

## Humour as Survival Strategy in Walter Scott's *Waverley*, *Rob Roy* and *Redgauntlet*

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**Abstract:** Humour will be shown to be present in a selection of novels by Walter Scott, as a strategy to temper hot spirits on the brink of violence and pre-empt conflict in the fictional societies. Despite the contagious effect spreading to the reader himself, this type of humour relies on paralogical hints, language inadequacy or language gaps, which the fictional audience as well as the reader has to fill in. In the process of solving the linguistic inaccuracies, the audience (both fictional and the reader) is forced to notice the deliberate violation of communication and look for meaning elsewhere. The distance between expected and discovered meaning is so great that a bout of laughter is the result, and fictional tensions are depleted of power. It is my claim that the humorous effect constantly brings the intuitive paralogic collapse of a logic which previously fostered conflict by coagulating opposing factions around powerful feelings and pathos.

**Keywords:** *humorous distance; paralogic intuition; incongruity; pathos; language gaps; survival strategy.*



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The present study will look at three novels, *Waverley*, *Rob Roy*, *Redgauntlet*, which evince the same ‘narrative disease’. The ‘disease’ mentioned is the diagnosis advanced by the first reviews of the *Waverley* novels. Critics accused the author of lack of a deeper perspective, lack of pathos, too much humour. The mildest of these reviews states:

Such is the outline of a work which, if it seldom melts us to tears by its pathos, or astonishes us by its sublimity, will be long the favourite of every reader to whom the beauties of nature, the peculiarities of general life and provincial manners, and the development of human character, are objects of sympathy or curiosity. It will please the man of taste and of feeling, but will not be likely to obtain an extensive popularity among the readers of circulating libraries. It abounds too little with non-sense, affectation, and romance, to be acceptable to the masters and misses who command a market for the annual productions of the Minerva press. (*The Scourge* 298)

There is also a thematic link, as these works deal with Jacobite uprisings. Humour proves often to be of paramount importance, delighting the reader, disarming emotional pathos in the fictional participants and in the reader as well, and activating a different kind of pathos.

The interplay between humour and pathos and their reliance on non-rational elements continue to baffle the academic world. Is humour entirely a self-defence mechanism? Humour seems to be part of the human evolution, but it seems that “no literary theorist currently prominent in the humanities has developed a scientifically defensible view of comedy that considers laughter as an evolved phenomenon. Henri Bergson, it is true, approaches laughter as an adaptive behaviour, but his philosophical commitment to ‘creative evolution’ gives his ideas a pseudoscientific cast, or at least a decidedly un-Darwinian one” (Storey 75). In this study, humour is definitely a means of communicating meaning.

The ensuing analysis will focus on humour in *Waverley*, *Redgauntlet* and *Rob Roy*, where it appears as one of the remedies proposed for insufficiently considered fictional decisions which are driven by some irrational elements and feelings. The abandonment of logic, usually shown in the laughter caused by unexpected incongruities, offers relief and a depletion of former pathetic feelings. But humour is not always associated with laughter.

In what follows, I will rely on Bakhtin’s theory which deals with humour and laughter, as well as with pathos. He operates with two distinct forms of pathos, poetic or authentic pathos and novelistic/prosaic pathos (Caryl and Morson 355). In the case of the authentic pathos, Bakhtin argues that “[a] discourse of pathos is fully sufficient to itself and to its object. Indeed, the speaker completely immerses himself in such a discourse, there is no distance, there are no reservations. A discourse of pathos has the appearance of directly intentional discourse...” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 394). But this is not always the case. He says that

“[a] discourse of pathos may also be conditional, and may even be doubled, like double-voiced discourse. In the novel it is precisely as double voiced that pathos almost inevitably occurs” (394). The difference lies primarily in the fact that this form of pathos becomes one among others. It no longer has scope over the entire world. “When it appears in the second stylistic line, the language of the first line loses its privilege. It becomes just another language of heteroglossia to be set into dialogue with others. The discourse of chivalric romances, of baroque novels, and of sentimental narratives no longer represents the world, but is represented as part of it” (Caryl and Morson 356-7). This is the case in the novels mentioned above. There is a repeating pattern in these writings, the pathetic discourse attempts to take over, sharply polarize and mobilize via pathetic feelings. Then, we get a constant subversion at the narrative level via multiple humorous incidents which prevent the empathetic siding of the reader with any of the factions. In the fictional society, an accumulation of pathetic feelings (in Bakhtin’s acceptance of the term) is usually rendered flat and depleted of tension via witty humorous interventions which rely on the infringement of one of Grice’s maxims of conversation, suspension of the pathetic logic and collapse into an overall laughter/humour which creates the “pathos of unity”, one which relies on wit and humour, rather than feelings.

While destroying the official conception of his time and of contemporary events, Rabelais did not seek, of course, to submit them to a scholarly analysis. He did not speak in the conceptual language but in the tongue of popular comic images. While breaking up false seriousness, false historic pathos, he prepared the soil for a new seriousness and for a new historic pathos. (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 439)

While this is in sync with Bakhtin’s view of laughter as a relief mechanism, the element of incongruity is also decisively present, as we will see in the fictional situations analysed. In every situation a conversational maxim is deliberately flaunted in order to force a reconsideration in which the incongruity becomes the centre, rendering the situation humorous.

This pushes humour beyond the boundary of reason, but not beyond meaning, as meaning with Bakhtin is not restricted to speech. Utterances can be entirely devoid of meaning unless they are a rejoinder in a dialogue (Bakhtin, *Speech* 145). Bakhtinian humour introduces another “pathos of unity”, but not via irrational feelings. Rather, a paralogic meaning comes into being via suspension of the rules of conversation (usually Grice’s maxims are tampered with) and gaps in conversation. To look into this phenomenon, I appealed marginally to linguistic theories on humour based on pragmatics.

The first passage which features this disintegration of the fictional pathetic discourse is taken from *Waverley*. The Pretender's troops, none of the most united, experience an internal misunderstanding in which the feelings of the

contenders escalate into tensions ready to burst in open conflict. Here the Prince, although portrayed as a historical failure in political matters, comes to solve the problem by deliberately violating the maxim of quality (Thomas 72) and offering a misleading lie. The contrast between stated meaning and the contradicting reality provides comic relief to the readers and the fictional characters who were on the brink of a dangerous conflict.

To promote or restore concord among his followers was indispensable. Accordingly, he took his measures.

“Monsieur de Beaujeu!”

“Monseigneur!” said a very handsome French cavalry officer who was in attendance.

“Ayez la bonté d’aligner ces montagnards-là, ainsi que la cavalerie, s’il vous plait, et de les remettre à la marche. Vous parlez si bien l’Anglois, cela ne vous donneroit pas beaucoup de peine” (Scott, *Waverley* 504).

This is the false statement, little suspected as such by the fictional French officer. The reader is thus forced to laugh when he spots the incongruity. While reading about de Beaujeu’s endeavours to bring the troops in formation, we are constantly laughing at the linguistic inadequacies and failures occasioned by the initial false statement of the Prince.

“Messieurs les sauvages Ecossois—dat is, gentilmans sauvages, have the goodness d’arranger vous.”

The clan, comprehending the order more from the gesture than the words, and seeing the Prince himself present, hastened to dress their ranks.

“Ah! ver well! dat is fort bien!” said the Comte de Beaujeu. “Gentilmans sauvages! mais, très bien. Eh bien! Qu’est ce que vous appelez visage, Monsieur?” (to a lounging trooper who stood by him). “Ah, oui! face. Je vous remercie, Monsieur. Gentilshommes, have de goodness to make de face to de right par file, dat is, by files. Marsh! Mais, très bien; encore, Messieurs; il faut vous mettre à la marche. Marchez donc, au nom de Dieu, parce que j’ai oublié le mot Anglois; mais vous êtes des braves gens, et me comprenez très bien.”

The Count next hastened to put the cavalry in motion. “Gentilmans cavalry, you must fall in. Ah! par ma foi, I did not say fall off!

“Eh bien, Messieurs, wheel to de right. Ah! dat is it! Eh, Monsieur de Bradwardine, ayez la bonté de vous mettre à la tête de votre régiment, car, par Dieu, je n’en puis plus!” (Scott, *Waverley* 504–5)

Language failure, unfortunate code mixing here and there, failure to pronounce some affricates, as well as the masterful appellation “gentilmans sauvages” betray the inability of the French officer to deal with the task: “have de goodness to make de face to de right par file, dat is, by files. Marsh!” (Scott, *Waverley* 505) The fictional society is thus relieved in laughter from the seriousness and anger of the initial accumulation of pathos.

We as readers are easily dissuaded from taking seriously any pathetic discourse, be it Fergus McIvor's, *Waverley*'s or the one of the unfortunate Prince for that matter. Communication is temporarily suspended, logic and reason are superseded by paralogic hints at the great discrepancy between statement and reality and the reader could barely suppress laughter at the Comte's ill-qualified efforts to execute the order. The pathos surrounding Prince Charlie's quasi-romantic enterprise is dispelled from the minds of the readers. To conclude the analysis of this episode I offer Bakhtin's own words in *Dialogic Imagination*: "The naivete of a simpleton who does not understand pathos (or who understands it in a distorted way, wrong side out), is counterposed to a false pathos, which together with gay deception has the effect of 'making strange' any pretensions to lofty reality a discourse of pathos might have. (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 402)

The second example I chose stems from *Rob Roy* and deals with the angry political factions hosted at the Black Bear in Darlington and a witty intervention which defused political pathos and installed general unity. The historical backdrop features the first Jacobite uprising and the narrator offers a description of the scene in which the supporters of king George and those of the Stuart line seem to be filled with pathos, in Bakhtin's acceptance of the term.

Every alehouse resounded with the brawls of contending politicians, and as mine host's politics were of that liberal description which quarrelled with no good customer, his hebdomadal visitants were often divided in their opinion as irreconcilably as if he had feasted the Common Council...

Dire was the screaming--deep the oaths! Each party appealed to Mr. Campbell, anxious, it seemed, to elicit his approbation.

"You are a Scotchman, sir; a gentleman of your country must stand up for hereditary right," cried one party.

"You are a Presbyterian," assumed the other class of disputants; "you cannot be a friend to arbitrary power" (Scott, *Rob Roy* 41).

Campbell, Rob Roy, McGregor flout the maxim of manner (Thomas 71), giving a rather long reply without actually choosing any side. The surprise consists primarily in the reduction of the problem to one common denominator; teasing with the fact that both monarchs are equally unable to help or offer a solution in the case of a 'very important' problem, pertaining to "carnival grammar" (Lachmann 152). After putting both kings on a par, he ironically validates the pathos of both groups, but the surprise comes with the reduction of their lofty ideas to a very prosaic and pragmatic matter, in a way similar to Bakhtin's subversion and allusion to the "lower bodily stratum", Campbell's thirst for brandy.

I havena much dubitation that King George weel deserves the predilection of his friends; and if he can haud the grip he has gotten, why, doubtless, he may made the gauger, here, a commissioner of the revenue, and confer on our friend, Mr. Quitam, the preferment of solicitor-general; and he may also grant some good deed or reward to this honest gentleman who is sitting upon his portmanteau, which he prefers to a chair: And, questionless, King James is also a grateful person, and when he gets his hand in play, he may, if he be so minded, make this reverend gentleman archprelate of Canterbury, and Dr. Mixit chief physician to his household, and commit his royal beard to the care of my friend Latherum. But as I doubt mickle whether any of the competing sovereigns would give Rob Campbell a tass of aquavita, if he lacked it, I give my vote and interest to Jonathan Brown, our landlord, to be the King and Prince of Skinkers, conditionally that he fetches us another bottle as good as the last. (Scott, *Rob Roy* 41–2)

The proposed monarch is the humorous solution uniting everyone in the pub and providing comic relief to the reader as well. “This sally was received with general applause, in which the landlord cordially joined; and when he had given orders for fulfilling the condition on which his preferment was to depend” (*Rob Roy* 42).

*Redgauntlet* deals with a third and almost entirely fictional Jacobite uprising. The abundance of humorous passages is so great, that the entire novel seems to be a deliberate collection of ironic subversions. From the witty exchange of letters to the comic surprise of Alan Fairford when he discovered that the lady he was helping to dismount was a rather “solid weight,” i.e. his friend Darsie brought by Redgauntlet to the meeting in a lady’s dress, the novel leaves little room for pathetic discourse to properly deploy and win adherents.

The participants in the fictional third Jacobite uprising, betrayed by Cristal Nixon, Hugh Redgauntlet’s henchman, are surprised by General Campbell, who entered their place of meeting and managed to pre-empt violence via humorous encroachments upon the maxims of quality and manner. Here the opposition pathos-humour plays a central role. The adherents to the Stuart line maintain their pathos and heroism, and try to show their unshakable resolution.

He had passed through their guards, if in the confusion they now maintained any, without stop or question, and now stood, almost unarmed, among armed men, who nevertheless, gazed on him as on the angel of destruction.

‘You look coldly on me, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘Sir Richard Glendale—my Lord ---, we were not always such strangers. Ha, Pate-in-Peril, how is it with you? and you, too, Ingoldsby—I must not call you by any other name--why do you receive an old friend so coldly? But you guess my errand.’

‘And are prepared for it, general,’ said Redgauntlet; ‘we are not men to be penned up like sheep for the slaughter.’

‘Pshaw! you take it too seriously--let me speak but one word with you.’

'No words can shake our purpose,' said Redgauntlet, were your whole command, as I suppose is the case, drawn round the house.' (Scott, *Redgauntlet* 247–8)

The General's attempts to divert them from their pathos-filled discourse and their drive for heroic action were at first seemingly useless. After the group's resolution to fight to death in their honourable cause, the endeavour was crowned with the Pretender's offer of self, his supreme sacrifice for the sake of his adherents. "Hear ME, sir,' said the Wanderer, stepping forward; 'I suppose I am the mark you aim at--I surrender myself willingly, to save these gentlemen's danger--let this at least avail in their favour.' (Scott, *Redgauntlet* 248). Group cohesion was at its peak, the adherents rallied around the Wanderer, apparently nothing could bend their resolution. "An exclamation of 'Never, never!' broke from the little body of partisans, who threw themselves round the unfortunate prince, and would have seized or struck down Campbell, had it not been that he remained with his arms folded, and a look, rather indicating impatience because they would not hear him, than the least apprehension of violence at their hand" (Scott, *Redgauntlet* 248).

But after the Prince offered to give his life for the sake of his adherents and the climax of this pathos-filled proposition, everything is brushed aside with an entirely different solution. The general flaunts the maxim of quality (Thomas 67) several times, suggesting an outlet. "At length he obtained a moment's silence. 'I do not,' he said, 'know this gentleman' -- (making a profound bow to the unfortunate prince) -- 'I do not wish to know him; it is a knowledge which would suit neither of us'" (Scott, *Redgauntlet* 248). There is a clear discrepancy between the statement and the gesture which shows the initial statement to have been a lie and gives the hearers the cue to interpret differently Campbell's following affirmations, using a different set of maxims and conversation principles, different from the general norm. "Then a humour-cooperative principle (CP) is introduced which can accommodate the original CP, but can also allow violations of the CP as long as they are eventually redeemed. . . Other CPs seem to exist, as well as a 'meta-CP' which regulates violations to the CP." (Attardo 286). General Campbell seems to display stupidity and inability to grasp their pathos.

Come, do not be fools, gentlemen; there was perhaps no great harm meant or intended by your gathering together in this obscure corner, for a bear-bait or a cock-fight, or whatever other amusement you may have intended, but it was a little imprudent, considering how you stand with government, and it has occasioned some anxiety. Exaggerated accounts of your purpose have been laid before government by the information of a traitor in your own counsels; and I was sent down post to take the command of a sufficient number of troops, in case these calumnies should be found to have any real foundation. I have come

here, of course, sufficiently supported both with cavalry and infantry, to do whatever might be necessary; but my commands are--and I am sure they agree with my inclination--to make no arrests, nay, to make no further inquiries of any kind, if this good assembly will consider their own interest so far as to give up their immediate purpose, and return quietly home to their own houses. (Scott, *Redgauntlet* 248–9)

The listeners as well as the readers can decode the implied meaning behind the seeming inability to understand pathetic discourse, they are invited to activate the meta-CP (cooperative principle). This serves the purpose of the Bakhtinian parodic subversion in dialogue:

Stupidity (incomprehension) in the novels always polemical: it interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo-intelligence) with which it polemicalizes and whose mask it tears away. Stupidity, like gay deception and other novelistic categories, is a dialogic category, one that follows from the specific dialogism of novelistic discourse. For this reason, stupidity in the novel is always implicated in the language, in the word, at its heart always lies a polemical failure to understand... someone else's pathos charged lie that has appropriated the world and aspires to conceptualize it, a failure to understand generally accepted, canonized, inveterately false languages with their lofty labels for things and events" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 403).

Campbell is the one who cannot grasp the exalted pathos of the Jacobite plotters and their defence. With Bakhtin, pathos is connected with enthusiasm, and the pathetic discourse implies the word which intends to install itself as the ultimate word, without the possibility of other rejoinders. Through his seeming inability to understand and his impatience at their not being able to listen to his rejoinder, Campbell attacks the seriousness of the enterprise. By reminding them that this is one view among others, he diminishes their pathos and conveniently minimizes the pathos of government forces. The scene is playful, humorous, yet without laughter, although the rest of the novel is studded with comic moments when laughter rules supreme. This is a form of "that higher humour which skilfully blends the ludicrous and the pathetic, so that it is hardly possible to separate between smiles and tears" (Lynch 170). The moment the revolutionary pathos is represented and it becomes another line in the dialogue, the Pretender's party remains with the conclusion that a change is not necessary, the 'play of bear-baiting', the 'amusement' is played out and there is no point in pursuing further a dangerous agenda. They choose the outlet suggested by Campbell's reinterpretation of their intentions and go home.



Bakhtin's own words might best conclude the analysis of this last episode from *Redgauntlet*:

The inadmissibility of mono-tony (of serious monotony). The culture of multi-tony. The sphere of serious tone. Irony as a form of silence. Irony (and laughter) as means for transcending a situation, rising above it. Only dogmatic and authoritarian cultures are one-sidedly serious. Violence does not know laughter. Analysis of a serious face (fear or threat). Analysis of a laughing face. The place of pathos. The pathetic element transformed into the maudlin. The sense of anonymous threat in the tone of an announcer who is transmitting important communications. Seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations. But laughter lifts us above them and delivers us from them. Laughter does not encumber man, it liberates him. (Bakhtin, *Speech* 134)

In the analysed episodes we have noticed the way in which humour resorts to interruptions in the normal flow of communication, to language gaps and violations of the cooperative principles of conversation, spotted in our analysis through the violation or flouting of Grice's maxims of conversation.

In line with Bakhtin's theory, pathos, as represented in the novels under analysis, is linked with one view of the world which attempts to become the final, last view, wishing to preclude other rejoinders in the dialogue. Humour offers a parodic view of "philosophical, moral, scholarly, rhetorical, poetic and in particular the pathos-charged forms of discourse (in Rabelais, pathos almost always is equivalent to lie)" (Dentith 204). Groups actuated by such powerful pathos tend to come into conflict, and tensions in the fictional societies threaten to explode. Laughter, humour, introduced by means of seemingly irrational, stupid mistakes come to dispel these tensions and preclude violent discharges thereof. However, the seeming gaps and mistakes in communication always bear a higher meaning, as Bakhtin theorized in his *Notes from 1970*, sometimes coming with a paralogic intuition which introduces laughter at the unexpected incongruities revealed. Broken utterances and language failures are actually rejoinders given to the "authoritarian" word, and as such they bear meaning. Bakhtin's view is confirmed by recent linguistic theories concerning humour, as these identify an overarching meta-cooperative principle, which is activated by the intuition of the interlocutor, who then switches from the regular rules of conversation to a different set of rules, dictated by humour.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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