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Malcolm Scott, *Chateaubriand: The Paradox of Change*. Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2015. vi + 216 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$57.95 U.S. (pb and ed). ISBN 978-3-0343-1845-7.

Review by Andrew J. Counter, New College, Oxford.

In introducing this, the twenty-fifth volume of Lang's series on "Romanticism and after in France," Malcolm Scott makes two distinct claims for his book. The first is that it presents "A New Approach" (p. 2); the second is that it is "an *intellectual* biography" (p. 14). In the latter aim it is broadly successful, and, above all, worth reading. I shall come to this presently. In the former, however, the book falls rather short of its own rhetoric.

Scott begins by casting a rueful eye over the *état présent* of Chateaubriand studies. Chateaubriand's place in the pantheon, Scott alleges, has lately been compromised by a lack of critical attention: "the regular supply of lifeblood [i.e. critical monographs] necessary to refresh his standing seemed until quite recently to have dried up" (p. 1). The querulous might wonder whether an author's diminished "standing" doesn't in fact *cause* a decline in scholarly attention rather than vice versa (whether, indeed, the two are not basically the same thing), but this would be to miss the larger point: the hyperbole of Scott's depiction of the field. To be sure, Scott hails the appearance of two French-language biographies—Ghislain de Diesbach's in 1995, and Jean-Claude Berchet's surely definitive masterpiece in 2012—and rightly laments that neither has (yet) been translated into English, leaving the exclusively Anglophone public reliant on George Painter's incomplete 1977 offering.[1] Yet if what is at issue is Chateaubriand's scholarly standing, then the language of publication seems less important (scholars of French literature presumably read French...), and—when work in French and English is tallied as a whole—the situation is far less dire than Scott suggests. No one would deny that Chateaubriand's popularity among literary scholars has declined somewhat since the 1980s; this, indeed, is a fate he shares with Romanticism in general. But the idea that "no book of substance has attempted to embrace the work as a whole since those of Pierre Barbéris and Pierre Clarac, published in 1974 and 1975 respectively" (p. 2) ignores—to name but two—Marc Fumaroli's *Chateaubriand: poésie et terreur* (2003) and Berchet's hugely rewarding collection of essays, *Chateaubriand ou les aléas du désir* (2012);[2] while the suggestion that the most recent articles in English that may be read "with profit" are those of Donald Charlton and Diana Knight (1969 and 1983) seems eccentric to say the least.[3]

This rhetoric matters, first, because it is symptomatic of a pressure many of us now feel to situate our work as filling a "gap" in an imaginary "market," and second because it exerts a distorting effect on Scott's presentation of his own contribution and its originality and thereby risks obscuring its merits. Attributing Chateaubriand's relative literary eclipse to an assumption among scholars that "there was, and is, nothing new to say" (rather than to the fickleness of literary taste, which seems a more likely culprit), Scott finds that what is needed is "a new approach," which would involve identifying "an area . . . on which previous books have not focused, but which is important enough to sustain a fresh reading of the author's work as a whole" (p. 2). The area Scott settles on is the theme of "change," of which term Scott concedes: "This might seem at first glance to be a very simple concept on which to base a new study of so complex a writer" (p. 2). But this would not be my worry. If anything, the concept seems too

broad and nebulous to effect a meaningful selection within the work (what literary text *doesn't* have to say something about change?); and, more importantly, the idea of change seems too fundamental for this really to be the missing “new approach” that will revivify the flagging field of Chateaubriand studies. This double suspicion is confirmed a couple of pages later, when Scott argues for the primacy of his chosen theme: “Change—as a verb (*changer*) in all its forms and conjugations, or as a noun, *changement*, or in synonymous terms like *modification* or *transformation*, and finally through the word that signals the radical escalation of change, *revolution*—is *the* most frequent linguistic and thematic reference to be found in his work” (p. 5). It seems hardly surprising that such an expansive nebula of related terms should be a frequent—even “*the* most frequent”—reference point in an author’s work; and to the extent that one of the lexical avatars of “change” is “revolution,” it is hard indeed to see how the theme can be called unexplored—revolution having been just as arguably the most frequent linguistic and thematic reference to be found in work *on* Chateaubriand, as in the work *of* Chateaubriand. Consequently, the sections of the book that deal with this aspect of the theme seem weirdly divorced from the rich critical conversation on Chateaubriand’s experience of, and attitudes towards, the political upheavals of his lifetime, while the notes and bibliography are remarkably sparse in their reference to the work of other critics.

Towards the end of his introduction, however, Scott takes a rather different tack: “The chapters that follow, although not intended to amount to a biography in the traditional sense, . . . will refer to episodes in [Chateaubriand’s] life and times, because it was the impact of events, situations, encounters with people and places that triggered his endless reflections on change. His thought and his writings remain the main focus of what is offered here as an *intellectual* biography of the writer . . .” (p. 14). Now to propose an intellectual biography is an altogether more modest ambition than to create a new approach, and it is in this endeavor that the book’s true strength lies. When considered in these terms, indeed, the “change” theme itself becomes more helpful—no longer a dubiously original fundamental category of analysis, but rather a loose structuring idea around which a broadly (if not exactly) chronological account of Chateaubriand’s life and work can be organized. One understanding of “change” takes on a very particular importance in this regard: that of “revision.” To read a work of Chateaubriand—be it *René* or *Les Natchez*, the *Essai sur les révolutions* or the memoirs—is always to read a palimpsest, for in Scott’s words, Chateaubriand was constantly “revising and altering” his texts, “often over many years, and transferring whole sections of text from one work to another as his perception changed, in a changed context, of the rightness or wrongness . . . of what he had originally written” (p. 3). Scott promises that “particular attention will be paid in the course of this book to the dating of the extracts quoted, and to the significance of textual modification,” and sure enough, he is utterly scrupulous in this regard. His analysis helpfully separates the chronological layers of Chateaubriand’s works, identifying with precision both innocuous alterations and those more tendentious moments, especially common in the political writings, when revision becomes revisionism.

The primary thread of the book, then, is Chateaubriand’s maturing intellectual personality and his developing worldview. In chapters covering his revolutionary experience, his exile, his flirtation with the Empire, his political career under the Restoration, and so on, Scott tracks a changeable man through ever-changing circumstances. Chateaubriand’s attitude to change, Scott notes, was one of “radical pessimism” (p. 8), influenced, one supposes, by his early readings of Rousseau; indeed, for Chateaubriand, the historical model of change was the Fall of Man, and “la nature a changé depuis la chute de notre premier père” (p. 11).<sup>[4]</sup> In this respect, Chateaubriand stands apart from his putative literary progeny, the Romantics: Chateaubriand “writes of change more penetratingly than his successors, because, while for them, it was an aesthetic fancy, for him it was a living nightmare” (p. 118). On the one hand, this distinction begins to give a sense of what is meant by the “paradox” of change identified in Scott’s title: Chateaubriand is a great writer of change precisely by virtue of his pointedly ambivalent personal feelings about it. On the other, Scott uses this “off-message” attitude towards change as a helpful starting point from which to rearticulate the reasons critics should handle the “Romantic” label with caution where Chateaubriand is concerned, beyond his own often stated

queasiness about it. Though widely identified in survey courses and readers as a founding figure in French Romanticism, Chateaubriand was, Scott argues, a Romantic “unconsciously or . . . accidentally” (p. 12). Yet by intellectual sensibility he was something quite different: Scott’s valuable sixth chapter, “Classical Preference,” makes clear how deeply invested Chateaubriand really was in Classical subjects and seventeenth-century literary models, and ends by drawing attention to a particularly telling moment of revisionism, this time in the domain of aesthetics. In a passage of the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* revised in 1846, Chateaubriand describes his friend Fontanes’s reaction upon hearing a first draft of *Les Natchez* as one of uncomprehending rapture and admiration before the birth in Chateaubriand’s own person of “l’école dite romantique.” In fact, Fontanes had found the work’s manner not to his liking, and suggested classicizing revisions that Chateaubriand duly and even eagerly implemented—with what Scott considers (and one is not inclined to disagree) disastrous results for the finished work (pp. 146-47).<sup>[5]</sup> Yet what is most fascinating about this episode of “meta-re-writing” is that, even as it arouses our suspicion of hastily applied critical labels, it confirms the irreducible importance of those labels to Chateaubriand, and to his later readers.

At its best, then, Scott’s book offers a series of nuanced and sensitive readings of individual texts, deftly situating them within Chateaubriand’s evolving corpus and bringing to light their internal genetic instability. It also supplies a usefully succinct—and skeptical—account of Chateaubriand’s grand political journey to liberalism and even republicanism. If its opening framing, which returns only very briefly in the final pages, promises more than the book can deliver, this does not diminish its usefulness to scholars eager to participate in the ongoing critical conversation about this sublimely Protean author.

#### NOTES

[1] See Ghislain de Diesbach, *Chateaubriand* (Paris: Perrin, 1995); and Jean-Claude Berchet, *Chateaubriand* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

[2] Marc Fumaroli, *Chateaubriand: poésie et terreur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); Jean-Claude Berchet, *Chateaubriand ou les aléas du désir* (Paris: Belin, 2012).

[3] Scott refers to Donald Charlton, “The Ambiguity of Chateaubriand’s *René*,” *French Studies*, 23 (1969): 229-43; and Diana Knight, “The Readability of René’s Secret,” *French Studies*, 37 (1983): 35-46. An MLA Bibliography search limited to articles on Chateaubriand in English since 1990 yields seventy hits. But again, scholars are presumably also able to read the 237 articles in French listed for the same period by, among others, Pierre Glaudes, Fabienne Bercegol, Jean-Marie Roulin, Arlette Michel and Jean-Claude Berchet.

[4] Citing François-René de Chateaubriand, *Essai sur les Révolutions, Génie du christianisme*, ed. by Maurice Regard (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 484.

[5] Citing François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, 2 vols, ed. by Maurice Levaillant (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), vol. 1, p. 390.

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