

## WAS SIR WALTER SCOTT A POET ?

BY ARTHUR SYMONS

SCOTT was twenty-six, the age of Keats at his death, before he wrote any original verse. He then wrote two poems to two ladies: one out of a bitter personal feeling, the other as a passing courtesy; neither out of any instinct for poetry. At twenty-four he had translated the fashionable *Lenore* of Bürger; afterwards he translated Goethe's youthful play, *Goetz von Berlichingen*. In 1802 he brought out the first two volumes of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, in which the resurrection of the old ballad literature, begun in 1765 by Percy's *Reliques*, was carried on, and brought nearer to the interest of ordinary readers, who, in Scott's admirable introductions and notes, could find almost a suggestion of what was to come in the *Waverley Novels*. The *Lay of the Last Minstrel* was begun in 1802, and published, when Scott was thirty-four, in 1805. It was begun at the suggestion of the Duchess of Buccleugh, and continued to please her. Lockhart tells us: "Sir John Stoddart's casual recitation of Coleridge's unfinished *Christabel* had fixed the music of that noble fragment in his memory; and it occurred to him that, by throwing the story of Gilpin Horner into somewhat similar cadence, he might produce such an echo of the later metrical romances as would seem to connect his conclusion of the primitive *Sir Tristrem* with the imitation of the popular ballad in the *Grey Brother* and the *Eve of St. John*." Its success was immediate, and for seven years Scott was the most popular poet in England. When the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* appeared in 1812, there was a more popular poet in England, and Scott gave up writing verse, and, in the summer of 1814, took up and finished a story which he had begun in 1805, simultaneously with the publica-

tion of the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*,—the story of *Waverley*. The novelist died eleven years later, in 1825; but the poet committed suicide, with *Harold the Dauntless*, in 1817.

Until he was thirty-one Scott was unconscious that he had any vocation except to be a "half-lawyer, half-sportsman." At forty-three he discovered, sooner than all the world, that he had mistaken his vocation; and with that discovery came the other one, that he had a vocation, which he promptly adopted, and in which, with his genius for success, he succeeded, as instantaneously, and more permanently. He was always able to carry the world with him, as he carried with him his little world of friends, servants, dogs, and horses. And how deeply rooted in the work itself was this persuasive and overcoming power is proved by the fact that *Waverley* was published anonymously, and that the other novels were only known, for many years, as by the author of *Waverley*. None of the prestige of the poet was handed over to the novelist. Scott attacked the public twice over, quite independently, and conquered it both times easily.

Success with the public of one's own day is, of course, no fixed test of a man's work; and, while it is indeed surprising that the same man could be, first the most popular poet and then the most popular novelist of his generation, almost of his century, there is no cause for surprise that the public should have judged, in the one case, justly, and in the other unjustly. The voice of the people, the voice of the gods of the gallery, howls for or against qualities which are never qualities of literature; and the admirers of Scott have invariably spoken of his verse in praise that would be justified if the qualities for which they praise it were

qualities supplementary to the essentially poetic qualities: they form no substitute. First Scott, and then Byron, partly in imitation of Scott, appealed to the public of their day with poems which sold as only novels have sold before or since, and partly because they were so like novels. They were, what every publisher still wants, "stories with plenty of action;" and the public either forgave their being in verse, or for some reason was readier than usual, just then, to welcome verse. It was Scott himself who was to give the novel a popularity which it had never had, even with Fielding and Richardson; and thus the novel had not yet flooded all other forms of literature for the average reader. Young ladies still cultivated ideals between their embroidery frames and their gilt harps. An intellectual democracy had not yet set up its own standards, and affected to submit art to its own tastes. This poetry, so like the most interesting, the most exciting prose, came at once on the wave of a fashion: the fashion of German ballads and "tales of wonder" and of the more genuine early ballads of England and Scotland; and also with a new, spontaneous energy all its own. And it was largely Scott himself who had helped to make the fashion by which he profited.

The metrical romance, as it was written by Scott, was avowedly derived from the metrical romances of the Middle Ages, one of which Scott had edited and even concluded in the original metre: the *Sir Tristrem* which he attributed to Thomas of Ercildoune. This *Sir Tristrem* is but one among many fragmentary versions of a lost original, giving the greatest of all legends of chivalry, the legend of Tristan and Iseult. The most complete and the finest version which we have is the poem in octosyllabic couplets written in German by Gottfried of Strassburg at the beginning of 1200. In this poem we see what a metrical romance can be, and it is no injustice to Scott if we put it for a moment beside his attempts to continue that heroic lineage.

A friend of mine, an Irish poet, was telling me the other day that he had found himself, not long ago, in a small town in the West of Ireland, Athenry, a little lonely place, with its ruined castle; and having to wait there, because he had taken the wrong train, he took out of his pocket a prose version of Gottfried's poem, and sat reading it for some hours. And suddenly a pang went through him, with an acute sense of personal loss, as he said to himself: "I shall never know the man who wrote that; I have never known any man who was such a gentleman." The poem, with all its lengthy adventures, its lengthy comments, is full of the passion of beauty; the love of Tristan and Iseult is a grave thing, coming to them in one cup with death. "Love," says the poet, "she who turneth the honey to gall, sweet to sour, and dew to flame, had laid her burden on Tristan and Iseult, and as they looked on each other their colour changed from white to red and from red to white, even as it pleased Love to paint them. Each knew the mind of the other, yet was their speech of other things." And, at their last parting, Iseult can say: "We two have loved and sorrowed in such true-fellowship unto this time, we should not find it over-hard to keep the same faith even to death. . . . Whatever land thou seekest, have a care for thyself — *my* life; for if I be robbed of that, then am I, *thy* life, undone. And myself, *thy* life, will I for thy sake, not for mine, guard with all care. For thy body and thy life, that know I well, they rest on me. Now bethink thee well of me, thy body, Iseult." This, remember, is in a metrical romance, written in the metre of the *Lady of the Lake*. Now turn to that poem, and read there: —

Nor while on Ellen's faltering tongue  
Her filial welcomes crowded hung,  
Marked she, that fear (affection's proof)  
Still held a graceful youth aloof;  
No! not till Douglas named his name,  
Although that youth was Malcolm Graeme.

Much has been claimed for Scott's poetry because of its appeal to unpoetical

persons, who, in the nature of things, would be likely to take an interest in its subject matter; and it has been thought remarkable that poetry composed, like much of *Marmion*, in the saddle, by one "through whose head a regiment of horse has been exercising since he was five years old," should have seemed genuine to sportsmen and to soldiers. A striking anecdote told by Lockhart allows us to consider the matter very clearly. "In the course of the day, when the *Lady of the Lake* first reached Sir Adam Ferguson, he was posted with his company on a point of ground exposed to the enemy's artillery, somewhere no doubt on the lines of Torres Vedras. The men were ordered to lie prostrate on the ground; while they kept that attitude, the captain, kneeling at the head, read aloud the description of the battle in Canto VI, and the listening soldiers only interrupted him by a joyous huzza when the French shot struck the bank close above them." "It is not often," says Mr. Hutton in his *Life of Scott*, "that martial poetry has been put to such a test." A test of what? Certainly not a test of poetry. An audience less likely to be critical, a situation less likely to induce criticism, can hardly be imagined. The soldiers would look for martial sentiments expressed with clear and matter-of-fact fervor. They would want no more and they would find no more; certainly no such intrusion of poetry as would have rendered the speech of Henry V before the battle of Agincourt but partially intelligible to them, though there Shakespeare is writing for once almost down to his audience. Scott's appeal is the appeal of prose, the thing and the feeling each for its own sake, with only that "pleasurable excitement," which Coleridge saw in the mere fact of metre, to give the illusion that one is listening to poetry.

Let me give an instance from another art. If, on his return to England, you had taken one of Sir Adam Ferguson's soldiers into a picture gallery, and there had been a Botticelli in one corner, and a Titian in another, and between two Bel-

lini altar-pieces there had been a modern daub representing a battle, in which fire and smoke were clearly discernible, and charging horses rolled over on their riders, and sabres were being flourished in a way very like the trooper's way, is there much doubt which picture would go straight home to the soldier? There, it might be said, is a battle-piece, and the soldier goes up to it, examines it, admires it, swears that nothing more natural was ever painted. Is that a "test" of the picture? Are we to say: this picture has been proved to be sincere, natural, approvable by one who has been through the incident which it records, and therefore (in spite of its total lack of every fine quality in painting) a good picture? No one, I think, would take the soldier's word for that: why should we take his word on a battle-piece which is not painted, but written?

A great many of the merits which people have accustomed themselves to see in Scott come from this kind of miscalculation. Thus, for instance, we may admit, with Mr. Palgrave, that Scott "attained eminent success" in "sustained vigour, clearness, and interest in narration." "If we reckon up the poets of the world," continues Mr. Palgrave, "we may be surprised to find how very few (dramatists not included) have accomplished this, and may be hence led to estimate Scott's rank in his art more justly." But is not this rather a begging of the question? Scott wrote in metre, and in some of his metrical narratives attained "sustained vigour, clearness, and interest in narration." But is there anything except the metre to distinguish these stories in verse from what, as Scott himself afterwards showed, might have been much better if they had been told in prose? Until this has been granted, no merit in narration will mean anything at all, in a consideration of poetry as poetry; any more than the noughts which you may add to the left of your figure 1, in the belief that you are adding million to million.

The fact is, that skill in story-telling never made any man a poet, any more

than skill in constructing a drama. Shakespeare is not, in the primary sense, a poet because he is a great dramatist; he is a poet as much in the sonnets as in the plays, but he is a poet who chose to be also a playwright, and in measuring his greatness we measure all that he did as a playwright along with all that he did as a poet; his especial greatness being seen by his complete fusion of the two in one. And it is the same thing in regard to story-telling. Look for a moment at our greatest narrative poet, Chaucer. Chaucer tells his stories much better, much more pointedly, concisely, with much more of the qualities of the best prose narrative, than Scott; who seems to tell his stories rather for boys than for men, with what he very justly called "a hurried frankness of composition, which pleases soldiers, sailors, and young people of bold and active dispositions." Chaucer is one of the most masculine of story-tellers, and if you read, not even one of the *Canterbury Tales*, but a book of *Troilus and Cressida*, you will find in it something of the quality which we applaud in Balzac; an enormous interest in life, and an absorption in all its details, because those details go to make up the most absorbing thing in the world. But in Chaucer all this is so much prose quality added to a consummate gift for poetry. Chaucer is first of all a poet; it is almost an accident, the accident of his period, that he wrote tales in verse. In the Elizabethan age he would have been a great dramatist, and he has all the qualities that go to the making of a great lyrical poet. His whole vision of life is the vision of the poet; his language and versification have the magic of poetry; he has wisdom, tenderness, a high gravity, tinged with illuminating humor; no one in our language has said more touching and beautiful things, straight out of his heart, about birds and flowers and grass; he has ecstasy. In addition to all this he can tell stories: that was the new life that he brought into the poetry of his time, rescuing us from "the moral Gower" and much tediousness.

Now look at Scott: I do not say, ask Scott to be another Chaucer; but consider for a moment how much his admirers have to add to that all-important merit of "sustained vigour, clearness, and interest in narration." Well, it has been claimed, first and most emphatically, I think, by Sir Francis Doyle, that his poetry is "Homeric." Sir Francis Doyle says, in one of his lectures on Scott, given when Professor of Poetry at Oxford: "Now, after the immortal ballads of Homer, there are no ballad poems so full of the spirit of Homer as those of Scott." Homer, indeed, wrote of war and warriors, and so did Scott; Homer gives you vivid action, in swiftly moving verse, and so does Scott. But I can see little further resemblance, and I can see an infinite number of differences. No one, I suppose, would compare the pit-a-pat of Scott's octosyllabics with "the deep-mouthed music" of the Homeric hexameter. But Sir Francis Doyle sees in the opening of the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, and not in this alone, "the simple and energetic style of Homer." Let me, then, take one single sentence from that battle in Canto VI of the *Lady of the Lake*, and set against it a single sentence from one of the battle-pieces in the *Iliad*, in the prose translation of Mr. Lang. Here is Scott's verse:—

Forth from the pass, in tumult driven,  
Like chaff before the wind of heaven,  
The archery appear;  
For life! for life! their flight they ply,  
And shriek, and shout, and battle-cry,  
And plaids and bonnets waving high,  
And broadswords flashing to the sky,  
Are maddening in the rear.

And here is Homer in English prose: "And as the gusts speed on, when shrill winds blow, on a day when dust lies thickest on the roads, even so their battle clashed together, and all were fain of heart to slay each other in the press with the keen bronze." Need I say more than these extracts say for themselves? What commonness and what distinction, what puerility of effort and what repose in energy!

Then there is Scott's feeling for nature. The feeling was deep and genuine, and in a conversation with Washington Irving Scott expressed it more poignantly than he has ever done in his verse. "When," he said, "I have been for some time in the rich scenery about Edinburgh, which is like ornamented garden land, I begin to wish myself back again among my own honest grey hills; and if I did not see the heather at least once a year, *I think I should die!*" There is a great deal of landscape painting in Scott's verse, and it has many good prose qualities: it is very definite, it is written "with the eye on the object," it is always sincere, in a certain sense; it is always felt sincerely. But it is not felt deeply, and it becomes either trite or generalized in its rendering into words. Take the description of Loch Katrine in the third canto of the *Lady of the Lake*, the final passage which Ruskin quotes for special praise in that chapter of *Modern Painters* which is devoted to a eulogy of Scott as the master of "the modern landscape" in verse. It gives a pretty and, no doubt, accurate picture, but with what vagueness, triteness, or conventionality of epithet! We get one line in which there is no more than a statement, but a statement which may have its place in poetry:—

"The grey mist left the mountain side."

In the next line we get a purely conventional rendering of what has evidently been both seen clearly and felt sympathetically:—

"The torrent showed its glistening pride."

How false and insincere that becomes in the mere putting into words! And what a *cliché* is the simile for the first faint shadows on the lake at dawn:—

"In bright uncertainty they lie,  
Like future joys to Fancy's eye."

Even in better landscape work, like the opening of the first introduction to *Marmion*, how entirely without magic is the observation, how superficial a notation of just what every one would notice in the scenery before him! To Ruskin, I know,

all this is a part of what he calls Scott's unselfishness and humility, "in consequence of which Scott's enjoyment of Nature is incomparably greater than that of any other poet I know." Enjoyment, perhaps; but we are concerned, in poetry, with what a poet has made out of his enjoyment. Scott puts down in words exactly what the average person feels. Now it is the poet's business to interpret, illuminate, or at the least to evoke in a more exquisite form, all that the ordinary person is capable of feeling vaguely, by way of enjoyment. Until the poet has transformed enjoyment into ecstasy there can be no poetry. Scott's genuine love of nature, so profound in feeling, as his words to Washington Irving testify, was never able to translate itself into poetry; it seemed to become tongue-tied in metre.

And, also, there was in Scott a love of locality, which was perhaps more deeply rooted in him than his love of nature, just as his love of castles and armor and the bricabrac of mediævalism which filled his brain and his house was more deeply rooted than his love of the Middle Ages. "If," said Coleridge to Payne Collier, "I were called upon to form an opinion of Mr. Scott's poetry, the first thing I would do would be to take away all his names of old castles, which rhyme very prettily, and read very picturesquely; next, I would exclude the mention of all nunneries, abbeys, and priories, and I should then see what would be the residuum—how much poetry would remain." In all these things there was personal sincerity; Scott was following his feeling, his bias; but it has to be determined how far, and in how many instances, when he said nature he meant locality, and when he said chivalry or romance, he meant that "procession of my furniture, in which old swords, bows, targets, and lances made a very conspicuous show," on the way to Abbotsford.

Ruskin's special praise of Scott, in his attitude toward nature, is that Scott did not indulge in "the pathetic fallacy" of reading one's own feelings into the aspect



of natural things. This, in the main, is true, in spite of those little morals which Scott attaches to what he sees. But it is hardly more than a negative merit, at the best; and it is accompanied by no intimacy of insight, no revealing passion; aspects are described truthfully, and with sympathy, and that is all.

Throughout the whole of his long poems, and throughout almost the whole of his work in verse, Scott remains an improviser in rhyme, not a poet. But in a few of the songs contained in the novels, songs written after he had practically given up writing verse, flickering touches of something very like poetry are from time to time seen. In one song of four stanzas, *Proud Maisie*, published in 1818 in the *Heart of Midlothian*, Scott seems to me to have become a poet. In this poem, which is like nothing else he ever wrote, some divine accident has brought all the diffused poetical feeling of his nature to a successful birth. Landor, who seems to have overlooked this perfect lyric, thought there was one line of

genuine poetry in Scott's verse, which he quotes from an early poem on Helvellyn. But I cannot feel that this line is more than a pathetic form of rhetoric. In *Proud Maisie* we get, for once, poetry.

For the rest, all Scott's verse is written for boys, and boys, generation after generation, will love it with the same freshness of response. It has adventure, manliness, bright landscape, fighting, the obvious emotions; it is like a gallop across the moors in a blithe wind; it has plenty of story, and is almost as easily read as if it were prose. The taste for it may well be outgrown with the first realization of why Shakespeare is looked upon as the supreme poet. Byron usually follows Scott in the boy's head, and drives out Scott, as that infinitely greater, though imperfect, force may well do. Shelley often completes the disillusion. But it is well, perhaps, that there should be a poet for boys, and for those grown-up people who are most like boys; for those, that is, to whom poetry appeals by something in it which is not the poetry.

## WORK AND PLAY

BY ARTHUR STANWOOD PIER

THAT more people know how to work than how to play seems to be a defect of education. All the punishments of childhood are for lawlessly following the impulse to play; and nearly all the rewards are for aptitude and industry in work. In some respects there has been a relaxation; the interest taken by most pedagogues in the sports of their pupils and the semi-official recognition of athletic prowess in schools are signs of a partial reaction. But it is only partial; the spirit of play is often suppressed before it becomes articulate; the spirit of work is from the first fostered and stimulated. To nearly all is it emphasized that on

work their very being depends; but to only a few is it made clear that on play depends their well-being.

As a nation, we are, it is true, devoted to sports and games, and therefore it would appear on the surface quite needless to point out the advantages of play. There is too much play already, in the opinion of many not illiberal persons; they say that our young men at college play more than they work, and they instance the general and often unhealthy interest in racing and bridge. Certainly it is but natural that the instinct for diversion, so often cowed and stunted by drastic measures in childhood, or perhaps given an