

J. H. Alexander, *Walter Scott's Books: Reading the Waverley Novels*, New York: Routledge, 2017. 250pp. US\$155. ISBN 978-0415789684 (hardback).

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J. H. Alexander's latest book *Walter Scott's Books: Reading the Waverley Novels* opens with an ambitious prospect, that is, to deal with the seemingly most fundamental yet unfathomable element in Scott's writing—the style. As he suggests, from the perspective of readership, that for modern readers, especially young students who are to have access to Scott's novels, one of the biggest challenges is Scott's "circumbendibus style" (29) with a variety of rhetorics, genres, conflicting voices and polyphonic characters in a single narrative as what Bakhtin defines as "heteroglossia." However, Alexander contends that the allusive style is also where the "fun" and "pleasure" of reading derive from, and the significance of Scott writing as a reader lies. To fully enjoy Scott's fictions, he suggests, one has to recognize how the texture of his works are formed.

In the project, Alexander analyses Scott's controversial narrative style from roughly two aspects. First, as he points out in Chapter 2, Scott's novels are literal counterpart to his physical private library in Abbotsford. His work is thus a representation, whether faithful or not, of his personal reading experience. His writing is not simply a pure self-creation from nowhere, but a huge archive of literary influences he has been exposed to. Thus, exploiting the "sources" of the textual allusions that form the "centrality" of Scott's fictions can loosen the tight knots (4). The second one, however, seems more of a self-conscious game Scott plays with his readers. Scott's novels, though reader-friendly by welcoming readers from all aspects of life in his context, sometimes would like to trick his readers by allying himself to a small amount of readers secretly by playing on coded speech, which can be analysed in-depth in his repetitive emphasis on the narrator's identity as "Author."

As Alexander states rather clearly in his introduction to the project, close reading and textual analysis are necessary to dissect the texture and intertextuality of Scott's literary heritage. However, as Alexander equals Scott's fictions to the Abbotsford library, the analysis, therefore, is a combination of

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biographical and textual reading. By establishing a relationship between the image of “library” in Scott’s fictions and his private library in Abbotsford, Alexander tries to persuade the readers into believing that “the physical presence of volumes powerfully felt in the novels” (11) can find its responses in real life.

In the main body of his book, Alexander analyzes intertextuality from every basic narrative element from resources, style, strategies, mottoes (epigraphs) to intertexts, and the method he adopts is rather straightforward with surprisingly similar structure and conclusion in each chapter. He argues, as Scott himself is an avid book collector, his works, filled with literary references and allusions, is itself a library as well just as the physical one he owns in Abbotsford. In the opening paragraph of Chapter 6 “Intertexts,” Alexander shows us some interesting data about Scott’s fictions: “The twenty-seven novels have more than 10,000 literary references, allusions, or echoes, nearly half of them accounted for by the Bible (over 3000) and Shakespeare (nearly 2000). There are also not far short of 2000 uses of proverbs and over 3000 allusions to works by authors other than Shakespeare and anonymous pieces” (116). This is where Alexander’s project is based on and he tries to clear it up where these allusions are from. In his project, Alexander tries very hard to find for us the “sources” of textual allusions, whether they are from Shakespeare and Bible that Scott quoted most often or writers from “[c]lassical time to his own time” (116) such as Virgil, Wordsworth and Coleridge. He proves, by comparing literary references and their sources, that Scott is undoubtedly a reader-writer.

However, if Alexander may spend more time analyzing what it means that Scott is an excellent writer as a reader instead of a writer as an adroit reader, his project may be more fully completed. The problem may relate to the aim of his project as he tells his readers in the beginning of the book, that in order to avoid approaching the Waverley Novels thematically or theoretically, he tries to focus on the “enjoyable textual experiences” that “fun” and “pleasure” take up the most important place (3). However, the criterion is ambiguous as he neither shows nor explores how “pleasure” can be related to the piling up of literary references. Besides, he leaves the question unanswered—whether his perspective is independent from the approaches he claims to avoid—which, as seen in his analysis, is hardly possible. In order to give his analysis a closing end, he has to, at Chapter 7, before concluding his project, analyzes the

Waverley Series in sequence in detail by reconstructing the narrative elements in the real fictional context and how they contribute to the complexity of the story, which, inevitably, falls into what he claims to avoid openly before, to read Scott's novels in a thematic manner.

Reading Alexander's extensive research on Waverley Novels, I feel respect for his perseverance in trying to find every equivalent to intertextual illusion in Scott's novels, establishing a reliable archive where comparative studies is made possible by placing Scott alongside with his predecessors and contemporaries. However, though his project seems exhaustive, I cannot help but ask if the prospect raised at the beginning of the book has been achieved satisfactorily. Though Alexander acts as a surgeon performing a delicate anatomy of Scott's fictions by pointing out the different layers constitute of the texture, at the end he leaves the tissues unexamined, leaving the readers or scholars who get interested in the topic wondering what organizes these tissues into a performable and even energetic "wholeness" of the body.

However, Alexander's project is inspiring as well. For one thing, it serves a detailed and comprehensive introduction to Scott's allusive style and abundant literature references. It will be helpful for those who are interested in the intertextual allusions in Scott's fictions and would like to locate where they are from. For another, as he himself realizes, quoting Kenneth Burke's *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, the exploration into Scott's historical world is just like an "unending conversation" with the author. By dealing with the seemingly basic yet essential to the understanding of Scott's style, Alexander's book will move along with other voices to the unknown destination of the unending conversation of Sir Walter Scott (qtd. in Alexander 1).