

The Romance of the Man of Letters as Historical Authority

Sentimental Masculinity and the Rise of History, 1790-1890. Mike Goode. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 258 pp.

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<1> Mike Goode aims to rewrite the history of historical thought as the history of a feeling rather than of an idea. His goal is reviving Romantic historicism, which looked to the past “for purposes of sentimental education, present cultural critique, civic and political indoctrination, nostalgia, and entertaining or escape” (3). However, since this feeling gave way to the rise of scientific history in the Victorian age, when the professionalization of the discipline depended on producing an objective account of the past through detailed research and archival work, Goode needs to stress the focus on the subjectivity of the historian in order to prove the difference between a Romantic feeling of history and its intellectual Victorian counterpart. Thus five chapters out of six focus almost entirely on the earlier part of the century, despite the claim to one hundred years’ coverage in its subtitle.

<2> Chapter 2, devoted to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), shows how such a subject is interrelated with questions of gender. At the turn of the nineteenth century, “a man needed to feel the idea of history in order to think it” (8) and, since Burkean sentiment understands historical comprehension “as the ability to sympathize with and through inherited codes” (39), the author of the *Reflections* can imply that the revolutionaries’ unsympathetic lack of regard for rank and sex not only demonstrates their deficiency in historical sense, but also indicates their unmanliness. In order to underline the connection between these two terms, Goode emphasizes the *Reflections*’ “tale of sorrow,”(1) in which Burke dramatically describes Marie Antoinette’s last moments: since the tale offers an image of the revolutionaries’ unsentimentality towards the queen as a type of overcharged sexuality, it also “implies that the manly feelings on which proper historical consciousness depends are as much sexual as they are sentimental” (40).

<3> In chapter 3 Goode shows how Burke’s detractors employed *ad personam* attacks on the historian’s feelings in order to question his historical sense,(2) the only exception being Thomas Paine who, in *The Rights of Man* (1791-2), reflected on the difference between principles and persons to undermine Burke’s vicious argument. The primary data Goode uses to analyze public reactions to the *Reflections* are caricatures, in which Burke appeared stereotyped as a Jesuit, a man of feeling, a Quixote, and an antiquary. These character types reflect how the popular

imagination was beginning to conceive Burkean rhetoric on the cult of male sentiment as a sort of hypocrisy. For instance, the sexual resonances between feeling and historical sense mentioned above led caricaturists to picture Burke as a sex offender instead of a chivalric man, and the main result of this criticism was not to weaken his arguments, but to put into question Burke's competence as a historian according to his own standards. I find Goode's point particularly interesting here by virtue of his stress on late-eighteenth-century physiology, in which the mind-body connection and the blurring of the lines between thought and feeling provide an account of the cultural background that informed the Romantic sense of history.

<4> Chapters 4 and 5 attempt to place Walter Scott's *Waverley Novels* within the emergence of modern historicism. The idea that "Waverley's development is not complete until the final chapters, when he recuperates his youthful sentimentality in a more socially acceptable guise" (90), is not new, considering that Ian Duncan made this point in 1992,⁽³⁾ but by applying his research to *The Antiquary* (1816), Goode manages to revive Scott's authority within Romantic historicism in an unprecedented way. The Romantic conception of antiquaries as queer figures ("antic-queer-ones," cries the wife of an antiquary in a 1791 caricature by Francis Grose)⁽⁴⁾ is already expressed in chapter 3, where Goode shows how Romantic satire considers antiquaries as men who substitute relics for women, but Scott's novel dramatizes the struggle "over what constitutes authoritative historical sense, and over what forms of historical training best promote it, as a choice between the different kinds of improperly sentimentalized and sexualized men that 1790s caricaturists satirized when critiquing Burke's historical sense" (93). Of the two antiquaries described in the novel, Sir Arthur betrays his fellows' contemporary stereotypes by means of "his rejection of historical direction in favor of the pleasures of historical reflection" (97), while Oldbuck shows a perversion all his own by means of his dry, morbid relationship with the past. In light of this, Lovel emerges in the novel less as a mediocre hero than as one whose prudent manliness allows him a proper historical vision. Goode's point is that "*The Antiquary* reveals the extent to which Scott understood his struggle for cultural legitimacy and authority outside the field of traditional history-writing in terms of late eighteenth-century antiquarianism's vexed struggle for the same" (111). Since, as Goode has already shown, manliness served as a negotiation between historical understanding and sentimentality/sexuality, the characters of the novel appear manly or unmanly according to their ability to welcome progress and, simultaneously, reject antiquarianism. A point that can never be stressed enough as regards Scott is that by claiming historical authority, the author of the *Waverley Novels* does not pretend to be writing "histories." As Goode often repeats and imperceptibly reveals, Scott conveys an historical vision that assesses its provenance from post-1789 England.

<5> Through a specular reading of *Rob Roy* and *Northanger Abbey* (both published in 1818), and a critical parade of medical treatises of the time such as Thomas Trotter's *A View of the Nervous Temperament* (1807), Goode contends that men's and women's interests in narrative at the beginning of the nineteenth century is tied to the historical situation of a settled people. Thus boredom and the consequent interest in gothic thrills expressed by English readers in the period can be read as symptoms of modern commercial life, in which the daily sedentariness of professional men is physiologically relieved through the sequential unfolding of fictional narratives.⁽⁵⁾ Goode argues that Rob's initial gothic fantasies are evaluated as unmanly because, far from opening new possibilities, gothic fiction forecloses the historical understanding that,

according to Scott, only the Waverley Novels can generate. However, the historical authority claimed by Scott as historical novelist is first questioned and then negated all through the Victorian age, when “this successful marriage between the historical novel and Romantic historicism effectively relegated both to the margins of an emergent academic discipline of history that *also* claimed authority on account of its manliness” (147). A major shift in the concept of manliness now imposed detachment and, following its own logic, the new notion began to consider the sentiments of Scott’s heroes as infantile, *ergo* unfit to claim historical authority. Nowadays we all believe that Victorian ideas of manliness were more nuanced than this, but Goode’s argument and, generally speaking, men’s studies in the period are so compelling because they emphasize the cultural construction of masculinities (a subject that first-wave feminist studies, with their idea of men as granitic blocks, had overlooked) and the implication of women’s exclusion from the public debate in ways that have not yet been sufficiently realized.

<6> In the end, Goode’s circular logic reads very well (in spite of some difficult sentences which are fortunately clarified by numerous repetitions) and both his research and his specific talent as a fertile antiquarian deserve praise. Nevertheless, this book has not managed to resolve an ideological problem I have always found when it comes to Scott. Boredom is here interpreted as a historical symptom of settlement in life, and there is no doubt that it is *also* that. But in the case of the Waverley Novels, and following Goode’s logic, could it also be read in another way? In a famous passage near the end of *Waverley*, the hero finds himself in what could be renamed his “field of sorrow,” where he is looking for the corpses of his defeated Highland friends; there he “felt himself entitled to say firmly, though perhaps with a sigh, that the romance of his life was ended, and that its real history had now commenced. He was soon called upon to justify his pretensions by reasons and philosophy.”(6) Now, isn’t Waverley here measuring in physiological terms the gains and losses of the mastery in spirit he has acquired? And if that is the case, does not the physical set of his speculations betray reason as the slaughter of his emotions? If such a position is plausible, then Waverley’s final settlement as a fit historical subject not only reflects the reader’s content boredom, but it may also represent the modern man’s inability to lay claim to his life within the same commercial world which has turned the sentiment of manliness into a dry performing standard. To what extent Scott’s fiction is ironically responsible for this shift is open to debate.

Endnotes

(1)The term “tale of sorrow” to indicate the passage in the *Reflections* in which Burke deals with the Queen’s deathbed, where he wrote that “the age of chivalry is gone,” was coined by Claudia Johnson in *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).(^)

(2)Goode writes that “contrary to Jürgen Habermas’s optimistic characterization of the public sphere as a space of impersonal rational-critical debate, intellectual authority throughout the

[eighteenth] century was as much a function of social standing as of the persuasiveness of arguments” (51). It would be interesting to track the origins of such a shift more closely, if ever such a shift did occur: according to Richard Sennett’s *The Fall of Public Man* (1977; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 2002), it was with the case of the libertine John Wilkes that the English public arena witnessed *ad personam* attacks for the first time. Sennett writes that in the 1760s Wilkes’s detractors would point out his personal characteristics in order to discredit him as a public figure.(^)

(3)See Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).(^^)

(4)See Goode 76.(^^)

(5)For a genial account of Victorian theories of the novel that privilege affect over epistemology, see Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).(^^)

(6)Walter Scott, *Waverley* (London: Penguin Books, 1985): 415.(^^)