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THE HISTORICAL NOVEL AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE PAST

My subject is Walter Scott the storyteller, the romancer who forged illusions of the past from an admixture of literary form and historical record, and the historian who used the logics of literary form as instruments for understanding the past. Storyteller and historiographer, Scott constructed his fictional project around the relationship between the language of fiction and historical reality, the possibility of grasping the movements of history in the language of fiction, and the denial of that possibility. Conscious of the fictionality of his narratives, he deliberately played fiction and history off against one another, not only as "artifice" against "reality," but as codified forms of written discourse. "Fiction" and "history" are verbal worlds for Scott, forms of understanding that appear at one moment radically disparate, at another virtually indistinguishable. This is where the complexity of the Waverley novels is to be sought, in the interaction of fiction and history.

In the Waverley novels, the mixed genre of historical romance becomes a field in which perceived contradictions in history can be recreated and resolved. It is a zone of freedom, a verbal realm apart from history, the limits of which are prescribed by the taleteller's imagination, where the ugly facts history throws in the way of the writer can be made into appealing, or at least consoling, stories about the past. For Scott, the facts of the past are the stuff of tales. Yet they serve not only as the raw material of his fiction, but as its justification as well. What made the Waverley novels so popular in Scott's own time, and what still appeals to many contemporary readers, is the sheer elaborateness of the worlds Scott created in his novels. But this density of realistic detail serves also as a pretext for writing romances. Scott's visions of social harmony require the

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endorsement of actuality lent to them by his realism. He uses the facts of the past both to ratify and to undermine the force of his romance plots. History becomes at once his alibi and his enemy. The historical romancer not only combines romance with "reality," but, viewing history as simply another way of seeing things that is at odds with the perspective of romance, writes history anew.

While Scott was manifestly conscious of the artificial nature of his work, some of his more reputable admirers have missed his cues. We know that in Scott's own time, the popularity of the Waverley novels rested largely on the perceived reality of his writing.[1] Scott is best known to contemporary readers as the inventor of the historical novel, a figure whose most significant contribution to the genre rests in his attempts to portray great historical movements. Due in no small part to the work of Georg Lukács the notion of Scott as an accurate depictor of the past has remained a significant issue among Scott's interpreters. The Scott created by Lukács is the instigating genius of a new genre, the originating consciousness of historical realism, faithfully portraying the crucial social and political changes of British history.[2] But the claims made for Scott's historical veracity, even by a reader of Lukács's philosophical sophistication, assume the possibility of a direct and spontaneous relation between word and world, between the language of fiction and historical reality. A novel may deal with real history, and it may even be empirically accurate in its details. But it remains a fictive treatment of history, as Terry Eagleton has expressed it, "an operation on historical data according to the laws of textual production":[3]

> History ... operates upon the text by an ideological determination which within the text itself privileges ideology as a dominant structure determining its own imaginary or "pseudo" history. This "pseudo" or "textual" real is not related to the historical real as an imaginary transposition of it. Rather than "imaginatively transposing" the real, the literary work is a production of certain produced representations of the real into an imaginary object. If it distantiates history, it is not because it transmutes it into fantasy, shifting from one ontological gear to another, but because the significations it works into fiction are already representations of reality rather than reality itself.[4]

History enters the novel, but only in retextualized form, only as ideology.[5] The real is visible in the novel only in its effects, in the transformations worked upon it by the forces of literary production. Despite any overt claims it makes to representing history, the novel

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is an evasion of history, an attempt to create a safe zone of language in which the forces of the real can be contained and managed. Even the classical historical novel has as its object not history, but ideology. Even in fiction that conceives of history as its subject, history can be present only as a "double-absence,"[6] as a production of a production of the real. History is available to us only in the gaps and fissures that appear in the surface of the novel, in the formal disjunctions and thematic oppositions visible in so much of Scott's writing. The Waverley novels would seem to approach the real more closely than the work of Scott's Gothic predecessors. What that means is simply that the "reality-effect" is stronger there, that Scott's fictional method serves to emphasize the "pseudo-real" to a greater degree than the techniques of the writers labelled as Gothics. Scott's version of the Jacobite rebellion in *Waverley* signifies not the real struggles between the British government and its rebellious subjects, but the ways in which early-nineteenth-century Britain represented itself in fiction. While Scott's pictures of the past contain elements of the real, they are, inescapably, ideological.

But Scott's work is never simply identical with ideology. It is a work of transformation upon ideology, a self-conscious production of produced representations of the past. Scott's novels are fictive reconstructions of a historical subtext of which English colonialism is a central pattern. His immediate historical subject in *Waverley* is the Jacobite rebellion of the mid-eighteenth century. The larger historical subtext of the novel is the anglicization of Scotland, the process of political and cultural assimilation Scott attempted to analyze in *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818). We must bear in mind that the anglicization of Scotland is more than an issue in regional history, a minor disagreement between Britons. It is a version, writ small, of a larger pattern of exploitation, a movement central to England's relationship with Ireland and Wales, which would occur on a much greater geographical and economic scale in India and Africa. To borrow the phrasing of a recent social-historical account, the deeper historical subtext of the novel is the process of "internal colonialism."[7] While Scott could not have conceived of himself as an agent of "internal colonialism," at some level he knew what he was writing against. His novels are fictions written to defer the effects of history, deceptively casual efforts to contain the forces of history by means of story, to alter the past he has evoked.

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In the early novels of rebellion, Scott takes a traumatic moment from the textual records of British history and attempts to assimilate it to a formal pattern that he has knowingly drawn, or, as Northrop Frye would say, ''kidnapped,'' from the literary world of romance.[8] The effect of this transgression, a crime openly repeated across the Waverley endings, is to shift potentially threatening material from one generic realm, one mode of emplotment, to another.

By this crossing of generic boundaries, Scott accomplishes the ''reemplotment'' that Hayden White regards as one of the fundamental ideological motives of historical writing. White's historian is as much an inventor as a discoverer of the past. More artificer than scientist, he approaches the historical record with a notion of the kinds of configurations that can be recognized as stories by his audience. He brings to the record a set of preconceptions, shared with his audience, about how a particular kind of event – the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 or the Cameronian revolt of 1679 – might be emplotted. The form of the historian's account depends on his emphasizing of certain elements and his repression of others. This is essentially a literary, story-making activity: a set of events is not a story in itself, but merely a set of possible story elements subject to the historian's procedures of selection.

White compares the activity of the historian to the work of the therapist in psychoanalysis:

> The therapist's problem ... is not to hold up before the patient the ''real facts'' of the matter, the ''truth'' as against the fantasy that obsesses him ... The problem is to get the patient to re-emplot his whole life history in such a way as to change the meaning of those events for him and their significance for the economy of the whole set of events that make up his life.

The events in the patient's past that have brought about his symptoms are ''detraumatized by being removed from the plot-structure in which they have a dominant place and inserted in another in which they have a subordinate or simply ordinary function as elements of a life shared with all other men.'' The historian's task is to place ''traumatic'' or threatening events within the configuration of a recognizable and reassuring story. The historian seeks to ''refamiliarize'' his audience with events that have been forgotten or repressed, to bring those events to consciousness and to situate them within the form of a familiar plot.[9]

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The motive of Scott's kidnapping is no less than the reemplotment of a historical crisis. In *Waverley*, he removes the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 from the historical narrative of dynastic politics in which it occupies a central position and sets it in the romance plot of the hero's career, in which it can have only a subordinate role. By means of this simple shift, the event is transformed from an expression of deep social and cultural divisions into an ordeal through which Edward Waverley must pass on his journey towards the exalted condition of landed proprietorship. Scott rehearses the English conquest of the Highlands and attempts at the same time to justify that action as an essential precondition for the greater progress of Scotland and the British nation. But he understands that in reenacting the 1745 rebellion, he is writing a story of the past in accordance with his own vision of history.

The modal mixture of Scott's fiction must be viewed against a tradition of fiction-writing that begins with the Gothic novelists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first chapter of *Waverley* indicates that the Gothic retained a genuine vitality for Scott and for his reader:

> Had I, for example, announced in my frontispiece, "Waverley, a Tale of Other Days," must not every novel reader have anticipated a castle scarce less than that of Udolpho, of which the eastern wing had long been uninhabited, and the keys either lost, or consigned to the care of some aged butler or housekeeper, whose trembling steps, about the middle of the second volume, were doomed to guide the hero, or heroine, to the ruinous precincts? Would not the owl have shrieked and the cricket cried in my very title-page? ... Again, had my title borne, "Waverley, a Romance from the German," what head so obtuse as not to image forth a profligate abbot, an oppressive duke, a secret and mysterious association of Rosycrucians and Illuminati, with all their properties of black cowls, caverns, daggers, electrical machines, trap-doors, and dark lanterns?[10]

As Jane Austen had done in *Northanger Abbey*, Scott defined his position as a novelist within and against the Gothic mode. His historical romances are not just one kind of challenge to Gothic conventions, but a dialectical response to Gothic romance. To grasp properly the place of Scott's fiction in literary history, we must see his novels as a countergenre to the Gothic, in which the forms of the Gothic are taken up and rendered as the conventions of an obsolescent literature, and at the same time preserved and modified. The forms

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of Gothic romance are represented in Scott's writing in order to be defamiliarized and then historicized. Scott expressed his conception of the uses of Gothic in his "Introduction" to Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*. Scott sees Walpole's object in *Otranto* as one of presenting "such a picture of domestic life and manners, during the feudal times, as might actually have existed, and to paint it chequered and agitated by the action of supernatural machinery, such as the superstition of the period received as a matter of devout credulity ..."[11] As Scott sees it, Walpole's aim was to present a plausible and realistic picture of feudal society and to describe the consciousness of the times, "the superstition of the period" which believed in the force of the supernatural. For Walpole, Scott observes, the supernatural is a matter of machinery, a technique which represents accurately the feudal world-view, yet which appears to the modern reader precisely as a technique. Walpole wrote in *Otranto* a certain kind of "romantic narrative," one which, "though held impossible by more enlightened ages, was yet consonant with the faith of earlier times."[12]

While Scott's assessment of Walpole is a strong misreading rather than a piece of objective description, the "Introduction" tells us a great deal about Scott's own attitude towards the past, about his own sense of his motives for using what he calls "supernatural machinery."[13] The project described in the "Introduction" marks an essential difference between Scott's work and the classic Gothic novels. Scott's exploitation of the Gothic in *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) goes well beyond the use of supernatural elements to represent the feudal consciousness. Scott turns the Gothic mode against itself, using it to demystify the vision of the "superstitious eye," to draw a phrase from *The Bride of Lammermoor* (ch. 20; 289), and to reclaim the world for a certain kind of historical vision. Despite Scott's manifest interest in historical issues, the novel retains the key ideological prerogatives of Gothic fiction.[14] Scott openly disavows subjective epistemology and belief in the power of the supernatural, and offers detailed studies of social life against the gloomy fatalism of the novel's central action. But in its very setting, the Scotland of pre-Union days, more than 100 years before its date of composition, *The Bride* is ideologically motivated. The use of archaic character types displaces the threat to social order from its real contemporary locus in a growing mass of industrial laborers to a much older and less potent enemy, to an aristocratic figure from the distant past. Along with these

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relatively simple strategies of historical distancing, the novel brings to bear a Gothic background of omens and prophecies, legends of usurpation and revenge, character types and stock symbols. By association with the novel's feudal character, these anti-realistic elements are ascribed to the archaic and obsolete consciousness of the past.

Scott's strategies of association are typically a matter of tainting his characters by contact with supernatural elements. Fergus MacIvor, the cosmopolitan clan chief of *Waverley*, is profoundly affected by the appearance of the Bodach Glas on the eve of what proves to be his final battle. But while the Highlander is deeply moved, Scott allows Waverley, and his reader, to remain at a distance from the supernatural version of events in which Fergus believes: "Edward had little doubt that this phantom was the operation of an exhausted frame and depressed spirits, working on the belief common to all Highlanders in such superstitions" (*Waverley*, ch. 59; 269). As a politician and military leader, Fergus stands as a recognizably modern figure, an ambitious individual whose aims coincided closely with those of the exiled regime. But his belief in the reality of the Bodach Glas marks MacIvor as a clansman, a true Highlander beneath the artificial surface of courtly manners and mores. In this brief scene, Scott bestows the supernatural with a relative credence as an essential element of clan consciousness, of which a man born into the social order of the clan would partake as a matter of course. But while Fergus believes, Waverley, and the reader, are allowed to hesitate, and thereby to assume a position of rational doubt.

This opposition between belief and disbelief, the shift between the rational consciousness and the "superstitious eye," is a fundamental element of Scott's fictional ideology. Scott's handling of the supernatural shows the kind of hesitation Tzvetan Todorov has defined generically as the "uncanny":

> In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions. Either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.[15]

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According to the generic laws proposed by Todorov, Edgar Ravenswood's uncertainty as to the reality of the spectre of Old Alice at the Mermaiden's well (*Bride*, ch. 23; 348–50) stands as an instance of the "fantastic": "Either the devil is an illusion, or he really exists, precisely like other living beings ... The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty."[16] But in its "semantic" aspect, to borrow Todorov's category, the novel manifests the "uncanny." In an earlier encounter between Ravenswood and his lover (*Bride*, ch. 20; 289) the supernatural vision is clearly relegated to a subordinate position in the novel's hierarchy of perception, while the rational vision takes the high ground.

This shift between the "fantastic" and the "uncanny" is a recurrent movement of Scott's fiction. When Darsie Latimer of *Redgauntlet* (1824) discovers the tell-tale horseshoe sign on his forehead, he partakes, for a moment, of the archaic consciousness of which Hugh Redgauntlet is a prime exemplum. He shares, for an instant, in the sense of fatality which impels his uncle:

> Catching the reflection of my countenance in a large antique mirror which stood before me, I started again at the real or imaginary resemblance which my countenance, at that moment, bore to that of Herries. Surely my fate is somehow strangely interwoven with that of this mysterious individual.
> (*Redgauntlet*, ch. 7; 14)

Consistently projecting a position of relative credence, and with it the thematic corollary of the shift between belief in the supernatural and doubt of its force, the novel allows a double reading of its events. But the interpretative problem thus engendered is again resolved in the direction of the rational, of historical explanation. To the archaic vision of the feudal consciousness, the failure of Hugh Redgauntlet's revolt would appear as yet another repetition of the pattern of fatality which has gradually destroyed the family line. But to the nineteenth-century reader, gazing on the past from the temporal distance of some sixty years there is little mystery to the failure of the rebellion. Redgauntlet's scheme was bound to fail because of the moral weakness of the Stuart heir, the superior intelligence and military power of the Hanoverian army, and the ideological enervation of the Jacobite party. The hesitation between belief and disbelief registered in the novel allows the exploitation of the supernatural sense of fatality in the service of historical analysis.

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Scott's disavowal of Gothic conventions in the opening chapter of *Waverley* is enacted repeatedly in his fiction. But realistic perception is reinforced in his novels by the very conventions he rejects as distortions of the real. In his mingling of history and fiction, realistic perception is defined and ratified by the vision of romance. Romance and realism are mutually constitutive, ways of seeing and writing the past defined by the specific context of their relationship within Scott's writing. Romance for Scott is a construction of the imagination. A source of delight and entertainment in moments of leisure, it is also a form of false consciousness, an untrue language, a source of distortion for which the rational vision must serve as the demystifying agent and the corrective. Yet romance is valuable to Scott for those very distortions of reality which are its failings. Scott sees romance as an evasion of the real, the language of irrationality, of illusion. Yet as a language of illusion, romance is a powerful instrument of historical revision. While Scott rejects the language of romance as a means of grasping the movements of history, he uses romance plots as a way of reshaping the past, of mastering history.

The motives of Scott's revisions can only be fully understood against the story of his life. The history Scott sought to master in his fiction is at once public and private. Scott wrote his own career over and over again in the careers of the Waverley heroes. In the process of transforming history, he revised the life of Scott, he altered his autobiography. This revision is not merely a matter of a few changes of names and places, but of a double transformation. The social experience of the author, which is already ideological, is itself transformed by Scott's fictional interpretation.

The modal tensions of the Waverley novels can be traced to Scott's conflicted sense of his own historical position.[17] Scott was a lawyer by training and occupation, a member of the professional middle class. He began his legal career as an advocate at the Scottish Court of Session, and in the course of his life held numerous legal and judicial positions. These included the office of Sheriff of Selkirkshire, a post which involved Scott in settling minor civil disturbances in a region dominated by large property-holders. Through his purchase of the land on which he built the Abbotsford estate, Scott became directly connected with the landowning class of the Border country. He made the original purchase of a small farm with money drawn from his earnings as an author and editor, and from his modest

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investment in John Ballantyne's publishing firm. Within a few months of the initial acquisition, Scott was planning to attach several adjacent farms to his property. A large portion of the profits later realized from his writing would be used to expand and improve the Abbotsford property. With the emoluments of his legal activities, his literary labors, and the investments that the popularity of his books made possible, Scott bought his way into the landed gentry. By gradually acquiring local properties as they came up for auction, he became, at least in his own ironic estimation, a "great laird."[18]

The Abbotsford estate is an architectural version of the political fantasy that animates the Waverley novels, the dream of landed establishment.[19] Abbotsford expresses two conflicting motives: the desire for upward mobility, the parvenu's dream of making it rich and buying a country estate; and a longing for the restoration of the ancient landed establishment, and with it, the social relations of an older and better world. These opposing drives are visible in another autobiographical text, in Scott's affair with Williamina Belsches. In his extended account of the affair, Edgar Johnson has observed the significant social distance beween the young barrister and the daughter of Sir John Belsches. As Johnson succinctly puts it: "The daughter of a baronet and the granddaughter of an earl enjoyed far loftier rank than the son of a cadet branch of a numerous clan, whose father was a mere writer to the Signet."[20] Since the story of the relationship is widely known, a brief sketch will do service here. Scott had known Williamina Belsches since his early youth and, over a period of several years, had fallen in love with her, finally proposing to her in his early twenties. Her responses to Scott's repeated advances were always ambiguous, but Scott persuaded himself that Miss Belsches was pledged to him, even as she was falling in love with a man who was more her social equal than was Scott. When her engagement was announced, Scott was shocked and angry, and his journal shows that a deep sense of injury remained with him until the end of his life.[21] While critics have drawn the obvious parallels between the Belsches affair and the events and characters of the novels, especially *The Bride*, the sexual element of the affair and its relationship to the social has generally been neglected.[22] Reenacted in *The Bride*, in the affair of Edgar Ravenswood and Lucy Ashton, the relationship takes on a powerful element of sado-masochism, with Ravenswood attacking his lover and himself in a single, grand gesture of revenge.

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