SIR WALTER SCOTT: A DUSTY EXHUMER OF CHRONICLES IN THE LIGHT OF HIS ART OF NARRATION

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ABSTRACT

Sir Walter Scott is without doubt the most widely acclaimed novelist of his day and has been one of the most influential literary figures from 1814 to the present. Scott is considered as “the father of the historical novel”. The historical novel is the most complicated form of novels because it consists of history. All of us know that history is based upon facts and novel is born out of imagination which comprises of so many elements of observation and experience. It is evident that the historical novel is of a very intricate nature. No doubt the historical novel which presents the historical atmosphere in an attractive manner, and has the historical quality to make the reader visualize all the events through the wordy descriptions, will be considered as successful. A novelist has to use his imagination in order to present the historical scene in a beautiful manner.

The right uses of the words, appropriate combinations of different expressions are the essential requirements of a proper historical novel. It is the duty of the historical novelist to make his readers feel that they are actually living in the days and among the people described. In fact it is the mastery of language and art of atmosphere building on the part of the historical novelist that creates a clear-cut distinction between historical novels and history. For the creation of atmosphere a novelist has to keep an eye on his words, language and narration. Walter Scott attaches great importance to the art of narration and says that “The interest becomes lost in a minute description of events not affecting the progress of tale.”

Present paper is an effort to probe into the mechanics of novel writing by Scott, in respect of the narrative techniques employed by him as a historical novelist.

KEYWORDS: Walter Scott, Exhumer, Narration, Historical, Soliloquy.
INTRODUCTION

“Oh what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive!”

Sir Walter Scott is the first historical novelist in English literature. The historical novel is the most complicated form of novel because it consists of history. All of us know that history is based upon facts and novel is born out of imagination which consists of so many elements of observation and experience. It is evident that the historical novel is of a very intricate nature. No doubt the historical novel which presents the historical atmosphere in an attractive manner, and has the historical quality to make the reader visualize all the events through the wordy descriptions, will be considered as successful. A novelist has to use his imagination in order to present the historical scene in a beautiful manner.

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The narrative technique of dialogue is used effectively by Scott, as he regards it as an important vehicle for presenting the various types of events and traits of character. For Scott dialogue is the supreme means for the revelation of characters and unfolding of events. The action is contrived simply to give the characters an opportunity to speak out. They put all of themselves into what they say. Scott knows that his main strength lies in the artistic depiction of dialogue as he shows in an ironic imaginary dialogue between Dick Tinto, a painter, and himself at the beginning of the Bride of LammerMoor.

"Your characters," he said, "my dear Pattieson, make too much use of the gob box; they patter too much (an elegant phraseology which Dick had learned while painting the scenes of an itinerant company of players); there is nothing in whole pages but mere chat and dialogue." The ancient philosopher," said I in reply, "was wont to say, 'Speak, that I may know thee'; and how is it possible for an author to introduce his personae dramatis to his readers in a more interesting and effectual manner than by the dialogue in which each is represented as supporting his own appropriate character?"

Though Scott has defended himself here yet in an anonymous review of his own novels he criticizes this excessive use of dialogue and insists that

“The practice especially pushed to the extent we have noticed, is the principal cause of the flimsiness and incoherent texture of which his great admirers are compelled to complain.”
Due to the lack of a proper and coherent plot, Scott has to make an excessive use of the dialogue technique in his novels. In his Guy Mannering he presents three strata of the dialogue, from the simple yet eloquent speech of the gypsy to the humorous realism of the conversation between two characters and the sympathetic kind of dialogues.

David Daiches has paid tribute to Scott in the matter of dialogue construction. He says that “Scott’s novel lives by its dialogue, the magnificent pedantic monologues of Old buck, the racy Scots speech of Edie Ochiltree, the chattering of gossips in the post offices are the examples.” Thus no action, in these early novels of Scott comes to life until somebody talks about it. It is also to be noticed that the dialogue is at its best when it is in the speech of humble people. Scott could make them live by simply opening their mouths.

The narrative technique of soliloquy is used by Scott, on few occasions, in his novels. It informs the reader about the inner feelings of the characters. For instance, Scott has used this technique in Fortunes of Nigel. Nigel delivers a significant soliloquy on his status and actions.

"She is right, and has taught me a lesson I will profit by. I have been, through my whole life, one who leant upon others for that assistance, which it is more truly noble to derive from my own exertions. Whatever of good or bad has befallen me, has arisen out of the agency of others, not from my own. Nigel Olifaunt, from this moment, shall owe his safety, success, and honour, to his own exertions. I will write it down in my tablets, in her very words,—'The wise man is his own best assistant.'"

This soliloquy reveals the inner feelings of Nigel and also indicates the growth in his character from a passive to an active hero. It can be noticed that the use of soliloquy gives a dramatic style to Scott’s novels. Another example can be cited from The Bride of Lammer Moor. Towards the end of the novel, in the belief that Wolf’s crag has caught fire, Edger goes to watch the final ruin of his only remaining property. Instinctively he is disgusted at the attitude of the boys from the village who also run to watch the spectacle. He says to himself:

“And these are the sons of my father’s vassals” he said, of a men bound, both by law and gratitude, to follow our steps through battle, and fire and flood; and now the destructions of their Leigh Lord’s house in but a holiday sight to them.”

Scott has used the technique of soliloquy to present the inner feelings of the characters. It also helps to reveal the inner traits of his characters. Thus the technique of soliloquy helps in making Scott’s novels lively and dramatic.

Scott has utilized the epistolary technique in his novels. Scott inherited this technique from Fielding and Richardson. He used this technique profusely in one of his most important novels Red Gauntlet. The first thirteen chapters of the novel are epistolary, consisting of a series of letters exchanged between Darsie, on his itinerary through the Scottish countryside and Alan, Edinburgh. These chapters are headed “Letter I”, Letter II and so on. After Letter XIII, Scott changes his method of presentation to Chapter I entitled “Narrative, and continues this method in chapter II; he then introduces for Chapters III to IX, “the journal of Darsie Latimer”. Chapter X through XVI are headed “Narrative of Alan Fiar Ford”. Chapters XVII through XX “Narrative of
Darsie Latimer, and Chapters XXI through XXIII “Narrative of Alan Fiar Ford”. The final chapter in the novel after the action has closed is entitled “Conclusions by Doctor Dryasdust, in a letter to the Author of Waverley”. Because of this kind of structure, Earnest Baker regards this novel as “irregular, easy going almost haphazard as any of Scott’s novels.”

It is evident from Baker’s comments that Scott failed to employ with success the epistolary technique and for this reason he did not use it in any others of his novels. In The Heart of Midlothian he has included the letters of Jeanie Deans and Davie Deans but they are not contributive to any development of theme.

Scott excels in the art of scene description. The pictorial quality of his novels is evident from his mode of describing the scenes. Scott gives an objective description of the landscape in his novels. In other words his scene depictions are more reader-conscious and less self-conscious. He has a taste to admire the picturesque and at the same time cannot refrain from describing the natural beauty of “wild scenes”. In Guy Mannering and The Pirate Scott describes the desolate country. In The Pirate he evokes the ruggedness of the Shetlands but he also feels obligatory to point out that only a particular type of weather produces:

“That variety of light and shade which often gives life to a bare and enclosed scene, for the time at least, a species of charm approaching to the varieties of a cultivated and planned country.”

Scott is capable of creating conformity between the natural scenes and the condition of their inhabitants. In The Heart of Midlothian when Jeanie Deans sees the fertile, well populated country round the Thames for the first time on her way to Windsor, Scott calls the scenery “unrivalled”. So it is in terms of the prosperity it brings to the farmers and the comforts of its inhabitants that Scott sympathises with Jeanie’s reaction to this luxuriance:

“It is braw rich feeding here for the cows, and they have a fine breed o’cattle here.......but I think just as well to look at the craigs of Arthur’s seat, and the sea coming in ayont them, as at a ‘thae muckle trees.’”

The most illuminating example of Scott’s mastery, as a painter of the scenes, can be quoted from The Monastery. He describes his own Border country:

“The mountains, as they would have been called in England........rose abruptly over the little glen, here presenting the grey face of a rock, from which the turf had been peeled by the torrents, and their displaying patches of woods and copse which had escaped the waste of the cattle and the sheep of the feuars, and which, feathering naturally up the beds of empty torrents, or occupying the concave recesses of the bank, gave at once beauty and variety to the landscape. Above these scattered woods rose the hill in barren, but purple majesty: the dark rich hue particularly in autumn, contrasting beautifully with the thickets of oak and birch, the mountains ashes and thorns, the alders and quivering aspens, which chequered and varied the descent, and less with the dark green and velvet turf, which composed the level part of the narrow glen.”
The interesting and beautiful language shows Scott’s adherence to the Romantic period, to which he belonged. The description is highly informative. He also emphasizes the loneliness of the scene.

“But the extreme solitude pressed on the heart; the traveller felt that uncertainty whither he was going, or in what so wild a path was to terminate, which at times strikes more on the imagination than the grand features of a show scene when you know the exact distance of the inn where your dinner in best poke, and at the moment of preparing.” 12

Agnus and Calder have also appreciated Scott for his great skill in the depiction of scenes.

“In fact to the roles of the historian and entertainer, Scott added that of the travel writer, using the jargon of the day to do the job performed by coloured photographs in a modern travel agent’s brochure.” 13

Thus Scott’s greatness as an excelled painter of scenes and landscapes is evident from the various scenes of his novels. These scenes are full of visual, auditory and tactile images and provide empirical characteristics to his novels.

As far as the mode of narration is concerned, Scott has a cavalier attitude which sometimes mars the artistic quality of his works. In spite of the admitted necessity of paying some attention to the plot Scott thinks, in the last analysis, that to have a tightly fitted narrative structure is in no way an absolute requirement for a successful novel because in his opinion human life itself is not coherent and lacks sequence.

Scott’s comments indicate that he was satisfied with the way in which he constructed his novel and preferred spontaneous development of the narrative to restricting it in the bounds of plot. David Daiches has also pointed out that “Scott was never the obsessed artist but the happy writer.” 14 Sometimes he begins right in the middle as is the case in The Heart of Midlothian, and Old Mortality. The kind of narrative structure presented in The Heart of Midlothian can be termed as loose structure. It was more congenial to his temperament. The reason for this trend can be traced in the particular characteristics of the romantic age to which he belonged. It seems that the romantic assertion for the spontaneous expression of feelings had developed in him a casual attitude towards plot and he preferred to make his novels lively and attractive through the artistry of dialogues and realistic presentation of the characters.

Scott’s language is reflective of the culture and environment of his characters. Scott used Scottish language for his Scottish characters and made English ones speak in their own native language. Graham Tulloch appreciates this device by Scott and says that

“Despite his popular reputation as the great romancer Scott was, as has long been recognized, in many ways a realistic writer. His presentation of Scots dialect conforms with this. So far as we can now tell it reflects the actual socio-linguistic situation in Scott’s own time.” 15
Scott makes use of the Scottish language in order to present his characters and situations in a true and natural manner. David Murison has paid a great tribute to Scott for his art in creating the speeches for his characters and says that:

“Just as he created a whole gallery of characters of all kinds and conditions, excelled only by Shakespeare and the Scottish ones the most memorable, so he rings the changes in their speech in all sorts of subtle ways.”¹⁶

Murison’s comments can be verified by the example of The Antiquary. The Fortunes of Nigel is another novel which illustrates the switching about from Scotch to English. The wandering Willie’s tale in Redguantlet is an acute example of the use of Scottish language. The language of the tale is a racy late eighteenth century Scotch. This tale being an oral tale put in the mouth of a wandering minstrel is filled by a deliberate conflation of dialects but when Scott speaks in his own person in the novel, he uses standard English except for an occasional Scottish of which he seems to be unaware because his aim was to present his novels to an English audience. His English characters speak in standard English. The example is the language of Waverley and many other great historical figures like the Duke of Argyle in Heart of Midlothian and Richard I in The Talisman.

Professor Ernest Weekly considers that of all individual writers next to Shakespeare whose formative influence on English is beyond all comparison, Scott has contributed most of the English vocabulary. Thus it is certainly clear that whatever the faults of Scott’s style there is no question of the richness of his language, which after all reflects the sheer bulk of his work. Its great sweep and range and the extraordinary variety of its content itself is a proof of the vitality he imparted to the words he used and in so many cases effectively recreated.¹⁷

According to an estimation made by David Murison “among Scott’s 30’000 word vocabulary are included 3,000 words are used only in Scotland or having meaning peculiar to Scotland and belonging to the remains of old Scots language.”¹⁸

Thus it can be inferred from a thorough study of the use of languages by Scott that he provides us with four models of narrative; firstly ordinary English narrative with a few Scotch words, secondly the recorded eighteenth century Scottish speech narrative as in Wandering Willie’s tale, thirdly the written Scots of uneducated Scotsmen like that of Davie Deans in The Heart of Midlothian and fourthly only barely explored language of the written narrative of an older educated who speaks Scotch informally, in a mixture of Scotch and English. The depiction of these four varieties of language is contributive of his versatility of themes in various novels. Thus Scott makes his characters speak in their own native tongues.

As far as the matter of objectivity is concerned, Scott’s personality never intrudes into his novel. In the matter of description Scott only states the period or the year of the theme of the novel. The social, moral and political aspects of society are revealed through the interaction of characters and through the objective narration of the events. Throughout his novels he observes the principles of negative capability and negates his own personality in depicting the events and people of his novels. Hence he is the best example of T.S.Eliot’s term of catalyst.”¹⁹
CONCLUSION

There is no doubt at all of Scott’s tremendous popularity with the broad reading public nearly 1900, nor of his secure position with the critics for as long or nearly as long. Scott however not only attracted other novelist and held them; he also created a new literary genre and has long been recognised, in another critical common place, as “the father of historical novel”. Saintsbury calls attention to “the singular and miraculous fashion in which Sir Walter taking a kind of writing which had......been tried, or at least tried at, for more than two thousand years, and which had never yet been got to run smoothly on its own and, by one stroke effected what the efforts of those to millenniums had been bungling and balking themselves over”20 The manner in which Scott brought to sudden and complete fruition a type which had been but feebly foreshadowed for so long assures his continued consideration as a figure of prime importance in the history of the novel.

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