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JOHN PECK

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HOW TO STUDY A NOVEL

Second Edition

John Peck

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For Alison

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General editors' preface

EVERYBODY who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to this problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literature. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of texts you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not simply convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you and show you how to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck
Martin Coyle

Preface

ONE of the most common experiences of students of English Literature is to read a novel and thoroughly enjoy it, but to be at an almost total loss to say what the book is really about or what things in it are most worthy of note. The natural tendency then is to rely on guidance from teachers or critics, but this is a poor substitute for constructing a personal response. Developing an individual reading can, however, seem extraordinarily difficult to the average student, even to the student who is 'good at English'. For it is a difficulty which is not due to any lack of intelligence on the part of the reader, but to inexperience of the nature of criticism. Literary criticism is an activity, like any other, with its own rules and well-established modes of conduct. But these rules are seldom, if ever, explained to the newcomer. He or she is likely to be thrown in at the deep end, and, in a confused sort of way, from the observation of others, expected to establish what the rules are.

What this book attempts to do is to set out some of the rules for studying a novel – or, at any rate, one version of the rules. It is indeed the variety of approaches and methods that exists that makes teachers reluctant to recommend any specific approach. But some general guidance about how to approach a novel must be better than none, and it is in this spirit that the method suggested here is offered.

I do not claim that this book will make you an expert novel critic: if anything, it can be compared to driving lessons. These teach you the basics of handling a car, and how to proceed with reasonable assurance, but even when you have passed your test there is still a lot to learn. This book only attempts to illustrate some basic techniques of handling a novel, although towards the end, when I look at recent approaches to criticism of the novel, I do make some suggestions about how you can advance further.

The criticism this book is open to is that it attempts to substitute a mechanical form of study for the enjoyable experience of reading. And

it is perfectly true that the best way to find out about novels is to read as many as possible. But the pressure of studying several subjects at school, as well as outside distractions, means that very few school or university students have read as much as they feel they should have. In addition, studying novels for exams is a somewhat different activity from reading novels for pleasure, and does demand a certain sort of disciplined attention which the general reader is not obliged to bring to literature. A more positive defence of the approach recommended here is that it should not prove constraining. In some ways it is no more than a frame, in which it should be possible to articulate clearly a genuine response to any novel.

A word about the format of the first five chapters: in each chapter I discuss individual novels because I think that too much laying down of abstract principles is unlikely to prove helpful. Rules only begin to make sense when seen in operation. But this means, if you are going to find these chapters at all useful, that you may have to read analyses of novels that you have not read, and have no immediate intention of reading. In each example, however, the method employed is meant to be relevant to many novels, not just to the novel at the centre of the discussion; in the first chapter, for instance, you should find that the approach adopted with *Waverley* and *Sons and Lovers* could easily be adapted to the novel you are currently studying.

Chapters six and seven focus on the issue of how to write an essay; the skills of how to organise, pace and develop an argument are central to the whole activity of literary criticism. These two chapters attempt to provide some essential groundrules (they might even help you avoid that all too common student problem of going round and round in circles, never quite managing to say clearly what it is that you want to say). They are followed by three entirely new chapters, which appear for the first time in this 'Second Edition'. In recent years there has been a flood of new thinking in literary criticism, and a whole range of new approaches: students at university, in particular, soon become aware of terms such as deconstruction, feminist criticism and New Historicism. Chapters eight, nine and ten illustrate these new approaches in action, and suggest ways in which you can absorb this new thinking into your own work. Inevitably, these chapters push this book into what are, at times, difficult areas and difficult issues, but a point I try to keep clear is that even the most innovatory approaches must be built upon close examination of the text. By the end of this book, therefore, you might feel that you have arrived in unfamiliar ter-

ritory, but do try to see that the essential method is that outlined in chapter one, of building your case from the evidence of specific passages; in other words, building an argument from the words on the page.

University of Wales, Cardiff John Peck

Part One

1

Tackling the text

Novels discussed:
Waverley, by Sir Walter Scott, published 1814
Sons and Lovers, by D. H. Lawrence, published 1913

I

I AM a student, at school, college or university, and have been told that the next book we are going to look at is *Waverley*, by Sir Walter Scott. I have heard of Scott, although the only thing I know about him is that he was Scottish, but I have never heard of *Waverley*. But, being a conscientious student, I decide to read the novel before the classes begin, and moreover, I hope to work out my own view of what it is about. Reading the book, I discover that it features a young man called Waverley who falls in with a group of Scottish rebels. At times it is very exciting, and moves along very quickly, but at other times it seems awfully wordy and slow. I enjoyed it, and think it might be about . . .

However, it is at this stage that I become very uncertain what to say, as I cannot decide what aspects of the book are most important. I lack any sort of confidence that the judgements I make can be accurate or worthwhile. And I feel particularly depressed as this does seem a relatively straightforward novel. I have tried my best, but I now decide to wait for lectures, when my teacher will guide me though the novel.

Obviously this is unsatisfactory. I should be able to produce my own response without immediately having to rely on help from another person. But I lack any sort of method that will enable me to develop my own view: I have lots of half-defined ideas about the novel, but I can't marshal them into any sort of pattern. Part of the problem is that the novel is so long that I am overwhelmed by sheer bulk. I just do not know where to begin. But this is where I can start to establish a method.

As length is a problem, it may help if I decide to concentrate on a few short passages in the novel, and try to work out from these to an impression of the work as a whole. No doubt there are limitations to such an approach, and it is going to have no value at all unless I have read the book beforehand, but it does seem a way of making a systematic start on coming to terms with the text. Further ideas about a critical method can develop as I go along.

Having decided to try this approach, my first task is to select useful passages. The logical thing to do would seem to be to start at the beginning, perhaps with a look at the first page of the novel, and then let my response to the opening determine my choice of where to look next. My hope, of course, is that the opening will introduce themes and ideas which will prove central to the work. So, I turn to the first page of *Waverley*. There, however, I encounter an immediate problem: the first chapter is entitled 'Introductory', and the opening does not seem very illuminating. But this is a problem that may often occur, particularly when the novel does not start with characters: in their absence it can prove difficult to find anything to hang on to. The answer is to turn on a few pages, until I find a passage that does present one or more of the leading figures. I can now formulate my first rule:

> *Step 1: After reading the work as a whole, take a close look at the opening page of the novel, or, if this proves unilluminating, at a passage fairly near the beginning featuring one or more of the principal characters.*

Following this procedure, I discover that, after his introductory chapter, Scott moves on quickly to Edward Waverley, the hero of the novel, and I could choose any of a great number of passages describing this young man. The extract I select is just under a page in length: that is, long enough to say something substantial, but short enough to allow me to explore it in some detail:

> His powers of apprehension were so uncommonly quick, as almost to resemble intuition, and the chief care of his preceptor was to prevent him, as a sportsman would phrase it, from overrunning his game, that is, from acquiring his knowledge in a slight, flimsy, and inadequate manner. And here the instructor had to combat another propensity too often united with brilliancy of fancy and vivacity of talent, – that indolence, namely, of disposition, which can only be stirred by some strong motive of gratification, and which renounces study as soon as curiosity is gratified, the pleasure of conquering the first difficulties exhausted, and the novelty of pursuit at an end. Edward would throw himself with spirit upon any clas-

> sical author of which his preceptor proposed the perusal, make himself master of the style so far as to understand the story, and if that pleased or interested him, he finished the volume. But it was in vain to attempt fixing his attention on critical distinctions of philology, upon the difference of idiom, the beauty of felicitous expression, or the artificial combinations of syntax. 'I can read and understand a Latin author', said young Edward, with the self-confidence and rash reasoning of fifteen, 'and Scaliger or Bentley could not do much more.' Alas! while he was thus permitted to read only for the gratification of his amusement, he foresaw not that he was losing for ever the opportunity of acquiring habits of firm and assiduous application, of gaining the art of controlling, directing, and concentrating the powers of his mind for earnest investigation, – an art far more essential than even that intimate acquaintance with classical learning, which is the primary object of study.
>
> [*Waverley* (Penguin, 1972), p. 46]

What do I say about this passage? Well, I am trying to be systematic, so it might be as well if I were to work out a standard procedure for looking at each extract. My analysis can fall into five stages:

(a) *A short statement of what the passage is about*
(b) *A search for an opposition or tension within the passage*
(c) *Analysis of the details of the passage, possibly relating them to the opposition already noted*
(d) *How the passage relates to the novel as a whole and/or novels in general*
(e) *A search for anything distinctive about the passage, particularly in the area of style, that has been overlooked in the previous stages.*

(a) The passage is about Edward Waverley, an enthusiastic young man, much attracted to literature, but who shows little application.

(b) There must always be some sort of conflict going on in a work of literature or there would be no story. Identifying a central opposition is one of the quickest ways of getting to grips with any novel, and, fortunately, this opposition is not only revealed in the work as a whole but to some extent is in evidence on every page. The opposition can take various forms. Most commonly, novels set the prevailing values of society against heroes or heroines who feel uncomfortable with these values: the novel records the quarrel between a particular individual and the society in which he or she lives. It is also possible, though, for novels to contrast different ways of living or the life-styles of different communities, or to set a traditional way of life against present-day life. Sometimes the opposition is less concrete – something familiar and

knowable is set against something more vague. It is possible for any specific novel to combine a number of these oppositions, some of which will only become apparent as the work progresses, but one central opposition should be apparent at the outset.

This is certainly the case in *Waverley*. In this passage the opposition is between Waverley's lightness of approach, his casualness, and his lack of discipline, and an alternative set of values emphasising application, responsibility, and earnestness. These, presumably, are the values of society, whereas Waverley is a wayward, although very likeable, youth.

(c) There is no need to dwell on the details of this passage as the opposition just noted is so obviously repeated, with different illustrations, in sentence after sentence.

(d) So far I have established that Scott presents a pleasant but rather undisciplined young man, and sets against him notions of more sober and steady conduct. I now want to relate this to my sense of the work as a whole. From my knowledge of how the story develops, I feel confident in stating that this is, at least in part, a novel about how a young man like this fares in the world. That is quite a sufficient sense of the novel to be going on with, but if I had got more than just an awareness of the story out of the novel on my first reading I might well be able to extend this initial impression. The approach is to feed such ideas as I have formulated into my systematic analysis of the novel.

But for the moment I will move on to how this episode relates to novels in general. As already suggested, novels are often about the relationship between individuals and the society in which they live. Often these principal characters are young and naïve, idealistic and romantic, too impatient to have much time for conventional behaviour. Such novels frequently deal with the maturing of these young people and the scrapes they get into before they finally settle down. *Waverley* seems to be a novel of this kind: a novel about how a certain sort of romantic young man grows up.

Now it might be objected that what I have spotted so far would be obvious from the most casual reading of the book. What I have established, however, does have a certain solidity, as it is based on a real examination of the evidence. But also, and more importantly, these are only the early stages of my analysis. At some point I might begin to spot far less obvious characteristics of the novel.

(e) It is my impression that this is the case when I try to analyse what is distinctive about this passage. Scott is presenting a not untypi-

cal hero, and developing a fairly familiar theme, but his way of writing about such a character is unusual, or at least distinctive enough to demand attention. To me, it seems that Scott almost holds things back, with an excess of his own observations, which are presented in an elaborate style: look, for example, at a phrase such as 'of which his preceptor proposed the perusal'. The narrator also seems very confident, speaking with the voice of long and broad experience. Why does Scott choose to narrate the novel in this way? To work out why, it helps to return to the opposition already noted. Waverley is a reckless young man, whereas Scott, as narrator, presents himself as the voice of sagacity and application, with a concern for phrasing which is in direct contrast to Waverley's lack of concern for such matters. The narrator of the novel, then, can be said to represent a firm standard by which the behaviour of the hero can be judged.

Piecing everything together, I can now state that the novel will be about the romantic idealism of young Waverley, and the escapades he will become involved in as a result of being this sort of young man. The narrator views Waverley with something like amused detachment.

Step 2: Select and analyse a second passage

Looking at a first passage indicates a theme which should prove central to the novel. Selecting a second passage, I want to see this theme developed, which in this novel means choosing a scene where Waverley is becoming involved with the rebels. The passage I have chosen appears about a hundred pages on from the first extract – and, indeed, one of the most manageable ways of moving through any novel is to choose passages at about a hundred- or two-hundred-page intervals for analysis.

In this passage Scott describes some of the rebels and their refuge:

> The interior of the cave, which here rose very high, was illuminated by torches made of pine-tree, which emitted a bright and bickering light, attended by a strong though not unpleasant odour. Their light was assisted by the red glare of a large charcoal fire, round which were seated five or six armed Highlanders, while others were indistinctly seen couched on their plaids, in the more remote recesses of the cavern. In one large aperture, which the robber facetiously called his *spence* (or pantry), there hung by the heels the carcasses of a sheep, or ewe, and two cows lately slaughtered. The principal inhabitant of this singular mansion, attended by Evan Dhu, as master of the ceremonies, came forward to meet his guest, totally

> different in appearance and manner from what his imagination had anticipated. The profession which he followed – the wilderness in which he dwelt – the wild warrior-forms that surrounded him, were all calculated to inspire terror. From such accompaniments, Waverley prepared himself to meet a stern, gigantic, ferocious figure, such as Salvator would have chosen to be the central object of a group of banditti.
>
> Donald Bean Lean was the very reverse of all these. He was thin in person and low in stature, with light sand-coloured hair, and small pale features, from which he derived his agnomen of *Bean*, or white; and although his form was light, well-proportioned, and active, he appeared, on the whole, rather a diminutive and insignificant figure. He had served in some inferior capacity in the French army, and in order to receive his English visitor in great form, and probably meaning, in his way, to pay him a compliment, he had laid aside the Highland dress for the time, to put on an old blue and red uniform, and a feathered hat, in which he was far from showing to advantage, and indeed looked so incongruous, compared with all around him, that Waverley would have been tempted to laugh, had laughter been either civil or safe.
>
> [pp. 140–1]

In looking at this section, I go through the same stages as in discussing the first extract.

The passage is about Edward's encounter with the rebels: just the sort of life he has dreamed about in his reading, but now we see this world in rather more realistic detail. The opposition I note in this passage is the difference between what Edward expected and the less impressive reality of the robber-chief. It is rather different from the initial opposition noted in the first passage, but has some resemblance to it in that the emphasis falls on the gap between how the hero would like life to be and how life really is.

Looking at the details, I must try to decide why Scott has selected the details he has chosen to include. There seems to be a great emphasis on how different all this is from Edward's comfortable background: the rebels live in a cave, rather than a house, and the size of the cave is difficult to determine. In addition, there is an uncertain light in which it is impossible to determine exact numbers. Initially Scott appears to be emphasising the mysterious romantic impression. But the dead meat hanging in the cave reminds us that the rebels are real people who have to eat, and the use of such a word as 'slaughtered' suggests how close to butchery the lives of such rebels are. Scott is beginning to take some of the glamour out of romance, and this process is continued when we are introduced to Donald Bean Lean, for he is not at all the sort of person Edward had expected.

Relating this to the novel as a whole, the chances are that many other scenes around this point are serving the same function of puncturing Waverley's daydreams. His education is now under way. As in the first passage, one of the most distinctive features is Scott's style. He is again eager to impress upon the reader that his range of experience and knowledge of the world is sufficient to put all this in context: as he talks of 'Salvator' and 'banditti' we gain a sense of a sophisticated and worldly narrator. He is never angered or exasperated by what he sees, but simply condescends to be amused. One of the nicest touches is the way he takes the language of the polite world – 'The principal inhabitant of this singular mansion . . .' – and uses it in a totally inappropriate setting.

Pulling all these strands together, what I can now state with some confidence is that this is a novel about a likeable, but immature, youth, who goes off in search of romance and adventure. He certainly finds adventure, as it is not every day that a Highland gang is encountered, but the truth about this way of life is less glamorous than Waverley expected. In the final sentence of this extract we see that Waverley, for all his eagerness to seek adventure, is still very much attracted to the ways of the polite world, for he shares the narrator's amusement at the absurd appearance of Bean Lean.

I seem to be making some progress with *Waverley*, but I can see a problem. I have drawn a certain set of conclusions from the evidence of the text, but another reader might draw different conclusions from the same passages, or, choosing different passages, might produce a wildly dissimilar reading. This doesn't really matter, however: a novel can support many interpretations. The first need is to arrive at a personal reading: at a subsequent stage this can be checked against the readings of classmates, teachers, and published critics.

Step 3: Select and analyse a third passage

From my reading of the novel as a whole I know that events now take a far more serious turn, as the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 breaks out. Edward becomes more and more involved in the rebel cause, indeed becoming so highly regarded in Jacobite circles that it is not long before he meets the Pretender himself. The next passage I have chosen in fact features the Pretender, and also one of the rebel leaders, Fergus; I selected it because it seemed an interesting extract about two hundred pages on in the novel, but almost any other scene around this stage would prove just as rewarding to analyse:

> Edward . . . had now been more than once shocked at the small degree of sympathy which Fergus exhibited for the feelings even of those whom he loved, if they did not correspond with his own mood at the time, and more especially if they thwarted him while earnest in a favourite pursuit. Fergus sometimes indeed observed that he had offended Waverley, but always intent upon some favourite plan or project of his own, he was never sufficiently aware of the extent or duration of his displeasure, so that the reiteration of these petty offences somewhat cooled the volunteer's extreme attachment to his officer.
>
> The Chevalier received Waverley with his usual favour, and paid him many compliments on his distinguished bravery. He then took him apart, made many enquiries concerning Colonel Talbot, and when he had received all the information which Edward was able to give concerning him and his connections, he proceeded, – 'I cannot but think, Mr Waverley, that since this gentleman is so particularly connected with our worthy and excellent friend, Sir Everard Waverley, and since his lady is of the house of Blandeville, whose devotion to the true and loyal principles of the Church of England is so generally known, the Colonel's own private sentiments cannot be unfavourable to us, whatever mask he may have assumed to accommodate himself to the times.'
>
> 'If I am to judge from the language he this day held to me, I am under the necessity of differing widely from your Royal Highness.'
>
> [pp. 354–5]

I look at this passage in the same way as I looked at the other extracts, but with one difference. So far I have been anxious to pull everything into a simple pattern. I must now be prepared to make this pattern more complex. I have latched on to what I take to be the central issue of the novel, but the more I look the more I should try to see some of the nuances of Scott's presentation of his theme.

This passage is about two of the rebels. The main opposition is between the rather rough manner of Fergus and the gentlemanly demeanour of the Pretender, but there is also an opposition between the Pretender's idea about where Talbot's loyalties must lie and the reality of his allegiance.

Looking first at Fergus: Scott here seems to continue his undermining of romantic notions, for Fergus, although in some respects a glamorous figure, is cruel and insensitive; he lacks that consideration for others which is one feature of a polite society. Part of the skill of the novel, it is becoming clearer, is Scott's ability to present a full and convincing impression of the manners and morals of the rebels. It is the English who, for the most part, have an exclusive possession of gentlemanly behaviour, whereas the Scots, although brave, are coarse and brutal.

But the picture gains in subtlety with the introduction of the Chevalier. Calling him the Chevalier establishes a sympathetic tone, for it is an acceptance of the term the rebels themselves use. This is followed by references to his manners, his bearing as a leader, and his recognition of sterling qualities. The paragraph could easily have been slanted against him, but the intention is to present him in a favourable light. The most touching feature is his misconception about the degree of popular support he enjoys: he cannot but believe that Talbot is secretly one of his supporters, and Edward has to offer a tactful refutation of the assumption. The impression is of a courageous and honourable man, but one who is sadly unaware of the realities of his situation.

To relate this to the novel as a whole, at first Scott seems to have nothing but contempt for the rebels, scorning them with his clever and cultivated use of a superior language. But, as the text progresses, he establishes in some detail the different natures of the protagonists, and begins to indicate their strengths as well as their shortcomings.

The three passages considered have shown me that the novel deals with the experiences of Waverley; I have noted the differences between the English and the Scots; and, in looking at this third passage, I have begun to realise that Scott has a sensitive understanding of the various impulses that inspire the Scots. This added dimension can now become the main focus of my reading, for an interpretation of any novel is only going to be really valuable if it captures something of the complexity of the picture offered, rather than just the simplest outline of the text.

Step 4: Select and analyse a fourth passage

I want a passage now that will endorse, and possibly extend, what I have spotted so far. (Sometimes, of course, even after looking at three passages, I will still be far from clear about the direction the novel is taking. I deal with this problem later.) I move forward about a hundred pages and start to look for a suitable scene: I find one at the point where the rebellion has collapsed, and some of the principal figures are being brought to trial. Edward, though, has been granted a royal pardon. The scene I have chosen is the trial of Fergus and his kinsmen:

> Fergus, as the presiding Judge was putting on the fatal cap of judgement, placed his own bonnet upon his head, regarded him with a steadfast and stern look, and replied in a firm voice, 'I cannot let this numerous audi-