Sir Walter Scott and the Caribbean: Unravelling the Silences
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Since 2007, the year that marked the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the UK, a remarkable number of TV and radio programmes, events, exhibitions, literary and artistic works, as well as scholarly studies have unearthed and brought to the attention of the larger public Scotland’s involvement with the Atlantic slave trade and the exploitation of slaves in the Caribbean. A central concern in the ongoing investigation of this chapter of Scotland’s colonial history has been what I term an ‘un/willed amnesia’ — a forgetfulness that appears more radical in Scotland than in other European countries, also involved in the exploitation of slavery in the Caribbean, among which are England, France, Holland, Portugal and Spain. My choice of the term ‘amnesia’ represents an attempt to convey the endemic nature and extensive proportions of such forgetfulness. While by defining it ‘un/willed’, I propose that different levels of responsibility can be identified, and that an ethical distinction should be made between those who witnessed the events, or historians of later generations who were at least partly aware of them, and nonetheless repressed its memory, and the ‘common wo/men’ of the post-emancipation

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1 As recent historiography has revealed, Scots engaged in the imperial enterprise as British subjects but also, even though mostly cryptically, as members of their own nation. Scotland’s status of stateless nation, in fact, did not prevent it from firmly privileging and protecting its economic and political interests. See, among others, *Scotland and the British Empire*, ed. by John M. MacKenzie and T. M. Devine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). In the Caribbean in particular, as Douglas J. Hamilton observes, Scots created powerful networks ‘to buttress their imperial activities’ employing ‘connections among their families and friends’, but also developing ‘fictive bonds’ that allowed them to be especially responsive to local circumstances. See Douglas J. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750–1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 27.

eras, who hardly had the means and competence to retrieve, or to imagine, a long buried past.

‘Recovering Scotland’s slavery past’ — to use T. M. Devine’s phrase — is in fact a complex task. At least two obstacles to such recovery are familiar to scholars in the wider field of Atlantic slavery studies. The first concerns the defectiveness of archives, that have preserved mainly non-narrative documents (newspaper advertisements of slave auctions or runaways, laws pertaining slavery, bills of sale etc.); abolitionist literature, often marred by a narrow ideological perspective; or slave narratives, relatively rare and often questioned in their ‘authenticity’.

The second, and partly related problem is represented by the resistance of national historiographies and narratives to full assimilation of the history of slavery. Transnational studies on slavery today are numerous and engaging, but they have made relatively little or no impact on national historiographies, which still tend to exclude or marginalize events that threaten to undermine the moral self-esteem of the nation.

The specific problem with Scotland’s amnesia, however, is more complex. It arguably has its deepest roots in the teleological philosophy of history conceived and diffused by the Scottish Enlightenment, according to which ‘the analysis of the past [is] not on its own terms, but in the light of

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5 A meaningful and well-known example is represented by The Life of Olaudah Equiano (1789), whose complex in/authenticities have been investigated at least since the 1990s. See, among others, Katalin Orban, ‘Dominant and Submerged Discourses in The Life of Olaudah Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa?)’, African American Review 27: 4 (1993), 655–664.
what it could contribute to an account of progress towards the present’.\textsuperscript{6} In the nineteenth century especially, the practice of slavery across the Atlantic dramatically conflicted with Enlightenment principles of ‘civility’ and ‘liberty’, which were closely associated with the idea of ‘progress’. Even though exploited for economic profit, and ‘justified’ by racist ideologies slavery remained a morally questionable, if not downright unacceptable, and ‘primitive’ practice.

Scotland’s removal of the memory of slavery, however, is certainly also related to the mechanisms of construction and transmission of national history in a stateless nation, taking place largely outside the boundaries of (or in open antagonism with) institutional historiography. In Scotland’s case, in Murray G. H. Pittock’s words, lack of independence went along ‘with a lack of independent means of securing one’s own history’,\textsuperscript{7} and ultimately led to a mythologized, or iconified version of national history, long assessed as a lack, or a failure,\textsuperscript{8} and only recently appropriately re-evaluated as a form of ‘protest history’ or ‘underground history’.\textsuperscript{9} It is in such fluid and problematic context, that the tension revealed by contemporary theorists of history, at least since Hayden White’s\textit{Metahistory} (1973), between two contradictory directions — history as a knowledge based on traces and signs, and history as rhetorical mode/ art of telling — takes on a new level of complexity.

The work of Sir Walter Scott — staging an elaborate dialogue between history and romance, and functioning as a powerful source of alternative


\textsuperscript{7} Murray G. H. Pittock,\textit{The Invention of Scotland (Routledge Revivals): The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present} (London: Routledge, 2014) p. 5.

\textsuperscript{8} See, for example, Marinell Ash,\textit{The Strange Death of Scottish History} (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1980).

\textsuperscript{9} Pittock,\textit{The Invention of Scotland}, p.5.
historiography — can be seen as placed at the confluence of all these tensions, and thus as epicentral also in the field of Caribbean-Scottish studies. Like Robert Burns, Scott did not join the ranks of abolitionists. The regrettable truth is that the works of the two most iconic and popular Scottish writers bear only fleeting references to an issue that took centre-stage in the debates of the time. But while Burns’s silence has been interrogated by critics in the past decade,10 no doubt also in virtue of the Bard’s lasting status of icon of Scottishness — that of an ‘archetype for every other Scot to aspire to’11 — Scott’s reticence has on the whole been neglected. And yet, Scott’s silence appears both as more striking and more impactful, given his crucial and complex role as historiographer and myth-maker in nineteenth-century Scotland. Scott, indeed, ‘stands central to the cultural work that is Scotland’,12 as Caroline McCracken-Flesher points out, ‘precisely because his influence is both admitted and resisted Scott is in fact a site of contestation producing the nation today’.13

The present essay makes no claim of exhaustiveness in the coverage of Scott’s vast literary production, but rather aims, by drawing especially from recent narratological theories, to interrogate, through the discussion of a selection of exemplary texts, Scott’s literary silences as a form of communication in their own right. By revealing the invisible maps of meaning of the unsaid and ‘unnarrated’, especially in his fiction, I also propose to critically rethink the problems and possibilities of engaging with Caribbean slavery in British/European nineteenth-century fiction. The first

13 McCracken-Flesher, p. 5.
necessary step, however, is to account for the actual intersections and between Scott’s own world and colonial Caribbean history.

Scott and the Caribbean: chronologies and intersections
Scott’s social background and education, and even his life span (1771–1832) placed him at the very centre of what was, from the last decades of the eighteenth century to at least the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, an extremely popular and emotional debate, in Scotland as much in the rest of the United Kingdom. As a resident of the New Town in Edinburgh (before moving to Abbotsford in 1812), he lived next door to many country fellowmen who were variously involved in the slave trade.14 As a lawyer, he was in an ideal position to follow and understand the legal implications of the many parliamentary debates on slavery. His knowledge of national and colonial history, and his interest in and grasp of economic issues,15 no doubt enabled him to be fully aware of the scope and implications of Caribbean slavery. As a freemason, and a member of the prestigious St David’s Lodge, he was no doubt in privileged contact with a host of notable and important people,16 including representatives of that city’s mercantile elite who, in the same period, thrived on the free labour of African slaves in the West Indies. He must have been well aware of the many initiatives of the Edinburgh Committee for the Abolition of the Slave, ‘the oldest and by far the strongest

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14 An interactive ‘Edinburgh Slavery Map’, part of an ongoing UCL based project, has begun charting the city’s legacy of slave–ownership by identifying the addresses of slave-owners on the basis of compensation claims following the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 http://www.scotlandslaverymap.com/ [accessed 3 December 2017].
16 Among these, his future publishers James and John Ballantyne. See Adam Muir Mackay, Sir Walter Scott as a Freemason, revised edn (Fort William: Temple-Arch Publishers, 1999), pp. 3, 7–8.
in Scotland’. Interestingly, Ian Whyte lists among the prominent subscribers to the Committee’s reprint, in 1790, of the anti-slavery petitions previously published by the Presbytery and the Chamber of Commerce, also Scott.18

Scott had also relatively close family ties to the West Indian world. Among his brothers, who pursued military or administrative careers in the British Empire, one, Thomas (1773–1823), expected for a while a West Indian appointment,19 which never came: he was instead sent to Canada, where he died. Two other brothers, the eldest and the youngest, did travel to the Caribbean, and were both deeply affected by their experiences there. Robert (1767–87) took part in the naval Battle of the Saintes (1782), where Lord Rodney won over the French fleet, restoring British naval supremacy in the West Indies. Robert’s stories ‘about Rodney’s battles and the haunted keys of the West Indies’ inspired many passages in *The Pirate* (1821).20 Daniel (1776–1806), the ‘black sheep’ of the family, died after returning from a voyage to Jamaica, where he had been sent, thanks to Scott’s connections, to make a new life. Here, ‘ordered to subdue a revolt among a band of rebellious Negroes’, as Edgar Johnson informs us, ‘he showed the white feather and was dismissed in disgrace’. He returned home to die, and Scott refused to attend his funeral suffering, in later years, a sense of guilt for turning his shoulders to his youngest and frail brother.21 One is left to

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18 Whyte, p. 88.
wonder whether the source of Scott’s intense shame was merely confined to his brother’s cowardice, or was possibly amplified by its dark colonial context.

Scott would have been definitely too young to form an opinion on the momentous 1778 Knight v Wedderburn case, where Joseph Knight, an African slave, was granted the freedom to leave the employment of his Scottish master, John Wedderburn, in the Court of Session, Scotland's supreme civil court.\(^{22}\) However, other crucial moments of the national debate on slavery unfolded in his lifetime. William Wilberforce (1759–1833), for example, was his contemporary, and Scott witnessed his long battle, culminated in the 1807 Parliamentary abolition of the slave trade, and leading ultimately to the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. We know that Wilberforce admired and was inspired by Scott’s works,\(^ {23}\) and we also know that the two men had a pleasant dinner in Battersea Rise in February 1821.\(^ {24}\) Scott died in 1832, in the same year when Scottish advocate and historian Archibald Alison (1792–1867) issued a dramatic warning to the UK on the catastrophic consequences of abolishing slavery.\(^ {25}\)

On a global level, the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), often described as the largest and most successful slave rebellion, led by former slave Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743–1803), was an event that shook France, whose colonial power was for the first time overturned from the inside, and the whole Western world. Given Scott’s interest in French history, and in particular in the French Revolution

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\(^{22}\) See ‘Feature: Slavery, freedom or perpetual servitude? – the Joseph Knight case’, The National Archives of Scotland [http://www.nas.gov.uk/about/071022.asp] [accessed 3 December 2017].


\(^{25}\) Catherine Hall, “‘The Most Unbending Conservative in Britain’: Archibald Alison and Pro-Slavery Discourse”, in *Recovering Scotland’s Slavery Past*, pp. 206–24.
(whose principles had inspired the slave rebels), one would imagine this was an event that troubled Scott, as much as it affected the larger public.

Rare references to the contemporary reality of the West Indies do appear in Scott’s letters, accompanied by little or no detail — evocations of a reality that did not require much explanation, and with which his correspondents were already acquainted. He informs Miss Seward, for example, that Mrs Jackson’s ‘sons are prospering in the West Indies’, but worries at the thought that his son Walter might have to travel there. Elsewhere, he evokes the unfavourable conditions of life in the Caribbean by describing a heat wave at Abbotsford as ‘West Indian’, ‘exceeding in oppression anything which I ever felt’. Scott indeed does not differ substantially in his use of colonial clichés from many of his contemporaries. The few references to the West Indies, however, always imply an extreme situation — extreme wealth, extreme danger, extreme heat. There is no room for ‘normality’.

The Caribbean does occupy a place of prominence in Scott’s ambitious account of Scotland’s history, Tales of a Grandfather (1828–31), which contains his most extended discussion of Scottish-Caribbean colonial relations. Scott offers here a detailed account of ‘the disastrous history of the Darien colony’ and of the complex political and economic reasons that bring this venture to failure. The focus is firmly patriotic and Scoto-centric (that is, concerned with the welfare and future of Scotland as a nation), and colonial — Darien is the ‘Other place’, a mere ‘object’ of conquest, and unredeemably so.

Literary silences

‘History is what hurts’, according to Fredric Jameson, who challenged postructuralist theories of History-as-text by pointing out that even though History is an absent cause, its painful consequences can be felt in the present. History is then for Jameson not simply a process that we can recount, but also a limit, or a consequence that we inevitably feel and experience. In my investigation of the gaps and silences in Scott’s oeuvre in reference to Caribbean slavery I propose to follow an eclectic method, focusing both on pragmatic/narratological theories of silence, or the ‘unnarratable’, and on sociological/cultural investigations of collective remembering and forgetting, especially in relation to traumatic historical events. I also intend to borrow and adapt Jameson’s idea of History as something that cannot be entirely organized into a narrative, as an open wound that defies words.

The idea that a conscious silence within an utterance (be it common speech or historical narrative) may bear meaning and become a ‘metaphor for communication’ has emerged in the past two decades across a vast body of scholarship. Silence in fact occupies a position at the crossroads of ‘diverse communicative phenomena: linguistic, discoursal, literary, social, cultural, spiritual and meta-communicative’, and studies on silence have inevitably developed in an interdisciplinary direction. In what follows, I will briefly discuss some of the concepts that I intend to deploy to frame Scott’s literary silences.

32 Ibid, pp. 3–14 (p. 3).
In a pragmatic framework, long silences, produced consciously, ‘acquire meaning from their particular position, length, etc. And on the other, cast light on the verbal utterance produced’: a deliberate abstention from talk in a conversation may either signal consideration for the interlocutor or, on the opposite, hostility. Remaining silent can thus ‘be a manifestation of either negative, positive or off-record politeness’. Silence, then, functions like speech, insofar as it ‘enables people to communicate both polite and impolite messages’. However, ‘it is not talk or silence per se which lead to such implications’, but rather ‘the absence of what is conventionally anticipated’.

Along similar lines, theories of narrative have investigated gaps and silences as an author’s conscious strategy to imply without saying — to gesture towards the object of a text’s avoidances and unstated assumptions. Investigations of the unnarratable in fiction have highlighted how literary silences can be rife with meaning. Gerald Prince, for example, introduced the concept of the ‘disnarrated’, as a category of the unnarratable, to describe specifically ‘all the events that do not happen though they could have and are nonetheless referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text’. Among recent theorisations, Robyn R. Warhol, in her development of Prince’s concepts, identifies four categories of the unnarratable: the ‘subnarratable’, unworthy of narration; the ‘supranarratable’, that which defies narrative, the ineffable; the ‘antinarratable’, violating social conventions; the ‘paranarratable’,

34 Sifianou, pp. 63–84 (p. 72).
35 Ibid., pp. 63–84 (p. 79).
transgressing the laws of a specific literary genre. 37 Warhol focuses especially on the last two categories as more problematic, and points out how they may generate two different types of literary silences: a truly complete absence of information as opposed to an inexplicit presence. Warhol also observes how the laws of literary conventions seem more inflexible than laws of social convention and ‘have led throughout literary history to more instances of unnarratability than even taboo has led’. 38 She also usefully points out how an author’s conscious silences may be interpreted pragmatically as a form of ‘politeness’ — a desire to meet the reader’s expectations that plays a central role in the choice to include or exclude specific subjects or information. Indeed, as Ruth Rosaler has more recently observed, ‘authors’ writings are likely to be affected by their perceptions of what they think their audience will approve’. 39

Rosalier further develops the notion of disnarration by introducing the concept of ‘implicature’ — ‘a deliberate refusal of explicitness’ that can characterize fiction, a way of communicating ‘narrative propositions without explicitly stating them’. 40 Implicature does not simply describe lack of information, but identifies a ‘conspicuous silence’, which acquires and generates meaning through the interaction of text and context, and represents a form of communication in its own right, placing ‘more emphasis on the listener’s powers of inference than on his or her ability to decipher the information linguistically encoded in the utterance’. 41 Implicature, then,

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40 Rosaler, p. 2.
41 Rosaler, p. 3.
allows a writer to ‘narrate implicitly rather than explicitly’, thus ‘maintaining presentational politeness while discussing an impolite topic’, and can be realized through a number of textual strategies, from allusions to symbols, from metaphors to negative statements, or by implicitly communicating knowledge or feelings that are shared by writer and reader, but of which characters are unconscious or only partly conscious.

Finally, substantial scholarship focusing on the political, ideological, and psychological forces producing literary silences has been produced in the fields of postcolonial, trauma, and holocaust studies in the past two decades or so. At the crossroads of these fields, silences and gaps in narratives of Atlantic slavery have also received special attention. From abolitionist descriptions, slave memoirs, planters’ journals or travellers’ accounts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the many recuperative fictional narratives written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, accounts of Atlantic slavery are deeply haunted by the unsaid and the unsayable. Silences may be produced by the impossibility to convey the deeply traumatic experience of slavery and/or by the limitations posed by a white readership in the case of slave narratives, by a reluctance to come to terms with the historical responsibilities of slavery in the case of planters’ journals and travellers’ accounts, or by an internalized apprehension about disclosing shocking details and of offending one's audience in the case of abolitionist literature. Silences may also become a conscious and powerful mnemonic tool in the hands of modern and contemporary writers that trace and decode them in eighteenth and nineteenth century narratives, in order to re-create

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42 Rosaler, p. 63.
the suppressed texts and concealed stories in their works.43

**The Caribbean in Scott’s fiction: invisible maps of meaning**

There is a conspicuous imbalance between what Scott evidently knew about his fellow countrymen’s long-standing involvement in the colonization of the Caribbean, from the Darien scheme onwards, and the place that the reality of slavery and Caribbean colonialism occupies in his literary work. Such gap may be explainable by the fact that the Caribbean connection was a subject that neither belonged to a remote and sealed past, nor fitted into the ‘‘tis sixty years since’ formula of shortest safe distance from the facts narrated, but that instead extended controversially and troublingly into the present. This, however, can only work as a partial explanation, since Scott does indeed engage with the history and progress of empire, and on the entanglements of nationalism and imperialism in the nineteenth century. Ian Duncan agrees with Martin Green in saying that Scott should be identified as the father of ‘imperial romance’, and argues that while he ‘made the internal imperial formation of the modern secular national state his great theme, the canonical topic of “history”’, the Waverley novels also provide a pioneering representation ‘of the imperial matter of military and commercial penetration outside the national boundaries of European civilisation’.44 References to colonial realities surface in several novels by Scott, either as ‘casual’ terms of comparison, as in *Waverley* (1814), where Highlanders are compared to ‘American Indians’, ‘Esquimaux’ and ‘African Negroes’, or as more complex representations, as in *Guy Mannering* (1815) and in *The Surgeon's

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Daughter (1827), that engage with the experience of empire in India. While Scott’s main concern is always national (British and/ or Scottish) history, it is correct to state that for him history is, ‘to a great extent, the story of how Britain comes to manage the legacies of those other worlds’ — indeed, in Andrew Lincoln’s words ‘Scott’s work […] suggests that nations and empires are manifestation of the same process of political and cultural consolidation’.

Given the central role played by the imperial theme in Scott’s historical fiction, and the historical and economic relevance of the Caribbean connection, it seems all the more striking that he avoided to engage with it in any substantial way. There is an evident difference, for example, in substance and length, between the detailed account of the colonial reality of the East Indies in Guy Mannering, and the fleeting and elliptical reference to Glasgow’s West Indian source of wealth in Rob Roy (1817) — Scott’s most ‘radical’ reference to Scotland’s colonial exploitation of the Caribbean colonies. The East Indian connection, well visible and explicit in Scott’s oeuvre, has solicited an investigation of Scott’s understanding of India, a country he had not visited but that had nonetheless attracted his attention and kindled his imagination. The few passages in Rob Roy that evoke the West Indies, and that will be analysed further on, have, unsurprisingly, invited so

far only a few considerations on the reasons for Scott’s ‘deeply ingrained reticence’ in the context of the recent re-assessment of Caribbean-Scottish relations, more as an example of Scotland’s ‘willing amnesia’, than as critically relevant material.

There are, however, at least two reasons why Scott’s reticence should be considered more carefully — more carefully than I myself did in my ‘Acts of (Un)willed Amnesia’ chapter. One is more general, and pertains the meaningfulness of conscious literary silences, especially in relation to traumatic/shameful contexts, as discussed in the previous section. The second pertains Scott’s complex approach to writing and his metanarrative and metalinguistic concerns. These have been recently explored by Alison Lumsden, who has pointed out how Scott’s creativity has ‘at its very heart an awareness of the limits (and problematics) of language as a tool for communication’. Such awareness, according to Lumsden, generates a distinctive anxiety, often surfacing in Scott’s writing, in relation to the possibility of recovering the past. ‘The unreliable and slippery nature of language’, in fact, prevents meaning from being tied to — or closed by — the speaking or writing subject, and thus hinders historical construction. It is within this metalinguistic uneasiness that silence takes on a ‘compensative’ and communicative role in Scott’s poetry and fiction. Lumsden observes how ‘silence, or what might be called “negative narration,” can be found throughout Scott’s earlier work’. In The Lady of the Lake (1810), for example, the whole plot appears to rely ‘upon what is not

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49 Sassi, pp. 131–98 (p. 146).
51 Lumsden, p. 96.
said rather than what is said’.\textsuperscript{52} In later works, the use of silence takes on even more extreme features, as in \textit{Peveril of the Peak} (1823), where ‘characters are repeatedly rendered speechless at key moments of crisis and conflict’. Here the author’s awareness ‘of the fissuring and distorting nature of language’ seems to lead to ‘a realisation that, at times of crisis, the only option available may, indeed, be silence’\textsuperscript{53}

In what remains of this essay, I shall explore Scott’s silence as a writer, as well as the silences enacted by implied authors and characters in his fiction. I will also try to set my investigation against a nineteenth-century ideological backdrop, taking into account readers’ expectations, writers’ concerns, genre demands/limitations, as well as genre insubordination, that is the possibility of overstepping conventions, by introducing new narratorial strategies leading to what Warhol calls a ‘neonarrative’\textsuperscript{54}

The first observation concerns the genre privileged (and shaped) by Scott, described by Ann Rigney as ‘hybrid’ — Scott’s brand of historical realism indeed ‘calls into question any easy separation of fictional narrative and historical fact, of invention and representation, at the same time as it suggests a certain tension between them’.\textsuperscript{55} That a conflict of, or a tension between discourses and genres is a distinctive trait of Scott’s fiction, has been reiterated by several scholars. Among these, Fiona Robertson, beside highlighting the complex interplay of styles and genres in Scott’s fiction, has also observed how a fluid authorial presence further complicates the narrative form — the ‘inbuilt plurality in the identity of the “Author of

\textsuperscript{52} Lumsden, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{53} Lumsden, p. 161.
\textsuperscript{54} Warhol, pp. 220–31 (p. 221).
Waverley’’ would be an example — and how his novels take on an extreme polyphonic form, through the continuous release of new voices, as well as of paratextual discourses.

A question we should ask ourselves at this point is: could this complexity have accommodated an openly critical representation of Caribbean slavery, if this had been — and quite obviously it was not — what Scott had at heart? The reply is in all probability no, not in the nineteenth century. Today, his novels’ polyphonic complexity and relativism represent an ideally sensitive instrument for the retrieval of the traumatic and fragmented memory of Atlantic slavery. Caryl Phillips’s Cambridge: a Novel (1991), for example, recounting the fictional story of an African slave in an eighteenth-century Caribbean plantation, owes a lot to Scott’s method — from its deployment of different, conflicting and intersecting voices, to its hybridisation of different genres and use of a paratextual apparatus. The problem here is rather that the distinctive features of Scott’s historical novel appear to be incompatible with the tenets of abolitionist literature (or indeed of any ‘propagandist’ literature), as it was defined in the second half of the eighteenth century in Britain. British abolitionism, voiced across different genres (novels, poetry, tracts, newspaper articles, journals, pamphlets, political speeches etc.), was in fact structured around a distinctive rhetoric of sensibility. Brycchan Carey has observed how ‘a number of loosely connected rhetorical tropes and arguments [was] available for the rhetorician to choose from when attempting to persuade an audience that a person or group of people are suffering and that that suffering should be diminished or relived entirely’. Abolitionist literature was then deeply animated by ‘a

belief in the power of sympathy to raise awareness of suffering, to change an audience’s view of that suffering, and to direct their opposition to it’.58 Within this context, it would be unproductive to adopt a black and white perspective in assessing Scott’s work, and to equate simplistically his silence to a downright acceptance of the practice of slavery.

There are, in fact, specific ways in which Scott’s texts engage with Caribbean history, which is worth addressing. Direct references to the Caribbean — as a land of adventure and opportunity, of plentiful natural resources, of lawless buccaneers, of unnamed threats and horrors, and as the theatre of colonial conflicts and naval wars — surface, almost unnoticeable, throughout Scott’s literary work. Such references may be regarded as little more than an evanescent series of fleeting, apparently accidental allusions — they are never the central object of the narration, and represent, at best, a second-degree subtext. And yet, their sum, in a macro-textual perspective, evokes a subtle filigree — a cryptic map of the ‘West Indian’ connection that is very much in line with colonial discourses at Scott’s time.

The poem ‘Rokeby’ (1813) provides an interesting illustration of this. Set in England, at Rokeby Park in County Durham, during the Civil War (1642–1651) just after the Parliamentarian victory at Marston Moor (1644), its plot is advanced through the clash between Parliamentarian Oswald Wycliffe and Royalist Lord Rokeby. Among the characters, both Philip Mortham, a former associate of Oswald Wycliffe, and the villainous Bertram Risingham have returned as rich men after a spell of piracy in the Caribbean. The poem discloses glimpses of the violent, dark, and adventurous life of buccaneers, while a rich series of notes in the ‘Appendix’ provide a structured and detailed account of legal and technical aspects related to piracy in the

58 Carey, p. 2.
Caribbean in a historical perspective. Susan Oliver, inquiring into Scott’s choice of ‘a tale of buccaneers and their plunder, and of the bringing home of experience gained from encounters with native Americans, at this particular point in his writing career’, has observed that ‘Scott's characterization of Risingham is unmistakably anxious, for the latter's devious nature (we learn late in the poem that in his youth he was a Borders reiver, or cattle rustler) has been exaggerated as a result of his foreign experiences’. Risingham’s ferocious nature is indeed presented by Scott as the outcome of his ‘going native’, of embracing the ways of ‘Caribbean and American Indians’. I wish to suggest that a possible way of interpreting both the choice of this subject, and its ‘anxious’ framing, is that of treating them as the outcome of a conspicuous ‘implicature’ — a refusal to engage with the anti-narratable, that is with the horrors of slavery, still practiced in the Caribbean at the time of writing the poem, and under growing political and social pressure after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. The buccaneers’ dark world of the seventeenth century, marginally evoked in the poem, would then act as a metonymic gesture towards a closer, unnameable reality, well-known to both writer and reader. Furthermore, the hybrid form of ‘Rokeby’, split between poetic text and denotative paratext, may suggest a paranarratable plot closure, exposing the limitations of the long poem to articulate by itself the repressed history of violent colonial encounter.

The inexplicit presence of Caribbean slavery is nowhere closer to an actual presence than in Rob Roy. Set around the time of the 1715 Jacobite rising, and developing across four ‘regions’ — London, Northumberland, Glasgow and the Scottish Highlands — this is a novel that engages with the

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60 Ibid, 15–35 (pp. 24–25).
complexities of the United Kingdom at the dawn of Union but also with the unsettling realities of the expanding Empire. The historical context invoked by the novel is closely and directly connected, politically and economically, to that in which Scott lived. As Ian Duncan has argued, in Rob Roy ‘historical romance [is] a medium for viewing, not the past, but the unrecognizable forms of the present’.61 This is also a novel haunted by a deep sense of anxiety that remains unredeemed to the end — from the protagonist and narrator’s sense of guilt and inadequacy (Frank Osbaldistone is indeed ‘frank’/ ‘honest’, but largely unable to trace and convey information reliably), to the many dark, gothic happenings that take centre-stage and remain troublingly unsolved.62 It is Frank that introduces the West Indian theme, by offering insight into the recent origins of Glasgow’s present affluence: ‘the Union had, indeed, opened to Scotland the trade of the English colonies’, Frank observes, and the ‘immense fabric of commercial prosperity’ witnessed by Scott’s contemporaries depended on ‘an extensive and increasing trade with the West Indies and American colonies’.63 Frank elides Caribbean slavery from the enticing picture of Glasgow’s growing prosperity: his mention of the West Indies can thus be considered as a subtle implicature — he leaves to the reader the not-so-difficult task of fill in the missing information. More meaningful, however, are the elisions enacted by Glasgow magistrate and merchant Nicol Jarvie, whose confidence in the progressive and prosperous future brought about by the imperial enterprise, pragmatism, and competence in the matters of law and commerce make him a much more reliable source of factual information

63 Walter Scott, Rob Roy ed. by David Hewitt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 155. For a more articulated commentary on this passage, see Sassi, pp.131–98 (pp. 146–47), and Morris, ‘Yonder Awa’, pp. 41–61 (pp. 42–43).
than Frank. Not only does he omit reference to Caribbean slavery, but he suppresses — twice, in the course of the novel — the name of the region where this takes place, ‘euphemizing’ the West Indies into a vague direction in space — ‘west-awa’ yonder’ and ‘yonder awa’’. As Morris has pointed out, Jarvie almost slips into a direct mention of slavery at least once, when, celebrating the quality of a West Indian liquor, he observes that ‘good ware has aften come frae a wicked market’. Morris observes that here ‘contemporary readers would be likely to hear the echo of the apology for slavery — the needs justifies the means’, and that indeed, slavery ‘hangs like a shadow over the scene, present only in the readers’ knowledge of historical context’. It is worthwhile to further interrogate the structure and function of Jarvie’s implicatures. The first (‘yonder awa’) clearly elides euphemistically a name that for Jarvie is evocative of, or metonymically contiguous to, something shameful or embarrassing. There is of course no specific need to suppress the name of the ‘West Indies’, which is actually used by the narrator in the same passages. The only plausible function of the euphemism here seems to be that of highlighting and making visible the moral friction that is the source of Jarvie’s embarrassment — the fact that slavery may be regarded as acceptable, but certainly not morally commendable. Seen in this light, the euphemism can be seen as a form of gentle indictment of Jarvie’s hypocrisy. The second implicature goes in the same direction, and further foregrounds the ambiguity of Jarvie’s moral stance: while many readers, and in all probability Scott himself, subscribed to the magistrate’s ruthlessly pragmatic philosophy, the friction between the pleasure of drinking that ‘excellent liquor’ and the ‘wicked’ practice behind

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64 *Rob Roy* ed. by David Hewitt, p. 205, 221.
65 Ibid., p. 205.
66 Morris, ‘Yonder Awa’, pp. 41–61 (p. 43)
it is nonetheless exposed. Scott’s silence, even in this case, is a complex one, and reveals a more nuanced stance than a firmly pro- or anti-slavery one.

In the relatively few references to the Caribbean in Scott’s fiction, the most recurrent allusion is that to a place of darkness and danger. ‘My uncle is the best man in the world, and in his way the kindest; but rather than hear any more about that cursed *phoca* [‘seal’], as he’s pleased to call it, I would exchange for the West Indies, and never see his face again’,67 mutters Hector McIntyre, the Antiquary’s nephew in the eponymous novel (1816). As a captain engaged in the war in Flanders, his ironic suggestion that the Anglo-French naval conflict in the Caribbean (culminating with the victory of Britain in 1794) would represent a lighter option than his uncle’s company in fact reinforces the stereotypical idea of the West Indies as a hellish world — a cliché shared by Scott and his readers. What actually makes the Caribbean a fearful destination, even for a soldier, is figured here (and in several other examples across Scott’s work) as the antinarratable — as belonging beyond the bounds of what can be represented and said. The horror is here actually neutralised or deferred by the ironic inversion — a sort of narrative exorcism.

A similar association, more tied to the advancement of the plot and thus more consequential, but not less cryptic, can be traced in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (1818), where the villain, George Staunton, the son of the Rector of Willingham, is born in the West Indies. His childhood story is briefly but meaningfully evoked by the narrator:

> The father of George Staunton had been bred a soldier, and during service in the West Indies, had married the heiress of a wealthy planter. By this lady he had an only child, George Staunton, the

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unhappy young man who has been so often mentioned in this narrative. He passed the first part of his early youth under the charge of a doting mother, and in the society of negro slaves, whose study it was to gratify his every caprice. His father was a man of worth and sense; but as he alone retained tolerable health among the officers of the regiment he belonged to, he was much engaged with his duty.68

It is of course striking that the narrator chooses to qualify the limitations of Mrs Staunton as a mother, but remains silent as to the nature of the ‘negro’ slaves’ negative influence on the boy’s personality. This is only implied by the narrator, unsayable, and yet ‘known’ to (or rather imaginable by) Scott’s readers. Within the same silent ‘complicity’ between writer and reader, it is also possible to locate Mrs Staunton’s personality — as a member of the plantation society, she appears as a gentler offshoot of the same, wider moral degradation. Her (moral) weakness as a mother is in fact pitted against her husband’s soldierly and ‘rational’ solidity: his ‘tolerable health’, in the context of a highly unhealthy climate (and social milieu) may indeed symbolize his distance from and resistance to a world he inhabits but he does not belong to. Scott’s recurrent father-son theme takes on here, then, a specific colonial and Caribbean colouring. The antinarratable seems to shade over into the paranarratable, as the historical romance itself appears not to be able to accommodate any further representation of and comment on the Caribbean plantation world. Interestingly, however, later on, some insight into Atlantic slavery is indeed offered by the narrator, who this time describes it and denounces it, deploying the framework of a typically nineteenth-century discourse of sympathy, making extensive use of that

language of feeling\textsuperscript{69} that in the same period permeated abolitionist discourse. The episode in question concerns the shady dealings of Donacha dhu na Dunaigh, a bandit and a trafficker in human beings, in the troubled times about 1745. ‘Black Duncan’ is a man ‘to whom no act of mischief was unknown’ and is ‘occasionally an agent in a horrible trade then carried on betwixt Scotland and America, for supplying the plantations with servants, by means of \textit{kidnapping}, as it was termed, both men and women, but especially children under age’\textsuperscript{70} While Scott’s fiction includes passionate and open indictments of the practice of slavery — from \textit{Ivanhoe} (1820) to \textit{The Talisman} (1825) — all at a safe remove, geographically or chronologically, from the contemporary Caribbean scene, \textit{Heart of Mid-Lothian} is unique in accommodating these two very different approaches to two almost identical aspects of the same system of exploitation.

\textbf{Conclusion}

While ongoing historical research may reveal further intersections between Scott and the Caribbean, what we can infer from the nuanced silences in his fictional writings — more, in fact, than those I have been able to discuss in the present essay — is nonetheless very valuable. These reveal a complex and fluid ‘map’, straddling across the conventional categories of anti- or pro-abolitionist literature of the time. Scott himself seemed to inhabit, like many of his contemporaries, a ‘grey’ area, between a degree of abhorrence for what could not but be considered as an inhumane practice, and a pragmatic attachment to the economic and political certainties of imperial politics. It is not his personal stance — not commendable, for sure — that makes his work


\textsuperscript{70} \textit{The Heart of Mid-Lothian}, p. 463.
relevant in a Caribbean-Scottish studies perspective. Nor what he tells about the West Indian world can strike us as original and innovative. His silences, however, complex at least as his polyphonic, uneasy narratives, tell us of social and literary conventions in the nineteenth century, and usefully point to their contradictions, ambiguities and hybridities. They also speak of that History that, in Jameson’s words, ‘hurts’, as shame, fear, anger, or trauma, that cannot be entirely organized into a narrative, and that yet seeks and demands expression.