

2007

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Recommended Citation

Hewitt, David (2007) "'Hab Nab at a Venture": Scott on the Creative Process," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 35: Iss. 1, 426–443.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol35/iss1/32>

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David Hewitt

"Hab Nab at a Venture": Scott on the Creative Process

In *Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, Herbert Grierson writes of Scott's "active, impatient temperament which kept him from ever being sufficiently analytical of his own mind and motives."¹ Grierson's judgment is not aberrant (many critics have made similar remarks), but it is wrong. Scott is certainly not interested in the Freudian activity of analyzing motives, but in his *Journal* he shows a consistent interest in the workings of mind and body in the process of writing. His comments are scattered—he was keeping a diary, not writing a treatise—but when brought together, and when related to the evidence gathered in editing Scott's fiction for the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels (EEWN), they constitute a coherent description of creativity. Coleridgean and Freudian models of the creative mind have long dominated literary thinking about the artist, but, however interesting, they are only models.² Even in the Romantic period there were other ways of understanding, and a unique approach is provided by Scott. He describes the psychology and physiology of the process of writing as he experienced it. Scott's self-observation is acute, and his description of what is happening when writing works as long as novels is, in its way, as enlightening as Coleridge's theory of the imagination in *Biographia Liter-*

¹Sir Herbert Grierson, *Sir Walter Scott, Bart.: A New Life Supplementary to, and Corrective of, Lockhart's Biography* (London, 1938), p. 68. Henceforth Grierson.

²See P. E. Vernon, ed., *Creativity: Selected Readings* (Harmondsworth, 1970).

aria, but the significance of Scott's self-analysis has not been recognized because the *Journal* is not systematic.

In 1808 Scott made three different attempts at fathoming his own creativity—in his "Memoirs," in the introductory epistles to the six cantos of *Marmion*, and in the opening chapters of *Waverley*. In the "Memoirs" he brilliantly describes his early reading, and the stories his grandmother and his aunt told him when he was still very young, but this experience, although clearly crucial to the formation of his mind and personality, does not explain why thirty years later he was a writer.³ In *Marmion* he confronts this issue; he imagines his friend Henry Erskine arguing that he should write on a modern theme, but he responds:

But say, my Erskine, hast thou weigh'd
That secret power by all obey'd,
Which warps not less the passive mind,
Its source conceal'd or undefined;
Whether an impulse, that has birth
Soon as the infant wakes on earth,
One with our feelings and our powers,
And rather part of us than ours;
Or whether fitlier term'd the sway
Of habit, form'd in early day?
Howe'er derived, its force confest
Rules with despotic sway the breast,
And drags us on by viewless chain,
While taste and reason plead in vain.⁴

Lockhart's footnote suggests that Scott here reworks a passage from *An Essay on Man* where Pope says that the function of the imagination is to exacerbate the master passion, the "lurking principle of death."⁵ Scott implicitly rejects Pope's narrow moral focus, accepting that one's mental characteristics are either there at birth or are formed at a very early stage in life, and arguing that writing poetry is not a matter of choice, but a psychological necessity. In a sense the "Memoirs" and the *Marmion* epistles are Scott's *Prelude*—an attempt to explore why he should be a poet. Wordsworth suggests that he was chosen to be a poet, and that Nature actively formed him into one; Scott says

³Walter Scott, "Memoirs," in *Scott on Himself*, ed. David Hewitt (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 1-44.

⁴Walter Scott, "Introduction to Canto Third," in *Marmion*, in *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, [ed. J. G. Lockhart], 12 vols. (Edinburgh 1833-34), VII, 134-5.

⁵Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man* (1733-34), Epistle 2, line 134.

that he is necessarily a writer. But still, while both describe how they are formed by their pasts, and characterized by their memory of their pasts, neither manages to explain their literary creativity. Scott's description of the young Waverley, which implies that the hero is a product of his reading habits and is acting out his own bookishness, is recognized by all readers as a gently mocking self-portrait and so it may be taken as a skeptical commentary on the poet of the "Memoirs" and *Marmion*,⁶ for in trying to explore himself in the retrospective narrative of the "Memoirs," Scott probably recognized that the story of his own life has a strong element of teleological self-construction. While there is no reason to doubt his account of the books in which he was interested as a child, it is at least possible that the poet he was in 1808 required the construction of a narrative of his past which stands for what he is as he writes in 1808. Whether he was at this time conscious of the intellectual problem that writing history could be seen to be *creating* the past, a problem of which he was certainly aware when composing *Redgaunlet* in 1824, cannot be determined, but he probably recognized that the self generated in the "Memoirs" is a product of fashioning his own past into a narrative.

Scott was clearly dissatisfied with each attempt at writing himself, and in November 1825 turned to a different form, the diary. He was stimulated by the first published version of the diary of Samuel Pepys which had recently appeared, and which he reviewed for the *Quarterly Review* in January 1826, where he wrote:

In private diaries, like that now upon our table, we come several steps nearer to the reality of a man's sentiments. The journalist approaches to the situation of the soliloquist in the nursery rhyme.

"As I walked by myself,
I talked to myself,
And thus myself said to me."

It is no doubt certain that in this species of self-intercourse we put many tricks upon our actual and moral self, and often endeavour to dress deeds, enacted by the former on very egotistical principles, in such a garb as may in some degree place them favourably before the other's contemplation. Still there must be some more fair dealing betwixt ourself and our conscience, than ourself and any one else;—

⁶The early chapters of *Waverley* were written 1808, not 1805, the latter being a fictional date proposed by the subtitle and the first chapter of *Waverley*: see P. D. Garside, "Dating *Waverley*'s Early Chapters," *The Bibliothek*, 13 (1986), 61-81.

here there is much which can be neither denied or extenuated; *Magna est veritas et prevalebit*.⁷

There can be no doubt that Scott is talking as much about himself as about Pepys: he uses the same tag of verse as an epigraph on the first leaf of his *Journal*.⁸ His representation of consciousness is Romantic, rather than seventeenth-century: the self is split, one part observing the other, with a certain indefiniteness about which is the self and which the other. And as the very first entry makes clear, he thinks it is the irregularity of the self-observation which makes the journal an efficient medium for self recording: Byron, he says, probably "hit upon the right way of keeping such a memorandum-book by throwing aside all pretence to regularity and order and marking down events just as they occur to recollection" (*Journal*, p. 1; 20 Nov. 1825). In other words, Scott is knowingly trying to avoid literary structuring, and to represent the movement of the mind as it happens, although he is honest in remarking that is it not the course of the day which is recorded, but the recollection of it.

However, irregularity makes it difficult to discern significance, as the normal discursive and narrative ordering devices work only in a paragraph of discussion or in the telling of an anecdote. In addition literary readers bring expectations of the nature of creativity. For instance, since Freud creativity is usually represented in psychoanalytic terms. Of course Scott lends himself to Freudian speculation. There have been those who have implied that Scott, caught in an unsatisfactory marriage, sublimated his sexual energies, and so wrote (a lot).⁹ That no one now believes in the Freudian thesis, that creativity arises from unfulfilled desire,¹⁰ is not relevant, not because it is not relevant to Scott, but because he does not represent the activity of writing in terms which are susceptible to this kind of analysis. He is more concerned with literary activities, and with the mental states that generate or accompany them. Scott describes thinking about a book, writing a book, and completing a book, and because he describes processes, what is required is a model which categorizes the activity of literary production. One such is offered by Graham Wallas in

⁷*The Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart*, 28 vols. (Edinburgh, 1834-6), XX, 97. Henceforth *Prose Works*.

⁸*The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson (Oxford, 1972), p. xlviii. Henceforth *Journal*.

⁹For example see Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown*, 2 vols. (London, 1970), I, 123.

¹⁰Sigmund Freud, "Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 23 vols. (London, 1957-1966), XI, 53-4.

The Art of Thought: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification.¹¹ The model is old, but, although there has been criticism of the sequentiality of the four stages, it is useful as a means of ordering the evidence of the *Journal*, and is used in this article as a means of making sense of what Scott writes.

Scott's best known exposition of his approach to writing is in the Introductory Epistle to *The Fortunes of Nigel*, in a dialogue between the Author of Waverley and Cuthbert Clutterbuck (pp. 3-17).¹² A similar passage is to be found in the *Journal* entry for 12 February 1826:

Now I have not the slightest idea how the story is to be wound up to a catastrophe. I am just in the same case as I used to be when I lost myself in former days in some country to which I was a stranger—I always pushed for the pleasantest road and either found or made it the nearest. It is the same in writing. I never could lay down a plan—or having laid it down I never could adhere to it; the action of composition always dilated some passages and abridged or omitted others and personages were rendered important or insignificant not according to their agency in the original conception of the plan but according to the success or otherwise with which I was able to bring them out.... This may be called in Spanish the *Der donde diere* mode of composition—in English *Hab nab at a venture*. It is a perilous stile I grant but I cannot help [it]—when I chain my mind to ideas which are purely imaginative—for argument is a different thing—it seems to me that the sun leaves the landscape, that I think away the whole vivacity and spirit of my original conception, and the results are cold, tame and spiritless (*Journal*, p. 86).

Scott has an original conception. He does not describe exactly what that consists of, but many artists report that their starting point is a visual image, or a fragment of conversation, and in Scott's case a story seems most likely. He says, secondly, that the actual business of writing alters what he thinks he was

¹¹Graham Wallas, *The Art of Thought* (London, 1926), p. 80.

¹²Walter Scott, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, ed. Frank Jordan, EEWN 13 (Edinburgh, 2004), pp. 3-17. Henceforth *Nigel*. All quotations from the Waverley Novels bar one are from the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels (EEWN). Full citations are given here, together with a shortened form of reference, where appropriate: *Guy Mannering*, ed. P. D. Garside, EEWN 2 (Edinburgh, 1999); *The Antiquary*, ed. David Hewitt, EEWN 3 (Edinburgh and New York, 1993); *The Tale of Old Mortality*, ed. Douglas Mack, EEWN 4b (Edinburgh and New York, 1993) (*Old Mortality*); *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, ed. David Hewitt and Alison Lumsden, EEWN 6 (Edinburgh, 2004) (*Mid-Lothian*); *The Abbot*, ed. Christopher Johnson, EEWN 10 (Edinburgh, 2000); *Kenilworth*, ed. J. H. Alexander, EEWN 11 (Edinburgh and New York, 1993); *The Pirate*, ed. Mark Weinstein and Alison Lumsden, EEWN 12 (Edinburgh, 2002); *The Fortunes of Nigel*, ed. Frank Jordan, EEWN 13 (Edinburgh, 2004) (*Nigel*); *Saint Ronan's Well*, ed. Mark Weinstein, EEWN 16 (Edinburgh and New York, 1995); *Redgauntlet*, ed. Alastair Wood and David Hewitt, EEWN 17 (Edinburgh and New York, 1997); *Anne of Geierstein*, ed. J. H. Alexander, EEWN 22 (Edinburgh and New York, 2000) (*Geierstein*).

going to say, and that he finds himself unable to follow a consciously formulated plan. Indeed if he fails to follow the momentum of the compositional process "I think away the whole vivacity and spirit of my original conception." This description implies that he must surrender to a process which evidences itself in the act of writing.

This passage may be taken as Scott's general statement. It brings in two of Wallas's processes, incubation and illumination, but the bar to taking it seriously is the way in which it is written. It is personal observation, not an argued idea. For the most part it lacks the rumbustious, Blackwoodian vigor which characterizes the sparring of the Author of *Waverley* and Captain Clutterbuck, except for the one phrase, "Hab nab at a venture." The phrase is rash, splendidly rash, and Scott has paid for it in repeated beratings of his "slapdashery." He does open himself to criticism by expressing himself in this way, but the mode is an essential part of his meaning. In the Magnum Introduction to *The Fortunes of Nigel* he apologizes for what he terms the "'hoity toity, whisky frisky' pertness of manner"¹³ of the Introductory Epistle. "Hoity toity" does not carry its modern overtones, but means "romping" or "frolicking," while "whisky frisky" means "light and lively." But the conjoined phrase is in quotation marks and seems to have been used only in *The Race*, a poem by Cuthbert Shaw first published in 1765, in a passage where Shaw is talking of his own poetic endeavor:

Prove then, oh! Goddess, to my labors kind,
And let these sons of *Dullness* lag behind,
Whilst *hoity toity, whisky frisky*, I
On ballad-wings spring forth to victory.¹⁴

The manner for which Scott apologizes thus involves the new anti-Augustan, popular-literature aesthetic of the later eighteenth century. It also implies that he feels that treatises on literature tend to be dull, while his should romp and frolic. In the at times apparently inconsequential, at others jocular, and at yet others dramatic mode of formulating his approach to writing, Scott rejects the solemnity of theories of literature and criticism (such as the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and Wordsworth's habit of taking himself very seriously), and substitutes the skeptical self-knowledge of a practitioner. To modern readers "*Hab nab at a venture*" suggests a carelessness of attitude and approach, but when its context is fully analyzed it can be seen that Scott emphasizes the intellectual and physical momentum of writing. It is almost as though writing necessarily involves a kind of surrender to the activity of writing.

¹³Walter Scott, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, in *The Waverley Novels*, 48 vols. (Edinburgh, 1829-33), XXVI, xvii.

¹⁴Cuthbert Shaw, *The Race*, 2nd edn. (London, 1766), p. 28.

However, this is just one facet of Scott's practice. According to Wallas the first stage in creative thought is *preparation*. Scott writes "I am just in the same case as I used to be when I lost myself in former days in some country to which I was a stranger," but is the parallel exact? Was he a stranger to what he was writing? The answer is no. In the "Essay on the Text" in *The Tale of Old Mortality* Douglas Mack writes:

In his 'Memoirs' he tells us that in the period 1782-83 he acquired by 'disputing' with his tutor James Mitchell 'a great acquaintance in particular with the old books describing the early history of the Church of Scotland, the wars and sufferings of the Covenanters and so forth'. Ballads from the time of the battle of 'Bothwell Brig' had appeared in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-03). His introductions and notes to those ballads provide a miniature history of the period, and also evidence of the sources of which he was already in command: Patrick Walker's *Life of Alexander Peden*, Captain Creighton's *Memoirs*, Cleland's poetry, John Howie's *The Scots Worthies*, *A Cloud of Witnesses*, Robert Wodrow's *The History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland*, Guild's Latin Poem "Bellum Bothwellianum," Lord Fountainhall's *Decisions*, and William Wilson's account of the events of 1679.¹⁵

Scott's own work as editor is also relevant. Besides *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, he edited the memoirs of George Carleton, an English soldier of the period (1808), the works of John Dryden in 18 volumes (1808), *A Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts* (otherwise known as "The Somers Tracts"), 13 volumes, 1809-15, which, Scott remarked in a letter to Lady Louisa Stuart of 16 January 1818, "made me wonderfully well acquainted with the little traits which mark'd parties & characters in the 17th Century."¹⁶ Then there are the nineteen volumes of *The Works of Jonathan Swift* (1814) and in 1816 *Memorie of the Somervilles*, a work by James, eleventh Lord Somerville, which throws much light on the manners of seventeenth-century Scotland. All these works feed into *The Tale of Old Mortality*.

In another entry in the *Journal* Scott discusses his imitators and comments:

They may do their fooling with better grace but I like Sir Andrew Aguecheek do it more natural. They have to read old books and consult antiquarian collections to get their information—I write because I have long since read such works and possess thanks to a strong memory the information which they have to seek for (*Journal*, p. 214; 18 October 1826).

¹⁵*Old Mortality*, p. 361.

¹⁶*The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson and others, 12 vols. (London 19832-37), V, 56. Henceforth *Letters*.

Much more was involved in the term "memory" in Scott's era than now when the word is most commonly used of the power of recall, particularly of names, or dates, or telephone numbers. In her fine book *Literary Memory* Catherine Jones says that Scott "viewed his compositional processes in terms derived from Enlightenment psychology,"¹⁷ and she shows that "memory" was fundamental to Scott's formulation of his sense of self. The quotation from the *Journal* clearly proves her point: Scott possesses a "strong memory," and draws upon it in writing. He is always able to quote aptly; he can both fit the sense to a context, and choose lexis, genres and forms proper to the period of which he is writing. Thus when Scott says that he does his fooling "more natural" he is actually talking about what is integral to him. His reading has become part of himself and the literature and the stories absorbed in childhood have become the programs of Scott's mind.

In *Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, Grierson suggested that in the first three novels "Scott starts from a personal experience, a hidden memory of events and sufferings in his own life, but does not, either because he cannot, or does not wish to, make the principal theme the elaboration of this experience and its emotional consequences" (Grierson, p. 131). All literature must have some relationship to the mind which creates it, and it is clear that in some novels such as *Waverley* and *The Antiquary* Scott does present a view or a commentary upon aspects of his own life and intellectual preoccupations, but the Freudian thesis that Grierson proposes, that there is a suppressed trauma which provides the psychic starting point, is not supported by any evidence. With the exception of *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* we do not know what constitutes the originating idea of any of his long poems or novels. Scott received the letter containing the outline of the story of Helen Walker, the prototype of Jeanie Deans, from Helen Goldie at the beginning of February 1817, and by 16 April seems to be proposing a new novel based upon it.¹⁸ This example might suggest that for Scott the intellectual trigger for a new novel is a story, which, as it is developed, leads to the transformation of materials read decades earlier,¹⁹ and that the originating idea predates any writing by many months. But generalizations cannot be made on the basis of one example. There are many suggestions in Lockhart's *Life* that friends provided particular stimuli, but whenever there is precise information, as for *Guy Mannering* or *Saint Ronan's Well*, it can be shown that the friends ascribe a role to themselves which they did not have. For instance, Joseph Train prepared a "Brief Sketch of a Correspondence with

¹⁷Catherine Jones, *Literary Memory* (Lewisburg and London, 2003), p. 11.

¹⁸*Mid-Lothian*, pp. 471-4.

¹⁹An analysis of Scott's use of source materials may be found in *Mid-Lothian*, pp. 585-94.

Sir Walter Scott commencing in the year 1814," which provided the main source for Lockhart's account of the genesis of *Guy Mannering*, but P. D. Garside remarks that "at no point" does the surviving correspondence support the assertion that Train provided material on gypsies and an astrologer which formed the basis of the novel.²⁰ Subjects were often suggested to Scott by his publishers, by friends and acquaintances, and by unknown correspondents, but were nearly always resisted. *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* is the one exception, and because it is an exception in this respect it cannot be claimed with confidence that Scott starts with a story, nor can it be said that he gets a new idea at a specific interval before beginning to write.

If we are normally unable to identify or date the original conception, we can in many cases determine exactly when he proposed a new subject to his publishers. He agreed a contract for *The Antiquary* in January 1815, and began to write on 30 December of that year.²¹ The contract for *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* was negotiated in September 1817 (although the idea dates from the spring); he began to write in late January 1818.²² The contract for *Kenilworth* was signed on 18 January 1820; he began to write in September.²³ *Saint Ronan's Well* was contracted on 8 October 1822; he had begun writing by 13 May next year.²⁴ *The Tales of the Crusaders* are probably prefigured in the mock advertisement for Josiah Cargill's "The Siege of Ptolemais" added to the end of *Saint Ronan's Well* on 11 December 1823,²⁵ and are certainly mentioned in a letter of 13 January 1824;²⁶ *The Betrothed* was begun around 16 June 1824. The subject of *Anne of Geierstein* is first mentioned in a letter of 6 August 1827, and writing began on 1 September 1828.²⁷ In each case, then, there is a gap of six months to more than a year between the first time a new novel is mentioned in the documentation, and his beginning to write. It is customary to ascribe the flow of new contracts signed by Scott to his need for money, and at certain points (for example in 1819 when he began *The Monas-*

²⁰See *Guy Mannering*, pp. 360-2; see also *Saint Ronan's Well*, pp. 375-6.

²¹*The Antiquary*, pp. 358-9.

²²*Mid-Lothian*, pp. 476, 484.

²³*Kenilworth*, pp. 396-7.

²⁴*Saint Ronan's Well*, pp. 375-6.

²⁵*Saint Ronan's Well*, p. 373.

²⁶See *Redgauntlet*, p. 382.

²⁷*Geierstein*, pp. 406, 409.

tery before completing *Ivanhoe*, and then split *The Monastery* in two, publishing *The Abbot* as a sequel)²⁸ this was a real external pressure. It was also the case that in the early twenties Constable wanted Scott to sign contracts so that Scott was bound to the one publisher. But the consistency of a pattern of a significant temporal gap between signing a contract for a novel and his commencing to write suggests that this was a period of incubation.

It can be deduced that in the period between agreeing on a contract and beginning to write Scott's mind was preparing the next novel, but not necessarily in a conscious way. On 7 December 1827 he writes:

There is one thing I believe peculiar to me—I work, that is meditate for the purpose of working, best when I have a *quasi* engagement with some other book for example. When I find myself doing ill or like to come to a still stand in writing I take up some slight book, a novel or the like, and usually have not read far ere my difficulties are removed and I am ready to write again. There must be two current[s] of ideas going on in my mind at the same time, or perhaps the slighter occupation serves like a woman's wheel or stocking to ballast the mind as it were by preventing the thoughts from wandering and so give the deeper current the power to flow undisturbed (*Journal*, p. 391).

Clearly, the taking up of a book is a response to immediate problems in writing, but the rest of the passage describes the incubation: there is commonly an immediate task and an incipient task. While writing *Paul's Letters to His Kinsfolk* late in 1815 he may have been preparing for *The Antiquary*, or while finishing his edition of Richard Frank's *Northern Memoirs* published in January 1821, he may have been thinking about *The Pirate* for which he agreed the contract in August 1820 and which he began in April 1821.²⁹ In that period of six to twelve months, the next novel was forming at a level of the mind of which he was not conscious, or deliberately not paying attention to. And the "must" of "There must be two current[s] of ideas going on in my mind at the same time" suggests that he wanted an immediate task to occupy his mind so that he could suppress his consciousness of planning the next work. At another point in the *Journal* he writes

there is a sort of drowsy vacillation of mind attends fatigue with me. I can command my pen as the School-Copy recommends but cannot equally command my thought and often write one word for another (*Journal*, pp. 96-7; 23 February 1826).

²⁸ *The Abbot*, pp. 377-85.

²⁹ *The Pirate*, p. 393-5.

Writing one word for another is a common feature in the manuscripts. Many of the mistakes are motor errors: the fingers start on a combination of letters which normally lead to a specific word, but which may be wrong in context. Others are homophones. Often the hand is running behind the mind and a word or phrase from a passage further down the page makes its appearance. No attempt has yet been made to prove that phrases in the manuscript of *Paul's Letters*, for example, eventually turn up in *The Antiquary*, but in due course it might be possible to test the hypothesis that when Scott was tired or under strain, and conscious control slackened, one work might infect another, and this would indeed demonstrate that Scott's mind was engaged on two works simultaneously.

There was, then, a period of preparation, and a period of incubation, but it is not clear when the moment of illumination might be said to have come. Just as he began writing, there was a period for conscious planning: while no one will dispute Scott's remark that he possessed, "thanks to a strong memory," the information which other writers had "to seek for," the remark is nonetheless a little disingenuous: in a letter of late August 1816 Scott asked his publisher to send a series of relevant works so that he might refresh his knowledge of the Covenants;³⁰ on 15 January 1818 the publisher reported that Scott, preparing for *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, had asked for "all the tracts, pamphlets &c &c" on the Porteous riot that they could find,³¹ Scott requested relevant books when writing *Kenilworth*;³² before he began to work on *Anne of Geierstein* he asked Robert Cadell to find him various works on the history of Switzerland.³³ The novels are certainly grounded in his extensive reading in youth and early manhood, but he revisited key works just prior to writing, and, no doubt, restructured the memories of his reading in the process. In addition to the revision reading there are hints of revision *visits* such as that to Bothwell in July 1816 prior to starting *The Tale of Old Mortality*.³⁴ Cognitive psychologists would consider the restructuring as fundamental to what we consider creativity. There is abundant evidence that the literary and intellectual foundations of the Waverley Novels predate their inception by decades, but there also is clear evidence from the way in which Scott prepared, and from studies of how he

³⁰NLS MS 4001, f. 244; see also *Old Mortality*, pp. 361, 388.

³¹NLS MS 322, f. 288v; see also *Mid-Lothian*, p. 485.

³²*Letters*, VI, 265-6; see also *Kenilworth*, pp. 397, 428.

³³NLS MS 744, f. 195r; see also *Geierstein*, pp. 406-09, 444.

³⁴*Old Mortality*, p. 360.

treated his sources,³⁵ that in writing a novel he transforms long-acquired knowledge and experience.

Scott did indeed say, as I have already noted, "I never could lay down a plan," but when critics use that phrase by itself they usually take it out of context, for he continues: "or having laid it down I never could adhere to it." The self-correction is telling, and reveals that Scott did make plans. No plan for any novel is known to be extant, but that for *Rokeby* has survived: Scott sketches scenery in the country round Rokeby House; he notes features of the landscape, drafts a stanza, outlines aspects of the story.³⁶ There were probably written plans and sketches for other works. In the Introductory Epistle to *The Fortunes of Nigel* Scott (if it is he who ventriloquizes through Captain Clutterbuck) apparently repudiates planning: "I have repeatedly laid down my future work to scale, divided it into volumes and chapters, and endeavoured to construct a story which I meant should evolve itself gradually and strikingly."³⁷ However, while saying that he is unable to adhere to a plan he is admitting that he repeatedly planned his work, and when he says that he stayed at home on 5 December 1827 adjusting his ideas on *Saint Valentine's Day* (*Journal*, p. 390), what he was doing could probably be comprehended under the term "planning." He began to write on the 7th.

Once he began, Scott would aim to write at least three of his manuscript pages each day on which he had to attend to his official duties in the Court of Session which normally lasted from 10 a.m. to around 2, and six on days when he was free. He wrote seven days a week. After the financial crash and the death of his wife in 1826 he spent longer at his desk and wrote more. He wrote fast. He usually completed around a quarter to a third of the first volume before sending his manuscript leaves to be copied. The resultant batch of transcribed text became printer's copy, and was sent at once to the printing house to be typeset. Scott would thereafter send small batches regularly to the copyist, and the copyist turned in copy to the printer. The novels were not published serially, but that was the way in which they were written, and, like Dickens, he liked the pressure:

I cannot pull well in long traces [in] which the draught is too far behind me. I love to have the press thumping, clattering and banging in my rear—it creates the necessity [which] almost always makes me work best (*Journal*, p. 90; 15 February 1826).

³⁵See *Mid-Lothian*, pp. 585-94.

³⁶This manuscript is privately owned.

³⁷*Nigel*, p. 10.

The extraordinary fluency and coherence of the manuscripts suggest that in practice he knew where he was going. He very seldom reorders material. That he was continually thinking ahead can be seen in mistakes and in small changes made as he progressed. The identity of Lovel in *The Antiquary* is let slip in the last chapter of Volume I in both the manuscript and the first edition.³⁸ Verbal corrections made in manuscript of "Wandering Willie's Tale" indicate that the conclusion was already in his mind and that it was directing the adjustments he was making. Sir Robert Redgauntlet's dwelling is altered from being a "ha" to a "castle,"³⁹ presumably to accommodate the jackanapes and the Cat's Cradle, and "towers" is replaced by "turrets" in the phrase "the auld chimnies and turrets, where the howlets have their nests,"⁴⁰ which again anticipates the resolution of the story.⁴¹ Thus it can be argued that the conclusions of his novels were in his head as he began, and that the writing process created a direction which began to determine the outcome. He may have said that he did not have "the slightest idea how the story is to be wound up to a catastrophe," but this applies not to his knowledge of what the catastrophe was to be, but to the details of the way in which it was to be achieved.

On the other hand his own self-reporting stresses the unconscious, and uncontrolled elements in creation. He repeatedly expresses his belief that the act of writing cannot be regulated: "I doubt if men of method who can lay aside or take up the pen just at the hour appointed will ever be better than poor creatures" (*Journal*, p. 154; 4 June 1826). He found beginnings hard work: "Like the machinery of a steam engine the imagination does not work freely when first set upon a new task" (*Journal*, p. 375; 8 November 1827). He hated what he called "task-work" (*Journal*, p. 23; 1 December 1825), and repeatedly records a kind of waywardness which made him avoid the task in hand:

I would not write to-day after I came home—I will not say *could* not for it is not true. But I was lazy: felt the desire *far 'niente* which is a sign of one's mind being at ease (*Journal*, p. 82; 9 February 1826).

One might expect a slightly censorious tone; in fact the attitude is indulgent. He likes his wandering and dreamy mental habit, as though it were necessary to his writing. He suggests that following such a desire is a sign of his mind being "at ease." In February 1826 he had many causes for anxiety, but for him

³⁸*The Antiquary*, pp. 116, 410.

³⁹NLS Adv. MS 19.2.29, f. 54; *Redgauntlet*, p. 89.

⁴⁰f. 54v; *Redgauntlet*, p. 91.

⁴¹*Redgauntlet*, p. 382.

the evidence of being well adjusted is in being able to abandon the mind to its own governance without feeling anxious or guilty. Later he writes:

My indolence if I can call it so is of a capricious kind—it never makes me absolutely idle but very often inclines me, as it were from mere contradiction's sake, to exchange the task of the day for something which I am not obliged to do for the moment or perhaps not at all (*Journal*, p. 416; 16 January 1828).

Once more he seems to resist "from mere contradiction's sake" what the conscious mind deems necessary.

In fact to judge from such descriptions in the *Journal* the dreamy days are those in which he is developing new ideas:

From the 19 January to the 2d. february inclusive is exactly fifteen days during which time (with the intervention of some days' idleness to let imagination brood on the task a little) I have written a volume (*Journal*, p. 75; 3 February 1826).

A little later he says:

Yesterday I did not write a line of *Wood-k*. Partly I was a little out of spirits—though that would not have hindered—partly I wanted to wait for some new ideas—a sort of collecting of straw to make bricks of—partly I was a little too far beyond the press (*Journal*, p. 90; 15 February 1826).

The rhythm of composition involves intense activity followed by inactivity. The inactivity is partly related to how he feels, but also to an apparent need to think without consciously thinking, a kind of combination of therapy and creativity. The proverbial reference "straw to make bricks of" is used casually as though it were just a useful formulation, but as so often in Scott an examination of its source, in the Book of Exodus, shows that there is an underlying idea which strengthens the overt point: "And Pharaoh commanded the same day the taskmasters of the people, and their officers, saying, Ye shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as heretofore: let them go and gather straw for themselves."⁴² Scott cannot stand task work, i.e. work imposed by another or by an external necessity, and he wished to gather his own straw. By implication he, like the Israelites, is not lazy but is sacrificing to his god; he is going through a species of atonement from which he draws the imaginative energy to continue to write.

His representation of how solutions to particular problems come to him both indicates the importance of mental activity that is not conscious, or that he chooses not to be conscious of, and shows that they are followed by a burst of energy which launches him into new or further writing:

⁴²Exodus 5: 6-7.

The half-hour between waking and rising has all my life proved propitious to any task which was exercising my invention. When I get over any knotty difficulty in a story or have had in former times to fill up a passage in a poem it was always when I first open my eyes that the desired ideas thronged upon me. This is so much the case that I am in the habit of relying upon it and saying to myself when I am [at] a loss 'Never mind, we shall have it at seven o'clock tomorrow morning,' (*Journal*, p. 83; 10 February 1826).

His description of confronting problems in *Saint Valentine's Day* is yet more vivid. Like the more familiar passage in the Introductory Epistle to *The Fortunes of Nigel* it combines mental and physical detail with a metaphoric use of traditional motifs in proposing means of solving narrative problems:

Meantime I have had an *inspiration* this morning which shows me my good angel has not left me. For this two or three days I have been at what the *Critic* calls a deadlock—all my incidents and personages run into a gordian knot of confusion to which I could devise no possible extrication—I had thought on the subject several days with some[thing] like the despair which seized the fair princess commanded by her ugly step-mother to assort a whole garret full of tangled silk threads of every kind and colour when in comes prince Percinet with wand, whisks it over the miscellaneous mass, and lo! all the threads are as nicely arranged as in a seamstresses housewife. It has often happened to me that when I went to bed with my head as ignorant as my shoulders what I was to do next I have waked in the morning with a distinct and accurate conception of the mode, good or bad, in which the plot might be extricated. It seems to me that the action of the intellect on such occasions is rather accelerated by the little fever which an extra glass of wine produces in the system (*Journal*, p. 433; 24 February 1828).

Were this passage reformulated in Freudian terms we would talk of the activity of the unconscious mind, particularly in sleep, feeding the conscious. Nowadays the unconscious is understood rather as a metaphor than an entity, but, even so, it is apparent that Scott does not want to observe too precisely what he is doing, and that he wants to see his best writing as a product of mental activity of which he is not conscious. The stress on automatic creativity could be seen as image-creation, fashioning an idea of the creative artist from the head-note to "Kubla Khan" and elsewhere which would be recognizable to his contemporary readership. But Scott remarks too often on what happens in sleep for it just to be that; in the *Journal* he comments frequently on the phenomenon, so that either this is indeed what happened, or alternatively that he engineers the physiological rhythm which generates his best ideas. There is a grand incubation period in which the overall story is conceived; there are delimited incubation period in which particular problems are resolved, and where the solutions come as illumination and bursts of physical energy given overnight.

The final stage in Wallas's model of the creative process is *verification*. Scott repeatedly reread his work: he made many small corrections as he wrote;

he expanded ideas adding them on the versos of the preceding manuscript leaves, facing his main text; he went over the previous day's work before beginning afresh the next morning, and the additions on the versos are often ideas added the next day. He would be about half way through the first volume when he received the proofs of the first few gatherings, and he liked to preserve that gap. As the successive volumes of the EEWN make clear, in proof he undoubtedly attended to matters which were wrong, but he also tightened the narrative, and heightened the dialogue. The process of verification, then, becomes the process which produces the expansion of characters and the multiplication of incidents;⁴³ it becomes part of the composition of a novel. And this is not just because in rereading and in correcting proofs he adds material. The proofs of earlier parts of a novel came in half a volume behind where he was in manuscript. He had a remarkable grasp of what he had written: when Darsie addresses Lilius by name towards the end of *Redgauntlet*,⁴⁴ Ballantyne wrote in the proofs: "By the bye, how came he to know her name at all?" to which Scott replied: "Redgauntlet introduced her p. 103. See also Vo[l. I] p. 289."⁴⁵ He must have had proofs beside him to provide the reference, but most readers find it difficult to locate passages even when they know a novel well. Scott, then, had an unusual awareness of what he had written, and he used this awareness to direct the development of the text. Going over what he had written became a preparation for what was to come. Reading the proofs maintained his sense of direction, the past, so to speak, providing for the future.

Romantic ideology promoted the idea of inspiration as the source of poetry, and Scott, like Coleridge and Shelley, professed himself an enemy to correction, because it might subdue the inspiration: "in the irksome task of repeated revision and reconsideration, the poet loses...the impulse of inspiration,"⁴⁶ wrote Scott in a review of Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming*. And yet Scott revised and corrected, almost obsessively. There is a tension, then, between the stress on automatic creativity (whether this is in sleep, in daydreaming, or in a surrender to the activity of writing), and the actual circumstances of composition, where it can be seen that there is much in his practice that can only be considered deliberate thought. It may be that he never reconciled the two ways of thinking about himself—the Romantic poet figure versus the professional writer. On the other hand, the opposition of inspiration and correc-

⁴³*Nigel*, p. 10.

⁴⁴*Redgauntlet*, p. 269.

⁴⁵*Redgauntlet* proof, Vol. 3, p. 115; the proofs are in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

⁴⁶*Prose Works*, XVII, 288.

tion may well be a reformulation of Pope's observation that "wit and judgment often are at strife,"⁴⁷ when an examination of Scott's practice suggests that an organic metaphor would be more appropriate: if what has already been written is the source and nutrient for a developing work of art, then a novel becomes a plant that grows.

Scott knew that his journal would be read by others; in not keeping one, he says in the very first sentence, "I have myself lost recollection of much that was interesting and I have deprived my family and the public of some curious information" (*Journal*, p. 1; 20 November 1825). He set out to be honest with himself, but the sense of an audience must have been inhibiting, at least to some extent. Some hints of this appear. On 11 December 1826, Scott, recovering from an indisposition, remarks that he "must take no more frisks till this fit is over," and then quotes Burns:

When once life's day draws near the gloaming
The farewell careless social roaming
And farewell jolly tankards foaming
And frolic noise
And farewell dear deluding woman
The joy of joys.⁴⁸

Long life to thy fame and peace to thy soul, Rob Burns. When I want to express a sentiment which I feel strongly, I find the phrase in Shakespeare or thee (*Journal*, pp. 251-2).

Obviously Scott finds these words, originally addressed to James Smith, apposite in that they lament social pleasures of which he is deprived by illness. They are also apposite in that they lament the passage of life, and the pleasures to which the young are accustomed. It is true that Scott finds quotations to apply to his situation, and indeed to situations created in his fiction, most often in the work of Shakespeare, and of Burns, and he uses their words, as others use the Bible, as a source of formulated and applicable wisdom. But there is another subtext to this passage. Burns is the writer who offered Scott the most alluring model: ardent Scotsman, natural artist with words, drinker, lover, but he was also the writer whom Scott could not afford to emulate. It is not that Scott did not participate in the activities for which Burns was notorious; he met an old friend at a dinner party on 4 March 1828 and describes him as a "boon-companion with whom I shared the wars of Bacchus, Venus and sometimes of Mars" (*Journal*, p. 437). The climate of opinion prevented the choice of Burns

⁴⁷Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), Part 1, line 82.

⁴⁸Robert Burns, "To J. S****" [James Smith], in *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock, 1786), p. 73.

as a model, yet the quotation from the "Epistle to James Smith" indicates Scott's attraction to it. If, then, it can be discerned that for all its irregularity the *Journal* constructs a more deliberate persona than Scott wishes to make out, it could be argued that Scott's description of the process of writing is designed to create an idea of what the great writer will be like. In fact it is inevitable, even in an unsystematic work like the *Journal*, that there must be an element of personality construction. But this does not make the picture false; it merely requires the reader to be wary, to be mistrustful.

The most endlessly fascinating of all the many works on the poet and poetry is *Biographia Literaria*, because of its extraordinary blend of personal story, disquisition, meditation, practical criticism, all bound together by the most evocative descriptions of mental activity. Scott may never have represented a movement of thought or feeling with the delicate precision of Coleridge, but he tells us more about the way he worked than any other writer of the Romantic period. He is acute on mental processes. He discusses the impact of external pressures on creativity. The immense documentation allows us to see patterns of work which illuminate our understanding of creative activity. All in all, this evidence tell us much about the Waverley Novels, but it also reveals to us a Scott who is infinitely more intelligent and observant about the creative process than any critic has previously recognized. Scott is the Coleridge of creative prose.

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