CHAPTER XXI

ON SIR WALTER SCOTT'S PLACE IN POETRY

I THINK that much importance has not been generally attached to the longer poems of Sir Walter Scott by Japanese students of English literature. For this there are several reasons—one of them is so obvious that I should like to call your attention especially to it. In the case of great writers, it is a curious fact that the editing of their texts for educational purposes is scarcely ever done from the standpoint of the highest and best taste. Students are impelled to study the worst of them rather than the best. Publishers are particularly anxious in England that school texts shall not offend any religious prejudices or any moral prudery, or any narrow-mindedness. If this can be accomplished the book may have a great sale; if, on the other hand, it be edited from the standpoint of literary taste only — of the higher literary criticism — immediately there will be an outcry on the part of over-moral people, over-stupid people, conventional forms of every description—and possibly, what is much more horrible, a religious cabal may be formed against the introduction of the text into schools. Inevitably, therefore, the publishers aim to publish the commonplace, the monotonous, the dull. They cannot help themselves. Good literary taste must always have a hard fight for existence, and much more for expression in educational circles. I need scarcely remind you that writers like Shakespeare can only be studied in schools through emasculated texts. The full text of Shakespeare will not be read in any English lower school.

Now in the case of Sir Walter Scott, the editing of him has been followed on the "safe" lines. He is not an author

quite important enough, as a literary standard for special treatment, such as might be given in higher educational instruction to the work of poets like Shelley or Goethe or Dante. He is edited only for schools — not universities. And therefore the composition usually chosen is "The Lady of the Lake." Now Sir Walter Scott's work is not always of equal value; some of his poems are rather indifferent in merit: others, especially the lyric works, must always have a very high place. "The Lady of the Lake" is not one of Scott's best compositions. It is a historical romance in poetical form; and it can interest English readers very much who happen to know the history referred to and the scenery described. But it is not likely to interest those who do not know; it is the one work of Sir Walter Scott which has been commonly read in Japanese schools,— and I do not wonder that the students never could learn to care much for it. For the publisher's sake the choice was a good one. "Marmion," a much better text from a literary point of view, is much disliked by Roman Catholic readers; and there are tragedies in it which offend the moral sensibility of others besides Roman Catholics. "The Lay of the Last Minstrel," is really a romance of mediæval magic; and there is a prejudice against introducing this subject to young readers. So, as I said before, in our school days, we are obliged to read, not the best, but the worst of Sir Walter; and we get tired of it, and quite disinclined to study the other work for fear that we should find it equally tiring. Tiresome, though, it is not; and Sir Walter Scott is worthy of being the subject even of a university lecture. In a course of study of English poetry he can no more be ignored than Wordsworth or Coleridge; and it is proper that every student should be able to state his right place in the evolution of English verse and to enumerate those merits by which he is distinguished from all the other poets.

We should think of Sir Walter Scott especially as the poet who, in modern times, revived the Romance of the

Middle Ages. In our study of the early English romances, you will remember what I said about the importance of that form of composition to all future English poetry. I told you that the poetical romance proper ended with the publication of Sir Thomas Malory's great romance of King Arthur. Malory's romance was in prose; but it was so great and perfect a thing, that it practically killed the poetical romance—no man could imagine anything proceeding beyond Malory. There were some feeble productions and verses of a later date, but nothing of any consequence. The mediæval romance went to sleep for hundreds of years until Walter Scott woke it up again, or rather, brought it out of its grave.

That is the great fact to remember about Sir Walter Scott's value in English poetry. He revived the mediæval romance; and the closer his work is to mediæval romance the better it is. It was when he attempted to apply the same method, in poetry, to modern subjects that his work became weak. Otherwise it is strong, and some of it never can die. Coleridge almost simultaneously revived the same subject. Tennyson followed with another revival. Still later Rossetti developed the mediæval idea in such magical poems as that of "The Bride's Prelude." Romance could not go farther than this. But it appealed only to the very highest taste. For the great mass of readers, the work of Morris—especially "The Earthly Paradise" — pleased better, and it had an astonishing success. And thereafter (I had almost forgotten to mention Swinburne's revival of mediæval lyrical subjects) romance went to sleep again and it is now buried for the second time. But observe that the movement lasted for a hundred years—from 1800 to 1900; and that Sir Walter Scott began it.

Such is his place; what are his particular merits? The question of form need not now be dwelt upon: I told you before that the verse which Scott and Coleridge adopted was the very best imaginable for the purpose of lengthy narration. Byron also adopted it. The important thing, however,

is to remember that Scott did what neither Byron nor Coleridge could have done, and that nobody else — not even Tennyson — ever succeeded in doing so well. The best of Scott's work is in his battle pieces. In all English poetry there is no other poet who has described battle in so grand and so large a way. Scott is an unrivalled painter of war. He is not a painter, in the sense that great French Meissonier is—of the detail of battle scenes. He does not paint for us with infinite exactitude, every difference or characteristic of harness or weapon. He does not photograph. That is not the highest art; but Scott's art is. He paints motion—terrible motion;—the surging of the battle as the surging of the sea or the stream. He gives us the roar of it, the smoke and dust, the confusion, the horror, and the mad excitement. We see and hear as if we were actually looking on. Nobody else, in all English literature, has done this.

Even when Scott only makes mention of battle as a memory — only refers to it in a few lines — his picture is never forgotten. Here is one stanza from a ballad — the horrible story of "Glenfinlas," perhaps the most awful ghost story that ever was written:—

> I heard the groans, I mark'd the tears,
> I saw the wound his bosom bore,
> *When on the serried Saxon spears*
> *He pour'd his clan's resistless roar.*

Here in two lines what a tremendous horror is suggested; — the English feudal army, standing in a circle or square, to defend itself from the sword rush of the mountaineers — only, however, to be broken asunder, and shattered by the shock of the charge, which is compared to the descent of a mountain torrent in flood that breaks up everything in its way. Such indeed was the famous rush of the clan. The last historical incident of the kind was quite modern—the battle of Killiecrankie—when the English army was cut to pieces in the space of a few minutes.

Now in that little simile of two lines the whole secret of Scott's immense power in battle description may be found. The simile is of a mountain torrent; and nothing in the action of such a torrent impresses the observer so much as the roar of it. You do not clearly see the force that hurls — all is foam and mist. But you hear, and you perceive the destruction. The use of the word "roar" instead of "force" is a great story. The power of the clan is meant; but it is not necessary to specify.

However, the best of Scott's pieces is in "Marmion"; and the incident treated is the great battle of Flodden—one of the most famous in English history. It happened in 1513;—the Scotch king, James IV, was killed with hundreds of his nobles; the English won the day, but only with great difficulty; and they were afraid to pursue. The English commander was Lord Surrey, so famous in the history of English poetry. Let us now notice how Scott describes the battle. We need not quote it all—but take specimens of the different passages of the sixth Canto — sufficient to bring forth before our eyes the entire picture. The story begins with the descent of the Scotch army from the mountains, and their meeting the English. It is described as seen by the squire of Lord Marmion from a distance:

> And sudden, as he spoke,
> From the sharp ridges of the hill,
> All downward to the banks of Till,
> Was wreath'd in sable smoke.
> Volum'd and fast, and rolling far,
> The cloud envelop'd Scotland's war,
> As down the hill they broke;
> Nor martial shout, nor minstrel tone,
> Announc'd their march; their tread alone,
> At times one warning trumpet blown,
> At times a stifled hum,
> Told England, from his mountain-throne
> King James did rushing come.*

* *Marmion*, VI, xxv.

The Scotch army burned its camp before descending—hence the smoke. It was a good bit of strategy to make the advance under cover of the smoke. Watching the beginning of the fire, the two squires can see nothing;—they only hear the first great roar as the armies meet. But presently the smoke clears, under the blowing of the wind:—

> At length the freshening western blast
> Aside the shroud of battle cast;
> And, first, the ridge of mingled spears
> Above the brightening cloud appears;
> And in the smoke the pennons flew,
> As in the storm the white sea-mew.
> Then mark'd they, dashing broad and far,
> The broken billows of the war,
> And plumed crests of chieftains brave,
> Floating like foam upon the wave;
> But nought distinct they see:
> Wide rag'd the battle on the plain;
> Spears shook, and falchions flash'd amain;
> Fell England's arrow-flight like rain;
> Crests rose, and stoop'd, and rose again,
> Wild and disorderly.*

See how the description begins to develop, and how the poet always makes us see through the medium of strong natural comparison. You cannot see faces at such a distance; masses of men appear only like a moving surface. It is like a sea in motion, this far-off battle, and the little white flags at the points of lances seem to hover over this sea like sea-birds, like white gulls. Plumes appear like lines of foam where the cavalry are moving; and the showering of English arrows is visible only like a distant shower of rain. The picture is strong—just because of these comparisons of billows, and storm, and sea-gulls, and foam. Gradually the eyes of the squires become able to distinguish the flag of their master's house, the banner of their Lord, which bears the figure of a falcon. They watch it going

* *Ibid*, VI, xxvi.

and coming, rising and falling, swaying backwards and forwards and sidewards in such a struggle that it seems as if it must fall. Then they naturally become terribly excited. One of them cannot wait any longer; and crying that he cannot bear to see his master's banner lost, rushes into the battle. Presently, however, the war-horse of the Lord himself gallops back to camp, all bloody and riderless. That compels the other squire to go to the rescue; and the two bring back Marmion, dying, with his arms dragged from among the feet of the horses. But the subject of Marmion interrupts the recital; it is the description of the battle that now interests us. The English are beginning to win. All day long the fight has been going on; the sun is set.

At last the Scotts are surrounded. But now all the nobles and their followers gather round the Scottish king in a great circle; and the English cannot reach him. This was indeed one of the most stubborn fights in human history. The English won; but they never could break the circle—

> But as they left the dark'ning heath,
> More desperate grew the strife of death.
> The English shafts, in volleys hail'd,
> In headlong charge their horse assail'd;
> Front, flank, and rear, the squadrons sweep
> To break the Scottish circle deep,
> That fought around their King.
> But yet, though thick the shafts as snow,
> Though charging knights like whirlwinds go,
> Though bill-men ply the ghastly blow,
> Unbroken was the ring;
> The stubborn spear-men still made good
> Their dark impenetrable wood,
> Each stepping where his comrade stood,
> The instant that he fell.
> No thought was there of dastard flight;
> Link'd in the serried phalanx tight,
> Groom fought like noble, squire like knight,
> As fearlessly and well;

Till utter darkness closed her wing
O'er their thin host and wounded King.*

The comparison of the arrow flight to the shower of snow again strikes us here. But this was not original with Scott—though he made splendid use of it. The expression was first made use of, I think, by Froissart, who described the work of English archers from observation. "So thick the arrows came," he said "that it looks as if it snowed." "Bill-men" is perhaps an unfamiliar word. The bill was a heavy swordlike blade attached to the end of a lance — a terrible weapon, capable of cutting a horse or a man in two. The use of it required special training; and the bill-men were called up chiefly when a square or circle had to be broken. These then went to work deliberately cutting away the sides of the square. The awful wounds made by such weapons are well suggested by the poet's adjective "ghastly." This bit of description is not only famous—it is historically true. There we have an account of the retreat on both sides; and the use of the similes drawn from nature still gives the effect;—

And from the charge they drew,
As mountain-waves, from wasted lands,
Sweep back to ocean blue.
Then did their loss his foemen know;
Their King, their Lords, their mightiest low,
They melted from the field as snow,
When streams are swoln and south winds blow,
Dissolves in silent dew.
Tweed's echoes heard the ceaseless plash,
While many a broken band,
Disorder'd, through her currents dash,
To gain the Scottish land.†

Here again we have illustrations taken from nature's forces, — the tidal waves, the melting of snow; — and the realism of the lines describing the plashing across the river

* † *Ibid.* VI. xxxiv.

could scarcely be surpassed in effectiveness. Of course the art of drawing battle pictures with the help of natural similes is old as Homer;—indeed some of Homer's work in this direction could not be surpassed by any of our poets to-day. But Scott, though using much more artistic verse than the Greeks, often produced quite as vivid a picture for mind and eye.

Next to the battle pieces in "Marmion," Scott's greatest battle work is in "The Lord of the Isles"—describing a Scottish victory, as the other narrative described a Scottish defeat. It begins with a few lines of pictures of the appearance of the English army advancing in the distance—a feudal army, remember, every warrior in steel:—

> Beyond, the Southern host appears,
> A boundless wilderness of spears,
> Whose verge or rear the anxious eye
> Strove far, but strove in vain, to spy.
> Thick flashing in the evening beam,
> Glaives, lances, bills, and banners gleam;
> And where the heaven join'd with the hill,
> Was distant armour flashing still,
> So wide, so far, the boundless host
> Seem'd in the blue horizen lost.*

An artist, knowing the costume and armour of the day, could instantly make a picture from the few lines above quoted; for the details of the picture are there presented to him, with distance, foreground, perspective, everything. But the following narrative is particularly famous as being an accurate account of the battle of Bannockburn, where a remarkable incident took place. Scott knew the scene of the battle well; and he had often, when young, visited the spot to study it. At Bannockburn King Robert Bruce, contrary to the advice of his chiefs, rode forward in advance of his army to reconnoiter the English front. He was mounted on a small light horse—a horse quite unsuited,

* *The Lord of the Isles*, VI, x.

people thought, for battle purposes; but the king said that he and that horse understood each other perfectly well. Events proved him right. An English knight suddenly charged upon him as he advanced alone, — the name is usually given as De Boune (pronounced Boun). The Scottish chiefs thought that the king was lost. But he sat quite still until the knight came within a few yards of him;—then, at a touch of his rein, his obedient little horse leaped to one side. The knight could not stop his horse so quickly, and the impetus of his charge carried him past the king. In the same moment Bruce rose in his stirrups and with one blow of his battle-axe crashed De Boune's helmet head like a nut. Bruce was a very powerful man; and it is said that he never needed to strike twice. On this occasion his axe was broken to pieces. Now see how well Scott relates in verse the incident which I have been telling you as historically recounted. The quotation begins with some lines about the desire of Sir Henry Boune, or De Boune as Scott calls him to attract the attention of his own king, King Edward:—

He burn'd before his Monarch's eye
To do some deed of chivalry.
He spurr'd his steed, he couch'd his lance,
And darted on the Bruce at once.
—As motionless as rocks, that bide
The wrath of the advancing tide,
The Bruce stood fast.—Each breast beat high,
And dazzled was each gazing eye,
The heart had hardly time to think,
The eyelid scarce had time to wink,
While on the King, like flash of flame,
Spurr'd to full speed the war-horse came!
The partridge may the falcon mock,
If that slight palfrey stand the shock;
But, swerving from the Knight's career,
Just as they met, Bruce shunn'd the spear.
Onward the baffled warrior bore
His course—but soon his 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 pass'd,
Fell the stern dint, the first, the last!
Such strength upon that the blow was put,
The helmet crash'd like hazel-nut;
The axe-shaft, with the brazen clasp,
Was shiver'd 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!*

Easy lines, smooth and clear, but full of spirit. Still more spiritedly is told a famous incident of the rout. One brave English knight tried to fight his way to the King, while the rest of the army were flying. He wanted to keep back the pursuers. He actually killed four men; but he received a blow that almost cut him in two, before he fell at the feet of Bruce. It is impossible not to admire the swing of Scott's narrative:—

'Now then,' he said, and couch'd his spear,
'My course is run, the goal is near;
One effort more, one brave career,
Must close this race of mine.'
Then in his stirrups rising high,
He shouted loud his battle-cry,
'Saint James for Argentine!'
And, of the bold pursuers, four
The gallant knight from saddle bore;
But not unharm'd—a lance's point
Has found his breast-plate's loosen'd joint,
An axe has razed his crest;
Yet still on Colonsay's fierce lord,
Who press'd the chase with gory sword,
He rode with spear in rest,
And through his bloody tartans bored,
And through his gallant breast.
Nail'd to the earth, the mountaineer

* *Ibid*, VI, xv.

Yet writhed him up against the spear,
And swung his broad-sword round!
—Stirrup, steel-boot, and cuish gave way,
Beneath that blow's tremendous sway,
The blood gush'd from the wound;
And the grim Lord of Colonsay
Hath turn'd him on the ground,
And laugh'd in death-pang, that his blade
The mortal thrust so well repaid.*

Now, if you turn to history for an account of these incidents, you will be surprised to find how little embellishment Scott has attempted. He keeps rigidly close to fact as recorded, indulging imagination only to the degree of pure realism. But as the facts are intensely romantic, this method only lends strength to their poetical treatment. However, when Scott chooses to invent, — to make a story entirely out of his own imagination, — the realistic effect is just the same,—at least whenever the narrative is of battle or heroism. Not often now is the poem of "Rokeby" read; but it has remarkable beauties of strength and spirit of the same class.

Now "Rokeby" happens not to be a feudal romance, but the story and the scenes are laid in the 17th century, — the time of Cromwell and the wars between King and Parlia, ment. People had become accustomed to think of Scott only as a poet of feudalism: they liked to read about his knight-who—

Carved at the meal with dirks of steel
And drank the red wine through the helmet barred.

But that Scott should write about the 17th century they thought imprudent.

This poem did not have much success when first published; and soon after Scott saw that he could not compete with Byron who was then becoming very popular, so he took to writing prose, novels and romances, and became a

* *Ibid.* VI. xxxii.

king of literature. It was just as well for him that people ceased to care temporarily about his verse; for his greatest talent lay in the direction of prose romance. But the public was nevertheless mistaken. Scott was a better poet than Byron — much more careful, and much healthier. He had not some of Byron's gifts; but he had none of his faults— especially the fault of carelessness. "Rokeby" offers an opportunity to contrast Scott with Byron; for they both treated on one occasion a like subject, choosing for hero a desperado, a murderer, a fugitive from society, an enemy of law. You will remember how fond Byron was of types of this kind—his Lara and his Corsair. But Byron's Lara and Corsair are not real, — excepting so far as they are supposed to be pictures of Byron's own self; and you know that, in literature, sincerity in describing oneself is scarcely possible. Byron's heroes are theatrical heroes — exaggerations and distortions. When Scott undertook to give us a man of this style, he gave us a real living figure. He chose for his type a buccaneer — one of those desperate English adventurers who helped to overthrow the Spanish domination in America and in the East Indies. This character, Bertram Risingham, is an actual presentation of character; and the history of the buccaneers furnished many such characters, capable of generosity, but also capable of atrocious cruelty; able to win fortunes by daring, yet reckless enough to lose them in one night over a game of cards; —distrusting everyone, yet sometimes capable of disinterested friendship; — believing nothing but their own strength and cunning, though occasionally superstitious—these extraordinary men had nothing to recommend them to admiration except their splendid courage. I believe you know that at last they became a terror to the English Government itself; and it was found necessary to suppress them as pirates. Kingsley wrote a little poem, "The Last Buccaneer," giving the pathetic side of the occurrence.

But, it is in the description of battles, of active fighting especially, that Scott stands alone, and while recommending

you to study the character of Bertram in "Rokeby," I shall only quote the incident of Bertram's escape from a burning castle, and the narrative of his death. Observe the rushing force of both:—

> And where is Bertram?—Soaring high,
> The general flame ascends the sky;
> In gather'd group the soldiers gaze
> Upon the broad and roaring blaze,
> When, like infernal demon, sent,
> Red from his penal element,
> To plague and to pollute the air,—
> His face all gore, on fire his hair,
> Forth upon the central mass of smoke
> The giant form of Bertram broke!
> His brandish'd sword on high he rears,
> Then plunged among opposing spears;
> Round his left arm his mantle truss'd,
> Received and foil'd three lances' thrust;
> Nor these his headlong course withstood,
> Like reeds he snapp'd the tough ash-wood.
> In vain his foes around him clung;
> With matchless force aside he flung
> Their boldest,—as the bull, at bay,
> Tosses the ban-dogs from his way,
> Through forty foes his path he made,
> And safely gain'd the forest glade.*

Scott's account of anything like this is always short. But it is always strong. Rapid action, especially the action of fighting, ought to be rapidly told; and the art of telling strongly is the art of telling quickly. In no department of poetry are words more often wasted than in descriptions of heroism. Great poets, who understand the art of narrative, condense what they have to say; small poets too often expand, with the necessary result that the emotion of the incident dies away in the reader's mind long before the thing is half told. Such is not the case in the account of Bertram's death. He had sworn to kill a Scottish lord who

* *Rokeby*, V. xxxvi.

had tried to betray him to the soldiers; and the fact that the lord was surrounded in his own castle, by a strong force of troops, did not deter him in the least. Into the castle he rode at an unexpected moment, forced his way to the side of the chieftain and blew out his brains.

But to ride out again did not prove so easy a matter as to ride in:

> While yet the smoke the deed conceals,
> Bertram his ready charger wheels;
> But flounder'd on the pavement-floor
> The steed, and down the rider bore,
> And, bursting in the headlong sway,
> The faithless sandle-girths gave way.
> 'Twas while he toil'd him to be freed,
> And with the rein to raise the steed,
> That from amazement's iron trance
> All Wycliffe's soldiers waked at once.
> Sword, halberd, musket-butt, their blows
> Hail'd upon Bertram as he rose;
> A score of pikes, with each a wound,
> Bore down and pinn'd him to the ground;
> But still his struggling force he rears,
> 'Gainst hacking brands and stabbing spears;
> Thrice from assailants shook him free,
> Once gain'd his feet, and twice his knee.
> By tenfold odds oppress'd at length,
> Despite his struggles and his strength,
> He took a hundred mortal wounds
> As mute as fox 'mongst mangling hounds;
> And when he died, his parting groan
> Had more of laughter than of moan!
> —They gazed, as when a lion dies,
> And hunters scarcely trust their eyes,
> But bend their weapons on the slain
> Lest the grim king should rouse again!*

It is no use to say that the man who could write that was not a strong poet. Read it over some time by your-

* *Ibid*, VI, xxxiii.

selves, and then notice the effect that it leaves upon your imagination.

Here I will end these notes upon Scott, with a few brief remarks. I wanted to impress upon you his real place in the history of poetry, and his special value in particular directions. I think that you will be able to appreciate his importance as a painter of battle and English heroism. The two great qualities of this painting are terseness and force. But there is another quality that has no name—that cannot be described—that lifts you up in heart while you read, and that always afterward leaves a pleasant glow in memory. Doubtless that quality is Scott's own beautiful character. No man ever lived who more admired all that is brave and strong and true; and no man, except perhaps Kingsley, is able in the same way to make us share that admiration. The extraordinary charm, the exultation of Kingsley's prose, is very much like the exultation in the best parts of Scott's poetry.