

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 1 (1984)

Artikel: Narrative, scene and the fictions of history
Autor: Hughes, Peter
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99831>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 10.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Narrative, Scene, and The Fictions of History

Peter Hughes

All narratives tell lies as well as truths, and by going back to the roots of modern narrative in the Romantic period, I hope to point out a way ahead for narratology; one guided by the recognition that narrative itself is a critical path that at once falsifies and validates our awareness of events. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke suggests that all narrative is "the temporizing of essence."¹ This is a wonderfully suggestive pun because it implies not only that narrative makes temporal what is (or seems to be) timeless and essential, but also that narrative temporizes in other more compromising and compromised ways: that narrative stalls, trims, "plays for time". In this second sense, all narratives falsify experience by turning into sequence what is experienced or felt to be simultaneous. We might even say that one of the attributes of modern narrative is the attempt to tie back narrative line into a knot of simultaneous perceptions. The epiphanies of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and – even closer to my argument – the tableau of the *comices agricolas* in *Madame Bovary* make this clear. "Everything should sound simultaneously", says Flaubert of this scene; "one should hear the bellowing of the cattle, the whisperings of the lovers and the rhetoric of the official all at the same time."² Both kinds of tableaux are poignant attempts to overcome the falsifying sequence by which narrative, and discourse itself, stretch out, postpone and flatten the rounded immediacy of experience.

But what if narrative is not about experience? What if it does not arise from the known and felt world, but rather from the rhetorical patterns that enable us to perceive and respond to (we sometimes even say to experience) the other, the *not-I*, while still admitting that the other is alien and unknowable? Then it could be argued that narrative is an attempt to "make good", to make literal, what as a metaphor or image is figurative, equivocal, even false. We speak in tropes and figures, we

¹ (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), p. 430.

² Cited in Frank O'Connor, *The Mirror in the Roadway* (New York, 1955), p. 53.

tell stories shaped by rhetorical patterns; and we do this not only because we confuse them with the truth of experience (as we often do), but also because they lead us onward to a truer or less false awareness. The classical and confident view of this process of discovery was perhaps best expressed by Samuel Johnson, who further grasped its aesthetic value, in his *Preface to Shakespeare*: "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they call realities to mind."³ A bleaker view is always possible, as in the implications of Suger of Saint-Denis' verse: "Mens hebes ad verum per materialia surgit."⁴ If we have grown sceptical about the *verum*, about the truth that Suger thought lay above and beyond the show of things, we may reject any claims made for transcendence through narrative; reminding ourselves that above the topmost rung of the ladder there may be no vision, but only vertiginous air.

If we concentrate on the journey rather than the arrival, on the spaces between the rungs rather than the space beyond, we can defend narrative as truth-telling through continuing discovery, or better, through *discovering* – what Gérard Genette calls diegesis. And in this sense narrative sequence is the attempt to confer truth through repetition and continuity upon scenes and symbols that are figurative and equivocal. They may even be mysterious or miraculous – alarming possibilities I shall turn to in a moment. Let us note for now that narrative, seen from this point of view, is a prolonged attempt to actualize, explain, even explain away, what in itself could only be expressed as a figure of speech.

This point of view is central to any approach that respects the ways in which narrative texts are composed of prior narratives and texts. Such an approach, once called rhetorical and now deconstructionist, emphasizes that any form of narrative discourse draws and tempts the reader toward the world, toward realism or surrealism, and away from an epiphany or tableau that is the narrative's origin. Jonathan Culler speaks for example of "Paul de Man's view of narrative as the expansion or literalization of tropological structures,"⁵ a view that J. Hillis Miller has extended to show that the relations between fictional and historical narrative are tortuous, swerving between question begging and Bate-

³ *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo [The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson] (New Haven and London, 1968), VII, 78.

⁴ Cited in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton, 1953), p. 156.

⁵ "Fabula and Sjuzhet in the Analysis of Narrative: Some American Discussions", *Poetics Today* 1,3 (Spring 1980), 27–37, 29.

son's double bind. Miller, again to quote Culler, offers an "account of the way narratives claim the status of history for their plots and then show history to originate in an act of discursive interpretation."⁶ This is certainly true as an account of the English and indeed of the European novel, of the many books called the *True History of . . .*. Such a title explicitly claims an historical model, not only for its names and dates, but also for its narrative structure. We understandably interpret fictional narratives by aligning them with histories and pseudo-histories. And this alignment has been made, or made to seem, more precise through influential Marxist approaches to the novel, notably that of Georg Lukács, who treats the historical novel as an effect whose cause was the French Revolution. This approach, as we shall see, involves a proleptic jump across the intervening textual and propagandist abyss of the Revolution, which is inseparable from its representations. What Lukács speaks of as history, as the French Revolution, is already a myriad of historical accounts, not *res gestae* but *historiae*.

Our notions concerning narrative, like our attempt to create a study of narrative in narratology, are to my mind seriously flawed by errors in both our historical and our theoretical accounts of the subject. If narratology is to exist as a discipline and a method, it must be based upon a valid notion of narrative. And I could make the argument of this paper clear by first citing Gerald Prince's definition of narrative as "the representation of real and fictive events in a time sequence"⁷ and then pointing out that narratology has not yet grasped or grappled with either the problematic status of "events" or with the relations between "real" and "fictive" events. What I shall first suggest, basing my remarks on the response to the novels of Sir Walter Scott on the part of the great narrative historians of the nineteenth century, is that we have misunderstood, perhaps even reversed, the relations between historical narrative and the historical novel. I shall then argue that both histories and novels show a double and divided impulse toward narrative sequence on the one hand and the scene or tableau on the other. This double impulse is what marks the greatness of an historian such as Michelet, who was constantly torn between the claims of narrative and those of the tableau, and indeed was much less involved in the narrative of so-called real events and much more caught up in the creations of scenes

⁶ Ibid.,

⁷ "Aspects of a Grammar of Narrative", *Poetics Today* 1, 3 (Spring 1980), 49.

and tableaux than we have been led to believe. And finally, I shall trace this fascination with scenes back to some surprising origins. Beyond this historical argument lie certain theoretical implications for the study of narrative and the creation of a discipline and method of narratology. At the heart of all of these narratives, both fictional and historical, we find the figurative, the metaphorical, the mysterious. When we get to the center of the labyrinth we find not events but symbols, and even in the histories things that cannot be described as either fictional or factual. What we find are miracles, made by writers whose final task is to decide on their truth or falsehood.

We have to start with Scott and with the first of the historical novels, *Waverley*. The summary of Edward Waverley's reading, stripped of its irony, could serve as a guide to both Scott's historical narrative and, more surprisingly, to the origins of nineteenth-century narrative history:

"In classical literature, Waverley had made the usual progress, and read the usual authors; and the French had afforded him an almost exhaustless collection of memoirs, scarcely more faithful than romances, and of romances so well written as hardly to be distinguished from memoirs. The splendid pages of Froissart, with his heartstirring and eye-dazzling descriptions of war and of tournaments, were among his chief favourites..."⁸

In a strange parallel to Jane Eyre, Edward Waverley shapes himself as a character through his reading, and through these promiscuous sources Scott shapes his own writing. This immediately puts in question the usual account of the rise of the historical novel, the most persuasive of which appears in Georg Lukács' *The Historical Novel*. Lukács' account gains a great deal of force from its Marxist premise that historical fiction must follow historical fact – as in his famous declaration that it was the French Revolution that made history part of a mass experience and hence a subject of contemporary fictions and the source of the historical novel.

But Lukács' Marxism blinds him to the evidence that contradicts this. First, as Hegel said in a letter about his times in 1807, "Publication is a divine power. Printed things often seem entirely different from things said or done."⁹ Lukács put it the wrong way round; for in fact the

⁸ *Waverley; or This Sixty Years Since*, ed Claire Lamont (Oxford, 1981), p. 14. Subsequent references to *Waverley* are to this edition.

⁹ "Und doch ist die Publizität eine so göttliche Macht; gedruckt sieht die Sache oft ganz anders aus als gesagt und getan...", Letter of 8 July 1807 in *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg, 1961), I, 176.

historical novel arose not from historical events but from romance and memoir, from self-conscious fictions advanced by those, above all by Scott, who opposed the events of revolution through what Edmund Burke called "the dream of chivalry."¹⁰ Hazlitt, a contemporary, recognized at once what Lukács uneasily admits: that Scott was a conservative, a reactionary, who nonetheless spoke directly to the people, who had mastered their language, and who appealed to an immense popular audience. Hazlitt further recognized that Byron, so close to his own and to the age's revolutionary spirit, was nonetheless always alien and elitist in his poetry as in his life.¹¹ Michelet felt this paradox with something close to anguish. He who had devoted his life and work to the cause of the people and to the Revolution had never been able to reach that popular audience so devoted to Scott, and even worse to Chateaubriand.¹²

What is more significant for a study of narrative, and what has generally gone unnoticed, is that the rise of "scientific history" in the nineteenth century, the first works of modern history by the great French historians – Thierry, Barante, Guizot, and above all Michelet – were at once shaped by Scott and determined to displace him. They wanted to capture for the new history that voracious audience fed, but in their eyes hardly nourished, by his historical romances. In ways not noticed by Lukács and others, the new sense of the past and sense of history in the early nineteenth century, which furthered both old romance and new history, was very much a sign of hunger and loss. As Michelet saw then and as R. W. Southern has more recently suggested, the Romantic fascination with the historical past was the fascination of the dispossessed, of those who hungered after a past that the French Revolution seemed to have distanced and even destroyed.¹³ The historians tried to hang Scott with his own rope, and the *Journal* of Michelet makes plain his rivalry with Scott and the way Scott transformed the course of his own historical narrative. Michelet repeatedly describes a

¹⁰ *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 170.

¹¹ *The Spirit of the Age*, ed. E. D. Mackerness (London and Glasgow, 1969), pp. 115–6.

¹² See especially his *Journal*, ed. Paul Viallaneix (Paris, 1959), I, 89, 125, 143, 153, 202.

¹³ "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing, The Sense of the Past," in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, Vol. 23 (1973).

scene or event he has developed from chronicles and archival documents as “un tableau digne de Scott.”¹⁴ This greatest of narrative historians constantly downgrades narrative in the hope of matching the tableaux vivants of Scott and Chateaubriand and thereby reaching the people, whose language he felt he had never been able to master. For Michelet, as Roland Barthes cryptically remarked, “Le récit est calvaire, le tableau est gloire.”¹⁵

The paradox needs to be repeated. This master of narrative history undercuts narrative itself: even as he creates historical narrative, he puts in question this extension of events and reasserts the central meaning, not of its narrative (*récit*), but rather of the wondrous tableau, the scene or trope or metaphor that lies at the heart of his histories, the eternal moment of Joan of Arc or the French Revolution. And that eternal moment is a miracle that interrupts the course of nature and suspends the order of time upon which all narrative depends. The Revolution, he says, was “an awesome thing, never seen before: no more transitions, no more duration, no more years, no more hours or days; time suspended.”¹⁶ This miraculous violation of narrative is also the violation of nature, as Joyce realizes in the *Portrait* and George Eliot in her view in *Middlemarch* that simultaneity creates a history of the obscure, the unknown, the otherwise unknowable. But it appears first in narrative history before it appears in the novel. In his *Essay on Human Understanding*, Hume had given the enlightened deathblow to the miracle as an element in any account of the real world: “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined...”¹⁷ And yet here is Michelet setting the tropes of miraculous scenes against narrative and further declaring that what matters in historical narrative is the struggle against that nature upon which narrative and realism depend: “History is nothing else than the narrative of the endless struggle of man against nature.”¹⁸

¹⁴ *Journal*, I, 187.

¹⁵ Michelet, (Paris, n. d.), p. 21.

¹⁶ “...chose terrible, qui ne s'est vue jamais: plus de transitions, plus de durée, plus d'années, plus d'heures ni de jours, le temps supprimé.” *Histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1952), I, 289.

¹⁷ *Philosophical Works*, IV, 93–4.

¹⁸ *Oeuvres complètes*, II, 229.

There was nothing naive or unliterary about Michelet and his contemporaries. They saw their task as the converse of that of the novelist or writer of fictive narrative "The writer," Michelet says, "strives to increase his effects, ... to seize the reader ... He is happy if the natural event appears a miracle ... The historian on the contrary has the special mission of explaining what appears [to be] a miracle, surrounding it with precedents, circumstances that will return and restore it to nature."¹⁹ And he saw the novel as the age-old threat to this extension or literalization of the miracle. His undercutting of narrative in the name of scene and miracle is sharpened by his following of Thierry's lead in the *History of the Norman Conquest* in creating for the first time that weight of reference, that subtext of footnotes, that desecration of narrative through the marginal gloss and commentary, that we now take for granted in modern historical narrative.²⁰ But that too goes back to Scott. *Waverley*, for example, is so heavily prefaced, annotated, and postscripted by Scott that the novel has a virtual subtext of references to sources.²¹ Beyond that, the author constantly qualifies his own narration by providing the kinds of historical decisions and judgments that Michelet later said were even more important to historical narrative than the business of recounting and narrating. Sometimes this intrusion of the novelist as scholar and critic of his sources is brief and jocular. When Waverley is summoned back to his regiment, the episode is introduced as follows: "If he could have had any doubt upon the subject, it would have been decided by the following letter from his commanding officer, which, as it is very short, shall be inserted verbatim..."²² At other times it amounts to a subversion of narrative continuity through

¹⁹ "L'écrivain occupé d'augmenter les effets, de mettre les choses en saillie, presque toujours aime à surprendre, à saisir le lecteur, à le faire crier: 'AH?.' Il est heureux si le fait naturel apparaît un miracle. – Tout au contraire l'historien a pour spéciale mission d'expliquer ce qui paraît miracle, de l'entourer des précédents, des circonstances qui l'amènent, de la ramener à la nature". 1869 Preface to the *Histoire de France*, I, 32. The implications of this subject have been dealt with in a forthcoming article by Diane Owen Hughes on "Michelet and Miracles," to which I am indebted in my remarks on the miraculous.

²⁰ Stephen Bann, "A Cycle in Historical Discourse", *20th Century Studies*, 1971, 110–30.

²¹ This subtext, which is surprisingly common in prose of the romantic period, has the further effect of reducing both the suspense and the credibility of characters in Scott.

²² p. 125.

the running commentary of the modern author on the differences and peculiarities of an earlier historical period.²³

By creating a subtext of references and comments, Scott slows narrative until it freezes into a series of memorable tableaux. A scene such as the death of Colonel Gardiner at the Battle of Prestonpans, where Waverley is unable to save him, is reversed and repeated in scenes showing the exchange of protection between Waverley, Colonel Talbot, and the Baron of Bradwardine. In Scott's novel these scenes are distinguished from the intervening narrative by their origins in undeniable historical events: Colonel Gardiner existed, commanded the 13th Dragoons, and was killed by Highlanders at Prestonpans. And although Scott split the story into two, it goes back to the account of a mutual exchange of protection between a Jacobite, Alexander Stewart of Invernahyle, and a Hanoverian, Colonel Whitefoord,²⁴ told to the young Scott by Stewart himself. This chivalric tableau is crucial to *Waverley*. It is the hinge, as Scott himself said, "upon which the whole plot depends."²⁵ Why did it matter so much? Why did Scott split and repeat this tableau, even to the extent of weakening the novel's plot?

We can best answer these questions and see their importance if we notice how frequent and central such redemptive scenes are in the historical and fictive narratives of the period. Michelet makes the whole plot of his *Histoire de France* depend on the great tableaux of Joan of Arc and the French Revolution. They are the scenes that unify and redeem both Michelet's narrative and the object of that narrative, his own divided and corrupted nation. The first tableau of Joan of Arc reflects the younger Michelet's Anglophobia and Catholicism, to which he was converted in adolescence after a godless childhood; and the redeemed France presented by the tableau, or through the image of Joan, at once chauvinist, popular, and ideologically ambiguous. France

²³ The pseudo-editorial (and always jocular) intrusion of the author on the subject of a minstrel's poem is one example that may stand for many: "... I conjecture the following copy to have been somewhat corrected by Waverley, to suit the taste of those who might not relish pure antiquity." (p. 60)

²⁴ Claire Lamont gives an excellent analysis of this story in her edition of *Waverley*: see especially pp. xviii–xix.

²⁵ pp. xviii, 386–89.

²⁶ p. xvi. I am indebted to Peter Winnington for bringing to my attention the article by Miklos Molnar et al., "Walter Scott et les historiens", *Etudes de Lettres* (Lausanne), série IV, tome 2,3 (1979), 79–103, which examines other aspects of Scott's impact on (chiefly) French historians.

and France's history are to be reconciled in the figure of the virgin warrior. The scene of the French Revolution is much more complex and collective; the central figure is the people of Paris, and the redeemed France is *laic* and republican, reflecting both the zeal and scepticism of the later Michelet. It is a red view of French history balanced against the earlier white, but both tableaux are meant to present a nation reconciled in and through exemplary scenes. Barthes cryptic distinction becomes clear. The *récit* of narrative really is the way of the cross or *calvaire* that leads to the paradisal resurrection of the French Revolution. Or more precisely, the resurrection claimed and prophesied by Michelet's text, and in the end fulfilled only through his history.

Such a reconciliation of left and right, enlightenment and tradition, of warring factions of all kinds, is one of the central tableaux of the period's narratives. The tableaux of *Waverley* include both those already named, whose chief function is to celebrate the reconciliation of Jacobite and Hanoverian, or more loosely, Scotland and England. But the further scene of the marriage between Waverley and the daughter of the Baron of Bradwardine, a quasi-allegorical union between England and Scotland, raises doubts about the fictive and historical functions of such tableaux. As Claire Lamont has observed:

The marriage between Edward and Rose may, as in romantic comedy, be taken as a symbol of concord and continuity. It may even, here, be taken as a symbol of the peace and prosperity to come to Scotland through the defeat of Jacobitism. But if so it has come too soon. The novel is set at a specific period in history, and the historical reality of 1746 will not be forgotten. It may be claimed that the horror of the '45 has been taken into the novel at the trial and execution in Carlisle. But unfortunately the novelist cannot make such a bargain with history. Readers know that the background to Waverley's wedding festivities was the terrible aftermath of Culloden. And Scott knew.

Their union is miraculous in several ways. It is at once a renewal and purging of the past, transforming its horror and restoring or more accurately, inventing a lost continuity between Jacobite Scotland and its modern Hanoverian self, which is in great part a self conferred by England. As Scott explains in his "Postscript, which should have been a Preface,"

There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century, or little more, has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland. The effects of the insurrection of 1745, — the destruction of the patriarchal power of the Highland chiefs, — the abolition of the heritable

jurisdictions of the Lowland nobility and barons, – the total eradication of the Jacobite party, which, averse to intermingle with the English, or adopt their customs, long continued to pride themselves upon maintaining ancient Scottish manners and customs, commenced this innovation (p. 340).

Both the starkness of this account – “destruction . . . abolition . . . total eradication” – and its concern for historical causality as a shaping force of the present and future, which includes a further analysis of economic change since 1745, could be set beside Michelet’s own retrospective account of what he had done as an historian and why he had to do it, his “L’Héroïsme de l’Esprit” of 1869:

Le fil de la tradition, en toutes choses, avait été brisé. Tous attestaient, louaient, blâmaient un passé (romain, chrétien, révolutionnaire, n’importe), qu’ils ignoraient également.

Il fallait de deux choses l’une, ou déclarer comme Fourier que le genre humain, jusqu’ici, avait été imbécile, rejeter toute l’expérience des temps antérieurs, procéder par voie d’écart absolu, ou bien essayer de refaire l’histoire, la fonder sur une base meilleure et plus sûre, rétablir la longue génération des causes, de manière que le présent, légitimement amené par les enfantements du passé, s’expliquât par sa naissance et permit d’entrevoir en lui quelque chose, l’embryon qu’il a dans les flancs: l’avenir.²⁷

This bold statement of the need to remake history has a direct connection with Scott; but we might for now note the importance of the oblique or analogous connection of ideas. To both Scott and Michelet, writing about the past is an admission of its loss through the disruptions of political and economic revolution. Redoing history is an attempt to undo that loss, and the promised gain will be the ability to represent, which is also to re-present and to “make present” the shape of the future, in the name of which the past is not only to be displayed and narrated, but also *judged* and if need be, condemned. This last function of both the novelist and the historian, a function claimed during this same period by Nietzsche for philosophy and by Marx for political economy, makes each kind of writer into a magistrate, even into a hanging judge, and each of his works into a court-trial. “Ein Buch,” as Lichtenberg once put it “ist ein Prozess.”

This may help to explain some strange and unnoticed aspects of the alliance and rivalry that Michelet thought to exist between himself and Scott, and more generally, between history and the novel. It may also help to account for the impatience with narrative, the fascination with scenes and tableaux, and the urge to judge, to condemn and redeem,

²⁷ In “Michelet,” *L’Arc*, 52, 4.

even to work miracles, that recur so often in modern narrative. Michelet leads up to his direct reference to (and attack upon) Scott in “L’Héroïsme de l’Esprit” by dwelling self-consciously on his own development from writer and artist to historian: “Mon progrès fut énorme du second volume au troisième. J’avais été surtout écrivain et artiste. Je fus vraiment historien” (p. 10). His transformation into a true historian, we quickly learn, was caused by a feel and love for the people that enables him to concentrate the linear dispersion of his narrative, give it a strong and solemn beat, and drive it not only onward but downward into a deeper world. His methods remain the same, but they are transformed by that power of compassion and sensitivity that mark the imaginative writer:

La sensibilité, mobile et trop souvent dispersée aux deux premiers volumes, se concentre, se fixe, donne au récit un accent grave et fort, de plus en plus profond.

Grand changement qui en entraîne un autre, c'est qu'une histoire si sérieuse éprouve le besoin de descendre au plus loin, au plus bas, jusqu'au tuf, de s'asseoir aux terrains solides (p. 10).

The stylistic meaning of this slowing and deepening of narrative (*récit*) is that it approaches more and more the status and stasis of scene or tableau. And its significance for Michelet is that he can thereby go beyond as well as beneath the surface of chronicle to attain a vitality lacking in Scott's slavish followers among the French historians:

Là on aperçoit aisément que la chronique tant vantée, suivie docilement par nos faux Walter Scott, copistes de Froissard, non seulement est tout extérieure, légère, superficielle, mais qu'elle est trop souvent le contraire de l'histoire, n'en montre tout au plus qu'un côté partiel (p. 10).

We should notice here that the attack on Scott glances off him to strike his disciples. These “copistes de Froissard” are not only the first generation of romantic medievalists, chroniclers of the pageantry of the Middle Ages. They are also the first generation of romantic readers of both history and fiction. They might even be described as the second generation of romantic heroes – figures like Edward Waverley, Jane Eyre and Frankenstein's monster, all of whom come by their character by reading. We may recall how indebted Waverley was to “the splendid pages of Froissart, with his heart-stirring and eye-dazzling descriptions of war and of tournaments . . .” (p. 14). Sir Walter Scott himself was much more like Michelet, bent on reviving the past as a redemptive tableau; resurrecting the dead he has long loved in order to renew their presence

in a world that has all but forgotten them: "... and now, for the purpose of preserving some idea of the ancient manners of which I have witnessed the almost total extinction, I have embodied in imaginary scenes, and ascribed to fictitious characters, a part of the incidents which I then received from those who were actors in them. Indeed, the most romantic parts of this narrative are precisely those which have a foundation in fact" (p. 340).

On one level Scott's assertion is unsurprising. It is one of many claims advanced by earlier novelists that their questionable fictions are grounded in truth, above all in the representation or codification of truth offered by the models of biography, confession, or history. And on another level it repeats the romantic premiss that truth, especially the truth left unrecorded or unnoticed because of the myopia of classical or genteel taste, is stranger than fiction. Like the "sylvan historian" of Keats, the tribal historian – the historical novelist – is uniquely qualified to tell a modern audience "wie es eigentlich war" and thus fulfil the task set by and for the modern historian by Lepold von Ranke. The irony of this lies in the fact that Ranke, as Hayden White has pointed out, was drawn to this "truer" past of medieval history through his reading of Scott, whom a closer study of the evidence showed to be fanciful, at once exaggerated and inadequate:

Ranke had been enchanted with the pictures Scott had drawn of the Age of Chivalry. They had inspired in him a desire to know that age more fully, to experience it more immediately. And so he had gone to the sources of medieval history, documents and contemporary accounts of life in that time. He was shocked to discover not only that Scott's pictures were largely products of fancy but that the actual life of the Middle Ages was more fascinating than any novelistic account of it could ever be.²⁸

Notice the paradox. First Scott in writing about the accounts of the past offered (or ignored) by his time, then Ranke in writing about Scott, claim a greater truth, a more perfect realism, in the rediscovery or resurrection of a more fascinating, even miraculous past.

What Michelet describes as the historian's task of restoring miracles to their natural context and as a reversal of the falsifying work of the writer (*écrivain*) at his most seductive in the historical novelist, exalts the miracle in the process of restoring it to the world of circumstances and common sense. Michelet on Joan of Arc or the battle of Jemappes creates a miraculous tableau in the process of normalizing it, and he

²⁸ *Metahistory* (Baltimore and London, 1973), 163.

disturbs or destabilizes the truth of narrative through his critique of earlier accounts. Both the novelist and the historian play a godlike role in relation to the past, which is a Lazarus they must bring back from the dead, a shadow to be warmed by the dark blood of their ink,²⁹ and finally a possible sacrifice to be made, should they see fit, to the future of the nation. Scott saves some elements from extinction in writing about Highland customs and beliefs, but he extinguishes part of his resurrected world by passing over in silence episodes such as the aftermath of Culloden. Michelet is as always more explicit about his symbolic role as preserver and destroyer, but the fatal power remains the same:

Dans ma parfaite candeur, dont au reste je n'ai aucun repentir, je me dis: "Je ne combattrai pas un mort; d'abord, je le ferai revivre et c'est en le voyant debout, refait, réchauffé de ma vie, que je saurai loyalement quel fut vraiment son droit de vivre et quelle est légitimement sa nécessité de mourir."

(p. 8)

This impulse toward judgment, toward both redemption and condemnation, is surely a neglected and significant aspect of the fiction as well as of the historical writing of the nineteenth century. The liberal and humanistic attitudes that have dominated most modern readings of this vast body of work have consistently (in both senses of the word) shown great insight into aspects such as autonomy of character, realism of detail and, perhaps most firmly, an alleged principle of historical progress that underlies and even requires "the progress of the fable". Such readings, with the same consistency, have turned a blind eye to whatever cannot easily be made to fit into this progressive view of narrative and events. Novelistic attitudes as different as Jane Austen's cruelty, Thomas Hardy's fatalism, and Thackeray's puppeteering, are neglected or scanty, and parallels among continental novelists are often treated as liminal extremes – the results of Pan-Slavic fanaticism for example, or of a cracked theory of history. But all of these attitudes are part of the development of the judgmental function of both the novelist and the historian that accounts for the powerful appeal of scene as the resolution and *Aufhebung* of narrative: the final scene, after all, that unites and expresses all of these attitudes is the Last Judgment.

It is especially curious that these aspects of narratology should be neglected by those who approach the subject from a reading of English

²⁹ The blood-ink metaphor in Michelet even extends to his complex relations with his second wife and friends: it warrants further study as a key to Michelet's relations with the past.

literature; for the eighteenth-century English novel was as certainly the source of this impulse as the novels of Scott were the source and pre-emptive rival of so much in nineteenth-century historical narrative. As Peter Szondi pointed out in a brilliant study of the tableau in bourgeois drama,³⁰ the source lay in Diderot's enthusiastic reading of Richardson and in his own plays *Le Fils naturel* (1757) and *Le Père de famille* (1758). The action of this latter play, for example, is the transition from an opening scene that shows a family divided by discord to a closing scene that represents "an apotheosis of a family which has regenerated itself and is once more living in harmony."³¹ The kind of regeneration mentioned here, and the apotheosis it can lead to, is a pristine and private version of the political and public reconciliation later represented in fiction and history by Scott and Michelet.

And the tableau is meant to teach a lesson, even to convert the reader or spectator, not merely to reflect the ways of the world. Peter Brooks has rightly objected to a reading of the worldly French fiction of the eighteenth century in terms of the moralizing English outlook associated with Richardson.³² Yet here we find the exception in Diderot that was later to be such an important rule in nineteenth-century historical and fictional writing. The tableau was meant to hold up an example to a *peuple corrompu* of a better moral future. And although Diderot's intended audience was the bourgeoisie, Szondi emphasizes (against Lukács) that the exemplary figures in the tableaux are aristocrats, a saving remnant rather than a realistic portrayal of either the nobles or the middle classes.³³ And in language used by Scott to defend his novels, Diderot praises Richardson with the argument that Michelet later tried so hard to refute:

Si l'on appliquait au meilleur historien une critique sévère, y en a-t-il aucun qui la soutient comme toi? Sous ce point de vue, j'oseraï dire que souvent l'histoire est un mauvais roman ; et que le roman, comme tu l'as fait, est une bonne histoire.³⁴

³⁰ "Tableau und coup de théâtre: Zur Sozialpsychologie des bürgerlichen Trauerspiels bei Diderot..." I cite the translation in *New Literary History*, vol. XI (Winter 1980), no. 2, 323-343.

³¹ Szondi, 326.

³² *The Novel of Worldliness*: Crébillon, Marivaux, Laclos, Stendhal (Princeton, 1969), especially pp. 3-10.

³³ Szondi, 323-4.

³⁴ *Eloge de Richardson*, in *Oeuvres*, Pléiade ed. (Paris, 1951), p. 1068.

A detailed study of the redemptive tableaux in other narratives of the period would lie outside the scope of this essay. But we might in closing note that in Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Vigny's *Servitude et grandeur militaires* we find two extreme examples of this imbalance between narrative and scene, and that in these extremes we may find a first step toward such a study. We would all grant that *Caleb Williams* is a novel of pursuit, perhaps the first of its kind: the narration of Caleb's doomed attempt to escape takes up most of the book. It is at the same time a self-consciously realistic novel: its full title is *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams*. It is a novel about the failure of any hope for the kind of miraculous social reconciliation represented by the tableau, about its impossibility in the repressive and imprisoning world that England had become through its reaction against the French Revolution. Its extreme emphasis on narrative is a clear sign of this, as is the grim epigraph Godwin affixed to the first edition:

Amidst the woods the leopard knows his kind; The tyger preys not on the tyger brood: Man only is the common foe of man.

By contrast, Vigny's book so reverses the balance – away from narrative and toward scene – that it is broken up into a series of exemplary tales, each of which centres around a tableau, and all of which are unified by Vigny's explicit purpose. He seeks to reconcile his people and his audience after the fratricidal conflict of the July Revolution of 1830. And he further seeks to reintegrate the soldier into the social order from which he, like the poet before him, has become an outcast, a pariah: "Après avoir, sous plusieurs formes, expliqué la nature et plaint la condition du Poète dans notre société, j'ai voulu montrer ici celle du Soldat, autre Paria moderne".³⁵ His sequence of tableaux, like those so admired by Diderot and later by Scott and Michelet, embody things as they might be, or might have been; not things as they are.

³⁵ (Paris, 1961), p. 247.