2012

WRITER, READER, AND RHETORIC IN JOHN GIBSON LOCKHART'S MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE OF SIR WALTER SCOTT, BART.

Gerald P. Mulderig
DePaul University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/16

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.
“[W]hat can the best character in any novel ever be, compared to a full-length of the reality of genius?” asked John Gibson Lockhart in his 1831 review of John Wilson Croker’s edition of Boswell’s Life of Johnson. Like many of his contemporaries in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Lockhart regarded Boswell’s dramatic recreation of domestic scenes as an intrusive and doubtfully appropriate advance in biographical method, but also like his contemporaries, he could not resist a biography that opened a window on what he described with Wordsworthian ardor as “that rare order of beings, the rarest, the most influential of all, whose mere genius entitles and enables them to act as great independent controlling powers upon the general tone of thought and feeling of their kind” (ibid.). Was Lockhart also thinking of his ailing father-in-law as he wrote these lines? Was he already contemplating the challenge of composing his own monumental study of one among “that rare order of beings”?

What we do know is that within weeks of Walter Scott’s death in the following year, Lockhart was collecting materials for the biography that would take six years to complete and eventually fill seven octavo volumes. In his final text, however, Lockhart explicitly declined to “Boswellize” his subject by recreating Scott’s private conversations in his narrative (3: 186). Instead, the intimacy with Scott that he offered his readers would be found in a bountiful selection of Scott’s letters and in extracts from his journal, which together occupied such a prominent place

in the text that Lockhart could plausibly describe his authorial task as merely "to extract and combine the scattered fragments of an autobiography" (4: 21). Perhaps it is in part this disarmingly modest depiction of his function as biographer that has resulted in the critical neglect of Lockhart’s role in the text—described by one modern reader, for example, as “so slight and shadowy that he never really emerges as a character, much less as a dramatic persona.”4 Lockhart’s biography may indeed seem to be dominated by mounds of sometimes undigested primary documents, but as Francis R. Hart has tellingly noted, about 300,000 of its 900,000 words are Lockhart’s own narrative and commentary, which not only provide connectives between the autobiographical “fragments” of Scott’s life but also establish the biographer as the “central consciousness” of the work (Hart 239).

In fact, Lockhart himself suggested the reader’s need for such an interpretive center in biography. Like Carlyle and Macaulay, Lockhart considered the *Life of Johnson* an unwitting success; drawing on his legal training, he compared Boswell to a courtroom witness “obviously unconscious, all the while, of the real gist and bearing of the facts he is narrating.”5 The reader’s challenge in trying to apprehend Boswell’s text, consequently, is like that of a juror attempting to follow the honest but undirected testimony of a child:

One of the oldest adages in Westminster-hall is, “in a bad case, the most dangerous of witnesses is a child;” and it holds not less true, that, in a good cause, a child is the best. But all jurymen cannot be expected to combine and apply for themselves, with readiness, or to much purpose, a long array of details, dropped threadless and unconnected from the lips of veracious simplicity. Comparatively few, in a difficult case, can turn such evidence to much use, until they have had their clue from the summing up. . . .6

---

Balancing truthful but disjointed testimony against the jurors’ need to make sense of the information they have been given, Lockhart’s courtroom analogy implies a theory of biography that equally values fact and interpretation. The success of a biography depends, Lockhart suggests, not simply on the validity of the biographer’s evidence but on an interpretive viewpoint that will enable the reader to understand that evidence correctly.

At the close of his Life of Scott, Lockhart writes that he has “withheld nothing that might assist the mature reader to arrive at just conclusions” (5: 433)—a statement that reiterates his conception of the reader’s active role in assimilating the factual content of the biography even as it reminds us of his own role in selecting, organizing, and contextualizing materials so as to lead the reader to a proper understanding of Scott. The pervasive editorial control by which Lockhart imposed coherence and theme on his biography’s voluminous documentary evidence has been so thoroughly examined by Hart that it needs no review here. My interest is a different aspect of Lockhart’s biographical art: the rhetorical effect of the roles that he adopts as writer and the functions that he assigns to his readers as participants in constructing Scott’s life. “A reader,” as Walter Ong reminds us, “has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life.” By focusing on the relationship established between writer and reader in Lockhart’s biography—by concentrating not on the “truth” of his text but on the elements in its design that make it seem true—we can better understand Lockhart’s rhetorical skill in moving us toward “just conclusions” about Scott.

I

As Hart has observed, the post-Boswellian biographical tradition in which Lockhart wrote paradoxically stressed the biographer’s role as sympathetic interpreter and mediator of his or her subject but also required the reader’s direct encounter with the subject through letters,

---

7 Through a study of the original documents and of revisions that Lockhart made on the proof sheets, Hart has convincingly demonstrated that his deletions, revisions, conflations, and transpositions were, in the main, less an attempt to suppress or misrepresent information than an effort to achieve narrative coherence by eliminating irrelevant material, avoiding repetition, sharpening focus, and heightening dramatic effect (Hart, pp. 199-236).

diaries, and other documentary materials, all of which should ideally be incorporated into the text intact—or at least with the appearance of intactness. The tension between these demands is reflected in two of Lockhart’s contrasting roles in his text, both of which serve his rhetorical ends. On the one hand, he is at pains from the earliest pages of the biography to demonstrate his intimacy with Scott and by doing so to win the trust of the reader in the judgments and assessments that he makes throughout the text. At the same time, Lockhart defines for himself an extraordinarily visible but seemingly narrow role as composer of the Life of Scott, a role in which he is repeatedly seen sorting through the documentary evidence on which his text rests. By frequently foregrounding the merely editorial process of transcribing and arranging documents, Lockhart creates for the reader the sense of a biography founded not on his subjective impressions but on objective fact.

Although Lockhart did not meet Scott until 1818, from the opening pages of his narrative he invents opportunities to refer to himself that affirm the legitimacy of his position as biographer by suggesting the closeness and duration of their relationship. Some of these references, by mentioning an experience that Lockhart and Scott shared alone, cast the biographer in the role of the novelist’s companion and confidant: “I remember well being with him, in 1820 or 1821, when he revisited the favourite scene [a garden at Kelso], and the sadness of his looks when he discovered that ‘the huge hill of leaves’ [a favorite Platanus tree] was no more” (1: 96). Others emphasize the duration of Lockhart’s relationship with Scott by indicating his familiarity with the novelist’s habitual sayings and actions: “I have heard him many times utter words which no one in the days of his youthful temptation can be the worse for remembering:—‘Depend upon it, of all vices drinking is the most incompatible with greatness’” (1: 125). Still other references suggest their special closeness as family members. After quoting a letter of advice to the twenty-one-year-old Scott from his father, for instance, Lockhart pauses to imply a similar paternal relationship between Scott and himself: “I think I hear Sir Walter himself lecturing me, when in the same sort of situation, thirty years afterwards” (1: 161).

9 Hart pp. 2-43; Julian North has argued more recently that in the case of early nineteenth-century literary biography, the intimacy with authors’ domestic lives that readers experienced through such documentation replaced their intimacy with authors’ works and created a new cult of personality that made biography “the most influential transmitter of the myth of the Romantic poet in the nineteenth century and beyond” (Julian North, The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009], 3).

10 The subtlety with which Lockhart may anachronistically insert himself into the narrative is illustrated by James Skene’s reminiscences of outings with Scott in
Though Lockhart will claim in the final chapter of the biography that he has “refrained from obtruding almost anything of comment” in the preceding volumes (5: 433), in fact he repeatedly draws on this authority as an intimate of Scott to evaluate for the reader the documentary evidence that dominates his narrative. The memoirs of Scott that Lockhart collected from the novelist’s friends, for example, often appear in the text with his personal guarantee of their accuracy. Thus Mrs. Churnside’s description of Scott as a boy is corroborated by Lockhart’s Wordsworthian assertion that he sees in it an image of the adult Scott he himself knew (1: 85-86); James Ballantyne’s account of a conversation with Scott about Byron wins Lockhart’s approbation as “delightfully characteristic” (2: 509); and J. L. Adolphus’s reminiscences of his visit to Abbotsford in 1823 come before us bearing Lockhart’s approving comment that “every word of these memoranda is precious” (4: 130). As we encounter Scott in such testimony by his friends, we are thus simultaneously aware of the biographer who confirms the authenticity of our experience. On other occasions, Lockhart invokes the authority not of a friend or family member but of a researcher whose knowledge of his subject proceeds from extensive documentary evidence unseen by his reader. Preparing us to appreciate the various professional roles revealed in Scott’s correspondence during the summer of 1805, for example, he places representative samples in the context of a larger collection of letters to which he alone has had access:

[T]hese military interludes [as quartermaster in the Scottish volunteer militia] seem only to have whetted his appetite for closet work. Indeed, nothing but a complete publication of his letters could give an adequate notion of the facility with which he already combined the conscientious magistrate, the martinet quartermaster, the speculative printer, and the ardent lover of

1805. Lockhart silently emends one of Skene’s original sentences—“A favourite excursion was St. Mary’s Loch and the Loch of the Lowes, and of course a frequent one”—to include two references to himself. “I need not tell you,” writes Skene in Lockhart’s published version, “that Saint Mary’s Loch, and the Loch of the Lowes, were among the most favourite scenes of our excursions, as his fondness for them continued to his last days, and we have both visited them many times together in his company” (1: 424; my emphasis; see Hart 225-26). By addressing Skene’s sentence to himself, Lockhart indirectly asserts the importance of his role as mediator of the memoirs entrusted to him by Scott’s friends; by adding the final clause, he augments his authority as he transforms the passage from a blandly factual statement into a kind of testimonial to the frequency of his own later travels with Scott.
literature for its own sake. A few specimens must suffice. (1: 404-05)

Similarly, when he reprints Scott’s letters, Lockhart frequently accompanies the autobiographical document with his own rationale for having selected it. His comments on resolving to quote a letter in which Scott refers to his early love for Williamina Belsches, for example, explicitly show him deciding which of the many available documents we should read:

I have had much hesitation about inserting the preceding letter, but could not make up my mind to omit what seems to me a most exquisite revelation of the whole character of Scott at this critical period of his history, both literary and personal;—more especially of his habitual effort to suppress, as far as words were concerned, the more tender feelings, which were in no heart deeper than in his. (1: 204)

Lockhart uses his authority as biographer not only to select and validate the evidence of the narrative but frequently to shape our understanding of it, inducing us to adopt his own vision of Scott. As we make our way though the biography’s vast collection of Scott’s letters, the biographer erects guideposts that lead us in the path he has already marked out for himself. Following a series of extracts from Scott’s correspondence with George Ellis in 1801 and 1802, for example, he organizes our impressions of the selections by observing that they place before us in a vivid light the chief features of a character which, by this time, was completely formed and settled. . . .:—His calm delight in his own pursuits—the patriotic enthusiasm which mingled with all the best of his literary efforts; his modesty as to his own general merits, combined with a certain dogged resolution to maintain his own first view of a subject, however assailed; his readiness to interrupt his own tasks by any drudgery by which he could assist those of a friend; his steady and determined watchfulness over the struggling fortunes of young genius and worth. (1: 297)

In the same way, before reproducing some of Scott’s correspondence with his son, the biographer explicitly points out what we are to observe in these letters: “specimens of Scott’s paternal advice . . . [that] may prove serviceable to other young persons,” evidence of Scott’s “manly
kindness to his boy,” and indications of a “practical wisdom . . . based on . . . comprehensive views of man and the world” (3: 300).

While much of Lockhart’s commentary in the biography thus encourages our reliance on his familiarity with Scott, on his judgment and his research, many of his other appearances in the text simultaneously suggest the inherent objectivity of the narrative by stressing the simply editorial nature of his role as biographer. In the middle of a paragraph in which he has been tracing Byron’s indebtedness to Scott and implying their comparable stature as poets, Lockhart suddenly draws back and comments meekly that “my business is to record, as far as my means may permit, the growth and structure of one great mind, and the effect which it produced upon the actual witnesses of its manifestations, not to obtrude the conjectures of a partial individual as to what rank posterity may assign it amongst or above contemporary rivals” (2: 510). Here, significantly, Lockhart—the “partial individual” of this passage—does not place himself among the witnesses to Scott’s life but instead assumes a humbler role as recorder of their impressions. Throughout the biography, similarly, he repeatedly de-emphasizes his interpretive function by referring to himself only as its “editor” or “compiler.” Constant references to the documentary evidence of the narrative—the “note-book [of Scott’s] from which I have been copying” (1: 230), the “vast heap of documents now before me” (2: 498)—present a writer actively engaged in assembling the text we read and help to establish its objectivity by depicting his primary function as the mere organizing of materials at hand. This impression of immediacy is reinforced by Lockhart’s frequent apologies to the reader for having carried on with a digression longer than he had intended or for having accidentally left out important information:

I ought not to have omitted that during Scott’s residence in London, in April 1815, he lost one of the English friends [George Ellis], to a meeting with whom he had looked forward with the highest pleasure. (2: 523)

* * *

Before quitting the year 1818, I ought to have mentioned that among Scott’s miscellaneous occupations in its autumn, he found time to contribute some curious materials toward a new edition of Burt’s Letters. . . . (3: 247)
By enhancing the image of an unselfconscious biographer struggling to sort out the myriad details of Scott’s life, such interruptions heighten the reader’s sense of the apparently artless nature of the composition.

In another way, too, Lockhart creates the impression that his text is a purely factual record over which he exercises only limited control. Over and over, he appears before us as a biographer compelled by the force of the truth to present information that he would actually prefer to omit:

I have now to transcribe, with pain and reluctance, some extracts from Scott’s letters, during the ensuing autumn, which speak the language of anxious, and indeed humiliating distress. . . . (2: 276)

* * *

I am sorry to have to add that this severity of labour [completing *Guy Mannering* within six weeks] . . . was the result of his anxiety to acquit himself of obligations arising out of his connexion with the commercial speculations of the Ballantynes. (2: 502)

* * *

Death has laid a heavy hand upon that circle—as happy a circle I believe as ever met. Bright eyes now closed in dust, gay voices for ever silenced, seem to haunt me as I write. With three exceptions, they are all gone. . . . But enough—and more than I intended. . . . (3: 503; my emphasis)

To some extent, the harmonious coexistence of Lockhart’s seemingly incompatible roles in the text as an intimate of Scott and as a mere compiler of information about him is made possible by the scale of this biography, which mutes the disparities between Lockhart’s personae by spreading out his periodic appearances over hundreds of pages of narrative. And the consistent elements of the biographer’s perspective—his high regard for Scott and his works, his genuine interest in the documentary evidence available to him, his genial attitude toward the reader—also tend to mask the differences between these two rhetorical stances. Still, it is a rhetorical paradox of the *Life of Scott* that its authenticity as a biography appears to derive simultaneously from the breadth of the biographer’s knowledge about Scott and from the seemingly narrow limits of his role in constructing the text.  

---

11 Lockhart’s two personae, the conscious image-maker and the objective editor, are also interestingly reflected in his correspondence about the biography. Objecting to his publisher’s idea of producing a collection of Scott’s letters as a
II

Lockhart, visibly engaged in composing the biography, assigns to his reader a similarly active role. The author’s address to the reader is of course a familiar convention of nineteenth-century fiction and nonfictional prose, but Lockhart’s attempts to enlist the reader in his own efforts as biographer are unusual in their character and insistence. In the course of the narrative, the reader is repeatedly asked to agree with the biographer, or pardon him, or withhold a complaint, or admit interest in what the biographer is saying:

To return to Ellis’s letter [on The Lay of the Last Minstrel], I fancy most of my readers will agree with me in thinking that Sir Henry Englefield’s method of reading and enjoying poetry was more to be envied than smiled at. . . . (1: 392)

* * *

I fear the reader will hardly pardon me for bringing him down abruptly from this fine criticism [an article in the London Review] to a little joke of the Parliament House. (4: 84)

* * *

I think . . . the reader will not complain of my introducing the fragment [of a poem] which I have found among his papers. (1: 265-66)

supplement to those printed in the Life, Lockhart looked forward with regret to the day when publication of the complete texts of the letters would reveal the extent of his silent textual emendations. “[T]he perhaps dampest thing for me,” he wrote, “. . . is that very likely, when all his letters are thrown open to an unscrupulous after age, my manipulation may be thrown overboard entirely. . . .” (qtd. in H.J.C. Grierson, Introduction to The Letters of Sir Walter Scott, ed. Grierson, Vol. 1 [London: Constable, 1932], xxvii). Lockhart’s comments to Scott’s friend Will Laidlaw, on the other hand, de-emphasize his creative role in composing the biography. “My sole object,” he wrote in January 1837, “is to do [Scott] justice, or rather to let him do himself justice, by so contriving it that he shall be, as far as possible from first to last, his own historiographer, and I have therefore willingly expended the time that would have sufficed for writing a dozen books on what will be no more than the compilation of one” (qtd. in Andrew Lang, Life and Letters of John Gibson Lockhart, 2 vols. [London, 1897], 2: 117).
[Scott’s] accounts to William Clerk of his vacation amusements . . . will, I am sure, interest every reader (1: 161).

But the reader’s participation in this work is not limited to mere acquiescence in the biographer’s demands. Assuming his readers’ familiarity with Scott’s works and with the outline of Scott’s life, Lockhart freely asks them to draw upon their knowledge to supplement his own narrative and complete the story that he is trying to produce. Commenting on the relationship between Scott’s Marmion and his earlier translation of Goethe’s Goetz von Berlichingen, for example, the biographer sketches a topic for his readers to consider on their own: “As the version of the Goetz has at length been included in Scott’s poetical works, I need not make it the subject of more detailed observation here. . . . [W]ho does not recognise in Goethe’s drama the true original of the death-scene of Marmion, and the storm in Ivanhoe?” (1: 258-59). Occasionally he even instructs his readers not to continue until they have familiarized themselves with supplementary material that is essential to their full participation in the biography. Before quoting from the surprisingly critical review of Marmion by Scott’s friend Francis Jeffrey, Lockhart enlists his readers’ engagement in the imaginative act of recreating this episode in Scott’s life and precisely defines the role they are to assume: “The reader who has the Edinburgh Review for April 1808, will I hope pause here and read the article as it stands; endeavouring to put himself into the situation of Scott when it was laid upon his desk. . . .” (1: 492).

In Lockhart’s presentation of the financial catastrophe in Scott’s life, the reader is urged to participate in the text in another way, by actively adopting the biographer’s vision of the essentially ironic movement of Scott’s career—his attainment of vast wealth and unparalleled fame, undercut by sudden bankruptcy and lonely years of writing to escape from debt. Although Lockhart refrains from explicitly stating what lies ahead for Scott until his narrative reaches the financial collapse itself in 1826, the earlier chapters of the biography are studded with veiled references to the impending catastrophe that draw the reader into steadily greater union with the biographer’s ironic perspective on the events of the narrative. “[F]rom beginning to end,” he writes early in the biography, with a characteristically muted parenthetical allusion, “[Scott] piqued himself on being a man of business; and did—with one sad and memorable exception—whatever the ordinary course of things threw in his way, in exactly the businesslike fashion which might have been expected from the son of a thoroughbred old Clerk to the Signet. . . .” (1:}
122). As Scott begins his partnership in James Ballantyne’s printing business in 1805, Lockhart describes their arrangement ominously as a “web of entanglement from which neither Ballantyne nor his adviser had any means of escape” (1: 401). His involvement in John Ballantyne’s publishing house is presented in even more threatening terms. “[T]he day that brought John into pecuniary connexion with him,” Lockhart writes decisively, “was the blackest in his calendar” (2: 35). As the story of Scott’s life unfolds, the framework of dramatic irony created by such comments leads the reader to perceive the ironic dimension of other events in the narrative, even in the absence of interpretive commentary from the biographer. The recurring financial troubles of the Ballantyne printing and publishing businesses, for example, which Scott seems to regard merely as exasperating but transient problems, grow steadily more portentous. Similarly charged with meaning for the reader are Lockhart’s accounts of Scott’s reckless purchases of land on credit and the expansion and elaborate refurbishing of Abbotsford. The letters between 1822 and 1824 that Lockhart prints depict a frenzy of activity as Abbotsford undergoes its final renovations and also suggest the dangerous degree of Scott’s preoccupation with material goods—carved wainscoting from the kirk of Dunfermline for the entrance hall, Chinese wallpaper for the drawing room and bedrooms, Jamaican cedar for the library shelves, silk damask for curtains, elaborately designed plaster ceilings, innovative gas lighting and a new compressed-air system of servants’ bells, mirrors, mantles, and the ever-expanding collection of ancient weaponry and suits of armor. And amid these preparations, without comment from Lockhart, a striking letter of advice from Scott to his son Walter, now a lieutenant in Berlin: “[Y]ou must learn to keep all your expenses within your income; it is a lesson which if not learned in youth lays up much bitter regret for age” (4: 68). When Abbotsford is completed in 1824 and Scott himself totters unknowingly on the brink of bankruptcy, the criticism implied in the biographer’s culminating observation confirms the participating reader’s sense of the magnitude of the collapse that is at

12 In 1938, H. J. C. Grierson traced Lockhart’s depiction of the Ballantyne brothers’ culpability in Scott’s bankruptcy to the biographer’s reliance on Robert Cadell, the partner of Scott’s publisher Archibald Constable and therefore a man “whose account could hardly be expected to be entirely impartial” (Grierson, Sir Walter Scott, Bart. [New York: Columbia UP, 1938], viii). In his more recent account, John Sutherland writes more bluntly not only that Lockhart “savagely overstates the case against James Ballantyne” (Sutherland, The Life of Walter Scott: A Critical Biography [Oxford: Blackwell, 1995], 287) but also that he falsely depicts Constable, rather than Cadell, as the person who misled Scott about the firm’s precarious financial situation because Cadell was now Lockhart’s publisher and Constable was conveniently dead (Sutherland, 274-76, 284-98).
hand: “With what serenity did he walk about those splendid apartments, handling books, expounding armour and pictures, and rejoicing in the Babylon which he had built!” (4: 262).

When Lockhart enters into his discussion of the hitherto undisclosed details of Scott’s bankruptcy, he seeks yet another kind of identification with his reader, one based not on shared knowledge about Scott but on mutual surprise over the degree of his financial desperation. The narrative of events halts, and the sudden perplexity of the biographer as he attempts to account for Scott’s fiscal irresponsibility dramatizes the enormity of Scott’s financial loss, engaging the reader in the mystery that surrounds it. Lockhart had earlier admitted his surprise at discovering the extent of Scott’s dependence on credit advanced for still unwritten novels (3: 524); now he gropes for a satisfactory way to explain Scott’s failure to monitor the Ballantyne printing business, in which he had invested so much of his capital. In a passage whose staccato punctuation and breathless syntax create the effect of shock and incredulity, he vainly rehearses evidence of Scott’s sophisticated business sense presented earlier in the biography:

How shrewdly Scott lectures [Daniel] Terry in May 1825:—“The best business is ruined when it becomes pinched for money, and gets into the circle of discounting bills.”—“It is easy to make it feasible on paper, but the times of payment arrive to a certainty.”—. . . Who can read these words—and consider that, at the very hour when they fell from Scott’s pen, he was meditating a new purchase of land to the extent of £40,000—and that nevertheless the “certainty of the arrival of times of payment for discounting bills” was within a few months of being realized to his own ruin;—who can read such words, under such a date, and not sigh the only comment, sic vos non vobis? (4: 343-44)

Such retrospection recalls not only an earlier Scott, but an earlier and more self-confident Lockhart as well. The contrast between the biographer’s previous serene authority and his apparent confusion at this point in the narrative magnifies the catastrophe by creating the powerful dramatic impression that he is perceiving its full implications for the first time as he writes. His bafflement grows as he contrasts Scott’s diligence in recording personal and household expenses with his inattentiveness to the state of James Ballantyne’s accounts:

---

13 Reed makes a similar point in a somewhat different context (as in n. 4 above, pp. 140-41).
I could, I believe, place before my reader the sum-total of sixpences that it had cost him to ride through turnpike-gates during a period of thirty years. This was, of course, an early habit mechanically adhered to: but how strange that the man who could persist, however mechanically, in noting down every shilling that he actually drew from his purse, should have allowed others to pledge his credit, year after year, upon sheafs of accommodation paper, “the time for paying which up, must certainly come,” without keeping any efficient watch on their proceedings—without knowing, any one Christmas, for how many thousands, or rather tens of thousands, he was responsible as a printer in the Canongate! (4: 344)

Just as they share in the knowledge about Scott’s impending ruin that sustains the narrative’s dramatic irony, the biographer and his readers are drawn together in the surprise of discovery as the full dimensions of Scott’s bankruptcy and its implications for an understanding of his character become clear. Scott’s failure to watch over his business investments is “the enigma of his personal history” (4: 342), a mystery that the astonished biographer cannot penetrate, and his desperate attempts to reconcile the Scott whom he knew with the Scott whose financial records now surround him involve the reader in the puzzle as well. “Scott, no doubt, had it in his power to examine [the account books] as often as he liked to go there for that purpose. But did he ever descend the Canongate once on such an errand? I certainly much question it” (4: 343). Lockhart’s tentative explanation for such laxity is a characteristically Romantic one, an answer by which he links himself and his readers as respectful witnesses to the mysteries of the creative imagination. Scott, he concludes, “must have passed most of his life in other worlds than ours” (4: 347), and “this self-abandonment of Fairyland” (4: 348) gradually unsuited him to many of the duties shared by ordinary mortals. In the biography’s conclusion Lockhart will return to this point, but more confidently, as if additional reflection has convinced him of the accuracy of his earlier hypothesis. There he describes Scott’s entire life as “a romantic idealization of Scottish aristocracy” (5: 439), asserting that Scott “appears to have studiously escaped from whatever could have interfered with his own enjoyment—to have revelled in the fair results, and waved the wand of obliterating magic over all besides; and persisted so long, that (like the sorcerer he celebrates) he became the dupe of his own delusions” (5: 441). In bringing his narrative to a close, Lockhart will thus invoke once more the ironic perspective from which he has all along invited the reader to view Scott’s illusory world.
Lockhart’s manner of establishing the biography’s images of Scott the man is quite different from his method of presenting the ironic pattern of Scott’s life. In that case, as we have seen, the biographer’s point of view was apparent early in the text, inviting the reader’s collaboration as the narrative proceeded toward inevitable catastrophe. In contrast, the text’s images of Scott often seem to depend less on the biographer’s subjective vision than on the weight of objective evidence—testimony, anecdotes, and memoirs that develop Scott’s personality by a gradual process of accretion. Lockhart, as noted above, periodically appears to validate the documents from which he quotes, but he leaves the ideas suggested by this material largely unstated, thereby forcing the reader’s own engagement in the act of discovering the thematic patterns of the text.

The Scott who takes shape in Lockhart’s pages is a multidimensional figure who simultaneously occupies several interlocking spheres of activity. There is, above all, Scott the prolific author, whose early travel and antiquarian research provide him with a fund of geographical settings and historical anecdotes later employed in his prodigious literary career. There is Scott the international celebrity, for whom “[s]tation, power, wealth, beauty, and genius, strove with each other in every demonstration of respect and worship” (3: 180). There is Scott the brilliant storyteller, whose grasp of poetry, history, and legend astonished those around him. “[N]o one topic can be touched upon,” writes Captain Basil Hall in his journal during a stay at Abbotsford in 1825, “but straightaway there flows out a current of appropriate story—and let the anecdote which any one else tells be ever so humorous, its only effect is to elicit from him another, or rather a dozen others, still more in point” (4: 223). There is Scott the Scotsman, devoted to the history, civilization, and people of his native land, and Scott the political partisan, the zealous Tory whose mind, Lockhart candidly admits, “could at times be unhinged and perverted by the malign influence of political spleen” (2: 113). There is Scott the quartermaster in the Scottish militia, Scott the clerk of court in Edinburgh, Scott the publisher of Canongate, Scott the sheriff of Selkirkshire, Scott the generous and obliging host at Abbotsford. And behind all of these images is Scott the dynamo, who fulfilled his many roles like “a locomotive engine . . . when a score of coal waggons are seen linking themselves to it the moment it gets the steam up, and it rushes on its course regardless of the burden” (2: 13)—a comparison that must have suggested energy of awesome proportions to Lockhart’s readers in the first decade of widespread rail travel in Britain.
Wolfgang Iser’s description of the process by which a reader assimilates the elements of a literary text helps to explain the contribution that the reader’s participation in evolving these images of Scott makes to the biography’s seeming authenticity. A literary text, Iser observes, must “be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself.” Driven by the need to discover consistent patterns in the text, the reader alternately foregrounds and backgrounds its various components, participating in a constant process of retrospection and anticipation. “By grouping together the written parts of the text,” Iser explains, “we enable them to interact, we observe the direction in which they are leading us, and we project onto them the consistency which we, as readers, require.” Out of the imaginative engagement through which the reader strives to create patterns in the text arises the apparent reality of the world it presents—its “impression of life-likeness.”

As anecdote corroborates anecdote in Lockhart’s text, the evidence of the biography collects in resonant patterns that simultaneously shape and confirm the reader’s evolving images of Scott, bringing him to life in the text. The various thematic patterns that unify the *Life of Scott* are difficult to discuss adequately apart from the narrative itself, but their development can perhaps be suggested by considering some of the evidence by which the reader is led to recognize and accept just one of Lockhart’s key ideas about Scott: his warm relations with his fellow citizens and with his tenants. The novelist’s regard for and popularity among common people are notes struck repeatedly during a portion of the

14 Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974), 275, 284, 290. The concept of giving historical events a thematic dimension has of course also been frequently discussed by Hayden White, whose term for this pattern-making power is “emplotment.” Historical events, White explains, “are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. . . . How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind” (White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978], 84-85). Martine Watson Brownley, similarly, has used the term “imaginative referent” to describe the vision of the historian that imbues historical evidence with “thematic structure and aesthetic coherence.” The result, she writes, is the reader’s perception of reality in the text, “the sense that what he is encountering is the historical truth” (Brownley, *Clarendon and the Rhetoric of Historical Form* [Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1985], 14).
narrative that spans nearly twenty-five years. Describing a tour of the Lasswade environs with Scott as early as 1803, Wordsworth writes that “wherever we went with him, he seemed to know everybody, and everybody to know and like him” (1: 354). Visiting the Scotts at their early home in Ashestiel five years—and five chapters—later, J. B. S. Morritt makes precisely the same comment. “There [Scott] was the cherished friend and kind neighbour of every middling Selkirkshire yeoman,” he writes, “just as easily as in Edinburgh he was the companion of clever youth and narrative old age in refined society” (2: 22). Among the anecdotes that dramatize the respect afforded Scott is the story of his finding himself trapped in a crowd of celebrants following the coronation of George IV in 1821; when one of the soldiers restraining the people discovers him, he immediately calls to the others, “Make room, men, for Sir Walter Scott, our illustrious countryman!” to which they respond “Sir Walter Scott!—God bless him!” (3: 479). As such evidence for Scott’s wide popularity mounts, each item performs, in Iser’s terms, both a retrospective and a prospective role, simultaneously confirming earlier evidence and further defining the pattern into which the reader will fit future data in the narrative.

Once the estate at Abbotsford takes shape, a parallel image of Scott develops: the feudal lord whose willing role is “paternal solicitude for the well-being of his rural dependents” (3: 159). Lockhart, ostensibly striving for balance, admits reluctantly that Scott was inordinately attracted to wealth and rank (4: 328-31), but throughout the biography he marshals evidence that demonstrates Scott’s concern for those who lived and worked on his estate and their reciprocal devotion to him. Visiting Abbotsford in 1817, Washington Irving is struck by the bond between Scott and his tenants. “The face of the humblest dependent,” he writes in the memoir from which Lockhart quotes, “brightened at his approach—all paused from their labour to have a pleasant ‘crack wi’ the laird’” (3: 28). At the annual festivals for all members of the Abbotsford estate, Morritt writes in Lockhart’s narrative of the year 1820, “to witness the cordiality of [Scott’s] reception might have unbent a misanthrope.” “He had his private joke for every old wife or ‘gausie carle,’” Lockhart continues, “his arch compliment for the ear of every bonny lass, and his hand and his blessing for the head of every little Eppie Daidle from Abbotstown or Broomylees” (3: 408). Still later in the narrative we are offered the corroborating testimony of a tenant that “Sir Walter speaks to every man as if they were blood-relations” (4: 147). And when Lockhart, in a role reminiscent of Boswell’s, rashly comments in Scott’s presence that novelists tend to regard human life merely as raw material for their books, a visibly dismayed Scott corrects his “young ideas” with a lecture on the heroism and wisdom of the poor. Maria Edgeworth, also on hand,
makes an observation that pulls together for the reader the evidence produced so far: “You see how it is—Dean Swift said he had written his books, in order that people might learn to treat him like a great lord. Sir Walter writes his, in order that he may be able to treat his people as a great lord ought to do” (4: 295).\textsuperscript{15}

Lockhart’s narrative of Scott’s life after the crash of 1826 is so affecting because the evidence it presents systematically recalls and subverts the images of Scott established earlier in the text. Like Scott himself, Lockhart’s readers undergo a change in this final portion of the biography as their images of Scott collapse. Scott the indefatigable author, who turned out his brilliant novels at lightning speed, now labors against constant fatigue, recognizing in himself for the first time “a want of the usual inspiration” (5: 324) and producing works that Lockhart admits are flawed by “a cloudiness both of words and arrangement” (5: 263). Scott the feudal lord now endures the periodic harassment of his creditors and lives in a greatly changed household:

The butler, instead of being the easy chief of a large establishment, was now doing half the work of the house, at probably half his former wages. Old Peter, who had been for five-and-twenty years a dignified coachman, was now ploughman in ordinary, only putting his horses to the carriage upon high and

\textsuperscript{15} Modern readers are likely to find unsettling the discrepancy between the biography’s presentation of Scott’s concern for the poor and his instincts as a Tory gentleman, two images of Scott that Lockhart did not find incompatible. In a letter to Joanna Baillie in January 1819, after the annual visit to the Abbotsford house by the children on the estate, Scott wrestles—but only for a moment—with the issue of his tenants’ meager earnings: “I declare to you, my dear friend, that when I thought the poor fellows who kept these children so neat, and well taught, and well behaved, were slaving the whole day for eighteen-pence or twenty-pence at the most, I was ashamed of their gratitude, and of their becks and bows. But after all, one does what one can, and it is better twenty families should be comfortable according to their wishes and habits, than half that number should be raised above their situation” (3: 246-47). When the “little hunch-back tailor” who has been making curtains for the grand refurbishment of Abbotsford lies dying, Lockhart presents Scott’s visit to his “hovel” on the estate as an example of his attentiveness to the sufferings of his tenants and their reciprocal gratitude: “He murmured some syllables of kind regret;—at the sound of his voice the dying tailor unclosed his eyes, and eagerly and wistfully sat up, clasping his hands with an expression of rapturous gratefulness and devotion, that, in the midst of deformity, disease, pain, and wretchedness, was at once beautiful and sublime. He cried with a loud voice, ‘The Lord bless and reward you,’ and expired with the effort” (4: 147). Lockhart sees no irony in this episode but abruptly continues the narrative with a discussion of Scott’s thoughts on the painting of interior woodwork.
rare occasions; and so on with all the rest that remained of the ancient train. (5: 151).

As the nation’s political climate changes, Scott the outspoken Tory seems an increasingly anachronistic figure. “[N]obody talks Whig or Tory just now,” he notes in his journal in 1827, “and the fighting men on each side go about muzzled and mute, like dogs after a proclamation about canine madness” (5: 123). The Scott whose dynamism filled the previous pages of the biography is ashamed now “to walk so slow as would suit me” in the streets of Edinburgh (5: 248), and on excursions to the favorite sites of his earlier days he rests while others clamber about. “I did not go up to St. Rule’s Tower, as on former occasions,” he writes of an outing to St. Andrews; “this is a falling off, for when before did I remain sitting below when there was a steeple to be ascended?” (5: 122). Even Scott’s popularity with his countrymen is dramatically undercut when, attending the election in Jedburgh in 1831, he is spat upon and his carriage is stoned by crowds angered over his virulent opposition to reform (5: 333-34).

Scott’s mental decline during these years is vividly dramatized in vignettes that recall for the reader earlier accounts of his dazzling storytelling:

He would begin a story as gaily as ever, and go on, in spite of the hesitation in his speech, to tell it with highly picturesque effect—but before he reached the point, it would seem as if some internal spring had given way—he paused, and gazed round him with the blank anxiety of look that a blind man has when he has dropped his staff. (5: 331).

Traveling to Lanarkshire with Scott in 1831, as he had done eight years earlier, Lockhart is struck by the sad change he discovers. On the previous trip he had been amazed by “the apparently omnivorous grasp of [Scott’s] memory. That he should recollect every stanza of any ancient ditty of chivalry or romance that had once excited his imagination, could no longer surprise me: but it seemed as if he remembered everything without exception, so it were in anything like the shape of verse, that he had ever read” (4: 131). Now his description of Scott’s decline reminds us of that account: “It was not as of old,” he writes, “when, if any one quoted a verse, he, from the fulness of his heart, could not help repeating the context. He was obviously in fear that this prodigious engine had lost, or was losing its tenacity, and taking every occasion to rub and stretch it. He sometimes failed, and gave it up with miseria cogitandi in his eye” (5: 338).
As Scott’s friend and son-in-law, Lockhart could not but regret the bankruptcy that shattered his life; as his biographer, though, he recognized the illustrative importance of Scott’s resolution to repay his creditors in full with the proceeds of works to be written during his final years. “They who knew and loved him,” he writes, “must ever remember that the real nobility of his character could not have exhibited itself to the world at large, had he not been exposed in his later years to the ordeal of adversity” (4: 347). The documentary evidence for Scott’s heroic response to his misfortune Lockhart found in the journal that the novelist began, by chance, only two months before his ruin and continued during the last six years of his life, and extracts from it consequently dominate the biographer’s narrative of the years after 1825. The result is a dramatic shift in the text as the multiple voices heard earlier—the voices of Lockhart and his contributors, as well as Scott’s own modulations of tone in letters to different correspondents—are largely replaced by Scott’s introspective and recurrently morbid record of his last years.

Lockhart does not completely disappear from view—he is at hand from time to time to comment on the nobility of Scott’s efforts and the pathos of his condition—but the dominant voice in this section of the biography is Scott’s own. Here Lockhart offers his readers an intimacy with Scott unparalleled in the biography as they are drawn deeply into his private world of mental anguish and physical exhaustion, sharing in sufferings that he tries to conceal from those around him. As Hart has shown, Lockhart intensifies the impression of Scott’s solitude and loneliness at Abbotsford by excising from the journal most references to social gatherings after 1826 (218-20). What remains is a moving self-portrait of the novelist increasingly aware of his mental confusion, desperately afraid that he will be unable to complete the projects he has undertaken, and at the same time periodically resigned to death.

As the biography moves toward its close, however, Lockhart interrupts the journal with increasing frequency by interpolating extracts from memoirs of Scott’s last months composed by Hall, Adolphus, Mr. Scott of Gala, Dr. Fergusson, and Sir William Gell among others. Blending with the biographer’s own narration, these voices gradually dominate over excerpts from the journal, with the result that Scott himself recedes further and further from the reader. In silencing Scott’s voice in the text, the concluding chapters of the narrative thus recreate his insensible condition on returning to Scotland from abroad in July 1832. By making Scott, whose words and actions have dominated the biography, gradually disappear from its closing chapters, Lockhart brilliantly enacts for the reader the same sense of loss at Scott’s death that was felt by those who knew him.
The complaints of some of Lockhart’s contemporaries that his biography lacked focus and coherence were echoed in the twentieth century by Harold Nicolson, who claimed in 1928 that Lockhart “had no thesis,” that he “merely, with the requisite degree of taste and selection, furnished facts” (153), and have been repeated more recently by Isabelle Bour, who has depicted Lockhart as a mere “chronicler of events” who offers no “narrative guidance” to the reader and fails to “[assume] narrative authority” (38). Such assessments of the Life of Scott seem to me to fall very wide of the mark. Not only do they overlook the unifying elements of Lockhart’s narrative—the images of Scott around which the details of the text coalesce, all presented within the tragic context of rise, fall, and struggle for redemption; they also ignore the rhetorical dimensions of Lockhart’s strategic appearances in his narrative, which serve to validate his perspective even as they suggest his objectivity, and which define the way we as readers are to participate in the text. Lockhart delineates for us an active role in perceiving the central irony of Scott’s life, in constructing the multifaceted dimensions of his personality, and in feeling the diminishments of his old age. Uniting us with the biographer as he strives to understand Scott, it is a role that lends both power and credence to his text.

DePaul University

16 “[W]e are sorry to say,” wrote the Athenaeum reviewer after the appearance of the third volume, “that Mr. Lockhart, in place of attempting a coherent, well-proportioned, and philosophical biography . . . seems to have aimed at (and surely has effected little beyond) collecting the materials for such a work” (Athenaeum [June 3, 1837]: 396-97; p. 396). Carlyle, similarly, describing the biography as “not so much a composition, as what we may call a compilation well done,” lamented that Lockhart’s aim had not been “to do much other than to print, intelligibly bound together by order of time, and by some requisite intercalary exposition, all such letters, documents and notices about Scott as he found lying suitable, and as it seemed likely the world would undertake to read” (“Sir Walter Scott,” in works, as in n. 5 above, 29: 28). Harold Nicolson, The Development of English Biography (New York: Harcourt, 1928), 153; Isabelle Bour, “John Gibson Lockhart’s Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart., or the Absent Author.” Studies in Scottish Literature 29 (1996): 37-44 (p. 38).