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Richard E. Johnson

## The Technique of Embedding in Scott's Fiction



The charge of repetitiousness--of always writing the same novel, with the same set of character types, over and over again--has been laid against Scott ever since his contemporary, the Reverend Sydney Smith, pointed it out in his admiring but candid letters to Constable as each new Waverley novel came from the press.<sup>1</sup> The charge is, of course, to a certain extent true. That contributes to, rather than detracting from, the probability that we can learn from paying serious attention to the characteristic patterns and devices Scott used in constructing his narratives.

One of the most interesting structural devices in both novels and poems is the technique of embedding--that is, of inserting one poem into another, or a poem into a prose fiction, or one story into another. Of all his works, *The Bridal of Triermain* is perhaps the most perfect example of Scott's use of this technique. Published anonymously in 1813 as a supposed imitation of Scott's style, this short poem (only three cantos long) contains three separate though closely inter-related stories. The outermost story, set in the present, consists of the monologue of Arthur, a young poet, to Lucy, his beloved and, by the third canto, his bride. To her he sings the legendary story of the "bridal" of the Baron of Triermain to Gyneth, an illegitimate daughter of King Arthur. This, the first embedded story, occurs in the early middle

middle ages. Within it is set yet another story, the purely mythical one of Gyneth's birth and subsequent enchantment by Merlin.

The primary interest of the embedding in this poem is the inter-relationship it implies between the three times in which the three stories occur--the present, when Arthur is wooing Lucy; the legendary past, when Roland of Triermain went in quest of his bride; and, finally, what we might call the "mythic" past of Arthurian romance. Of these relationships, that between the present and both of the two pasts is the easiest to explain: it is one of simple analogy. Lucy entertains some compunctions about marrying Arthur, evidently because she is of higher rank than he. Gyneth's story acts as a remonstrance against Lucy's reluctance, since Gyneth was enchanted as a punishment for disdain to marry any of her suitors, all of whom she considered beneath her. When Roland of Triermain, by his prowess and merit, is able to rescue her from enchantment and claim her for his bride, the intimation is clearly that even so the worthy Arthur should receive his reward.

The relation between the two pasts is more significant. A paradigm of Scott's treatment of this relation can be drawn from the story of Roland's quest for his bride. The Baron is unable to find a satisfactory bride in his own time. Hearing the story of Gyneth and her enchantment, he determines to win her. On certain rare occasions the enchanted castle in which she lies sleeping appears in the Vale of St John, and there, after watching long, the Baron finally sees and enters it. Having passed various tests of courage, ingenuity, and virtue, he awakens Gyneth with a kiss. The enchantment broken, the castle disappears. Gyneth and the Baron find themselves back in the Vale of St John and are, presumably, married.

The paradigm may be stated thus: A figure from the historical past, dissatisfied with his own environment, makes a journey into the mythic past. After a series of adventures, he re-enters the historical past, bringing back with him something out of the mythic past. As a result, the historic past is transformed and the hero is reconciled to his environment; but the mythic past is destroyed.

The nature and position of the hero are two of the paradigm's crucial features. As most studies of the Waverley novels have pointed out, Scott's heroes tend to be "transparent" characters, of either moderate or easily swayed political opinions. They almost unanimously are not the most striking figures in the narrative, those positions being reserved for persons embodying extremist allegiances and principles. If there is a conflict in the novel, the hero has sympathies with both sides but is identifiable with neither.<sup>2</sup> Edward Waverley is a typical example. Born the son of a Whig politician,

raised by his Tory and vaguely Jacobitic uncle, he receives his commission in the army without having any firm allegiance to the Hanoverian succession. In joining the army of the Pretender, he acts more out of resentment at being deprived of his commission, friendship for Fergus and love for Flora MacIvor, than from a conviction of the justice of the Jacobite cause. Other heroes taking middle positions in their novels come readily to mind: Henry Morton, a political and religious moderate, driven into an uncomfortable alliance with the assassins of Archbishop Sharp; Frank Osbaldistone, caught between his father's desire for him to become a merchant and his own eagerness to live as a poet and "gentleman"; Darsie Latimer, a lawyer by training but infected with wanderlust; or Edgar Ravenswood, torn between traditional family loyalties and his love for Lucy, the daughter of his father's relentless foe.

The reason Scott uses this kind of hero is clear from the context of the paradigm as a whole. The hero must be capable of changing as a result of his journey into the mythic past and his retrieval of some part of it. Scott gives him this capacity by keeping his allegiances flexible until the end of the novel.

Three features of the paradigm--the unsatisfactory environment, the hero's experiences with the mythic past, and the nature of his final reconciliation with his context--can be discussed jointly, using *Rob Roy* as a focus. Frank Osbaldistone repudiates his father's plans to train him up as a merchant because, to his idealistic mind, the life of a merchant must of necessity be reasonable and practical, and therefore unromantic, mundane, and boring. As a result of his estrangement, Frank is sent to the north of England, then to Glasgow, and finally ventures into the Highlands. During his experiences there with the romantic past, two things occur which transform his views: Die Vernon's ridicule of his verses (just as severe as his father's and even more mortifying), and his encounter with Bailie Jarvie, the lively Glasgow merchant. These, together with his eye-witness experience of the viciousness of the "romantic" Highlands, disenchant him with his false idealism and convince him of the superiority of the rational, practical life. When Frank returns to Glasgow, he submits himself to his father and finally is rewarded with the hand of Diana Vernon. Frank Osbaldistone, Edward Waverley, and Darsie Latimer all run the same basic course. Each is brought up with his own inclinations given free rein. As a result, when called to a responsible position in society (as merchant, soldier, or lawyer), he rebels or is found unfit. Consequently, each has a series of adventures which first disillusion him with a romantic life and then per-

suade him to a practical, useful life. He is thus reconciled to his society and assumes the life for which his birth and education qualify him.

The hero's final reconciliation with society is made possible by two things--his own change, and the fact that the society offered to him at the end of the novel is no longer the simple *status quo* it was at the beginning. The hero brings back into the historical past some element retrieved from the mythic past and so is able to match his own inner transformation with a transformed environment.<sup>3</sup> The Baron of Triermain brings back a bride; Waverley marries and settles on the restored Tully-Veolan estate; Frank Osbaldistone inherits a title and Osbaldistone Hall; Darsie Latimer finds a family and an identity. By these simple plot devices Scott suggests the rejuvenating influence of the past on the present.

For the paradigm's final feature--the destruction of the mythic past after the hero's experience with it--a simple explanation can be found in terms of overall novelistic structure. A Scott hero, in moving from place to place, context to context, also journeys between the "historical" and "mythic" pasts. A journey from London or Edinburgh ("the city") is a journey out of the historic past; an adventure into the Highlands is an encounter with the mythic past; leaving the Highlands means re-entering the historic past. Structurally, the mythic past is embedded in the center of the story, and once the hero's adventures in it are over, the context of those adventures naturally disappears from view. But this explanation is far from adequate, if only because something rather more drastic than a mere "disappearance from view" happens to the mythic past. The castle in *The Bridal of Triermain* literally disappears; the world of Fergus MacIvor is annihilated. The senior branch of the Osbaldistone family, Jacobites all, is lopped off; and in *Redgauntlet*, the Pretender returns to France and the Jacobite cause dies forever. Not only does the mythic past vanish from sight--there is no longer a mythic past to be seen.<sup>4</sup>

The only explanation is a symbolic one. The whole point of a story by Scott is to make the hero repudiate his initial submission to the bypassed values of the romantic past. When some of the past survives into the present, its effect is to rejuvenate and enrich. This is why the hero is allowed to retrieve some element from his adventures in the mythic past. But if the past becomes master of the present, it disables. This is why the past in a novel by Scott must be destroyed. The hero must free himself from living by the values of the past, since they prevent him from fulfilling his duties in the present. Allegiance to the mythic past must be destroyed in his mind, and destruction of the mythic past is an objective

correlative for the destruction of the values associated with it in the mind of the hero. It symbolizes the final victory in the hero of reason over romanticism.

Two of Scott's novels, *Old Mortality* and *The Bride of Lammermoor*, may seem to present counter-instances to the form of the paradigm as I have discussed it. Whereas *Waverley*, *Rob Roy*, *Redgauntlet*, etc., are all comedies in that they terminate with reconciliation and marriage, *Old Mortality* and *The Bride* are tragedies. There are no reconciliations, no symbolic marriages here. Henry Morton ends in exile (I follow most of Scott's critics in adopting this point as the true conclusion of the novel, viewing the subsequent story of Morton's return, and especially "the author's" final explanation to Miss Buskbody, as a tacked-on happy ending discontinuous with the logical development of the story);<sup>5</sup> Edgar Ravenswood perishes in the Solway Sands. Yet these novels can be viewed as variations on the form of the paradigm, not as negations of it, for in each the tragic ending is produced simply by changing one feature of the paradigm itself. With *Old Mortality*, the change is in the nature of Morton's context. As Scott normally uses the paradigm, the hero's original context is presented as, though not perfect, yet essentially sound, and the novel educates the hero into accepting it rationally. But all of the factions in the political-religious conflict which makes Henry Morton's context are clearly diseased. Morton is a rational man from the very beginning. His problem is not having any context that a rational man can identify himself with, and so there can be no final reconciliation in the novel. The changed feature in *The Bride of Lammermoor* is again the absence of a rational context. Edgar temporarily tries to make peace with Sir William Ashton by espousing himself to Lucy, but Lady Ashton destroys this contract, leaving Edgar only desperation and death. Both these novels thus embody the dilemma of an essentially rational man trying to survive in an irrational context. Furthermore, they both directly uphold the paradigm's implication of the necessity of rejecting "romanticism" in favor of reason. Morton is exiled because his society is irrational. Ravenswood is destroyed by the "romantic past" of ancient loyalties and prejudices. Rather than rising above it, he is victimized by it.

Several conclusions about Scott's theory of history can be drawn from my discussion of this paradigm. One is that for Scott the historical contexts in which men act are themselves the products of other historical contexts.<sup>6</sup> *Waverley*, for example, acts in the conflict of 1745, which is an outgrowth of the Hanoverian succession of 1714, the Revolution of 1688, etc. The "historical past," growing out of and containing the "mythic past," is that which the present grows out of and con-

tains. Likewise, the present is continually in the process of becoming the past and so is the history out of which the future will grow. What is present in *Waverley* is past in *Redgauntlet*. History may thus be interpreted as a continuous process of embedding one time period into another.

Because the present is the creation of the past, history is a process from which no one can escape. This is one reason why almost all of Scott's novels, even though like *Guy Mannerling* or *The Antiquary* or *St Ronan's Well* they may seem to be "unhistorical," nonetheless have specific historical contexts.<sup>7</sup> It is Scott's recognition that there is no present without the past, that whatever men do is embedded in the unfolding process of history.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, one point of the paradigm is that though each man in his individual circumstances is a product of history, he may, by the exercise of reason, rise above its control. Reason may lead a Scott hero to accept his historical context if it also is reasonable or to reject it if it is not (the latter is the case with Morton and Ravenswood). In this sense, we may speak of man, in Scott's terms, as a rational creature embedded within possibly alien historical contexts.

We may further deduce from the paradigm a limited adherence on Scott's part to a doctrine of progress. For Scott, events in history normally constitute not only an organically-related but a rationally-ordered sequence.<sup>9</sup> Each new present born from its historical past is an improvement over that past and will in turn be improved upon by the future that grows from it. This is represented by the hero's rejection of the romantic past and his acceptance of his present context. In Scott's novels, Jacobite uprisings fail not only because history books say they did, but because they deserve to fail. They are regressive attempts to impose the tyranny of the past onto the present. (This is not the same as asserting that the Stuarts deserved to be exiled in the first place. That is another question.) Most of the *Waverley* novels express Scott's faith that out of historical conflict and movement is continually born something superior.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that I have been able to state these three conclusions in general terms indicates the fourth and final one. For Scott, our present use of history is analogical. Men may profit from past analogies to present situations. I have already cited the example of Arthur the poet in *The Bridal of Triermain*; Scott's general desire in the historical novels to teach his reader through the presentation of a fictional story in the past is additional evidence. Just as the hero is educated by encountering the mythic past, so the reader is educated by encountering the historical past in a novel by Scott.

All this represents in fully developed form what is clearly

present in Scott in embryo at least as early as 1802, when he published the ballad of "Thomas the Rhymer" (*Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, II, 251; Child 37). In addition to printing the traditional ballad itself, Scott added a continuation consisting of his own "alterations: of prophecies ascribed to Thomas of Erceldoune and also unabashedly composed, out of his own fund of inspiration, a conclusion describing Thomas's mysterious disappearance at the summons of the Queen of Elfland. When the ballad itself as printed by Scott is compared with the two other versions printed by Child, it seems possible that in it, too, Scott's hand was at work, altering or composing.

"True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank," when he saw approaching him the Queen of Elfland. She carries him off, not into the historical or mythic past, but into Elfland. Up to this point, Scott's version agrees in basics with Child's other versions. What is new in Scott's (coming possibly from his own hand) is the Queen's gift to Thomas, as the "wages" of his journey, of "the tongue that can never lie." When Thomas returns to earth after a seven years' absence, he uses his gift of soothsaying by making the prophecies traditionally ascribed to him. He returns from Elfland as poet and prophet.

Here is the basic narrative we find again and again in Scott's own productions: The hero leaves "the earth" (his normal, mundane context), enters "Elfland" (the place of changed values), and returns with a "gift" which both transforms his relation to "the earth" and helps define his role in it. True Thomas's experiences in Elfland are prelude to his real career as prophet on earth. For him, as for Roland of Triermain, Frank Osbaldistone, Darsie Latimer, and all the long pageant of Scott heroes who venture away from the ordinary world, the place where values are different is valuable primarily as it enriches the present and enables the hero to live in his own time and place.

*Cincinnati County Day School*

#### NOTES

1. See the generous sampling of Smith's letters in *Scott: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John O. Hayden (New York, 1970), especially pp. 173ff.

2. Georg Lukács, in *The Historical Novel*, trans. H. and S. Mitchell (London, 1962), says that the hero's task is "to



bring the extremes whose struggle fills the novel, whose clash expresses artistically a great crisis in society, into contact with one another" (36).

3. David Daiches, in "Sir Walter Scott and History" (*Études Anglaises*, XXIV<sup>e</sup> Année, N<sup>o</sup> 4), isolated as one of Scott's central interests how "earlier codes of honour cease to be viable and . . . the degree to which anything can be salvaged for the future from those earlier codes" (459). F. R. Hart, in *Scott's Novels: The Plotting of Historic Survival* (Charlottesville, Va., 1966), says that the persistent question in the Waverley novels is "how to stabilize the present by redeeming the past" (338).

4. Jill Rubenstein, in "The Dilemma of History: A Reading of Scott's *Bridal of Triermain*" (*Studies in English Literature* 12), writes: "Contemporary man lacks a quality of romance, imagination, or perhaps credulity that would permit him to see the enchanted castle. This quality had markedly diminished even by Sir Roland's time, and it has totally disappeared in the late eighteenth century of the frame story" (725).

5. Angus Calder, in his introduction to *Old Mortality* (Baltimore, 1975), recognizes the "happy ending" explanation but offers this alternative to it: ". . . in fact this strange final movement is essential. Scotland must be shown as a country in which the epic mode of life is now, for better or worse, impossible . . . this state of affairs is what the Glorious Revolution (in Scott's view) achieved" (39).

6. Cf. Leslie Stephen, *Hours in a Library* (New York, 1907): "Scott was really the first imaginative observer who saw distinctly how the national type of character is the product of past history, and embodies all the great social forces by which it has slowly shaped itself" (I, 224).

7. Hart offers this explanation: "I conclude that history is often essential as a limiting cultural condition, often essential as a major threat to the natural stabilities of human character and society, always essential as the occasion for a crisis of cultural continuity and an ordeal of personal identity" (335).

8. What Donald Cameron says of *The Bride of Lammermoor* in "The Web of Destiny: The Structure of *The Bride of Lammermoor*," in *Scott's Mind and Art*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (New York, 1970), provides an interesting parallel here: ". . . a spectre or a soothsayer, or even a tradition, tells an indi-

vidual that to proceed along his current path will be disastrous, but the character is imprisoned by the actions he has already carried out and by his own nature" (188). Cameron notes concerning the individual exactly what I am arguing for concerning moments in history generally.

9. Rubenstein notes that the simple lapse of time brings reformation in Gyneth and Lucy (727). This is in a way symbolic of a doctrine of progress.

10. I am well aware of the complexity of Scott's attitude to "progress," symbolized by the very fact that the "feudal" manor at Abbotsford was one of the first houses in Scotland to be lit by gas (*The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson [Oxford, 1972], 4, note 1). As Hugh Trevor-Roper has pointed out in "Sir Walter Scott and History" (*The Listener*, Vol. 86, 19 August 1971), Scott's general approval of modern Scotland in no way implied a scorn of past cultures: "Admitting the advantage, or necessity, of progress, he nevertheless sought to appreciate a different form of society within its own historical context: to allow that the past is autonomous, that it is not to be judged by the present, that its values are its own and, having their own coherence, are as legitimate as ours" (228). In this respect, his view of progress was, as Trevor-Roper shows, markedly different from the received opinion of the eighteenth-century "philosophical historians"--Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Robertson.