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Walter Scott in Poland

Part I

Warsaw and Vilno

According to T. S. Eliot, we cannot appreciate a poet alone; we "must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."1 In practice this often means setting the writer within the context of a national literature. But in some cases it is even more profitable to find the writer's place in the literature of an alien nationality and language. Then "contrast and comparison" may reveal some unnoticed, even surprising features in the fairly well known author. And in this process usually light is thrown on the two literatures compared. The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott by Donald Davie (London, 1961) offers some interesting examples of what may be gained by this kind of study.

Let this be the justification of what follows here. To set Sir Walter Scott among the Polish writers is to add something to the knowledge of the English-speaking students of the great Scotsman. It is to enlarge the literary and social scope of his writings. Perhaps, even, it is to change—to some extent—the accepted valuations.

Let us first see the general setting in which Walter Scott as a literary phenomenon appeared in Poland and then we shall pass to an analysis of his significance to the Poles.

His greatest influence coincides with the early phase of the long Romantic period of Polish literary history extending from about 1820 to about 1860. Its early phase opened with the publication of a volume of poetry by Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) in 1822 and ended, in one way, in 1830 with the outbreak of the November Uprising which developed into a futile Polish-Russian war. In another way this most creative and dynamic phase of Polish Romanticism continued in exile until about 1834 when it produced its finest and richest fruit.

Polish Romantic literature was shaped by following Western European literary patterns—mostly German and British—and yet it developed

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an individually national character of its own. It is impossible to understand how those divergent trends have been reconciled in a synthesis or to assess the nature and the range of the foreign influence without having an idea of the historical situation of the contemporaneous Polish society.

This situation had developed towards the end of the eighteenth century when Poland had been partitioned by the three neighbouring empires of Russia, Prussia, and Austria. The imperial, absolutist, and reactionary governments of the powers did not care for any free development of the Polish nation. Consequently, the Poles started on a long period of continual, hopeful, but unsuccessful attempts at regaining political independence by force. At the same time they realized that in the absence of their own state their native language and literature might become the mainstay of the national tradition. The idea crystallized in the writings of two literary critics—Kazimierz Brodziński and Maurycy Mochacki. They wanted a new Polish literature which would be a mirror of the national character and existence. In practice this meant turning away from the Neo-Classicist, decaying literature of the eighteenth century with its rigid rules, cold rationalism, and emphasis on the general and cosmopolitan. This also meant following the example of the Germans—Herder, Schiller, and Goethe—and of the British—Shakespeare, Scott, and Byron. These names became for the Poles symbols of fidelity to the national spirit, to the idea of liberty and humanity. Their owners had shown how to create a new, free, dynamic, imaginative literature stirring the reader's emotions and prompting him to action.

Thus Romantic literature in Poland, while modelling itself on writers like Scott and Byron, expressed the deepest aspirations of an unhappy nation whose very existence was endangered. Thus Scott's patriotism acquired in Mickiewicz almost cosmic dimensions, and Byron's hero, disgusted with society and with himself, changed on the Polish soil into a patriot who suffered because "his fatherland knew naught but sorrow"


The text by Kazimierz Brodziński (pp. 125-132) is the final part of his larger work O klasycyzmie i romantycyzmie twórczości Adama Mickiewicza [Classicism and Romanticism and the Spirit of Polish Poetry] published in 1818.

The text by Maurycy Mochacki (pp. 323-344) consists of two articles: "O sonetach Adama Mickiewicza" ["On Adam Mickiewicz's Sonnets"] published in 1827, which ends with the words: "If ever we have an original literature and poetry, we shall owe it to him" (i.e. Mickiewicz). The second article is entitled "Myśli o literaturze polskiej" ["Thoughts on Polish Literature"] published in 1828, in which the author pleads against mechanical imitation of foreign models and for following boldly adapted ideas.
and was ready to do almost anything to change the conditions. This explains the interdependence between literature and politics, characteristic of Polish Romanticism. Writing became a political activity, shaping attitudes which culminated in the November Uprising of 1830.

The tsarist government against whom, as the greatest oppressor, the insurgents of Warsaw struck, had been aware of the interdependence even before 1830, and it began more vigorously to suppress and punish after the failure of the uprising. Most of the great poets had to emigrate. Instead of Warsaw Paris became the centre of Polish liberal and revolutionary Romanticism. St. Petersburg grouped rather conservative and less talented people who tried to save what might be saved within the narrow limits imposed by their loyalty to the tsar whom the Congress of Vienna (1815) had also made the king of the Russian-dominated part of the country ("the Congress Kingdom of Poland").

Then it was that the tragedy of 1830 became reflected in the literature of the Great Emigration. Poets became the leaders and guides of the nation, actually believed to be endowed with prophetic foresight and greatness of soul. The ancient religious Roman idea of the vates returned in the Polish semi-religious name of wieszcz. And it must be admitted that the greatest of the poets at least tried to live up to their responsibility and national dignity which far surpassed even the prestige enjoyed by Sir Walter as the representative of his nation.

But it is an undeniable fact that the Scotsman, together with the half-Scott Byron, were spiritually present at the birth of the new literary movement in Poland. They inspired, they showed some possibilities, they set up some models and standards. The form of the ballad, the poetic tale, the historical romance, the poetic travelogue, the Don Juan-like epic—these are only some of the genres which the two British writers lent to the Polish Romantics and which in some cases acquired greater literary and social significance in their new home.

It would be hardly reasonable to see mere accident in all this. Forms result from contents, contents from ideas and attitudes. Parallels point to the existence of something common to both sides.

It will be worthwhile then to investigate when, how, why, and to what extent Sir Walter Scott's literary presence in Poland affected one of the greatest developments in the literature of a country with which he had personally so little contact.

* * *

The first mention of the writer is to be found in Warsaw in a journal Pamiętnik Warszawski (The Warsaw Register) of 1816, soon after contact between England and the Continent was re-established
after the final fall of Napoleon. If we consider that the Battle of Waterloo and the end of the Congress of Vienna had taken place in June 1815, the appearance of the article entitled "A Review of the English Literature of the Last Twenty Years" in *Pamiętnik Warszawski* six months later is proof of a lively interest on the part of the Poles of those times in Western European literature.

The article was a translation from the *Bibliothèque Universelle*, a French periodical providing an international forum of exchange of information and specimens of major European literatures. Its purpose was also to inform the Continental reader what had happened in the literature of the British Isles during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars.

The author of the article mentions "works by Mrs. Radcliffe (Rattcliff), Darblay, Maria Roche, Edgeworth—illustrious writers" and "the romances bearing the name of William Godwin," marked with "the stamp of genius;" he barely touches the contemporary English drama, and passes to poetry with a remark that "the spirit of the English language, a language bold, independent, and abounding in figures of speech, is an ally even of a mediocre talent." Among the British he sees two geniuses. One of them is "Lord Byron" — "magnificent, but sombre."

The other poet, Walter Scott, born in Scotland, provides a quick and most pleasant stimulus for the imagination. His genre combines both the poetry of the troubadours and that of the bards. He presents the manners of feudal times and decks them with brilliant colours. In his songs everything is alive, everything has breath. The strangest details seem to be true, customs quite contrary to ours seem to be our own. Men and clothes, horses and arms are made visible: we look at the chase or at battle. The background of this abundance of brilliant scenes consists of wild Nature—those mists, those silver firs, those waterfalls, rocks and lakes, which give shape to wild, but beautiful cold climes. His talent excels in the picturesque and if he does not abuse it at fruits of lesser care, he will prove worthy of the name of "the Ariosto of the North."

The wonderful fecundity of this poet, always equal to himself, also deserves homage. In a few years four large poems came from his pen, not to mention romances on which he did not bestow his name. (pp. 298-299)

The points raised by the quoted lines are: a connexion as regards theme and form between Sir Walter's poetry and medieval poetry; its picturesque quality and energy; his use of the romantic landscape as a background; his prolixity and a mention of his anonymous works in prose, which appeared in 1814 and 1815. It is remarkable that the poet was dubbed "the Ariosto of the North"—a designation which appears in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Canto IV, XL), which was not published until 1818.
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The author of the article mentions four poetic tales by Scott and says that their features are: "profusion of thought, terseness of the narrative, charming detailed descriptions, bright and vivid colour, and—above all—this bold onrush, this fervour of a poet who, letting his pegasus loose, pierces through the clouds and ethereal regions, reaches for great effects and despises mere seductive charms." (p. 299) "Such is the mark of that Northern genius who terrifies with his audacity and captivates the imagination with the spell of his art."

The author does not dare to quote from Scott's poems "because to translate his works into French is hardly possible." But he says that it is worthwhile "to learn English in order to read Walter Scott who cannot be translated into a foreign language." At the same time it is expedient "to get to know Scotland, its history and to become familiar with the situation of the places described by him."

The whole shows that the author was well informed about Scott's works and their character down to 1815. At the same time it is obvious that the Polish translator, who signed the review with the initial S., did not read Scott's poems. He made Marmion a woman!

This early information about Scott was not lost on the readers. It was not limited to Warsaw readers either. Warsaw was the cultural centre in which the interests of all other centres of Poland, Lithuania, and the Ukraine converged, though each of them had a life of its own.

One of the cultural centres, closely connected with Mickiewicz, the most representative poet of Poland, was Vilno. The city is a well-recorded example of the intellectual trends of the times and of the contacts with Warsaw. It had been an ancient capital of Lithuania, but in Mickiewicz's times, in spite of certain provincial dislikes, the memory of the liberal Polish-Lithuanian empire or union, formed through a royal marriage towards the end of the fourteenth century and continuing until the final partition in 1795, was still very strong both among the Poles and the Lithuanians. The problem of the emancipation of Lithuanian culture from Polish cultural supremacy was as yet practically non-existent. The medium of education and creative work of the enlightened Lithuanians and Poles, who mixed freely, was Polish. And Vilno University flourished in that period before the suspicious absolutism of the tsar cut its life short.

In Mickiewicz's student days the young scholars formed all kinds of scientific and socially-ethical societies at the University. The most prominent of the organizations were the Philomaths, or the Friends of Sciences, and the Philaretes—the Friends of Virtue. Their correspondence, collected and published, gives a revealing picture of the young men's
avid interest in foreign languages and literature, of their attempts to
draw inspiration rather from the German and the British Romantic
sources as opposed to French sources then identified with Neo-Classicism.8

Mickiewicz used to borrow the Bibliothèque Universelle from Fran-
ciszek Malewski and used the eighth volume of the series to prepare a
paper which he read at a meeting of the Philomaths. In the paper he
reviewed Canto III of The Lady of the Lake using phrases which sound
like echoes of the article published in Pamiętki Warszawskie. The poem,
he wrote, had been written "in the spirit of the Caledonian bards." Its
features were "gloom and dread" and "a tenderness wild and terrifying,"
it's heroes "taken from the age of chivalry." Its "plenty of expressions
and the novelty of similes" deserved attention. The poem "might serve
as a most beautiful model of chivalric serious poetry."14

Writing an essay on Romantic poetry, which formed a preface
to his Poems of 1822 which, like Lyrical Ballads, marked the beginning
of a new period in the literary history of the poet's country, Mickiewicz,
as it were, repeated some statements of the French article. He wrote
about the "two geniuses: Walter Scott and Byron," adding, "The former
has dedicated his talent to national history, publishing folk tales of
the romantic world, handled in a classic way. He has produced a repetition
of national poems and has become an Aristide for the English."15

Franciszek Malewski knew English, like his friend Jan Sobolewski,
the translator of The Vicar of Wakefield. He regularly read the Biblio-
thèque Britannique and its continuation, the Bibliothèque Universelle,

8See Jan Crubek (ed.) Archiwum Filomatów (Kraków, 1913), 3 Parts in
10 vols.

The following names of English and Scottish writers are to be found in the young
men's correspondence, with occasionally mentioned or implied titles of works
read in French or German translation: POETS: G. Byron (Darkoest, The Siege
of Corinth, Maxepo, Marina Felten, Sandemanis, Hebrew Melodies), G. Crabbe,
J. Dryden (Alexander's Feast), T. Moore (Lalla Rookh), A. Pope (Essay on Man),
W. Scott, R. Southey (Roderick), E. Young; NOVELISTS: O. Goldsmith (The
Vicer of Wakefield), S. Johnson (Rasselas), L. Sterne; HISTORIANS: Adam
Ferguson, Edward Gibbon, David Hume, William Mterford, William Robertson;
William Guthrie, the geographer, and Adam Smith (The Wealth of Nations);
PHILOSOPHERS and ESSAYISTS: Hugh Blair (Lectures), Dugald Stewart, Henry
Home (Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion), William Hu-
garth (The Analysis of Beauty), the Earl of Shaftesbury.

1A. Mickiewicz, Działy wyrzytkie [Collected Works] (Warsaw, 1913), V,
429, 435.

2Read: "the Britons" or even "the Scots." Polish usage, perhaps unfortunately
and unthinkingly, extends the name of England and that of the English to cover
all the nationalities living in Great Britain unless distinction is intended.
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which he borrowed from Fryderyk Moritz, a bookseller of Vilno, as well as the *Edinburgh Monthly Review* and some "German almanachs" with translations from Shakespeare, Scott, and Byron.

Malewski’s letters testify that in 1820 he knew Byron's *Mazeppa*, Dryden's ode (*Alexander's Feast*), Shaftesbury's philosophical works, and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (in French translation). In 1821 he mentions Henry Home's *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* and Hugh Blair's *Lectures* (again in French). In 1822 the list was extended by "an interesting panlibro by Byron" published in a "revue" (most likely the *Revue Encyclopédique*). On Christmas Eve of that year Malewski sent from Berlin to St. Moritz *Lalla Rookh* and two volumes of Moore’s other poems, Byron's *Sardanapalus* and *Marco Faiero*, and two volumes by Southey—all for Mickiewicz. For himself he reserved *Roderick* by Southey.

Malewski was a great reader of everything that came from England or Scotland. He used his knowledge of French, German, and English, treating German not only as a means of access to literature written in English, but also as an approach to the English language. In his letter of Sept. 9th, 1819, he encouraged Mickiewicz in the following way: "Take up German soon, even to the detriment of Greek or French. Now is the time to do it and you might read all English works in exact translations; besides, the labour will make your way to the English language itself." (I, p. 171). A month later Mickiewicz wrote to Jezowski: "I have made considerable progress in German" (I, p. 291). This statement provoked Malewski to a new challenge of April 6th, 1821: "Now, Master Adam, when you have learnt German Leben, Geist, and Welt, it is time to get to know English comfort, blessing, and grief; I leave this for you to consider" (III, p. 251). Mickiewicz accepted the advice on that occasion as well and earned his friend's exclamation: "Glory be to God for your having tackled English!" (on Feb. 13th, 1822, IV, p. 151).

The young men used Ebers' *New Hand-Dictionary of the English and German Language* (III, p. 255). Probably all the books read by Malewski were known to Mickiewicz for exchange of publications was the custom of the Philomaths. Mickiewicz was subject to urgent reminders: "Return *Bibliothèque Britannique* and other stuff!" "For Goodness' sake return *Bibliothèque Universelle*!" (I, pp. 110, 208).

The wave of interest in the liberal aspects of Western literary movements naturally brought Sir Walter's name and works to wider and wider notice. Mickiewicz read him in 1819, Malewski in 1820 and 1821, Tomasz Zan in 1822. Then Walerian Krasinski wrote from
Warsaw in November that Mickiewicz's first volume of poetry was published and that the poet "pleased Warsaw immensely; they have called him . . . the Lithuanian Walter Scott and are impatiently waiting for the second volume" (IV, p. 326).

On Christmas Eve 1821 Malewski reported from Warsaw that Karol Sienkiewicz, Prince Adam Czartoryski's librarian, who had visited Britain in search of Polonica, had returned and was publishing his translation of The Lady of the Lake into Polish. The translation appeared in 1822.

Sienkiewicz, the author of A Diary of Travel in England 1820-1821 was one of those few Poles who had seen Walter Scott. "His appearance is quite simple," he wrote after having seen the writer in the court in Edinburgh on November 24th, 1820, "neither genius, nor kindness, nor tenderness are apparent. His eyes are grey, he is blond-haired, somewhat bald, about 50, lame too, and often bows when walking. Dressed in a lawyer's gown. His face round, fat, slightly ruddy." (p. 186) Notwithstanding this almost unfriendly description, Sienkiewicz was deeply interested in everything that the Scottish writer's pen produced. The events of the day, registered in his diary under the date of Jan. 13, 1821, are: getting a letter containing the news of somebody's death, and "the new romance by Scott—Kenilworth—which has just come out from the press, still wet from the printer's ink." (p. 213)

Besides Karol Sienkiewicz, Malewski found other men in Warsaw who might have read Scott in English. They were "Józef Korzeniowski, Zamoyski's librarian, a writer of sorts, capable, well read in English and German literature" (who later turned out a novelist) and "Chlebowski, [Count] Krasinski's tutor, the most capable of them all, I think, interested in politics, well versed in English and in German" (Arch. Filom., IV, p. 103).

The Vilnius circle had contacts with Mrs. Maria Puttkammer, Mickiewicz's passionate romantic love, the "Maryla" of his poems. When she had decided to marry Baron Puttkammer instead of the practically penniless poet, naturally their acquaintance was broken off, but Jan Czeczot maintained an exchange of letters with the lady, occasionally providing his two friends with some information about each other. Czeczot was asked by Mrs. Puttkammer to borrow some books in town for her. On May 29, 1823, he wrote to Maryla: "The literature of romance is completely unknown to me and yet romances only are to be found in the new catalogue here. Choice is not easy anyway and here

*S. Sienkiewicz, Dziennik podróży po Anglii 1820-1821 (Wrocław, 1933), the first edition!
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it has become still more difficult. Fortunately I remembered, Madam, that you once wished to read Scott's *Marmion*; it was to be found in the library so I am dispatching it, taking no responsibility for the choice."

In the same letter he added: "In the new... catalogue... a historical romance by de Radklif was to be found too, describing the manners of the thirteenth century and once I heard about that woman Radklif that she had been a famous writer of romances..." (op. cit., V, p. 24).

But Mrs. Puttkammer was better informed. She answered: "We have kept *Marmion* by Walter Scott to read it, the other two books I am returning, because I know Goethe's and I never read any romances by Radklif." (V, p. 243). Thus a distance was maintained between Scott's name and that of Mrs. Anne Radcliffé's, used by a French imposter to win readers for his imitation.

There was at least one man more in Lithuania who had mastered English well enough to be able to translate Thomas Moore and to imitate Scott's own practice. His name was Antoni Edward Odyniec, a small beer of a poet, but an ambitious man who wrote to Czeczor in May 1823: "Yesterday I wrote an original ballad based on a story told by the postillion." (V, p. 210). Here we have a hint of a fashion modelled on Scott's way of looking for literary motives in chats with postillions, country wives, and guests of wayside inns met by chance.

*(To be continued)*

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