1978

The Technique of Embedding in Scott's Fiction

Richard E. Johnson

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.[1] The charge is, of course, to a certain ex-
tent true. That contributes to, rather than detracting from,
the probability that we can learn from paying serious atten-
tion 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 fic-
tion, 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 "myth-
ic" 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 remon-
strance against Lucy's reluctance, since Gyneth was enchanted
as a punishment for disdaining to marry any of her suitors,
all of whom she considered beneath her. When Roland of Trier-
main, by his prowess and merit, is able to rescue her from en-
chantment and claim her for his bride, the intimation is clear-
ly 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 histor-
ical past, dissatisfied with his own environment, makes a jour-
ney 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 para-
digm's crucial features. As most studies of the Waverley
novels have pointed out, Scott's heroes tend to be "transpar-
ent" 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.[2] 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 as-
sassins of Archbishop Sharp; Frank Osbaldistone, caught be-
tween his father's desire for him to become a merchant and his
own eagerness to live as a poet and "gentleman"; Darsie Lati-
mer, 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 environ-
ment, 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 Osbaldi-
stone repudiates his father's plans to train him up as a
merchant because, to his idealistic mind, the life of a mer-
chant must of necessity be reasonable and practical, and there-
fore 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 mortify-
ing), and his encounter with Bailie Jarvie, the lively
Glasgow merchant. These, together with his eye-witness expe-
rience of the viciousness of the "romantic" Highlands, disen-
chant him with his false idealism and convince him of the
superiority of the rational, practical life. When Frank re-
turns 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 possi-
ble by two things--his own change, and the fact that the soci-
ety 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 transforma-
tion with a transformed environment.[3] The Baron of Triermain
brings back a bride; Waverley marries and settles on the re-
stored 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 ex-
planation can be found in terms of overall novelistic struc-
ture. 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 High-
lands is an encounter with the mythic past; leaving the High-
lands 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 explana-
tion 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 annihi-
lated. 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.[4]

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 termi-
nate 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 Busk-
body, as a tacked-on happy ending discontinuous with the logi-
cal development of the story);[5] 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 fea-
ture 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 edu-
cates 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.[6] 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 fu-
ture 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 Manner-
ing* or *The Antiquary* or *St Ronan's Well* they may seem to be
"unhistorical," nonetheless have specific historical contexts.[7]
It is Scott's recognition that there is no present without the
past, that whatever men do is embedded in the unfolding pro-
cess of history.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10]

    The fact that I have been able to state these three conclu-
sions 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 al-
ready 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 edu-
cated by encountering the mythic past, so the reader is edu-
cated 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 Elf-
land.   When the ballad itself as printed by Scott is compared
with the two other versions printed by Child, it seems pos-
sible 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*, XXIVe Année, N⁰ 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 paralleled here: ". . . a spectre or a soothsayer, or even a tradition, tells an indi-

vidual that to proceed along his current path will be disas-
trous, 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 sym-
bolic 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: "Admit-
ting 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.