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*Margaret Movshin Criscuola*

Originality, Realism and Morality:  
Three Issues in Sir Walter Scott's  
Criticism of Fiction



Ioan Williams, in his admirable edition of *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*,<sup>1</sup> has done readers of Scott a great service. Scott's prefaces to *Ballantyne's Novelist's Library*, later published separately as *The Lives of the Novelists*, and the best of his reviews of contemporary tales, now may be puzzled through in convenience. This reader has become convinced in the process that Scott had a more consistent theory of fiction than he is usually given credit for, perhaps because it is more closely related to the thought of his Enlightenment predecessors than to that of his Romantic contemporaries. The aim of this paper is to tease out of Scott's multifarious criticism some of its underlying assumptions.

The enterprise may seem quixotic, for although Scott's critical judgment is frequently praised, its good qualities are traced generally to a temperamental rather than an intellectual origin, and so placed beyond our analysis or emulation. Williams dubs Sir Walter "a practical rather than a theoretical critic,"<sup>2</sup> and concludes that "temperamental inadequacy...prevented him, in spite of his capacity to perceive the practical aspects of a work of art, from making any major advance in the theory of the novel" (Williams, p. 6). Margaret Ball covered in her study of *Sir Walter Scott as a Critic of Literature*<sup>3</sup> the wide range of Scott's work as editor and biographer of Swift and Dryden, folklorist, and critic of poetry as well as of fiction, but made no attempt to test its logical coherence. John Lauber, noting that Scott's criticism of novels "surpasses, in both quantity and importance, the work of any previous or contemporary critic of fiction,"<sup>4</sup>

points out the difficulties Scott's statements raise in his seemingly philistine value for novelty, separation of plot and character, weakness in dealing with technique, and rejection of the moral importance of the novel. Still it seems worthwhile to seek the principles, unformalized as they are, behind the "balance and moderation" (Williams, p. 11), "large fresh sanity,"<sup>5</sup> "flexible...application of catholic...taste, qualities rare in the partisan and dogmatic periodical criticism of the time,"<sup>6</sup> and too rare at any time not to have had some foundation in theory. Besides, the work of Duncan Forbes<sup>7</sup> on Scott's intellectual antecedents in the school of the Scottish Enlightenment suggests new sources of analogous theory to assist this investigation. And in Scott's criticism (barring his comments in prefaces to the *Waverley Novels*, spoken "according to the trick" and unreliable for present purposes) we do find recurring terms which mark central issues. Originality and variety; human nature, romance, and novel; and morality: Scott returns to these again and again.

Let us begin as Scott usually does with originality--a "rare and valuable property" (Williams, p. 77) which he seldom fails to assess in the novelists who come under his scrutiny. He grants it to Henry McKenzie because "the sources to which he resorts to excite our interest are rendered accessible by a path peculiarly his own" (Williams, p. 77); that is, he attains the "pathetic effect" he shares with Richardson and Sterne by a new method: "the reader's sympathy is excited by the effect produced on one [character] of the drama," rather than by Richardson's "combination of minutely traced events" or Sterne's "wild, fanciful, beautiful flight of thought and expression" (Williams, p. 78). The pursuit of new effects is also original; for Ann Radcliffe invents a new "species of romance" by "an appeal...to the passion of fear, whether excited by natural dangers, or by the suggestions of superstition" (Williams, p. 110). In these and other such comments, form appears as the first measure of originality, and Scott speaks of a novelist's originality much as he did of Swift's:

There was indeed nothing before his time which could serve for his model, and the few hints which he has adopted from other writers bear no more resemblance to his compositions than the green flax to the cable which is formed from it.<sup>8</sup>

Scott frankly couples originality with providing a formal model to later authors when he describes Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* as "the original and model of a peculiar species of composition" (Williams, p. 87) and refers testily to Mrs. Radcliffe's many imitators (Williams, p. 111).

Scott equated originality with the invention of a new "species" or "style" or "variety"--the terms are used synonymously--of composition. Williams has noted that Scott was "remarkably free in his approach to work of 'kinds' which would or would not have been recognized by earlier and more schematic critics" (Williams, p. 17). Scott had good reason to welcome new species of prose fiction; it was obviously a new and rapidly growing genre in which he himself was a leading innovator. The publication of *Ballantyne's Novelist's Library* itself may be seen as an attempt to preserve examples of peculiar kinds of fiction as a record of the growth of the genre. Scott's enthusiasm for new varieties may also have had a more strictly theoretical basis; at least, it strongly resembles the ideas of Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Genius* which appeared the year before Scott's birth. Gerard, following Hume's associative psychology, held that the characteristic quality of genius was invention or originality, which is to be seen not in perfection of work, but in the creation of "some new work, different from those of his predecessors, though not perhaps excelling them..."<sup>9</sup> Scott agrees with Gerard in finding the introduction of a new literary kind the true yardstick by which to measure genius.

Scott shows his interest in new species of fiction in three distinct ways. First, he believes a critic must understand the kind of a work, even when the work is first of its kind, to evaluate it fairly. Defending Ann Radcliffe's Gothic romance, he attacks the criticism

which would undermine the fair name of an accomplished writer, by showing that she does not possess the excellence proper to a style of composition totally different from that which she has attempted. The question is neither, whether the romances of Mrs. Radcliffe possess merits which her plan did not require, nay, almost excluded; nor whether hers is to be considered as a department of fictitious composition, equal in dignity and importance to those where the great ancient masters have long pre-occupied the ground. The real and only point is, whether, considered as a separate and distinct species of writing, that introduced by Mrs. Radcliffe possesses merit, and affords pleasure....(Williams, p. 112)

This statement stands in firm opposition to criticism by pre-established kinds. Scott's practice is to deduce from the works he inspects their general aims and methods and to use these as standards for judging all aspects of the works--a

delicate procedure which any 'new Critic' can appreciate. Aware of her purpose after candid reading, he can praise the way Radcliffe's "materials...and the means employed in conducting the narrative, are all selected with a view to the author's primary object" (Williams, p. 114). He can even detect elements which mar the effect, such as the author's own "rule...that all the circumstances of her narrative, however mysterious, and apparently superhuman, were to be accounted for on natural principles, at the winding up of the story" (Williams, p. 115). Previously accepted norms and even injudicious standards erected by the author should, Scott believes, give way to the attainment of an effect upon the reader.

Since each kind has its own effect, the proliferation of kinds represents an enlarging of readers' possibilities; thus the genre becomes adapted to the tastes of more and more diverse readers. Scott judges Radcliffe's works ultimately on whether they "afford pleasure," and in the same spirit he accepts their unconventionality because "the infinite variety of human tastes requires different styles of composition for their gratification" (Williams, p. 112; cf. pp. 77 and 124). Here is no single human nature, no ideal reader, but instead many ordinary mortals who are to enjoy the works the critic discusses, and whose actual experience is far more important than his judgments. The critic's task is to see what is there, to point out, for instance, the gloomy tone of Charlotte Smith's works, realizing that it "may be a recommendation, or the contrary, as it affects readers of various temperaments, or the same reader in a different mood of mind" (Williams, p. 188). Behind this "practical" acceptance of the diversity of readers lies a Humean belief in common mental processes diversified by particular experiences, which enable people to share in great works of universal appeal and also to enjoy peculiar literary experiences without being necessarily corrupt or degenerate.

The second form of Scott's interest in variety is an appreciation of diversity for its own sake. He states:

We...behold, that not only each star differs from another in glory, but that there is spread over the face of Nature a boundless variety; and that as a thousand different kinds of shrubs and flowers, not only have beauties independent of each other, but are more delightful from that very circumstance than if they were uniform, so the fields of literature admit the same variety....(Williams, p. 112)

Nowhere does Scott differ more from modern critics than in this love of variety. It leads him to what would now be considered a preposterous comparison of Smollett with Fielding,

in which Fielding's "superior taste" is balanced or even outweighed by the "more inexhaustible richness of invention" of Smollett:

In comparison with his sphere, that in which Fielding walked was limited, and compared with the wealthy profusion of varied character and incident which Smollett has scattered through his works, there is a poverty of composition about his rival. (Williams, p. 66)

Here again Scott seconds Gerard, who found "comprehensiveness of imagination" the first quality of genius, so that a "work of real genius always proclaims...that immense quantities of materials have been collected by fancy, and subjected to the author's choice."<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly, Scott as an historian of prose fiction evidently saw in diversity a principle of growth. He does not describe the novel's history as a gradual discovery of a single set of formal possibilities, although he traces the methods of individual authors back to their origins, noting LeSage's debt to Cervantes (Williams, p. 120), Smollett's to LeSage (Williams, p. 57), and Jane Austen's rich inheritance from their school of realism (Williams, p. 230). Instead, his overviews of the genre most frequently take the form of classifications. For instance, in a review of works of E. T. A. Hoffman, Scott categorizes the uses of the supernatural in fiction, differentiating among a variety of authors' peculiar effects, and displaying the original points of each. Throughout the *Lives of the Novelists*, Scott sees the work of his eighteenth-century forebears as a host of inventions, great and small, some incompatible with others, but all comprising a range of possibilities wider and richer than a single form could offer. The social thought of the Scottish moralists was dominated by the idea of social progress through an ever-increasing specialization and division of labor.<sup>11</sup> Scott has brought a similar idea into the discussion of literature: the genre grows by diversifying.

Originality and variety--the terms seem to lead Scott's criticism toward complete relativism and confusion. They are, however, tied to another which Scott can invoke as a standard; for he links true originality and invention with a "knowledge of the human heart" or of "human nature," with "the accurate power of examining and embodying human character and human passion, as well as the external face of nature" (Williams, p. 67). What this knowledge may be we will consider in a moment. First it is important to note Scott's conviction that it resulted from the work of intellect, not from feeling or

intuition. He makes this point firmly and fully in his account of Dryden's genius, which he saw distinguished by "the power of reasoning, and of expressing the result in appropriate language."<sup>12</sup> Scott held that

This power of ratiocination, of investigating, discovering, and appreciating that which is really excellent, if accompanied with the necessary command of fanciful illustration, and elegant expression, is the most interesting quality which can be possessed by a poet.<sup>13</sup>

Expression and illustration are merely "extrinsic qualities" of poetry; the "vivifying spirit" by which readers are affected is supplied by the intellectual "powers of observation and deduction"<sup>14</sup> of the poet, which are exactly identical to "the talents that led Bacon into the recesses of philosophy, and conducted Newton to the cabinet of Nature."<sup>15</sup> Alexander Gerard, too, found no difference in kind between the faculty "for producing original works of art" and that "for making new discoveries in science...."<sup>16</sup> By the time the *Life of Dryden* was published, Lockhart's notes to a later edition show, this idea had become, to an English reviewer at least, quite incomprehensible;<sup>17</sup> yet Scott pronounces it unhesitatingly and matter-of-factly. And this conception of poetic power as the power of reasoning from observation helps us make sense of Scott's otherwise bewildering liberality in the matter of "human nature."

Scott considered the most diverse fictions as revealing knowledge of humanity, and the knowledge assumes as many forms as there were forms of fiction. Richardson was "a cautious, deep, and minute examiner of the human heart," (Williams, p. 40) as were Sterne and Mackenzie; Fielding achieved "the extended familiarity with the English character, in every rank and aspect, which has made his name immortal as a painter of national manners" (Williams, p. 46); Smollett understood professional character, and was also "a searcher of dark bosoms" (Williams, p. 67). Robert Bage and Mary Shelley explore human thought; John Galt and William Godwin delve into superstition and extraordinary mental states and so create the "novel of character" (Williams, p. 299). Even works such as Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* which employ supernatural machinery may still provide an "accurate display of human character" (Williams, p. 85). And reviewing his own *Old Mortality* and *The Black Dwarf*, the Author of Waverley finds that their "delineation of the manners and characters" of past times, and "faithful representation of general nature" earn their author a place "on the bench of the historians of his time and coun-

try" (Williams, p. 256). In fact, the many kinds of "knowledge of human nature" which Scott found in the fiction he reviewed, and which we would now classify as psychology, social psychology, sociology, and ethics, in his day formed the single study of "moral philosophy." Scott took seriously the idea that fiction could contribute to this large area of study; indeed, in his comments the value of these works of literature seems at times in greater danger of being overlooked than their interest as investigations of human life.

We have now reached a much-debated issue in Scott's criticism and fiction--that of the novel (or realism) and romance. These are the only critical terms for which Scott gives formal definitions: Romance is "fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents;" Novel is "fictitious narrative, differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society."<sup>18</sup> Yet these are not distinct terms as Scott uses them. Richardson, for instance, is said to have broken from romance, tearing "from his personages those painted vizards, which concealed, under a clumsy and affected disguise, every thing like the natural lineaments of the human countenance" (Williams, p. 22). Still, his works are "but a step from the old romance ...still dealing in improbable incidents, and in characters swelled out beyond the ordinary limits of humanity" (Williams, p. 52). Fielding and Smollett offer more complete examples of the "minor-romance, or English novel" (Williams, p. 57), at least until Jane Austen achieves the full potential of the novelist's art, "keeping close to common incident, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life" (Williams, p. 231). The investigation of human nature lies in the province of the novel, not the romance. But clearly, romance and novel are historical terms for Scott, and achieve meaning only in the light of new inventions in fiction. The inventions he inspects in *The Lives of the Novelists*, moreover, include not only the realistic novel, but also new kinds of romance and new accommodations between the two types.

A scholarly article on Romance for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* shows Scott's mature views on romance. He recounts its history as a progress from historical tradition, which in "a very few generations"<sup>19</sup> loses its accuracy to marvellous additions, through the naive tale which embodies the fashions of its times without the author's conscious intent,<sup>20</sup> to a more sophisticated form, "written for a more advanced stage of society" which "demanded, at the hand of those who professed to entertain them, some insight into nature, or at least into manners...."<sup>21</sup> The novel's scrutiny of common life and character is the furthest point of this progress.



Yet throughout this history of realism a second force is acting--a countervailing taste for incident, suspense, and excitement, the "love of the marvellous, so natural to the human mind...."<sup>22</sup> Scott quotes with approval Southey's conclusions about the universality of this taste:

...man has his intellectual as well as his bodily appetites, and these things are the food of his imagination and faith. They are found wherever there is language and discourse of reason, in other words, wherever there is man. And in similar stages of civilization, or states of society, the fiction of different people will bear a corresponding resemblance, notwithstanding the difference of time and scene.<sup>23</sup>

Scott gradually came to believe that even specific plot-lines--for instance, that of the king in disguise who exchanges a pledge with a subject--may have universal appeal.<sup>24</sup> Of this he was certain: that romance of all forms relied for its acceptance on an intrinsic "universal charm of narrative" (Williams, p. 226). Incident artfully combined, however inherently improbable, appeals to a reader's imagination and anticipation with the "and then" movement E. M. Forster describes so wittily.<sup>25</sup> So romance is general in interest, always amusing--and never instructive.

Some fictions put the appeal of romance to the service of the discovery of human nature. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Johnson's *Rasselas*, which modern critics hold to be openly didactic analogues<sup>26</sup> rather than novels, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* all aim "less to produce an effect by means of the marvels of the narrations, than to open new trains and channels of thought" (Williams, p. 261). These works "suppose the existence of the most extravagant fictions, in order to extract from them philosophical reasoning and moral truth" (Williams, p. 326). The reader suspends disbelief and "grants, for the time of perusal, the premises on which the fable depends" (Williams, p. 90); in return, the author provides him with the same knowledge of humanity to be found in works of more realistic method. The Voyage to Brobdingnag, for instance, "exhibits human actions and sentiments as they might appear" to giants (Williams, p. 147); that to the Houyhnhnms shows man "such as he may be found in the degraded ranks of every society, when brutalized by ignorance and gross vice" (Williams, p. 150). Robinson Crusoe on his imaginary island becomes

an example of what the unassisted energies of an individual of the human race can perform...acting and thinking precisely as such a man must have thought and acted in such an extraordinary situation. (Williams, p. 180)

Only to John Bunyan and Edmund Spenser does Scott ascribe downright allegory and the presentation of a moral truth distinct from factual observation of one of the many aspects of human nature.

Romance is un instructive usually because it sacrifices character to incident; its characters cannot be expanded and individualized without disarranging the neat vicissitudes of plot. In Radcliffe's romances, for example, "our curiosity is too much interested about the evolution of the story to permit our feelings to be acted upon by the distresses of the hero or heroine."<sup>27</sup> Contrariwise, Scott finds that his own plots suffer precisely when he creates his most successful characters (Williams, p. 457). Dryden, when unable to use the "bold and impetuous characters he delighted to draw,"<sup>28</sup> fell back on "generic representation[s] of...certain class[es] of men or women,"<sup>29</sup> and in place of "moral and sentimental passion," of which he knew little, substituted "the absurd, unnatural, and fictitious refinements of romance."<sup>30</sup> Scott assumes here that romance, the customary, even universal, turns of plot, will occur to all writers in distress. Gerard, too, expects such lapses from originality; when the principles of imagination are weak,

they will call in memory to their aid. Unable to guide our steps in an unknown country they keep in the roads to which they have been accustomed; and are directed in suggesting ideas, by the connexions which we remember.<sup>31</sup>

Originality as Scott and Gerard conceive it presupposes a crude base of conventional assumptions and forms from which the new arises and is distinguished. For Scott, this base is romance.

So Scott watches with interest as Maturin outgrows romance in favor of his own more valuable "feeling and conception of character," and attempts

a different and more interesting model, pretending to the merit of describing the emotions of the human heart, rather than that of astonishing the reader by the accumulation of imaginary horrors, or the singu-

lar combinations of marvellous and perilous adventures. (Williams, p. 273)

Burke's sublime, which acts upon the reader so powerfully by curiosity and terror, is not for Scott the noblest literary effect. Works which attempt no intellectual discovery, those like Mrs. Radcliffe's which display neither "the command of the human passions, nor the insight into the human heart, nor the observation of life and manners, which recommend other authors in the same line" (Williams, p. 119), are only amusements, distractions. Scott defends them in these terms:

Perhaps the perusal of such works may, without injustice, be compared with the use of opiates, baneful, when habitually and constantly resorted to, but of most blessed power in those moments of pain and of langour, when the whole head is sore, and the whole heart sick. (Williams, p. 105)

The defense is harsher than many attacks.

The novel is a very different fictional possibility. First, though the chief charm of romance lies in the tricks and turns of plot, fiction can dispense with this "added beauty" (Williams, p. 52). Scott weighs its value thus:

few of the merits which a novel usually boasts are to be preferred to an interesting and well-arranged story. But then this merit, however great, has never been considered as indispensable to fictitious narrative. On the contrary, in many of the best specimens of that class of composition--*Gil Blas*, for example, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Roderick Random*, and many others of the first eminence--no effort whatever is made to attain the praise belonging to a compact system of adventures.... (Williams, pp. 187-8)

Again and again Scott asks, "What is the use of the plot but to bring in fine things?" (Williams, p. 188; also pp. 239, 454) Incidents in a novel may resemble pearls in a strand (Williams, p. 188), or "the pictures in a showman's box" (Williams, p. 172; also p. 239), and be merely strung together. In Scott's estimation, the plot of *Emma* is "extricated with great simplicity" upon a "simple plan" (Williams, p. 234), for its "train of mistakes and embarrassing situations, and dialogues at balls and parties of pleasure" (Williams, p. 234) carries no intrinsic interest as events. It brings in fine things: Austen's "peculiar powers of humour and knowledge of

human life" (Williams, p. 234). This novelist has abjured the genuine though conventional effects of romance plotting and characterization,

neither alarming our credulity nor amusing our imagination by wild variety of incident, or by those pictures of romantic affection and sensibility, which were formerly as certain attributes of fictitious characters as they are of rare occurrence among those who actually live and die. (Williams, p. 230)

Instead, Austen has chosen "the art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader...a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him" (Williams, p. 230).

For Scott the art of copying from nature, in Austen's work and that of other novelists, is the creation of characters securely placed in a general scheme and also particularized by exceptional details so as to appeal as individuals. Scott praises his own ability to "separate those traits which are characteristic from those that are generic" and so to represent both "the manners of the times" and "individuals as they thought and spoke and acted" (Williams, pp. 256-7). Smollett, analyzing character by profession, has "diversified" his "sea-characters," "distinguishing the individual features of each honest tar, while each possesses a full proportion of professional manners and habits of thinking" so that "we at once acknowledge them as distinct persons, while we see and allow that every one of them belongs to the old English navy" (Williams, p. 68). Such characters are even historically informative (Williams, p. 68). And they are interesting: Smollett's particularized evil-doer, Ferdinand Count Fathom, "is a living and existing miscreant from whom we shrink," while Fielding's Jonathan Wild, "a cold personification of the abstract principle of evil," becomes "absolutely tiresome" as a character (Williams, p. 67). General characters may have "truth and force" (Williams, p. 188) and may be positively informative, as Richard Cumberland's "generic" sailors, Spaniards, Jews and Quakers are (Williams, p. 215); but they evince their authors' "power[s] of ratiocination" without the "command of fanciful illustration"<sup>32</sup> which should embody the fruit of observation. Individualizing, "unless the author is powerfully gifted with the inventive faculty, is more likely to produce monsters than models of composition" (Williams, p. 188).

Particularization and generalization were the subjects of much Enlightenment aesthetic debate. Reynolds in the *Discourses* urges the artist to "look only on those general habits

which are every where and always the same,"<sup>33</sup> and "not to run into particularities."<sup>34</sup> The generalizing "great style" has an offshoot, "original or characteristic style,"<sup>35</sup> marked by peculiarities of the artist's own temperament, such as Salvator Rosa's works, of a "rude and wild character"<sup>36</sup> which Scott likened to the romances of Mrs. Radcliffe (Williams, p. 109). Reynolds reluctantly recognized a third style, that of the Dutch painters who show "their own people engaged in their own peculiar occupations" and "exhibit all the minute particularities of a nation differing...from the rest of mankind."<sup>37</sup> Scott compares Jane Austen's novels to Flemish painting (Williams, p. 285). Reynolds evidently considers the three styles as distinct alternatives; but the Scots thinkers Alexander Gerard and James Beattie reconcile them much as Scott does. Gerard holds that the genius draws his generalizations from experience and embodies them in particularized creations in a single imaginative act.<sup>38</sup> Beattie, his follower, distinguishes them as complementary processes, generalization being the foundation and individualization the completion of the artist's work: "Homer's heroes are all valiant, yet each displays a modification of valour peculiar to himself," and the great poet lets us "know every particular that can be known"<sup>39</sup> about them. Scott's acceptance of both particular and general characters, and his preference for the former, appears very similar to Beattie's, based on an idea of the poetic process as observation, deduction, and illustration of the deductive categories in unique examples. The apparent contradictions of Scott's strictures on characterization thus dissolve into an orderly theory of representation.

Characterization is for Scott verity; verisimilitude is a mimicking in the narrative texture of the artist's process of thought. We may see this in Scott's descriptions of two basic techniques of verisimilitude. The first is detail--"circumstantial detail of minute, trivial, and even uninteresting circumstances" (Williams, p. 42)--which disguises fiction as real, imprecise and subjective observation. This is so because

small and detached facts form the foreground of a narrative when told by an eyewitness...just as a musket-shot, passing near the head of a soldier, makes a deeper impression on his mind, than all the heavy ordnance which has been discharged throughout the engagement. (Williams, p. 154)

The narrative, in short, takes the shape of the associative principles of a single mind. Thus Richardson's prolixity (Williams, p. 43) and Defoe's "deficiencies of style" (Williams, p. 173) may become assets, suggesting the foibles of

real story-tellers. The careful knitting of incidents and characters may even detract from verisimilitude (Williams, p. 180)!

Detail, in this view, produces verisimilitude by setting up a point-by-point comparison between the fiction and the reader's own methods of observation. A narrative persona, representing ordinary people's habits of speech and thought, not only provides a study in psychology, but also vouches for the truth of the rest of the tale. Its truth--as what? Obviously not as a logical exploration of potentialities, but as genuine observation, unavoidably complex and partial. Neat plotting and authorial control would reduce this complexity--so Scott is willing to sacrifice them to what he believes is a leading truth of human life. We see in his joy in variety the same belief: that the world is too rich for any one mind to order, or any one literary form to limn.

Scott recognizes that the unity of the story suffers from the detail necessary for verisimilitude, so to repair the damage he suggests the dramatic method of narrative.<sup>40</sup> The reader takes the place of observer (filled by the persona of earlier fiction) and is "compelled to gather the meaning of the scene from what the dramatis personae say to each other" without authorial explanation (Williams, p. 239). The "characters...evolve themselves with dramatic effect," and the scope for "minute detail" might be *too* wide (Williams, p. 235). Unfortunately, however, the narrative is broken down into a series of scenes, giving it "flimsiness and incoherent texture" (Williams, p. 239), while the protagonist has his fate "uniformly determined by the agency of the subordinate persons" "evolving themselves" free from demands of plot (Williams, p. 240). Scott's experimentation in his own novels and comments on them show that he never solved, to his own satisfaction, the formal problem of presenting convincing detail within an organized plot.

The second technique of verisimilitude Scott describes institutes a comparison between the author's and reader's powers of generalization: the reader is won over to the author's premises because they are internally consistent, or proportional. James Beattie showed that internal consistency lends probability to the marvellous, that Swift's Lilliputians "may pass for probable beings" because "every circumstance relating to them accords with itself, and with their supposed character."<sup>41</sup> Scott's comments on *Gulliver's Travels* (Williams, pp. 152, 160, 163) follow Beattie's closely, and he adds the general rule that "proportion forms an essential attribute of truth, and consequently of verisimilitude, or that which renders a narration probable" (Williams, p. 152). This statement strains the distinction between verisimilitude and accurate

representation. Swift's fantasy achieves psychological accuracy, for Gulliver and his hosts "conduct themselves towards each other precisely as must necessarily have happened" in reality (Williams, p. 152). Moreover, manipulation of proportion sets vice in its true light, "political intrigue...ridiculed by being transferred to a court of creatures about six inches high," and "female levities, and...lighter follies... rendered monstrous and disgusting" by being drawn on a giant scale (Williams, p. 152). Shakespeare's supernatural beings hover near factuality, gifted with "such attributes as all readers...recognized as those which must have corresponded to such extraordinary beings" (Williams, p. 97). After all, the two techniques of verisimilitude are merely applications to the conduct of narrative of the principles of thought, fact-gathering and class-building, which establish truth when exercised on reality.

Much of Scott's criticism of the novel is directed toward the process by which it achieves or apes intellectual discovery. When a work of fiction instructs by different means, Scott is at a loss. Swift, for example, sets up clashes between what Scott would call the generic and the individual, between narrative proportion and detail, with his Houyhnhnms threading needles and Gulliver pleading innocent to enjoying a Lilliputian lady. Such clashes Scott sees only as errors (Williams, p. 163). Swift, writing a determined attack on modern thought, aims to baffle his reader's rational quest for knowledge and chasten his faith in scientific method; Scott is left searching the *Travels* for 'straight' representations of human behavior. He is inadequate as a reader of Swift's irony<sup>42</sup> because he is an inveterate modern, relying on generalization and particularization as complementary--not contradictory.

One element of fiction is free of intellectual demands. Scott, we have seen, credits romance only with aesthetic effect, and ignores the question of how romantic plotting or marvellous postulates work in essentially novelistic tales. In practice, he does not regard most novels as unified wholes, and adopts different criteria to talk about the two kinds of fiction. The position seems arbitrary, yet we will suggest a principle behind it. Hume, in defining the limits of ascertainable knowledge, discarded knowledge of causation, arguing that the causal connection was based on habit and, though useful in daily life, was not provable or logically warranted.<sup>43</sup> Scott may view romance, story, or causal structure as a mental construct analogous to a theory of causation, and so value it for its practical aid and effect on passions and emotions, yet reject it as a contribution to the search for truth. Certainly, the fiction Scott studied readily tolerated inconsistencies in plot: the monstrous accumulation of children and

lovers in *Moll Flanders*, for instance, will never do as a unified significant action; and the elaborate causal structure of *Tom Jones* is presented with such arch playfulness that thoughtful readers may prefer to follow it as a rhetorical structure rather than a serious causal explanation.<sup>44</sup> In this regard Scott is a naive critic, gazing through the lens of fiction as if it were air, never inquiring how it distorts what lies on the other side, and never examining the arranged nature of the whole tableau. The means by which to do these were as yet undiscovered. We, however, in possession of these means, should not let them distract us entirely from an important aim of eighteenth-century fiction--and of Scott's fiction--the delineation not of a unified action but of the multifarious transactions of ordinary life to introduce the reader to a complex social world.

Finally we are ready to take up the problem of the moral influence of fiction. Scott's statements on this issue, too, seem contradictory at first; he joins his contemporaries in weighing tales as moral instruction, but he concludes by laughing down the idea that representations of immoral acts will harm readers. First, in a defense of *Pamela*, he excludes the moral resulting merely from plot:

The direct and obvious moral to the deduced from a fictitious narrative, is of much less consequence to the public than the mode in which the story is treated in the course of details. If the author introduces scenes which excite evil passions, if he familiarizes the mind of the readers [sic] with impure ideas, or sophisticates their understanding with false views of morality, it will be an unavailing defence, that, in the end of his book, he has represented virtue as triumphant. (Williams, p. 23; cf. p. 54)

To "excite passions" belongs to romance; Scott leaves the pornographer's use of the marvellous to the mercy of the censors. Richardson's plot can be ignored, and his realistic mode results in a study of innocent Pamela to which the character of lustful Mr. B- is merely an adjunct (Williams, p. 23). Fielding too is saved by his realism, acquitted not because Jones suffers for his sins, but because his author paints "life as it is, with all its shades, and more than all the lights which it occasionally exhibits, to relieve them" (Williams, p. 55). These comments tend to demand representations not completely taken up with the dark side of life; for Smollett's Ferdinand Count Fathom is such a "complete picture of human depravity" that virtuous readers find him a "disgusting



pollution of the imagination," while the vicious may adopt him as an instructive example (Williams, p. 60). Even so, Scott does not argue that the portrait will corrupt the innocent. Instead, it is distasteful, as other delineations of low life may be by which a reader "may be amused" yet feels that he is slumming and "must be not a little ashamed of that which furnishes the entertainment" (Williams, p. 167).

Fiction which "sophisticates...with false views of morality" seems to be that which is based on wrong assumptions about human nature, so that its representations would cause, not emulation of evil, but despair or presumption. Swift, for instance, depicts man as an animal, an idea which "if admitted, would justify or palliate the worst vices" (Williams, pp. 163-4). The "speculative error" of Robert Bage's rationalist "political and philosophical tenets" (Williams, p. 141) --not his sexual explicitness<sup>45</sup>--draws Scott's heaviest fire in this regard. It is tempting to dismiss the Tory's criticism of an egalitarian democrat. Scott clearly expresses his scorn for Bage's political propagandizing, especially for his belief "that revolutions were to be effected, and states governed, by a proper succession of clever pamphlets" (Williams, p. 139). But this is a mere symptom of the real evil--Bage's unreasonable rationalism. Applied to the observation of society, this leads Bage into factual accuracy: "[t]he very vices and foibles of the higher classes in modern times are of a kind different from what Bage has frequently represented them" (Williams, p. 141). It also makes him mistake the role of women in society (Williams, p. 142). At root of both lies an exclusive reliance on individual reason:

Hermsprong, whom he produces as the ideal perfection of humanity, is paraded as a man who, freed from all the nurse and all the priest has taught, steps forward on his path, without any religious or political restraint, as one who derives his own rules of conduct from his own breast, and avoids or resists all temptations of evil passions, because his reason teaches him that they are attended with evil consequences. (Williams, p. 142)

Scott demands, "But did such a man ever exist?" (Williams, p. 142) How can his author imagine that one may cast off all habits gained in nurture? Are not the ancient philosophers (and Fielding's Mr. Square) instructive demonstrations of the ethical inefficacy of the rule of right reason? and how does Hermsprong differ from the religious fanatic who, "referring his course of conduct to the action of some supposed internal inspiration, conceives himself...incapable of crime, even when

he is in the very act of committing it" (Williams, p. 143)?

We sometimes think of *a priori* reason as the method of the Enlightenment, and of appeals to tradition and the individual as Romantic. These categories, if they work at all, do not work for Scott, whose respect for past experience and the experience of the individual is in the tradition of the British Enlightenment, being founded upon reason as a means to free, wide-ranging but self-aware investigation. Bage would select his facts and ignore the limits of reason in the face of man's passions on the one hand and the complexities of his social institutions on the other; therefore, his doctrinaire rationalism is a "sophistry" (Williams, p. 144). Readers who as they read necessarily accept the author's "postulates" and adapt themselves to his "mode" of treating his subject, will acquire a brief practice in wrong thinking from Bage.

Still Scott is only annoyed, not frightened. His calmness in the face of immoral literature provoked Lockhart, reviewing *The Lives of the Novelists*, who noted Scott's confidence in the value of novels and concluded triumphantly that "if they may be thus powerful for good, we fear it follows, as an unavoidable consequence, that they may be equally powerful for evil."<sup>46</sup> Not necessarily. Romances may prompt generous emotions, and novels "may sometimes instruct the youthful mind by real pictures of life," but their primary function is "mere elegance and amusement" (Williams, p. 54). This view does not denigrate fiction unfairly. If even in ethics observation and deduction yield our knowledge, then the representations of novels must compete with real life for the reader's belief.<sup>47</sup> He will learn from what he can bring into his own deductive categories, and will discard the anomalous and incongruous. Thus the moral value of books depends partly on the reader's associations:

Robinson Crusoe produces the same impression upon an adventurous spirit which the Book of Martyrs would do on a young devotee, or the Newgate Calendar upon an acolyte of Bridewell....(Williams, p. 183)

Readers of Swift will find the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos too "gross and improbable" and inconsistent to believe--unless they already share Swift's "gloomy misanthropy" (Williams, p. 164). Skillful technique effects little, for

men are aware that every case may be argued on both sides, and seldom render their assent to any proposition merely on account of the skill with which it is advocated, or the art and humor with which it is illustrated. (Williams, p. 139)

The *Novelist's Library* preserved works based on principles which "if acted upon, would introduce vice into society" (Williams, p. 144); all because the "Editor...was never one of those who think that a good cause can suffer much by free discussion" (Williams, p. 139). This idea too we recognize as a legacy of the Enlightenment, perhaps its greatest--the reasoned defense of freedom.

Although we have insisted that Scott's critical thought is coherent, it is of course used exclusively in specific readings and literary history. Indeed, it renounces the attempt to dictate with general descriptions, supposedly exhaustive taxonomies or defenses which assign goals to the genre, and insists only that the fiction writer's methods be consistent with his own primary goals. Scott's theory made possible the freedom, versatility and good nature of his practical criticism because it allowed explicitly for sympathetic attention to the aims of different kinds of works--it welcomes new departures, whether or not their final tendencies for the genre are apparent, it distinguishes literary effects within works and treats them differently, and it shields works from demands they cannot meet. This pioneering approach was thus singularly adapted to encourage the flourishing young novel, and in the modifications (and occasional perversions) of liberal criticism it continued to serve the mature form. A searching inspection of the original framework may be useful now that new sources of elaboration and qualification have become available, to see if it can help prop an aging genre.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction* (London, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> *Scott on Novelists and Fiction*, "Introduction," p. 1. Subsequent quotations from this book are designated "Williams" in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Ball, *Sir Walter Scott as a Critic of Literature* (New York, 1907). See also Peter F. Morgan, "Scott as Critic," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, IV (1966-7), 90-101, for a treatment of Scott's criticism and its Romantic affinities.

- <sup>4</sup> John Lauber, "Scott on the Art of Fiction," *Studies in English Literature*, III (1963), 543.
- <sup>5</sup> Ball, *Scott as a Critic of Literature*, p. 8.
- <sup>6</sup> Lauber, "Scott on the Art of Fiction," pp. 551-2.
- <sup>7</sup> Duncan Forbes, "The Rationalism of Sir Walter Scott," *Cambridge Journal*, VII (1953-4), 20-35.
- <sup>8</sup> *Life of Swift*, Vol. I of *Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (Edinburgh, 1827), p. 482.
- <sup>9</sup> Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Genius*, ed. Bernhard Fabian (Munich, 1966; a facsimile of the first edition of London, 1774), p. 9.
- <sup>10</sup> Gerard, *Genius*, p. 44.
- <sup>11</sup> See Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society*, Chap. IV, "Man's Past" (Princeton, 1945), pp. 78-113.
- <sup>12</sup> *Life of John Dryden*, ed. Bernard Kreissman (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1963; a reproduction from the *Collected Prose Works*, ed. John G. Lockhart, Edinburgh, 1834), p. 406.
- <sup>13</sup> *Dryden*, p. 407.
- <sup>14</sup> *Dryden*, pp. 408-10.
- <sup>15</sup> *Dryden*, p. 406.
- <sup>16</sup> Gerard, *Genius*, p. 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Hallam, quoted by Lockhart in a note to the *Life of Dryden*, pp. 406-70.
- <sup>18</sup> "Romance," *The Encyclopedia Britannica: Supplement* (Edinburgh, 1824), p. 435.
- <sup>19</sup> "Romance," p. 444.
- <sup>20</sup> "Romance," p. 445.
- <sup>21</sup> "Romance," p. 448.
- <sup>22</sup> "Romance," p. 436.

- <sup>23</sup> Quoted from Southy's Preface to *Morte D'Arthur*, Vol. II (London, 1817) in "Romance," p. 446.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ivanhoe*, Introduction of 1830 (New York, 1905), p. xii.
- <sup>25</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1927), p. 55.
- <sup>26</sup> See Sheldon Sacks, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964), pp. 1-15, 31-60 for distinctions among the novel, apologue, and satire.
- <sup>27</sup> *Lives of the Novelists* (London, New York and Toronto, 1906), p. 351.
- <sup>28</sup> *Dryden*, p. 412.
- <sup>29</sup> *Dryden*, p. 415.
- <sup>30</sup> *Dryden*, p. 406.
- <sup>31</sup> Gerard, *Genius*, p. 42.
- <sup>32</sup> *Dryden*, p. 407.
- <sup>33</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art, with Selections from the Idler*, ed. Stephen O. Mitchell (Indianapolis, 1965), p. 33.
- <sup>34</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, p. 65.
- <sup>35</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, p. 65.
- <sup>36</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, p. 51.
- <sup>37</sup> Gerard, *Genius*, pp. 63-4.
- <sup>38</sup> James Beattie, "On Poetry and Music, as They Affect the Mind," *Essays*, 3rd ed. (London, 1779), p. 84.
- <sup>39</sup> Beattie, "On Poetry and Music," p. 39.
- <sup>40</sup> Frank Jordan, Jr., "Walter Scott as a Dramatic Novelist," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, V (1967-8), 238-45, presents a study of Scott's handling of this technique.
- <sup>41</sup> Beattie, "On Poetry and Music," p. 39.

<sup>42</sup> George Falle, "Sir Walter Scott as Editor of Dryden and Swift," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, xxxvi (1966-7), 164. Falle generally admires Scott's "critical judgment and literary sensibility" (p. 167) in his handling of Swift.

<sup>43</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1894), pp. 40-7 *passim*.

<sup>44</sup> See Ronald S. Crane, "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*," *Critics and Criticism* (Chicago, 1952), pp. 614-47.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Faulkner, "Scott as Editor of Bage," *Notes and Queries* CCXV (1970), 376-8, finds that Scott was a "remarkably restrained editor" of Bage's sexually explicit passages (p. 378). Several emendations noted by Faulkner can be read as typographical.

<sup>46</sup> [John G. Lockhart], Review of *The Lives of the Novelists*, *Quarterly Review*, XXXIV (1826), 366.

<sup>47</sup> Adam Ferguson, a moral and social philosopher, produced a similar argument on the moral uses of art. He asserts: "It is a specific character of active and progressive natures (such as man's), that they profit by the task which they themselves perform, more than by mere information, or instructions received from abroad....In the course of his progress, even the error he commits, or the evil he incurs, stimulate his exertions and promote his advancement...such steps however interrupted or slow, lead, in the end, from ignorance to knowledge, and from defect, to the supply of that defect. Inasmuch, that although mistakes may be indefinitely multiplied, it is the tendency of experience to exhaust the sum of possible errors, and to limit the choice at last to what is best." *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (Edinburgh, 1792), I, 297-8.