

IN THE SPACE BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION – THE ROLE OF
WALTER SCOTT'S FICTIONAL PREFACES

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Sir Walter Scott for a long time had functioned in literary criticism as a novelist who facilitated development of the novel towards its realist form. This is not to say that he was regarded as a great realist writer; on the contrary, his deviations from realism had been frequently pointed to him. On the whole, however, it is valid to say that literary criticism valued him “as an accurate depicter of the past” (Kerr 1989: 1) and ignored those aspects of his novels that undermined the realistic illusion that he had first created. After the invalidation of the realist tradition critics began to notice that Scott’s fiction apart from the more or less accurate pictures of the past offers also a self-conscious commentary on the relationship of history and fiction. Contemporary criticism thus focuses on metafictional devices in the novels.

The reevaluation of Scott’s novels is accountable by the fact that the distinction between history and fiction has become in the twentieth century as blurry as it was in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Historians, literary critics and novelists alike draw attention to parallels between literature and history. Hayden White (1999: 6) argues that “[l]iterary discourse may differ from historical discourse by virtue of primary referents, conceived as imaginary rather than real events, but the two kinds of discourse are more similar than different since both operate language in such a way that any clear distinction between their discursive form and their interpretative content remains impossible” and points to the applicability of literary theory to the study of historical modes of writing. In his seminal study *Metafiction* (1973) the historian analysed nineteenth-century histories according to “modes of emplotment: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire” (1973: 7).

The same theme is present in literary criticism. Linda Hutcheon (1991: 105) argues, for instance, that “separation of the literary and the historical ... is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than how they differ”. Historiographic metafiction, which is a contemporary variety of the historical novel, emphasises common points of literature and history, pointing to the equal reliance on verisimilitude of the two discourses, their linguistic constructedness and intertextuality (Hutcheon 1991: 105).

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Scott showed the interplay between fact and fiction in prefaces to the first editions of his novels. What distinguished these prefaces from those written for the reeditions of the Waverley Novels (usually referred to as the Magnum Opus edition) was that they were signed by fictitious personae. The description of the careers of the putative authors of prefatory material will serve to illustrate how leaky the boundaries between textual, paratextual, and extratextual entities are and how broad is the space between reality and fiction. The easiness with which fictitious characters penetrate the boundary between text and paratext and empirical figures assume textual form within a fictional composition seems to be Scott’s most vivid commentary on the workability of the rigid distinction between fact and fiction. It points to the intermediary spaces between the two entities, proving that they are but poles of a spectrum rather than mutually exclusive alternatives.

The history of reception of Scott’s novels clearly demonstrates that their significance to literature is estimated on the basis of how neatly they fit within the realist tradition, that is that tradition that recognises the nineteenth-century novel as a height of development of the genre and looks upon earlier texts as on its stages. Contemporary critics, however, emphasise that Scott’s historical novel may well be “the direct continuation of the great social novel of the eighteenth century”, as Lukács described it (1962 [1989]: 31), and a forerunner of the Victorian novel, but what traditional critics ignored, or considered as its deficiency was a great degree of self-consciousness, most apparent in the prefaces with which Scott supplied most of his texts. Scott’s problem with beginnings is notorious among both his critics and readers. It takes some patience to plough through dozens of pages before getting to the proper story but it is in the prefatory material, for decades ignored, or even omitted by publishers, where Scott developed his theory of the historical novel.

However, by no means should it be supposed that the theory contained in the prefatory material is serious and consistent. Scott originally published his novels anonymously, realising that as “an experiment on public taste” they may not find favour in the eyes of readers. That is why the prefaces to their original editions were often signed by fictitious personae. It is only after the bankruptcy of Constable and Co., which left him with a huge debt of 114 thousand pounds,

that Scott acknowledged the Waverley Novels as his own and decided to prepare them for reedition, the so called Magnum Opus edition, to pay off some of his debts. The new edition was provided with new prefaces, this time signed with his own name. If we add to the two prefaces a third one that contemporary editors usually attach and remember that first chapters are frequently preliminary and the real story commences only in the second, we will understand why Scott apologises for his cumbersome beginnings. And yet, as Gerard Genette (1997: 288), the author of *Paratexts*, makes it clear, “these prefaces are the most fascinating of Scott’s œuvre. This intoxication with incognito, this proof of otherness by identity (“It cannot be I, for it is I”), is a form of extravagant humour that prefigures the most unsettling masquerades of a Pessoa, a Nabokov, a Borges, a Camus...”.

The prefatory material of the Waverley Novels assumes variegated forms: “a postscript, which should have been a preface” (Scott 1998: 339), dedicatory epistles, advertisements, introductions, letters or minutes from a meeting. They also serve numerous functions. They are the place when the author, albeit through the mouth of a surrogate persona, can express his opinion concerning genre definition of the following texts, answer critical opinions concerning his fiction or explain his theoretical assumptions. Yet, above all, they demonstrate in practice how broad is the field between reality and fiction. Thus, the two concepts appear to be more like poles of a spectrum than binary oppositions.

It has been argued that Scott, unlike the eighteenth-century writers who were trying to assimilate their novels to various forms of historical discourse, situates his texts safely within the bounds of fiction (Zimmerman 1996: 222). The situation, however, is much more complex. It frequently appears that the events constituting the substance of the novels have solid substantiation in historical reality and at the same time elements of empirical reality dissolve into fiction. The latter process is palpable in the functioning of paratexts, whose ontological status is altogether different from that of a text proper. It would seem that paratexts, such as prefaces, which are usually considered as a part of factual discourse or at least are excluded from the operation of the laws of fiction, provided a boundary between the novelistic and extra-novelistic world. Scott’s original prefaces, however, as all fictional prefaces, merely simulate their serious counterparts (Genette 1997: 279). Thus, they are still fiction but superior to that of the novel’s proper content. They, in turn, are preceded by the Magnum Opus prefaces, signed by Walter Scott, but regarded by critics as “best and most lastingly persuasive of all his disguises” (Robertson 1994: 118). The fiction thus seems to have penetrated also the border between the fictional and authorial preface.

In the fictional prefaces the author calls into being an army of personae, with either editorial or authorial claims to the novels at the head of which they appear. The first figure is Jedediah Cleishbotham, who introduces himself in the

capacity of the editor of *Tales of my landlord*, which function as four subseries of the Waverley Novels. The reader encounters him for the first time on the title page of *Old Mortality* (1816), where he dedicates “these tales illustrative of ancient Scottish manners, and of the traditions of their respective districts” to his “loving countrymen...” (Scott 1993: 3). In the following introduction Cleishbotham informs the readers that he is a schoolmaster and a parish clerk of Gandercleugh, a man of learning and experience, who, contrary to what critics implied, had all the competence indispensable for writing the tales. The credit, however, or rather the censure that the tales may attract, should not be addressed to him but to Peter, or Patrick, Pattieson, a young teacher “who delighted in collection of old tales and legends, and in garnishing them with the flowers of poetry” (Scott 1993: 9) and who is the author of the work. “I am NOT the writer, redacter, a compiler, of the Tales of my Landlord, nor am I, in one single iota, answerable for their contents, more or less” (Scott 1993: 6), Cleishbotham announces and then, after the fashion of eighteenth-century editors, explains how he acquired the manuscript that was offered to the public. Since Pattieson is no longer among the living it was given to him as a settlement for funeral and deathbed expenses. The editor makes it clear, that despite any inaccuracies of the text, it was sent to a bookseller, “a mirthful man, of small stature, cunning in counterfeiting of voices, and making facetious tales and responses” (Scott 1993: 9), in an unaltered form, as willed by the deceased.

Providing all the information concerning the publication of a presented text Jedediah Cleishbotham acts in the way that is expected from all real editors. Besides, he speaks from a position traditionally reserved for a text authored by an empirically existing person. And yet, the abuse of the trust placed by the readers in prefaces, which has been rampant since the origin of the novel, makes the reader suspicious of any editors of more or less obscure manuscripts. Accordingly, Cleishbotham’s text is readily qualified as nothing more than a reflection, a parody, if you will, of the convention of the motif of a found manuscripts. The schoolmaster then is twice removed from the reality to which he aspires. And yet, the situation of establishing Cleishbotham’s status is not devoid of a certain twist. It appears that the character shares certain features of the empirical author, as contemporary editors scrupulously indicate. The name of Gandercleugh may be deciphered as Abbotsford, Scott’s beloved estate, and the mirthful bookseller’s description seems to fit in with Scott’s publisher and printer, John Ballantyne.

In the preface to *The Heart of Midlothian* the identification of the two figures, the empirical author and Cleishbotham, becomes even more obvious. The latter mocks criticisms customarily levelled against the Author of Waverley, especially that of writing solely for commercial reasons. At first, the schoolmaster expresses gratitude to his readers for their favour, claiming that both parties en-

joy benefits from his publications but because those gained by him “being the most solid, (in respect that a new house and a new coat are better than a new tale and an old song)” (Scott 1994: 7) his gratitude should be expressed louder. Accordingly, the new volumes presented to the public, as Cleishbotham declares, are only a token of the profound thankfulness and not an attempt to gather money for “that pendicle or pofle of land called the Carlinescroft, lying adjacent to my garden” (Scott: 1994: 8). Nevertheless, if the owner of the land wished to sell it, “he may meet with a purchaser: unless (gentle reader) the pleasing pourtraictures of Peter Pattieson ... shall have lost their favour...” (Scott 1994: 8). All the remarks refer clearly to the events of the empirical world. Scott, for the royalties obtained from *Tales of my landlord* began to build a house and at the time intended to buy land from his neighbour.

Despite the parallels between the lives of the empirical Scott and textual Cleishbotham, the latter disavows any relation to the former. He invites any readers wishing to see Pattieson’s manuscripts to come to his house and to corroborate the injustice of identifying him with the “inditer of vain fables; who hath cumbered the world with his devices but shrunken responsibility thereof” (Scott 1994: 8). It is worth mentioning that Cleishbotham points to the authority of the title page as that which should state a factual state of authorship:

what can a man do to assert his property in a printed tome, saving to put his name in the title-page thereof, with his description, or designation as the lawyers term it, and place of abode? Of a surety, I would have such sceptics consider how they themselves would brook to have their works ascribed to others, their names and professions imputed as forgeries, and their very existence brought into question... (Scott 1994: 8).

Cleishbotham thus is not only offended by the implications that he can have any relation to the Author of Waverley but also insists on the fact that his existence is as unquestionable as those of his critics.

The status of Laurence Templeton, who signs the preface, or rather the epistle, to *Ivanhoe*, is equally equivocal. The name may well have been familiar to the readers of Scott’s times, since this was one of the author’s pseudonyms for non-novelistic writings. Templeton acts in the capacity of the author of “a publication, which the more grave antiquary will perhaps class with the idle novels and romances of the day” (Scott 1996: 13) and addresses his epistle to Rev. Jonas Dryasdust, who derives his existence straight from the pages of Scott’s earlier novel, *The Antiquary*, where he was introduced as a learned friend of the eponymous hero. The aim of the letter was to justify the experiment of recording “the result of ... antiquarian researches” in “the slight, unsatisfactory, and trivial manner” (Scott 1996: 13). Templeton recalls other writers who took liberties with history, such as Horace Walpole and George Ellis, thus the surrogate author

in a letter to a character, who slipped to the preface, puts himself on a par with extratextual, or real authors. Moreover, he refers those readers who are curious to see the manuscript which served as a source for the tale of *Ivanhoe* to Sir Arthur Wardour, another character from *The Antiquary*. In this way he constructs his world out of textual and extratextual elements without drawing any distinction among them.

In the preface to *The monastery* the group of the authorial personae is joined by Captain Clutterbuck and The Author of Waverley himself. It appears then that not only do characters from the novel slip to the prefaces, but also the author appears there to engage in a correspondence with, as he is well aware, characters of his own making. Clutterbuck writes a letter to the Author, addressed to Mr John Ballantyne, Hanover Street, Edinburgh, with a request to prepare for publication a manuscript, which, not surprisingly, was given to him in mysterious circumstances. He describes himself as a former soldier and an amateur antiquary, who turned to the Author because of "the light ... [he has] occasionally thrown on national antiquities" (Scott 1897: 15). He is not an avid reader of fiction, which he makes clear in the following sincere words:

I [do not] pretend to much taste in fictitious composition, or that I am apt to be interested in your grave scenes, or amused by those which are meant to be lively. I will not disguise from you that I have yawned over your last interview of Melvor and his sister, and fell fairly asleep while the schoolmaster was reading the humours of Dandie Dinmont (Scott 1897: 15).

However, although he is not a passionate fiction lover, he is well-acquainted with the persons involved in its production. He admits that before he resolved to turn to the Author Waverley, he turned to a schoolmaster, who encouraged by the fame of Jedediah Cleishbotham was willing to undertake the task but he could not give up his current occupation for financial reasons.

Like other fictitious personae from prefaces Clutterbuck aspires to the existence in the reality superior to his own and boldly suggests that his name should appear on the title page of the book prepared from the manuscript, next to that of the Author. The Author, however, stands in the way of Clutterbuck's aspirations, revealing that he saw through Clutterbuck's disguise. "The truth is", he declares, "your origin and native country are better known to myself than even to yourself. ... I mean that part of the *terra incognita* which is called the province of Utopia" (Scott 1897: 39). Yet, by no means are the boundaries between the land of Utopia and that of the real world impenetrable. The Author informs Clutterbuck that his countryman, Jedediah Cleishbotham, spends his Christmas vacation in Edinburgh, visiting the houses of the Northern literati. The schoolmaster even became "a sort of a lion in the place, and was led in leash from house to house along with the guisards, the stone-eater, and other amusements

of the season..." (Scott 1897: 40). Thus, as Clutterbuck can clearly see, there is no reason for "being afraid of being supposed connected with the fairy-land of delusive fiction" (Scott 1897: 41).

Having revealed the provenance of Clutterbuck, the author mercilessly exposes the practices of editors coming from his fatherland, mocking the convention of a found manuscript.

What I have remarked as peculiar to Editors of the class in which I venture to enrol you, is the happy combination of fortuitous circumstances which usually put you into possession of the works which you have the goodness to bring into public notice. One walks in the sea-shore, and a wave casts on land a small cylindrical trunk or casket, containing a manuscript much damaged with sea-water, which is with difficulty deciphered, and so forth. Another steps into a chandler's shop, to purchase a pound of butter, and behold! the waste-paper on which it is laid is the manuscript of a cabalist (Scott 1897: 42).

The Author emphasises that in the real world writers have to make great exertions to produce a manuscript, which the editors from Utopia find by so fortunate accidents.

The Author even implies that any agreement of an empirical with a fictitious editor may prove perilous to the inhabitants of the real world, which is a perverse statement, considering the number of Utopian figures that Scott makes claim his own texts. That is why he flatly refuses to place Clutterbuck's name next to his own. "Editors of your country are of such a soft and passive disposition, that they have frequently done themselves great disgrace by giving up the coadjutor who first brought them into public notice and public favour, by suffering their names to be used by those quacks and impostors who live upon the ideas of others" (Scott 1897: 44). Here he refers to the famous case of the alleged author of *Don Quixote*, Cid Hamet Benengeli, whose manuscript was published by Cervantes in 1605. Then the unfaithful Cid changed allegiance and a spurious sequel was published by Alonso Fernandez de Avellaneda in 1614, and then returned he to original patron and a rival sequence was published in 1615. As a result, Cervantes put his hero to death, "lest he should again fall into bad hands" (Scott 1897: 44). In order to avoid, such an unpleasant situation, Clutterbuck has to make do with the modest role of a sleeping partner. The Author stresses the power that he yields over his correspondent, as his creator, threatening that in case of disobedience he "can at pleasure cut off ... [his] annuity" or "actually put ... [him] to death, without being answerable to anyone" (Scott 1897: 45).

This interplay of textual and extratextual realities becomes even more fascinating when the Author resolves to meet the children of his pen. In this way he not only corresponds with his personae from the empirical world but also as-

sumes a textual shape equal to that of his creations. Clutterbuck describes such an interview in a letter to Dryasdust placed in the preface to *The fortunes of Nigel*. The meeting took place in the backshop of a bookseller in a gothic atmosphere. Clutterbuck first was wandering for a while through a "labyrinth of small dark rooms, or *crypts*" (Scott 1907: xxxv) and then in a "vaulted room dedicated to secrecy and silence ... beheld, seated by a lamp, and employed in reading revise, the person, or perhaps I should rather say the Eidolon, or representative Vision, of the AUTHOR OF WAVERLEY (Scott 1907: xxxv-xxxvi). The Author, despite his physical rather than textual appearance does not look like a person of flesh and blood. The room is dark, Clutterbuck is "overwhelmed with filial awe" (Scott 1907: xxxvi) and the figure is veiled, so that it is difficult to establish even the Author's sex. From Dryasdust, however, the Author does not try to conceal his features, when he honours the antiquary with a visit. As a result, in the preface to *Pevekil the Peak*, where Dryasdust places the letter informing Clutterbuck about the interview, there is a detailed description of "the Great Unknown": a bulky and tall man, in a travelling great-coat, which covered a suit of snuff brown ..." (Scott 1900b: lxix) and so the description continues. After the interview the Author vanishes into thin air, the servant implies that there was no one there, suggesting that it could be nothing but a dream.

The preface to *The Betrothed* clearly demonstrates how the invented authorial, or editorial, personae, rather than share the fame with the Author, rebel against him. The preface takes the form of "Minutes of Serderunt Meeting of the Shareholders to form a Joint-Stock Company, United for the Purpose of Writing and Publishing the Class of Works Called the Waverley Novels Held in the Waterloo Tavern, Regent's Bridge" (Scott 1900a: xxix). In the meeting the reader meets all the familiar characters, such as Templeton, Clutterbuck as well as Oldbuck, Dousterswivel and all of them are not delighted with their chairman's idea. As a result the Author disclaims them, telling them to act on their own: "I perceive, gentlemen," he said, "that you are like the young birds, who are impatient to leave their mother's nest – take care your own pen-feathers are strong enough to support you; since, as for my part, I am tired of supporting on my wing such a set of ungrateful gulls. ... I will unbecome you". And then he adds that he has used his "halting assistants" for "sport rather than need" (Scott 1900a: xxxix).

It is arguable how great a weight should be attached to the words of an author who decided to cross the border dividing the extratextual and textual world to mingle with both his surrogate authors as well as characters from his fiction. It is to be supposed that the whole group of characters had a more important function to fulfil than to entertain its creator. They discuss the texts presented to the public, the problems of the interrelation between fiction and reality, raising questions rather than finding answers, but this remains in accordance with the

self-conscious nature of a preface. Their real value, however, appreciated only by contemporary criticism, lies in their playful demonstration of how it is possible for a fictional creature, a mere simulacrum, to gain a life of its own and for an element of reality to be dissolved into textual fiction.

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