Vection, Vertigo, and the Historical Novel

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The historical novel is newly relevant. If, as Jed Esty has recently argued, “contemporary historical fictions . . . are the realisms of our moment” (337), that makes it all the more imperative to examine how the genre at its inception develops its distinctive capability: the fictive representation of history. In placing Walter Scott at the origin of the historical novel, I follow a path laid down by Georg Lukács (Historical Novel), Harry Shaw, Ina Ferris, and others. But I want to propose that Scott accesses and evokes history in a new way: by deepening the realist novel’s focus on sensory experience. The evidence of the senses has long been accepted as the foundation of the realist novel’s distinctive mode of representation. The fallibility of sense experience, too, was recognized from the beginnings of both modern science and the novel. As Michael McKeon argued, the realist novel can be said to emerge at the point when the evidence of the senses could be understood skeptically as merely providing authenticating details within a fictive narrative. More recently, Ian Duncan, in Scott’s Shadow, has stressed the importance of Humean skepticism in determining the particular role that experience plays in licensing novelistic representation. David Hume demonstrated that little or nothing underpins our use of sensory experience to understand or predict the world: the continuous existence of objects outside ourselves, as well as uniform relations between them, are simply fictions resting on shared habits (Duncan 119–35).

Yet studies of the novel’s debt to empiricism have not had much to say about one type of experience particularly crucial to the realist novel and even more so to the historical novel: the physiological experience of movement through space. The movement of characters through fictive space has provided the armature of plot in narrative genres that date to antiquity. In epic, romance, or allegory, however, the subjective sensation of moving was less important than the movement’s relation to coordinates in the plot’s conceptual landscape or logic. In those narrative genres, the function of movement was largely to get a character from one place or one state to another. The movement itself signified something when it was integrated within another plane or level of meaning, often a metaphysical one. The meaning or significance of movement was often derived from the intention, will, or moral qualities of the characters involved in accomplishing, assisting, or blocking it. Also of primary significance was the intended destination or goal of movement: the desire to leave home, to return, or to find some object. In such ways, movement provided an axis of fictionality, a narrative infrastructure for incidents and episodes, as well as ideological torque. This tendency is still present in the realist novel as Scott finds it. Alongside the growing popularity of travel writing, novelists as diverse as Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, Tobias Smollett, and Ann Radcliffe used plots of travel to provide characters with varieties of colorful experiences or to expose them to plot-consequential events, such as accidents, encounters, and discoveries. Both Gothic and travel literature emphasized how movement is accompanied by inward physical sensations ranging from exhilaration to extreme forms of suffering, as Carl
Thompson and George Dekker have respectively shown. But Scott works with orientation and disorientation on other and often on multiple scales of reference. Scott’s characters struggle to ascertain whether they are moving and where they are going, and the answers are in the last instance not so much geographic or spatial as historical. That is to say, rather than simply inviting skeptical conclusions about the type of knowledge that sensory experience provides, Scott’s novels use this built-in disorientation as an analogue of historical transition itself. The phenomenon of uncertain movement thus functions as a way to evoke the latter viscerally.

Unlike earlier novelists, Scott stresses movement’s surprisingly loose relation to conscious perception, sensation, or cognition. As even his earliest readers noticed, Scott’s characters are frequently guided, carried, or even dragged around. Typically, they are uncertain about the direction, the cause, or the goal of their movement through space. They may move in the dark or even be carried blindfolded, as in Scott’s last novel, *Castle Dangerous* (1831). They try to figure out what is happening by focusing on internal sensations when external coordinates are lacking, as they usually are. Sometimes all they can feel is the pure sensation of movement, which can serve to sicken them or cut them off from their surroundings. The political significance of this phenomenon of being carried around, which Alexander Welsh called passivity, was analyzed by Welsh in his study of Scott’s conservatism, *The Hero of the Waverley Novels*. But less discussed has been the intensity of Scott’s interest in the physical sensations of motion and, even more importantly, in their unreliability as information. As a private experience, movement can be an intense perceptual puzzle. It can and often does incorporate the knowledge that one’s perceptions are illusory. You might not realize how quickly you are moving; but you may be able to guess when the outside world appears to be moving as a result of your own motions. For example, a minor character in Scott’s *Redgauntlet* (1824) escapes from the custody of English soldiers by suddenly throwing himself off the side of the road and rolling down a near-perpendicular hill into a deep hollow: “[T]o the bottom I came. There I lay for half a moment. . . . All the hills were spinning round with me, like so many great big humming-tops” (243). From everyday experience, the character knows that the spinning of the hills is an optical illusion induced by his own movement, a false registration of the external world. At such moments, Scott’s novels display an attitude toward spatial disorientation that

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1 My argument offers a different though not incompatible view from that articulated by Jeffrey Schnapp, who has argued that the experience of speed or velocity, under certain conditions, served to intensify sensation for modern subjects. His important article discusses kinetic prostheses and means of transportation ranging from the classic era to the Romantic period, Futurism, and postmodernism. He poses against the phenomenon of vection—or the loss of the sensation of movement that tends to occur in train travel, for instance—other types of experiences of high speed that actively pursue the dimension of risk taking and thrill. My argument is concerned less with the affects of tedium or excitement than with sensations of vertigo or vection that are related to the knowledge of location, position, and movement and with how these are represented specifically in the context of the realist novel.

2 On the relation between analogical thinking and historicism as illustrated by Erasmus Darwin and Scott, see Devin S. Griffith’s study *Age of Analogy*. 
differs from those of his novelistic predecessors. By being located within a different framework, sensory illusions such as this one are epistemologically and ethically neutralized, encompassed, and objectified. I want to suggest that this underlying framework derives not only from epistemology but also from the physiology of his time: the study of the functioning of the neural apparatus. The physiological study of the perception of movement gives him new ways to invoke certain feelings about history.

Scott’s particular attunement to the experience of movement can be linked to multiple factors. He often cites his awareness of a revolution in modes of transportation (Schnapp; Burgess); he was also linked through various channels to the world of Edinburgh science and medicine. Scott’s maternal grandfather, John Rutherford, was one of four Scottish students trained in Leiden by Hermann Boerhaave, a founder of neuroscience and central figure in eighteenth-century science. Rutherford taught at the medical school alongside the better-known Robert Whytt, who discovered the spinal cord and the optic nerve, and William Cullen, the author of an influential nosology (Smith; Bassiri; Rocca; Budge; “Obituary”). The stature that Edinburgh attained in the mid-eighteenth century as the European center of medical science rested in large part on the work of scientists who explored “animal œconomy” (Rocca 85), or the question of what caused or allowed the body to move. Pursuing in a different realm some of the same issues that philosophers of action debated, scientists such as Whytt and Cullen tried to figure out how movements of nerves and muscles within the body could explain its outward motions (Bassiri; Kramnick). As I argue below, the work of Erasmus Darwin, who studied with Cullen in Edinburgh, bears particular relevance to Scott’s handling of motion and movement.3

In Scott’s hands, the historical novel both links itself to the realist novel and distinguishes itself. It does the latter by doubling down on the representation of the sensory experience of moving or being moved through space—the bodily experience of velocity, of acceleration, of inertial motion, of gravitational pull. Scott’s novels often answer the question of how what we conceive of as history can be experienced through the senses—or, to put it differently, whether sensory experience might provide an analogue or even an actual key to lived historical transition. The genre of georgic, as Kevis Goodman has shown, also targeted the question of “historical presentness” and what it felt like (Georgic 3). As Goodman, Lily Gurton-Wachter, and Mary Favret have all argued, the historical momentousness of the period of the Napoleonic wars was not always easily felt through the senses, and

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3 There may well be an additional source of Scott’s interest in this subject. It was often noted by his contemporaries that Scott walked with a distinctive rolling motion, a limp caused by childhood polio, which had left his legs of different lengths. Much of Scott’s “Ashestiel Memoir,” an autobiographical narrative that he supplied for J. G. Lockhart’s Life, concerns his inability to walk as a young child and the experience of being carried around; he was also prohibited from movement as an adolescent for an extended period of mandatory bed rest. Scott links this forced immobility with his own beginnings as a fabulist (see Lockhart). The inability to take bodily movement for granted together with his experience of Scotland’s rapid historical change in the late eighteenth century intersect at the center of his origin story as an author of historical novels.
the awareness of this gave rise to considerable anxiety. But rather than invoking history as a sensation of "affective discomfort [or] cognitive 'noise'" (Goodman, *Georgic* 10) experienced in a static setting or at a distance from historical events, Scott’s novels adopt an unexpected, ingenious tactic. They focus on the seemingly inherent unreliability of the sensation of movement: how easily the perception of movement can be disrupted, tricked, incited, or soothed away by habit, history, or position. In this way, the novel dialectically overcomes skepticism about what experience can vouch for. The unreliability of sense perception can become evidence that historical change is real, ongoing, and representable through novelistic means. Large-scale historical transition enters the field of novelistic representation through this problematic subjective experience of movement.

It is important to note the nature of the uncertainty. At the level of *fabula*, the plot of action, it is often a question of who or what caused one’s movements: characters are regularly abducted, kidnapped, and moved around by undisclosed agents. But at another level of plot that connects with that of history, a level that I suggest is carried largely by description, more vivid moments of uncertainty address the question of whether one is moving at all and, if so, at what speed and in what direction. We could call this the plot of *vection*. The latter term came to be used later in the nineteenth century to refer to sensory uncertainty about one’s own movement in space.4 (The most common example cited now is that of being seated in a train next to another train that begins to move forward.) For Scott, the phenomenon of vection becomes a trope of historical change. In his novels, history is both explained and figured through the tendency of the human sense of movement to be inaccurate, confused, or obtuse. Gaps open up between the cause of a movement, its degree of reality, and its conscious perception. In other words, we might be moving and not feel it, or we might have the sensation of moving when we are actually standing still. Scott’s novels engage the question of epochal historical change on the micro-level of the sensory experience of movement. In the process, both the concept of history and the form of plot undergo shifts within themselves and in relation to each other. Movement separates itself from sensation, perception contains action, and description blends into plot.

Scott’s indebtedness to the conjectural history of the Scottish Enlightenment has been examined by numerous critics including James Chandler and Ian Duncan. According to that model, development or modernization follows a uniform sequence of stages and is understood to occur at different rates in various places in the world and even within the regions of Britain. Scott places this theory in dialogue with the novel’s resources for representing the subject’s internal registering of the external world. Erasmus Darwin had already explored these concerns in the mode or discipline of science. Scott’s novels thus begin to open up new ways for plot to operate and signify. Depicting historical events sparingly, if at all, the novels evoke historical transition by problematizing movement, perception,

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4 There are different views concerning the origin of this term. Bernhard Riecke and Jörg Schulte-Pelkum (30) cite Helmholtz’s studies in 1866 as its first use; Alain Berthoz (52) cites Mach, whose experiments in the 1870s focused on producing vection; and Nicholas Wade and Benjamin Tatler (193) cite an entry in a 1931 German physiology handbook.
and orientation in space. Chains of causality come to matter less than the simple question of who or what is moving, in what direction, and how fast. Indeed, the phenomenon of movement takes on as much significance as causal sequences. While for those caught up in it, history cannot be pinned to causally comprehensible deeds or events, the novel evokes historical change through movement both witnessed and experienced in medias res. Scott’s novels internalize history, an achievement that Claude Lévi-Strauss identified as Western culture’s dubious distinction. Scott offers up the concentrated, strategic representation of motion as vertiginous sensation and thus as a problematic register of change over time. Since the sense of forward progress or motion is remarkably fallible, as recent studies in physiology and even in creating virtual environments help us to understand, his novels grapple with the fictionality inherent in the concept of history as well as with the possibilities that remain open in the past (Galperin).

In the final chapter of *Waverley*, Scott offers “[a] Postscript, which should have been a Preface” (339). Scott justifies this deliberate misplacement of prefatory remarks by noting that “novel readers” habitually start with “the last chapter of a work; so that, after all, these remarks . . . have still the best chance to be read in their proper place” (339, 340). Readers want to know, first of all, what happens at the end. Scott not only tricks them but uses the analogy of vection to raise larger questions about beginnings and endings, motion, change, and sensation. In an oft-cited passage, he remarks, “There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century, or little more, has undergone as complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland” (340). But despite the epochal extent of the changes that resulted from economic, political, and legal reforms, he points out that it is strangely difficult to *feel* it, much less to know or to use it as the basis of prediction: “[T]he change, though steadily and rapidly progressive, has, nevertheless, been gradual; and, like those who drift down the stream of a deep and smooth river, we are not aware of the progress we have made until we fix our eye on the now-distant point from which we set out” (340). Scott gives skepticism a pointed application here, incorporating it into the repertoire of the novel and placing it at the heart of its new mandate. He is not addressing questions of agency, intention, or the ability to translate internal intentions into effects in the world—issues that arise in trying to distinguish action from event (Kramnick). Passivity is simply assumed for the purposes of this scenario. Nor can the puzzle be solved by factoring in the passenger’s ability to bring attentiveness to bear on the situation. The degree of distraction or attention makes no difference, as Scott underscores the unreliability of sensory data in the context of “progress” or steady motion. The perception of self-motion is curiously inaccurate, subject to an inherent, organic inability to register speed, distance, or movement accurately. Am I moving, and if so, how fast or slow, in what direction? Or is the world around me moving while I stay still? While the phenomenon of illusory self-motion only came to be called vection by mid-nineteenth-century scientists, the questions that it raises become the ground of the historical novel’s realism, as the “prefatory” status of this chapter of *Waverley* suggests.

Vection was studied in Scott’s time as part of the larger phenomenon of vertigo, both of which are experienced as an inability to detect whether you yourself are moving, falling, standing still, or standing upright. These phenomena link the
historical novel to contemporary developments in science and physiology, most notably in the writing of Erasmus Darwin, a poet and scientist whom Alan Richardson, Devin S. Griffiths, and others have read in relation to Romantic-era writers. Linked to Scott through multiple social channels, including mutual acquaintances such as Anna Seward, Maria Edgeworth, and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Darwin’s influential work was debated by Thomas Brown, Dugald Stewart, and other luminaries of Scott’s Edinburgh, many of whom worked across the fields of literary criticism, literary production, and science (Goodman, “Uncertain” 210). In his two-volume Zoonomia, or the Laws of Organic Life (1795–96), Darwin argued that all perception consists of “the motion of the organ of sense . . . these motions constitute our ideas” (1: 12, 14). Perceptions, sensations, and ideas alike consist of internal movements. The dynamic contraction of fibers, often occurring in groups or in sequences, account for sense perception, pleasure or pain, thought, and action. Darwin’s theory focuses on motion’s variable forms and situates both internal and external movements in what might be considered a micro-historical context. “By the various efforts of our sensations to acquire or avoid their objects, many muscles are daily brought into successive or synchronous actions; these become associated by habit, and are then excited together with great facility, and in many instances gain indissoluble connections” (1: 50). We can, by habit, walk so as to avoid running into objects with whose location we are familiar, because our larger “locomotive muscles” are coordinated through association with the fibers of the retina; once the retina is stimulated by the appearance of an object, our legs will move in a certain way (1: 41). These motions occur in the muscles and nerves, often without the conscious intervention of the will. Darwin’s principle of association consists of the historicity directly embedded in the body’s fibers.

What makes Darwin’s discussions particularly germane to Scott’s historical novels is not only the stress they place on habit, a familiar theme by this point. Rather, Darwin pays scrupulous attention to the perceptions and internal sensations involved in certain movement situations or scenarios. He also regards the orientation of one’s body in space, whether in motion or standing still, as a constant, dynamic process of adjustment that relies on various sensory cues. What Darwin calls perpendicularity is particularly rich in implications for the historical novel, as it represents characters in relation to a changing or visually ambiguous environment. Unlike earlier scientists who had often related vertigo to internal digestive processes, Darwin argues that we chiefly know whether we are standing upright “by attending to the apparent motion of objects within the sphere of distinct vision” (1: 232). We “determine our perpendicularity” primarily by the objects that we see directly or in the field of peripheral vision (1: 232). He refers more than once to the example of standing at the top of a high tower. People in such a position “are obliged to balance their bodies by the less accurate feelings of their muscles” (1: 232), or what is now called proprioception, sensations communicated to the brain.

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5 Darwin was a central member of the network that included Richard Lovell Edgeworth, whose daughter, the author Maria Edgeworth, Scott knew and corresponded with; Scott was also linked with Darwin through his acquaintance with Anna Seward and Wordsworth (see Brewer 186–90; and Scott’s letter to Richard Lovell Edgeworth in Ashe 458).
by the muscles, tendons, and joints. In certain visually featureless or repetitive environments, we lose our sense of being upright, Darwin notes; quite literally, we do not know which way is up.

Darwin also takes up the problem of self-orientation during movement: “[W]e require some experience to learn the peculiar mode of motion of any moving objects, before we can make use of them for the purposes of determining our perpendicularity. Thus some people become dizzy... by gazing on the fluctuations of a river, if no steady objects are at the same time within the sphere of their distinct vision” (1: 233). This is the phenomenon of vection, of feeling as if you are moving. Darwin notes that it is difficult “to distinguish our own real movements from the apparent motion of objects. Our daily practice of walking and riding... instructs us with accuracy to discern these modes of motion, and to ascribe the apparent motion of ambient objects to ourselves; but those, which we have not acquired by repeated habit, continue to confound us” (1: 233). When moving through space, we only perceive things as still and ourselves as moving because we have learned to discount the evidence of our senses. Only by dismissing the apparent motion of objects around us do we know that we are, in fact, the ones that are moving. Darwin points out that through habitual correction (via the brain), the objects around us “appear at rest; we can measure the distances with our eye, and regulate our attitude by them” as we move along (1: 233). But if one looks, for instance, at “distant hills or woods, through a thin hedge, which is near us, we observe the jumping and progressive motions of them” (1: 233–34). Habit, then, stabilizes the appearance of the world, but habit easily disappears through the agency of a filtering medium. Darwin argues that only through accumulated experience can we learn to distinguish our own movement through the world from the constant “apparent motion of ambient objects.” That is, we realize that our own movement has been projected onto the things around us. Illusions are built into any first-person sense of geometry; any such sense has to negotiate with the immediate data of perception. Darwin suggests that even standing still is far from a passive state. It requires us to evaluate constantly our distance from objects, to check their apparent size and stability, and to adjust our uprightness through certain half-conscious operations of the brain. Such findings expand the novel’s realism by going, in a sense, beyond philosophical skepticism. Illusory movement and illusory stasis become organic features of regular embodied experience and perception. History enters into our experience of motion.

Darwin insisted that motions traveled through our sense organs and all the way through the body’s fibers. The persistence of this motion was both real and involuntary, he argued. Because the motions of the sense organs were themselves the ideas, no further mental faculties and no acts of conscious mediation were necessary. Darwin proves that these organs, such as the retina, move by noting that when a person spins around for a certain length of time, “the spectra of the ambient objects continue to preserve themselves in rotation, and he seems to behold the objects still in motion” even after stopping (1: 20). In his response to Zoonomia, Brown disputes this model; Brown attributes the apparent continued rotation of the room to “that deception of imagination, by which we consider ourselves, as still in motion, after we have ceased to revolve. Of this belief it is the necessary
consequence, that the objects . . . appear to move . . . and all the phenomena of vertigo are thus induced” (382). This difference between Brown and Darwin can be considered in terms of fictionality. Brown suggests that belief grounds the experience of fictionality. Darwin, however, argues for something like a fictionality directly embedded in the very apparatus of perception, at least where movement or change of position is involved. The body’s fibers actually continue to move through a type of inertia. Fiction thus becomes much harder to distinguish from any mental idea; fiction can be a matter of a time lag, a slightly overlong continuation of something that once really happened. It is executed by the body’s organs. The room appears to spin around us, or we feel like we are falling down, but these phenomena come about because of the organic structure of the body.

Scott’s novels show how historical change produces and perhaps depends on such illusions: we may keep on feeling something internally or go on doing what we had been doing, much as the figure of Old Mortality seems unable to stop his work of deepening the inscriptions on old headstones. The consciousness of such feelings depends on altered historical circumstance. Darwin writes, “When first an European mounts an elephant . . . whose mode of motion he is not accustomed to, the objects seem to undulate, as he passes, and he frequently becomes sick and vertiginous” (1: 234). In short, “when we are surrounded by unusual motions, we lose our perpendicularity” (1: 234). The phrase “unusual motions” captures something of what history might feel like. The sense of motion, direction, velocity, or uprightness is thus attuned to history at multiple scales. Continuous movement creates the sensation of remaining still. Or a small change in our habitual ways of moving makes it look as if the objects of the world are spinning or jumping around. Scott puts to good novelistic use this organic or structural inability to detect who is moving or in what direction, whether the world is moving or the observer.

Extending Darwin’s lines of observation, Scott places what we might call the drama of perpendicularity at the center of many novels. How can one remain upright while moving or while in a situation that appears to be one of motion? How does one maintain a social, religious, ethnic, or even personal identity in the context of rapid and complex historical change? How can one ascertain whether change occurs externally or within? How can one distinguish the apparent motion of objects, to use Darwin’s phrase, from one’s own? An example from The Heart of Midlothian (1818) shows how, at a local level, plot allows historical change to be figured in concentrated but indirect form as a set of physical sensations. Not only spatial disorientation but emotional, ethical, and legal frameworks of orientation are all at play in the following scene. It is a scene of motion that is described from a mobile viewpoint. At this point in the plot, Jeanie Deans, the novel’s protagonist and daughter of an old Cameronian, has just succeeded in her improbable quest to obtain a royal pardon for her sister, who has been (unjustly) found guilty of infanticide. On her way back, Jeanie passes a spot where a public hanging of “a domned [sic] Scotch witch and thief” (427), in an onlooker’s words, is taking place. Scott describes the topography of the location, its history, and the movement of the carriage, “wheeling . . . round the verge of the rising ground.” The hanging itself is seen at a distance and in movement, first through the eyes of Jeanie’s traveling companion, an Englishwoman:
The eyes . . . which, with the head and substantial person [of the Englishwoman] were all turned towards the scene of action, could discern plainly the outline of the gallows-tree . . . one of the objects, launched into the air, gave unequivocal signs of mortal agony, though appearing in the distance not larger than a spider dependent at the extremity of his invisible thread, while the remaining form descended from its elevated situation . . . Jeanie, with instinctive curiosity, turned her head in the same direction. The sight of a female culprit in the act of undergoing the fatal punishment from which her beloved sister had been so recently rescued, was too much . . . for her mind and feelings. She turned her head to the other side of the carriage, with a sensation of sickness, of loathing, and of fainting. (427)

The dramatic response of the usually stoic Jeanie may appear to be a straightforward example of sympathy, but the situation is more complex and more entangled in historical circumstance. Scott defamiliarizes the execution through extreme distance, emotional detachment, and the Englishwoman’s lack of knowledge, comparing the “signs of mortal agony” of the executed woman to the motions of a spider. Hardly anything can be seen at this distance but the vertical movements of dark shapes. But the mobile narrative perspective suggests how sensations of motion and speed can register and reflect the difficulty of navigating and embodying uneven historical transitions. Because of her religious scruples, inherited from her strict father, Jeanie herself had testified earlier at her sister’s trial that Effie did not reveal her pregnancy: a decisive omission, which, together with the disappearance of the child, actually constituted the crime in the eyes of this particular law. “Even in this moment of agony and general confusion [in the courtroom], Jeanie did not lose that superiority, which a deep and firm mind assures to its possessor, under the most trying circumstances” (249). Her own testimony was primarily responsible for Effie’s conviction. As she moves along, Jeanie sees an ending that could have been the result of her own action—more specifically, her own unwillingness to bend her rigid adherence to a moral and religious code from the past.

Highly significant is the fact that Jeanie herself is in rapid, unfamiliar motion. Jeanie had noticed the sensations when riding in a carriage for the first time: “[It] rolled forward at a rapid yet smooth rate, very different in both particulars from the lumbering, jolting vehicle which she had just left” (390). Jeanie’s involuntary forward motion here draws attention to the movement of history; the narrator takes the time to point out that this same spot had been used for many executions during the wars between England and Scotland, and that “these frontier provinces remained long unsettled . . . even at the time of which we write” (426–27). Even more closely related to Jeanie’s experience, though, are the circumstances of her sister’s conviction for child-murder. The novel carefully explains that this particular law had long since fallen out of use, and that it had only recently begun to be enforced because of the complex political exigencies of Britain in 1736. Historicity becomes the most important and complex dimension of the enforcement of the law as well as of Jeanie’s response to it. She moves forward in time reluctantly; along with her rigidly Cameronian father, she feels a growing distance from the present. The problem is precisely one of figuring out what counts as uprightness, as
perpendicularity, in a rapidly moving and increasingly heterogeneous world. Turning her head from one side to the other, Jeanie makes a curious figure, both registering history and avoiding it. In terms of the plot, we can also note that this scene has a significance that emerges dynamically and dialectically. At this point, the identity of the executed woman is unknown to Jeanie, though she soon learns who it is. Not until the end of the novel, however, is it revealed that the woman, Meg Murdockson, is the person who had attended Jeanie’s sister and stolen the newborn baby. Her execution, then, represents an untimely, too-early fulfillment of poetic justice, as though the plot itself, like Jeanie, had been carried forward too fast.

In Scott’s novels, history is invoked as a field of countervailing forces that are accelerating, slowing down, or pushing against each other at any given moment—“a moving picture . . . forming various changeful groups” (Waverley 119). Historically implausible, dormant, often regressive social movements like the Jacobite army unexpectedly materialize before the eye: “a changing, fluctuating, and confused appearance of waving tartans and floating plumes, and of banners. . . . At length the mixed and waverering multitude arranged themselves into a narrow and dusky column of great length” (212–13). Consequential plot events, too, can be similarly represented as a field of pure movement and counter-movement, as in this hunt that is described at a level of blurry abstraction: “half-heard cries . . . half-seen forms which were discovered, now emerging . . . now sweeping over its surface, now picking their way where it was impeded” (Bride of Lammermoor 107). Such half-dematerialized descriptions show Scott’s debt to Radcliffe, whose Gothic novels offer intense experiences of movement as optic flow, or the flow of images over the retina. Radcliffe achieves impressive effects by thus describing what characters see while in motion: typically, the landscape is “changing every instant, as the varying lights fell upon their surface” (53). Vistas appear and disappear, as do constant, mysterious auditory cues (murmurs, peals, music), as I have argued elsewhere.6 Usually, Radcliffe’s protagonist pursues her way with a balance of caution and curiosity, randomness and directedness, but even her self-directed movements tend to remain oddly inconsequential in terms of the plot.

As Ian Duncan has persuasively argued of Radcliffe, “The secret power . . . is that of the heroine’s dispersed subjectivity, fearing and mourning and yearning across the text” (Romance 47). In Scott, by contrast, even characters who would like simply to observe from a distance are invariably pulled into the catastrophe, interpelated by history. Paradigmatically, after young Waverley watches the motions of the Jacobite army described above, he himself rides through the middle of the heterogeneously moving mass, slowing down and then catching up to his position near the front.7 Scott’s novels have a far deeper interest in kinesthesia and proprioception, the internal stimuli from muscles, joints, and other deep tissues that communicate to our brains a “sense of body position and movement” (Aronoff et al., qtd. in Geurts 53). Where proprioception remains for Radcliffe’s characters a

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6 In “Radcliffe’s Materiality,” I make a more extensive argument about the ontology of Radcliffe’s Gothic novels (Lee).

7 Elsewhere, I discuss a different aspect of Scott’s historicism as shown in this scene (Lee, “Austen’s Scale-Making”).
way to acquire information about their location within a fictional world, Scott’s characters try to figure out something larger and more abstract through “the less accurate feelings of their muscles,” in Darwin’s phrase. In his novels, proprioceptive sensations become a way to articulate his characters’ social locations and destinies within complex situations of historical transition. Through his attention to the feeling of moving, of pushing against something, Scott invokes the deeply opaque experiential quality of historical agency and historical embeddedness.

We can posit two levels of plot in Scott’s novels. There is the plot of action, whose structure rests on decisions made by fictional and historical personages. This plot concerns how war, love, property, and politics are carried out, won, lost, or disputed; ethics, honor, desire and loyalty provide the motives for action. This plot traces a nexus of causality and is often fairly conventional. But another layer of plot, a plot of vection, relies on the detailed, granular description of movement, with its subjective physical sensations, in order to show how history is far from “settled and established” (Waverley 141). History, the present established order, is always being contested, pulled by half-seen forces. It has no fixed coordinates by which the forward or backward direction of movement can be calculated—hence the paradigmatic character of the Jacobite rebellion. Such episodes of disoriented movement reveal characters guessing, resisting, or simply losing themselves in their own sensations. The stakes are high: the scope of the novel’s realism. The novel thus aims at encompassing the experience of history as transition, which manifests itself somatically as the feeling of moving, falling, or being about to fall, often accompanied by “sickness and nausea,” “dizziness,” or “bodily distress . . . so great and engrossing, that to think of [one’s] situation was impossible” (Redgauntlet 268, 283, 287). But such moments do more than function as quasi allegories of history in which the narrative shifts to a different register or mode of representation. Rather, Scott embeds the plot of vection within the plot of action, stretching or prizing apart sequences or transitions in the latter to focus on the experience of moving and its proprioceptive sensations. One might say that conventional plot time or time at the level of story is temporarily suspended, while other dynamic forces emerge and make themselves felt through the level of somatic or physiological experience.

I will briefly examine two novels to illustrate how this can happen. In Redgauntlet, about a fictive failed Jacobite rebellion that occurs some twenty years after 1745, the protagonist, Darsie Latimer, discovers his identity as a member of a family doomed to be on the wrong side, or the losing side, of historical struggle. As legend has it, the Redgauntlet family always find themselves in “the situation of men striving against both wind and tide, who distinguish themselves by their desperate exertions of strength . . . but without being able to advance themselves upon their course” (320). The Redgauntlet family, in other words, have a purely proprioceptive relation to history; they can only feel their own exertions internally, but it is implied that they lack the ability to know how the external world is moving. It simply seems to push against them. In the plot, Latimer comes to learn that he is the nephew of the eponymous Redgauntlet through a physical resemblance: an involuntary, demonic contortion of the facial muscles. Latimer’s conscious thoughts are blandly conservative; he is loyal to the current regime. But his muscles and proprioceptive sensations provide the link to his identity as a Redgauntlet. What initiates the plot
of action is Latimer’s half-voluntary decision to walk across the estuary that separates Scotland, where he was sent and forced to remain, from England, where he is vulnerable to his uncle’s authority: “[M]y feet slowly and insensibly approached the river which divided me from the forbidden precincts, though without any formed intention” (33). As the tide rapidly turns and fills the bay, his experience becomes one of proprioceptive panic: “feeling, or thinking I felt, each pool of salt water through which I splashed, grow deeper and deeper . . . the sands . . . turned softer” (33). When, not long after, he is kidnapped by Redgauntlet and taken across the same estuary, he regains consciousness to find himself bound and moving. He tries to orient himself without visual clues:

*I was carried violently forward in some conveyance, with an unequal motion, which gave me much pain. My position was horizontal . . . all around me was dark . . . I at length, and gradually, recovered . . . the power of observing external sounds and circumstances . . . the vehicle, sinking now on one side, and now on the other, sometimes sticking absolutely fast . . . was subjected to jolts in all directions, which were very severe. At other times it rolled silently and smoothly. (173–75)*

In terms of the plot of action, this moment is critical, as Latimer now becomes a passive instrument in his uncle’s planned rebellion. But this is also where the plot of vection asserts itself through the sensations of lateral, vertical, and forward passive movement. These fail to yield precise information about the external world. Latimer does not know where or why he is moving, though near the end of the passage, he glimpses the tide advancing rapidly toward him in a dramatic instance of vection. The plot of vection relies on the feeling of being carried, pushed, or pulled forward, of struggling and pushing against something whose direction is uncertain. That something can be the unsettled forces of historical transition—in this case, the imagined last attempt on the part of a social minority to invoke a feudal definition of legitimacy. At the end of the novel, the group of aging, unwilling Jacobites who have been gathered together complain, “[Y]ou must not hurry us on too fast, Mr Redgauntlet . . . we will not be driven forward blindfold” (369). The feeling of the ground beneath one’s feet, though not always accurate or reliable, cannot be dismissed; indeed, it may be the novel’s primary mimetic form of access to the deeper forces of history.

Inertial motion plays a strikingly important role in the plot of Scott’s *Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), another representation of historical decline and replacement. The novel is deliberately vague about how the feudal possessors of Ravenswood have lost their land to the rising professional class: it was “neither sale, nor mortgage, nor . . . debt” (171). Instead of assigning a cause, the novel focuses on the way in which physical movement continues or even accelerates of its own accord. In one instance, a wild bull’s charge is stopped by young Ravenswood’s fortunate appearance, but even after it is shot, the animal continues to move forward: “[T]he progressive force of [the animal’s] previous motion, rather than any operation of

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8 Chandler considers this novel’s tendency to freeze into scenes in terms of the protocols of Romantic historicism (340–47).
his limbs, carried him up to within three yards of the astonished Lord Keeper, where he rolled on the ground . . . quivering with the last convulsions of muscular motion” (56). All that needs to be done is simply to wait for such forces to play themselves out. But rather than resist his decline, the last Ravenswood throws himself into it actively, adding his own force to what is presented as inevitable. He tries to immerse himself in “the feeling of his own rapid motion” (Bride 107) in the case of the hunt referred to above; he tries to dissolve himself in the proprioceptive apprehension of pure velocity without a clear sense of direction. The novel subordinates causality to other kinds of law—to laws of motion, for instance, that result in an inexorable acceleration of change. Ravenswood’s motion in the hunt “acquired a spirit of forcible and violent progression. Neither was his eagerness proportioned in all cases to the motive of impulse, but it might be compared to the speed of a stone, which rushes with like fury down the hill, whether it was first put in motion by the arm of a giant or the hand of a boy” (107).9 The comparison suggests that intention plays hardly any role; he has no particular destination or goal in mind. Objectively, his purpose is to disappear from history. The plot of action and the movement of history coincide here; no one stops him from rushing into nonexistence, as actually happens at the end of the novel. Another character waits and watches Ravenswood ride headlong toward him: “At once the figure became invisible. . . . No trace whatever of horse or rider could be discerned” (347).

The pastness of history as a recorded chain of events presents challenges for the novelist working within a realist mode. After Waverley’s protagonist is swept forward into the first battle of the 1745 rebellion, the narrator dryly remarks, “The rest is well known” (225). Two sentences suffice to remind the reader of how it unfolded. Scott cannot change that outcome, even if he can insert acts involving fictional characters. To some extent, he circumvents this structural limitation by inventing a plot in which fictional characters, along with a few historical ones, engage in what Roland Barthes calls “the larger articulations of praxis (to desire, to communicate, to struggle)” (“Introduction” 258). At this level of plot, what Jonathan Kramnick calls the “causal history” of actions (25) is ultimately explained: who made what happen and why. But this is not all there is to history—far from it. Scott also uses highly detailed accounts of the sensation of motion to evoke history as a phenomenological horizon rather than a causal sequence. In what I have called the plot of vection, or movement we cannot identify as forward or backward, up or down, self-motion or the ambient motion of the world, such moments cannot be fully accounted for by knowing who made what happen. Resurgence, resistance, and change—the major articulations of history in the Waverley novels—are invoked through the experience of movement in its own right, including vertigo and vection.

But are not such moments simply descriptions, added to produce a “reality effect”? Or “filler,” placed between significant narrative points? The distinction between “consequential,” “risk-laden moments of narrative” and those moments that are merely “consecutive,” or filling in the spaces between important events, was originally made by Barthes (“Introduction” 248). Barthes distinguished

9 The simile appears elsewhere as well, as toward the end of Waverley, where Scott uses it to describe the tempo of his own narration.
narrative “nuclei,” points at which it was possible for more than one path in the plot to be taken, from “catalysts,” the small actions that simply filled out a sequence once a decision had been made. Franco Moretti has recently extended the significance of this narrative function, seeing in such “filler” one of the key values of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism: “incessant . . . quiet action” (82). The other, Moretti argues, can be found in precise, descriptive pauses, which “inscribe the present so deeply into the past that alternatives [become] simply unimaginable” (93). But in Scott’s novels the energies of plot are coiled and concentrated in descriptions of movement, which are also the spaces of openness within history.10 Movements are not simple events, nor do they merely extend in time or space a choice that has already been made. Motion is itself a change of position, posture, or location that may be illusory, uncertain, and without clear direction or goal.11 Or it may be real. These are truly, to borrow Barthes’s phrase, “risk-laden moments” of narrative. By drawing attention to sensations of movement, Scott’s novels blur the distinction between description and narration. They also loosen what we might call the grasp of the preterit.

The preterit, or past tense, is the point at which history as we usually think of it coincides with the plot as a formal narrative device. Both the nineteenth-century novel and the genre of history, as Barthes explains, rely on narratives told in this past tense in order to create an enclosed world, “self-sufficient, reduced to significant lines . . . a slim and pure logos” (“Writing” 30). Lukács, too, stresses the reliance of narration on past tense in his important essay “Narrate or Describe?” Only in retrospect, he argues, can we know what was important and what it all meant. But as Scott’s scenario of drifting downstream suggests, the sense of pastness relies on a tenuous, self-mediated reconstruction of the experience of movement. He thus links history to the dynamic experience on which narrative plots depend. He reminds us that the compositional point of view consistently favored by Lukács is not the only one—maybe not even the most relevant one when it comes to the experience of history and the construction of the historical novel. For a reader, the narrative’s ending gives meaning or dimensionality to what came before it. In other words, plot, as the term is conventionally used, only comes fully into view when we look back from that final spot or imagine ourselves looking back from there. In his classic study, Reading for the Plot, Peter Brooks coined the phrase “the anticipation of retrospection” to describe how we make sense of plot; “the end,” Brooks argues,

10 This argument also bears on recent debates concerning description as a critical practice as well as a literary one. See Cynthia Wall; and Heather Love.

11 In Smollett’s Humphrey Clinker, movement takes on sociological as well as physiological significance. The journey chronicled in that novel reveals the fast-urbanizing social world, uncover dimensions of the fictive world (new or hidden relationships between characters, for example), and affects characters’ inner states of being in highly divergent ways. The modern urban world is represented as a phenomenon of mobility. But for the conservative Smollett, mobility as a social feature falls within the larger category of disorder; it is a concept that remains in opposition to an unchanging ideal of order. Smollett allows for the physical benefits of travel and motion, but movement still remains instrumental, a way of arriving at a condition of health (or its opposite). Most tellingly, for Smollett it cannot be a matter of doubt whether one is in motion or at rest.
writes the beginning and shapes the middle” (22–23). But Scott’s historical novels imagine the opposite: the retrospection of anticipation, a looking-back to a looking-forward. The success of the historical novel rests on how well it meets this challenge of creating suspense while recounting a sequence of events whose outcome is already known. It was shrewd of Scott to focus on the curious fallibility of perception when it comes to movement and motion. It allows him to approach history not only as a set of events that have already occurred, “repeatedly gathered up and contained in the hand of a creator” (Barthes, “Writing” 31), but also as a series of orientations and disorientations, with notable gaps or openings between intention, consciousness, and the perception of movement.

Scott’s historical realism operationalizes in a fictive narrative context the findings of physiology, and it is only partially ironic that he should invoke the universal claims of science to evoke historical change in a new manner. The links between his novels and the type of investigation carried out by Erasmus Darwin and others suggest other ways in which fiction and science converge: not only at the level of large-scale conceptions about life, matter, or form (Gigante; Goldstein) but also through questions of how the human body works. The physiology of perception can help us understand the effects of reading novels, as Nicholas Dames and Deidre Lynch have shown. But it can also illuminate the embodied epistemologies that the realist novel relies on to represent historical phenomena. Scott shows a deep and consistent interest in how external senses register movement and how the internal sense of balance and motion operates. Though he did not use the same language that researchers use today, his novels focus on body-based cues, which become especially important “when either walking without vision or when passively moved through space” (Frissen et al. 127). Like Darwin, who considers signals from the muscles and joints to be a secondary system for maintaining uprightness, Scott is aware of how proprioception must combine with visual cues and vestibular signals to allow us to feel absolute motion. Through Ravenswood, carried away by “the feeling of his own rapid motion,” or Jeanie Deans, overcome by nausea when moving through space and past a narrowly averted history, we can see that such sensory cues play a key part at multiple levels of plot. Scott grasps how contingent is any “coherent percept of self-motion” (Frissen et al. 125).

By building a level of plot on movement, by making even action consist in anticipating, halting, or participating in movement, Scott ties plot to the mechanisms of perception in a way supported by the recent work of the physiologist Alain Berthoz. Berthoz argues for a “motor theory of perception,” which holds perception to be itself “an internal simulation of action. It is judgment and decision-making, and it is anticipation of the consequences of action” (9). In other words, what we are able to perceive depends on our ability to imagine doing something with it; the brain has a “repertoire of . . . possible actions . . . that organize perception even before sensory stimuli are processed” (20). Vection is of interest to Berthoz because it reveals “assumption[s] [that] the brain makes” as it integrates visual, vestibular, and proprioceptive information (53). Expecting to move easily leads to the false sensation that you are moving: “Anticipation is crucial to the perception of self-motion,” but so is the maintenance of velocity within a certain range (53). Moving
too fast leads people to “the illusion that they are motionless before a world that is hurtling toward them” (53). Berthoz’s findings have rich implications for the study of the historical novel, of narration, plot, and description. The complex process of perception and the coordination of various cues provided by neurons, muscles, and the brain all occur in what is essentially a narrative context: “[T]o perceive an object is to imagine the actions its use will involve” (214). In narrative terms, description is always already oriented toward the plot, so it may not be entirely accurate to speak, in Gérard Genette’s terms, of a “descriptive pause” (99–106). To perceive something, to describe it, depends on being able to place it in a plot-like structure. For Scott’s novels, that plot-like structure is not limited to personal or individual actions; it is framed at the scale of change usually referred to as history.

Recent studies confirm Scott’s intuitive sense of how the novel can engage history by representing the sensations of moving through space. Studies of vection, now carried out in more formal scientific settings, discover that one of the strongest sources of vection for experimental participants lies in “optic flow” that occurs in the “peripheral visual field”—in other words, the movement of images in one’s peripheral vision (Riecke and Schulte-Pelkum 31). Researchers who tried to create this sense in virtual environments found that “naturalistic environments” with a “clear . . . frame of reference,” such as a furnished room, could more vividly create such effects. If such an environment is made to rotate, for example, viewers feel strongly that they themselves are the ones in motion (41). Most importantly, current research confirms that body-based cues—the information provided by the vestibular or inner-ear system and muscles and joints—can be misled and confused by conflicting visual cues. Experimental participants not only experienced illusory motion quite easily but confused forward and backward motion (Frissen et al. 125–31). Believability or verisimilitude plays a critical role: “[K]nowing that actual motion is possible . . . can make people believe that they actually moved, even though they never did” (Riecke and Schulte-Pelkum 42). In this last observation, the intimate links connecting plot and fiction with the experience of movement become apparent. Though these researchers do not use the term, realism appears to be closely, organically tied to the phenomenon of vection.

For Scott, the sensations of movement are critical not because they give information about the external situation but because they are so fallible, ambiguous, and absorbing. It has been argued that Scott’s novels begin from the conviction that eventful history has come to an end. The Waverley novels “discover the horizon at which—as for the individual subject, so for the nation—history comes to a stop” (Duncan, Romance 53). They have been read as showing the irreversible establishment of a liberal social order “that presupposes normal change as the serial production of novelties and a tolerance of inconsequential differences that occur

12 Genette in fact argues that no such descriptive pauses exist in Proust, “for the obvious reason that with him description is everything except a pause in the narrative” (106). This has often been overlooked by critics who assume that descriptions always constitute a pause in the fabula.

13 Carnival or fairground rides in the nineteenth century had taken advantage of this knowledge in, for example, the “haunted swing” (Wade and Tatler 193–98).
within preordained constraints,” in Jerome Christensen’s words (173). While much in the novels supports these conclusions, Waverley, the novel that not only lent its name to but also created a model for Scott’s future works, was written during a period of social turmoil and rapid technological and material change that led to further revolutions. Lukács thus describes the form of the historical novel, which he sees as the true epic of modernity: “The novel . . . gives us not the concentrated essence of some particular trend, but . . . the way in which the trend arises, dies away, etc. . . . The most important thing is to show how the direction of a social tendency becomes visible in the small, imperceptible capillary movements of individual life. . . . The essential aim of the novel is the representation of the way society moves” (Historical 140–44). While drama works through concentration and collision, the epic or novel focuses on representing a more dispersed, multidirectional or multidimensional movement: “[T]he consistent epic writer [i.e., historical novelist] will only show the direction of this movement; there is not the slightest need for him to depict ultimate victory or even a decisive triumph” (144). Here, Lukács changes the mimetic scope or profile of the novel’s plot. Instead of the imitation of action, the novelistic plot is the imitation of social movement. The historical novel places us within a field of intense, countervailing movements, where forward and backward have no fixed meaning, since they occur in a dialectical frame. For this reason, as Fredric Jameson notes, “realism is dependent on the possibility of access to the forces of change in a given moment of history” (204).

In Scott’s historical novels, new dimensions, functions, and affordances of plot are opened up through the experience of movement and its inherent sensory and cognitive dilemmas. By describing the internal cues, sensations, and adjustments that characters receive, process, and perform as they move in space, his novels change how other things are described and even how they happen. Landscapes are characterized in terms of the potential bodily sensations that would be encountered in traversing them; spaces are rough or smooth, broken or steep; there are always sudden turns, drops, and swerves.14 Interiority and exteriority, perception and action, cannot be separated from each other. Scott’s novels scale movement upward to a world-historical level and down toward the body’s fibers. They attend to the sensation of moving, or of watching something move, as a problematic phenomenon that in many ways defies conscious awareness and comprehension. The moving object may be oneself or the world; it may move on its own; it may sometimes need to be stopped. If our understanding of plot usually includes where a character goes and why, and what happened along the way, in Scott’s case, the raw experiential dimension of movement seems more crucial both to plot and to the realist novel’s mandate to represent history. The senses, including those of balance and motion, are especially important not because they are acute but because they are so easily deceived. Is movement an event or a condition? Am I moving? Or are you?

14 Travel writing of the period reveals interesting bifurcations between visual or optic experiences linked to the sublime (usually attained at the top of a climb) and proprioceptive experiences of climbing, toiling, and bodily effort. See, e.g., Charles Cordiner.

**Works Cited**


