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NARRATIVE STRUCTURE  
IN THE NOVELS  
OF SIR WALTER SCOTT

*by*

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*Erskine College*

1969

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I've just read *Pickwick*, by Dickens. Do you know it? There are some splendid parts; but what defective structure! All English writers are like that. Walter Scott excepted, they lack plan. This is intolerable for us Latins.

*Gustave Flaubert*

(Letter to George Sand, July 12, 1872)



## PREFACE

This study is an analysis of the narrative structure of Sir Walter Scott's novels. The first chapter includes a review of the scholarly comments on the subject and some of Scott's own statements about it, along with definitions of terms to be used. The second and third chapters deal with the novels themselves, under the headings of the "romances" and the "chronicles". In the fourth chapter the following matters are analyzed as indicative of the world-view underlying the works: the mediocre hero, his relationship to history, and his structural function; the theme of initiation; and the problems of determinism, the "two cultures", and the relationship between past and present. The fifth chapter contains a summary and presents conclusions about Scott's ability to construct a plot and about the meaning of the narrative structure of the Waverley group as a whole.

I want to express my gratitude to Professor H. K. Russell of the University of North Carolina for his invaluable help in the preparation of this work. His incisive suggestions always pointed the way to greater clarity, and I am specifically indebted to him for the terms "defining event" and "definition, confirmation, culmination" as used in Chapter I and throughout.

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*Marian H. Cusac*





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# I

## STRUCTURE DEFINED

Sir Walter Scott was 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. For nearly two decades, a novel which bore "By the Author of *Waverley*" or the name of Scott on its title page was assured of a wide sale and a generally favorable critical reception, a situation which continued to obtain for the better part of a century. According to Hillhouse,

There is no doubt at all of Scott's tremendous popularity with a broad reading public until nearly 1900, nor of his secure position with the critics for as long or nearly as long. One may dismiss as a critical commonplace his popularity in his own time, with the reminder, however, that it included, on the authority of Carlyle and others, the very highest and most critical levels of the reading public. The merely popular best-selling novelist of today does not presumably include among his devoted readers men like Goethe, Hazlitt, DeQuincey, Byron, Jeffrey, and Coleridge; neither did he (or she) attract and hold such readers a century ago.<sup>1</sup>

Scott, however, not only attracted them and held them; he also created a new literary genre and has long been recognized, in another critical commonplace, as "the father of the 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 lines to its own end, by one stroke effected what the efforts of those two millenniums had been bungling and balking themselves over".<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> James T. Hillhouse, *The Waverley Novels and Their Critics* (Minneapolis, 1936), p. 331.

<sup>2</sup> George Saintsbury, "The Historical Novel", in *The Collected Essays and Papers of George Saintsbury*, III (London, 1923), 20.

Neither of these points – Scott’s popularity and his importance as the molder of a new form – requires additional emphasis. They are well established. What does call for attention is the shape which this new form took, that is, the structure of the novels themselves. A man who in eighteen years produced thirty-two pieces of prose fiction, twenty-six of them full-length novels, must have had, either consciously or unconsciously, some underlying concept of form in fiction. It is my purpose here to examine the twenty-six novels in order to determine, primarily, the nature of their narrative structure, and secondarily, the function of the fictional heroes and the historical characters within this pattern,<sup>3</sup> and then to present conclusions regarding Scott’s place as a writer of what he termed “romantic composition”.<sup>4</sup>

There has been no detailed study of the structure of “the Waverley novels”.<sup>5</sup> Criticism of a general sort has of course been available since their appearance,<sup>6</sup> first in reviews in the contemporary periodicals and later in the century in more extensive critical estimates by Carlyle, Bagehot, Leslie Stephen, and others. These estimates, however, tend to be extremely vague, at least by modern standards, and offer little help in understanding the structural technique either of any particular novel or of the Waverley group as a whole. One of Bagehot’s remarks may be taken as an example: “The plots produced, so to say, by the pen of the writer as he passes over the events, are likely to have a freshness and a suitability to those events, which is not possessed by the inferior

<sup>3</sup> The six shorter works – “The Highland Widow”, “The Two Drovers”, “The Surgeon’s Daughter”, “My Aunt Margaret’s Mirror”, “The Tapestry Chamber”, and “Death of the Laird’s Jock” – will not be considered except incidentally. All of these pieces have far greater affinities with the short story than with the novel. They appeared in 1827 and 1828, coming between *Woodstock* (1826) and *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828).

<sup>4</sup> Scott’s “General Preface to the Waverley Novels”, in *Waverley*, p. xxiii. The edition of the novels which will be used in this paper is the “Riverside Edition” of *Scott’s Complete Works*, 25 vols (Boston, 1923). For the reader’s convenience in locating references in other editions of the novels, chapter numbers will be given along with the volume and page numbers.

<sup>5</sup> This term is used loosely today, as it was in Scott’s time, to refer both to the novels by “the Author of *Waverley*” and to those which, because of the revelation of his identity in 1826 at the time of the failure of James and John Ballantyne, subsequently bore Scott’s name. The six shorter works (see note 3, above) also have been customarily published with “the Waverley novels”. Here the term refers to the twenty-six novels under consideration. See Appendix A for a chronological list of Scott’s fiction.

<sup>6</sup> See Hillhouse’s succinct treatment, pp. 40-153.

writers who make up a mechanical plot before they commence."<sup>7</sup> Such a comment is valid; it is a just reflection of both the technique and the effect of many of Scott's works; but it is of little use as an aid to understanding what the technique and the effect actually are, and in this deficiency it is typical of much of the earlier criticism.

Saintsbury is slightly more specific when he points out what he considers to be the two faults of Scott: that he allows some persons to be elaborately presented, then dropped; and that he hurries his conclusions.<sup>8</sup> In fact, says Saintsbury, "Plot, in the strict sense, he never achieved, and very seldom even attempted to achieve it. . . . It may almost be said that Scott never winds up a plot artfully."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless he indicates, in what seems to be a contradictory judgment, that Scott was perfectly well aware of what he was about, that he did not blunder into his successes, and that evidence for these assertions may be found both in and out of the novels.<sup>10</sup>

Among later critics, John Buchan gives a favorable opinion of the novels as well-composed works of art, even while stressing Scott's lack of a pre-conceived plan:

The stories built themselves up half-consciously in his mind, while his fancy ran free. Hence his structure was not an artificial thing beaten out by laborious cogitation, but an organic development proceeding slowly and naturally like the growth of a tree. In none of the greater novels are we offended by any jerking of the wires. . . . The novel, when he wrote, was still in process of changing from the rambling, inconsequent, picaresque tradition. But . . . [in Scott's novels] the main drama is nearly always well shaped, though that drama is not always coterminous with the whole story. The novels, it seems to me, do in a large measure achieve an artistic unity.<sup>11</sup>

Buchan's comment, emphasizing the Romantic organicism<sup>12</sup> inherent in the novels, is echoed in part by Lukács when he points out that the

<sup>7</sup> Walter Bagehot, "The Waverley Novels", in *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot*, ed. Mrs. Russell Barrington, III (London, 1915), 71.

<sup>8</sup> *The English Novel* (London, 1913), p. 209. The latter observation had been made at least as early as 1816 by Scott himself, when, in the Conclusion to *Old Mortality*, he indicated that he was "of the opinion that a history, growing already vapid, is but dully crunched up by a detail of circumstances which every reader must have anticipated, even though the author exhaust on them every flowery epithet in the language" (II, 292). See p. 18, below, for the complete quotation.

<sup>9</sup> "The Historical Novel", p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> *The English Novel*, pp. 207-208. For such evidence see esp. the Introduction to *The Fortunes of Nigel*.

<sup>11</sup> *Sir Walter Scott* (New York, 1932), p. 340.

<sup>12</sup> See Morse Peckham, "Toward a Theory of Romanticism", *PMLA*, LXVI, 5-23 for a concise discussion of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century cosmological shift from "static mechanism" to "dynamic organicism".