

SCOTT'S POETIC PHASE

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WE have for so long been accustomed to think of Scott as a writer of prose and of Burns as a writer of poetry that we lose sight of the fact that Scott was the author of some of the most beautiful verse in our language, and Burns of some of the most interesting and idiomatic prose. Well indeed may we think of Scott as a prose writer when the quantity of his prose is so vast—twenty-five long novels, not to speak of tales and essays, of the *Tales of a Grandfather*, of *Demonology and Witchcraft*, of an edition of Dryden, of the Life of Swift, of the Life of Napoleon; in the words of his Dominie, "Prodigious!"—and it *was* amazing. Doubtless had each sentence been as carefully worded as one of Macaulay's, such an output would have been impossible. But Scott is more readable than many writers of much more compact prose. In truth, however, we ought not to think of him as only the novelist, seeing that he wrote so much verse and not a little tender, dignified, stirring, vivid and musical poetry.¹ Popular appreciation of his poetry has certainly undergone a change within the hundred and fifteen years or so since his poems were first given to the public. The success of the longer narrative poems, *The Lady of the Lake*, *Marmion* and *The Lord of the Isles*, regarded merely from the monetary standpoint was very remarkable. But it is notorious that the change which has overtaken the popular "taste" for Scott's poetry is as complete as it is disappointing.

In the headlong and aimless rush of modern life, people have now no leisure to read long rhymed romances. Descriptions of scenery have largely lost their interest because, since Scott's time, the scenery of nearly every part of the world has been fully described. Nevertheless, to many people the scenery of Scotland is as unfamiliar as that of Nicaragua, and to some people even to-day Edinburgh is no more than the name of a railway-station. Scott must be read in the appropriate emotional environment and in the proper state of mind—reverence for the past, love of Scotland, and a delight in linguistic beauty. Many readers have none of these.

In his own time, the brightness of Byron's poetical star outdazzled Scott's, but that is not the reason why Scott's poetry is not read to-day. The appreciation of pure verbal beauty is rapidly waning. But it is just the manner in which, for instance, the

1. Scott was the author of 9 long narrative poems, 7 translations from the German, 9 contributions to the "Minstrelsy of the Scottish border" and about 150 songs and "mottoes" from the novels.

story of Flodden and of Edinburgh before Flodden is told, that is of the essence of the enjoyment of Scott as a poet and as a poetical historian.

To those who desire to read subtle, involved, introspective, "psychological" poetry—prosodical philosophy in fact—the direct, simple, out-of-door Walter Scott does not appeal. There is a healthiness and a robustness in him which is antipodean to the subjective lucubrations of "modern" poets. Not that, when he wished, he could not write astutely of the inmost workings of the human mind and character. He could and did: here and there he astonishes us with his flashes of insight into the motives of people as remote from the life of a Scottish lawyer as nuns, mailed knights, warriors, and kings. But his pre-eminence is in the rôle of a descriptive poet, he is the bard of out-of-door Nature; and it is just this breezy and uncomplicated sort of thing which is voted "boring" by so many of those who to-day consider themselves the arbiters of taste in literature. The vast majority of modern readers have not even taken the trouble to weigh Scott in the balance and find him wanting; they simply damn him unheard and uninvestigated—a mental labour-saving device that cannot be improved upon. Scott may at times be dull, but he is never obscure. He is crisp and apt without the savagery of Byron or the terrific realism, the biting satire and the uproarious humour of Burns.

It would be shameful if it ever came to pass that for Britons, and most of all for Scotsmen, Sir Walter was thought to be speaking in an unknown tongue. Nay, rather, are we not forced to admit that although he was singing of his own dear land and his own romantic town, the sentiment is universal and the strains of his music immortal? In the realm he made his own, he is supreme.

Sir Walter's love of Edinburgh, his wonderful native city, is for ever finding expression throughout his writings. Again and again his affection for that picturesque and unique place gets the better of him. Two of the best known of these passages are in the Fourth Canto of *Marmion*.

In the first he apostrophizes the beautiful and at that time pastoral solitude of Blackford Hill—

Blackford! on whose uncultured breast
 Among the broom, and thorn and whin,
 A truant boy, I sought the nest,
 Or listed, as I lay at rest,
 While rose on breezes thin
 The murmur of the city crowd,
 And from his steeple, jangling loud
 Saint Giles's mingling din.

From this spot the reader is made to see Edinburgh through the eyes of Marmion,

And mark the distant city glow
 With gloomy splendour red,
 For on the smoke-wreaths huge and slow
 That round her sable turrets flow
 The morning beams were shed,
 And tinged them with a lustre proud
 Like that which streaks a thunder-cloud.
 Such dusky grandeur clothes the height
 Where the huge castle holds its state
 And all the steep slope down,
 Whose ridgy back heaves to the sky,
 Piled deep and massy close and high,
 Mine own romantic town!

These are the words of the lover lingering over the beloved object—the grand old city of storied Edinburgh in the morning light—and remembering that it was *his*!

But he gazes beyond the city across the broad estuary of the Forth to the hills on the northern shore. Here the light of the rising sun is not obscured by the smoke of the town, and so he says—

But northward far with purer blaze
 On Ochil mountains fall the rays,
 And, as each heathy top they kissed,
 It gleamed a purple amethyst.
 Yonder the shores of Fife you saw,
 Here Preston Bay and Berwick Law,
 And broad between them rolled
 The gallant Firth the eye might note
 Whose islands in its bosom float
 Like emeralds chas'd in gold.

The islands referred to are that chain which stretches from Queensferry to North Berwick—Inchgarvie, Cramond Island, Inchmickery, Inchcolme, May Island and the Bass Rock. These are places very familiar to every Edinburgh man, but Scott throws such a halo of beauty over them that we are almost prepared to believe they are “the isles of the blest.”

Vividness and joyousness are two outstanding features of his narrative poetry. Nothing could be more vivid or joyous than the stanzas in which he describes the voyage by the Western Isles to Lerwick in the sailing ship in which he spent some time as guest of the Commissioners of the Northern Lights—

Merrily, merrily bounds the bark,
 She bounds before the gale,
 The mountain breeze from Ben-na-darch
 Is joyous in her sail;
 With fluttering sound like laughter hoarse
 The cords and canvas strain,
 The waves divided by her force
 In rippling eddies chased her course
 As if they laughed again.
 Not down the breeze more lithely flew
 Skimming the wave, the light sea-mew
 Than the gay galley bore
 Her course upon that favouring wind,
 And Coolin's crest has sunk behind
 And Slapin's cavern'd shore.

Nothing could be more joyous and dainty, more truly descriptive of a sailing ship running before the wind; we can feel the breeze, we can hear the breeze, we can almost smell it.

Scott, a word-painter with a broad brush, is pre-eminently a poet of the open air. King Robert the Bruce is speaking, in description of the Isle of Skye:

The wildest glen but this, can show
 Some touch of Nature's genial glow;
 On high Ben More green mosses grow,
 And heath-bells bud in deep Glencoe
 And copse on Cruachan-Ben;
 But here—above, around, below,
 On mountain or in glen,
 Nor tree, nor shrub, nor plant nor flower
 Nor aught of vegetative power
 The weary eye may ken,
 For all is rocks at random thrown,
 Black waves, bare crags and banks of stone,
 As if were here denied
 The summer sun, the spring's sweet dew
 That clothe with many a varied hue
 The bleakest mountain side.
 The evening mists with ceaseless change
 Now clothed the mountain's lofty range,
 Now left their foreheads bare,
 And round their skirts their mantle furl'd
 Or on the sable waters curl'd
 Or on the eddying breezes whirl'd
 Dispersed in middle air,
 And oft condensed at once they lower .
 When brief and fierce the mountain shower
 Pours like a torrent down,
 And when return that sun's glad beams,
 Whitened with foam a thousand streams
 Leap from the mountain's crown.

If this is not to be called poetry, it is condensed, vivid and accurate descriptive writing in verse.

Scott in these romantic narrative poems is nothing if not vigorous. The description of the Battle of Bannockburn is given in a series of cantos which are models of terseness and martial energy. For instance, the single combat between Bruce and De Boune:

Onward the baffled warrior bore
 His course—but soon that course was o'er
 High in his stirrups stood the King
 And gave his battle-axe the swing,
 Right on De Boune the whiles he passed
 Fell that stern dint, the first—the last.
 Such strength upon the blow was put
 The helmet crashed like hazel-nut,
 The axe-shaft with its brazen clasp
 Was shivered to the gauntlet-grasp.
 Springs from the blow the startled horse,
 Drops to the plain the lifeless corse,
 First of that fatal field, how soon,
 How sudden fell the fierce De Boune.

Or the account of the Battle of Flodden in *Marmion* which closes with these lines—

Tradition, legend, time and song
 Shall many an age that wail prolong;
 Still from the sire the son shall hear
 Of the stern strife and carnage drear
 Of Flodden's fatal field,
 Where shivered was fair Scotland's spear
 And broken was her shield.

As in his novels, so in his poems, Scott's knowledge of topography and locale is perfectly amazing. He knows the history of every Lowland family and of every Highland clan. He is at home in every epoch of Scottish History; when did the busy lawyer have time to acquire it all?

Of the "Grandson of Lochiel, the valiant Fassiefern," he sings—

Through steel and shot he leads no more,
 Low laid mid friends' and foeman's gore,
 But long his native lake's wild shore
 And Sunart rough and high Ardgower
 And Morven long shall tell,
 And proud Ben Nevis hear with awe,
 How, upon bloody Quatre Bras,
 Brave Cameron heard the wild hurra
 Of conquest as he fell.

But, of course, Sir Walter could sing of other things than battles. He can give us gem-like miniatures perfect down to the smallest detail. Thus—

On fair Lock Ranza streamed the early day,
Thin wreaths of cottage-smoke are upwards curl'd
From the lone hamlet which her inland bay
And circling mountains sever from the world.
And there the fisherman his sail unfurl'd,
The goat-herd drove his kids to steep Ben-Ghoil,
Before the hut the dame her spindle twirl'd
Courting the sunbeam as she plied her toil—
For wake where'er he may, Man wakes to care and coil.

This is perfect, it needs no "setting," it is music itself, and in that it describes with perfect fidelity an actual scene, it is not merely sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. For Sir Walter Scott was "musical" in the sense that he enjoyed music and loved in particular the melodies of his native land.

I have elsewhere discussed this topic at some length.¹ Scott wrote some of the finest songs which have ever been supplied with music by the musicians of any country. Our difficulty is to choose examples. "Bonnie Dundee" will occur to everyone. Equally singable is "Jock o' Hazeldean" which was set to "A Border Melody" (1816)—

Now let this wilfu' grief be done
And dry that cheek so pale,
Young Frank is chief of Errington
And Lord of Langley Dale;
His step is first in peaceful ha',
His sword in battle keen—
But aye she loot the tears doon fa'
For Jock o' Hazeldean.

For vigour in rhythm nothing can surpass "The MacGregors' Gathering", also written in 1816 to be set to a particularly stirring Gaelic air, "Thain a Gregalach."

This superb song must be heard sung to be appreciated; the fifth verse is—

If they rob us of name and pursue us with beagles,
Give their roofs to the flame and their flesh to the eagles;
Then vengeance, vengeance, vengeance, Gregalach!

It is almost unbelievable that this terrific outburst was the composition of a lame Scottish lawyer who worked daily from ten till four in the "Parliament House."

In "Blue Bonnets over the Border," the tramp of armed men is heard in every line—

1. "Was Sir Walter Scott musical?" *Scottish Musical Magazine* Aug. 1930.

March, march Ettrick and Teviotdale;
 Why the deil dinna ye march forward in order?
 March, march Eskdale and Liddlesdale,
 All the Blue Bonnets are bound for the Border.
 Many a banner spread
 Flutters above your head,
 Many a crest that is famous in story,
 Mount and make ready then,
 Sons of the mountain glen,
 Fight for the Queen and our old Scottish glory.

(*The Monastery*, Chapter xxv)

Another spirited song is the well known "Lochinvar," Lady Heron's song in *Marmion*—

So faithful in love and so dauntless in war,
 There never was knight like the young Lochnivar.

Perhaps the most musical in rhythm of all Scott's songs is the glorious boat-song in *The Lady of the Lake* which begins—

Hail to the chief who in triumph advances,
 Honoured and blest be the ever-green pine!

The second verse is especially striking—

Ours is no sapling chance sown by the fountain,
 Blooming at Beltane, in winter to fade,
 When the whirlwind has stripped every leaf from the mountain,
 The more shall Clan Alpine exult in her shade.
 Moor'd in the rifted rock,
 Proof to the tempest's shock,
 Firmer he roots him, the ruder it blow,
 Menteith and Breadalbane, then,
 Echo his prize again,
 Roderigh, Vich Alpine dhu, ho, ieroe.

The last verse begins—

Row, vassals, row for the pride of the Highlands,
 Stretch to your oars for the evergreen pine.

This splendid song has, of course, long ago been set to appropriate music.

Another familiar ballad is Scott's "Hunting Song"—

Waken Lords and Ladies gay,
 On the mountain dawns the day.

A lyric with a sprightly lilt is a song in *Marmion* beginning—

Where shall the lover rest
Whom the fates sever
From his true maiden's breast
Parted for ever!
Where through groves deep and high
Sounds the far billow,
Where early violets die
Under the willow.

The little song sung by poor mad "Blanche of Deván" in *The Lady of the Lake*, has been set to a simple but exquisite air by Natale Corri. The first verse is—

They bid me sleep, they bid me pray,
They say my brain is warped and wrung,
I cannot sleep on Highland brae,
I cannot pray in Highland tongue;
But were I now where Allan glides
Or heard my native Devan's tides,
So sweetly would I rest and pray
That Heaven would close my wintry day.

There is insight into much sadness in these simple lines. A weird song with words in a curious metre is to be found in *The Heart of Midlothian*—

Proud Maisie is in the wood,
Walking so early,
Sweet Robin sits on the bush
Singing so rarely;
"Tell me, thou bonny bird,
When shall I marry me?—
When six braw gentlemen
Kirkward shall carry ye".
"Who makes the bridal bed,
Birdie, say truly?"—
"The grey-headed sexton
That delves the grave duly.
The glow worm o'er grave and stone
Shall light thee steady,
The owl from the steeple sing—
'Welcome, proud lady'."

These mournful words have been matched with a suitably mournful air.

A beautiful lyric, "One hour with thee" (in Chapter xxvi of *Woodstock*) will compare favourably with anything of its own, the sentimental, class in Burns. The last verse reads—

One hour with thee; when sun is set,
 Oh, what can teach me to forget
 The thankless labours of the day,
 The hopes, the wishes flung away
 The increasing wants, the lessening gains,
 The master's pride who scorns my pains?
 One hour with thee.

When Lord Byron's "Hebrew Melodies" appeared, they very properly called forth a chorus of praise, but we venture to argue that "Rebecca's Hymn" in *Ivanhoe* is as fine as the best of them.

When Israel of the Lord beloved,
 Out of the land of bondage came,

it begins; and it ends with this dignified and reverent stanza—

Our harps we left by Babel's streams,
 The tyrant's jest, the Gentile's scorn,
 No censer round her altar beams,
 And mute are timbrel, harp and horn.
 But Thou hast said, the blood of goat,
 The flesh of rams I will not prize;
 A contrite heart, a humble thought
 Are mine accepted sacrifice.

Scott is always dignified where dignity is expected. He can be light-hearted, but he is never frivolous; he can be merry, but he is never ribald. A mingling of dignity and tenderness suits him best, as in "The Harp of the North" in the Introduction to *The Lady of the Lake*—

Oh wake once more! how rude soe'er the hand
 That ventures o'er thy magic maze to stray,
 Oh, wake once more; though scarce my skill command
 Some feeble echoing of thine earlier lay:
 Though harsh and faint and soon to die away,
 And all unworthy of thy nobler strain:
 Yet if one heart throb higher at its sway,
 The wizard note has not been touched in vain,
 Then silent be no more! Enchantress, wake again.

This is as stately as the stateliest stanza in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

A similarly dignified stanza is to be found in the first Canto of *The Lord of the Isles*. It shows Scott as the minute observer of that Border scenery where his heart is buried:

Deem'st thou these sadden'd scenes have pleasure still,
 Lov'st thou through Autumn's fading realms to stray,
 To see the heath-flower wither on the hill,
 To listen to the wood's expiring lay,
 To note the red leaf shivering on the spray,
 To mark the last bright tints the mountain stain,
 On the waste fields to trace the gleaner's way,
 And moralize on mortal joy and pain,
 Oh, if such scenes thou lov'st, scorn not the minstrel strain.

That Sir Walter was intensely patriotic is known to even the most superficial reader of the "Life." When in 1797 the possibility of a descent by Napoleon on the British Isle was regarded as a very real danger, Scott not only joined "The Royal Edinburgh Light Dragoons" (which drilled on Portobello Sands) but wrote for them a spirited war song which begins—

To horse, to horse, the standard flies:
 The bugles sound the call:

And throughout Scott's writings, there is much against France and in praise of Pitt. Nor did the patriotism of a day that was dead fail to appeal to the loyal pen of Scott, for in *Woodstock* (Chapter xx), he wrote a spirited "Glee for King Charles"—

Bring the bowl which you boast,
 Fill it up to the brim,
 'Tis to him we love most,
 And to all who love him.
 Brave gallants, stand up,
 And avaunt ye base carles!
 Were there death in the cup,
 Here's a health to King Charles!

The buoyant spirit of this song is all the more remarkable when we remember the painful circumstances amidst which *Woodstock* was written.

But Scott like all poets from Homer to Tennyson is a master of metaphor, trope and simile. Likening his dear Edinburgh to an Empress—Queen of the North—he exclaims—

When safe amid thy mountain court
 Thou sit'st like Empress at her sport,
 And liberal, unconfined and free,
 Flinging thy *white arms* to the sea.

No words could more aptly describe the growth of the New Town of Edinburgh towards the estuary of the Forth, the stone of

which New Edinburgh is built being a handsome white sandstone most of which comes from the great quarries at Craighleith.

Four lines in *Rokeby* contain a striking metaphor—

All that gives gloss to sin, all gay
Light folly past with youth away:
But rooted stood in manhood's hour
The weeds of vice without their flower.

At the end of that fine poem—"The Field of Waterloo" (1815)—we have a beautiful expression for the grave—"The bed that morning cannot know."

The poet speaking of those who fell in that great battle addresses them in these choice lines—

Forgive, brave Dead, the imperfect lay!
Who may your names, your numbers say?
What high-strung harp, what lofty line
To each the dear-earn'd praise assign,
From high-born chiefs of martial fame
To the poor soldier's lowlier name?
Lightly ye rose that dawning day
From your cold couch of swamp and clay
To fill, before the sun was low,
The bed that morning cannot know.

The Great War called forth nothing finer, in their way, than these pathetic lines.

Scott, when he likes, can condense much into as few words as any in "Scots wha' hae." And could any sixteen words say more than these—

Let women, Edward, war with words,
With curses monks, but men with swords.

(*Lady of the Lake*).

Unlike his poetical contemporaries, Byron and Burns, Scott very rarely obtrudes his personal griefs and worries upon his readers. But he closes the *Lady of the Lake* with the following sad, restrained and delicately worded lines—

Yet once again, farewell thou minstrel harp,
Yet once again, farewell my feeble sway,
And little reck I of the censure sharp
May idly cavil at an idle lay;
Much have I owed thy strains on life's long way
Through secret woes the world has never known,
When on the weary night dawned wearier day
And bitter was the grief devoured alone,
That I o'erlive such woes, Enchantress, is thine own.

This is poesy not posing; the true poet obtains emotional relief in composition, just as all the other true artists do in the exercise of their talents, let psychologists explain it if they can. These lines are the grief of a man of culture, not that of a morose and self-centred *poseur* proclaiming imaginary woes from literary house-tops. In Scott's lines the personal touch is sad because it is real; Scott is so convincing because he is sincere.

Of course like most poets he wrote too much, but at his weakest he never descends to "bellman's jingle" as does Byron. Scott is a poet in that he can give the poetical view of the commonplace, and in this performance his nearest companion is Wordsworth. But whereas Wordsworth either raises the commonplace to the realms of philosophy or sinks it to those of banality, Scott always makes it interesting if not picturesque. For after all, was not this exactly what Scott did—transform the familiar scenery of the Lowlands and Highlands of Scotland into the enchanted regions of old-time romance? He had the same kind of material as Wordsworth to work upon, but the results of their treatment were very different. Wordsworth distilled philosophy from the commonplace, while Scott completely transformed it by an alchemy which made lead silver, and silver gold. He changed the grey, the drab and the colourless into the crimson of the sunset, the purple of the twilight and the azure of the everlasting vault of heaven.

Most people who know Scott as a poet at all think only of his long narrative poems and forget his lyrics, his songs and his occasional pieces. These people think of him as a writer of rhymed romances and forget him as a supreme artist in words describing scenery, as a fervent patriot and as one who could sing very tenderly of things domestic and personal.

Scott could be the poet of the healthy emotions of childhood although he was none other than that incomparable magician who revived for us in such gorgeous colours the glories of the days that are gone. For he was a poet before he wrote a line of prose. It was the accident that Byron was a contemporary which prevented Scott from occupying a still larger place in the affections of his contemporaries, for he could not be dearer to the hearts of his own discerning countrymen than he is at this hour. Carlyle with a sense of personal loss—for he had *seen* him limp along Prince's Street—took leave of him in 1838 in words as noble as they are sincere; and so we may take leave of him a hundred years later in words no less sincere—farewell Scott, great as a poet, great as a creator in prose, and, if possible, still greater as a *man*!