

Writing against the Grain: Walter Scott's *The Talisman*

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Abstract: *This study investigates Walter Scott's novel The Talisman from a postcolonial perspective. It consists of four parts: the reception of the novel's Arabic translation, Scott's historicism, especially Edward Said's dis/valuation of it, Scott's representation of Saladin as universal man, and a critical analysis of Scott's attempt to break new ground and write against the grain in the heyday of empire, and to liberate the image of the East from the lingering medieval prejudices. The article's thesis is that Scott's historicism does not adhere to the early-nineteenth-century trend of Orientalism as proposed by Said. It aims at presenting a different perspective on Scott's work: that the East meets the West in the space of The Talisman in an archetypal civilisational dialogue in which Scott revisits history in order to connect it teleologically with the present and the future.*

1. Introduction

The need to revisit Walter Scott's *The Talisman* (1832) issues from the apparent neglect of this novel despite its seminal location on the map of another type of 'border' literature where the East meets the West, - an archetypal civilisational dialogue. The novel has received relatively little attention and indeed, as some critics confirm, "it is sometimes omitted altogether in critical discussions of Scott's work" (Irwin 1997:130). A closer look at the history of fiction reveals that *The Talisman* ushered a trend in the genre which questions one way or another the European adventures in the East; a trend, though in the shadow of empire less frequently pursued, continued nevertheless to live in the masterpieces of Joseph Conrad and E.M. Forster. Casting doubt on empire in its heyday might well be one reason why the novel has been, until recently, less favourably received.

Investigated here is the reception of *The Talisman* in the Arab World, Scott's dialogical approach to cultural and political differences, and his representation of Saladin (Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi) (1138-1193). Scott's historicism and the multilayered time structure he generally employs in his fiction has been expounded by many critics. In the present article, however, this is highlighted as a tool of revisiting history in order to teleologically connect it with the present.

2. The reception of *The Talisman* in the Arab World

Edward Said is not the only one to criticise Scott's *The Talisman*, accusing Scott, in his epoch-making *Orientalism*, of "letting his Christian characters attack Muslims theologically" (2003:101). Recently, students at the University of Jordan, less discerning than Said and perhaps under his influence, protested

when a visiting scholar included the novel in his course reading list. That visiting scholar, in his turn, was possibly under the impression given by Byron Porter Smith (1977:177) in his *Islam in English Literature* that *The Talisman* should be pleasing both to Christian and Muslim readers alike, or perhaps by the fact that Arabist H.A.R. Gibb, used to recommend *The Talisman* to his students (Irwin 1997 135). While Said finds fault in Scott's historicism, the students at the University of Jordan, with a background completely different from that of Gibb's students, saw in the mere medieval offensive language directed especially at the Prophet of Islam an uncalled-for insult, or an early nineteenth-century literary version of the recent Danish Cartoons. Even if the historicized diction reflected the characters' consciousness, not necessarily the author's, it made no difference.

A century earlier, Arab intellectuals facing the dilemma of simultaneously liking and disliking the text, and in order for the Arabic translation of the text to be palatable to Arab/Muslim readers, had to subject the text to a considerable amount of bowdlerisation. The first public reception of *The Talisman* in the Arab world was in the Egyptian theatre in 1883. In his article "The Unknown Arab Theatre: The Play of Saladin" (in Arabic), Sayyid Ali Ismael (2011:104-6) traces the translations and stage productions of Scott's novel in Egypt and other Arab countries. It was first translated in an adaptation for the theatre in 1893 by Najeeb al-Haddad, and was first performed in March of the same year at the Royal Opera House in Cairo under the title "Sultan Saladin and Richard the Lionheart". A review in the well-established *Al-Muqattam* appeared the next day extolling the whole event, concluding that "tonight's performance comprised all that pleased the spectators and satisfied their mind; as they were leaving, they expressed their praise and congratulations".

For several decades the play was a great success; once even performed by the same troupe for ten continuous years beginning in 1894. Almost at the same time, a translation of the novel in its original form by Ya'qub Sarruf appeared in 1886, motivated by "its historical theme and by the figure of Saladin, who has become a legendary exemplar of chivalry" (Moosa 1997 100). In his article entitled "The Popular Arabic Novel of the Nineteenth-Century", Saad Elkhadem (1982: 453) indicates that "of the works that dominated the literary scene at the turn of the [nineteenth] century were Arabic translations of Walter Scott's *The Talisman*".

However, the fascination of Arab readers and dramatists with *The Talisman* only confirms Byron Porter Smith's prediction that the novel should please a Muslim audience. But, popularity came at a price: it seems that the historicism with which Scott sought to convey the spirit of the Crusades Age had to be completely reshuffled. Matti Moosa, in his *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, describes al-Haddad's translation as loose, which indicates some crucial editing. Sarruf, too, first changed the title to the new *Lionheart and Salah Al Din*, explaining in the introduction to his translation,

We have condensed this novel from a famous English novel called 'The Talisman' written by Walter Scott. But we felt free to add to it, change and replace things in

it, so that it should conform to the taste of readers in these Lands as well as tally with the historical truth of most of the events described in it (so as to be consistent with that of those readers). (quoted in Aissi 1987:28)

A full Arabic translation of the novel, published in Cairo in 1938, manifests a mode of thought contrary to that of Edward Said. The translator, Mahmoud Mahmoud Muhammad (1938:2), concludes his introduction with an apology to the Muslim reader "for what he may find offensive in the novel," adding, "we find an excuse for Scott in that [historicism]; for he wrote about a religious war between the cross and the crescent in a time of extreme religious fanaticism. It was only natural for the Christians and the Muslims to ridicule each other's religion".

3. Historicism and orientalism

In his "adding, changing and replacing things" in *The Talisman*, Sarruf seems to anticipate Edward Said's critique of the text almost a century later. In his *Orientalism*, Said (2003:101) vehemently dismisses the text in its original English form as unpalatable to an Arab/Muslim audience, condemning the "enormous liberties" its author takes "with Eblis's role by turning him into a hero for the faithful [i.e., Muslims]". He also adds,

what is truly curious is not the feeble historicism by which Scott makes the scene 'medieval,' letting Christian attack Muslim theologically in a way nineteenth-century Europeans would not (they would, though); rather, it is the airy condescension of damning a whole people 'generally' while mitigating the offense with a cool 'I don't mean you in particular' (ibid. 101).

Broadly speaking, there is much truth in Said's statement. Yet, from a different perspective, Scott can be seen as a counter-voice to the orientalism of his time. His historicism, hurriedly judged as 'feeble' by Said, needs to be re-examined in more detail from this perspective.

Said's criticism of *The Talisman*, naturally aligned with the general approach he adopts in his *Orientalism*, is itself questioned by critics. In her article entitled "Thinking Globally: *The Talisman* and *Surgeon's Daughter*," Tara Ghoshal Wallace (2009:170) believes that in his accusation of Scott of sharing Sir Kenneth's "rigid adherence to generalizations" and participating in dehumanizing orientalism, Said is in fact conflating creator and character. Wallace further questions the validity of the dichotomy Said sets between "human" and "Oriental," "a dichotomy that implicitly privileges the individual over national or cultural identity." Conversely, she endorses Lukács's approach, which is the exact opposite; for, in her opinion, he celebrates instead "Scott's drive to collapse such distinctions," and quoting Lukács, Wallace seems in complete agreement with his judgement that Scott's greatness lies in his capacity to give human embodiment to historical-social types. We must add here the fact that should not be ignored that Scotland, country, people and culture, is also represented by a single character, Prince David disguised as Sir Kenneth, the Knight of the Couching Leopard.

Robert Irwin (1997:133), on the other hand, in his comment on Said's reading of the novel, points out that

what is missing from Said's somewhat cursory and jaundiced reading of *The Talisman* is any appreciation of just how favourable Scott's portraits of Saladin and his Saracen physician are [in fact they are one person]. Courageous, intelligent and magnanimous, they really come out better than Kenneth, Richard or any of the other protagonists in the story.

Irwin's answer (1997:133) to Said's reproof of *The Talisman's* "feeble historicism" is that

... [to] express opinions such as that the Arabs are the equal if not the superior of Scotsmen, that Islam is a jolly good religion and the crusades are really just disguised imperialism, in the context of a novel set in the late twelfth century, such remarks in the mouth of Sir Kenneth would strike most readers as anachronistic.

In truth, Scott does all that and more, though not in the mouth of Sir Kenneth; a point that constitutes the basic thesis of this article. However, in this context, one has to envision Scott as actually writing for a 'dual readership' (Orienne Smith 2009:748). Through his Scottish and English heroes in *The Talisman*, he tries to appeal to the early nineteenth-century general public in Britain that "would attack Muslims theologically" (to borrow Said's words), while simultaneously joining in the wave of a discourse tending to revolutionise the perception of the Orient, such as that undertaken by his friends Goethe, Carlyle and Emerson.

Additionally, *The Talisman's* historicism is set to comprise two intersecting epochs, with an eye on the future. The scenes are made medieval, but at the same time, the narrator and his point of view belong to the early decades of the nineteenth century; thus connecting with his contemporaries and trying to impact future generations. From the outset of the novel, the duality of time is plainly indicated,

Times of danger have always, and in a peculiar degree, their seasons of good-will and of security; and this was particularly so in the ancient feudal ages, in which . . . the manners of the period had assigned war to be the chief and most worthy occupation of mankind. (Scott 1956:19)

Situated at a distance from the action taking place, the narrator speaks from the vantage point of modernity, commenting on the different paradigms of the Middle Ages with expressions such as, "Tales of magic and of necromancy were the learning of the period" (ibid 39) and "The etiquette, to use a modern phrase, ..." (ibid 63). Scott also uses expressions such as "as became the time", and "as they were then called," that emphasise the wide gap in time between the narrator and the events in his narrative. Meta-fictional phrases such as "Let us not disguise the truth from our readers" (ibid 63) are there to help establish affinity between narrator and reader. Scott's duality of time is a continuous attempt to keep the balance between the medieval characters and the modern narrator as he narrates, examines, analyses, and comments on the medieval world through modern eyes.

Interestingly, the author's intention for his work, found in his paratextual comments and notes, institutes in the schemata of the novel a sense of a third time dimension, that of the future. In his Prefatory Letter in *Peveril of the Peak*

(1822), Scott (2003:267) explains, "I only show what has been done when there were giants in the land. We pigmies of the present day, may at least, however, do something; and it is well to keep a pattern before our eyes, though that pattern be inimitable. "To keep a pattern before our eyes" reveals some expectation of influencing the audience and affecting their future behaviour. And as *The Talisman* deals with the darkest confrontation ever between the East and the West, it is loaded with hints and directives meant to push the 'pigmies' of today into the path of those giants of the past; perhaps those pigmies can become, or at least try to become, the giants of the future.

The past, to Scott, has its moments of great nobility that ought to be revived and experienced time and again in order to imprint their preciousness onto the consciousness of generations to come. It is the 'epical' element in his historical novels, to use Lukács' term, - epical in the full Homeric sense where the heroic is not meant simply to glorify but also to influence. The didactic purpose of setting the giants/pigmies juxtaposition is obvious, meant to ignite the latter's awareness of their potential. That is why in order for a reading of the past to succeed in its educative function it needs to be selective. Scott's endeavour has been to choose carefully whom to put in the spotlight and how to groom them. Hence, the novel is actually turned into some sort of "ideological discourse ... and one that Scott himself wished to make the basis for the education of Britain's leaders of the future" (Kelly 1989:140). This makes it hard to accept William Hazlitt's claim that Scott has his mind brooding over antiquity as if cut off from reality and the demand of the moment. Hazlitt humorously labels Scott "*laudator temporis acti*" – a "*prophesier* of things past". "Our historical novelist," he goes on to say,

firmly thinks that nothing *is* but what *has been* – that the moral world stands still, as the material one was supposed to do of old – and that we can never get beyond the point where we actually are without utter destruction, though every thing changes and will change from what it was three hundred years ago to what it is now, - from what it is now to all that the bigoted admirer of the good old times most dreads and hates! (2003:279-80; original italics)

In fact, Scott's historicism in *The Talisman* can be explained in terms of Hegel's 'necessary anachronism' and Venn diagram as Stuart Ferguson elucidates in his article "The Imaginative Construction of Historical Character: What Georg Lukács and Walter Scott Could Tell Contemporary Novelists." In his analysis of Scott's dedicatory note to *Ivanhoe* in which Scott writes, "It is necessary, for exciting interest of any kind, that the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated into the manners, as well as the language of the age we live in" (Scott *Ivanhoe* 12), Ferguson explains how Hegel's 'necessary anachronism,' "suggests a model (like a Venn diagram) in which two sets of consciousness intersect, with much the larger part of each set falling into the 'intersection'" (2005:38-39). He offers a further explanation: "The belief that Europeans could learn something about their ancestors from the study of Arab clans and American tribes was part of Scott's imaginative arsenal" (ibid 41).

But the whole idea of historical investigation and learning about 'ancestors' is to influence the present realities one way or another; in other words, one should select the pattern to be kept before the eyes. It is this teleology that drives Scott to 'invest', rather than 'divest' the past, in total disagreement with Henry James' philosophy:

Sir Walter could not have read so widely or so curiously as he did, without discovering a vast deal that was gross and ignoble in bygone times. But he excludes these elements as if he feared they would clash with his numbers. He has the same indifference to historic truth as an epic poet, without, in the novels, having the same excuse. The task of the historical story-teller is, not to invest, but to divest the past. (2003:430)

However, when Scott reintroduces his own stylised version of the historical Saladin, he does so with a touch of the Swiftian prince of the Brobdingnagian giants (giant being an enlightenment metaphor), who despises Gulliver's European civilisation, with its pettiness and political intrigue:

Set against this glorious and sinister folly is the character of Saladin, an enlightened, cultivated, rational, responsible, mediating monarch, a model of the professionalized gentleman that was Scott's principal recommendation to his own time for the cure of his society's ills. Saladin's disguise as a physician and his possession of a healing stone resonate down the centuries into the 1820s. (Kelly 1989:165)

If one agrees with the critics who believe that the Oriental-in-Europe satirical device of the Enlightenment is meant "to defamiliarize and criticise European culture and politics" (ibid 213), one can see how Scott inverts the situation by placing the European in the Orient and in the Middle Ages, in a "civilisation that is in some respects more sophisticated. Here historical distance from the Scotland of his own day allows Scott to undertake an imaginative critique of the Christian psychology that helped to establish the modern European world-view" (Lincoln 2002:105).

4. Representation of Saladin

To theorise on the interpretation of Scott's positive portrayal of Saladin in *The Talisman*, four assumptions can be made: The first is that it serves an ulterior nationalistic purpose for Scott, issuing from his own conception of "the artist as agent of national reconciliation" (Smith 2009:746). At the national level, reconciliation is brought about between David, the Scottish Prince, and the English King, Richard; while, at the international level, the bond of friendship and trust is established between these two on one side and Saladin on the other. "'It were well,' said Richard, 'to apply to the generosity of the royal Saladin, since, heathen as he is, I have never known knight more fulfilled of nobleness, or to whose good faith we may so peremptorily intrust ourselves'" (Scott 1956:258).

In fact, it can be correctly said that the bond between the Scottish Prince and the royal Sultan becomes much stronger and more special. Scott turns Saladin into a patron, protector and an educator for the young Scottish prince,

David, who is posing in most of the action in the novel as Sir Kenneth. The very close alignment and friendship between the two characters, especially in their frequent confrontations with the King of England bring to mind Robert Irwin's ironic remark on Lane-Poole and Gibb, with the implication of Scott as well:

It seems that Lane-Poole thought of Saladin as a sort of honorary hero of the Scottish nation. The same may also be true of Sir Hamilton Gibb (1895–1971). Gibb, who had attended Scott's old school, the Royal High School in Edinburgh, was soaked in the works of the novelist and later in life he used to recommend *The Talisman* to his students in Arabic as 'a work of art from which they could learn much about Islamic history'. Gibb, who was to have a distinguished career as an Arabist and a historian of the Middle East, wrote not one biography of Saladin, but rather a series of studies which appeared in the 1950s and 1960s. (1997:135)

Caroline McCracken-Flesher too seems to harbour similar thoughts, though not the irony, contemplating the kind of unifying 'otherness' developed between the two heroes, the Prince of Scotland and Saladin. Well-known for her interest in the analysis of the subaltern responses (including the Scottish) to English dominance (Simpson 2008:440n), McCracken-Flesher analytically refers to the heraldic symbolism of the noble Scot's motto, explaining,

"I sleep – wake me not" ... Scott, however, begins to wake the Sleeping Leopard. He starts the long process of Sir Kenneth's re-education as a speaking Scot by confronting him with Saladin. This most alien of Others can teach the Scottish knight neither to hide his otherness, nor to accept its silencing through English systems, but to embrace it and to use it – to voice himself across it. (2005:122)

In fact, Scott offers more than one unifying element to bring the two characters together; he presents them as lone figures that stand for whole nations. Sir Kenneth lost all his men, except for one sick squire, whose single role is to vindicate Saladin's power of healing. Saladin, similarly, acts, for most of the time, alone. The reader notices that instead of frequenting his novel with other Muslim and Scottish characters, Scott rather multiplies the hero's presence through disguise, not as a reconstruction of identity or fragmentation of the self, or, as suggested by some critics, Irwin for one, a technique simply adopted in imitation of the *Arabian Nights* (Irwin 1997:132), but as a method of revealing, in the case of Saladin the polymath, the rich, diverse culture and the sophisticated learning of his nation. Through his disguise in the garb of humbler identities, Saladin manages to get closer to his opponents, to enter into dialogue with them about cultural differences, and to care for them (Lincoln 2002:117). He writes to Richard,

We have therefore sent to tend and wait upon thee at this time the physician to our own person, Adonbec el Hakim, before whose face the angel Azrael spreads his wings, and departs from the sick chamber; who knows the virtues of herbs and stones, the path of the sun, moon, and stars, and can save man from all that is not written on his forehead. (Scott 1956:93)

Sir Kenneth's disguise, on the other hand, symbolises the national and political realities between Scotland and England. In either case, they both resemble Lukács' epical hero in his *Theory of the Novel* (1971:66), who is, "strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that one of the essential

characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community". Lukács (ibid 67) also adds, "[T]he epic hero, as bearer of his destiny, is not lonely, for this destiny connects him by indissoluble threads to the community whose fate is crystallised in his own". Loneliness stands for a state of the mind and not a physical reality. In *The Historical Novel*, Lukács (1962:36) quotes Hegel as saying that the heroes of the epic are "total individuals who magnificently concentrate within themselves what is otherwise dispersed in the national character, and in this they remain great, free and noble human characters."

The second assumption is postcolonial, based on Edward Said's identification in his *Orientalism* (2003:62) of what he terms the "narcissistic Western ideas about the Orient". Although Said (ibid 62) does not specifically apply this theory to Scott's work, his proposition that Europe finds some kind of incarnation of its infinite ideals in the Orient can well fit Scott's portrayal of Saladin:

Thus the Orient acquired representatives, so to speak, and representations, each one more concrete, more internally congruent with some Western exigency, than the ones that preceded it. It is as if, having once settled on the Orient as a locale suitable for incarnating the infinite in a finite shape, Europe could not stop the practice; the Orient and the Oriental, Arab, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, or whatever, become repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating.

As for the 'Western exigency' Said mentions, it could be interpreted in Scott's case as the great connection he creates between Saladin and European chivalry of past times, mediævally romantic, but loaded with ever-relevant moral values and higher ideals. Scott could not really uphold his Scottish prince, David, nor King Richard himself as anywhere near the perfect chivalrous man.

Worth-mentioning here is a very curious piece of some mediæval metrical romance, included in *The Talisman* volume by Scott (1956:6-11), as "Appendix to Introduction", which the reader is expected to glance at before setting on reading the novel itself. It narrates an incident described as the 'extraordinary invention' of attributing cannibalism to the King of England. The subversive effect of the appendix, however, is not altogether eliminated by Scott's feeble refutation of the ghoulish action. The barbaric side of the Middle Ages is graphically conveyed to the modern reader, especially Scott's implied British reader, through this shocking, utterly unnecessary digression that appears to serve, as a free motif, a functionality not structurally related to the story itself. Maybe Richard in that romance is supposed to act as the foil of Scott's Richard, to be contrasted with and measured by, since many critics agree on Scott's improvement on the latter, as in David Simpson's account: "Scott does not much approve of Richard the Lionheart either in *Ivanhoe* or in *The Talisman*, but he is still portrayed there as better than he was, since it was in his reign that some of the worst persecutions of the English Jews took place" (2008:440).

Another postcolonial analysis of the novel is offered in a chapter entitled "Saladin and the Third Crusade: A Case Study in Historiography and the

Historical Novel," that appeared in Routledge's *Companion to Historiography* (1997) by critic Robert Irwin (1997:132), who comments on King Richard's idea that the Eastern people will profit by the Crusaders and learn the language of chivalry, saying that "it is apparent in the novel that, although Saladin is one of the paynim [sic], his courage, courtesy and generosity make him an exemplar of chivalry. He is indeed more chivalrous than his antagonists". One observes that Richard's emphasis is on the *language* of chivalry, while chivalry *de facto*, i.e., the unity of word and deed, is the ideal chivalric code Scott aims to represent in the exemplary character of Saladin. Also, in her article mentioned above, Tara Ghoshal Wallace (2009:170) offers a postcolonial approach to the interpretation of *The Talisman*, asserting that it "reveal[s] Scott's global vision, which considers Britain's relation to the Eastern territories it has come to rule and the cultures it seeks to dominate".

Postcolonialism also provides us with a contrary interpretation. The lone figure of Saladin can be understood in terms of mimicry as used by Homi Bhabha; it "is a strategy of colonial power/knowledge emblematic of a ... revised Other. It is a strategy of exclusion through inclusion that purports to accept the "good native" all the better to exclude and denounce the majority "bad natives" (Childs and Williams 1997:129). This Saidian line of thinking brings us to the third assumption which does not credit Scott with 'choosing' or discovering Saladin, but regards this positive portrayal as nothing new, but a continuation of an old European tradition that has appropriated Saladin, keeping a niche for him in appreciation of his virtue, most clearly pronounced in *The Divine Comedy*, where Dante ejaculates, "I saw great Saladin, *aloof, alone*" (iv:129; italics added) and include him in the virtuous pagans:

What souls I knew, of great and Sovran
Virtue, who in that Limbo dwelt suspended.
... "Their honourable name,
Still in thy world resounding as it does,
Wins here from Heaven the favour due to fame. (iv: 44-45, 79-81)

The last assumption is that historical Saladin stands as well for the universal man, or Plato's wise man. In his analysis of Scott's fiction, Lukács compares three types of heroes: the Homeric, the tragic and Plato's wise man. It may sound too convenient to apply this classification to the three main figures in of *The Talisman*, respectively, Sir Kenneth, Richard, and then Saladin. Lukács' elaboration on the last type can be used here to throw more light on Saladin's representation in the novel:

. . . Plato's new man, the wise man with his active cognition and his essence-creating vision, does not merely unmask the tragic hero but also illuminates the dark peril the hero has vanquished; Plato's new wise man, by surpassing the hero, transfigures him. This new wise man, however, was the last type of man and his world was the last paradigmatic life-structure the Greek spirit was to produce . . . for to be a man in the new world is to be solitary. (1920:36)

The universal man can be defined in terms of "Humanism's and the enlightenment's archetypal Homo Universalis, whose outstanding traits are rationality, versatility, and esprit de corps;" he is also 'total man' who is "the

didactic pursuit" (Ali 2001:68, 74, 79). And if we consider Gibb's description of Saladin being "a man out of his times, one who refused to play the political games of his age" (qtd. in Irwin 1997:135), we can see that Scott tries to capture this universality through the many-faceted identity of his Saladin, and, conversely, through the parochialism displayed by his opponents:

Indeed, when Saladin refuses Richard's offer to settle the fate of Palestine by single combat, political maturity is here embodied in the pagan [sic] rather than the Christian monarch who has, moreover, been perfectly willing to condemn to death a loyal dependent for the sake of a mere flag. (Simpson 2008:443)

More and more critics, in recent times especially in light of the later developments in postcolonialism, are unravelling the real import of the juxtaposition of the two monarchs. Universal man, or, in McCracken-Flesher's description of Saladin, "complete man," is not bound by the urges of the moment or by the subjectivity of the individual: Saladin cures his enemies and brings justice into their ranks because he no longer sees them as enemies; his perspective on people and events surrounding him is detached, dispassionate, and completely controlled. In his article "Which is the Merchant here? And Which the Jew?" *Friends and Enemies in Walter Scott's Crusader Novels*, David Simpson (2008:443) touches on this aspect of Saladin's character:

Saladin's last acts in the novel – the attempt to cure Conrade of Monserrat and the execution of the Grand Master of the Templars – represent his successful control of both harming and healing, which is at this point nothing less than control of the plot itself; without him there would be no just conclusion. His opposite number, Richard the Lionheart, is out of control, unaware of what is happening, and a much less efficient politician, albeit less destructive than he was in *Ivanhoe*.

David Hume (1983:2:22), too, one of the influences on Scott's treatment of the East, explains in his *History of England: From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to The Revolution in 1688*, finds it important to highlight Saladin's cosmopolitan sympathies that extended even after his death: "By his last will he ordered charities to be distributed to the poor, without distinction of Jew, Christian, or Mohametan". Such universality is enhanced when juxtaposed with the narrow-mindedness of Richard, who replies to Saladin's letter introducing the physician in more-or-less irrational words, expressing his disgust at Saladin's religion and promising to "repay the noble Soldan his generosity", expressing what seems to be a love-hate complex:

I will meet Saladin in the field, as he so worthily proposes, and he shall have no cause to term Richard of England ungrateful. I will strike him to the earth with my battle-axe – I will convert him to Holy Church with such blows as he has rarely endured – he shall recant his errors before my good cross-handled sword, and I will have him baptized in the battlefield, . . . he loves me as I love him – as noble adversaries ever love each other – by my honour, it were sin to doubt his good faith! (Scott 1956:94)

The universal mind reflects its finer cultural and civilisational background, which in turn must be attributed to the fact, Hume (1983:I:393) asserts, that the advantage of science, moderation, humanity has been entirely on the side of the Saracens; and that

this gallant emperor [Saladin], in particular, displayed, during the course of the war, a spirit and generosity, which even his bigoted enemies were obliged to acknowledge and admire. Richard, equally martial and brave, carried with him more of the barbarian character, and was guilty of acts of ferocity, which threw a stain on his celebrated victories.

5. Writing against the grain:

. . . Sir Thomas, were it fair to take the Holy Land from the heathen Saladin, so full of all the virtues which may distinguish unchristened man, and give it to Giles Amaury, a worse pagan than himself – an idolater – a devil-worshipper, a necromancer[?] (Scott 1956:77)

More interrogative statements like this are dispersed in *The Talisman*, betraying immense doubts concerning the imperialist and the colonialist projects' moral justifications, echoing the anti-crusade sentiment and rationales sounded by Hume among others. Scott (ibid 156) bluntly categorizes the Crusade as “an undertaking wholly irrational.” Some critics actually view the novel, at this point in the twenty-first century and in a gesture of reappraisal, “as though Scott has written a fairly straightforward anti-crusade, anti-imperial narrative, one that amply demonstrates Saladin’s incontrovertible right to rule, a right based not only on ethnic and territorial legitimacy but also on military, intellectual, and moral superiority” (Wallace 2009:172).

In *The Talisman*, as we have seen so far, Scott, reinstates a favourable image of Muslims through the portrayal of Saladin, the way Goethe and Carlyle do through their impressions of Muhammad. W. M. Parker (1956:ix), in his Preface to the 1956 edition of *The Talisman*, surmises that the novel “is probably the first, or among the first, of English novels to praise Mohammedans”. A revolutionary spirit is witnessed to rebel against the placid acceptance of the prejudices and distortions of their time. Edward Said (2003:42) charts the period, which, ironically, is also seen as the heyday of the imperialist project, as follows:

[T]he prejudice and distortion displayed by Christian scholars and polemicists created an accepted canon, a constituted body of belief about Islam, which identified a 'real truth', substantially different from what Muslims themselves actually believed. Constantly confirmed by repetition, this 'doctrine about doctrine' became firmly embedded in the consciousness of the Europeans concerned, until it became virtually impervious to change.

From here comes the seminal achievement of Scott, who, according to James Watt, struggles to break new ground in the way he portrays characters and handles historical matter in *The Talisman*. Watt (2004:94) observes that such a remarkable novel eschews “the increasingly influential language of racial essentialism,” and “complicates the mythology of oriental despotism, while at the same time focusing on the ramifications of cultural contact and exchange”.

On more than one occasion in *The Talisman*, Scott overtly criticises the English imperialist attitude, not just towards Easterners, but also towards Scots. In a long passage in Chapter VII, Scott elaborates on the sentiment of De Vaux, the English nobleman, towards his near neighbours, the Scots, whom he thinks

of as a "wicked, deceitful, and ferocious race, . . . holding them in his secret soul little better than the Saracens, whom he came to combat" (1956:81). And when the same lord calls the Scottish people, represented by Sir Kenneth, 'false,' Scott inserts the following footnote:

Such were the terms in which the English used to speak of their poor northern neighbours, forgetting that their own encroachments upon the independence of Scotland obliged the weaker nation to defend themselves by policy as well as force. The disgrace must be divided between Edward I. and II., who enforced their domination over a free country, and the Scots, who were compelled to take compulsory oaths, without any purpose of keeping them. (ibid 165)

As indicated above, the nationalistic issues in Scott's work are explored thoroughly by Caroline McCracken-Flesher in her book *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow*. She (2005:119) makes the assertion that to Richard, Christian allies and Muslims were equally envisioned as Other that should stand subject to English systems. "Given that Sir Kenneth turns out to be a Prince of Scotland, ... serving anonymously in the crusading forces, Scott offers no optimistic picture of his contemporaries' operations within the Union." Hence comes the symbolism of disguising Sir Kenneth as the Nubian slave, a gift sent by Saladin to King Richard; however, there is optimism in the way Scott chooses to end this servitude by giving the Scot the upper hand as he saves Richard's life. Besides, through the reconciliation of such far apart entities as Saracens and Crusaders, the reconciliation of the British neighbours should seem more possible than ever.

Nevertheless, though Scott's nationalist spirit may seem reconciliatory, unionist, and against radical politics, his medieval Scottish hero is not. He swears to Saladin, "No, by the bright light of Heaven! If the King of England had not set forth to the Crusade till he was sovereign of Scotland, the Crescent might, for me, and all true-hearted Scots, glimmer for ever on the walls of Zion" (Scott 1956:36).

In his depiction of Saladin, Scott categorically diverges from the mode of romance into a decidedly historical realm. Contrary to romance traditions, the Muslim hero is not seduced into conversion, nor is he vanquished by Christian knights; better still, his defence of his faith and his explications of issues long-misunderstood are clearly vocalised. Some of the speeches Scott puts in the mouth of his Eastern hero are borrowed almost verbatim from the recent and more authentic historical sources available in his time, including citations from translated Arabic manuscripts. With these he attempts to explain the underlying principles wherefrom springs Saladin's fine chivalry, simultaneously dispelling grave misunderstandings and long-inherited cultural prejudices. One example is Saladin's rebuff of the allegations Sir Kenneth throws at him:

The Greeks and the Syrians have much belied us, seeing we do but after the word of Abubeker Alwakel, the successor of the Prophet, and, after him, the first commander of true believers. 'Go forth,' he said, 'Yezed Ben Sophian,' when he sent that renowned general to take Syria from the infidels, 'quit yourselves like men in battle, but slay neither the aged, the infirm, the women, nor the children.

Waste not the land, neither destroy corn and fruit-trees, they are the gifts of Allah. Keep faith when you have made any covenant, even if it be to your own harm. If ye find holy men labouring with their hands, and serving God in the desert, hurt them not, neither destroy their dwellings. ... As the Caliph, companion of the Prophet, hath told us, so have we done. (Scott 1956:30)

This is a famous text in Islamic history, translated into English in the eighteenth century by Simon Ockley (1678-1720) in his well-known reference work *History of Saracens* (1708, 1718), which includes the excerpt above verbatim (Ockley 1857:94). It is obvious that Scott follows Ockley in blaming Greek historiographers for the "lame accounts" of Arab and Muslim history. In his introduction Ockley (ibid xvi) writes, "It might reasonably have been expected, that the Greeks . . . would have taken particular care to have given a just account of it. But, on the contrary, they have been more jejune and sparing in this particular, than is allowable in any tolerable historian."

The third and best edition of this work was published in London in 1757. Editors record that "Upon its first publication this work was received by scholars with marked approbation, as the most complete and authentic account of the Arabian Prophet and his successors which had yet been given to the world" (Ockley 1857:i). Gibbon made considerable use of this work in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, where he speaks of Ockley as "a learned and spirited interpreter of Arabian authorities, whose tales and traditions afford an artless picture of the men and the times;" and in his Autobiography Gibbon describes him as "an original in every sense, who had opened his eyes." (qtd in Ockley 1857:ii-iii). Critics also recommend the strong moral painting and dramatic vivacity with which the vigorous writer diversified and elevated his subjects (ibid. iii), a policy obviously later adopted by Scott. In the biographical sketch of Ockley, the editors of the work (ibid. vii) find it important to point out that Ockley "perhaps was the first who exhibited to us other heroes than those of Greece and Rome; sages as contemplative, and a people more magnificent even than the iron masters of the world."

This may well be the source of historical information for Scott on which he draws the rather more or less accurate knowledge about Islam which he fuses in *The Talisman*, such as anti-racist judgements: "judge not by his complexion, according to the foolish ones of the earth," the performance with sand of an imitation of ablution for lack of water (1956:233), even such little things as the curing of dogs as a religious duty (ibid 156). All are based on well-known traditions of the Prophet. Equally important is the Emir's clarification of the treatment of prisoners of other faiths, that they are not forcefully converted into Islam:

Violence and bribery are alike alien to [Saladin's] plan for extending the true faith. Hearken to me, my brother. When the blind man was miraculously restored to sight, the scales dropped from his eyes at the Divine pleasure – think'st thou that any earthly leech could have removed them? (ibid 243)

Even when Saladin surprises everybody by beheading the Grand Master of the Templars, King Richard himself acknowledges it as "a great act of justice" (ibid 311).

However, the following complex statement by Scott (ibid 2) in his introduction to the novel, stands perhaps as a warning to his readers, pointing out what may challenge their imperial sentiments: not just the usual accentuated East-West binaries, but also hierarchies upset in a Bakhtinian carnivalesque, betraying a conciliatory attitude, ambiguously didactic and interrogative:

The period relating more immediately to the Crusades, which I at last fixed upon, was that at which the warlike character of Richard I., wild and generous, a pattern of chivalry, with all its extravagant virtues, and its no less absurd errors, was opposed to that of Saladin, in which the Christian and English monarch showed all the cruelty and violence of an Eastern Sultan; and Saladin, on the other hand, displayed the deep policy and prudence of a European sovereign, whilst each contended which should excel the other in the knightly qualities of bravery and generosity.

His novel, as he unequivocally states, is basically structured around this theme of binary opposition, "the singular contrast," to borrow his phrase. The two sets of binaries here are centred around history and prejudice, what is actually reported in historical references and what is expected of rulers, Eastern and Western, in Scott's contemporary world. Despite the conciliatory tone, the well-known inversion, set in the remote past and space, enhances the liberation of the author originally afforded in fiction writing. At moments in the novel, Saladin seems to act as authorial voice: "The master places the shepherd over the flock, not for the shepherd's own sake, but for the sake of the sheep" (Scott 1956:23-24). And when history tells us that, above all, "the Sultan himself led a conspicuously orthodox and Spartan existence" (Housely 1987:18), we conclude that Saladin represents the wisdom of a great civilisation that the West has chosen to ignore or overcome. "On the issue of cultural cosmopolitanism, this text grants the Muslim indisputable superiority" (Wallace 2009:171).

If one accepts the assumption that the novel is ideological discourse and agrees with critic Kelly's hypothesis cited above concerning the education of Britain's future leaders (Kelly 1989:140), then the first lesson is that true knowledge is the key to world stability, and that understanding the Other creates a platform for respect. At an early point in the novel Sir Kenneth the Scot is about to utter injurious words about Prophet Muhammad betraying the kind of bigotry that made him and the rest of the crusaders heap their slandering expletives on the Prophet of Islam, in a medieval, Dantean fashion. Checking this irrational habit of speech, the hallmark of crusading, the Emir raises three points: the first concerns the error in reasoning when passing judgement without proper knowledge, as in the argument *ad ignorantiam* fallacy. The second is there can be no hierarchy among friends; and the third is the crucial necessity for a fair mind to make the distinction between fallibility of men and the nobility of their higher ideals.

An electrical shock of passion thrilled through the form of the Emir; but it was only momentary, and the calmness of his reply had both dignity and reason in it, when he said 'Slander not him whom thou knowest not; the rather that we venerate the founder of thy religion, while we condemn the doctrine which your priests have spun from it. (Scott 1956:31)

Saladin is only rephrasing an old Arab proverb: "Man is enemy to what he does not know."

Any discussion of *The Talisman* is not complete without highlighting the hints left here and there in the text to a conception of the unity in essence of the two faiths, something that develops as the action progresses, as if history and knowledge gradually unfold themselves to Scott, who confesses in his memoirs that "the philosophy of history," did not appeal to him before, but that he "gradually assembled much of what was striking and picturesque in historical narrative" (Lockhart 1900:I:29). One such incident takes place in the mountain dwelling of the strange hermit: the Prince of Scotland and Saladin, both in disguise, jointly respond to the hermit's prayer:

The anchorite . . . entered, and folding his arms on his bosom as he stood before them, saith with a solemn voice – "Blessed be His name, who hath appointed the quiet night to follow the busy day, and the calm sleep to refresh the wearied limbs, and to compose the troubled spirit!" Both warriors replied "Amen!" (Scott 1956:51)

Indeed, the prayer may well be taken literally from these verses of the Qur'an: "And We made your sleep for rest, and the night as a covering, and the day as a means of subsistence" (Qur'an 78:9-10). Moreover, Scott (1956:234) illustrates the desired growing understanding of the Other, as it occurs in his Scottish hero's mind, as the latter starts to wonder

what new-born feelings could teach him to accompany in prayer, though with varied invocation, those very Saracens, whose heathenish worship he had conceived a crime dishonourable to the land in which high miracles had been wrought, and where the day-star of redemption had arisen.

It is as if Scott himself is attempting another miracle, which is to bring civilisations together, to end armed conflict and build bridges of knowledge, understanding and respect. "Like Scott, we want to believe in a better future. But like him, we are often held hostage by its opposed promise. Thinking our way back into a yesterday which we also recognize as our today might help us break that cycle, even if Scott himself could not" (Kipp 2005:233).

In conclusion, what has been attempted here is a reappraisal of Scott's novel, and a salvaging of the novelist's voice, taking as a starting point the fact that Scott, by the way he portrays his characters and negotiates historical matter, has actually broken new ground. In his representations of the Orient he is a dissenter. Very few indeed would venture, as he did, at the beginning of the nineteenth century to give a favourable colouring to anything remotely Oriental.

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