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Walter Scott, Postcolonial Theory, and New South Literature

THE IMPORTANCE OF SIR WALTER SCOTT'S FICTION for U.S. Southern culture has hardly gone unnoticed, from Mark Twain's exasperated quip about the South's "Sir Walter disease"¹ or Charles W. Chesnutt's ironic allusions to *Ivanhoe* in *The House Behind the Cedars*,² to C. Hugh Holman's more recent examination of Scott's influence on William Gilmore Simms's American Revolutionary romances,³ or Laura Doyle's study of ideals of race purity that initiates its analysis with Scott.⁴ But at this juncture in U.S. literary history, when paradigms derived from colonial and postcolonial studies are challenging Puritan-centered narratives of American identity, there has never been a better time to reexamine Walter Scott's legacy for U.S., especially Southern, fiction. For Scott is an indispensable novelist for studying narratives of how conquered colonies or border states reclaim nationhood, and if there is any region in which Scott's influence can clearly be shown to be dominant for a lengthy period, that area is the U.S. South both before and after the Civil War. In this paper I focus, first, on an overview of the relevance of Scott's fiction to some current ideas central to colonial and postcolonial studies, with specific focus on Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* (1820), and, second, on how under-recognized tensions in Scott's classic postcolonial novels may provide crucial insights into the cultural work of New South fiction, especially Thomas Dixon's.

¹*Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. 242.

²*The House Behind the Cedars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900).

³*The Immoderate Past: The Southern Writer and History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977).

⁴Laura Doyle, *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

For readers familiar with some of the central terms and debates of contemporary postcolonial theory, from subaltern, contact zone, and creolization to the issue of how to understand the roles played by nativism vs. hybridity, Scott's narrative voice is experienced with a shock of recognition. Consider *Ivanhoe's* description of the "miserable" condition of the English nation one-half century after the Norman French invasion, "prey to every species of subaltern oppression."⁵ Scott's synoptic opening chapter of the novel provides us with an anatomy and a history of the Anglo-Saxons' colonization:

Four generations had not sufficed to blend the hostile blood of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons, or to unite, by a common language and mutual interests, two hostile races, one of which still felt the elation of triumph, while the other groaned under all the consequences of defeat. The power had been completely placed in the hands of the Norman nobility, by the event of the battle of Hastings, and it had been used . . . with no moderate hand. The whole race of Saxon princes and nobles had been extirpated or disinherited, with few or no exceptions; nor were the numbers great who possessed land in the country of their fathers. . . . (p. 16)

From such passages it appears that Scott's novel works primarily through tracing how binary oppositions run through every aspect of Saxon and Norman life, uniting while they also separate. As Scott's best interpreter, Georg Lukács, long ago pointed out, the plots of Scott's novels are always dialectical, with his heroes embodying the mixed virtues of the "middle way," a sometimes calculated and at other times involuntary synthesis between opposing forces that threaten the society's social cohesion. Through the hero's struggles and moral choices, what could rend the society apart becomes instead the means for a new phase of its growth. And this social transformation always occurs via a redistribution of power in the public sphere and new alliances in the private sphere, especially through marriage. In Lukács's words, "It is [Scott's heroes'] task to bring the extremes whose struggle fills the novel, whose clash expresses artistically a great crisis in society, into contact with one another. . . . Scott always chose

⁵Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe; A Romance* (1820), The Edinburgh Edition of The Waverly Novels, Vol. VIII, ed. Graham Tulloch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 65.

as his principal figures such as may, through character and fortune, enter into human contact with both camps.”⁶

The role of Jews in *Ivanhoe*, especially Isaac and his daughter Rebecca, complicates both the Saxon/Norman binary that sets the novel in motion and the narratives of heroic mixture by which Scott attempts to achieve closure. In general, the Jews are cast as the text’s immutable Others, eternally to be outside of any “English” social configuration. “The leopard will not change his spots,” Friar Tuck says at one point, changing the meaning of Jeremiah 13:23, “and a Jew he will continue to be” (p. 282).

Yet the role of the Jews in *Ivanhoe* is more involved. They are lightning rods of sympathy as well as antipathy, both the characters’ and the narrator’s. As well as revealing cowardice and avarice, Isaac is given speeches meant to be as eloquent as Shylock’s exposing the hypocrisy of both Saxon and Norman societies. Isaac also praises *Ivanhoe* as a character who, familiar with being an exile in his own land, has compassion for “the exile of Jacob” and his descendants (p. 336). Rebecca too evokes admiration for her strength of character under duress and her eloquent descriptions of the pain of exile.

The “voluntary” Jewish exodus that shapes the ending of *Ivanhoe* confirms a crucial shift in the novel’s use of the word “race.” Primarily deployed in reference to Saxons and Normans as two hostile “races” separated by blood as well as by culture, Scott’s use of “race” shifts as the novel moves toward its climactic synthesis of Norman and Saxon to mark one form of identity that cannot be blended. Rowena’s marriage to *Ivanhoe* is read typologically by Scott’s narrator as uniting two different races that hereafter can be understood as two different cultures and classes:

the attendance of the high-born Normans, as well as Saxons, joined with the universal jubilee of the lower orders, . . . marked the marriage of two individuals as a type of the future peace and harmony betwixt two races, which, since that period, have been so completely mingled, that the distinction has become utterly invisible. (p. 398)

⁶*The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p. 36.

The story of *Ivanhoe*, then, is in general the story of how races become ethnicities, which then become simply intermingled family lineages and customs. The Jewish Otherness that contrasts with this Saxon/Norman synthesis, however, becomes increasingly marked as the novel progresses—not just as a different history but as a different blood, race, even species.

Yet the final irony emphasized by *Ivanhoe's* brilliant concluding chapter is that, although exiled, Rebecca remains deeply internalized within Rowena's and Ivanhoe's memories. Further, she becomes not just a vision of the strengths of Jewish character (though she is certainly that) but of the strengths of the Saxon race that allowed it to endure its own form of exile. Deep within Saxon cultural identity until it becomes "invisible" must always be the memory of exclusion, and paradoxically the figure who gives most eloquent voice to that memory is not Saxon but Jewish.

Scott's analysis of colonialism in the Waverly novels and *Ivanhoe* was so influential in the nineteenth century that it became a central feature of the novel in English, a primary way in which it figured historical memory, cultural progress, and England's supposed destiny as an imperial empire. Let us turn now to the U.S. South and ask why, of all regions in the country, this one would respond most strongly to Scott's historical vision. Scott's influence on antebellum Southern writing, especially William Gilmore Simms's historical romances about the South's role in the Revolutionary war, has been attentively studied by literary scholars such as C. Hugh Holman, who has found the South's receptivity to Scott an example of the primary difference between the Southern and Northern U.S. In *The Immoderate Past*, Holman argued that the South's imagination is primarily historical and dialectical, whereas the North's is primarily typological and ahistorical because it is grounded in the Puritan intellectual legacy.

The relevance of Scott for understanding the post-Reconstruction New South has not received sustained attention. Yet Scott arguably provides the most influential narrative paradigms for both the white South's understanding of its defeat and subjugation, and for its rebirth. Progressivist ideology of white racial reunion leading to new empire was profoundly influenced by the white New South, which means that it was also enabled by that region's reading of Scott. Conversely, we cannot understand how dissenting voices in fiction conceived their resistance to white New South

ideology—voices such as Mark Twain, Frances Harper, Sutton Griggs, Charles W. Chesnutt, and Pauline Hopkins—unless we consider well the ways in which they too felt they had to engage and revise narrative patterns inherited from Scott.

Among postwar U.S. novelists who adapted Scott's novels to U.S. history, the one with the most ambitious and popular agenda was—unfortunately—Thomas Dixon. Dixon's Reconstruction trilogy (*The Leopard's Spots* [1902], *The Clansman* [1905], and *The Traitor*, [1907]) is easy to interpret as unintentionally bad Scott, with chivalric trappings, stilted dialogue, melodramatic reversals, and a predictable mix of romance and martial epic plots. But such an approach trivializes Dixon's huge cultural impact, which means that it trivializes rather than squarely faces Dixon's appeals to racism. Dixon was so influential not because of his subtlety but because of his audaciousness: he knew that with some crucial revisions (more on that in a moment) Scott's formulas for describing oppression and cultural rebirth in medieval England or eighteenth-century Scotland would be well suited for whites trying to come to terms with the cataclysms of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Dixon adapted *Ivanhoe* to show how the white North and the white South could finally be reconciled. The invading Normans are the arrogant Northerners, the Southerners the stalwart Saxons, and the dangerous but necessary Jews become the blacks; the plot revolves around heroes in eclipse, threatened rapes, set-piece battles, epic debates and historical summaries, unjust trials, villains whose lusts are compulsively detailed, and medieval trappings and combat trials which signify not nostalgia so much as an aggressive and revisionary modernism that sheathes itself under the guise of rediscovering lost values. As Nina Silber, building on Jackson Lears's work,⁷ has well argued, Dixon's fascination with icons of premodern manliness is part of a larger U.S. cultural crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century about gender roles and combating the perceived

⁷Jackson T. J. Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

feminization of Anglo-Saxon men by high capitalist culture.⁸ Southern whites' double experience of defeat—first in the war and then during Reconstruction—fueled Dixon's drive to create popular melodramas of beset white manhood triumphant.

Written in the midst of raging debates for and against the recent U.S. accession of Puerto Rico and the Philippines, Dixon's Reconstruction trilogy—which we should of course call the anti-Reconstruction trilogy—provided a blueprint for how Anglo-Saxons could control and exploit colored peoples without being polluted by them. In Dixon's quasi-millennial vision, the New South's rejoining the United States would, like the cultural synthesis celebrated in *Ivanhoe*, spur the country to a new phase of its development and a new phase of understanding its racial destiny. For Dixon, one of the South's greatest contributions to the new American empire—a contribution that would erase the South's great mistake about slavery—would be to supply expertise to the U.S., the new champion of the "Aryan race,"⁹ as to how to dominate and maintain control of colored races at home and abroad. As Scott Romine has argued, "whiteness"—even more than the cotton boll—was at the turn to the twentieth century the South's most significant export to the rest of the nation. And Dixon's brand attracted a big market share.

Walter Benn Michaels makes a significant error when he argues in *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*¹⁰ that Dixon was an anti-imperialist because he abhorred race mixture. Michaels is quite right to stress that Dixon's imagination, unlike Thomas Nelson Page's as revealed in *Red Rock*,¹¹ was explicitly nationalist and statist; the maturity of his heroes is always defined as submission to state authority, properly defined. But Dixon's statism was not just concerned with healing the white nation; he

⁸Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

⁹"To the Reader," preface to *The Clansman*.

¹⁰Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

¹¹*Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction* (New York: Scribner's, 1899).

linked this healing to empire, to the nation's expansion. Once victorious, the heroism of the Klan, the "Invisible Empire," is to serve as a national model for a *visible* American empire with colonies: the New South will teach the nation as a whole how to realize its imperial destiny, which includes learning to control colored labor without becoming subordinate to it.¹² A climactic speech in *The Leopard's Spots* that Michaels has no comment on runs as follows:

"The young [post-Reconstruction] South greets the new era and glories in its manhood. He joins his voice in the cheers of triumph which are ushering in this all-conquering Saxon. Our old men dreamed of local supremacy. We dream of the conquest of the globe. Threads of steel have knit state to state. Steam and electricity have silently transformed the face of the earth, annihilated time and space, and swept the ocean barriers from the path of man."¹³

If Ben Cameron in *The Clansman*¹⁴ is Dixon's Robin Hood, and the KKK a rebel organization that, as in *Ivanhoe*, must yield its authority to the new state, Phil Stoneman, the Northerner converted to the romance of Southern heroism, becomes Dixon's Ivanhoe, the scion of the future. What Phil represents at the novel's end is best embodied in his "Eagle and Phoenix" cotton mills (yes, the name is symbolic). These mills unite Northern capital and Southern labor while also, for Dixon, providing the proper middle economic way between premodern agrarianism and the evils of unregulated, wage-slavery capitalism. Mill owners and other businessmen became the South's new economic and political elite and, as Dixon well shows, were both in alliance with the KKK and also sought to restrain its use of terrorism within what they felt were "acceptable" limits. This new white elite made its hegemony stable by dividing the subaltern class, the

¹²For Walter Benn Michaels's argument about Dixon's anti-imperialism, see *Our America*, pp. 17-22, 146n27. I should point out that although I am unpersuaded by Michaels's claim that Dixon is simply anti-imperialist (or that any of his novels takes such a univocal position), I find suggestive and persuasive a number of Michaels's key points, most notably that for Thomas Nelson Page the central social unit is the family and region, whereas for Dixon it is the nation-state.

¹³Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Leopard's Spots; A Romance of the White Man's Burden—1865-1900* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1902), p. 435.

¹⁴Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Clansman; an Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1905).

mill-workers and other laborers, via the Jim Crow color line, the crop-lien system, and other modern inventions for social stratification that proved as adaptable to the new Southern cities as they did for the South's rural areas. C. Vann Woodward long ago made this essential point about the new world order of the New South, and José Limón has given it a vibrant new configuration in the opening chapter of his *American Encounters*.¹⁵ In sum, we cannot understand Dixon's appeal to both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—two American presidents with rather different personalities, domestic policies, and imperial visions—unless we understand the ways in which Dixon updated Scott to body forth how a global U.S. empire could outmatch its British rival. "Eagle and Phoenix" indeed.

Let us now change direction and read more contrapuntally, as Edward Said has urged us to do. Despite Dixon's assurance that Scott provided the best model for his narratives of subjugation and victory, a number of elements in Scott, particularly in *Ivanhoe*, were bound to prove troubling to Dixon. For ultimately Scott's vision of the racial nation was incompatible with Dixon's. One obvious example of this contradiction is Rebecca's role in *Ivanhoe*.

As well as being eloquent defenders against tyranny, Scott's Jews are, as I have emphasized, associated with racial Otherness; they are "spotted," not Anglo-Norman. Yet for readers who know *Ivanhoe* well, as many of Dixon's readers did, the clear parallels between Rebecca's and Phil's trial and rescue by heroic knights inevitably means that Phil will be associated with Rebecca's key character traits as well as her threatened martyrdom. We may call this the leopard's spots paradox: whiteness in formation contrasted with racial Otherness inevitably *also* becomes spotted, that is, incorporating what it defines itself against. Dixon's mode of melodrama (which as a genre constantly pushes toward the separation of opposites) has no way of coping with such paradoxes, other than to be silent about them.

Even more difficult for a novelist like Dixon to manage was Scott's repeated cultural synthesis theme, brilliantly orchestrated in *Ivanhoe* but also prominently featured in the Scottish Waverly novels. Scott explicitly grounds

¹⁵José E. Limón, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

both the strength of the British empire and the beauty of the English language on mixture and amalgamation, two concepts we know were anathema to Dixon. Perhaps one of the reasons why Dixon's images of blackness are so compulsively negative is that he felt he had to go out of his way to exorcise Scott's mixed feelings of admiration and repulsion for the Jews, an ambivalence that gives *Ivanhoe* much of its power. In Dixon's Reconstruction trilogy Dixon tries and fails to make his adaptation of Scott's cultural dialectic apply *only* to white Northerners and Southerners losing hate for each other via their common bond in whiteness. Eternally haunting Dixon's novels, however, is the possibility of adapting Scott's dialectic in a different way, shaping a narrative of U.S. reunification that would find strength in multiple languages, ethnicities, and perhaps even "races."

Twain and a host of black writers are key sources for alternative interpretations of the New South consensus. In some ways, blacks were as strongly drawn as whites to New South and, later, Progressivist ideals, including the new American imperial vision—as we are reminded by the neglected work of Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., whose study *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903*¹⁶ explored the black elite's complicity with and sometime resistance to U.S. colonial arguments and policies. This is a complex subject worth much more research. In the case of black novelists of the period, such as Frances Harper, Sutton Griggs, or Charles Chesnut, we must take seriously the relevance of Scott for their project of constructing alternative readings of the New South consensus and American imperial imperatives. Harper's black heroes and heroines in *Iola Leroy*,¹⁷ particularly Iola herself, give a powerful new meaning to the Scottian motif of the protagonist in eclipse and exile, while also promoting newly organized black discussion clubs as model working democracies. Chesnut's essays on race published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1900,¹⁸ which stress that racial purity is a social fiction and argue that "the secret of the progress of Europe has been found in racial heterogeneity," are profoundly

¹⁶Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975.

¹⁷*Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* (1893; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁸"The Future American," *Boston Evening Transcript*, August 18, 1900, p. 20; August 25, 1900, p. 15; September 1, 1900, p. 24.

attentive to new developments in science versus the lies justifying Jim Crow, but they should also be understood as a deep response to Scott. Harper and Chesnut and Griggs have rightly been studied primarily in the context of black literature and culture or of the dominant late nineteenth-century American culture that they critiqued. But it shows no disrespect to any of these contexts to argue that we cannot gain a full appreciation of the ambition of such writers unless we treat them seriously as historical novelists, which means considering their relation to Scott. The same could be said of many other writers of the early twentieth century casting a cold eye on the New South and the Progressivist empire who deserve renewed attention, including Pauline Hopkins, Ellen Glasgow, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Walter Hines Page.

