



Narrating the Passions

New Perspectives from Modern and
Contemporary Literature

Edited by Simona Corso
and Beth Guilding

Peter Lang

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8 Walter Scott, the Birth of the Historical Novel and the Romantic Legacy: Locality, Emotions and Knowledge*

Indeed, the common phrase for insanity is in this respect a misleading one. The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.

— G. K. CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*

In the long process which brought Walter Scott to the invention of the historical novel a crucial role was played by his reflection on the role of emotions in the process of knowledge. He was certainly prompted to do so by the flood of tears which – to counterbalance the predominance of reason in the age of enlightenment – did actually submerge European literature in the second half of the eighteenth century. But Scott broke all continuity both with the culture of enlightenment and the culture of sensibility. And he rather pioneered an entirely new aesthetics and a new literary practice in which the essential heritage of one of the most important – though often rather underrated – features of the Romantic Revolution is, I believe, to be found.

As clearly stated by Hans Eichner in 1982, Romantic writers had well-grounded reasons for refusing the classicist aesthetic tenets, linked as they were to the old classical episteme founded on universals (Winckelmann's 'there is only one beauty', Voltaire's 'there is only one morality' ...).¹ Yet he

* I wish to thank the 'Associazione Sigismondo Malatesta' who gave me leave to republish here, in English and in a slightly revised edition, this essay which was first

also argued that they went too far in the opposite direction, since their 'decided preference for the temporal, the local, and the individual'² kept them from drawing general conclusions from the observation of individual particularities. The intellectual flaw in their aesthetic stance, Eichner argued, was the refusal of the process of induction in knowledge, that is, that final formulation of general laws which had been so essential in the scientific revolution of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By refusing its procedures ('the observation of facts, the formulation of hypotheses to account for those facts, and the subsequent testing of the hypotheses by suitably designed experiments'³) the Romantics actually refused, Eichner argued, not only the founding principles of modern science, but the essential foundation of all scientific knowledge, thus initiating the process which fatally led to our modern divarication between Natural Sciences and the Humanities. And he saw this as a fatal mistake, since 'the road that leads from Copernicus via Newton and Laplace to Einstein and Planck has its twists, and turns, but it is one road'.⁴

But Romanticism is a very complex phenomenon and, as Eichner himself had forcefully shown elsewhere,⁵ there are more things in it (*in primis* national differences) than literary critics are willing to discern. And

published in the Collana Malatestiana *Studi di Letterature comparate* as 'Scott, la genesi del romanzo storico e l'eredità del romanticismo: l'emozione e il particolare nei processi conoscitivi', in P. Tortonese, ed., "C'è del metodo in questa follia". *L'irrazionale nella letteratura romantica* (Pisa: Pacini, 2015), 127-143.

- 1 Hans Eichner, 'The Rise of Modern Science and the Genesis of Romanticism', *PMLA* (January 1982), 8-30; 17.
- 2 *Ibid.* 16.
- 3 *Ibid.* 21.
- 4 *Ibid.* 20, where he also appealed, for the argument of the absolute continuity between seventeenth-century modern science and our modern contemporary science, to Werner Heisenberg's authority who in 1963 had written: 'Modern physics is just one link in a long chain of events that started from the work of Bacon, Galileo and Kepler and from the practical application of natural science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.'
- 5 Cf. Hans Eichner, ed., *'Romantic' and its Cognates / The European History of a Word* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972).

there was indeed, among some of the Romantics, a curious contradictory combination of opposing tendencies:

Romantic irrationalism went hand in hand – for long stretches of time, apparently, without any sense of contradiction – with a peculiarly arrogant speculative rationalism. For Fichte the identity of object and subject that he regards as “given” in intellectual intuition is a sufficient premise for the deduction of all knowledge; in announcing his Berlin lectures of 1804, for instance, he promised nothing less than a “complete solution of the riddle of the universe and of consciousness with mathematical certainty” that is, by a deduction *a priori*.⁶

By focusing on this surprising mixture of ‘irrationalism’ and ‘arrogant speculative rationalism’ in Fichte and Schelling, Eichner seems to suggest that what was actually really missing in them was the engagement down that difficult and uneven path which connects the observation of facts to the formulation of more or less general hypotheses. This essay will focus instead on literary examples which do engage in that direction, and on Scott’s historical novels, rooted as they were in the very heart of the Romantic revolution, as pioneering this tendency. Scott invented a new aesthetics, founded on the dynamic articulation of the Romantic ‘decided preference for the temporal, the local, and the individual’⁷ with the classicist appeal to universals (the notion of an unchanging universe and an unchanging human nature). And in this new aesthetics emotions, as we will see, played a new, fundamental role in the process of knowledge.

The past had already started to be a special source of all sorts of emotions – fascination, terror, sublime – and to challenge the modern spirit of the age of reason a long time before Scott was born. And his Scotland had long been peopled by the eccentric antiquaries of his childhood recollections (who inspired future unforgettable characters like the Baron of Bradwardine in *Waverley* or Mr Oldbuck of Monkbarns in *The Antiquary*), and by the antiquarian societies flourishing in the Edinburgh of his youth. But Scott’s historical novel was the product of a genuine critical stance against both the use of the past as a mere reserve of romance to feed modern

6 Eichner, ‘The Rise of Modern Science’, 21.

7 Ibid. 16.

sensibility and – at the opposite pole – the extreme specialization of antiquarian science. It was indeed while musing on the failure of an ingenious antiquarian romance, *Queen-Hoo-Hall* (which had been left unfinished at the death of its author and had been edited and finished by Scott himself at the request of his publisher), that the project of *Waverley* first took form in Scott's mind:

Queen-Hoo-Hall was not [...] very successful. I thought I was aware of the reason, and supposed that, by rendering his language too ancient, and displaying his antiquarian knowledge too liberally, the ingenious author had raised up an obstacle to his own success [...]. I conceived it possible to avoid this error [...] and was led to form the opinion that a romance, founded on a Highland story, and more modern events, would have a better chance of popularity than a tale of Chivalry. My thoughts, therefore, returned more than once to the tale which I had actually commenced [...].⁸

Queen-Hoo-Hall had been a failure because, notwithstanding the flawless antiquarian reconstruction of Henry VI's reign, Scott's contemporaries had not warmed to it, and were not involved enough to read it through. Hence Scott's invention of the plot of *Waverley*, where the fantastic and romantic survivals of chivalry in the Highlands were intertwined with the events of the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion that many of Scott's contemporaries still remembered well. And where, above all, the whole story was seen through the ravished eyes of a young Englishman whose characterization was that of the typically romantic youth of early nineteenth-century European literature.⁹ If the stiff conformity to antiquarian specialization had prevented all communication between the past and the present in *Queen-Hoo-Hall*, here instead identification was granted, and the success of *Waverley* was unprecedented.

8 Walter Scott, *General Preface* [1829] to the *Waverley Novels*, in Walter Scott, *The Prefaces to the Waverley Novels*, ed. M. A. Weinstein (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 86–102, 92–93.

9 For the essential function in the novel of the 'Romantic' characterization of Waverley see my 'Romance and History in "Waverley"', in *Athena's Shuttle. Myth Religion Ideology from Romanticism to Modernism*, ed. Franco Marucci and Emma Sdegno (Milano: Cisalpino, 2000), 93–111.

But another momentous innovation contributed to its success: Scott's choice of his historical sources. While the antiquarians had drawn their information out of musty manuscripts and records, and concentrated on the accumulation and verification of data, in *Waverley* instead Scott freely mixed his written sources with the tales of those who had been 'actors' in the narrated events, and his historical reconstruction was largely based on the evidence of 'intelligent eye-witnesses'.¹⁰ And since in their tales the strong passions of the turbulent days of the Scottish Jacobite rising were actually alive again, it was in the very nature of Scott's historical sources that the difference between him and the antiquarians originated. To their dry and shallow erudition he opposed his full-length canvases of the multifarious humanity of past epochs, whose historical significance Carlyle thus celebrated in his 1838 essay on Scott:

[...] these Historical Novels have taught all men this truth, which looks like a truism, and yet was as good as unknown to writers of history and others, till so taught: that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions of men. Not abstractions were they, not diagrams and theorems; but men, in buff or other coats and breeches, with colour in their cheeks, with passions in their stomach, and the idioms, features and vitalities of very men. It is a little word this; inclusive of great meaning! History will henceforth have to take thought of it.¹¹

'Colour in their cheeks' and 'passions in their stomach': emotions and passions are what indeed differentiates the historical reconstruction of Romantic Scott from that of the antiquarian scientists, both the emotions of the readers who identify themselves in *Waverley's* romantic reveries and heroic aspirations, and the passions of the eye-witnesses revived by Scott in the language and temper of his characters crushed by the events of history.

Yet in Scott's works emotions share a very problematical status. If on the one hand they have the invaluable function of granting identification

10 Walter Scott, *A Postscript, which should have been a Preface* (ch. LXXII), in *Waverley*, ed. C. Lamont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1986] 1998), 340, 341.

11 Thomas Carlyle, *Walter Scott* ('Westminster Review' 1838), in Thomas Carlyle, *Miscellaneous Essays*, vi, 6 vols (London: Chapman, 1888), 21-80, 71-72.

with the characters and events of the past, they do on the other hand foster all sorts of mistakes. By introducing the story of its eponymous protagonist on the very threshold of his first historical novel, Scott articulated a veritable critique of the role of emotions in his education, focusing on the features of *Waverley* which were the most overtly autobiographical. As he himself was later to state in the 1829 *General Preface* to the *Waverley Novels*, the young *Waverley* of the first chapters and the young Scott whose portrait was drawn in the autobiographical *Memoir* published by Lockart at the beginning of his biography share a similar experience: a defective education, marked by their utter indulgence, without any rules or limits, in the reading of all kinds of literature set in a romantic and adventurous past, amid heroic enterprises and chivalrous deeds. To these two portraits of a typical Romantic sensibility, where youth is spent in reading 'rather to awaken the imagination than to benefit the understanding',¹² Scott entrusted his critique of a relationship with the past based on the mere consumerism of pleasing emotions, and devoid of any element of knowledge or understanding. In the course of the novel *Waverley* will learn the hard way what its consequences may be. 'O, indolence and indecision of mind! If not in yourselves vices, to how much exquisite misery and mischief do you frequently prepare the way!'¹³ he will say in chapter sixty-five, and not until the end of the novel will he be able to become, as Coleridge's ancient mariner, 'a sadder and a wiser man.'¹⁴ As for Scott himself, he told the story of how he was rescued from this dissipation by the reading of Thomas Percy's *Relics of Ancient English Poetry*, which finally taught him that the legendary stories which had long been the 'Delilahs' of his imagination, and charmed his childhood and youth, might become instead the subject of sober research, and therefore concluded:

12 Scott, *Waverley*, 14.

13 Ibid. 219.

14 Ibid. 296.

The only thing that saved my mind from utter dissipation was the turn for historical pursuit which never abandoned me even at the idlest period.¹⁵

Yet Scott never disclaimed his emotional fascination with the past, which features in the first as in the last of his novels. And *Waverley* – despite all his errors – never rejects his passion for the heroic world of the Jacobites to whose memory he pledges himself and which he engages to preserve at the end of the novel (with the restored Tully-Veolan, the spirited painting of himself and Fergus in highland garb ...). And – what is even more important – without that common youthful indulgence in the emotions induced by the contemplation of scenes from the past, *Waverley* would have stayed Hanoverian, and very unlikely to yield to the charm of the Jacobite world (a sort of second, worthy but stiff, Colonel Talbot) and Scott – if we are to trust his *Memoir* – would not have invented the historical novel. Emotions in Scott's works play then a definitely complex role. They blur the perceptions of the mind and foster mistakes. Yet the emotions consumed by *Waverley* in his unruly and undisciplined education do indeed, without his knowing, prepare the way to his future understanding of the Jacobite world, and the emotions of his childhood and youth at Kelso did furnish Scott with the original impulse for his future historical enterprise of understanding and narrating that world to his contemporaries. Scott and *Waverley*'s mistakes are thus very similar to that typically modern error Ruskin called the 'pathetic fallacy', that is, the error the mind falls victim to when affected by strong emotions which determine a flawed perception of external things. An error indeed but, as Ruskin explains, a sort of a happy one. Since if it is indeed on the greater or lesser capacity of the mind to control emotions that the belonging to the first or second order of poets depends, it is in the very liability to errors, when affected by strong emotions, that the very essence of poetical imaginations consists:

For it is no credit to a man that he is not morbid or inaccurate in his perceptions, when he has no strength of feeling to warp them; and it is in general a sign of higher

15 Walter Scott, *Memoirs*, in D. Hewitt, ed., *Scott on Himself: A Selection of the Autobiographical Writings of Sir Walter Scott* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1981), 1–44; 13.

capacity and stand in the rank of being, that the emotions should be strong enough to vanquish, partly, the intellect, and make it believe what they choose.¹⁶

It is in this perspective that young Waverley and young Scott's mistakes are to be appreciated. Ruskin's notion of the 'pathetic fallacy' (the blurred perception of things and consequent feeble thinking induced by the intensity of the emotions) is by no means necessarily a permanent condition. If indeed the poets who are permanently under its effect inescapably belong to the second order, there is no poet of the first order who has never experienced – from time to time – emotions stronger than what Ruskin calls 'his poor human capacity of thought',¹⁷ emotions which blur and confound his perceptions so that what did not belong to the compass of his conscious knowledge might gain access to it. Emotions are thus the very energy which dismantles the control of the mind, but in the great poets this condition does not last long. It does instead produce a new control of the mind, *new* because what had been only dimly perceived under the effect of a strong emotion must then have found its place in it.

No description could better fit the dynamic transformation of Scott's initial passive fascination with the past into his immense historical knowledge. But a similar dynamic is also at work in the crucial moments of Waverley's *Bildung*: when in chapter sixty-six, while fighting on the Jacobite side against the regular Hanoverian army of which he had been part until recently, the familiar sound of the English trumpets and drums unexpectedly stir in him deep emotions. And conversely the garb and appearance of the highlanders all of a sudden seem to him strange and wild:

[he] heard their whispers in an uncouth and unknown language, looked upon his own dress, so unlike that which he had worn from infancy [...].¹⁸

16 John Ruskin, *Of the Pathetic Fallacy* [1856], in *Modern Painters 3*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, v, 39 vols (London, 1903–1912), 201–220, 208.

17 Ibid. 209.

18 Scott, *Waverley*, 221.

It is nothing but the emotion of a sudden, unexpected identification, and the intimation of a false note, but it is precisely what makes him actually begin to understand that his Jacobite adventure must come to an end.

Just as in Scott's historical novels – both in their genesis and in their aesthetics – the emotions enter into a dynamic relation (as of pushes and counter-pushes) with the control of the mind, so does the historical local datum engage in a similar dynamic with what Scott calls 'the great book of Nature'. There is indeed something in the architecture of the entire cycle of the *Waverley Novels* which counterbalances the extreme particularization of the historical period each single novel richly illustrates, something which actually holds together the single parts and creates connections among them, something that Ruskin considered as the special quality of Scott's art and called his excellence in the 'Arts of design'. So it happens that at the end of the first chapter of *Waverley*, the novel which was to make the cult of the local colour widespread all over Europe and celebrate the triumph of the Scottish picturesque, after 'romantically' declaring that he had entrusted the force of his narrative to the peculiarity of the 'characters and passions of the actors', Scott surprisingly qualifies them:

[...] those passions common to men in all stages of society, and which have alike agitated the human heart, whether it throbbed under the steel corslet of the fifteenth century, the brocaded coat of the eighteenth, or the blue frock and white dimity waistcoat of the present day. Upon these passions it is no doubt true that the state of manners and laws casts a necessary colouring; but the bearings, to use the language of heraldry, remain the same, though the tincture may be not only different, but opposed in strong contradistinction. [...] It is from the great book of Nature, the same through a thousand editions [...] that I have venturously essayed to read a chapter to the public.¹⁹

And when, six years later, he published *Ivanhoe* he went even further. It was the ninth of his novels, where for the first time he abandoned both the Scottish subject-matter and the setting in a recent past (the felicitous combination that had made the success of *Waverley*) to focus on the conflict between Saxons and Normans in England at the time of the Third

19 Ibid. 5.

Crusade. To engage the interest of his contemporaries in events belonging to such a remote past age was much more difficult than it had been in his Scottish novels set in recent history. And much higher was for him the risk of incurring – in his attempt at being successful by introducing elements familiar to modern readers – the censure of the severe antiquarians for having, ‘thus intermingling fiction with truth’, polluted ‘the well of history with modern inventions’ and impressed in the young generations ‘false ideas’²⁰ of the past age he was describing. Scott knew very well the serious risk he was running, and his original response to this difficult issue was again the appeal to what is common to different epochs across ages to counterbalance what was instead historically individualized and might make past manners and customs incomprehensible to modern readers.

In the 1820 *Dedicatory Epistle to Ivanhoe*, under the fictitious name of Laurence Templeton (the supposed author of the novel) he answered the objections of the equally fictitious antiquarian Dr Dryasdust by formulating his genial strategic defence of ‘that extensive neutral ground, the large proportion, that is, of manners and sentiments which are common to us and to our ancestors.’²¹ By including in his historical reconstruction what was common to both his contemporaries and their ancestors Scott avoided the error of the ingenious Strutt (the author of *Queen-Hoo-Hall*) who had instead invested only in differences and excluded ‘everything which was not sufficiently obsolete to be altogether forgotten and unintelligible.’²² And it also marked the difference from the unhappy Chesterton who, Scott argued, ‘to give his language the appearance of antiquity [...] rejected every word that was modern, and produced a dialect entirely different from any that had ever been spoken in Great Britain.’²³

By so doing, that is, by going against the antiquarian taste of his epoch and appealing instead to that ‘extensive neutral ground common to both his contemporaries and their ancestors’ (as he had appealed, in the first

20 Walter Scott, *Dedicatory Epistle to the Rev. Dr Dryasdust, F.A.S.* (1820), in *The Prefaces to the Waverley Novels*, 29–39, 33.

21 *Ibid.* 34.

22 *Ibid.* 35.

23 *Ibid.*

chapter of *Waverley*, to the 'passions common to men in all stages of society'), Romantic Scott would seem to end up by reaffirming that notion of an unchanging human nature which had been one of the pivotal issues of the classicist aesthetics. But that was only apparently a step backward. Since this 'extensive neutral ground' was no longer the centre of the artistic creation, but merely – so to say – a sort of common language between ancient and modern men, the only language in fact in which they could communicate, to allow contemporary readers to understand the so many different shades, colours and forms that passions had in the past, and in places distant and altogether different from the centre of Europe. The universal laws or truths of an unchanging human nature were not what kindled Scott's artistic imagination which was incensed instead by the individual differences – the historical, local, geographical differences – which indeed lay at the centre of his historical reconstructions. But by appealing to the universals on which the classicist aesthetics was founded he avoided the risk Eichner diagnosed as inherent to the Romantic hegemony of the local and the particular: that is, the condemnation to relativist knowledge, and the consequent shrinking of the cognitive dimension of literature. By keeping instead the opening of the compass firm and steady between the two poles of the historical-local and of the universal truths of the great book of nature, 'the same through a thousand editions', Scott paved the way to the new aesthetics of the nineteenth-century novel, where the interest for the local, the singular, and the highly individualized went hand in hand with the firm belief that each new detailed case contributed a new plug to the vast and variegated fabric of the representation of the human condition in modern life.

The best illustration of the meaning and reasons of this new aesthetics was offered by George Eliot in *Middlemarch*, when she contrasted young Dr Lydgate's method of research to the sterile research of another antiquary, the Reverend Edward Casaubon. The research of both aim at universal truths (the key to all mythologies for Casaubon, the 'primary tissue' in human biology for Lydgate), and they are reminiscent of the great scientific publication of the century, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. But it is the capacity of paying attention to, and taking into account, particulars that makes the difference. Casaubon's antiquarian lack of interest in modern life

is not his only flaw (on his wedding journey to the magnificent Catholic Rome of the thirties he spends his time in libraries and, occasionally, museums, but he never actually casts a look at the vast variety in the life of the Romans of the present time). His disregard for the radical criticism passed on his research by a German critic, whose negative review he keeps hidden in a drawer of his desk, is a much more severe flaw. To take it into account would mean to question and revise the generalizations he had already formulated. Not to have done so is the way of proceeding which actually dooms his important research to its inevitable, tragic failure. Hence his sterile knowledge, to which Eliot contrasts Lydgate's method. Since he is a doctor, particulars wear for him the appearances of every single patient he treats, and his research is passionately devoted to single cases. He studies every single case of the fevers whose different origins were unknown at the time, and which were the appalling causes of high death rates among nineteenth-century populations. And if a single case calls into doubt the general hypotheses he had already formulated (as actually happens in the treatment of Raffles' alcoholism) to hide it in a drawer is never a temptation to him, and he is ready to start again with the verification of new hypotheses. His procedures follow the scientific method that keeps steady and firm the two opposite poles necessary to any knowledge, continually moving backwards and forwards between the observation and accumulation of single data and the capacity of the human mind to generalize, between the infinitely small and the infinitely large, a movement Lydgate compares, with a very bold physiological metaphor, to the activity of the human heart:

there must be a systole and diastole in all enquiry [and] [...] a man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-glass.²⁴

A movement between the historical, geographical, individual particularities and the universals, between the observation of tangible/sensible data and the formulations of general hypotheses to submit to further verification:

24 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), Bk VII, 640.

they are nothing but the old two poles of the classic scientific method established by the new science of Copernicus and Galileo in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But in the aesthetics of the nineteenth-century novel their respective weights – as originally in Walter Scott's novels – are inverted. In George Eliot's fictional parable it is in the capacity of attention to particulars that greatness consists. It is in his capability of patiently observing, studying and treating every single case, deeming none of them too insignificant to engage his attention, that Lydgate's excellence as a scientist consists. It is conversely in Casaubon's unwillingness to take into account the single exception of the negative review that his failure consists.

Since the vast variety of the case histories of the past of Europe entered the domain of fiction with Scott's invention of the historical novel, the new aesthetics of the nineteenth-century novel seemed to charge the classic scientific method with new meanings, focusing on the particular, on countless particulars, as the place where truth was more safely – and more likely – to be found. In the first chapter of *Waverley* Scott had declared that his aim was to read a chapter, just one chapter, from the great book of nature. Ruskin, in his turn, stated that he had learned from Scott's and Turner's art that the greatest enterprise a human being might achieve in this world was 'to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way'.²⁵ No great theoretical generalizations then, but even one single, little truth attained from the great book of nature. Because, as the parable of Casaubon and Lydgate illustrates, it is in the great theoretical generalizations that falsity is more likely to be lurking. In another passage in the novel, and in the completely different context of his unhappy relationships with women, Lydgate pronounces a hurried and common generalization on the cruelty of the female nature. This is the narrator's remark:

But this power of generalizing which gives men so much the superiority in mistake over the dumb animals, was immediately thwarted by Lydgate's memory of wondering impressions from the behaviour of another woman [...].²⁶

25 Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 3, 333. (Original emphasis.)

26 Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Bk VI, 592.

It is the sudden memory of Dorothea, and of her extraordinary capacity of sympathizing with the pain of an unfair husband who has just been diagnosed by Lydgate with a severe heart illness.

These two lines of development I have tried to trace back to Scott's invention of the historical novel are – it seems to me – the most important and lasting heritage of the Romantic revolution. And they are in marked opposition to the prevailing tendency to see instead its essence in the release of the wild and vital forces of the obscure and the irrational. The new role played by emotions in the process of knowledge was prompted by the intuition that the path that leads to truth, the truth about the world and about ourselves, does indeed exist but it is a difficult path, it has its twists and turns, and the control of our mind often offers resistance, out of mere laziness, or self-interest, or self-defence (as a century later psychoanalysis was to make clear). And that emotions can dismantle for a while the control of the mind, and re-establish new contact between the self and the world, because emotions are indeed the energetic engine of that contact (as at the origin between the present and the past in the aesthetics of Scott's historical novel), and to re-establish or extend it is the necessary condition of all knowledge, as George Eliot well knew when she identified its enlargement as the very essence of art:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies.²⁷

The growing importance of the particular as the safest domain of truth (which runs parallel to the growing importance of emotions in keeping cold and abstract generalizations at a distance) was originated by the preference for the historical, the local, the circumscribed, the humble to which the Romantics attributed so much importance. Because particulars are there to correct the mistakes human beings often make in their hurried generalizations, if only we are patient enough to pay them the attention

27 George Eliot, *The Natural History of German Life* ('Westminster Review' July 1856), in George Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and N. Warren (London: Penguin, 1990), 107–139, 110.

they deserve. This has been witnessed – *in primis* – by Charles Darwin, for years a tireless observer and cataloguer of the life of plants and of the tiniest living organisms, whether on the *Beagle* on his journey to exotic lands or at home, in the garden of Down House in Kent. It was both the method of the scientific discovery of the century and a remarkable feature of the new Romantic sensibility. Literature had not been backward and would long be under its influence, as witnessed by so many, and so different, examples.

Among them, Rousseau in book twelve of *Les Confessions*, lying on the grass by the side of a plant in order to better examine its structure and form. The idiot boy, Michael, and the other humble and rural characters of the *Lyrical Ballads*, among whom according to Wordsworth ‘our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated.’²⁸ Evan Dhu, Fergus Mac Ivor’s faithful servant and foster-brother, in whose ingenuous and extraordinary proposal to the Hannoverian judges in the solemn scene of the trial at the end of *Waverley* Scott portrayed the purest example of what feudal loyalty really meant. George Eliot’s militant declarations of poetics in chapter XVII of *Adam Bede*:

So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one’s best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. [...] It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her.²⁹

28 William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to ‘Lyrical Ballads’ and Appendix (1850),’ in *Selected Prose*, ed. J. O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 278–307, 282.

29 George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. S. Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), Book II, 178–179.

But the more coherent and exemplary interpreters of this new aesthetics of the nineteenth-century novel are the creators of whole fictional worlds, like Scott at the beginning and Hardy at the end of the century. The creators of worlds interweave thin threads which form a web of connections between the smallest details inside a single novel, but they also intertwine them with other threads which form in their turn connections across different novels in the larger general design of the cycle which is meant to emulate the great book of life. So it happens that in the character of the stern and inflexible Grand Master of the order of the Knights Templars, who sentences Rebecca to be burned alive in *Ivanhoe* on account of her charm and beauty which enchanted Bois Guilbert, there are features similar to those of Balfour of Burley, the stern and savage murderer of Archbishop Sharpe in *Old Mortality*. The former is a Christian knight at the time of the Third Crusade, the latter is a Puritan warrior in the years immediately following the seventeenth-century Civil War, and Scott did not indeed neglect to characterize their fundamental historical differences. And yet they both concur on the delineation of what seemed to Scott the frightening genealogy of modern fanaticism. Likewise, in the protagonists of his Wessex novels, Tess, Jude, Clym Yeobright, Michael Henchard, Grace Melbury, Hardy portrayed the many – and so different – forms of that modern tendency which he called in *Jude the Obscure* ‘the modern vice of unrest’.³⁰ Theirs are unforgettably different stories, yet they are all deeply conditioned by what seemed to Hardy the chief origin and cause of the modern human predicament, responsible at the same time for both the greatness and the misery of human beings.

And, to conclude with our starting point, the Romantic revolution, Hardy’s contemporary novelist, Giovanni Verga, writing from another circumscribed and peripheral place – Sicily – cultivated in his cycle of novels, *I vinti*, the bold project of investigating ‘Il cammino fatale, incessante, spesso faticoso e febbrile che segue l’umanità per raggiungere la

30 Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. D. Taylor (London: Penguin, 1998), Part II, 85.

conquista del progresso.³¹ And in justifying Sicily, and the humble life of the fishermen of Aci Trezza, as his privileged point of observation for his first and most celebrated novel, *I Malavoglia*, he availed himself of unquestionably 'romantic' arguments, basically identical to Wordsworth's in his *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads* when he justified his own choice of the shepherds and peasants from Westmoreland:

Il movente dell'attività umana che produce la fiamma del progresso è preso qui alle sue sorgenti, nelle proporzioni più modeste e materiali. Il meccanismo delle passioni che la determinano in quelle basse sfere è meno complicato, e potrà quindi osservarsi con maggior precisione.³²

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