SIR WALTER SCOTT AND THE FRENCH PRESS: PARIS 1826

À Sir Walter Scott

Peintre de la nature et de la vérité
Toi dont la muse unit la grâce et la beauté
des Vierges d’aonie;
J’admire tes romans, j’honore ton génie
dont la gloire s’envole à l’immortalité.
Ah! Dans ta brillante carrière
Tu ne moissonnes que des fleurs,
Et tu ressembles à Molière
Qui n’eut jamais d’imitateurs.1

The above flawed poem,2 a panegyric to Scott, states, unabashedly, the general climate of admiration for the Scottish poet and novelist throughout Europe in the first half of the nineteenth-century and, in particular, in France where translations of Scott’s works had already been undertaken by Joseph Martin (Guy Mannering) as early as 1816 and Sophie de Maraise (The Antiquary) and J-B Defauconpret (The Antiquary and The Puritans) both in 1817.3 During his lifetime, Scott made two visits to France. His first to Paris, under Allied occupation, in 1815, concluded a tour of Brussels and Waterloo.4 It was during this visit that Scott made contacts and established several friendships with some of the leading European political and military figures as well as the English fashionables frequenting the Paris salons after the fall of Napoleon. Amongst his 1815 contacts, Field Marshal M’Donald, Jean-Baptiste le Chevalier and Count Pozzo di Borgo, all welcomed Scott again to Paris in 1826.5 The purpose of his return visit to France, in 1826, to complete research
for his multi-volume work on the Life of Napoléon Bonaparte, is well documented in his Journal. The visit, according to Scott, was a grand succès.6 This study focuses on the apparent succès of Scott’s 1826 visit to Paris and his literary reputation, in the years directly preceding and up to 1826, as reported by some of the literati, but, primarily, by the French press: Le Globe, Le Figaro, Le Mercure and La Quotidienne to name but four.7

Scott’s arrival and subsequent two-week stay in Paris at the Hôtel Windsor, rue de Rivoli, was to cause quite a stir in both Parisian haute société and literary circles:

A great sensation was excited here yesterday by the arrival of Sir Walter Scott, and I understand that half the nobility, and of course every literary character, have left their cards at his hotel in the Rue de Rivoli. (...) Sir Walter’s object in visiting the French capital, I understand, is for the purpose of consulting several works in the Royal Library, to illustrate his life of Napoléon.8

One of the literary characters and admirers was the romantic poet and novelist, Alfred de Vigny whose historical novel, Cinq-Mars, of which a dedicated copy was presented to Scott, in person, on November 6, is currently housed at the Abbotsford library.9 To date, however, no correspondence between Scott and Vigny has surfaced. Moreover, and in spite of the latter’s entreaties, “Je l’ai prié de m’en écrire les défauts en lui donnant mon adresse,”10 Scott does not commit himself but is clearly moved by the occasion and appreciative of the work if we are to give credence to Vigny’s account of the meeting: “Ne comptez pas sur moi pour critiquer, m’a-t-il dit, mais je sens, je sens!”11 Scott, ever true to his avowal, “I make it a rule seldom to read and never to answer foreign letters from literary folk,” is disinclined to enter into an agreement to write to Vigny.12 Only Goethe with whom he corresponded in 1827 appears to have been the exception to this trenchant assertion.13 Goethe was, of course, a literary giant, at that time. Vigny, although celebrated in French literary circles, was not in the same world literary class as either Goethe or Scott.

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Twelve years later, in 1838, and six years after the death of Scott, Vigny professes certain reservations in his Journal concerning the faiblesse of composition of Scott’s novels: “Je dis à Charles Nodier que j’étais convaincu qu’en commençant un roman Walter Scott ne savait pas comment il le finirait. Nodier hésitait à le croire tout en trouvant ses compositions bien faibles.”¹⁴ His veneration at the age of twenty-nine of the father of the historical novel has undergone a negative transformation at the age of forty-one or, at the very least, he is more discerning in his appraisal of Scott’s work. In this, we will show, Vigny was not alone. That aside, the entry in his Journal includes a near perfect translation into French taken from Scott’s Journal in which the Scottish author describes, with refreshing honesty, his own aesthetic approach to his literary compositions:¹⁵ “Now this may seem strange but it is quite true, and it is no less so that I have generally written to the middle of one of these novels without having the least idea how it was going to end.”¹⁶

In fairness to Scott, he was all too aware of the perils of his impressionistic approach and indeed advises against using his free-flowing style:

(...). It is a perilous style I grant but I cannot help it - When I chain my mind to ideas which are purely imaginative - for argument is a different thing - it seems to me that the sun leaves the landscape, that I think away the whole vivacity and spirit of my original conception, and that the results are cold, tame and spiritless. It is the difference between a written oration and one bursting from the unpremeditated exertions of the Speaker which have always something of the air of enthusiasm and inspiration. I would not have young authors imitate my carelessness, however . . . .¹⁷

Scott’s disclosure suggests that his unrestrained and expansive prose is partly design and partly accident. The rest is surely innate talent. Moreover, the amount of credence we give to Vigny’s criticism is diminished by our knowledge that he has already read Scott’s Journal and could, therefore, be pirating...
Scott's own critical assessment of his work. Is it also possible that Vigny's jaundiced view in 1838 is the result of Scott's refusal to write to him? It is more likely, however, that twelve years after their meeting, Vigny, no longer blinded by Scott's celebrity and more experienced, himself, as a writer, could afford to put forward a more objective and dispassionate criticism. Yet even in 1826, there is deep sadness and disappointment underlying Vigny's apparent enthusiasm following his meeting with Scott. Indeed, it surfaces briefly in a letter to Adolphe Saint-Valry written November 7, the day after he met Scott at the Hôtel Windsor:

(...) J’ai passé hier quelque temps avec sir Walter Scott, l’oncle de ma femme, son compatriote, me l’a fait connaître. Je vous dirai tout ce que j’ai observé dans cet illustre vieillard, l’écrire serait trop long; je l’ai trouvé affectueux et modeste, presque timide: mais souffrant, mais affligé, mais trop âgé, ce que je n’attendais pas. Cela m’a fait peine.18 (my emphasis)

We are reminded of Gustave Flaubert’s sound advice: “Il ne faut pas toucher aux idoles. La dorure en reste aux mains.”19

That said, the numerous entries on Scott in Vigny’s Journal d’un poète are, grosso modo, encouraging and he clearly admired him enough to accord him the references.20

While Scott’s presence in Paris was being noted by the British correspondent in the Edinburgh Weekly Review, his every déplacement, gesture and word were being duly recorded in the French press under court news, society news and, more alarmingly, dagger thrusts (coupes de lancette) wherein he was the subject of several leaders and sub-leaders:

Sir Walter Scott a reçu une marque très flatteuse de distinction de la part du Roi. L’honorable baronnet se trouvant avec sa fille sur le passage de S. M., le Roi a permis qu’il restât dans la galerie vitrée où les dames seules sont admises. S. M. qui n’a point oublié que le chantre de Marmion a consacré aussi quelques lignes aux infortuns des Bourbons, a adressé au poète les paroles les plus gracieuses, et s’est entre-

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tenu pendant quelques moments en anglais avec miss (sic) Anne Scott.21

M. Roger, ayant appris que Walter Scott était boiteux, lui a fait offrir le fauteuil.22

Le temps est peut-être venu de soumettre le talent de Sir Walter Scott à cette critique sérieuse à laquelle jusqu’ici l’enthousiasme du public et la rapide succession de ses ouvrages ont également concouru à le dérober.23

Serious criticism aside for the present, honour, respect and enthusiasm in various social milieux were the key ingredients of Scott’s 1826 visit. On September 20, shortly before Scott’s arrival in Paris, Le Figaro publishes the following review of an operatic version of Ivanhoe at the Théâtre royal de l’Odéon directed by M. Frédéric:

Ivanhoe, que nous avons entendu la seconde fois avec la plus scrupuleuse attention, est décidément un pasticcio fort remarquable. D’abord, prévenu par le souvenir du chef d’oeuvre de Walter Scott, nous aurions désiré retrouver ces scènes tracées de main de maître et qui se refusent au cadre d’un drame et surtout d’une œuvre musicale. (…) Mais en réfléchissant à la portée d’un libretto français, et en faisant abstraction de Walter Scott et de son génie, et en nous occupant moins du poème que de la musique, nous avons rectifié notre jugement, et Ivanhoe nous a paru digne de grands éloges. (…) L’ouverture a été exécutée avant-hier avec une précision parfaite. (…) Nous consacrerons un article à la partition de cet opéra qui, tirée des meilleurs ouvrages de Rossini, forme un choix des plus admirables morceaux de ce grand compositeur. (…) L’ouverture a été exécutée avant-hier avec une précision parfaite. La mise en scène, les décors et les costumes sont, à peu de chose près, en harmonie avec la magnifique musique de Rossini.24
In addition to the obvious artistic success of the opera, it was hoped that Ivanoe would help to pull the Théâtre royal de l’Odéon out of its current financial and administrative difficulties:

M. Bernard cède la place à M. Frédéric. (...) partout des dettes, des vuides à combler, une troupe incomplète et mal organisée, un répertoire usé; enfin tous les maux qui signalent le plus funeste système d’administration. (...) Que faire dans ces moments difficiles? M. Frédéric avait besoin d’user de toute sa sagesse et de tout son talent pour soutenir le cadavre théâtral abandonné à ses soins. Les obstacles qui s’opposaient à la réussite de son entreprise ne l’effrayèrent pas; et enfin après six mois de travaux constants, il est parvenu à réparer les fautes nombreuses de son prédécesseur; les dettes ont été payées, la troupe augmentée, le répertoire renouvelé, et les désordres de la dernière administration ont entièrement disparus. Voilà la situation présente de l’Odéon; elle est de bon augure pour l’avenir. (...) Sans doute les succès d’estime ont aussi leur prix; mais les succès d’argent sont bien plus rares; Robin des bois a été le premier à l’Odéon; espérant qu’Ivanhoe ne sera pas le dernier.25

Scott, himself, at that time, encumbered by financial problems, may have been gratified to learn that an adaptation of one of his works had helped to stave off financial ruin for the Odéon. Ivanhoe was a success and Scott notes that he was pleased with the production if not a little critical of the dialogue.26 The operatic version of Ivanhoe seemed destined to share in the success of the novel:

Le libraire Sautelet (place de la Bourse) ne s’endort point; il veille au contraire avec une très-louable activité aux plaisirs des nombreux lecteurs de Walter Scott. A sa première livraison a déjà succédé la seconde, qui comprend Ivanhoe, cette belle épopée du Moyen Âge qui vaut beaucoup mieux que de très-célèbres épopées en vers.27
Praise, indeed, to be ranked above the most revered of traditional literary forms. Nevertheless, the allusion to the épopée is an accurate assessment of Scott's novels. In *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács with references to Vissarion Grigorevich Belinsky, sums up the epic quality of Scott's work, thus: "It is (...) with the specific nature of his historical themes, with his selection of those periods and those strata of society which embody the old epic self-activity of man, the old epic directness of social life, its public spontaneity (...) that make Scott a great epic portrayer of the 'age of heroes'." He argues that while Scott's heroic figures like traditional epic heroes often personify a collective national and social experience, they differ from the traditional hero of the épopée in that they are "decent and average" rather than "eminent and all-embracing." These differences are secondary, however, to our argument. There is little doubt that Ivanhoe has epic qualities. As for the stage version, White concludes that Ivanhoe "aroused a great number and a wider range of dramatic adaptations than any other Scott production."

In the days that followed this visit to the theatre, Scott informs us that his popularity was becoming more a burden than an asset. Letters of introduction, calling cards, invitations to dine and to sit for paintings were showered on his bemused yet weary person. On November 5, the day he met Alfred de Vigny, he notes:

> I believe I must give up my journal till I leave Paris. The French are literally outrageous in their civilities - bounce in at all hours and drive one half mad with compliments – I am ungraceous (sic) not to be so entirely thankful as I ought to this kind and merry people.31

By way of example, in *Les Soirées de Walter Scott*, the enthusiasm and elation of Paul-L. Lacroix, the bibliophile, is touching and amusing if not a little discomfitting in the account of his efforts to meet Scott and obtain his autograph. On learning of Scott's arrival in Paris, he writes:

> "O Walter Scott!" Ah! Si j'avais possédé seulement ce nom-là écrit de la main de celui qui le porte, je ne
Lacroix claims that Scott writes and signs the following inscription in a copy of a work by Jean Scott, a namesake and celebrated medical professor from the Sorbonne: “Voilà mon maître. Walter Scott.” The recipient has, however, unwittingly brought not a tome of Jean Scott’s as was his intention but a 1559 tome of Froissard’s! Scott, we are told, is unperturbed and happy to confide in his audience:

Messieurs, ... grâce à monsieur, que je n’ai pas l’honneur de connaître, quoique son procédé m’annonce un homme d’esprit et d’érudition, je viens de confesser une vérité dont certainement on s’armera contre moi. (...) Oui, ... c’est dans le vieux Froissard que j’ai trouvé le germe du roman historique. La création ne m’en appartient pas, je l’avoue en toute humilité; je n’ai fait que ressusciter des morts, ramasser des trésors dans les tombeaux et emporter dans mon pays des biens nés dans le vôtre, et que vous dédaignez, fautes de les connaître. (...) Nous autres Anglais, nous faisons un cas extrême de tous vos chroniqueurs, et leurs ouvrages deviennent tous les jours plus rares en France, parce qu’ils sont à
l’enchère au delà du detroit. (…) Je ne m’étonne plus si j’ai acheté ce Froissard 140F à la vente du duc de Lavallièr... Messieurs, ... vous me forceriez à me faire plus modeste que je ne le suis en effet; j’ai reconnu Froissard pour mon maître. (…) Je ne saurais vous témoiner combien je dois de reconnaissance aux vieux historiens français. Ils ne m’ont pas seulement montré la manière de faire agir et parler des personnages historiques, je leur dois encore l’idée de mon Quentin Durward.... Bientôt j’espère puiser une nouvelle composition dans les annales de votre histoire, et ne pouvant jouter avec Froissard quand il s’agira de représenter Charles le Téméraire, j’essaierai du moins à l’imiter.33

Was it a ruse on Lacroix’s part to bring Froissart’s work instead of Jean Scott’s? Had he already heard of Scott’s passion for Froissart?34 Indeed, is Lacroix’s version of the meeting apocryphal? The problem with the préface is its apparent anecdotal form. In addition, Scott says nothing about this meeting between himself and Lacroix and very little about these soirées passionnantes: “Je ne dirai pas que l’on applaudit le conteur, l’éloge sera faible auprès de cette extase magnétique qui enchaînait chacun de nous quoi qu’il en eût.”35 Scott is oddly mute on the subject of his nightly “cours d’histoire appliquée au roman”.36 Wayne Conner suggests exploitation on the part of Lacroix although he doesn’t state specifically why he believes Lacroix to be exploitative.37 It is possible he used Scott’s name in his préface to encourage the sale of his entertaining and stylish book published in 1829.38 On the other hand, instead of exploiting Scott’s name, it is also possible that the deep and heartfelt gratitude expressed in his préface simply acknowledges his dependence on Scott for his material. Putting aside scepticism and accepting a degree of veracity on the part of Lacroix, the zealous devotee, Scott’s frank disclosure is illuminating on two counts. Firstly, it says much for his candidness and sincerity in the climate of cloying flattery and hero worship in which he has unexpectedly found himself. While acknowledging both Froissard as the source of his
inspiration and the important place in literature for the historical novel, he openly admits to a degree of vanity concerning his own novels:

... le roman est, si j’ose m’exprimer ainsi, un fils naturel de l’histoire. Bien des gens se font scrupules de le reconnaître. Quant à moi, qui ai fini par fouler aux pieds la honte, et me déclarer père d’un trop grand nombre peut-être de ces enfants naturels, je prouverai facilement que l’histoire ressemble quelquefois au roman à s’y tromper, et sans invoquer à l’appui de mon opinion une foule de chronique aussi exactes qu’amusantes, je pourrais rapporter en forme d’exemple quelques faits curieux et peu connus que j’ai réunis dans mes recherches.39

Secondly, while Scott’s indebtedness to Froissart is widely acknowledged, it is evident that his alleged appreciation of the French chronicler extends beyond the French language as is suggested by W.E.K. Anderson in the Journal: “Scott’s French owed its greatest debt to Froissart.”40 That Froissart was the inspiration for characterization in Scott’s works is significant. Certainly, it is Scott’s treatment of his dramatis personae that elicits the most praise from the French critics:

Ce sont des personnages vivants, où se trouvent à la fois l’existence passionnée, les traits caractéristiques des temps, des peuples, des professions et des croyances. Telle est cette vérité, telle est la magie qui s’y attache, que les deux lévriers de Waverley nous plaisent, que le vieux chien du Seigneur de Woodstock nous intéresse. Les moindres objets réveillent, chez cet écrivain sans modèle, toutes les associations des idées qui ressuscitent une époque et reproduisent son caractère; cette fidélité de détails, jointe à la vérité des portraits, cause l’illusion la plus parfaite qui jamais on ait produite avec des paroles. (...) que de vérités profondes de caractères et de moeurs! que de points d’histoires éclairés et devenus populaires!
Si “l’âme du poète,” comme l’a dit Leibnitz, est “le miroir du monde,” jamais poète ne méritera mieux ce titre.41

While Phiorète Chasles praises the characterization and realism in Scott’s novels, he does a volte-face when critiquing the writer’s style:

Personne, nous osons le dire, n’est moins littéraire, dans l’acception vulgaire du mot, que Walter Scott, le souverain de la littérature présente. Ses ouvrages ne sont pas écrits en beau style, et l’oreille la moins délicate, le goût le moins sévère se choquent souvent de la barbarie de ses phrases scoto-anglaises, et de la verbeuse lucidité de ses périodes. Variété, vérité, liberté, voilà ses devises.42

It is not surprising that Scott’s free-flowing style shocked some of the French writers who were still much influenced by the aesthetics of a classical literary tradition steeped in rules. As for the “barbarie de ses phrases scoto-anglaises,” it is doubtful that Chasles had linguistic skills wide-ranging enough to appreciate fully the richness of Scott’s English. There were others, too, like Chasles, ready “to submit Sir Walter Scott’s talent to some serious criticism the like of which, to date, public enthusiasm and the quick succession of his works had conspired to rob it”:

L’histoire de Napoléon Bonaparte, par Sir Walter Scott, ne sera qu’une continuation des lettres de Paul. Avis au public français.43

Après avoir exploré le roman historique, Sir Walter Scott va faire l’histoire romanesque.44

Sir Walter Scott vient, dit-on, à Paris, pour quêter des matériaux secrets et curieux pour son Histoire de Napoléon. M. le duc de ***, M. le conte de ***, M. le baron de *** sont assez riches pour faire une abondante aumône au romancier écossais.45

Ce que je ne pardonne pas à Walter Scott, disait dernièrement un jésuite, c’est d’avoir fait des romans.
Scott’s work was beginning to receive mixed reviews. Either he had nothing new to say or, it was implied, he had dared to write a romanesque history on the still revered figure of Napoléon. Even 10 years after Napoléon’s defeat, an Anglais writing on one of France’s heroic figures must surely have been on sacred ground and, therefore, open to public scrutiny if not attack. Some of the reviews, in particular those from the coups de lancette in Le Figaro, were severe, even spiteful. Yet this is to be expected from a newspaper column entitled dagger thrusts. Scott, like all celebrated writers, had his detractors and ominous rumblings about Napoléon, as from the French press above, had already begun in 1826. Nevertheless, it seems clear that those who sought to denounce him were matched by critics who offered a more thoughtful and just assessment of his literary career as a whole:

(...) voilà ce grand artiste sur son déclin; ses derniers ouvrages trahissent une imagination vive encore par intervalles, mais évidemment fatiguée. (…) L’intrigue, comme un voyageur fatigué se traine de scène en scène jusqu’au dénouement. (…) Et certes il n’y a rien là de surprenant. Peu de poètes ont fourni une aussi longue carrière de Sir Walter Scott; il est tout simple qu’il subisse à la foi la loi commune. (…) On n’est peintre que pour un temps. L’imagination est comme ses sources qui ne coulent que le matin, et qui désèchent au milieu du jour des ardeurs du soleil; vive et féconde dans la jeunesse des nations et des individus, les années l’épuisent peu à peu et finissent par la tarir. Et quand elle est épuisée, c’est en vain qu’on invoque les muses et qu’on se bat les
flancs: le ciel est sourd et la volonté impuissante. ... nous marchons et ne tournons pas; et, puisque nous en sommes à l'amour de la réalité, nous ne tarderons pas à en être à l'amour du contaraire. Or, comme ces nouveaux goûts nous domineront, il ne sera plus temps d'apprécier le mérite de Sir Walter Scott et de ses ouvrages. (...) Voici donc le temps de les apprécier, parce que voici l'époque où on les sent.48

The artist’s Muse is, of course, a fickle thing. Yet, it must be said that Scott’s Muse did yeomen service to such a distinguished writer for the best part of his professional life. To add anything more to the above enlightened and poetic critique of Scott’s work would undervalue its essential truths. Suffice to say it is objective and sensitive. Moreover, most critics both in France and at home continued to extol their admiration for Scott and his original works:

For the last 25 years no French writer has afforded us any thing like the pleasure we have derived from the works of Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott; and this we frankly acknowledge. (...) The French were certainly never more interested about England than they now are.49

The French interest in Scott was awakened, we have said, as early as 1816, the year of the first translations or adaptations. And, in spite of the bland translations/adaptations of his work, it is clear that Scott was reaching the pinnacle of success towards 1820: “Le succès de Scott devient foudroyant vers 1820, malgré la fadeur et l’inexactitude des traductions de Defauconpret et ses confrères.”50 E. Preston Dargan is equally candid on the subject of Defauconpret’s adaptations: “Defauconpret’s (...) pace is pedestrian and his manner platitudinous.”51 S.B. Davis is no less critical: Defauconpret’s versions are “severely truncated” and full of “distortions.”52 As if anticipating future criticism and by way of an explanation, Defauconpret submits the following to the editor of Journal des débats, in 1819:
Je crois qu’en faisant passer un roman d’une langue dans une autre, le premier devoir d’un traducteur est de le mettre en état de plaire aux nouveaux lecteurs qu’il veut lui procurer. Le goût des Anglais n’est pas toujours conforme au nôtre. (...) J’ai donc supprimé quelques détails qui auraient pu paraître oiseux à des lecteurs français et j’ai raccourci les portraits de quelques personnages qui ne sont aucunement liés à l’action.53

The sins of Defauconpret could readily be filed under translator and poetic licence which he has, evidently, freely practised. That English and French tastes differ needs no further comment other than to add that Defauconpret lived for some time in England and was, therefore, quite familiar with both cultures and literary tastes. Neither is it surprising that Defauconpret’s works pale by comparison to the last minstrel’s genius. Genius is a formidable contender as is time: “… le grand auteur est de son temps, ou en avance sur son temps; le traducteur, lui, est toujours (un peu) en retard.”54 Yet credit must be given to the translators, for without them Scott would not have had the wide readership he succeeded in capturing: “Ce fut à travers ... le voile trop transparent de traductions improvisées que le talent original de Scott parvint à se faire jour.”55 Suffice to say that no number of weak translations could ever extinguish the flame of Scott’s genius.

Some credit for Scott’s continuing success in France must also be given to French Romantics like Vigny, Hugo, and their counterparts. These young literary Turks were eager to revolutionize literature, to shake off the yoke of classical influences and literary convention in order to liberate the medium of literature. Scott’s historical novel fitted unquestionably into the framework of romantic tragedy: “Qu’est-ce que les romans de Walter Scott? De la tragédie romantique, entremêlée de longues descriptions.”56 Stendhal’s innovative work, Racine et Shakespeare, was one of several works destined to overturn the classical literary genres in favour of a form of literature more in keeping with contemporary literary tastes: “Le romantisme est l’art de présenter aux peuples les œuvres littéraires qui, dans l’état actuel de leurs
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habitues et de leurs croyances, sont susceptibles de leur donner le plus de plaisir possible."57 Scott’s historical novels with their emphasis on social history must have seemed the ideal prototype for the Romantic novel. Moreover, Lamartine, Hugo and even Vigny (for a short time) all pursued a political career revealing a sincere belief in the role of the literary figure as social reformer. It is not surprising they were drawn to Scott’s novels recounting social history and change. His influence on young writers was remarkable. Witness the following moving extract from Vigny’s correspondence, in 1822, to Victor Hugo:

Je vous écris, la main encore tremblante de l’émotion que m’a donné une scène de l’Antiquaire de Walter Scott, la mort du fils du pêcheur, je ne sais ce que l’on peut dire et ce que l’on peut faire après une telle lecture, sinon votre roman de Han.

Finissez-le, je vous en supplie, mon ami; en vérité, l’émotion profonde est là, parce que là est la nature vraie. ... Comment jamais faire tomber une de ces larmes qu’il (L’Antiquaire) vient de me tirer, avec ma malheureuse poésie?58

By drawing a parallel between Scott’s writing and his own malheureuse poésie, Vigny underlines in this touching letter not only Scott’s superiority but his own ambivalence towards his own literary outpourings at that date.59 He had not yet written Cinq-Mars.60 It is, nevertheless, Scott’s depiction of human nature, in other words, the characterization in his novels, that has moved Vigny to compare Hugo’s Han d’Islande with The Antiquary. Hugo’s admiration for Scott is equally manifest. In La Muse française, a short-lived literary journal established in 1823 by Antonin and Émile Deschamps for the publication of poetry, prose and reviews, he pays homage to Scott’s Quentin Durward while at the same time gently scolding him for some chronological inaccuracies or distortions:

Peu d’écrivains ont aussi bien rempli que Walter Scott les devoirs du romancier relativement à son art et à
son siècle; car ce serait une erreur presque coupable dans l'homme de lettres que de se croire au-dessus de l'intérêt général et des besoins nationaux, d'exempter son esprit de toute action sur les contemporains, et d'isoler sa vie egoiste de la grande vie du corps social. Et qui donc se dévouera, si ce n'est le poète? Quelle voix s'élèvera dans l'orage, si ce n'est celle de la lyre qui peut le calmer? (...) Nul romancier n'a caché plus d'enseignement sous plus de charme, plus de vérité sous plus de fiction. (...) Quelle doit être l'intention du romancier? C'est d'exprimer dans une fable intéressante une vérité utile. (...) Nous remplissions un devoir de conscience en plaçant Walter Scott très-haut parmi les romanciers, et en particulier Quentin Durward très-haut parmi les romans. Quentin Durward est un beau livre. Il est difficile de voir un roman mieux tissu, et des effets moraux mieux attachés aux effets dramatiques. (...) Nous pourrions (...) tâcher de faire voir en quoi le nouveau drame de Sir Walter Scott nous semble défectueux, particulièrement dans le dénouement; mais le romancier aurait sans doute pour se justifier des raisons beaucoup meilleures que nous n'en aurions pour l'attaquer. (...) Nous nous bornerons à lui faire observer que le mot placé par lui dans la bouche du fou du duc de Bourgogne sur l'arrivé du roi Louis XI à Péronne appartient au fou du François Ier, qui le prononça lors du passage de Charles-Quint en France, en 1535. Nous croyons également que l'expédient ingénieux qu'emploie l'astrologue Galéotti pour échapper à Louis XI avait déjà été imaginé quelque mille ans auparavant par un philosophe qui voulait mettre à mort Denys de Syracuse. (...) Nous sommes (...) étonné que le roi adresse la parole, dans le conseil de Bourgogne, à des chevaliers du Saint-Esprit, cet ordre n'ayant été fondé qu'un siècle plus tard par Henri III....

Hugo's laudatory review places much importance on the
writer as edifier and, by extension, social reformer. Vigny, too, believed that “tous les grands problèmes de l’humanité peuvent être discutés dans la forme des vers.” In short, the Romantics were committed writers whose mission it was to lay bare a vérité utile that would relate to present society and with which the general public could feel empathy. Literature had a dual function; it was both esthetic and useful. (L’art pour l’art would succeed the Romantics). Scott fitted the Hugolian aesthetic and philosophical theory: a powerful and influential writer could play a decisive role in social progress.

In the final analysis, while Hugo underlines Scott’s chronological errors in the review, they are all but expunged because of the writer’s skill in dramatizing this moral truth that Hugo seeks from the novel/any novel: “J’aime mieux croire au roman qu’à l’histoire, parce que je préfère la vérité morale à la vérité historique.” Indeed, Hugo attaches little importance to Scott’s chronological imprecisions even aware that an author is not a chronicler: “un romancier n’est pas un chroniqueur.”

Hugo did not meet Scott in 1826 but his admiration three years earlier is undeniable. Neither did Stendhal meet Scott and he has little to say about the visit other than a cryptic comment in franglais on Scott’s imprudence concerning the bookseller, Gosselin: “Sir Walter Scott was ridicule (sic) there, he has refused renseignements to him for his History of Napoléon, by the bookseller Gosselin.” Vigny, on the other hand, felt privileged to meet the father of the historical novel on November 5, 1826, and I attribute his good fortune to his familial military contact, Colonel Hamilton Bunbury.

Scott, we know, left France enthusiastic about his further writings on Napoléon and with his reputation intact, for the most part. Sadly and unlike Scott’s visit, Napoléon was not a grand succès in Europe. Nevertheless, Scott continues today to be a highly respected author in France and, undeniably, the father of the nineteenth-century historical novel: “Walter Scott est sans conteste le cristallisateur, le modèle et, dans toute l’ambivalence du terme, le père du roman historique du XIXe siècle.” His literary legacy is enduring.

France, like Britain, has a long history of both journalism
and literary criticism to which some readers subscribe and others pay no more than lip service. Yet there is an important place in literary history for this genre of criticism and especially concerning authors long deceased. The timeless quality of this type of writing takes the reader back to a living or viable past which can be both edifying and uncanny; the latter all the more so when we use the information to fill in the hazy areas of Scott's social and literary circle in France in 1826. If, on occasion, I have turned, also, to correspondence, it is not only for its subject relevance but especially because, unlike articles that are written after the fact, letters are, grosso modo, extemporaneous and provide, therefore, a more accurate picture of the event. Henry's poem may be flawed, even disquietingly reverential, but it does represent more genuine feeling than Lacroix's Soirées published three years after Scott's visit and, thus, suspect not the least because memory is frail and liable to error. The passion in Vigny's letter to Hugo, in 1822, on Scott's Antiquary, is no less genuine than Henry's. His acute emotional response to Scott's work is immediately palpable to the reader. True feeling does not lie and is easily discernible from base flattery something Scott could not abide: "No man who has ever wrote a line despised the pap of praise so heartily as I do."67

It is clear from both the criticism presented and Scott's Journal that this visit to Paris in 1826 was exhilarating and instructive for both Scott and the French. I have endeavored to present without bias some of the ideas of the French literary critics and journalists from a selection of the newspaper and literary journals of the time. Some of the writers are well known, some are anonymous, especially the newspaper critics. No doubt they were familiar to their contemporaries. Today, it is not always easy, sometimes impossible, to identify them. I do not claim to have exhausted the press reviews of 1826 but have presented instead a cross-section. To discuss them all would require much more space than is intended for this article. The selection, itself, is, therefore, open to criticism because of its subjectivity. I have tried, nevertheless, and wherever possible, to present the opinions of the critics as I found them. Whenever or if the pendulum swings both ways, as is the case with Philorète
Chasles, both sides of the argument are offered. Reviews that appear blunt, unfair or even potentially damaging to Scott’s reputation have also been exposed in an attempt to create a reasonable critical balance for I do not believe that Scott would have shrunk from such candid criticism so great was his resilience and his ability to smile ruefully in the face of adversity: “I have had unhappy days, unhappy weeks – even on one or two occasions unhappy months – but Fortune’s Finger has never been able to play a dirge on me for a quarter of a year together.”

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Endnotes

1 F. A. Henri, Angers, November 6, 1826. National Library of Scotland. MS 3903, fol. 430.
Painter of nature and truth
Whose muse marries the grace and truth of Aonian Virgins,
Your works are admirable!
And I honour your genius that soars towards everlasting glory.
Oh! You who reap only the finest rewards throughout your dazzling career
Like Molière will ever be unique.
My translation throughout.

2 “Les vers que j’ai l’honneur de vous adresser, sont un bien faible hommage que je rends à vos talents.” / “The lines of verse I have the honour of addressing to you are only a feeble homage to your talent.” NLS, MS 3903, fol. 428-429. Henri, as this document reveals, was an official at the Préfecture de Maine et Loire.

3 Scott has had many French translators/adaptors amongst whom the most prolific were J-B Defauconpret, Amédie Chaillot and Gigault de la Bédollière. It was, however, Amédée Pichot “who, by his translations, laid the flaming inspiration of Scott, of Byron, even in a large measure of Shakespeare, at the feet of the French Romantics.” Laurence Adolphus Bisson, Amédée Pichot: A Romantic Prometheus (Oxford: Blackwell, 1942), p.xi.
4 See Donald Sultana, From Abbotsford to Paris and Back: Sir Walter Scott’s Journey of 1815 (Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1993).


7 References are also made to British newspapers and/or journals where deemed appropriate.

8 Edinburgh Weekly Review, 8 November, 1826, p. 354.


11 “Do not count on me to critique the work. However, I do value it, I value it!” ibid.

12 Journal, p. 316.

13 See Johann Peter Eckermann, Gespräche mit Goethe, Mittwoch, den 25 Juli 1827 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutcher Klassiker Verlag, 1999), pp. 617-619.

14 Journal, p. 1064. “I said to Charles Nodier I was convinced that once Walter Scott started a novel, he didn’t know how it would end. Nodier was reluctant to believe this although he did find Scott’s works rather weak.” For further references to Scott, see Vigny, Journal, pp. 883, 891, 935, 937, 942, 944, 946, 1048, 1064, 1109, 1167.

15 To date, Scott’s Journal has not been translated into French. Vigny’s command of English, in 1838, was good. He had already published adaptations of Shakespeare for the stage: Roméo et Juliette (1828), Le Morte de Venise (1829), Le Marchand de Venise (1829). We recall, also, that he married the Englishwoman, Lydia Bunbury in 1825. Sadly, in 1826 Vigny’s English was not good enough to enable him to converse with Scott when they met in Paris. Nor was Scott able to converse in French with Vigny: “As to French (sic) I speak it as it comes and (like) Doeg in Absalom and Architophel, ‘- dash on through thick and thin / Through sense and nonsense never out nor in’.” Journal, p. 259. Vigny’s uncle, Colonel Hamilton Bunbury, acted, instead, as translator. See note 9.
Yesterday, I spent some time with Sir Walter Scott. My wife's uncle and fellow countryman introduced me. I will tell you everything I remarked about this illustrious old man as writing would take too long. I found him affectionate, modest, indeed, almost timid but suffering, but afflicted, but too old. I didn't expect this and I found it distressing."

"Do not touch your idols. The gilt will come off on your hands." Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary.

work. However, by keeping our deliberations within the confines of a French libretto, by putting aside Walter Scott and his genius, and by concentrating more on the music and less on the poem, we have corrected our judgment. We consider Ivanhoe worthy of great praise. We will devote an article on the musical score of this opera which, taken from Rossini’s best works, constitutes a choice of the most admirable pieces of this great composer. Two days ago, the overture was executed with perfect precision. The production, the scenery and costumes are very closely in harmony with Rossini’s magnificent music.” Henry Adelbert White quotes a less favourable review from Le Moniteur universel in, Sir Walter Scott’s Novels on the Stage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927), p. 113.

25 Le Figaro, op. cit. “M. Frédéric has taken over from M. Bernard. (...) debts everywhere, lacunae to fill, an incomplete and badly organised company, a tired repertoire. In short, all the evils that suggest a most woeful administration. What’s to be done in such difficult times? M. Frédéric needed to use all his wisdom and talent to maintain this skeleton of a theatre entrusted to his care. The obstacles threatening the success of his enterprise did not daunt him and after six months of constant work, he has succeeded in repairing the numerous mistakes of his predecessor. The debts have been paid, the company increased, the repertoire revamped so that the disorganization of the last administration has completely disappeared. Such is the status quo at the Odéon. It bodes well for the future. (...) To be highly regarded is no doubt an asset. However, financial success is much rarer. Robin Hood was the first of such financial successes. Let us hope Ivanhoe will not be the last.”

26 Journal, October 31, 1826.

27 Le Mercure, BnF, microfilm, vol. XII, p. 523, le 16 juin, 1826. “Sautelet, the bookseller is not sleeping. On the contrary, he is supervising a most praiseworthy activity for the pleasure of Walter Scott’s many readers. A second delivery has already followed the first which includes Ivanhoe, this beautiful epic of the Middle Ages that is valued much more than some of the very celebrated epics in verse.”

28 Lukacs, Novel, p. 35.

29 ibid, p. 36.

30 H. A. White, Stage, p. 102.


32 Paul-L. Lacroix aka Paul-L. Jacob, Soirées de Walter Scott, (Paris: édition Paulin, 1846), pp. 14-15. “O Walter Scott! Ah! If only I had had that name written in your hand, I would not be publishing this book today! What can you expect? To complete my collection, I needed the handwriting of the famous baron. In order to procure this valuable
handwriting, I put together at first a thousand more and more extrava-
gant projects, more than would have been required for the golden
fleece. At times, I thought about sending a letter of welcome, a kind of
panegyric to the famous traveller in the hope of receiving a response;
sometimes, and because I had heard speak of his avarice, I spurred
myself on to offer him an honest sum of money (as one might say in
provincial academic gatherings) in exchange for a few lines. What do I
know? I might have seduced his servants, given a dinner with four
starters, a ball with mirrors, all that for two traces of handwriting, from
the hand that has written so many beautiful works."

33 “Gentleman, thanks to this gentleman whom I do not have the honour
of knowing and yet whose courteous ways tell me he is a witty and
erudite man, I have just disclosed a fact which will certainly be used
against me. Yes, I found the seeds of the historical novel in old Froissard.
I humbly confess that I am not the creator of the historical novel. All I
have done is revived extinct authors, collected some of the treasures
from their ashes and taken back to my country some of the good things
that were created in yours but which you disdain through lack of knowl-
dge. The rest of we English make much of your historians and every
day their works are becoming rarer in France because they are being
auctioned across the Channel. It isn't surprising to me that I bought
Froissard for 140F at the Duc de Lavallière's sale. Gentlemen, you
are forcing me to be more modest than I actually am. I acknowledge
Froissard as my master. I cannot tell you how much gratitude I owe to
the old French historians. They have not only shown me how to make
my historical characters act and speak, they have also given me the idea
for my Quentin Durward. I soon hope to draw a new work from your
history and, as I cannot joust with Froissart when it comes to represent-
ing Charles the Bold, I will try at least to imitate him.” pp. 16-29.

34 There are currently in excess of 15 tomes of Froissart in the Abbotsford
library.

35 “I will not say that we applauded the storyteller for praise is too weak a
word to express the captivating ecstasy of each one of us whatever the
experience.” p. 20.

36 "courses on applied history adapted to the novel." Scott was aware,
however, that Lacroix had dedicated his book to him. See Letters, p. 21.


38 “Les vers de M. De lacroix (sic) sont de l’histoire de fait et de style. Je dis
de style car il est étonnant à quel point le Bibliophile Jacob s’est attaché
to emprunter le tours des pensées, des phrases et les locutions en usage
au temps de Malherbe, de Racan et de Segrais.” Vigny, Correspond-
dance, I, p. 424. “Mr Delacroix’s writing is historical both in content
and style. I say style because it is astonishing to what degree Jacob, the
bibliophile, has borrowed the thought, sentence structure and phraseology of the era of Malherbe, Racan and Segrais."

39 Soirées, p. 19. "If I might dare to express myself in the following manner, the novel is the natural son of history. Many people would hesitate to agree with this. As for myself, I have trampled on shame and declared myself the father of perhaps too many natural children. I will easily prove that history sometimes mistakenly resembles the novel. And without needing to invoke a multitude of chronicles equally exact and amusing in support of my theory, I could recount to you by way of an example a few strange and little known facts that I have compiled in the course of my research."

40 Journal, p. 227, note.

41 Philorêtes Chasles. BnF, microfilm, Le Mercure, vol. XIV, pp. 307-308. "These are living characters who portray a passionate existence, the characteristic traits of their era, as well as their people, professions and beliefs. We like the two greyhounds in Waverley and we find the old dog in Woodstock interesting because of the kind of authenticity and magic that is tied into these characters. Even the most inferior objects can reveal a whole association of ideas that resurrect a century and reproduce its characteristics. The accuracy of detail combined with the authenticity of the portraits, create the best perfect illusion that has ever been done in words. What deep authenticity of character and lifestyle! What enlightened historical truths that have become popular! If, as Leibnitz said, the soul is the world’s mirror, no poet better deserves this title."

42 Chasles, Mercure. "We dare to say it. No-one is less literary, in the ordinary sense of the word, than Walter Scott, the sovereign of contemporary literature. The style of his works is not beautiful. The least refined ear, the least rigorous of tastes are often shocked by the coarseness of the Scottish/English sentences and the verbose perspicacity of his eras. Variety, authenticity and freedom are his motto."

For a more contemporary perspective on Scott’s style, see, for example, John Huston Alexander, “Only Connect: The Passionate Style of Walter Scott” in Scottish Literary Journal, 1979, vol. 6, pp. 37-54.

43 Le Figaro, le 4 novembre, 1826. Microfilm. “The life of Napoléon Bonaparte, by Sir Walter Scott is only a continuation of Paul’s letters. Beware, the French public.”

44 Le Figaro, le 5 novembre 5, 1826. Microfilm. “Having tried out the historical novel, Sir Walter Scott is going to do a romantic history.”

45 Le Figaro, le 6 novembre 6, 1826. Microfilm. “It is said that Sir Walter Scott has come to Paris in search of private and unusual material for his Life of Napoléon. The Duke of ***, Count *** and Baron *** are rich enough to offer abundant aims to the Scottish novelist.”
46 Le Figaro, le 11 novembre, 1826. Microfilm. “I cannot forgive Walter Scott for having written novels, said a Jesuit, lately. The author of Paul’s Letters was an amateur who has muttered to us from The Scottish Puritans, Ivanhoe and Kenilworth etc.”

47 Le Mercure, vol. XV, 1826, p. 288. Microfilm. “Sir Walter Scott is a very distinguished and skilful writer. However, is that enough to make him Napoleon’s historian?”

48 Le Globe, le 4 novembre, 1826. Microfilm. “The sun is going down on this great writer and although his last works still reveal a lively imagination from time to time, it is obviously spent. The plot, like a tired traveller, drags on from scene to scene right to the denouement. There is certainly nothing surprising, there. Few writers have had such a long career as Sir Walter Scott and it is only natural that he should finally be subject to the common order. A painter is only a painter for a certain time. The imagination is like a spring that only flows in the morning and dries up in the afternoon from the intensity of the sun. Energetic and fertile in the springtime of nations and of humanity, the years drain it bit by bit until it finally runs dry. Once exhausted, it will invoke and spur on the muses in vain for the Heavens will remain silent and powerless, the will. We are moving forward and do not look back. We favour reality and do not, therefore, waste time favouring the opposite. And because we are governed by new aesthetic tastes, the time will come when we no longer appreciate either Sir Walter Scott or his works. Now is, therefore, the time to appreciate them because it is now that we are experiencing them.” To date, I have not identified the author of this article signed T.J.


53 Quoted by Patrick Hersant in Le Romantisme, 106 (1999), 86. “In the adaptation of a novel from one language to another, the primary concern of the translator seeking new readers is to please them. English taste does not always conform to ours. I have, therefore, withheld some details which would have appeared pointless to the French reader and have shortened some sketches of characters who are not in any way linked to the action.”
54 “The great writer is in tune with the times or ahead of his time. The translator is always a little behind.” ibid, p. 88.

55 “It was by way of a very weak veil of improvised translations that Scott’s original talent succeeded in making itself known.” Le Globe, novembre 1826, p.189. Microfilm.


57 op. cit. p. 39. “Romanticism is the art of giving to the world literary works that are likely to offer the greatest pleasure possible in that they correspond to the people’s current customs and beliefs.” See also, Vigny’s preface in Cinq-Mars and Hugo’s Préface de Cromwell for further readings in Romantic literary theory.

58 Correspondance, Tome 1 (Paris: Presse universitaire de France, 1989) p. 84. “My hand is trembling with emotion as I write to you because of a scene in The Antiquary that treats the death of the fisherman’s son. Like your novel, Han, what can one say or do after such a reading? Finish it, I beg you, my friend, for in truth there is profound feeling in it because it depicts real life. How will I ever be able to draw even one of these tears that The Antiquary has drawn from me with my unfortunate poetry.”

59 Vigny’s major works to that date consisted in poetry and his form and style were still at the experimental stage.

60 Cinq-Mars was published in the spring of 1826.

61 La Muse française, BnF, microfilm, juin 1823, pp. 25-37. “Few writers through their art and in keeping with their century have fulfilled their duty as novelists as Sir Walter Scott. Indeed, it would be almost a shameful error on the part of the literary man to consider himself above the general interests and needs of a nation, to exempt himself from the actions of his contemporaries and to isolate himself selfishly from the important path of the social corpus. Who might devote himself to this if not the poet? Whose voice will rise above the storm to quell it if not the voice of the lyre? No novelist has veiled more instruction under more charm, more truth under more fiction. What is the intention of a novelist? It must be to express a useful truth in an interesting story. By placing Sir Walter Scott very high on the list of novelists, and in particular, by placing Quentin Durward high on the list of novels, we are carrying out an act of conscience. Quentin Durward is a beautiful book. It would be difficult to find a better woven novel whose moral force is so fused with the dramatic force. We could try to reveal how this new drama of Sir Walter Scott’s is flawed, particularly its denouement. However, in order to justify himself, the novelist would have much better reasons than we would have for attacking him. We will limit our observations to the following: the words attributed by Scott to the Duke de Bourgogne’s
fool on Louis XI's arrival at Péronne belong to François I's fool during Charles-Quint's passage through France in 1535. Poor Triboulet's immortality hangs on this word. Let us not take it away from him. We also believe that the ingenious stratagem adopted by the astrologer Galéotti in order to flee from Louis XI had already been foreseen several thousand years before. We are surprised that the King addresses the knights of Saint-Esprit in his Bourgogne council as this order of knight was founded a century later by Henri III.

62 "All great problems pertaining to humanity can be discussed in literature." Vigny, Journal, p. 1204

63 "I prefer to believe in the novel because I prefer moral truth to historical truth." M use, p. 35.


65 Vigny, himself, had many military connections given he spent thirteen years in the army. His novel, Servitude et grandeur militaire, was the issue of his military experience.

66 "Scott is unquestionably the founder, model and, in every ambivalent respect, the father of the nineteenth-century novel." Bernard, Le Passé recomposé, p. 43.

67 Journal, p. 198.

68 Journal, p. 124.