

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET
THE POETRY OF SIR WALTER SCOTT

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LOCKHART tells a story of how Scott, in the midst of writing *The Lady of the Lake*, decided to measure his own fiction by the facts. He threw himself on horseback and, in Lockhart's words, 'put to the test the practicability of riding from the banks of Loch Vennachar to the Castle of Stirling within the brief space which he had assigned to Fitz-James's Grey Bayard, after the battle with Roderick Dhu'.

It is the sort of anecdote which delighted those many admirers of Scott throughout the nineteenth century who applauded in such episodes of Scott's life, as in the poems themselves, Scott's robust and virile, extroverted attitude to the business of writing. The most authoritative expression of this was Byron's, in *Beppo*:

One hates an author that *all author*, fellows
In foolscap uniforms turn'd up with ink,
So very anxious, clever, fine and jealous,
One don't know what to say to them, or think,
Unless to puff them with a pair of bellows;
Of coxcomby's worst coxcombs e'en the pink
Are preferable to these shreds of paper,
These unquench'd snuffings of the midnight taper.

Of these same we see several, and of others,
Men of the world, who know the world like men,
Scott, Rogers, Moore, and all the better brothers,
Who think of something else besides the pen;

This account of Scott, which ranges him, if with Byron himself, also with Samuel Rogers and Tom Moore as against Coleridge and Wordsworth, is in line, so far as I can see, with our current estimate of Scott as poet. In the present century the case often goes by default; Scott's poetry is quite simply overlooked. But I dare say, if challenged, the instructed reader today would agree with Byron, though not in Byron's spirit nor on his grounds, that Scott as poet stands nearer to Rogers than to Wordsworth. However, anyone who thinks it worth while

talking about Scott's poetry at all cannot be satisfied with this estimate of Scott as just a representative Regency versifier, and of his poetry as having therefore, by and large, only historical importance.

The reader who on the other hand endorses this estimate will think he finds confirmation if he turns to the passage in question, the account of Fitz-James's ride:

Along thy banks, swift Teith! they ride,
 And in the race they mock'd their tide;
 Torry and Lendrick now are past,
 And Deanstown lies behind them cast:
 They rise, the banner'd towers of Doune,
 They sink in distant woodland soon;
 Blair-Drummond sees the hoof strike fire,
 They sweep like breeze through Ochtertyre;
 They mark just glance and disappear
 The lofty brow of ancient Keir;
 They bathe their coursers' sweltering sides,
 Dark Forth! amid thy sluggish tides.
 And on the opposing shore take ground,
 With splash, with scramble, and with bound.
 Right-hand they leave thy cliffs, Craig-Forth!
 And soon the bulwark of the North,
 Grey Stirling, with her towers and town,
 Upon their fleet career look'd down.

We may relish the exultation of this, the swing and fire of the rhythm, and still find ourselves thinking that it is essentially, necessarily trivial. One way to disturb this impression is to read on in Lockhart, who remarks, 'the principal landmarks in the description of that fiery progress are so many hospitable mansions all familiar to him at the same period—Blair-drummond, the residence of Lord Kaimes; Ochtertyre, that of John Ramsay, the scholar and antiquary . . . and "the lofty brow of ancient Keir", the splendid seat of the chief family of the name of Stirling . . .'. The names then were not chosen at random, nor just for euphony and rhyme. And if we read the passage again with this information to assist us, we can indeed envisage the possibility—that the litany of place-names has such pace and stir, not only because they mark the stages in a furious ride against time, but also because of the fellow-feeling and the patriotic excitement which their associations awake in the poet. However, this remains only a possibility. The example is not at all conclusive. And no doubt the passage cannot count for much one way or the other.

But perhaps the unsympathetic reader will object to more in this passage than what he sees as its triviality. One can imagine the objection, 'But how wasteful this is! so many ways of saying simply that they galloped past or galloped through!' This seems to me a more profound misunderstanding. At their least considered such objections reveal a misunderstanding not just of Scott's poetry but of all poetry; they strike at and strike down not just the habit of Scott's imagination, but the act of the poetic imagination as such. I should like to dwell on this.

The ride to Stirling comes in Canto V of *The Lady of the Lake*; what follows is from Canto III, which as a whole is a good deal finer. It is a description of an ancient battlefield; or rather, more precisely, a meditation upon it—

The Knot-grass fettered there the hand,
Which once could burst an iron band;
Beneath the broad and ample bone,
That buckler'd heart to fear unknown,
A feeble and a timorous guest,
The field-fare framed her lowly nest;
There the slow blind-worm left his slime
On the fleet limbs that mock'd at time;
And there, too, lay the leader's skull,
Still wreath'd with chaplet flush'd and full,
For heath-bell with her purple bloom
Supplied the bonnet and the plume.

Clearly the reader who complained, 'So many ways of saying only that they galloped!' could complain of this, 'So many ways of saying only that they are dead and gone!' And yet I think he would be more reluctant in this case, would feel uneasily that to complain on these grounds might be to miss the point of poetic perception altogether.

For the way in which syntax and word-order in this passage are continually varied so as to mask, and yet to assert, the identity of the relationships—as knot-grass is to the hand, so field-fare to the heart, blind-worm to the limbs, and heath-bell to the head—this is an example of what may be called 'elegant variation', simply the saying of one thing many ways. And such variation is a constant and governing feature of Scott's style. Another name for it, perhaps a better one, was found by Roman Jakobson when he spoke of the 'poetry of grammar'. Following Sapir, Jakobson would say that grammatically each of the clauses in this passage is identical with all the others. They differ not grammatically but lexically; an identical grammatical

structure is differently 'filled out', but the difference is only in the trappings as it were, and in the disposition.¹ In much ancient poetry such grammatical parallelism, often in a more elementary form, serves as a self-sufficient principle of poetic ordering—as it does once again in some modern *vers-libre*. By Scott, of course, it is used only in conjunction with other ordering principles, the traditional ones of rhyme and imagery and metre. But Scott seldom uses these traditional devices with real power; by the time he wrote *The Lady of the Lake* Scott was, for instance, a dexterous but also a very unsubtle metrist. In any case it is when the traditional principles of order are reinforced by grammatical patterning and parallels that we recognize a poetry thoroughly achieved, structured through and through; and elegant variation, the saying of one thing many ways, brings with it for Scott this additional source of order.

When we speak of such variation as 'elegant', we should not seem to imply that it is peculiarly characteristic of late sophisticated styles. On the contrary, repetition with variation, riddles, and grammatical parallels are staple features of primitive forms like the ballad and the lay and the song; indeed the device of the refrain has meaning and power only in relationship to this principle. And so the distinction of this passage about the battlefield is the same in principle as that of the incomparable 'Proud Maisie', or of a much more relaxed but still wonderfully achieved song, the exquisite 'Brignall Banks are wild and fair' in Canto Third of the otherwise tedious *Rokeby*. The augmented and diverted significance with which on each repetition the refrain is endowed—this is, in poems of this kind, a stroke of the highest art.

Poetry of grammar enters also into rhyme, for the rhyming of a verb with a noun has a more striking and normally a more artistic effect than the rhyming of verb with verb or (but this is different again) of noun with noun.² And thus elegant variation or the poetry of grammar is present in the sophisticated rhyming poetry of Pope as in the riddle and the kenning or those other ancient poetic forms which Scott encountered in

¹ I am here reproducing almost verbatim a passage from Jakobson's paper to an International Conference of Linguistics and Poetics in Warsaw, 1960. It seems to me one case in which linguistics has had something to say which literary criticism cannot afford to ignore. I think the same position was approached out of *criticism*, by R. P. Blackmur in his use of the idea of 'ad-libbing' in an essay on Yeats—a passage which once shocked me into incredulity, which now, however, I am disposed to accept.

² See W. K. Wimsatt, 'One Relation of Rhyme to Reason', in *The Verbal Ikon* (University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

the ballad-collections of Ritson and Bishop Percy, which he encountered at first hand for himself when he compiled *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. On the other hand, rhyme is rather a special case, since it involves direct repetition only of sound, not of sense. And the good poets of the eighteenth century, Scott's predecessors, tended to look askance at manœuvres which involved repetitions of sense, for the sufficient and admirable reason that they valued very highly the qualities of terseness, rapidity, and compactness. Modern poetic theory, because it similarly places a high premium on these qualities, is ill placed to acknowledge as legitimate, still less to enjoy and admire, the sort of talent in Scott which produces his meditation on the ancient battlefield. And Scott himself appears to have held that the terseness and compactness of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* made it poetry of a higher order than any he wrote himself. What needs to be insisted on, however, when we notice the lack of these qualities in Scott's poetry, is that Scott's leisurely and expansive narration can achieve effects which are as foreign to Johnson's style as Johnson's pithiness is foreign to the style of Scott. These are the effects of that gift which seems to figure in our older criticism as 'copiousness of invention'. Not only has this expression disappeared from our criticism, but I do not see what other expression has taken its place. And it puzzles me how we manage without it, or something like it, except by growing blind to that range of poetic effects which it used to denote, ancient and universal as those are. Certainly this, the copiousness of his invention, is the greatest thing in Scott, in poetry and prose alike; and so when we find him saying 'they rode on' in seven different ways, one after the other, we should not suppose that this is wasteful superfluity, but direct creative energy revelling in its own fecundity. If any one protests that this is Art for Art's sake, I would retort that it is rather Nature for Nature's sake; Pasternak has a profound passage in his autobiography, *Safe Conduct*, where he says that just as a physicist plots upon squared paper the track followed by a unit of physical energy such as an electrical charge, so the poet plots in a poem the track followed among images by that psychic energy which we call 'feeling'.

This answer is effective, if only because it is the same copiousness of invention in Scott which elaborates sentiments through variation and contrives one grammatical pattern after another, which elaborates his plots and contrives episode after episode. But the argument is not quite fair, still less conclusive. For the

fact is, of course, that very little of *The Lady of the Lake* is so well written as the passages I have so far considered. George Ellis, in his *Quarterly* review of *The Lady of the Lake*, noted, as new developments since *Marmion* and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, 'a profusion of incident, and a shifting brilliancy of colouring that reminds us of the witchery of Ariosto'.¹ That 'shifting brilliancy' can be illustrated, more literally perhaps than Ellis intended, by a passage such as this, from the first Canto:

The western waves of ebbing day
 Roll'd o'er the glen their level way;
 Each purple peak, each flinty spire,
 Was bathed in floods of living fire,
 But not a setting beam could glow
 Within the dark ravines below,
 Where twined the path in shadow hid
 Round many a rocky pyramid,
 Shooting abruptly from the dell
 Its thunder-splinter'd pinnacle;
 Round many an insulated mass,
 The native bulwarks of the pass,
 Huge as the tower which builders vain
 Presumptuous piled on Shinar's plain.
 The rocky summits, split and rent,
 Form'd turret, dome, or battlement,
 Or seemed fantastically set
 With cupola or minaret,
 Wild crests as pagod ever deck'd,
 Or mosque of Eastern architect.
 Nor were these earth-born castles bare,
 Nor lacked they many a banner fair;
 For, from their shiver'd brows display'd
 Far o'er the unfathomable glade,
 All twinkling with the dew-drops sheen,
 The brier-rose fell in streamers green,
 And creeping shrubs, of thousand dyes,
 Waved in the west-wind's summer sighs.

This is wretched work. It is no good asking the affronted reader not to look in a long poem for a compactness of sentiment, for a weight and also a polish in the expression, which only the short poem can give him. He may be thus outflanked, he is not convinced. And he is right. Such verse as this is not to be

¹ I take it that this reference to Ariosto was what gave the cue to those admirers of Scott who brought it about that a few years later Scott was being advertised all over the Continent as 'the Ariosto of the North'.

excused by any talk of energetic invention, or of bluff appetite and gusto too caught up in its own narrative to pause for effeminate niceties. On the contrary, what is disastrously lacking to this writing is precisely masculinity, masculinity as Pater defined it when he spoke of 'manliness' in art as 'a full consciousness of what one does, of art itself in the work of art, tenacity of intuition and of consequent purpose'. It lacks that 'masterly execution' which, to Hopkins too, as Pater's pupil, 'is a kind of male gift'. It lacks precisely that structuring through and through which appears in the passage about the battlefield. It is this, an energy of apprehension which, so far from running wild, seeks out of itself the structures to control it, which makes a piece of writing masculine or manly, as Pater and Hopkins understood those terms. And I hope it is plain that their understanding of masculinity is more serious, more ancient (for it goes back, I think, to 'Longinus'), and also far more relevant to poetry as poetry, than Byron's liking for 'men of the world, who know the world like men' or, to take another example, the 'virility' which W. M. Rossetti in 1870 allowed to Scott, as something implied by calling him 'spirited'. And if Scott always has Byron's and Rossetti's kind of masculinity, only seldom does he rise to the manliness demanded by Hopkins and Pater.

The effeminacy of this last passage, the absence from it of the truly masculine, the *truly* robust, appears in nothing so clearly as in the handling of the metre. It was Ellis again, reviewing the poem on its first appearance, who was sorry to see it cast into octosyllabic couplets. If one speaks, in a time-honoured phrase, of the 'fatal fluency' of this metre, one ought to mean, I think, that the metrical norm asserts itself so insistently as to iron out any play of spoken stress against that norm. Thus in the case of 'The brier-rose fell in streamers green', the interesting rhythm of that line in isolation, with its hesitation on the very weak second syllable of 'brier', and the breath-pause that must intervene between the stressed syllables 'rose' and 'fell', is subjugated entirely when the line is read in the context, so that we read Thē briēr-rōse féll; the stressed syllable 'rose' being crammed into the weak supposedly unstressed place in an iambic foot, while the frailty of the second syllable of 'brier' is drowned out completely. (This is a good example, incidentally, of how delicacy with metre assists diction also, for if Scott had respected the innate rhythm of his words he would have noticed how 'rose' and 'fell' lived awkwardly together because of the other 'rose' that comes from 'to rise'.) 'Earth-born castles'

and 'the west-wind's summer sighs' are two other phrases whose rhythms are stunned by the metre. And in fact, scansion reveals that, throughout, the disposition of stress against the syllables is insensitive, arbitrary, slipshod, and improvised.

And yet this is the poet who wrote 'Proud Maisie'; who wrote also this—

From the sound of Teviot's tide,
 Chafing with the mountain's side,
 From the groan of the wind-swung oak,
 From the sullen echo of the rock,
 From the voice of the coming storm,
 The Ladye knew it well!
 It was the Spirit of the Flood that spoke,
 And he called on the Spirit of the Fell
 . . . 'Sleep'st thou, Brother?' . . .

The shock which this gives us (it is from *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*) is almost entirely a matter of rippling, resilient movement; it has to do with the accentual, rather than accentual-syllabic, metre. Not only is it more resilient and sprightly; the rhythms are given more margin to gather power before being reined back. Then too, the wandering of the stress keeps us alert so as to find it, never in each new line quite where it was in the line before. Scott, we are told, took the hint for this from Coleridge; but he deserves credit for having of himself a sufficiently inward aliveness to verse-movement to be able to profit from Coleridge's rediscovery of this ancient music. And in any case, to some extent this new alertness and unpredictability of rhythm were characteristic of all the good verse from the first phase of the English Romantic Movement, when it was still close to Percy's *Reliques*. Professor Josephine Miles in her very instructive and learned *Eras and Modes of English Poetry*, sets these lines from the *Lay* along with stanzas from Blake, from Burns, and from Tom Moore, to recreate very challengingly our sense of what a new departure was inaugurated when these poets and others began writing in this way at various dates in the 1790's. We are so aware of the confusingly many things that Romanticism later became, that we are in every danger of forgetting what a simple and salient thing it must have appeared to start with; and most of our difficulties with, for instance, the masterpiece of this first phase, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, come when we try to read that poem as if it belonged to a later Romanticism which trafficked in allegory. But this is to stray from considerations simply of metre. And as

to this, I am glad to borrow Professor Miles's authoritative account, when she speaks of 'a varied and broken line pattern, the constant remission of four stresses to three, with consequent effects of easy repetition or wordlessness, the lightness of assonance as the shading of rhyme, feminine as the shading of masculine endings, shadings of echo and progression from stanza to stanza, and indeed in every new form of modification in sound, the quality of shadow, echo, or answer, rather than the massed and cumulative forces of the old pentameters'. This is a description of the musical dimensions of *The Lay* and, not so exactly but still substantially, of *Marmion* also. Such fineness in the texture of sound is absent from *The Lady of the Lake*; and in fact it may well be maintained that by the time Scott wrote *The Lady*, the third of his narrative poems, his most original work was already behind him. Certainly, although there are interesting things in later narratives such as *The Lord of the Isles* and *Harold the Dauntless*, there are the clearest indications in his long poems after *The Lady of the Lake* that the resources of the author's most vivid imaginative life were already being husbanded against the time when he would draw upon them for his novels. And equally certainly some of the most impressive characteristics of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Marmion*, have already disappeared from *The Lady of the Lake*.

We see this in another way, at the level of diction rather than metre, if we go back for a moment to what Ellis said of 'the shifting brilliancy of colouring' in *The Lady of the Lake*. In the passage I quoted from this poem it is indeed the 'purple peak', the brier-rose which is 'twinkling with the dew-drops' sheen', and the 'creeping shrubs, of thousand dyes', which are the clearest symptoms of the loss by Scott of his initial vision and impetus. It is not that these notations are inaccurate or imprecise. For neither an Imagist exactitude nor a Keatsian full vividness of sensuous register was at any time part of Scott's purpose. In his earlier poems, as in the ballads which inspired them and (what should give us pause) in the heroic poetry of the ancient world, colours for instance have a function as much emblematic or heraldic as descriptive. Quite simply, in *The Lay* and in *Marmion* as opposed to *The Lady of the Lake* or *Rokeby*, Scott used a far more restricted palette of bold primary colours, and so achieved a more severe effect:

When red hath set the beamless sun,
Through heavy vapours dark and dun;

Till, dark above, and white below
Decided drives the flaky snow, . . .

(where 'Decided', I think, is very fine); or else (Flodden field seen from afar):

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 . . . ,

where the diverse colours of the pennons are strangely and emblematically bleached to a uniform white.

Ruskin in volume III of *Modern Painters* takes another example from the description of Flodden:

The white pavilions made a show
Like remnants of the winter snow
Along the dusky ridge.

And Ruskin makes a great deal of Scott's use of colour:

in general, if he does not mean to say much about things, the *one* character which he will give is colour, using it with the most perfect mastery and faithfulness, up to the point of possible modern perception. For instance, if he has a sea-storm to paint in a single line, he does not, as a feebler poet would probably have done, use any expression about the temper or form of the waves; does not call them angry or mountainous. He is content to strike them out with two dashes of Tintoret's favourite colours:

*'The blackening wave is edged with white,
To inch and rock the sea-mews fly.'*

And—

Again: where he has to describe tents mingled among oaks, he says nothing about the form of either tent or tree, but only gives the two strokes of colour:

*'Thousand pavilions, white as snow,
Chequered the borough moor below,
Oft giving way, where still there stood
Some relics of the old oak wood,
That darkly huge did intervene,
And tamed the glaring white with green.'*

But this last example is something different, as Ruskin should have acknowledged. 'And tamed the glaring white with green'—this is too painterly, too precious I had almost said, for comfort.

There are other places where Scott shows this sort of precious-

ness in stylized patterning of colour. A place where it causes no discomfort is the first stanza of Canto Second of *The Lay*:

If thou would'st view fair Melrose aright,
Go visit it by the pale moonlight;
For the gay beams of lightsome day
Gild, but to flout, the ruins grey.
When the broken arches are black in night,
And each shafted oriel glimmers white;
When the cold light's uncertain shower
Streams on the ruin'd central tower;
When buttress and buttress, alternately,
Seem fram'd of ebon and ivory; . . .

This domino pattern of black and white, with the painterly perception of 'cold light' in the fine line, 'When the cold light's uncertain shower', has not at all the severe effect of the whites and blacks at Flodden. On the contrary this is plainly a perception of the Regency man of letters, not of any belated harpist of the Scottish border. It is none the worse for that; indeed it comes conveniently to remind us that *The Lay* for all its loving re-creation of the conventions of late medieval romance, is by no means a simple pastiche, however expert, like some of Scott's art-ballads. The distinction of the poem is precisely that its author, while not pretending to be other than he is, a man of the Regency, can nevertheless assimilate into that modern posture habits of thought and feeling from an older and very different age.

The quite different colour-effect which Scott brings over from the ballads appears at its most impressive, as I think, in the introduction to the third Canto of *Marmion*. Here, in an epistle to William Erskine, Scott excuses himself for having deserted classical precedents of form, of genre, and of subject ('Brunswick's venerable hearse'). The emphasis falls on structure, as Scott vindicates the rambling development of 'the romance' against the classical requirement of a single unified great action. But the verse comes to life when the alternative unclassical inspiration is seen in terms not of structure but of *hue*:

Yet was poetic impulse given
By the green hill and clear blue heaven.

And the other example which Scott gives, besides the green and blue of his native Scotland, of how early environment moulds

the poet beyond what precept can later correct, is similarly seen in terms of primary colour:

Look east, and ask the Belgian why,
 Beneath Batavia's sultry sky,
 He seeks not eager to inhale
 The freshness of the mountain gale,
 Content to rear his whiten'd wall
 Beside the dank and dull canal?
 He'll say, from youth he loved to see
 The white sail gliding by the tree.

The surely unpremeditated repetition here—'whiten'd' and 'white'—has a mysterious purity and force which imprint it on the mind as the metrical resilience and eagerness imprint 'By the green hill and clear blue heaven'. What both passages have is a simplicity which is not Wordsworth's simplicity, though related to his. For it is a definitive characteristic of English Romanticism as the literary historian knows it in its earliest phase, when it is the deliberate revival, not just in subject and mood, vocabulary and metre, but also in *morality*, of the poetic style of the ballad.

When I speak of morality, I have not in mind codes or habits of morality between man and man, such as the code of chivalry to which Scott pays tribute when William of Deloraine stands over the body of his enemy Richard Musgrave. Rather I mean the sort of morality which particularly concerned Ruskin, the morality of man's relation to the non-human Creation. Accordingly I return to Ruskin for a statement of the morality implicit in Scott's way of seeing and Scott's way of writing:

Scott is able to conquer all tendencies to the pathetic fallacy, and instead of making Nature anyway subordinate to himself, he makes himself subordinate to *her*—follows her lead simply—does not venture to bring his own cares and thoughts into her pure and quiet presence—paints her in her simple and universal truth, adding no result of momentary passion or fancy, and appears, therefore, at first shallower than other poets, being in reality wider and healthier.

It is generally held, I suppose, that 'the pathetic fallacy' is a bee which never buzzed in any bonnet but Ruskin's. And for my part I have no wish to bring back the days when the first thing to do with any poet was to inquire after his 'feeling for nature'. Yet ours is an age when we are invited to see the non-human world for purposes of poetry as merely a repertoire of 'objective correlatives', of potential symbols ready to 'stand in' for the

human reality which, on this showing, alone deserves the poet's attention. In such a period we may indeed dismiss as shallow what is simply sane and truly robust.

For here I believe 'manliness' appears again, with yet another meaning. When Byron said of Keats, 'Such writing is a sort of mental masturbation . . . I don't mean he is indecent, but viciously soliciting his own ideas', he was surely defending his own practice as the author of such lines as these:

It was the cooling hour, just when the rounded
 Red sun sinks down behind the azure hill,
 Which then seems as if the whole earth it bounded,
 Circling all nature, hush'd, and dim, and still,
 With the far mountain-crescent half surrounded
 On one side, and the deep sea calm and chill,
 Upon the other, and the rosy sky,
 With one star sparkling through it like an eye.

This stanza from *Don Juan* is, as usual with Byron, extremely careless. But 'the deep sea calm and chill' represents a strength which Byron shares with Scott and with no one else among his contemporaries. The bold and simple epithets—'deep', 'calm', 'chill'—are like Scott's greens and blues, whites and reds and blacks, his bright and dark and cold. They represent a morality in respect of the natural world which is incompatible with the Keatsian morality, but not necessarily inferior. Such a brave risking of the obvious which issues for both Scott and Byron (notably in *Don Juan*) in simple naming of objects and their appearances, seems to testify to a straightforward gratitude for the pleasures of sense, and a fear that to probe them too nearly, on the one hand so far from heightening will tarnish them, on the other hand will seem ungrateful. There are several reasons for calling this refusal to fuss and probe a masculine attitude. For one thing such a casual registering of only the broad appearance is appropriate to the horseman or the traveller, the man in active life; whereas the more sedulous analysis and enumeration of Keats, of Coleridge, Tennyson, Hopkins (different as these are) is plainly, by contrast, sedentary. The modern writer who at his best shares this attitude is a self-consciously masculine author, Ernest Hemingway.

It may have appeared perverse in me to dwell so long on what must be called, however loosely, the descriptive element, in what are after all narrative poems. But Scott himself, in a headnote to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, declared that 'the description of scenery and manners was more the object of the

author than a combined and regular narrative'. For narrative in the narrow sense of an unpredictable but probable story suspensefully told, *The Lady of the Lake* is the best of the poems; but then it is also the poem of which one feels that the story would do better as a *Waverley* novel, in prose. On the other hand, the clumsy and improbable plot of *Marmion*, though it is irritating, is less so in verse than it would have been in prose. In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* the story is so slight and simple, so patently only the vehicle for other matters, that it does not get in the way. This is as much as we ask, and it is what we get; though particular episodes, such as Deloraine's visit, in Canto II, to the tomb of Michael Scott in Melrose Abbey, are well and suspensefully handled. In none of the poems is the plot itself the symbol of the issues being debated, as it is, for instance, in *Waverley*. But this would be to ask of Scott what neither he nor any other poet in English has provided, the novel in verse such as Pushkin provided with *Eugene Onegin*, and Mickiewicz in Poland with *Pan Tadeusz*. If we did have such works in English poetry, we should be hard pressed to know what to do with them, so readily do we assume that plot is trivial, so eagerly do we probe behind the literal meaning, and the subject overtly offered, to the 'theme' which we suppose lies behind it. It is this which makes us treat *The Ancient Mariner* as if it were a poem about the alienation of the artist from society, or about Christian redemption, or about neurosis and its cure; so far are we from seeing it as about a mariner and the strange voyage he took. Only if we recover the conviction that the meaning at the literal level is at any rate part, and a principal part, of the total meaning of a poem, only then shall we be in a position to appreciate a poem like *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, the literal meaning of which is all the meaning there is (and quite sufficient too), a poem which is 'about' no more than what it is overtly about, that is, a foray into the Scottish lowlands in the sixteenth century. It is true, moreover, that in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* Scott did aim at what has come to be accepted as a principal function of the European novel—the substantiation of a whole provincial society. And I think he succeeded, for we do indeed realize an image, convincing to the imagination, of the society of the Border in the sixteenth century, at every social level from the brutalized smallholder Watt Tinlinn, through the man at arms William of Deloraine, and the monk of Melrose, to the nobility. If I have said little of this, where Scott (it is clear) laid great store by it, it is partly because it is difficult to illustrate

in any way that illuminates equally matters of diction, syntax, and metre. Moreover, this delineation of manners is something which the Waverley novels do sometimes better and nearly always equally well; whereas my object has been to show that Scott is a poet, not merely a novelist who also wrote verse.