with his customary acumen and strong good sense, but for the rest—with rare exceptions—we have only warm appreciations by writers who are too much in love with the man to look impartially upon his work, or essays in belittlement by adherents of some minor coterie. An exception is the late A. W. Verrall—*clarum et venerabile nomen*—whose study of Scott's prose style is a model of what I mean by impartial and penetrating criticism—such criticism as Shakespeare has had for a hundred years. I want to see Dr. Verrall's method applied to all the aspects of Scott's genius, for only thus can justice be done to him.

This short paper is not an attempt to meet that need. I have no claim to speak with authority as a critic. I propose only to consider one or two of the more serious charges which have been advanced against the Waverley Novels, and to offer one or two pleas in defence. I will take criticisms which go to the heart of the matter—which, if admitted, must make us question Scott's right to a place in the highest rank of letters. The three I have selected are the charge against his verbal style, the charge against the form and construction of the tales, and the complaint of a lack of that quality which the Greeks called *σπουδαϊον*—of a shallow and conventional conception of human life. I offer my remarks in the hope that some among you, who are better equipped than myself, may be induced to take the matter further.

1

The complaint as to his style needs to be exactly stated. Obviously we cannot expect to find in him anything esoteric in the use of words, any delicate exercises in verbal dry-point, any of what Professor Elton has called 'those false associations of painful, choice, and fastidious language that have gathered for half a century round the word *art*'. I do not say that these refinements have not their beauty and value in their proper place, when the subject admits of them—in Sir Thomas Browne, in Charles Lamb, in Walter Pater, in some of the essays of Stevenson. But in Scott's type of work they are manifestly out of keeping. There is a passage in his *Journal*, written in 1826, where he makes a revealing confession. 'I am sensible, that if there be anything good about my poetry or my prose either, it is a hurried frankness of composition, which pleases soldiers, sailors, and young people of bold and active disposition. I have been no sigher in shades.' Had Scott indulged in the *finesse* of language he would have been guilty of a grave fault of craftsmanship, and the result would have been as preposterous as an insertion of point lace in a buff coat. Any complaint on this score may be discarded as irrelevant, and left to that not very important class whom Stevenson has described as 'the young gentlemen who cant about Art'. I find it impossible to dissociate style from matter, and to admire a form which is not an organic part of the substance. Mere juggling with words for their own sake seems to me a foolish trifling, and I do not understand a manner of saying something which has merit independent of the thing said. I have heard of a short-sighted and somewhat affected lady who one day at a Scotch railway station ran up to a porter and wailed, 'What *am* I to do? I have lost all my luggage and I cannot find a porter.' The man regarded her gravely and replied: 'Twa verra serious losses. But if ye've lost all your luggage, ye'll no need a porter.' We can apply the moral. What use is a porter to those who have no luggage?

The real charge is a more serious affair. It is that Scott, from carelessness or ineptitude in the use of words, spoiled the artistic effect of his narrative; that his tools were so blunt and cumbrous that they often fail to do their work; that his extreme facility kept him always on the edge, and sometimes led him over the edge, of banality; and that he attains his great moments by a kind of happy accident in defiance of his style. The charge has been made by Stevenson, an admirer and follower, in his 'Gossip on Romance', and it has been made in uncompromising terms. 'His characters . . .

will be wading forward with an ungrammatical and undramatic rigmarole of words' . . . He could . . . often fob us off with languid, inarticulate twaddle' . . . He conjured up the romantic with delight, but he had hardly patience to describe it' . . . , 'He was a great day-dreamer . . . but hardly a great artist; hardly, in the manful sense, an artist at all'

This is a solemn bill of attainder, but is it just? Well, in the first place I cannot agree with the critic about the example he selects in justification of his charge. It is the famous 'recognition' scene in *Guy Manmring*, when Harry Bertram lands at Ellangowan and hears the tune on the flageolet. It is true that it contains a sentence somewhat clumsily interpolated, but the romantic pitch is so high, the drama so intense, that to me, at least, the clumsiness seems negligible. But I do not wish to found on one instance, and I am prepared to make concessions to the critics. Scott is sometimes ungrammatical, as the faithful Lockhart was never tired of telling him. He is sometimes so careless that one sentence trips on the heels of another. He could fall into that jargon which in his time was believed to be polite English, and speak of 'the superb monarch of the feathered tribes', when he meant an eagle, and allow Helen Macgregor in *Rob Roy* and Norna in *The Pirate* to talk like a governess from Miss Pinkerton's Academy, and—unpardonable crime—make the adorable Di Vernon thus address Rashleigh Osbaldistonc—'Dismiss from your company the false archimage, Dissimulation, and it will better ensure your free access to our classical consultations.' Let us grant that he could write abominably. But is there any great writer, especially any great novelist, who does not sometimes nod? Dickens has appalling lapses of style; so has Thackeray; so has George Meredith, though his habit of twisted language often disguises their feebleness. The truth is that any man whose business it is to portray life in action and who is caught up in the white heat of his task, is certain at times to seize the first phrase which comes to his hand, and jar on his readers. Scott in his careless moments fell into the fault of 'polite English', but was it worse than the dessicated quasi-scientific phrases which disfigure the work of even our best to-day? Was it a worse cloak for laziness and slackness of thought than, say, the chatter of psycho-analysis, with its 'complexes' and 'reactions' and 'inhibitions'? Does it jar more than the pompous inanities of philosophy which intrude into other men's prose? I will give you one example from a very great modern. To my mind the most beautiful passage written in our day by any novelist is the last two paragraphs of Mr. Hardy's *Woodlanders*.

It is so beautiful that I am almost ashamed to pick a hole in it. You remember how it goes :—'As this solitary and silent girl stood there in the moonlight, a straight slim figure, clothed in a plaitless gown, the contours of womanhood so undeveloped as to be scarcely perceptible in her, the marks of poverty and toil effaced by the misty hour, she touched sublimity at points.' Could anything be better ? But it goes on—'and looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sea: for the loftier quality of abstract humanism' Could anything be much worse? It sounds like a sentence from an oration delivered over some deceased Positivist.

This, I grant, is only a plea in extenuation. But I submit further that Scott was a very great artist in words, playing with them as a musician plays with the notes of music, and weaving harmonies as subtle and moving as you will find in the whole range of English prose. On a certain level his gifts are admitted by all. He was a master of easy, swift, interesting narrative ; he was a master of dialogue, especially that of humble folk ; he invented a mode of speech for the figures of past ages, which is at once romantic and natural. But on the highest levels, where alone he is to be judged, he is more wonderful still. When the drama quickens and the stage darkens he attains to a style as perfect and unforgettable as Shakespeare's, and it is most subtly compounded. Dr. Verrall has analysed the speech of Meg Merrilees to the laird of Ellangowan, and has shown with what extraordinary cunning and justice the soft vowels and the harsh consonants are used, how repetition is artfully employed to enhance the majesty of the indictment, how each particular object mentioned, each adjective, plays its part in the total impression. Professor Elton has done the same thing with Claverhouse's speech to Morton in *Old Mortality*. That is the kind of criticism of Scott's style which is worth making—careful, patient, imaginative analysis such as we give to a chorus of Aeschylus, and his work is great enough to justify it. The method might well be applied to the closing scene of *Redyaullet*, or the last chapters of *The Bride of Linnemuir*, and above all to *Wandering Willie's Tale*, in which hardly a word fails of its exact adequate effect. If it be urged that this was done by instinct, not by conscious art, I reply that I do not care. Scott wrote hurriedly, and so did Shakespeare; the divine fire was there and we are not concerned with how it was lit.

One other word in this connexion. Scott, as he said, was no signer in shades, and there are certain qualities of style which we do not look for in romances of active bustling life. But now and then

comes another mood, when the sense of the transience of things steals over him and touches his prose with a strange wistfulness, as if the strong and self-contained soul at last found utterance. You will find the mood occasionally in his novels, but it is in every page of the *Journal*. There you have the tenderness which keeps watch over man's mortality and neither quails nor complains—a language as universal as the Gospel of St. John. Whatever of his work may be forgotten, the *Journal* will surely remain to comfort the weary and the sorely tried.

II

The second charge is more important, and touches the ordering and shaping of his tales, their alleged lack of proportion, their often huddled and hasty conclusions. Here again it is necessary to make frank admissions. (I Scott's habit was to take a great mass of life and show it in all its infinite variety.) He did not write with a thesis, and therefore he is loath to discard what interests him, even if its relevance is not very clear. His affections were so actively engaged with his characters and their doings that he is apt to linger with them in side-walks. The architecture of his novels is certainly not their strong point. Only *Old Mortality* and *The Bride of Latiimer-muir*, I think, are really well-constructed; and, of course, the short stories like *Wandering Willie's Tale* and *The Two Drovers*. I admit that *Waverley* is disjointed, that *The Heart of Midlothian* ends anyhow, that he allowed the plot of *St. Ronaris Well*, a fine tragic theme, to be grossly mauled by the prudery of his publisher.

But there are two things to remember. One is that, when he began to write, the tradition of the novel was picaresque, a rambling, often inconsequent, adventure, not adopted for the exposition of a single *motif*. The second is that, while a novel as a whole may be badly arranged, the main episodes are almost always perfectly managed. When we judge Scott's architecture I think that we should consider rather the main drama, which is not always co-terminous with the whole story. If we take that as the unit we shall find little to complain of. The essence of *The Heart of Midlothian* is the self-sacrificing sisterly love of Jeanie Deans, and the record of that has no flaw in it; of *Redgauntlet*, the tragic irony of a forlorn loyalty surviving into a world of prose, and could there be a more perfect culmination than when on the Solway shore a Campbell speaks the noble and chivalrous epitaph of Jacobitism? There may be padding and fumbling in the minor episodes, but the great dramatic moment arrives and Scott rises to it with the ease and

certainty of genius. The list is endless—Fergus MacIvor passing to death under the archway; Caleb Balderstone, picking up the Master's feather and placing it in his bosom; the end of Sergeant Bothwell; Morton's flight from Burley; the recognition scene in *Guy Manner-* .
iw^; the scene between Elizabeth and Leicester in the grotto at Kenilworth | the meeting of Jeanie Deans and Queen Caroline; the sudden martial ardour of Baillie Nicol Jarvie at the Clachan of Aberfoyle; the gathering in Neil Blane's public-house at the beginning of *Old Mortality*; the whole episode of Elspeth of the Craighburnfoot in *The Antiquary*. These things are great drama, for they proceed from the clash of character, but they are also epic, for they show the conflicts of history sublimated and focussed by a triumphant imagination, and they stir the blood like wine and trumpets. . I will take one last illustration from what seems to me to be on the whole one of the lesser novels, *Ivanhoe*—the scene at the tournament at Ashby, when Locksley is shooting at the butts. Up till then it has all been excellent vivid narrative—the jousting and the archery, the pleasantries of Wamba, the jealousy of Saxon and Norman; and then suddenly comes something different.—'And now', said Locksley, '*I will crave your Grace's permission to plant such a mark as is used in the North Country.*' What has happened? The horns of Elfland are blowing. What we have had before has been the good stock machinery of romance, but now the horizon is suddenly enlarged to embrace the greenwood, and Old England is summoned to the rescue. Can we wonder that such a note should appeal to youth? Scott judged his audience rightly, and in that lies one secret of his permanence, for the literature of the middle-aged has its modes and changes, but the fashion of youth is eternal.

In connexion with this question of construction let us glance at a complaint often made against the novels—their *longueurs* and excessive padding, and the flat monotony of most of the heroes and heroines. We have Scott's own defence of his padding in his review of Miss Austen.

'Let any one cut out from the Iliad or from Shakespeare's plays everything . . . which is absolutely devoid of importance or interest *in itself*; and he will find that what is left will have lost more than half its charms. We are convinced that some writers have diminished the effect of their works by being scrupulous to admit nothing into them which had not some absolute, intrinsic, and independent merit. They have acted like those who strip off the leaves of a fruit-tree, as being of themselves good for nothing, with the view of securing more nourishment to the fruit, which in fact cannot attain its full maturity and flower without them.'

It sounds as if there might be reason in that. 'His padding, antiquarian and otherwise, is intended as a relief, to provide a rest for the mind in the midst of exciting action. Something of the same kind may be said about his stockish heroes and heroines, They are passive people for the most part, creatures of the average world, not majestic men and women of destiny.) But they are not unreal; the earth is full of them; they are all the more natural for being undistinguished. They seem to me on the whole to play a very vital and artistic part, for there is such a thing as having too stimulating fare. They form a solid background, a kind of Greek chorus, repeating all the accepted platitudes, and keeping the drama, which might otherwise become fantastic, within reach of our prosaic life.

The point is worth developing further, for it is bound up with the meaning of romance. | It is one of Scott's characteristics that, though sympathizing in every fibre with the coloured side of life, with men's exultations and agonies, he feels bound to let common sense put in its word now and then, to let the voice be heard of the normal, pedestrian world, Coventry Patmore in his *Principle in Art* has pointed out that in a great painting there is always some prosaic object which provides a point of rest for the eye, and without which the whole value of the picture would be altered. This duty is performed in literature by the ordinary man, by Kent in *Lear*, by Horatio in *Hamlet*, by Banquo in *Macbeth*—they are, so to speak, the 'eye' of the storm which rages about them, and serve to measure the departure of the others from sanity, moderation, virtue, or merely normal conduct. 'Each of these characters', he says, 'is a peaceful focus radiating the calm of moral solution throughout all the difficulties and disasters of surrounding fate; a vital centre, which, like that of a great wheel, has little motion in itself, but which at once transmits and controls the fierce revolution of the circumference.' Mr. Patmore calls this point of rest the *Punctum indifferens*; I seem to have heard it called also the *Punctum immobile*; it is the quiet anchorage of good sense from which we are able to watch with a balanced mind the storm without. I am inclined to think that no great art is without it, and that the absence of it prevents certain writers such as Dostoevski from being in the highest class. Scott never loses his head; he never forgets the 'main march of the human affections'; and the artistic value is as undeniable as the moral value. The fantastic, the supernatural, the quixotic are heightened in their effect by being shown against this quiet background; moreover, they are made credible by being thus linked to our ordinary world. Behind all the extravagance we hear a voice like Dr. Johnson's, reminding

us that somewhere order reigns, that Prometheus may be a fine fellow, but that Zeus is still king of gods and men. Compare Scott with Victor Hugo and you will understand the difference which the lack of this quality makes. In the great Frenchman there is no slackening of the rein, no lowering of the top-note, till the steed faints from exhaustion and the strident voice ceases to impress our dulled ears.

Another aspect of this gift is Scott's skill in cunning anti-climax, which, like the 'falling close' in a lyric, does not weaken but increases the effect. Like the Gifted Gilfillan in *Waverley*, he can pass easily and naturally from the New Jerusalem of the Saints to the price of beasts at Mauchline Fair. The grave-digger Mortsheugh in *The Bride of Lammermuir* has his petty grumble amid the shadows of high tragedy: Mause Headrigg, caught up in religious ecstasy, begs her son 'not to sully the marriage garment', and Cuddie replies: 'Awa, awa, Mither, never fear me . . . ye're bleezing awa about marriage, and the job is how we are to win by hanging'; Alick Polwarth, after the fine tragic scene of Fergus MacIvor's death, brings us to earth with information about which gate his head will be fixed on; and old flaagen in *The Pirate* dashes Minna's sentiment about Montrose by expounding with inexorable logic the superior wisdom of running away. It is a breaking in upon romance of a voice from the common world; it does not weaken the heroic, it brings it home.

I am willing to go farther and argue that, without some such salt of the pedestrian, romance becomes only a fairy tale and tragedy a high-heeled strutting. The kernel of romance is contrast, beauty and valour flowering in unlikely places, the heavenly rubbing shoulders with the earthly. The true romantic is not the Byronic hero; he is the British soldier whose idea of a *beau geste* is to dribble a football into the enemy's trenches; he is some such type as the Georgian sea-captains who wore woollen underclothing, and loved food and wine and the solid comforts of the hearth when they were not about their business of fighting; or some warrior like old Sir Andrew Agnew at the battle of Dettingen, who thus exhorted his regiment: 'My lads, ye see these loons on yon hill there; weel, if ye dinna kill them, they'll kill you.' All romance, all tragedy, must be within hailing distance of our humdrum lives, and anti-climax is a necessary adjunct to climax. You will find it in the Ballads—this startling note of common sense linking fact and dream. You will find it in Shakespeare, who can make Cleopatra pass from banter with a peasant to the loftiest of human soliloquies—'Hast thou the pretty worm of Nilus

there? . . . , Those that do die of it do seldom or never recover . . .
I wish you joy o the worm,' And then:

Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me.

You will find it in Scott, whose broad sane vision saw that tragedy and comedy are sisters, and that, like Antaeus, neither can live without the touch of her mother, the earth.

III

I come now to the most serious charge of all. There are two counts in it, though they are linked together, for they imply the absence of the same quality. The first count is that Scott's delineation of character is purely exterior and that he has no deep insight into human souls. Hazlitt suggests it when he finds him lacking in ⁶what the heart whispers to itself in secret ; Carlyle states it flatly: ' Your Shakespeare fashions his characters from the heart outwards: your Scott fashions them from the skin inwards, never getting near the heart of them'; Walter Bagehot puts it precisely after his fashion, when he finds Scott weak in his treatment of love and of religion. The second count is that he lacked high seriousness, a profound vision of life; that he is without the moments which

tease us out of thought,
As doth eternity.

We have mind, manners, animation , ' says Bagehot, ' but it is the stir of this world. We miss the consecrating power.' And Carlyle shakes the disapproving head of a fellow Scot, who would fain revere but can only admire. ' Not profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for edification, for building up or elevating in any shape ! The sick heart will find no healing here, the darkly struggling heart. no guidance; the Heroic that is in all men no divine awakening voice,'

It is a grave charge, so grave that if it were substantiated it would exclude Scott from the inner circle of greatness and relegate him to the populous borderland of mere skilful entertainers, for the ' stellar and undiminishable something' would be lacking. Before we examine it let us try to set down what were Scott's limitations. Bagehot, I think, is right in the main in his strictures, though I dissent from his general conclusion. Scott's world was a very large and rich one, larger and richer perhaps than that of any other novelist, but it had its boundaries. It was a world in which things worked out normally by some law of averages, where goodness was on the whole rewarded

and evil punished, a friendly universe not at war with human aspirations. It was above all a healthy world, founded on common sense and honest sentiment. It was not grievously perturbed with thought. Hence we do not find in it figures of profound intellectual or moral subtlety. I will go further and say that I do not believe that Scott could have portrayed that type; he could picture a Hotspur or a Henry V but not a Hamlet. Such an historical figure, for example, as Montrose, could not have been drawn in detail on his canvas; for what Bagehot has called the 'labours of the searching and introspective intellect', were, I think, altogether beyond his scope. Nor has he given us, nor could he have given us, any deep studies in the religious consciousness. These matters did not interest him; he had a robust and very simple faith of his own, but by one who lived, in Emerson's phrase, 'at large leisure in noble mornings' the struggles of the twilight of the soul were scarcely to be understood. Again, I am ready to admit that he is no great exponent of the female temperament and mind—in his own class, that is to say, for the criticism is certainly not true of his peasants. For women he had an old-fashioned reverence, and, as some one has said, regarded them very much as a toast to be drunk after King and Constitution. But with the *nuances* of feminine character he was little concerned, and toward high passion between gentlefolk he showed always a certain timidity and repugnance. He was incapable of delving into the psychology of sex, for a reason which I think does him credit. He felt it ill-bred to pry into secrets which a gentleman does not talk about in public. I do not suggest the severe doctrine that no man can write intimately of sex without forfeiting his title to gentility, but I do say that for Scott's type of a gentleman, to do so would have been impossible without a dereliction of standards. But indeed, the question scarcely arises, for even had he tried he would almost certainly have failed. I agree with Bagehot's pontifical sentences, 'The same blunt sagacity of imagination which fitted him to excel in the rough description of obvious life, rather unfitted him for delineating the less substantial essence of the female character. The nice *minutiae* of society by means of which female novelists have been so successful in delineating their own sex, were rather too small for his robust and powerful mind.' Woman—cultivated, gently-born woman—remained for him a toast,

What do these admissions amount to? That his knowledge and imaginative understanding of life had its limits a charge which is true of every writer that ever lived, even of Shakespeare; that with certain rare types of character, in which Shakespeare excelled, he must

have failed; that he regarded gentlewomen with perhaps too respectful an eye. Not certainly that the interest of the novels depends only on costume, and that the characters are drawn from the skin inwards and have no souls. Within the wide range of his understanding Scott drew character with a firmness, a subtlety, a propriety, which are not easy to match outside Shakespeare. The proof is to be found in the reading of the novels, and I should weary you if I were to make a list of the living, three-dimensioned figures, who are as completely realized in their minds as they are vividly depicted in their bodies—from people that hold the stage for long like Baillie Nicol Jarvie and Jeanie Deans and Dandie Dinmont and Edie Ochiltree, to those who merely enter and go, like Mrs. Howden in *The Heart of Midlothian*, or mine host Mackitchinson in *The Antiquary*, or Bessie Maclure sitting by the cross-roads to warn the Covenanters in *Old Mortality*. But since we are on the point of psychological subtlety let me give three less familiar instances. One is Robin Oig in *The Two Drovers*, in whom the whole code of the perverse but logical Highland ethics is brilliantly summarized. Another is Chrystal Croftangry in the second series of *Chronicles of the Canongate*, a moving figure of regret and disillusioned philosophy. The third has been noted by Dr. Verrall and can be verified by a careful reading of *Wandering Willie's Tale*. That is a story where the explanation seems to be supernatural, and the narrator, Steenie Steenson, believes this. But Scott knew so profoundly the average man and his incapacity for exact evidence, that he made Steenie in telling the story give two different versions of the crucial incident—first, one which is consistent with a prosaic explanation, and a second in flat contradiction and full of excited detail, which transports the whole affair into the realm of the occult. It is a masterpiece of insight into character, and also surely one of the most astonishing examples of the *tour de force* in literature—to write a tale of *diablerie* which is overwhelming in its impression, and at the same time incidentally and most artfully to provide its refutation.

It is possible that the charge against Scott's character-drawing made by hasty critics is due to his avoidance of two habits, which have given certain novelists a specious appearance of profundity, but which I cannot but regard as vices. One is the trick of dissecting a character before the reader's eyes and filling pages with laboured analysis. Scott held it his business to make men and women reveal themselves in speech and action, to play the showman as little as possible, to present a finished product and not to print the jottings of the laboratory? The other is the spurious drama which is achieved

by a frequent recourse to the pathological. 'Leaving the supernatural aside for the moment, Scott is honourably averse to gaining effects by the use of mere ugliness and abnormality.' He was perfectly conscious of the half-world of the soul and glances at it now and then to indicate its presence, but he held that there were better things to do than to wallow in its bogs. The truth is, the pathological is too easy. Take the case of religious mania, which Scott sketches in a figure like Ephraim MacBriar. You will find James Hogg treating it at length in his *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, with a subtlety worthy of the most modern realist and with a distinction of style to which unhappily few modern realists attain. But are we therefore to assume that Hogg had gifts of psychological penetration denied to Sir Walter? It was the same with other forms of ugliness. There is a wonderful little scene in *The Antiquary*, where Mrs. Mailsetter and her gossips meet and Mrs. Heukbane recalls the gallantries of her youth.—'Ah! lasses, an ye had kend his brither as I did—mony a time he wad slip in to see me wi' a brace o' wild-deuks in his pouch, when my first gudeman was awa at the Falkirk tryst,' In that scene you have the essence of all the sordid amours of a little Scots village, and Scott just notes their existence, and then goes his way to better things. For him the kitchen-midden was the kitchen-midden, a necessary and even a useful institution, but not one to be planted under the dining-room windows.

There remains the last and gravest count, which is principally Carlyle's—that the novels lack the high translunary things of literature, that they are adapted only for the type of reader called in America, I believe, the 'tired business man', what Carlyle terms 'the task of harmlessly amusing indolent languid men'; that, again in Carlyle's words, 'opinions, emotions, principles, doubts, beliefs, beyond what the intelligent country gentleman can carry along with him, are not to be found'; that 'they do not found themselves on deep interests, but on comparatively trivial ones; not on the perennial, perhaps not even on the lasting'. Some of this criticism, if you are in agreement with what I have already said, you will be prepared to reject at once. Clearly Scott carries us far beyond the country gentleman's intellectual equipment, and clearly he does much more than amuse. I suspect that Carlyle at the back of his mind hankered after something which we have no right to ask from an imaginative writer, something for which we must go to the professed philosophers or certain poets—a definite, formulated creed of life. He was a serious man, come of a serious stock and belonging to a very serious generation, and the tradition of Scottish Calvinism was in his blood. He

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wanted a message, a creed. Now there are good writers—but very few great writers—whose work is patently didactic, and about whom little handbooks can be written called 'The Teaching of Mr. A——' or 'The Philosophy of Mr. B——'. I should be the last to underrate the value of the moralist in letters. But it is not easy to pin the greatest imaginative writers down to one moral, or even to a code of morals. What is the teaching of Homer? What is the lesson of Shakespeare? It would be hard to say, for there are a thousand lessons. Genius such as theirs reveals men and women to themselves, and with a divine compassion expounds all the frailties and strivings of humanity. It would wrong their magnificence to force them into the bonds of any creed.

But Carlyle has still to be reckoned with. We have a right to demand from the greatest not only a brilliant picture of life but an interpretation, something, as he says, profitable for doctrine and edification, an awakening voice to the heroic that is in all men. 'The sick heart will find no healing' in Scott, says Carlyle, but it is to be noted that Hazlitt took an opposite view. 'How many sad hearts', he exclaims, 'have been soothed in pain and solitude!' I confess myself of Hazlitt's opinion. It seems to me that Scott at his best accomplishes that enlargement and purification of life which is the test of great literature; he makes the world at once more solemn and more sunlit. The first he accomplishes by his sure instinct for the tragic, which is the failure of something not ignoble through inherent weakness or through a change of circumstance to which it cannot adapt itself. The Master of Ravenswood, whose quality is expended idly in a waste of pride; Fergus MacIvor carrying his high tradition to a felon's death; Redgauntlet watching the Cause, which had been entwined with the arrogance of his decaying house, shattered on the Solway beach—these are figures of a moving greatness. They are mirrors in which to read the transience of human glory and the fragility of human hopes. Always in his bustling world Scott is aware of the shadow of mortality. In his orderly scheme of rewards and penalties the Fates are permitted now arid then to snap their illogical shears. It is a gay world, but at the last it is a solemn world, and few can so cunningly darken the stage and make the figures seem no longer men and women but puppets moving under the eyes of God and Eternity.

(I have left to the end the question of Scott's use of the supernatural.) Admittedly it is not always happy, and I am not prepared to defend the White Lady of Avenel, or even to be enthusiastic about the Bodach Glas. But there are moments when he uses it as Shake-

speare uses it, to trouble the mind with a sense of powers beyond our understanding, as if the monitors of another world whispered in our ear. He was a master of the eccentric and the uncanny, just because his outlook was so sane and central, for only a mind solidly buttressed with fact can bring mystery out of cloud-land into our common life. An instance is that grim scene at the tavern-board in Hell in *Wandering Willie's Tale*; another and a greater is to be found in the chapters of *The Bride of Lammermuir*, when Ailsie Gourlay predicts the Master's fate in the weird rhyme about the Kelpie's Flow, and when the witch-wives talk in the churchyard.

'He's a frank man, and a free-handed man, the Master . . . and a comely personage—broad in the shoulders and narrow around the lungies—he wad mak a bonny corpse—I wad like to hae the streaking and winding o' him.'

'It is written on his brow, Annie Winnie . . . that hand of woman, or of man either, will never stntught him—dead-deal will never be laid on his back—make you your market of that, for I hae it frae a sure hand.'

Will it be his lot to die on the battle-ground then, Ailsie Gourlay? Will he die by the sword or the ball, as his forbears hae dune before him, mony ane o' them?'

'Ask nae mair questions about it—he'll no be graced sae far,' replied the sage.

I ken ye are wiser than ither folk, Ailsie Gourlay—but wha teli'd ye this?'

'Fashna your thumb about that, Annie Winnie,' answered the sibyl; 'I hae it frae a hand sure enough.'

But ye said ye never saw the foul thief,' reiterated her inquisitive companion.

'hae it frae as sure a hand,' said Ailsie, 'and frae them that spaed his fortune before the sark gaed ower his head.'

'Hark! I hear his horses's feet riding aff,' said the other; 'they dinna sound as if good luck was wi' them.'

'Mak haste, sirs,' cried the paralytic hag from the cottage, 'and let us do what is needfu', and say what is fitting; for, if the dead corpse binna straughted, it will girn and thraw, and that will fear the best o' us.'

Observe the art of that phrase 'frae a sure hand'; observe the cumulative impression of the broken dialogue with its ghoulis details; observe, above all, the tremendous effect of the sound of the horse's feet breaking in. It is a scene which for unearthly tension is not far behind the knocking at the door in *Macbeth*.

But if he makes the world more solemn he also makes it sunnier. That is the moral consequence of comedy, and in comedy in the "widest sense Scott is most clearly the master. It was this side of his

work that made Byron declare in that famous correspondence between the two that among the living he found no one of whom Scott could with reason be jealous, or, all things considered, among the dead. The novels enlarge our vision, light up dark corners, break down foolish barriers, and make life a happier and more spacious thing. If they do not preach any single philosophy, they, in Shelley's words, ⁶ 'repeal large codes of fraud and woe'. They restore faith in humanity by revealing its forgotten graces and depths.

Is there nothing here for comfort and edification? Is there no more than the utterance of the intelligent country gentleman? One instance of this enlargement I will give you, and then I have done. No professed prophet of democracy ever achieved so much for the plain man as this Tory Border laird. Others might make the peasant a pathetic figure, or a humorous, or a lovable, but Scott made him sublime, without departing one hair's breadth from the strictest faithfulness in portraying him. It is not a queen or a great lady who lays down the profoundest laws of conduct; it is Jeanie Deans.

'Alas! it is not when we sleep soft and wake merrily ourselves, that we think on other people's sufferings. Our hearts are waxed light within us then, and we are for righting our ain wrangs and fighting our ain battles. But when the hour of trouble comes to the mind or to the body—as seldom may it visit your leddyship—and when the hour of death comes, that conies to high and low—long and late may it be yours—oh, my leddy, then it isna what we hae dune for ourself, but what we hae dune for others, that we think on most pleasantly. And the thought that ye hae intervened to spare the puir thing's life will be sweeter in that hour, come when it may, than if a word of your mouth could hang the hail Porteous mob at the tail of ae tow.'

It is not the kings and captains who most eloquently preach love of country, but Edie Ochiltree, the beggar, who has no belongings but a blue gown and a wallet.

'Me no muckle to fight for, sir? isna there the country to fight for, and the burnsidies that I gang daundering beside, and the hearths o' the gudewives that gie me my bit bread, and the bits o' weans that come toddling to play wi' me when I come about a landward town? Deil! ... an I had as gude pith as I hae gude-will and a gude cause, I should gie some o' them a day's kemping.'

And it is the same Edie who in the great scene of the storm, speaks words which, while wholly and exquisitely in character, are also part of the world's poetry.

'That's not worth the counting,' said the old man. 'I hae lived to be weary o' life; and here or yonder—at the back o' a

dyke, in a wreath o' snaw, or in the wame o⁵ a wave, what signifies how the auld gaberlunzie dies ?'

'Good man,' said Sir Arthur, 'can you think of nothing ?—of no help ?—Fll make you rich—Pll give you a farm—I'll—.'

'Our riches will be soon equal,' said the beggar, looking out upon the strife of the waters—'they are sae already; for I hae nae land, and you would give your fair bounds and barony for a square yard of rock that would be dry for twal hours.'

We are familiar enough with laudations of lowly virtue, but they are apt to be a little patronizing in tone; the writers are inclined to enter the 'huts where poor men lie' with the condescension of a district visitor. It is Scott, the Tory county gentleman, the worldling, whom some would have us discard as superficial, that lifts them into the clear air of the heroic.

