Walter Scott as a Dramatic Novelist

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In his recent history of the English Romantic Movement, 1815-1832, I. A. Jack remarks that "important as the concept of the Picturesque was to Scott . . . it does not cover what seemed to him the chief technical innovation in the Waverley Romances: he considered that they were more dramatic than the work of his predecessors, and by that he meant that they made more use of dialogue. . . . This claim to originality in the matter of dialogue comes as something of a surprise today, yet there is no doubt of the importance of dialogue in most of Scott's books."1 So far as I can tell, the observation is original with Mr. Jack,2 but I fear it will not receive the attention it merits because he has chosen not to argue his point. In this essay I propose to supply the evidence for Jack's statement, not only because I feel the point is crucial for the understanding of Scott but also because I feel it may be important for the understanding of the English novel in its evolution.

Historians and theorists of the novel have long since noted that dialogue as a narrative method in fiction was relatively late in appearing, as Robert Liddell reminds us by quoting George Saintsbury:

We have seen . . . how very long it was before its [dialogue's] powers and advantages were properly appreciated; how mere récit dominated fiction; and how, when the personages were allowed to speak, they were for the most part furnished only or mainly with harangues—like those with which the "unmixed" historian used to endow his characters. That conversation is not merely a grand set-off to a story, but that it is an actual means of telling the story itself, seems to have been unconscionably and almost unintelligibly slow in occurring to men's minds; though in the actual story-telling of ordinary life by word of mouth it is, and always must have been, frequent enough.3

With recognizing that conversation "is an actual means of telling the story itself" the Victorian novelists are usually credited. If a forerunner

2Others have, of course, argued the importance of Scott's dialogue, but they have not recognized the chief end to which Scott employed it, the dramatic novel.

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is to be produced, then Jane Austen is invariably mentioned, and rightly so. But if Scott is a dramatic novelist, as Mr. Jack asserts and I affirm, then probably Austen should share with Scott the reputation of having prepared the way for the Victorians. Indeed, given his greater fame in the nineteenth century, it may well be that Scott, not Austen, chiefly influenced the later novelists in this respect.

With his first novel Waverley (1814), Scott established the pattern of his fiction, including the pattern of his narration. And this pattern of narration is not merely implicit in that novel. Some hundred pages or so into the story, the Author of Waverley halts his narrative for the purpose of justifying an upcoming character sketch of considerable length. In the process of his apology the voluble narrator informs the reader that his pen can speedily shift "from description and dialogue to narrative and character." From the outset, then, Scott considered dialogue a distinct narrative method, but in the beginning it was at best a minor method, as the opening portion of Waverley bears witness: six chapters with scarcely a word of conversation anywhere in them. Among critics of Scott, only E. M. W. Tillyard, who tended to perverse opinions where Scott was concerned, has professed to admire the early pages of Waverley. Before the story is told, of course, the Author of Waverley has permitted dialogue to carry part of the narrative burden, but it never succeeds in becoming anything like the chief narrative method of the novel.

Guy Mannering (1815), Scott’s second novel, differs from Waverley in several ways, but in none more strikingly than in the greater use of dialogue to conduct the story. Where before Scott waited fifty pages to introduce dialogue, now he waits only five, so that Lord David Cecil and others have written enthusiastically of the opening chapter. Moreover, in Waverley Scott employed dialogue only for important scenes, if then, but in Guy Mannering he uses it for exposition as well. At one point, for example, the Author of Waverley can be discovered saying:

Our narration is now about to make a large stride, and omit

5 Border Edition (48 vols.; London, 1892-1894), I, 173. Subsequent citations are to this edition, and will be given in the text.

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a space of nearly seventeen years, during which nothing occurred of any particular consequence with respect to the story we have undertaken to tell. The gap is a wide one; yet if the reader’s experience in life enables him to look back on so many years, the space will scarce appear longer in his recollection than the time consumed in turning these pages.

It was, then, in the month of November, about seventeen years after the catastrophe related in the last chapter, that, during a cold and stormy night, a social group had closed around the kitchen-fire of the Gordon Arms at Kippelträngen, a small but comfortable inn kept by Mrs. MacCandlish in that village. The conversation which passed among them will save me the trouble of telling the few events occurring during this chasm in our history with which it is necessary that the reader should be acquainted (III, 99).

In effect, the narrator uses dialogue for the sort of task that occupied six chapters of narrative in Waverley. When all is said and done, however, dialogue is the second method of the novel; narrative remains Scott’s chief method.

With The Antiquary (1816), Scott’s third novel, the two methods — narrative and dialogue — come into balance, if indeed dialogue does not overshadow narrative in that novel. By page four the Author of Waverley has so manipulated his material that two of his major characters have been brought together, introduced, and are talking about a late coach in which both expect to travel. Needless to say, the device of the coach for bringing characters together and into conversation is hardly novel, but it allows for the early introduction of conversation. And once initiated, conversation, it may be claimed, rarely ceases for any length of time in The Antiquary. A garrulous main character no doubt made it easier for Scott to increase the proportion of dialogue in this third novel, but it seems likely that even without Jonathan Oldbuck, the character whose preoccupation gives the novel its title, The Antiquary would have been a more dramatic novel than its two predecessors: the trend was already set.

Old Mortality (1816), the next novel and the first in the series known as Tales of my Landlord, is not attributed to the Author of Waverley but to a young school teacher, Peter Pattieson, recently dead of consumption. It would seem that there is a connection between the dramatic method and the new narrator. However that may be, Old Mortality is Scott’s most dramatic novel. Not only is dialogue regularly used for exposition, traditionally a job for narrative, but it is also used for characterization, originally a distinct method in Scott’s fiction. One example should suffice. Pattieson is sketching the character of an innkeeper; after a few words of his own he determines on another pro-
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cedere: "But his character, as well as the state of the country, will be best understood by giving the reader an account of the instructions which he issued to his daughter, a girl about eighteen, whom he was initiating in those cares which had been faithfully discharged by his wife until about six months before our story commences, when the honest woman had been carried to the kirkyard" (IX, 38).

Further evidence of a dramatic method in Old Mortality is the war council convened by Claverhouse in order to have the advice of his officers about proceeding against the Covenants: "'I do not call you around me, gentlemen,' said Claverhouse, 'in the formal capacity of a council of war, for I will never turn over on others the responsibility which my rank imposes on myself. I only want the benefit of your opinions . . .’" (IX, 219). There follows a long, heated discussion among the summoned officers. As a council of war, it differs little from the pattern set by the epic poets; all the possible positions find spokesmen. But it differs significantly from the war council in Waverley: it is rendered by dialogue, whereas the earlier council is summarized by the narrator.8

The best evidence of the highly dramatic quality of Old Mortality, however, comes with a comment late in the story:

It is fortunate for tale-tellers that they are not tied down like theatrical writers to theunities of time and place, but may conduct their personages to Athens and Thebes at their pleasure, and bring them back at their convenience. Time, to use Rosalind’s simile, has hitherto paced with the hero of our tale; for berwixt Morton’s first appearance as a competitor for the popinjay and his final departure for Holland hardly two months elapsed. Years, however, gilded away ere we find it possible to resume the thread of our narrative, and Time must be held to have galloped over the interval. Craving, therefore, the privilege of my cast, I entreat the reader’s attention to the continuation of the narrative, as it starts from a new era, being the year immediately subsequent to the British Revolution (X, 188).

So obsessed has Scott become with being a dramatic novelist that he must apologize, it seems, for conducting himself as a novelist instead of as a dramatist. Indeed, one could make a case for the argument that by this time in his career Scott had come to think of himself as a dramatist working in the novelist’s medium. Certainly he can be detected at times thinking more like a dramatist than a novelist. I cite one example: "It was needless to say more; he was at her side, almost at her feet, pressing her unresisting hands, and loading her with a pro-

8 See I, 131-133.
fusion of thanks and gratitude which would be hardly intelligible from the mere broken words, unless we could describe the tone, the gesture, the impassioned and hurried indications of deep and tumultuous feeling, with which they were accompanied" (IX, 141). Clearly the narrator implies that a description of tone and gesture is not possible; at any rate none follows, and the reader must be content with "the mere broken words," unintelligible though they be.

But that Scott understood and appreciated as well as any novelist that writer's obligation to indicate tone of voice and gesture there can be no doubt. A passage in his life of Fielding (1821) shows him keenly aware of the distinction between the novelist's and the dramatist's craft: "Action, and tone, and gesture, the smile of the lover, the frown of the tyrant, the grimace of the buffoon, — all must be told, for nothing can be shown. Thus, the very dialogue becomes mixed with the narration; for he [the novelist] must not only tell what the characters actually said, in which his task is the same as that of the dramatic author, but must also describe the tone, the look, the gesture, with which their speech was accompanied,—telling, in short, all which, in the drama, it becomes the province of the actor to express."10 Perhaps one should simply acknowledge the inconsistency of Scott's theory and his practice and pass on, as is often done. But it may be that the five-year interval between Old Mortality and Lives of the Novelists explains the discrepancy. For as this essay will, I hope, demonstrate, Scott was to moderate his practice of dramatic fiction after Old Mortality.

So far, I have been relying on the novels themselves for evidence of Scott as a dramatic novelist, but at this point it becomes possible to introduce material of a different order. In the Quarterly Review for January, 1817, appeared a review of Tales of my Landlord, First Series. It has since been proved that Scott himself wrote the article.10 Among other things, the review shows Scott's determination to be a dramatic novelist and, more than that, his determination to be recognized as a dramatic novelist. After certain preliminaries, he begins to reprove Pattison for presenting the tales as series of unconnected scenes rather than as coherent narratives. Then he qualifies his censure, in these words:

There may be something of system in it however; for we have remarked, that with an attention which amounts even to affecta-


2. See TLS, November 8, 1918, p. 529.

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tion, he has avoided the common language of narrative, and thrown his story, as much as possible, into a dramatic shape. In many cases this has added greatly to the effect, by keeping both the actors and action continually before the reader, and placing him, in some measure, in the situation of the audience at a theatre, who are compelled to gather the meaning of the scene from what the dramatis personae say to each other, and not from any explanation addressed immediately to themselves. But though the author gain this advantage, and thereby compel the reader to think of the personages of the novel and not of the writer, yet the practice, especially pushed to the extent we have noticed, is a principal cause of the flimsiness and incoherent texture of which his greatest admirers are compelled to complain. . . . In addition to the loose and incoherent style of the narration, another leading fault in these novels is the total want of interest which the reader attaches to the character of the hero. Waverley, Brown, or Bertram in Guy Mannering, and Lovel in the Antiquary, are all brethren of a family; very amiable and very insipid sort of young men. We think we can perceive that this error is also in some degree occasioned by the dramatic principle upon which the author frames his plots.  

The review obviously allows for a broader interpretation of the phrase "dramatic novelist": a novelist who constructs his plots on the dramatic pattern of acts and scenes and designs his characters as though they were sketches to be completed by actors and actresses. But it also obviously includes the more limited meaning with which I have been dealing and will be content to deal with in this essay.

The story of Scott's development as a dramatic novelist does not end with the review—not quite. Scott was to attempt once more to create for himself the image of a dramatic novelist. This time he chose the preface to The Bride of Lammermoor (1819) as his vehicle and Peter Pattieson, the persona-author of that novel, as his spokesman.  

Quarterly Review, XVI (January 1817), 431-432. Note Scott's care to maintain the persona of a reviewer: like most of Scott's readers, the writer assumes that the Author of Waverley and Peter Pattieson are the same. Hence the reference to Waverley, Bertram, and Lovel in the quoted passage.

After The Bride of Lammermoor and its companion A Legend of Montrose, Scott turned to historical fiction, for which the dramatic method he had evolved was obviously inappropriate. Hence he dropped the persona of Pattieson, associated with the dramatic novel, and assumed the mask of Lawrence Templeton, English antiquary. For Pattieson's living sources he substituted Templeton's ancient Wardour Manuscript, which for all its wonders could not credibly be expected to include much dialogue of any interest or intelligibility. Templeton's career as persona was exceedingly short, but when the Author of Waverley replaced him Scott's original persona took up where Templeton left off rather than resuming the dramatic method of Pattieson. As in the beginning "narrative" prevailed over dialogue in Scott's fiction.
Much of the preface is a conversation between Pattieson and an itinerant artist and friend by the name of Dick Tinto. The ostensible purpose of the conversation is to account for the story of *The Bride of Lammermoor*, which Pattieson had from Tinto—in short, to provide verisimilitude for Scott's novel. But if Tinto is the source of Pattieson's story, he is also the critic of that fictitious author's earlier tales, mixing "many a dose of salutary criticism with the panegyrics which my composition was at times so fortunate as to call forth" (XIV, 13).

At the heart of Tinto's "salutary criticism" is the theory that fictitious narrative is the sister art of painting and when properly practiced follows the rules of painting. Pattieson, he charges, has hitherto confused the art of narrative and the art of drama, with the unfortunate result that his characters talk far too much and act far too little. More description and less dialogue is Tinto's prescription for future tales, advice which Pattieson is initially reluctant to follow. In defense of his established practice the novelist countercharges that it is the painter who confuses family relationships in the arts. But seeing that Tinto's much abused ego is at stake, Pattieson genially capitulates to his opponent, promising "to make one trial of a more straightforward style of composition, in which my actors should do more, and say less, than in my former attempts of this kind" (XIV, 16). Shortly thereafter Pattieson is rewarded with the gift of Tinto's notes on the strange history of an ancient castle in Lammermoor. He would have us believe, however, that when he came to write the story of this castle habit prevailed over promise: "following in part, though not entirely, my friend Tinto's advice, I endeavoured to render my narrative rather descriptive than dramatic. My favourite propensity, however, has at times overcome me, and my persons, like many others in this talking world, speak now and then a great deal more than they act" (XIV, 20).

It is reasonable to assume that Pattieson speaks for Scott. Tinto, however, is not so easily disposed of. Does he represent an actual critic, some acquaintance or reviewer of Scott, or does he represent simply another side of Scott himself, so that he is imaginary? Is he, for example, the spokesman for the method of pictorial description, once a major method in Scott's fiction but no longer so? The answers to these questions are at best speculations, but the significance of the con-

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versation is not solely dependent on them. Two points, I think, are apparent: (1) Scott is questioning the dramatic method of fiction, questioning the propriety of making dialogue the exclusive or even major narrative method in fiction; and (2) he is at the same time claiming that for Walter Scott, a particular novelist, the dramatic method is the natural method, claiming that dialogue is for him the most artistically satisfying narrative technique. To be sure, irony modifies the seriousness of both question and claim: Tinto, the unsuccessful painter who presumes to patronize the more promising and prosperous novelist; Pattieson, the sympathetic friend who pretends to abandon his theory of fiction at the drop of a compliment on his work. Scott can no more be taken at face value here than elsewhere in his comments on his craft. But he cannot be dismissed as merely whimsical, either. Rather he emerges from the preface a writer with serious thoughts about the art of fiction. Thanks to the irony, he does not appear to be an apostle of that art.

In the interval between Old Mortality and The Bride of Lammermoor—an interval in which two novels were published—Scott may have had some second thoughts about his narrative method. Perhaps it is only to be expected that, once a writer achieves a goal, technical or otherwise, he becomes critical of that goal. Certainly self-appraisal of this kind is healthy exercise, and if Scott indulged in it, then there is still more reason to qualify, if not abandon, the conventional notion that he had no concern for the craft of fiction. At any rate, one thing, I would hope, is now clear: the distance between Waverley and The Bride of Lammermoor in terms of narrative technique is considerable. Scott began the journey a conventional, even derivative novelist; he ended it a dramatic novelist, which, he would have us believe, was a new breed. His progress can be readily traced by examining closely the stages of his journey.

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14 Rob Roy (1817), a fourth novel by the Author of Waverley, and The Heart of Midlothian (1818), second series of the Tales of my Landlord. Both novels are less dramatic than Old Mortality but for somewhat different reasons. In the case of Rob Roy, the fiction of editing a memoir is perhaps responsible. If Scott did not appreciably alter his style so as to strengthen this fiction, he does seem to have recognized that dialogue is not characteristic of a memoir. In the case of The Heart of Midlothian, the nature of the story—a fabric woven of lesser narratives in the form of letters, documents, memoirs, reminiscences, broadsides—tends to produce a non-dramatic quality.

15 See the Chapter Introductory to Waverley, where the narrator takes pains to establish his kinship with the eighteenth-century masters of the novel.