Cristian Ştefan Vîjea

University of Bucharest

METAMORPHOSES OF THE COVENANTERS IN SCOTTISH HISTORICAL FICTION

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Abstract: *In this paper I will focus on fictional representations of the Scottish Covenanters and I will highlight a few important differences in the way their image is constructed by postmodern novelists, like Harry Tait and James Robertson. The Scottish Covenanters were staunch defenders of Presbyterianism and upholders of the National Covenant of 1638 or the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 signed between Scotland and England, which purported to establish and protect Presbyterianism.*

The following novels will be referred to: Old Mortality*, by Walter Scott,* Witch Wood*, by John Buchan,* The Ballad of Sawney Bain*, by Harry Tait, and* The Fanatic*, by James Robertson. I will pass the fictional Covenanters' discourse through the filter of Hayden White's theory of the tropes. The Covenanters construct a radical discourse, and, in some novels, they seem to be taken over by it.*

I will point out some salient differences in the way the fictional Covenanters and their enemies construct their discourse and stereotypes, and also some changes in the representation of the Covenanters' enemies. For example, the image of Montrose and Claverhouse varies, from Walter Scott and John Buchan to the more recent writers. For Buchan, James Graham is a model conservative, exponent of a balanced Christianity, while in Tait's novel he is just another fanatic with a different creed, driven by his own master narrative. Christianity itself is questioned as a master narrative, and small, once unheeded voices of divination and witchcraft are given a voice.

So, what happens when postmodern novelists like Harry Tait and James Robertson revisit a period of history, the religious wars of the 17th century, which has been powerfully represented by classic writers of historical fiction like Walter Scott and John Buchan? Are there important differences? If so, what are the contextual factors which shaped these differences?

I will argue that the image of the Covenanters and the description of the events in which they have been involved tell us something not only of the Covenanters, but also of the authors themselves and the intellectual milieu in which their works were engendered. The Covenanters appear always on the radical side[1], promoting violence as a creative

[1] "radicals and Anarchists, however, believe in the necessity of structural transformations, the former in the interest of reconstituting society on new bases, the latter in the interest of abolishing the society and

means of reconstructing the society around their "sound doctrine" (Buchan 62-3, Tait 289-90, 27, Robertson 98, Scott 108, 109, 318). Everything is understood in terms of purging God's field. Their discourse, bears the mark of a tragic emplotment (Robertson 98, Buchan 118, 160), everything they are doing has a higher, providential meaning; it is a last step, a final battle for eternity in order to achieve a high purpose, a moral regeneration. They proffered mechanicist (White 28) arguments explaining every failure and misfortune in terms of a lapse from the "sound doctrine" or projecting the guilt of it upon a scapegoat, considered a pit of sin (Tait 141-2). I will argue that the way in which their image is constructed varies and bears some marks of the society in which the fictional images were produced. In the recent works their guilt is extenuated by the fact that they were driven to extremities by opposing forces which were not considered less radical or more reflective. In the classical authors however, the Covenanters opponents are presented as intelligent conservative forces, compelled to resort to violence only by the radicalism of their enemies.

In the case of Scott, the influence of his time can be seen in the intolerance towards the fanatic Covenanters linked with the rise of the moderates in Scotland since the middle of the 18th century, and the optimistic trust in human nature linked with Scottish enlightenment. His tone is not elegiac, but deeply ironic and his ideological stamp is conservative. His position is more that of an 'enlightened' person but deeply influenced by the Christian values which were still pervading his society. Both Robertson and Tait are in permanent dialogue with Scott and Hogg, their works drawing extensively on and reinterpreting the events previously depicted by the classic authors. They lived however in a society in which the Christian discourse was not so much present and was no longer a major influence as was the case in Scott's society (cf. Callum g. Brown).

Scott's Covenanters

The plot of *The Tale of Old Mortality* is set in 1679 against the background of the military campaign led by John Graham of Claverhouse against a Covenanting army guided by John Balfour, the person who killed archbishop Sharp. Scott's treatment of the Covenanters is rather dismissive. He associates their fanaticism with mental delusion at times, and he portrays them collectively as a bunch of murderous fanatics, incapable of a more thoughtful discourse beyond a heap of biblical formulae quoted out of context:

> Gie ye some mair o't?" said Mause, clearing her voice with a preliminary cough, "I will take up my testimony against you ance and again.-- Philistines ye are, and Edomites--

substituting for it …" (White 24). "As for the pace of changes envisioned, Conservatives insist on a "natural" rhythm, while liberals favour what might be called the "social" rhythm of the parliamentary debates… by contrast, Radicals and anarchists envision the possibility of cataclysmic transformations, though the former are inclined to be more aware of the power needed to effect such transformations" (White 24).

> leopards are ye, and foxes--evening wolves, that gnaw not the bones till the morrow--wicked dogs, that compass about the chosen--thrusting kine, and pushing bulls of Bashan--piercing serpents ye are, and allied baith in name and nature with the great Red Dragon; Revelations, twalfth chapter, third and fourth verses. (Scott 136, 137)

Looking at Scott's novel we can easily realize the influence of the Enlightenment thought. When reading *Old Mortality*, the impression that prevails is that Scott had a tendency to caricature[2] the Covenanters and to praise the Royalists, achieving this through various means such as presenting the Covenanters' "irrational" reactions to mundane events, emphasizing the ridicule of their rhetoric, pinpointing their unreflective radicalism, and depicting anticlimactic portrayals of their representatives.

In the case of Scott, even the Covenanters' martyrdom is looked upon as second best. Trying to show that people who refused martyrdom for the "sound doctrine" were much wiser, Scott constructs an anticlimactic moment around a solemn scene of martyrdom, causing laughter in a moment in which people would have expected solemnity:

> "And are you content to accept of the King's pardon for your guilt as a rebel, and to keep the church, and pray for the King?"
> "Blithely, stir," answered the unscrupulous Cuddie; "and drink his health into the bargain, when the ale's gude."
> "Egad," said the Duke, "this is a hearty cock.--What brought you into such a scrape, mine honest friend?"
> "Just ill example, stir," replied the prisoner (Scott 391)

Scott provides anticlimactic portraits of important representatives of the covenanting faction; to their stern and austere features he adds some ridiculous aspects:

> The reverend Gabriel was advanced in years, somewhat corpulent, with a loud voice, a square face, and a set of stupid and unanimated features, in which the body seemed more to predominate over the spirit than was seemly in a sound divine." (Scott, *Old Mortality* 239)

He also comes up with the idea of a superior and refined aristocracy. As in the work of John Buchan, nobility is what the Covenanters do not have. But Scott has a different view from Buchan in that he does not side with any Christian faction, nor does he envisage an ideal type of Christianity; his religious affiliation is dictated by commonsense and the "principles of humanity".

[2] "whose intolerance and narrow-minded bigotry are at least as conspicuous as their devotional zeal" (Scott 62).

> "I should strongly doubt the origin of any inspiration which seemed to dictate a line of conduct contrary to those feelings of natural humanity, which Heaven has assigned to us as the general law of our conduct." (Scott, The Tale of Old Mortality 105)

Here we can sense the Enlightenment thought which put Christianity on trial (Hazard, *The European Thought* 58, 100-4)[3], and thought of purging the bible in order to remove the unreasonable elements (Hazard, *The European Mind* 213).

Henry Morton, the main character, is the only Covenanter to Scott's liking; a person who learned that "goodness and worth were not limited to those of any single form of religious observance." (Scott 186). "His enthusiasm was unsullied by fanatic zeal, and unleavened by the sourness of the puritanical spirit." (Scott, 186) Somehow this reflects also the eighteenth century shift of perspective. The hero was no longer loved for the violence used and the havoc wreaked in the service of a noble cause, but the philosopher who adds to the quality and comfort of life (Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century* 178-9). Peace-loving heroism is accepted by the enlightened mind.

Scott mainly criticizes the inclination towards violence of both parties and dismisses it as unnecessary, but the royalists are presented as reasonable people who are forced to resort to violence by the witless Covenanters. While Balfour, the Covenanters' leader, is a dangerous, murderous fanatic (Scott 462), Claverhouse is a serene nobleman fulfilling his duties (Scott 175), forced to use violence because of the Covenanters' radicalism. During his final meeting with Morton, Balfour shows clear signs of lunacy. His evolution from revolutionary leader to secluded lunatic shows Scott's derogatory opinion of the Covenanters' religious beliefs, which, though deemed to be a means of salvation, resulted in crimes and the loss of human reason.

Scott's Covenanters see real life through the lens of biblical texts, and they feel the need to put a biblical stamp on everything. Moreover, they distort the meaning behind these texts by using them as a justification for their crimes:

> "We are in arms," replied Morton, "to put down such cruelties, and not to imitate them, far less to avenge upon the innocent the acts of the guilty. By what law can you justify the atrocity you would commit?"
> "If thou art ignorant of it," replied Burley, "thy companion is well aware of the law which gave the men of Jericho to the sword of Joshua, the son of Nun." (Scott, *Old Mortality* 318)

Everything that is not encompassed within his belief is considered evil, the work of Satan:

[3] See also the whole chapter "The God of the Christians Impeached".

> "Morton answered, "That he remained of the same opinion…and was determined, at least as far and as long as possible, to unite the duties of a good Christian with those of a peaceful subject."
> "In other words," replied Burley, "you are desirous to serve both God and Mammon--" (Scott 108, 109)

Obviously, there is no tolerance in the definition of the Covenanter. Everything outside their spectrum is demonized, as we can see from the quotation above. Scott implies that their cultural isolation and exclusive emphasis on the Old Testament has made them spiral deeper and deeper into radicalism and fanaticism.

His subtle irony directed at the Covenanters can be found throughout the novel. He was rather hard on the covenanters, as several reviews of *The Tale of Old Mortality* asserted at the time[4].

John Buchan's Covenanters

If in Scott we find moderation and a silent exhortation purporting that religion should be in keeping with the feelings of humanity, John Buchan comes with a different perspective: to the Covenanters' fanaticism he opposes a balanced Christianity, which makes use of the greatest achievements of humanity and does not demonize the world outside its sphere.

Buchan set the book in the troubled times of seventeenth-century Scotland when the Church of Scotland upheld the Solemn League and Covenant and unleashed a wave of cruelty and religious wars across the land in its name.

His concern seems to be with the inner workings of the human mind and he shows that the Covenanters cut down too much on the innocent pleasures, demonizing almost everything. Non-theological literature was discarded and they suspected the presence of sin in every human work of art (Buchan 17, 154, 160). At the level of discourse, he opposes to the Covenanters' radical discourse a conservative[5] and balanced discourse, coming from Montrose and the other exponents of a balanced Christianity who kept the royal path (Buchan 45, 72-3, 172).

Good Christians are also cultured people of noble descent. We see that he proposes Montrose and his noble friends as representatives of this type of good Christianity. The covenanting ministers, with the exception of David, are seen as rather coarse, dull and unfeeling, or pusillanimous. We also see the difference when Mark Kerr

[4] "In particular, the distinguished Presbyterian church historian Thomas M'Crie sought to vindicate the character of the Covenanters in his review in the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*. His views were echoed in the *British Review* and *Eclectic Review* but refuted by Scott himself who anonymously reviewed his own novel in the *Quarterly Review*." At http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/works/novels/mortality.html

[5] The combination of a comic mode of emplotment and an organicist mode of argument are specifically conservative (White 28).

comes in disguise to Woodilee and his aristocratic features are contrasted to those of the rest of the villagers:

> The high-boned, weather-beaten face, the aquiline nose, the long pointed chin were no common trooper's, and the lines about mouth and eyes were like the pages of a book wherein the most casual could read of ripe experience. The brown eyes were dancing and mirthful, and the cast in the left one did not so much mar the expression as make it fantastically bold and daring. Here was one who had lived in strange places and was not used to fear." (Buchan 163).

The remedy which Buchan proposes is therefore a cultured Christianity which is able to imbibe elements from foreign cultures. This makes it more translatable (Buchan 45, Cronin 72).

Because intercultural dialogue is possible, this type of Christianity is more peaceful and less prone to isolation and aggressive behaviour. The Covenanters' exclusive focus on the Old Testament and rejection of any element of foreignness isolates them from other cultural influences and their cultural space is not enriched (Schleiermacher 209). This lack of dialogue is also another reason for their turning into extreme radicals, the tensions escalating because the other is understood in terms of a threatening influence.

And if they demonized everything, what were they left with? Are the innocent pleasures like admiring a beautiful landscape, loving a woman, enjoying a beautiful non-doctrinal book, helping a man in need although he happens to be of a different political creed, entirely sinful? This is what Buchan questions in his book and he shows that if you take away these natural feelings and pleasures from people, they will turn into hypocrite monsters[6]: "If young life may not caper on a spring morn to the glory of God, it will dance in the mirk wood to the Devil's piping." (Buchan 119-20).

So, what Buchan seems to say is that Christianity is good but the Covenanters lapsed into a primitive form of religion characterized by irrational outbursts, violence and taboo; they lapsed from the truth. He retains the idea of a unique truth and a superior religion, Christianity. Cultural dialogue is what he advocates, but starting from the premise that the fallen nature is not entirely corrupt and one cannot throw in the waste bin all the achievements of humanity labeling them simply as sinful. You can find pieces of truth even in other people's cultures.

Pagan worship is associated with hypocrisy, lapse into a primitive form of religion; it is not regarded as alternative religion and truth, as it is the case in Tait's book. Buchan insists that the Covenanters missed what was most important from Christianity, Christ. David's adherence to the New Testament principles was considered by Mr. Muirhead and the rest of the covenanters a "dangerous heretical trust in carnal conceits" (Buchan 186-7).

[6] This also questions the notion that human nature is completely corrupt after the Fall.

The author's sentence is pronounced in Mark Kerr's final, romantic speech in which he accuses the whole parish of having fallen into illogic and irrational ways that have nothing to do with Christianity:

> " If ye take the blood-thirstiness, and the hewing in pieces, and thrawnness of the auld Jews, and ettle to shape yourselves on their pattern, what for do ye no gang further? Wherefore d'ye no set up an altar and burn a wedder on't? What kind o' kirk is this, when ye suld have a temple with gopher and shittim wood and shew-bread and an ark o' the covenant and branched candlesticks, and busk your minister in an ephod instead of a black gown? Ye canna pick and choose in the Word. If one thing is to be zealously copied, wherefore not all? (Buchan 288).

Buchan seems therefore to condemn the cultural isolation of the Covenanters, and for him cultural dialog is almost synonymous with rational modern existence. What the Covenanters do is a lapse into a primitive form of existence and into irrationality. But cultural dialog is understood by him in terms of a unique Christian truth to which all groups should adhere. Modernity itself seems a child of Christianity in his view[7] and we can sense in his work the enlightenment temporal scheme of assessing cultures.

Clash of Utopias in Harry Tait's *The Ballad of Sawney Bain*

Harry Tait uses two narratives which subvert each other: the one of the new minister of Trig, which continues the narrative of other ministers of the Covenant, and a different version of the events presented by Agnes Gouglas, the very person accused of witchcraft by the radical Covenanters.

The great difference between Buchan and Tait lies in the way they levelled their critique at the Covenanters' proceedings. Buchan comes with a critique from within Christianity and modernity, and proposes a balanced Christianity instead of the zeal-ridden, "irrational" approach of the group who signed the upheld the Covenant. Covenanters lack the subtle understanding of the human inner workings, cut out pieces of creation which they do not understand and throw them to the waste bin. Tait comes with a critique levelled at all religious utopias, whether they appear as a zealous Christianity or a jealous preservation of "the divine right of kings", and proposes, instead of a contorted Christianity, a humane atheism, whose embodiment is Steenie Malecky.

Reading the story as told by the Covenanters we find in Malecky a dangerous warlock who used supernatural devilish powers in order to save Agnes, his concubine, from execution (Tait 28), the condign punishment, according to the Covenanters' principles. Somehow the group of the three characters reviled by the covenanting group, Steenie, Sawney and Agnes, serves as a mirror in which the Covenanters reflect their own identity. The "warlocks" are the catalysts that bring to light the Covenanters' almost irrational zeal and their utopian world. This reveals to a certain extent the antithetic vision

[7] B.P. Singh considers that modernity is a child born and raised on the lap of Christianity (Singh 95).

that was at the basis of the covenanters' actions and mentality; a world conceived of in terms of "us good, them bad". They needed to define their identity against a metonymically reduced other, against a demonized image of the other, in order to justify their extreme zeal and their radical rhetoric advocating a creative violence with the aim of setting up a better world. Every defeat in a battle is projected outwards, upon certain persons or groups that are used as scapegoats (Tait 142), bringing thus mechanicist arguments to explain their failure.

We find here, however, a less idealized portrait of Montrose, rich in intertextual references to Scott and Buchan, yet spiced up with critical comments coming from the mouth of the learned "warlock" Steenie (Tait 120, 122, 129). Montrose is seen not only as a faithful person to the king, but also in the less agreeable quality of a man who failed to keep his word. "John Graham, the first man in Scotland to sign the Covenant, the first to turn traitor to it" (Tait 120). Montrose was, however, a charismatic figure; 'he could make men's hearts beat for him, while his beat only for a king" (Tait 122). But Tait comes with the 20th century suspicion of the danger of a charismatic leader: "a man that needed to be shot, such a dreaming man and such a great captain is a damn dangerous man, and will certainly burn us awe in Hell if we dinna bow the knee tae his dreams" (Tait 130).

John Graham appears now very much like the Covenanters' counterpart in the king's camp, another fanatic with a different creed: "but where his bit king is concerned he will gang the bloodiest gate to be by his side" (Tait 236). There are two utopian visions in close conflict, wreaking havoc around and wasting people's resources and lives.

The main hero of the story is not Montrose now, nor one of his noble henchmen, but Steenie Malecky, an atheist and a man accused of witchcraft, a charismatic figure who managed to make friends and gain people's respect wherever he went. Steenie's humanity seems better than all utopian, millenarist dreams that drive the zealot Covenanters to slaughter or the other zealots under Montrose to battle. The novel seems intent to "undecide and relativise"(Hassan 196), it questions the legitimacy of old religious beliefs and creeds; Kirk and the divine right of kings come under its scrutiny and are found wanting.

Also, in a postmodern fashion, Tait questions the superiority of Christianity as compared with other religious beliefs (unlike Buchan). The new minister of Trig is appalled by Catriona, the Highland soothsayer woman, and is confronted with another religion which seems to question the uniqueness of his own religion and truth. Not only was Catriona dominating him, but she even pointed to his inner passions and foibles, like his desire for Helen Melville (Tait 418, 421).

The warlock Steenie fills the book with instances of his humanity and goodness (Tait 299, 137-8). The man so much reviled by the Covenanters gains an almost Christ-like status, people coming to his hill because they believed it has curative and beneficial powers (Tait 281). The rest of the Covenanters appear still as an unreflective, zeal-driven mob, within which the ministers distinguish themselves through deeds of relentless cruelty (Tait 264), ordering mass-murder, while the rest gives the impression of an irrational herd which lacks the intellectual stamina to question the ministers' proceedings.

Oppressors Become Oppressed. James Robertson's Covenanters

With Robertson we find a more favourable image of the Covenanters. He seems more intent on recovering the marginal and neglected discourse of the Covenanters who were no longer oppressors, but fighters and martyrs for the freedom of religious expression in Scotland.

At least the Covenanters manage to gain the sympathy of the public through their martyrdom. They could now appear as heroes, as clever ministers suffering persecution and they can argue and reason beyond slogans.

Robertson uses the dialogue between his characters, and two narrative lines, one in the 20th century, the other in the 17th century, in order to present multiple versions of events subverting each other. The Secret Book from which some of the events are taken disappears, there remains only a fancy in Carlin's head and the story remains open-ended, the 17th century narrative line disappearing. The reader is left to finish the tale by himself and to project his/her meaning into it.

The Covenanters are affected by the image which they constructed of the outside world and also by the stereotypes which the outside world used to qualify them. They constructed a demonized image of the world outside their faction (Robertson 72), but they also had an image constructed by the outside world qualifying them as uneducated bigots involved in lots of gross sins (Robertson 63).

In *The Fanatic* Robertson subverts to a certain extent this cultural clichés concerning the Covenanters. Also, conveniently, the book focuses on the period (the Restoration) when the Covenanters were in decline and from oppressors they became sufferers, restricted in their religious freedom.

Mitchell is a graduate, an educated man and not a loggerhead fanatic, although the author leaves open the door to considering him as suffering from some sort of mental or spiritual delusion at times (Robertson 99, 103). Their martyrdom attracts respect however, especially when it comes to intelligent people, who strive to be sincere in their intentions and faith. There is an atmosphere similar to what we read about in the history of early Christianity (Robertson 95-96) and in hagiographical literature, Robertson choosing to climax his description of sacrificial scenes with the execution of minister McKail and the wave of influence it had on the people who were watching it:

> McKail appeared on the scaffold, white-faced and dragging his ruined leg behind him, half the people gathered there already knew the joke he had made the night before, when asked if he was in pain: 'Oh' he had replied, 'the fear of my neck makes me forget my leg"…"here was a man going to his death and already like and angel….'this is sore work my friends, but every step on this ladder is a step closer tae Heaven…the crowd was now ecstatic in its anguish. Men and women alike were sobbing and holding up their hands to the figure on the scaffold….the officers looked terrified at the effect McKail was having" (Robertson 97).

In what follows there is the description of some Covenanters who were rather unfeeling individuals, too much intent on their mission to care about their fellow humans: "the minister had eyes like ice, unfeeling, impenetrable. The child only saw his reflection in them… his hand was gripped in the iron hand of the minister" (Robertson 33-4). At the same time they are not much wanted, even by their closest relatives, Mitchel's wife doesn't wish her child to be blessed by the hand of a saint like Mitchel, somehow their blessings were more of a curse. In his last moments Mitchel seemed more concerned with the fiery speech he would deliver at his execution than with his family: "James Mitchel sat writing his death speech, his last address to the Christian people of Scotland…he did not want any more delay (of the hanging)…if Lizzie could not come, she could not come. He was beyond her now." (Robertson 289). The way in which Robertson portrays the Covenanters lack of humane feelings is beyond doubt a reminiscence of Scott and earlier writers.

Harking back to previous texts, Robertson subverts the notion of "the elect". Major Weir realizes that his whole life he had been mistaken and he was elected, but by the devil (Robertson 188-91). Clearly the author refers here to earlier texts dealing with the problem of election, particularly to James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

The radical strain is still very much present, as we can see in the perpetual paranoiac suspicion entertained even against their fellow Covenanters. The tolerant ones were being accused of communicating with the devil and of apostasy:

> "you see many who have signed it and fallen away from its principles…his tongue speaks the right words, but he is ower tolerant. The land is full of holy wobblers like him, and they are a great danger. At least a man like Montrose you could mark for an enemy" (Robertson 47).

If in Scott's work everything seems to be rationalized and legends explained away, in the latter two novels we note a relish in the supernatural details. We find elements of legend not only in the death of martyrs, but also in the death of the infamous Major Weir. The community of Covenanters seemed to weave this net of supernatural events around the executions and deeds of persons noted for their devotion to their cause, or for their inveteracy in working against it. People would not put Major Weir's staff into the flames before he was burned, for fear he would escape with it (Robertson 193).

Like Tait, Robertson questions the legitimacy of both royalists' and Covenanters' metanarratives. Their effect upon the country is devastating, as we see in Lauder's words, the person that acts as a public conscience in this novel: "it seemed to us the haill kingdom was engaged in selfe destruction, like a chirurgeon that bleids himself to death believing himself sick, when in fact he is only a little melancholick in the mind" (Robertson 234).

Everything in a Covenanter's life is a great step towards a godly mission (Robertson 132-3); everything is understood in terms of a high providence specially reserved for him, the elect person. This makes obvious the link with Wieviorka's hypersubject (293-5)[8].

The irony of the text lies also in the way it surprises two different paradigms trying to eliminate each other, believing that it has the ultimate plan for the improvement of humanity. At the same time they are both barbaric and gruesome in their proceedings, the only difference being that they considered themselves justified and the other party illegitimate (Robertson 124). All set religious ideals are ironically subverted; Montrose's head is replaced on a spike by that of the Duke of Argyle. "Thus are saints made martyrs; and thus the martyrs made a mockery." (Robertson 134) and we are left with relativism. Royalists and covenanters are mimetic models (Girard 24), they vie for the same thing and resemble each other in great respects, yet Robertson subverts both projects by showing the atrocities committed by their promoters.

An interesting feature that unites the novels we analyze here is the presence of a person endowed with the frame of mind contemporary to the author in the setting of the religious upheavals of 17th century Scotland. Time and again the author uses that person as a lens through which the images of the Covenanters and of their opponents take an ever newer shape. In *The Tale of Old Mortality* we had Henry Morton, in Buchan's work it was the minister David Sempil, and in Tait's novel it is e a person accused of witchcraft and uncertain religious affiliation, Steenie Malecky, and in Robertson's novel the advocate Lauder comes with an almost postmodern distrust of metanarratives and condemns the ravages wrought by utopic projects. It is worthwhile mentioning that in all the novels under discussion the fictional Covenanters construct a radical discourse, using a war rhetoric based on Old Testament passages, and they seem to be taken over by it. In the recent novels discussed here, their guilt is extenuated by the fact that they were driven to extremities by opposing forces which were not less radical or more thoughtful.

[8] "Souvent, le sujet qui correspond au déficit de sens ne se contente pas d'exprimer, par la violence, son desir ou son besoin d'etre acteur alors qu'il ne peut pas encore l'etre, ou qu'il ne peut plus l'etre. Il arrive alors qu'il tente de conferer un sens a son existence par une violence a laquelle il peut attribuer des significations nouvelles, ou renouvelees. Celles-ci ne peuvent pas etre celles qu'il a perdues, ou dont il attend sans trop le savoir l'emergence, en les pressentant simplement. La sujetivite se leste alors d'un discours qui prend a la limite l'allure d'une plethora de sens. Celle-ci permet au sujet de s'installer dans un espace autre que celui ou il se constitue, et donc de transcender la situation anterior de vide, de perte, de manqué. Le sens est alors omnipresent, suabondant et peut meme sembler deborder de toute parts le cadre de references qui est celui de la vie courante anterieure, dans ses dimensions sociales, politiques ou culturelles...la religion a couramment cette function, et sourtout, authorize a pousser au plus loin la logique de la plethore de sens. Elle fonde en particulier le passage a l'acte, et ce jusque'a l'extreme, c'est a dire, dans certain cas, le sacrifice de l'acteur, qui s'abolit alors dans son acte, convaicu qu'il trouvera dans l'au-dela ce que le monde d'ici-bas ne peut lui apporter, en meme temps, le cas echeant, qu'il contribue par son geste a modifier les rapports de force sur cette terre….le sujet personnel s'affirme non pas tant ou seulement bic et nunc, mais aussi, et sourtout ailleurs, et dans une autre temporalite."(293-5).

The classic authors, however, tend to lay the blame on the Covenanters and to present an idealized image of their opponents. They seem to accuse the lack of intelligence or excessive zeal of the Covenanters. In *The Tale of Old Mortality* Claverhouse is exculpated, being more like the force of reason using the scalpel in order to remove the tumour. There seems to be less condemnation though in the later works. Both Robertson and Tait have written their books after what Callum G. Brown proclaimed as the death of Christian Britain, the substantial decrease of the Christian faith in Britain after the 1960s, and the gradual disappearance of the Christian discourse from the center of cultural life.

The Covenanters' marginal discourse for freedom of religious expression is retrieved by Robertson, but he doesn't spare them the severe critique levelled at all utopias[9]. Each author comes with a new shift of focus, reflecting somehow the power relations active in his own time. Scott, points to the irrational aspects of a religious faction, having in mind the 18th century professors of moral philosophy like Adam Fergusson, Dugald Stewart etc. Tait and Robertson come with the wish to retrieve the marginal discourses, left aside before. Tait recovers the discourse eliminated by the powerful faction of the Covenanters, the leading authorities at the time, and Robertson retrieves some discourses of the Covenanters themselves, when the balance of power relations shifted and they were no longer the leading authorities. Both Tait and Robertson come with the postmodern distrust of utopias, be they religious or otherwise. The rich imagological material provided by these novels reveals paradoxically not so many things concerning the Covenanters, but plenty of details regarding the societies in which the works were produced and the power relations which determined them. The startling difference lies in the fact that although there are over a hundred years between *The Tale of Old Mortality* and *Witch Wood*, yet, Buchan's image of the Covenanters bears still the mark of Scott and Enlightenment. The latter authors however are no longer framing their vision starting from a modernist project, and the concern with human nature is no longer there at the center. Also their narrative techniques are different, leaving the reader to project his meaning into their open ended tales.

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[9] "thus the Utopianist must win over, or else crush, his Utopianist competitors who do not share in his own Utopian aims and who do not profess his Utopianist religion….but he has to do more. He has to be very thorough in eliminating and stamping out all heretical competing views. For the way to the Utopian goal is long…and this can be achieved if he not merely crushes competing Utopian religions, but, as far as possible, stamps out all memory of them" (Popper 360).

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