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Philip Dundas

**Department of English Literature
University of Glasgow**

M.Phil (by research)

'John Wilson: the 'Margaret' Poems.'

1 May 2005

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Abstract

In her 1862 biography *'Christopher North'; A memoir of John Wilson*, Mary Gordon brushes over some important extant juvenilia composed by her father, dismissing it as sentimental versification. However, she refers to a volume of poems written by Wilson in 1802 and given to a young woman called Margaret Mitchelson. In an article written in PMLA in 1940 'John Wilson and the 'Orphan-Maid: some unpublished letters' Alan Lang Strout writes about a number of letters Wilson wrote from Oxford over several years, lamenting the loss of Margaret, whom his mother would not accept as suitable for her wealthy son. These letters (here offered in their original versions) and the volume of poems demonstrate the enormous importance of this experience in Wilson's early life and gives us invaluable insight into his educational background and literary influences. They show a young man completely in tune with the literary debates and poets of his day. And they also give us a fascinating view of the intellectual development of the young man at Glasgow College (before it became the university) who famously wrote a lengthy critique of *Lyrical Ballads* to Wordsworth in 1802, the same year as this volume was compiled.

Although little is known of its provenance, the octavo, calf-bound volume was bought by the British Library in the late 1920s. The volume contains a 38pp preface and 36 poems, covering over 200 pages. This submission for Master of Philosophy by research presents an edited version of these previously undiscovered poems and preface with introductory chapters detailing the circumstances behind and influences on their composition.

Philip Dundas
Dept of English Literature
University of Glasgow
May 2005

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Introduction

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The search for information on the life of a literary figure often starts with an entry in one of the many guides and companions compiled by the big publishing houses. However, when it comes to more obscure writers, few of these editions (despite claims of regular revision) offer the insights of current, detailed research. Their remit is simply too narrow to do anything but reduplicate information on all but the most clearly canonical writers. Hence a student of romanticism, who wanted the current view on John Wilson ('Christopher North'), will find scant detail of scholarship in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (OUP 2003) or the *Companion to the Romantic Age* (OUP 1999). They simply re-iterate details from Mary Gordon's *1862 Memoir of Christopher North*, itself a largely domestic and highly subjective biography. The key points are duly noted with some loose variations; his association with the Lake School, some palely derivative poetry, the loss of a personal fortune and the subsequent writing for *Blackwood's*, which led to the invention of 'Christopher North' and the *Noctes Ambrosianae*. Here Wilson was elected Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University for purely political reasons and was author of several 'mawkish' novels.

Such beggarly description belies the man but it is symptomatic of the doldrums in which Wilson has found himself adrift throughout most of the last century. Today he is seen at best as a minor figure who took advantage of his literary contacts, abused his friends and - even worse - through the pages of *Blackwood's*, damaged the literary geniuses of his day. But such a perspective - judging the man of history by contemporary social and political values - lacks academic rigour. And while it is outside the parameters of this work to evaluate fully the literary contribution of Wilson's lifetime, three common misapprehensions about him should be corrected here: his relationship with Wordsworth and Coleridge, his politics and the vindictiveness of his reviews.

After his years at Oxford, where he won the first Newdigate Prize for poetry, Wilson purchased land in the Lakes and came into the company of the Wordsworths. Henry Crabb Robinson, who like so many others since, could never forgive Wilson for what he thought were treacherous reviews of Wordsworth, claims that the latter was never close to the younger man. But this belies the facts. Both the Coleridge and Wordsworth families were frequent guests at Wilson's home at Elleray and Wilson was godfather to Wordsworth's son and close companion to his family. Letters show that Wilson for a time was Wordsworth's confidante and the two men shared a passion for walking in the mountains around Elleray. Crabb Robinson also describes Wilson's work as an attenuation of Wordsworth's. It is true that Wilson did attempt, in his 1812 collection, *Isle of Palms*, to write a volume of poetry with Wordsworth as his chief model and with considerable public success. But this should be interpreted as affirmation rather than denigration. While living at Elleray, Wilson also acted as a runner to the library at Calgarth for Coleridge, for whom he made significant contributions to *The Friend*. He is also mentioned with great affection as a close member of the Coleridge circle by Sarah Hutchison in her letters¹.

In contemporary Scottish studies, Wilson is accused of betraying of a radical tradition inherited from Burns and has been marked as the 'progenitor of the kailyard' school². On the other hand, it could be seen that for reasons of personal financial security, Wilson wrote his 'popular' novels to make a living (as many have since) and successfully fed a public appetite for sentimental fiction. On returning to Scotland, he found himself at the heart of the literary and artistic circles in Edinburgh and became a close associate of the important men of this society. James Hogg, William Blackwood and John Gibson Lockhart quickly became his allies and he remained on good terms with Scott, Cockburn and Jeffrey over many years.

Wilson was rarely interested in the political implications of his literary views but like Hogg he was temperamentally on the side of tradition. Finding the Whig literary constituency taken up by

¹ Hutchison, Sara. *The Letters of Sara Hutchison from 1800-1835*. ed Kathleen Coburn, (London)1954.

² Andrew Noble 'John Wilson and the Tory Hegemony' in *The History of Scottish Literature* vol 3. ed. Douglas Gifford, Aberdeen 1988, 125-15.

the *Edinburgh Review*, the potential to write for William Blackwood's monthly magazine was an opportunity to fill gap in the market rather than a statement of his political leanings. With such a clear gap in the market, the literary carve-up of Edinburgh's magazine war could begin in earnest.

As to the disparate extremes of Wilson's responses to Leigh Hunt, Keats, Wordsworth, Hogg, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron or Tennyson in the pages of *Blackwood's*, they were neither politically nor personally motivated. As a critic Wilson was controlled by an entirely personal ethos of what he saw as literary integrity. However inconsistent that might have been, he was never frightened to change his mind or extend himself beyond the boundaries of fashionable criticism. He promoted a highly original and robust critical style; a match for the greatest of his time. His reputation then was as leonine as it is has become asinine today.

Psychologically Wilson was more inclined towards Jacobitism than to anti-Jacobin *realpolitik* and was well known to have been a Whig in his political leanings. His elevation to the Chair of Moral Philosophy by Edinburgh Town Council was an astute move to fend off the threat of Sir James Mackintosh, although ultimately the battle was between Wilson and his old school friend William Hamilton, who later took the Chair of Logic. Critics of Wilson claim that, evidently unqualified for the job, he was chosen only because of his avowed Tory principles and then had his lectures written for him by his friend Alexander Blair: a surprisingly naïve assessment of history. Wilson's appointment was by no means untypical and a perusal of the Blair letters in the Brotherton Library in Leeds, will show that although Wilson was given considerable help and support with the content of his original lectures, they were by no means written by his friend. Thirty-five years, lecturing to hundreds of students in the classes of Moral Philosophy and Political Economy at Edinburgh University must have been a clear testimonial to his abilities.

My own interest in Wilson's life began with a short biography of John Wilson's life written by Elsie Swann³. I had been aware of his name on two counts. First his home in Edinburgh's Royal Circus, by then a hotel called the Christopher North, had been an illicit drinking den when I was a schoolboy. Secondly I was aware of the John Wilson who had written the letter to Wordsworth on reading *Lyrical Ballads* (a copy of which is often appended to school editions of the poet's work). Having read Swann's biography, I was curious why a man who evidently had such virtuosic talents and celebrity in his day had suffered such neglect among scholars today. I next turned to his daughter Mary Gordon's memoir. Uncritical and adulatory, it suggests that Gordon had sifted through the papers available, created a daughter's hagiography and destroyed as many of his personal papers she could, in order to prevent any future unauthorised scrutiny of his life.

However in reading the biography something intrigued me. She writes of a love affair Wilson embarked on when only a teenager. The young woman was Margaret Mitchelson. Before going up to university, Wilson wrote a volume of poems accompanied by a long preface which he dedicated and gave to Margaret. I looked it up at the British Library and recognising the importance of this collection of unpublished juvenilia in terms of its contribution to our understanding of Wilson's early life, set about transcribing the manuscript.

Clearly Wilson was precocious in his talents and enthusiasms. The volume shows a sharp intellect wholly engaging with eighteenth-century poetic traditions, while simultaneously embracing the new ideas enshrined in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The poems fit perfectly Robert Mayo's discussion of contemporary magazine poetry⁴; they are imitative in form and content but Wilson uses his subject matter deftly, producing a credible synthesis of many turn-of-the-century poetic influences and subjects, from Rousseau and Ossian, to Campbell, Bowles, Charlotte Smith, Rogers, Thomson and Pope. In the Preface he focuses on highly controversial

³ Elsie Swann, *Christopher North*, (Edinburgh 1934).

⁴ Robert Mayo, 'The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*', *PMLA* 69 (1954), 486-522.

elements of contemporary literary debate, taking issue directly with Francis Jeffrey's review of *Thalaba* in the *Edinburgh Review*, recognising the importance of ideas of the natural and sublime over the form and order of the Augustan poets. And with clear judgement, even at sixteen and against all conventional views, he recognises Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth as the important poets of his time.

At this time Wilson was a student of George Jardine, Professor of Logic at Glasgow, who himself had been one of Adam Smith's most influential students. Under Jardine's tutelage, Wilson composed one of the most perceptive critiques of *Lyrical Ballads* in his 1802 letter to Wordsworth; significant enough to elicit an uncharacteristically long reply from the poet. And my research proves that the May 1802 letter, originally sent to Wordsworth at Ambleside, had such an impact on Wordsworth that wishing to reconsider its contents, the poet had it forwarded to a *poste restante* address at Calais in August of that year.

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The substance of this submission for Master of Philosophy (by research) is a scrutiny of the 'Margaret Poems' and their accompanying preface. The first task has been to transcribe the handwritten volume in which are contained 38 poems and a 35 page preface and I present an edited version of these. Appended to these I offer a corrected version of Wilson's 1802 letter to Wordsworth as it was written at the same time as these poems and casts a useful light on Wilson's intellectual development. In the introductory chapters, I have looked at Wilson's early life, to the age of sixteen; returning to the original sources to bring together the accounts of his contemporaries and teachers, his unexpurgated letters, and the fragments of information still extant after his daughter had disposed of what she could.

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I would like to acknowledge the staff and trustees of the National Library of Scotland, the Mitchell Library, the Brotherton Library in Leeds, Glasgow and Edinburgh University Libraries, the British Library and the Wordsworth Library, Grasmere. I would also like to thank the staff of the Paisley Town Library, who helped me piece together the fragments of Wilson's family history

and childhood. I owe my thanks also to Professors Marilyn Gaull, Robert Morrison, Duncan Wu and John Worthen.

I embarked upon this work in 1999 as a part-time student. In the intervening five years it has taken to submit, there are a number of people without whose patience and encouragement I could not have completed. As research student, with a full-time career in educational broadcasting, this has at times been a daunting process and without the support of those professional and enthusiastic people it would never have been finished. Richard Cronin for having faith in me where others did not; Nicky Trott, my brilliant and inspiring supervisor, unfailing in her good humour, patient interest and belief in the end result; John Strachan for being a fellow Wilsonite; Michael and Melissa Bakewell for introducing me to Wilson and his coterie; Charles Maclean for teaching me how to be a researcher, then a writer and finally an editor and of course for introducing me to the Speculative Society; Helen Runciman who as a lifelong friend has made it her business to know more about Wilson than she might naturally be inclined to, and finally Glynn Jones for his love and continuous encouragement to complete this project. Thanks to you all.

A Note on the Text

In transcribing the poems and text in the volume, I have regularised Wilson's punctuation and capitalisation (his unconventional use of apostrophes often confuses the sense of what he is writing). His use of capitals is random and I feel more to do with Augustan convention and the flourish of handwriting than to give any *extra* meaning to the poems. Equally his ampersands seem to be a necessity in order to squeeze all of the poems within the pages of this octavo volume and so I have normalised these throughout the text. In his use of em-dashes he is prolific but I believe that they somehow transmit the breathless energy and virtuosity with which, it seems to me, he dashed off many of these poems in fair copy. However, I have corrected spelling mistakes, some careless and others more eccentric. Where the contents of the appendices are cited in the introductory chapters, the page or line number is given in brackets beside the name of the poem or at the end of the quotation.

*The following little Poems,
 Which owe any beauty they possess
 To the delicacy of her feelings,
 And the emotions she has inspired,
 Are as a small mark
 Of his esteem and regard
 inscribed
 By her warmest friend and sincerest admirer
 John Wilson*

Sometime between 4 June 1800¹ and June 1803, at the age of 16, John Wilson gathered together the poems he had written as a boy, added a preface to the work, copied it up in a neat leather-bound octavo volume and dedicated the whole to Margaret Mitchelson², to whom we presume it was given. This manuscript of the 'Margaret' poems, resurfaced during the 1920s, was acquired by the British Library and has remained there, largely unnoticed, ever since. It is one among many of his papers Wilson scholars might wish to see, many of which were destroyed or hidden by his daughter, Mary Gordon, after she had selected what she needed for her 1862 memoir. She does refer to the volume and even lists the poems contained therein but has nothing to say about them. This underestimates the project. She chooses to focus on the vague circumstances of the underlying love affair with Margaret as if to excuse the poems as juvenilia and all but peremptorily dismisses the serious literary significance of this early poetic endeavour:

These verses are commonplace enough; but the sentiments are never other than refined. The adoration is unmistakably genuine, and, though fervent, respectful; tinged with a sense of gratitude that touches the sympathies even now. Occasionally the strain rises above mere versification into something of real poetry.³

¹ The paper bears the watermarks 1800 and 1801 but the first poem I am able to date is 4 June 1801.

² Margaret was the 'Orphan Maid' Wilson later refers to throughout his writings. She was identified by John Dunlop of the Mitchell Library in 1933 for A.L. Strout, who discussed a number of manuscript letters concerning her relationship with Wilson and now at the Edinburgh University Library (see p7n).

³ Mary Gordon, 'Christopher North': a memoir of John Wilson / compiled from family papers and other sources (Edinburgh 1862) vol 1, 36.

Not much is known of John Wilson's childhood except for what he describes, as an adult in the quasi-biographical accounts of his alter-ego, in *The Recreations of Christopher North*. Outside these literary reveries, the information is scant. However, while isolating the facts is precarious and unreliable, these fictions do point to certain credible details threaded into them:

Our memory is a treasure-house of written and unwritten poetry—the ingots, the gifts of the great bards and the bars of bullion—much of the coin our own—some of it borrowed mayhap, but always on good security, and repaid with interest—a legal transaction, of which even a not unwealthy man has no need to be ashamed—none of it stolen...⁴

This statement is typical of the way that Wilson has fictionalised his life and what makes it so difficult for us to mark the real experiences of his life from the imagined. Even after he died, the veil of mystery continued around him. The following article appears in manuscript form in the Blackwood Papers in the archives of the National Library of Scotland, entitled 'Affecting Catastrophe'⁵:

We are truly concerned and have to state that the celebrated Professor Wilson of Edinburgh has—after lingering for three weeks in a state of the most vivid torture which he bore with that Christian patience and equanimity for which he was always distinguished—at last fallen victim to the consequences of the melancholy accident to which we sometime ago alluded. Like Lord Byron, this distinguished Character has been cut off in the very prime of his life and like him it is commonly reported the Professor had prepared Memoirs of his own history illustrated with many highly interesting notices of his literary and philosophical contemporaries. This work the Profr. gave two or three years ago to a friend of his now abroad whose pecuniary resources were at the time rather embarrassed. Major Baxter, however, has, like the Bard of Java, preferred the feelings of the heart and the temptations of avarice, and tho' *the world may lament the result, in a literary point of view* still it is impossible not to approve of the fine sensibility exhibited on this trying occasion by the generous Major.

Mr W's death was improved in a much affecting manner last Sunday by the Revd. Dr Thomson of St George's—of whose congregation the late Poet had long been a constant and distinguished Member. The congregation were dissolved in tears during the pathetic appeal of our great Preacher. The Text was Lamentations Chap III verse 7 and 8 4.—"He hath broken my bones".—

We hear it rumoured that a copy of the Memoirs *does* exist. It is said to be in the hands of Mrs Gray a lady of considerable rank in the world of Letters. Report talks of a private Edition from the Belfast press.

Whether this tantalising obituary was a 'Maga' ruse to gain notoriety, possibly even planted by Wilson himself, or whether there ever was such a memoir, remains unsolved. Suffice to say that the difficulty of distinguishing between John Wilson and Christopher North was ever so. What

⁴ 'Soliloquy on the Seasons' J. F. Ferrier ed, *The Works of Professor Wilson* (Edinburgh 1856), vol x, 241.

⁵ NLS MS 4107 ff294-295.

we can surmise from the early experiences described in this work, is that he invented the latter as a means of keeping many of the intimate experiences of the real man, private.

Wilson was born in 1785 in Paisley, on the River Cart about six miles west of Glasgow. In the *Statistical Account of Scotland 1791-1799*⁶, Paisley, a Royal Burgh, is described as one of the most affluent manufacturing towns in Scotland. Its chief trade was in the production of gauze linen and it was this business in which Wilson's family had found their fortune. An entry in the list of inhabitants of Paisley taken for the 1695 Poll Tax offers⁷:

John Wilson mert. worth 500 mks., 2 lib., 16sh general pole; Isabel Holmes, spouse
6sh.; John and Elizabeth his children, each 6sh.

This John, Wilson's grandfather, had inherited his business from his own father whose success was well established by 1732, when he built an impressive townhouse in the High Street of Paisley. It was here that John Wilson was born on 18 May 1785. His mother Margaret Sym (sister of Robert Sym, Edinburgh advocate, Writer to the Signet and the 'Timothy Tickler' of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*), came from the Dunlops of Garnkirk, who were descended from the Marquis of Montrose, the notorious Covenanter. These grand connections and the Wilsons' considerable wealth made them important figures in Paisley. Soon after Wilson's birth the acquisition of further property in the High Street, so as to build a bigger and more elegant mansion, marks his childhood as one of considerable luxury.

After a preliminary education in Paisley at the 'English' school under a teacher called James Peddie, Wilson was sent away to study in the manse, in accord with the tradition of his class. The minister was Dr George McLatchie who lived at Mount Pleasant near Newton Mearns. Wilson stayed with him along with a number of other boys. And from what Christopher North tells us, it was a happy childhood in salubrious surroundings. Time not spent in studies was whiled away fishing and exploring the countryside around the manse.

⁶ Sir John Sinclair ed. *Statistical Account of Scotland 1791-1799*, 21 vols; vii, 'Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire', 74

⁷ Matthew Blair, *The Paisley Thread Industry and the Men Who Created and Developed It*, (Alexander Gardner 1907), 83

Wilson made many friends among the locals and he always had great sensitivity to his attachments as a boy, the more so as his own childhood was dogged by tragedy. He describes how one of his classmates at Mount Pleasant, Harry Wilton, the grandson of an English peer and laird of Ardgowan, died of a fever while at the manse. A local boy, Lawrie Logan, became Wilson's next companion in adventure. They watched fox cubs and Lawrie once even saved Wilson from drowning when he became entangled in a fishing line. Wilson tells how Lawrie went off to be a soldier and how he returned only to face the death of his brother Willie, another of the schoolboy's familiars. Many of the local characters and rural events are recounted in swathes of sentimentalism. It is clear that Wilson remembered this time with great fondness, however hard the balance of truth and literary artifice is to distinguish. But we do know that as he grew up, grief continued to characterise his life. By 1797 Wilson had endured the deaths of both his sister and father and his halcyon childhood days were over.

Later that year, Wilson moved to Glasgow where he was enrolled in classes at the University, under the guardianship of George Jardine, Professor of Logic and Rhetoric. For six years this precocious, fiery-minded boy was educated in the rudiments and practice of rhetoric and composition, acquiring the extraordinary eloquence for which he was later so much admired.

Setting the pattern for his later life, according to his daughter's account and from what we can piece together from his later writings, Wilson would undergo massive bursts of creative and scholarly energy, to which the volume of poems edited in this thesis and their preface are witness. And an equally strenuous range of emotional and physical endeavours counterbalanced this intellectual prowess. He would take off for days at a time without warning, wandering far north through the glens and mountains, fishing his way upstream deep into the Highlands, a practice he would continue throughout his life.

The 'Margaret' poems are full of descriptions of natural scenery. In boyhood, his blossoming poetic imagination was captivated by the sublimity of his surroundings. As with many of the poems, in 'Caledonia'⁸(89) an inchoate romantic consciousness toys instinctively with the potency of poetry in recalling these sensations:

Though wild thy scenes and boisterous thy clime
Yet well I love thy frowning rocks sublime,
And when far distant from thy awful view
Will memory's living page thy striking charms renew? (29-32)

In ways that are commensurate with what we now recognise as distinctively romantic responses to the natural environment in his poems, Wilson also focuses on the self engaging with love and loss as essential sources of inspiration for poetry. In the 'Margaret' poems, death becomes the subject of elegy; he seems to find in the melancholy a sentiment through which he enjoys exercising his poetic efforts. As well as being direct responses to his own grief, he is also acknowledging the substance of his teacher's remarks in a lecture on 'Elegiac Composition':

The end which the elegiac poet has in view, is to excite that melancholy state of mind which is not inconsistent with some degree of pleasure, and with which there is a general disposition to sympathise... This end the poet effects by description of the death of friends, and other occasions of grief.⁹

The poem 'Lines Written in Kenmore Hermitage'¹⁰(163) mourns the death of both Wilson's father and sister. Like many other poems it has a crepuscular setting, opening in a dank grove and echoing with invocations to the muse of 'pensive eye' and the song of the night-warbler which 'Melt[s] so gradual on the ear'. Here Wilson enacts the part of Coleridge's 'night-wandering man' in 'The Nightingale'¹¹; the poet is poised for the recollection of loss, entranced by nature's 'strange fairy strains'. He is immersed in the peace of his solitude:

to the influxes
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
Surrendering his whole spirit¹²

⁸ ff Where the contents of the appendices are cited in the introductory chapters, a reference to the page and line number where appropriate is given in brackets beside the name of the poem or at the end of the quotation.

⁹ George Jardine, *Synopsis of the Lectures on Logic and Belles Lettres* (1797) GUL SpColi, 71

¹⁰ Kenmore is in Perthshire, on the banks of Loch Tay, evidence of quite how far the young Wilson travelled on foot.

¹¹ H. J Jackson ed. *A Critical Edition of the Major Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, (Oxford 1985), 99

¹² *ibid* 27-29

There is further correspondence between the Wilson and Coleridge poems, in the younger man's enthusiastic embracing of the philosophy of poetry as set out in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Throughout the 'Margaret' volume there are countless signs that Wilson has a confident grasp on new ideas. He moulds the sense of surrender to nature that Coleridge describes here to Wordsworth's dictum that 'the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'¹³. Wilson consciously recognises that nature is the vehicle in the process of his poetry. In the poems, nature is foregrounded and the effects of its varying shades on his spirits are recorded. In 'Lines Written in Kenmore Hermitage' it is the memory of his father that is recalled as he observes the secluded scene:

O Melancholy by thy power
 Our Souls rest mid the domes of heaven,
 While wandering through the gloomy bower
 We feed that hope to mortals given!
 Born on the viewless winds we seek the skies
 Where radiant glories strike our aching eyes,
 And soaring high thro' Ether's milky way
 Burst with transport on eternal day!
 Again we meet a parents eye
 No more to weep, to part, to die,
 But rapt with heav'nly joy... (65-75)

I see a Father's transport-beaming eye
 Bright as the star that lights the evening sky,
 A fair sister in youthful bloom
 Breaks from the slumbers of the tomb,
 While heaven on her cheek
 In silence seems to speak
 Her angel voice born on the air (157-163)

In the poem Wilson expands the traditional motif in his use of the nightingale, portraying it, as Coleridge does, both as access to and as escape from melancholy. The importance of the bird is in its emotive capacity to elevate sadness, distilling pain to form from it a purer sensation of joy:

at that still and lonely hour
 When tuning-wild his warbling throat,
 The pensive night-bird loves to pour
 In soothing strains his dying note!
 By hope's expanded pinions born on high
 We rise to mansions built amid the sky (81-86)

¹³ Brett and Jones ed. *Lyrical Ballads* (London 1991), 245.

In another poem, 'The Pains of Memory'¹⁴(134), Wilson describes his experience differently, here as the joyless orphaned child, encumbered by loss, alienated and forlorn. The poet's mood is increasingly defeatist as he questions the morbid contemplation of death, asking whether it can really uplift the heart, concluding that memory only 'nourishes despair':

Ah! Memory! spare his wild and frenzied mind
Nor in thy iron chain his feelings bind,
Blot from the evils of thy pictur'd page
Those woes that reason knows not to assuage,
Make the dark colours of his fate to seem
The faint creation of a wayward dream! (28-33)

The passion Wilson expresses for the mysterious orphaned Margaret in his poems and letters, confirms that the affair was not simply a boyish obsession but affected him deeply for the rest of his life. From the poems it is clear that the bond between the two was sealed in the recognition of each other's loss, a sympathy produced by shared experience and a solace discovered in poetry. Mrs Gordon tells us little of 'Miss M--' but we can identify her and confirm through the letters of George Jardine¹⁵ that she lived as the companion of a Miss Wight¹⁶ near the professor's summer home at Torrance and with him in Glasgow College during the winter months¹⁷. The two women appear to have joined forces after the death of Mitchelson's father, an Edinburgh advocate. In a letter to Robert Hunter in 1802, Jardine writes that 'Miss Wight still enjoys her usual health and spirits. Miss Mitchelson still continues with her and they live most happily and are most useful to each other.'¹⁸

Attuned to his own bereavement and depression, Wilson is also acutely aware of Margaret's lonely existence; that she had lost both parents activated his sympathies and gave the two of them a shared experience. 'The Orphan' (110) depicts a destitute child, clearly reminiscent of one of Wordsworth's innocents. In the poem Wilson attempts to achieve the unsophisticated

¹⁴ Like many of the poems in the volume, this is a direct response to *The Pleasures of Hope* by Thomas Campbell (1777 -1844).

¹⁵ GUL SpColl Ms Gen 507/1-140.

¹⁶ Miss Wight was the sister of Dr Wight, Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow from 1774, and kept house for him until his death in 1782.

¹⁷ A.L. Strout, 'John Wilson and the Orphan Maid', *PMLA*, March 1940, vol 56, 182.

¹⁸ GUL Sp Coll Ms Gen 507/120.

charm of 'We Are Seven' and though it does not sustain the subtle narrative underpinning of

Wordsworth's poem there remains an effortless poignancy in its simple lyricism:

Mid the gloom of a wintry sky
I press the cold ground for my bed
While storms and the pitiless rain
Rave wild round my innocent head;

Ah! Stranger a trifle bestow
Remember a destitute child,
I see in your eye pity's tear
I see you are gentle and mild! (13-20)

His relationship with the 'Orphan Maid', and their eventual separation, like the loss of his father, had an enormous impact on Wilson and colours much of his work. From the little we know of the summers when Wilson stayed at Jardine's country home, Hallside, it is clear that Margaret and he spent their days together walking and debating the merits of poetry. Although she was some years older, she doubtless enjoyed his unwavering attentions as well as, for her part, encouraging his poetic inclinations. She became a strong force of inspiration both as reader and object of his love; a source of beauty and melancholy. Their affections ran far deeper than a literary geniality, for a powerful emotion emerges from the poems and whether or not it was a misguided love, later regretted by one and lamented by the other, its importance is manifest at the time these poems were written, when the poet was still in his mid-teens. The dedicatory poem (62) leaves us in no doubt of this and the author's mind is clearly alert to both a refined expression of poetic sentiment and an awakening sexuality:

If this small offering of a grateful heart
The thrill of pleasure to thy soul impart
Or teach it e'er that magic charm to feel
Which thy tongue knows so sweetly to reveal,
Blessed be the breathing language of the line
That speaks of grace and virtues such as thine.
Blessed be those hours when warm'd by love and thee
I poured the verse in trembling ecstasy! (1-8)

Physicality surfaces as if through the poetry to suggest that, that which has been experienced can be relived. These poems are a response to his affair with Margaret and were anthologised in the knowledge of his imminent departure from Glasgow to pursue his studies at Oxford. As such the volume is prepared as an intensely private token of intimacy, written for an audience of one. It is

also the record of an important literary dialogue and a fascinating encounter with an intellect coming to terms with a new spirit of poetry.

There are two poems in the volume that lend insight into the strength of passion between Wilson and Margaret. One, written by Margaret herself, is called 'Answer' (185) and is a response to his own 'Lines Written in a Glen during a Moonlight Evening'¹⁹ (182). The poems offer unambiguous evidence of how much the two were in love. And they are animated by the underlying circumstances of their composition. Wilson is the solitary *penseroso* and focuses on the role nature plays in the imaginative correlation between recollection and feeling. 'Lines Written in a Glen during a Moonlight Evening' examines the process by which meditating on nature stimulates the passions; during his solitary nocturnal wanderings Wilson observes that sadness and love coexist in inexorable solidarity, 'grief and rapture strangely blend'. Contemplating nature energises his imagination; it stimulates a poetic catharsis, the intermingling of interior and exterior:

Say, canst thou feel a twilight scene
Those sorrows sprung from pensive eve
When ev'n the dew that wets the green
Prevails upon the soul to grieve! (9-12)

As yet the poet struggles to define this creative impulse of writing as something other than recording a kind of metaphysics of melancholy. The poem charts the delicate progression of the poet's thought, from the contemplation of sadness as inspired by his surroundings to the intellectual release offered by wistful joy. Here Wilson's poem responds intuitively to nature's influence but cannot escape the intrusion of worldly care. Nor does the otherwise affirming, 'Answer'. As an authentic literary response, this poem presents a rare biographical endorsement of what is elsewhere simply a unilaterally poeticised version of the relationship. Responding to the inquiry 'If Nature's power thy soul inspire', Margaret sustains the imagery developed in

¹⁹ This poem leads to some confusion as the title given is in the list of contents but in the manuscript the title is 'Lines written in a Glen during a Moonlight Evening'. This causes some further confusion as a poem earlier in the edition has the title 'Lines written at Evening' in the list of contents but is later titled 'Lines Written by Moonlight' (see headnote page 170).

Wilson's poem. Engaging in a form of verbal love-play, there is a moment of shared rhetoric as she gently deflects the inevitable despondency he feels from remembered grief:

Like thee, I then have felt my mind
Too earthly for a scene so fair
Too much wrapped up in humankind
To taste of bliss, devoid of care! (9-12)

Following the model of *Lyrical Ballads*, one of the volumes that had such an important effect on Wilson, the 'Margaret' poems are bold experiments that explore recollections of loss, love, and alienation, self, landscape and the imagination – all touched by the yearnings of adolescent desire. Mrs Gordon disregards the poems simply as the efforts of fervency, with little to recommend them but a pervasive sense of affected melancholy. It is precisely this sentiment, when examined in the context of the *real* feelings between the two lovers, which marshals the verse and informs it with an engaging immediacy. These are not the reflections of the poet in imagined experience but the energetic effusions of young love— *flagrante delicto*—intimate lines originally written for only the eyes of the lover. Whatever the ultimate verdict on their literary merit, the 'Margaret' poems are witness to the very private thoughts and emotions of a young man on the brink of moulding a romantic philosophy of poetry out of his own intellectual and emotional experience. The affair itself was unwelcome to Wilson's family, and though this was a private gift to Margaret, the dedicatory poem (62) to the volume suggests that there is already a tension surfacing in Wilson's mind between publication and privacy, the confessional and the poetic, the self-conscious and the literary.

A soothing hope has filled my trembling soul
And fluttering wishes to my Spirit stole,
That when my heart was imaged on my line
Its purest features might resemble thine! (37-40)

In this excerpt Wilson here sees an interchange of feelings and actions in the process of writing poetry. The convergence of the two, he hopes, will mutually nourish strong feelings and inspire strong poetry. Trying to recreate emotional response for his reader, he writes with a sense of the poet's responsibility to perform something beautiful, to paint the sublime and to nurture the relationship between reader and poem. Being party to this early literary experiment and *knowing*

the circumstances of the volume's production provides a revealing insight into Wilson's development as a poet. The knowledge we have of the specific circumstances of its writing adds substance to what would otherwise be conjecture based on flimsy biographical detail. It insists upon a more thorough analysis of that which influences the poetry, with Margaret Mitchelson, object of adoration and inspiration, at the core of its aesthetic and emotional range.

Reading the poems it is clear that the relationship between the two was mutually dependent. He was a fifteen year-old, profoundly affected by the deaths of his father and sister, physically mature and as much in need of having an object upon which to project his intense passion, as he was in need of being adored. She, without family or connection, was naturally captivated by the strength of Wilson's advances²⁰. Together they met needs in each other, not the least of which, certainly for Wilson, was to create a figurative poetic language from their union. In the poem archly titled, 'To a young lady who had said that she was not a good judge of poetry' (148), he is hungry for her praise :

Since thou art Nature's darling child²¹
And oft thy cheek the tear bedews,
Since oft thy hallowed soul runs wild
Mid sounds and form and fairy hues

To thy pure heart will poesy
Still be the source of high-wrought pleasures
And in thy breast each line will be
Possessed of new and unknown treasures! (36-44)

From the diaries and notebooks Mrs Gordon refers to it appears that Wilson's attentions towards Margaret were continuous until the time came when he was to go up to Oxford. Unfortunately these papers are no longer extant but it appears that they spent as much time together as possible. The parting must have been traumatic for both if the register of their feelings as expressed in the poems reflects its true intensity. What followed has been difficult to assess fully until now but Wilson was evidently devastated by the absence of Margaret as he began his new life at Oxford. Letters previously only partly published portray the young man's

²⁰ He was also a wealthy young man; he inherited £50,000 on his father's death.

²¹ 'nature's darling child' is Burns XXXXX

extreme reactions. From them we find Wilson subject to overwhelming depressions, threatening suicide and indulging in laudanum to numb the pain of heartbreak²². Mrs Gordon recounts this episode in her father's life in some detail, detailing his bid to escape his family and academic responsibilities by attempting to join the African explorer Mungo Park's 1804 expedition to Africa. Although Margaret dissuaded him from this plan, much of his time at Oxford over the next few years was spent distracted and despairing as the distance between them grew.

Only one letter from Wilson to Margaret survives²³, written from Oxford on 12 June 1803, not long after he had arrived. It is a reply to a letter from her, which must have been the first since his departure. Mrs Gordon prints it but, given her tendency to edit anything she thought would shed an inelegant light on her father, it is unlikely to be complete. It seems that Margaret had promised to send Wilson a portrait of herself and he writes of his state of misery at not even having that with which to console himself. His discontent is evident and he mentions his fear of deception, which must refer to the *sub rosa* nature of the affair. His mother's disapproval of the attachment always produced a major conflict in his allegiances. Wilson describes the depression that has daunted him for so many years, tells Margaret that only her company was able to dissipate his melancholy and how he submerges himself in a busy program of reading to distract himself:

As long as there is a moon or stars in the firmament will I remember you; and when I look on either, the recollection of Dychmont²⁴ Hill, the house, the trees, the wooden seat, which I am grieved is put away, will enter my mind, and make me live again the happiest period of my existence. Last night I was in heaven. I dreamed that I was sitting in the drawing-room at College Buildings, with you alone, as I have often done. The room was dark, the window-shutters close; the fire was little and just twinkling. I had my feet upon the fender; you were sitting in the arm-chair; I was beside you; your hand was in mine; we were speaking of my going to Oxford; you were promising to write me; I was sad, but happy; somebody opened the door, and I awoke alone and miserable.²⁵

Among the other letters of this time there are a number written between Wilson and his two school friends, Robert Findlay and Alex Blair. Mrs Gordon includes some of these letters in her memoir. It is evident from these letters that Wilson's closest friends believed there was a

²² Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections MS AAF.

²³ NLS MS 98, ff 69-94.

²⁴ Now spelled Dechmont. This is an area outside Glasgow.

²⁵ NLS MS 786 ff 154-164.

genuine love between him and Margaret. They suggest that contact between them does not seem to have diminished, nor would it for some years to come. Wilson returned infrequently to Scotland during his time at Oxford and his temperamental outbursts continued, causing considerable concern to his friends. He writes on 16 August 1803 to Robert Findlay, that 'Since I saw you, my mental anguish has been as great as ever. I feel that I am doomed to be eternally wretched, and that I am cut out from all the most amiable and celestial feelings of human nature'.

He continues in a tone of high melodrama;

By Heavens! I will, perhaps, some day blow my brains out, and there is an end of the matter ... I hope the French will land, and by God they shall have a shot at me,—which I trust will blow me to atoms.²⁶

By October Wilson had embarked on another extensive walking tour around England. This distraction was the only means of preventing his mind returning to Margaret and the disparity in their situations, which was forcing them apart. In a letter of 12 October to Findlay, he quotes a letter from Miss Wight, Margaret's companion;

You ask me what I thought of my dear girl's picture—This is a subject that always gives me pain whenever I think upon it. My mind always told me it was an improper thing and it was quite against my approbation that it was done. I am persuaded though it makes you happy in the mean time, it was most improper and impudent you having it. As to the resemblance—I daresay it is like; but I own to you the expression of the eyes don't please me at all, at least it might have been far better.—Oh! My dear John much could I say to you on this head of discourse—but what will it avail? Nothing. My heart misgives me when I reflect upon it. I must wait with patience and hope, for time softens down that impetuosity, and those strong violent feelings which you possess more than anybody I know.²⁷

Wilson was distraught the chance of losing Margaret to another, '...if she I love reposes on the bosom of another,—then is the chain broke which bound me to the world—no peace can then gild a single thought,—I have nothing to live for; all is dark, solitary, cold, wild and fearful.'

Although these were the kind of melodramatic remarks his friends had become accustomed to reading, there was obviously sufficient concern for his well-being that they kept a close eye on him while he was in Oxford. It transpires from them that before Margaret Mitchelson met Wilson, she had been involved with a young soldier called Pagan who returned from foreign service after Wilson had gone up to Oxford. A letter from Findlay to Blair of 24 January 1804

²⁶ NLS MS 786 f154-164.

²⁷ NLS MS 786 f154-164. Part of this letter is quoted in Gordon's *Memoir*, vol i, 62; however this section was published in A.L. Strout's 'John Wilson and the Orphan Maid', *PMLA*, March 1940, vol 56, 182-202.

indicates quite how seriously Wilson regarded his attachment to Margaret and how deeply his friends knew he would feel the possible consequences of a threatened shift of her loyalties to Pagan:

I am writing to Wilson—and shall send the letter tomorrow so that he will get it on Thursday morning.—I tell him why I am convinced that he is loved:—and what I fear she may be induced to do, both from her delicacy and just pride which must shrink from the idea of the disapprobation of relations—and from her scrupulous sense of right—which makes her refuse to separate him from those relations:—

I will say that I think she is now guided in everything she does by the resolution she has formed since he left her for sacrificing her happiness to her sense of right, (she may perhaps think) to his happiness:—and I will on that account caution to him against writing to her on that subject, because she might have strength of mind to write a refusal that would blast all his hopes—and make him never dare to speak of it to her again.—My wish is that he should see her in Summer and force from her a confession of her feelings.—

See what he thinks about Pagan.—He has talked to me as if he feared she was attached to him:—Pagan left the country when she knew nothing more of Wilson than that he was a fine boy:—and I think it very probable that at that time she might feel a grateful attachment to him for his love to her, and what she might think the generosity of disregarding what idiots think a stain on her name.—Does Wilson know so little of her and of himself as to dream for a moment that after knowing him as she has done for these last three years her heart can still hold by one wish to such a man as Pagan.—If she had formed any engagement to Pagan God help us!—I cannot think it possible— if it had been she must have acted differently—Her love might overpower in her for a time her sense of what she thinks she owes to the order of society—while her only restraint was the idea that she ought not to separate Wilson from all his family connexions I can conceive her doing all that she has done, with the purest and most virtuous mind—for all she acted under a degree of delusion— I am convinced she did not suspect the consequences to her own heart or to Wilson's—but if she could in the slightest degree look on herself as the property of another, every thing becomes utterly incomprehensible—a positive engagement leaves no room for delusion—and in that situation a woman of delicate feelings has but one way of acting.—²⁸

Another letter between Blair and Findlay of January 24 1804, testifies to the depth of Wilson's despair and their worry for his well-being;

it is a subject on which I dare not speak to him except at those moments when he seems happier than usual from my presence— If he is gloomy and dejected, as he sometimes is with me, I know that his mind will be shut to all reasonings favourable to his happiness; and that, to touch on that subject would be merely to give him occasion to overwhelm me with one of those long bursts of passion and misery to which I can make no answer—He was out of spirits the two first days I was there—and I thought it most probable that on the last evening he would from the idea of my going so soon feel a greater degree of kindness and affection for me which would keep his mind in a state of gentler feeling, and dispose it more easily to think happily of himself—If we had been alone that night I should have talked it all over with him.—I am doubtful whether I ought to write to him about it.

²⁸ EUL Sp Coll Dk.3.48 f3.

Despite his dejection, Wilson was plainly making progress in his academic studies and writes to Findlay in March to ask him to send a number of books including Malthus, Godwin, Hartley and Rousseau. He visited London in September to stay with his mother and then embarked on an extensive walking trip around Wales and visited the Lake District for the first time. These trips were to become familiar expeditions for Wilson; undaunted by climate or distance, he was able to work off both his physical and mental energies.²⁹ Before returning to Oxford he visited his mother in Edinburgh but did not go to see Margaret in Torrance. There was a scare in December, when Andrew Wilson rushed from his ship at Chatham to visit his brother, who was in 'very bad spirits' and thought to be close to suicide. It transpired to be a nervous disorder, for which he was bled.

By October 1805 Wilson was occupied with the acquisition of some land at Elleray, by Windermere. And some months later in early 1806 his mood is controlled as he discusses Margaret quite coolly in a letter to Robert Findlay;

By the by, I know not what excuse to make for not having visited Torrance. If ever you see Margaret, I wish you would tell her how happy you know I would have been to see her; but that it could only have been for an hour or two and that I therefore put off the happiness till I could stay a day or two with her in a few Months. Perhaps she may attribute to coldness what arose from the deepness of Love...³⁰

After leaving Glasgow for Oxford in 1803 it seems that the young Magdalen gentleman-commoner was forbidden mention of Margaret to his family for they strongly disapproved of his attachment to the older woman³¹, socially inferior and without prospects. After leaving for Oxford he was never to see her again. As much as the relationship flourished into a powerful and nurturing love-affair – for that is what it was – so the impact of its loss diminished him. From the letters of the period we know that she refused, for his sake, to make claim of love upon him, although she doubtless desired to continue the union. Wilson gave in to the mounting pressure from his family. Despite his apparent misery at the loss of Margaret, what becomes clear is the unbending sense of filial duty he showed to his Mother throughout his life until her death. Doubtless a respect for his financial prospects also forced him to capitulate to her demands.

²⁹ Once, while still an undergraduate he walked from London to Oxford in 8 hours, a distance of some 58 miles arriving in time for breakfast.

³⁰ EUL Sp Coll Dk.3.48 f15.

³¹ Although we have no accurate dates for her, if the assumptions made by A.L. Strout are correct, she could have been anything up to ten years his senior. Knowing his precocity, this does not seem an unlikely if unorthodox attachment. From my reading of the poems the implication is that although they were often together in company, the love affair was largely carried on illicitly.

It took him three years to reconcile himself to the loss of Margaret and it was eventually establishing himself far from Glasgow, in the Lake District, that allowed him peace of mind. He wrote to Findlay from Bowness in December 1807:

If ever you go now to Torrance and find my occasional silence thought of there, and if your own heart can find any reasons for my conduct endeavour as well as possible to be the Advocate of the distress'd and desolate, for situated as I am I know not how to act. Margaret desires me to come to Torrance—I need not say what my own desires are.—Did my Mother know that I did so, in the way I have done, it would break her heart. Indeed after all that has passed between her and me lately (I allude now to sayings of hers not on this subject immediately) and between me and my sisters, and Miss Wight and them, it would go much against my conscience to visit Torrance at present. Your own good sense will tell you the same thing. [? In] short I have made up my mind [?not] to visit Torrance at present. In any case I must not come to Glasgow . [which] resolution I hope is right. It has [?been] made after many an hour of [ms torn] reflection— This I know were I to go, I could not bear to look on my Mother's face, a [breaking] which must not be mine. Enclosed is a letter to Margaret. If you could take it yourself, and see how it is received it would please me much. Yet there may be people there in which case that would be useless.³²

Finding his home in the Lakes was the only real respite Wilson found to help him start to recover from the Margaret affair and he celebrates this in the poem 'My Cottage'³³. Mrs Gordon tells us that it was sent to Margaret at the time it was written in 1807, possibly among the contents of the letter Wilson asks Findlay to deliver to her. It is a clear statement of his intention to apply himself to poetry, no longer in dialogue but now in isolation:

Here I have found at last a home of peace
To hide me from the world: far from its noise,
To feed that spirit, which, though sprung from earth,
And linked to human beings by the bond
Of earthly love, hath yet a loftier aim
Than perishable joy, and through the calm
That sleeps amid the mountain-solitude,
Can hear the billows of eternity,
And hear delighted.³⁴

Buying Elleray was beginning to provide the distraction Wilson needed and soon he was writing to James Sym, his uncle, with repeated requests for cash advances to finance his acquisition. And during a stay in Scotland, he had even enjoyed the attentions of a young woman when he visited the manse at Newton Mearns, the home of his old schoolmaster Dr McLatchie. In February 1807 he writes, 'The first time you see Miss McLatchie tell her I have not slept soundly since I left Scotland, and that she, she alas! too killing woman is the cause'.³⁵

Until further evidence is brought to light from this period in Wilson's life, we can have only a vague sense of how he progressed towards his first successful volume of poetry, as a

³² EUL Sp Coll Dk.3.48 f17.

³³ Published in *Isle of Palms and Other Poems* (Glasgow 1812).

³⁴ 'My Cottage', *Isle of Palms* (1812).

³⁵ NLS MS 786 f154-164. Cited by A.L Strout in 'John Wilson and the Orphan Maid', *PMLA*, March 1940, vol 56, 182-202.

'Lake' poet, from this early volume of juvenilia. However, the 'Margaret' poems and their preface, written as a response to the love affair under the important poetic influences of the early 1800s, help us better to appreciate Wilson's original creative energies. His later work is haunted by the spectre of Margaret; she reappears in different guises, variously representing vulnerability, hopeless love, piety, resourcefulness and native resilience. The 'Orphan Maid' is the devout child of nature in *Isle of Palms*³⁶, the ever-resourceful survivor of *The Trials of Margaret Lyndsay*, the dutiful Lucy Forester, the resigned and faithful wife of 'The Convict', the battling Magdalene in *City of the Plague*. She is a subject Wilson refers to repeatedly and he frequently returns to the affair in his writings years later. Although by this time married many years to Jane Penny, his tone, with its characteristic robustness, is not without a note of regret:

What is mere boy-love but a moonlight dream. Who would weep—who would not laugh over the catastrophe of such a bloodless tragedy ... But love affairs, when the lovers are full grown men and women, though perhaps twenty years had not passed over either of their heads, are at least tragi-comedies, and sometimes tragedies; closing, if not in blood, although that too, when the Fates are angry, yet in clouds that darken all future life, and that, now and then, lose their sullen blackness only when dissolving, through transient sunshine, in a shower of tears.³⁷

Evidence of the affair emerges again in a later essay entitled 'Old North and Young North' from 1828, where Wilson describes the excitement he felt on moving from Glasgow to Oxford and his early visits to London. However much he felt the youthful delight at his new surroundings, he wistfully reminds himself:

Yet away went, even then, our thoughts to Scotland, like carrier-pigeons wafting love-messages beneath their unwearied wings! They went and returned, and still their going and coming was blessed. But ambition touched us, as with the wand of a magician from a vanished world and a vanished time.³⁸

While he goes on to describe this development from boy to man under the absorbing influences of a new and revealing life, it is never without a sense of his past, rooted in the romantic ideals of nature and devotion:

far down buried, but instinct with spirit, beneath them all, a life-deep love for Her, that Orphan-maid—so human, yet so visionary—afar off in the beauty of her heaven-protected innocence, beneath the shadow of that old castle³⁹, where by day the starlings looked down on her loveliness, sole sitting among the ruins, and for her the wood-lark, Scotia's nightingale, did sing all night long—a life-deep love, call it passion, pity, friendship, brotherly affection, all united together by smiles, sighs, and tears—songs sung as by an angel in the moonlight glen—prayers in that oratory among the cliffs—the bliss of meetings and of partings among the glimmering woods, sanctified by her presence—of that long, last eternal farewell!

³⁶ A.L. Strout writes that the poem is 'An escape from reality of a young man who can marry in the Isle of palms the girl whom his mother denies him in Scotland' ('John Wilson and the Orphan Maid', *PMLA*, March 1940, vol 56, 182-202).

³⁷ 'Streams' (*Maga* April 1826): *Works*, vol 5, 33.

³⁸ 'Old North and Young North' (*Maga* June 1828): *Works*, vol 5, 195.

³⁹ The ruined Bothwell Castle was a favourite haunt for Wilson and Margaret. (See 'Lines Written at Bothwell Castle', 148).

The older persona of North allows him to be detached from the experience and the result is a curious conflation of *real* and *imagined*. North describes his youth in reverie, in what he calls 'Our Midsummer Night's Dream' but underlying this there is a strong sense of the impact of the affair and its repercussions on Wilson's fragile emotional security. The loss of Margaret deeply scarred Wilson and he kept the memory of her alive, characterising different versions of her throughout his writings. As well as being a distinctive literary achievement, the evidence suggests then, that the 'Margaret' poems are an authentic autobiographical portrait of Wilson's youth and his early love affair.

While the available biographical detail of Wilson's early life offers us considerable insight into the 'Margaret' poems, it is the knowledge of his intellectual influences that helps us better to understand the writer of the Preface. He had written the poems during the time that he and Margaret were intimate friends but when he decided to collect them in the volume addressed to her, he added a critical essay, itself a considerable literary achievement and the focus of this chapter.

After enrolling in the class of William Richardson, professor of Humanities, in 1797, where he remained for a year, Wilson moved to George Jardine's Logic class. An account of this period exists in a manuscript autobiography written by John Dunlop of Gairbraid¹, the cousin of William Dunlop, who was a lifelong friend and contemporary of Wilson's. He describes with affection the classes in literature, philosophy and logic, and the compelling powers of the man who taught them:

As a teacher possibly [Jardine] was the most excogitative and inventive of his age. He seemed to dwell mentally all the year round in the atmosphere of his classroom, and to impost thither all experience, acquisition, rudiments and accomplishments, for the benefits of his students. He not only explained the first principles, but trained the mind of his scholars, [?]lulling] them, and forming them to practice and exercise. The students looked into his spirit as into a deep well, from which they were to draw elements, constituents, habits, methods and practise for their mental exercise during all their life.²

Jardine had a great impact upon his students and from contemporary accounts it seems he took an interest in their education beyond the logic class. During the 1780s Jardine maintained a correspondence with his friend the Rev Robert Hunter, Rector of Burton in Dorset. From these letters a liberal character emerges, moderate in his political beliefs and eagerly embracing the inevitable shift in social climate at the turn of the century:

Surely some great change in the direction of human affairs is at no great distance. Great progress has been made and is making in throwing off these restraints of Custom, opinion and

¹ John Dunlop was one of the founders of the Temperance Movement, and he is recorded as saying that the popularity of *Noctes Ambrosinae* in Ireland contributed greatly to the lack of sobriety he found there.

² NLS MS 9263.

Habit by which the bulk of men, have hitherto been governed. Now all matters of both Religion and Government are to be directed by convictions of Reason and Utility...³

Jardine's reputation as a man of social conscience is reflected in his concern for the poor of Glasgow during the food shortages of 1800. He writes to Hunter in April, after a harsh winter, explaining that he has drawn up a subscription among staff and students at Glasgow College to provide a soup-kitchen in the college fencing hall, catering for four hundred poor each day. The following summer Jardine writes that he has two boys staying with him at Hallside over the summer, one of them being the fourteen-year-old John Wilson and the other his brother Andrew⁴. He describes with warmth the mother of the two boys, who was visiting from Edinburgh to tend to one of her ailing sons.

From other materials in the University of Glasgow Archives, it is clear that Jardine had an active part in University life and appears to have been a strong influence on his many students. Glasgow College being one of only four universities in existence in Scotland at the time, many of the sons of well-to-do families throughout the country had studied under Jardine. So much so that during his travels Dr Peter Moore, the eponymous hero of John Gibson Lockhart's *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk*, hears Jardine commended by 'a large company of the Edinburgh literati, among whom it appeared there was a great number of his former disciples'⁵. The warmth of these student's adulation of Jardine and the way he is here described by Lockhart (with Wilson's collaboration), leaves little doubt of the importance of his method of teaching and sources of knowledge, which preferred independent intellectual development over didactic methods. While Aristotle was still an important subject in the study of poetry, Jardine preferred Addison, Hume, Burke, Kames, Blair and Knight as his models for initiating young people into the philosophical enquiry of taste. In his *Outlines of Philosophical Education*⁶, he explains that in the 17th century Aristotelian philosophy was declining in reputation and it was no longer suitable to the spirit of the times.

³ GUL SpColl MS Gen 507/106.

⁴ Andrew Wilson later joined the Navy.

⁵ Lockhart, *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk*, vol 3 (Edinburgh 1819), 106.

⁶ George Jardine, *Outlines of Philosophical Education, Illustrated by the Methods of Teaching the Logic Class in the University of Glasgow*, (Glasgow 1825), xvii; 'Introduction – On the Change in the method of conducting the first class of Philosophy'. 'Around 1646 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, considering itself invested to oversee the activities of the universities...appointed commissioners to examine the mode of

Lockhart goes on to compare Jardine's popularity as a teacher even to that of Thomas Arnold at Rugby. In *Peter's Letters*, Lockhart has Moore enjoy the hospitality of Jardine and his wife while in Glasgow and recounts attending one of the professor's logic classes, where he finds him examining a pupil on the previous day's lecture and in doing so displaying the very qualities for which he was widely renowned:

the benefits derived from his teaching may be traced in no inconsiderable measure to his peculiar excellence in this very branch of his duties. Such a clear manly method of putting his questions—such a ready manner of comprehending the drift of the replies he received—such skillful nicety in drawing out the working of perplexed minds, and making those who were puzzled find for themselves the thread that should lead them out of their labyrinths—⁷

Lockhart's account of Jardine, under whom he had himself studied, depicts him as a warm, paternal figure who had created a 'mighty family' of ex-pupils. But another teacher of great importance to the young Wilson while at Glasgow College was John Young⁸. He is described in John Dunlop's autobiography as 'on the whole a superior man. In his politics he was liberal. He was considered a skilful Grecian, but never published professionally.'⁹ Young was a highly respected classicist, one of the foremost philologists in Scotland, who was a great friend of Routh, the President of Magdalen College, Oxford¹⁰. This connection assisted Wilson's entry there as a gentleman-commoner in future years. In *Peter's Letters*, Lockhart describes Moore's experience of Young, whose facial physiognomy fascinates the doctor. He describes him in colourful detail and has his eyes 'full of a bright gleaming intelligence', a 'lynx-like intellectual glance' and 'lips compressed like the vice of a blacksmith'.

Young also had a central role in Wilson's literary education and although ostensibly a classicist there were no rigid boundaries in the range of learning acquired under different academics:

teaching.' They reinforced the teaching of Aristotle and it was not until the Royal Visit of 1727, that the first radical reforms were instituted in Glasgow College. The changes and improvements in the educational system were heralded by the appointment of Frances Hutcheson. By 1750 Adam Smith was given the chair of Logic and began to read his lectures in English, a tradition Jardine followed on his appointment in 1774.

⁷ NLS MS 9263.

⁸ John Young (?1750-1820) was elected Professor of Greek in 1774.

⁹ NLS MS 9263.

¹⁰ Martin Joseph Routh (1755-1854). Routh was reputedly the last man at Oxford to wear a wig. He was once injured when, reaching for a large volume, it fell on him. He was appalled, 'To be lamed by a book written by a dunce'!

We have sat at the knees of Professor Young, looking up to his kindling or shaded countenance, while that "old man eloquent" gave life to every line, till Hector and Andromache seemed to our imagination standing side by side beneath a rainbow glorious on a showery heaven—such, during his inspiration, was the creative power of the majesty and the beauty of their smiles and tears.¹¹

Young was rather notorious for having written a 'Criticism on the Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'¹², as is recorded by John Dunlop:

There got into print...a sort of satire on Dr Samuel Johnson's unscrupulous mode of criticism, in a pretended review of Gray's elegy in a churchyard. It displayed considerable learning, humour and acuteness.¹³

In manuscript notes taken by a student in Young's private Latin and Greek classes¹⁴ in 1791, there are interspersed reflections on a range of literary, educational and pastoral matters. These offer us some important insights into some of the influences on Wilson at the time. Young considers Gray's poem 'one of the finest lyric compositions in any language' and criticises Johnson's 'pompous latinised phraseology':

Dr Johnson's censure of this excellent piece provokes our pity rather than indignation, we consider him in the light of a blind man, arrogantly pretending to judge of colours; or of that tasteless critic (how like himself) who having the map of Aeneas' voyage before him, attempted to estimate the merit of Virgil's immortal poem by the justness of the geographical description¹⁵.

Young's defence of Gray's 'Elegy' continues by refuting Johnson's assumption that poetry is only worthy if it promotes some moral or political truth. He brings Akenside into the debate, claiming that although he clearly wrote from a didactic premise, Johnson also condemns him because he displays a 'zeal for...liberty' that stems from his Presbyterian faith:

What a glorious characteristic of a Religion and what a compliment to its teacher to be reproached with a zeal for liberty—this crime will never be imputed to the [?work] of Dr Johnson.¹⁶

¹¹ 'Homer and his Translators; Critique II': *Works*, vol 8, 36

¹² GUL Sp Coll MS Gen 825. A criticism on the Elegy written in a country churchyard. Being a continuation of Dr. Johnson's criticism on the poems of Gray. [By John Young, Prof. of Greek].

¹³ NLS MS 9263

¹⁴ It seems he ran classes for graduate students who wished to become teachers.

¹⁵ GUL Sp Coll MS Gen 825.

¹⁶ Both Johnson and Boswell dined at Glasgow College after their Hebridean tour and the latter described Young's parody as 'the most perfect imitation of the doctor's style' (W.P Courtney, *Bibliography of Johnson*, Oxford, 1915, 138).

Another literary entry in this notebook is a suggested reading which comprises a list headed 'Best Romances' including Fielding, Smollet and Richardson, and 'drama' which cites John Home's patriotic and sentimental play 'Douglas' and Thomas Otway's 'The Orphan'¹⁷. These both indicate that Young was equally instrumental in developing Wilson's enthusiasm for literature, especially poetry, as was Jardine, who was perhaps more prosaic and theoretical in his academic interests.

In her memoir Mrs Gordon refers to a diary, which studiously records the precise events of Wilson's life between 1 January and 26 October 1801¹⁸. While studying with Young and Jardine, the young Wilson is developing an enthusiasm for composition by 1801. The journal gives us some interesting clues to these literary endeavours. On 4 June, Wilson writes 'Finished my poem on Slavery'¹⁹. In the 'Margaret' volume there is a poem entitled 'The Song of the Shipwrecked Slave' (108). Three days later he began writing an essay on the 'Faculty of the Imagination', which was presumably read to his peers and presented to his teachers. Two other poems in the volume can be dated from actual events. The first, 'On the Execution of Governor Wall' (129), must have been written after 28 January 1802, and the other, 'On the Death of Dr Lockhart' (126), sometime between 17 February, when the death is mentioned in a letter by Jardine,²⁰ and 12 March 1802, the date of an extant single manuscript version of the poem²¹.

Glasgow University library's periodical collection from the period that Wilson was at Glasgow College, shows that Wilson had access to many of the popular magazines of the late eighteenth

¹⁷ Both of these plays are significant in the context of Wilson's later work. In his *The Trials of Margaret Lyndsay* the eponymous heroine illicitly attends a performance of John Home's play with her lover, strictly contravening the piety and moral code of her mother's house. Otway's *The Orphan; or The Unhappy Marriage*, appealed to Wilson's predilection for turgid sentimental tragedy.

¹⁸ Gordon (1862), vol 1, 24. There are no records of these papers still being in existence although it seems unlikely she would have disposed of them, having troubled to mention them, and also since she clearly preserved the 'Margaret' volume. As well as focusing on his studies, he found time to walk out in the country:

the Black Cart[a river south of Glasgow], beloved of us chiefly for the sake of Cath-Cart Castle, which, when a collegian at Glasgow, we visited every Play-Friday, and deepened the ivy on its walls with our first sombre dreams.

'Our Parish': *Works*, vol 9, 439.

¹⁹ Gordon (1862), vol 1, 24.

²⁰ GUL Sp Coll Ms Gen 507/120 'within a few days an old and worthy friend Dr Lockhart who was carried off by some of the fatal Branches of Apoplexy—he was suddenly taken ill on the Saturday and died on the Monday evening thereafter—much and most sincerely regretted by every descriptions of persons here.'

²¹ Glasgow Mitchell Library 434c.

century. *The Scots Magazine*, *Monthly Review*, *Critical Review*, and *British Critic*, as well as the *Spectator* and *Tatler*, were all available to Wilson at the time. And he mentions in his commonplace book that he bought a copy of *The Rambler*²², 'for which Jardine is owing me'; clear indication that he was being encouraged to read widely by his teachers.

It was this encouragement that enabled Wilson to engage directly with the literature of the day and he was profoundly affected by his first reading of *Lyrical Ballads*. At the age of 16 in early June 1802, he wrote a remarkably insightful letter to Wordsworth praising the volume. This was a display of sensitivity to Wordsworth's poetic philosophy, rare at the time. It marked the beginning of a relationship between the two men, which, despite controversy, was always infused with the high regard Wilson had for Wordsworth's poetry. Many years later in an essay in *Blackwood's Magazine*, Wilson, as his alter-ego Christopher North, describes the praise he has courted from all corners of the earth, for his role in extending and promoting Wordsworth's reputation from 'the banks of the Mississippi' to 'the Ganges'. In the same essay North claims that in Scotland in the early 1800s, there 'were not twenty copies [of *Lyrical Ballads*] – we question if there were ten'²³.

Despite his youth, Wilson's exuberant letter marks him out as a vigorously independent thinker and clearly able to extrapolate some of the key concepts in Wordsworth's *Preface*. He conceives of the poet's readers as connected by a 'delightful sympathy of Souls'; a union of common interest in the spontaneous appreciation of poetry. This system of philosophy, is embodied in poetry that, Wilson writes, 'flash on our Souls a conviction of immortality'.

Crucially here, Wilson recognises and responds to the poet's intention. In his Preface to the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth makes the claim for the poems that their purpose is to 'illustrate the manner in which our feelings and Ideas are associated in a state of excitement ... to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections

²² Gordon (1862), vol 1, 23.

²³ 'Stroll to Grasmere': *Works*, vol 2, 346.

of our nature.²⁴ Wilson is excited by Wordsworth's radical views on the duty of the poet and he even embraces the tone of his writing. The letter opens effusively praising Wordsworth's 'simple and forcible language' in rhetoric that bears all the hallmarks of an imagination profoundly coloured by *Lyrical Ballads* and its Preface.

Once he graduated and moved to the lakes, Wilson became a friend of both the Wordsworths and Coleridges. At one point he was assisting Coleridge's research for *The Friend* by running errands to the library at Calgarth Park, the home of Richard Watson, the Bishop of Llandaff. The Wordsworths were frequent visitors to Wilson's home at Elleray, which was far more comfortable than their own. It is not unlikely either that the two friends, Coleridge and Wordsworth, would have discussed their young acolyte's earlier letter. After all, it was a rare critical correspondence that had elicited an uncharacteristically long reply. Especially on the subject of the 'The Idiot Boy', Wilson's lucid comments on the poem in 1802 are so clearly articulated that Coleridge may have had them in mind, some fifteen years later when he refers in *Biographia Literaria* to the 'only plausible objections, which I have heard to that fine poem':

The one is, that the author has not, in the poem itself, taken care to preclude from the reader's fancy, the disgusting images of ordinary, morbid idiocy, which yet it was by no means his intention to represent. He has even by the 'burr, burr, burr,' uncounteracted by any preceding description of the boy's beauty, assisted in recalling them. The other is, that the idiocy of the boy is so evenly balanced by the folly of the mother, as to present to the general reader rather a laughable burlesque on the blindness of anile dotage, rather than an analytic display of maternal affection in its ordinary workings.²⁵

In his letter to Wordsworth, Wilson is torn between his genuine admiration for the poet and his uncertainty that the design of the poem achieves its motive. He questions the validity of the subject as a suitable vehicle for the moral intention of the poem. It's unclear whether Wilson is hesitant to relinquish to eighteenth-century tenets of what is appropriate material for poetry or finds it difficult to reconcile the brilliance of the poet with the grossness of the subject matter. But he seems to lose his conviction and marshals support from elsewhere. He alludes to 'the sentiments of men' whose feelings he also claims to admire and whose disapproval of the poem

²⁴ Brett and Jones, (1991) 247.

²⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, (1817), xvii, 45.

becomes the basis upon which he attempts to structure his own criticisms. This is informed by Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in which the philosopher claims that some things have not moral purpose sufficient for poetry. Wilson does not simply recoil from the physicality of the idiot:

I have seen a most excellent painting of an Idiot²⁶—but it excited in me inexpressible disgust. I was struck with the excellence of the picture—I admired the talents of the artist—but I had no other source of pleasure. The poem of the idiot boy produced upon me an effect in every respect similar.²⁷

Wilson was not alone in this response and here demonstrates a familiarity with contemporary opinion. As Robert Mayo in 'The Contemporaneity of the Lyrical Ballads'²⁸ has pointed out, this was a poem that had divided the critics.

The only published version of John Wilson's 1802 letter to Wordsworth is found in Mary Gordon's 1862 memoir of her father, *Christopher North—A Memoir of John Wilson* (Edinburgh 1862). Gordon came across the letter six years after her father's death, while gathering material for the *Memoirs*. In 1860 she had written to Wordsworth's son William, John Wilson's godson, asking for information about the two men's relationship:

I cannot find an allusion to him throughout the whole Vols of Mr C Wordsworth-Memoirs of the poet. There may have been reasons no doubt but of that I have nothing to do—My father's admiration and love for your father's poetry amounted to a sort of adoration, and these two men must at one time have been *intimately* known to one another—and I would almost hope you could give me some clue to their early meetings and ways of going on as friend with friend—I have reason to think from hints in an old Common place book of my father that they had wanderings together among the Mountains when he spoke of the touching loss of a beloved brother...also the loss of a son of your own name in childhood that he loved to speak of?²⁹

The 1802 letter is now in the library of the Wordsworth Trust. John had sent it to her in response to her request for information and she duly returned it (with some pencil annotations). The letter (of which I offer a new version in Appendix C) should be read in the context of the poetry Wilson was writing at the time. Gordon makes a number of changes in her version.

²⁶ For more detailed account of the subject of 'idiots' in eighteenth-century British art see catalogue to the 1998 exhibition, *Angels and Urchins* by Martin Postle, Djangogly Gallery, University of Nottingham.

²⁷ Appendix C, 197

²⁸ Mayo (1954), 499.

²⁹ WLMS A.ix (Wordsworth Library, Grasmere)

These eliminate the emphatic gallop of the letter by making subjective adjustments in punctuation and structure that rein in its precocity and tempo.

In the letter to Wordsworth and the Preface to the 'Margaret' poems Wilson attempts to synthesise the doctrines of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and the principles of eighteenth-century aesthetics he was learning under Jardine and Young. Through these two documents Wilson's ideas begin to form an original poetic manifesto. He recognises the value of meeting the more formal requirements of established principles of poetry while being enthusiastically receptive to the possibilities he encounters among the new poets of the day. He acknowledges the traditional structures and the importance of form held by many eighteenth-century poets but experiences 'delight [sic]' (11) from his reading of *Lyrical Ballads*. Although much of this tension surfaces in Wilson's later work, it is in his preface that we witness a mind determined to reconcile the disparate elements of tradition and innovation. The teachings of both Jardine and Young demonstrate an inclination towards a philosophy of poetry that allows for Wilson's ideas. The *Synopsis* to Jardine's lectures published in 1797, includes notes on his classes on Taste, where the professor establishes that in composition:

The general end of poetry is to *please*—to excite agreeable sentiments and passions, or active and awakened states of mind.³⁰

These are words that herald Wordsworth's 1800 Preface. Superficially they are rooted in an eighteenth-century critical rubric but the suggestion that the force of poetry can have an extrinsic power that is capable of stirring 'awakened states of mind' is a notion close to the 'state of vivid sensation'³¹ Wordsworth wishes to recreate in poetry:

The end of Poetry is to produce excitement in coexistence with an overbalance of pleasure.³²

The 'Margaret' poems and their Preface reveal the young Wilson drawing on ideas like these from Jardine's lectures, while simultaneously being alert to ideas from Wordsworth. Jardine's

³⁰ GUL, Sp Coll Mu21—d.52.

³¹ Brett and Jones (1991), 241.

³² *Ibid*, 263

teachings, which he was later to publish as *Outlines of Philosophical Education*³³, were to have a important impact on Wilson. This was a system that exposed young men to new ideas and encouraged original thought. In the *Outlines* Jardine strives to cultivate in his students that quality that most characterises the Enlightenment; 'a vigorous imagination'. He states that he exhorts them not simply to turn to great works or authors but to form singular opinions based on the perusal of best models of poetry, 'forming for *themselves* a standard of taste' [my italics].

In his Preface Wilson produces a plausible, original philosophical 'defence' for his own poems and in doing so endeavours to evaluate the intellectual climate of the turn of the century. He opens with a disclaimer that of the poems, few will live up to the argument of his preface. The ideas, he states, come more readily than the poetry. Questioning whether the public mind is actually able to judge poetry, he goes on to distinguish between that which contains beauties 'striking and original' and the writing of average verses. Whatever the answer, he appears to decide that clothing universal and simple emotions in the language of poetry is a harmless occupation. Such uncharacteristic modesty is quickly consumed by a rhetoric that is much more familiar to the reader of Wilson's later work:

When the mind is under the influence of strong and violent emotion, or soothed into tranquillity by calm feelings of peace and happiness, to breathe into poetical enunciation, the Essence of our spirits affords exquisite delight at the present time, and raises a memorial of our joy more lasting than the fragile Tablets of Memory.

This concept of experience relived in poetical recollection is developed in what appears to be a direct reference to Wordsworth's 1802 revisions to the Preface where he describes the poet's ability to conjure passions separately from real events. Wilson illustrates his point by distinguishing between ideal grief as experienced through poetry and the real pain of new suffering. By comparing actual feelings with those arising from the calmness of recollection, Wilson places poetry as the channel of experience. Although the argument weakens this is an attempt to construct a highly sophisticated defence pre-empting any uncharitable judgement of his poems.

³³ George Jardine, *Outlines of Philosophical Education illustrated by the method of teaching the Logic Class in the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow 1825).

All the signs of the future poet and critic are beginning to surface; here a bold and often intuitive assertion is followed by an attempt to modify it, usually the effect of deflated confidence. He complains that that the only poetry that is deemed worthy of attention is the production of 'extraordinary Genius'. This shows early signs of the desperate over-sensitivity that remains with him throughout his career and underpins much of his work. He is caught between the need to display his own amateur poetic 'effusions' and at the same time enter a serious discussion on the merits of genius.

He goes on to compare poetry to the sister arts of music and painting, wondering what would ever be seen or heard if such strict rules of criticism were consistently adhered to. Attempting to trace the origins of such severe rules of criticism, Wilson, following the paradigm of his teachers, looks back to the Augustan era of ancient Rome, where the first authors of genius brought to literature an aesthetic principle of taste. However as result, a surge of untalented authors 'servilely trod in the steps of those who preceded them and repeated their sentiments so often and with so great dramatical impropriety, that what was once beautiful became at last disgusting'. The result of this was deleterious to the art of poetry, which became no more than 'miserable jargon' and there was a need to form the 'severest' rules of criticism to stem this 'nuisance'. When the necessity of these rules was relaxed, the prevailing effect of their impact on literature remained: 'So great is the inveteracy of universal prejudice!'

Here Wilson is recalling the influence of Jardine who states that the classical rules of criticism are not necessarily appropriate 'for initiating young persons into their philosophical studies of taste and criticism'³⁴. There seems to have been a backlash, during Jardine's career at Glasgow, against too rigid application to the ancient authors³⁵. In his *Outlines* he explains that this is traced back to the previous century. He denies the efficacy of Aristotelian dialectic, determining it as

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ see page 20n.

unsuitable for the purposes of instructing his pupils, and showing a distinctly European preference:

The dialectics and metaphysics of Aristotle...were decidedly opposed to any exercise of the powers of taste. The French philosophers in later times, set the first example of scientific inquiry in the department of taste and criticism...The essays of Mr Addison in the sixth volume of *The Spectator*, may be said to exhibit the first philosophical exposition which appeared in England, of those powers of mind whose office it is to appreciate objects of taste.³⁶

Jardine goes on to cite the works of Smith, Hume, Burke, Kames, Blair, Alison and Knight as more suitable models of criticism. In 1750 Adam Smith had been appointed to the university as Professor of Logic and began to read his lectures on rhetoric and belles-lettres in English, a tradition which his successor continued. The unsuitability of what was being taught thus became clearer and lectures became more miscellaneous in their nature as students were encouraged to develop a vigorous imagination through improved reading.

From his Preface, in condemning the severe rules of classical criticism clearly Wilson is making an analogy to the conditions he sees poetry weighed down under in his own time. And without flinching he develops his argument, confidently weaving through it references to his own reading. This he introduces by explaining that there are subjects for which it has seemed almost impossible for poets tied to tradition to achieve with veracity. That is to 'convey a distinct and vivid conception' through poetry, of nature:

The person who has stood amid the beauties of Nature during the breathing silence of a Moonlight evening, who has felt within their breast the magic light of the stars of heaven, and been regaled with the pensive music of winds and waters, knows how exquisite is that melancholy that seems to descend from the stars, and makes him abandon every earthly and grovelling sentiment.

Underlying the heightened language, Wilson is voicing important concerns in the shifting emphasis of poetry of the day. Although Wilson does not as yet refer to any poets explicitly, his general comment precurses his later comparisons in the Preface between Pope, the authors of *Lyrical Ballads*³⁷ and their contemporaries. He laments that there is an absence of 'analysis of such

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ In 'Homer and his Translators': *Works*, vol 8, 119, this debate regarding nature, classical models and modern poetry is reiterated, albeit in a different context. Wilson declares of Pope's translation of Homer's

emotions' among the English poets. Here Wilson clears the way to regard his own efforts towards describing such feelings, claiming that if 'Justice' is served to any degree, praise would be due. What can appear to be blatant self-gratification, is part of a technique of that will be familiar to any reader of Wilson's later work.

Bringing to bear such sub-Miltonic language in the cause of poetic vigilance against what he sees as second-rate literary expression only serves to deflect our attention from what he is well aware is deeply flawed juvenilia in the shape of the 'Margaret' poems. However, Wilson enjoys the opportunity of establishing some general principle of criticism that is often a wildly self-conscious truism of little or no contribution to the debate. Here, recalling his earlier, somewhat specious, distinction between poetry and verse, he refuses to accept that the affectations of metrical language and versification are able to revive a bad poem. These should simply be 'thrown aside with contempt and consigned to eternal oblivion'. The essence of poetry, Wilson goes on, lies in its intrinsic power to inspire, excite or 'delineate' the emotions it describes. The militant register reaches a crescendo as he characterises mediocre poetry as 'the Impostor' and the discussion transforms into a literary battleground upon which is waged a war between the evil power of poetry in perfect form and the 'amiable' if imperfect work that seeks to delineate true feelings.

In the aftermath of this stirring outcry, the whole is cleverly deflated by Wilson as he begs the indulgence of 'one', his reader Margaret, whose 'judgement, taste and feeling' he respects. She will not criticise the poems too harshly because she has been the source of so much inspiration in their writing and, besides this, her views are widely different from the 'common opinion'. This gives Wilson yet another stance from which he can vent his ideas on poetry. He attempts to isolate the reason behind the lack of interest in new writing. It is a general perception that the public are coerced into considering that poetic talent is based upon form rather than the merit

'moonlight scene' that 'Three of our best descriptive poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, have, as you probably know, declared it infamous...in departing from Homer, Pope departed from nature'.

of its content, therefore the public expectation of modern poetry has significantly decreased and its exponents will be judged poorly and literary progress is halted.

Having again apologised for the standard of his own 'little verses' he writes;

That poetical genius is rapidly declining, is a complaint that has been often repeated during the close of the last century, and the confidence with which the fact has been asserted, has probably served in no small degree to impress the public mind with a conviction of its existence.

Wilson in recognising this paradox in the perceived paralysis of contemporary poetic development, blames the critics who deny the evolution of any innovative poetic genius. In highlighting the inconsistency, Wilson enacts the role of detached commentator, an opinionated but pragmatically argued position that he later sustains throughout much of his critical work. His extensively developed intellect, even at this early age, is familiar and proficient with established poetic traditions, while his creative impulse responds instinctively to the ideas and work of new poets. Wilson despairs of those who would restrict that process towards innovation.

Having established that the decline in poetic genius has resulted in an unfavourable reputation for poetry and its proponents, he now tries to evaluate the reasons for that decline. Initially he blames the critics who see it as the inevitable result of poets attempting to move away from 'the old school'. If poetry is only ever to be judged on its similarity to the models that have preceded it, progress will be utterly impossible:

Genius will be laid under fetters to which it cannot submit;—the expression of strong and violent emotion must be regulated not by the impulse of passion, but by the cold rules of unfeeling criticism. New modes of thinking will be despised; original views of any subject will be deemed unnatural and extravagant; and every exertion to enlarge the sphere of the domain of poetry, will be treated with contempt, for no other reason than because the same thing had not been done formerly.

Hinting that it is the duty of the critic to nurture the reader by supporting the efforts of the poet, Wilson complains at the lack of interest in poetry. He goes on to cite the significant advances of scientific knowledge in recent years as indicative of the appetite of a society hungry for new expressions of knowledge. Philosophy, and even literature generally has been 'freed from

all the clouds and vapours that formerly obscured its splendour', so why should poetry alone be in torpor? It is not. Only the perception of its merit has declined. While the public taste may not have been prepared for or encouraged to engage with new ideas, poets have continued to write.

Now Wilson starts to focus on specific poets. Having claimed that the fine arts had no greater encouragement than at the end of the eighteenth-century and that amongst them only poetry has remained inert, Wilson examines some of the reasons why this may be the case. The first thing he fixes on as a cause for the lack of progress in poetry is the popularity of poets of the last century as inviolable models. The first poet he discusses – and with great insight – is Pope;

The vivacity of Pope's Imagination;—the fluency and comprehensiveness of his expression;—the captivating antithesis of his style;—and the unequalled harmony of his numbers, have justly made him an universal favourite and placed his name high in the scale of excellence.

But Wilson goes on to state that despite style and form there is an absence of the sublime or any real passion in his work:

But it must be confessed that Pope was deficient in Fire, in energy of thought; in great and exalted sentiments; in pure and refined feelings, qualities very essential in the character of a real Poet.

This is a controversial but sharply penetrating critique. We are seeing Wilson's earliest demonstration of skills that made him so incisive and imperious a critic. He dispenses with obvious censure, acknowledging Pope's talents with apparently unrestrained praise, for the spirit, colour and control of his subject matter and expression. These lines are a barbed encomium, cleverly constructed on the rounded antithesis; Pope's own familiar poetic stamp.

Reading the sub-text, the words 'vivacity', 'fluency', 'comprehensiveness', 'harmony' suggest a formulaic orthodoxy; damning with praise. Wilson does not deny the importance of Pope's place in the development of poetry but recognises that it lacks the qualities of inspiration and radicalism necessary to push forward new talent and ideas. These elements were to become essential to Romantic poetry, where poet recorded and reader engaged with, uncontrolled

emotional responses, where the mind passionately aspired to the sublime with a vigour previously determined as dangerous and disordered.

Wilson's comments on Pope might help us to date more accurately the 'Margaret' volume, for in its diction and tone it is clearly a response to another important literary critique of 1802; Jeffrey's essay on Southey's *Thalaba* in the *Edinburgh Review*. At sixteen Wilson was already demonstrating his mental agility in the halls of one of Edinburgh's best known clubs—he notes in his 1801 Commonplace book, 'Went to the Speculative Society; spoke as a stranger'³⁸. The Speculative Society, founded in 1764, aimed at 'Improvement in Literary Composition and Public Speaking'. Wilson often visited the capital where his mother had settled and where he attended balls and dinners and developed a strong attachment to his uncle Robert Sym, later 'Timothy Tickler' of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*. Able to compete confidently among his elders, with an appetite for intellectual confrontation, and armed with the skills of classical rhetoric, Wilson developed an almost instinctive enthusiasm for debate. One among the young luminaries of the 'Spec' was also beginning to make a name for himself. Francis Jeffrey³⁹ had been a keen player for some years, submitting essays and taking an active part in the debates. At this time he was collaborating with fellow members Smith, Horner and Brougham on the first edition of the *Edinburgh Review*, preparing the notorious attack on Wordsworth and appended to the review of *Thalaba*.

In his review of Southey's *Thalaba*, Jeffrey opens with a claim no doubt often rehearsed in the halls of the Speculative Society:

Poetry has this much, at least, in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago, by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer lawful to call into question
...⁴⁰

Amongst many of its literati, Scotland still saw its English counterparts as having the upper hand when it came to manners and etiquette, both social and literary. Such inhibited sense of national

³⁸ Gordon (1862) vol 1, 23.

³⁹ It is worth noting that Francis Jeffrey had himself enrolled in Jardine's class some ten years previously and was no doubt under many of the same literary influences of taste and criticism as Wilson.

⁴⁰ 'Thalaba the Destroyer', *The Edinburgh Review*, October 1802, 1, 8, 63-83.

character was manifest in a constant striving towards perceived decorum and Jeffrey was one of the many Edinburgh men to train his accent towards an anglicised pronunciation, fearing he would be considered ill-educated or unrefined. Naturally Jeffrey and his peers sought correct literary models in their striving towards classical polish and idiom, of which the epitome, of course, was Pope.

In the Preface to the 'Margaret' poems Wilson asserts that it is this kind of uncritical adulation that has prevented the advance of poetry:

The admiration bestowed upon his writings was by far too great; and the general enthusiasm was so violent, that the Poetry of Pope, was considered as the Summit of Perfection, and made the standard by which poetical merit should afterwards be estimated.

Jeffrey defined poetry through the neo-classical canon of which Pope was the hero. Wilson on the other hand, here responds by imploding Jeffrey's arguments and mocking the heights at which he positions Pope. Jeffrey regards any transgression of classical principles of form as a betrayal or 'heresy' – a dangerous subversion of order. In the *Thalaba* review he rounds on Southey and his 'sect' of poets, accusing them of turning their back on this established order, describing them as 'dissenters [sic] from the established systems in poetry and criticism'. But Wilson makes a more judicious approach; influenced both by eighteenth-century standards and alert to the form of new ideas, recognises the virtue of Pope's contribution to poetry but despairs that the public taste has been formed solely on the template of his work:

I would therefore attribute the neglect shown towards Poems of the present day in a great measure to an unjustifiable admiration of this truly fascinating writer. His writing made an era in the History of Poetry, which was no doubt productive of many advantages. But they also occasioned a servile and disgusting Imitation, highly prejudicial to the improvement of Poetry. The public taste was thus insensibly formed upon one model—and in many respects not a good one.

Again Wilson deploys the antithetical barb, desecrating the virtues of Pope but blaming indiscriminate idolatry – something of which Wilson could never be accused – as deleterious to new models of poetry.

Emboldened by his correspondence with Wordsworth and the literary milieu of the 'Spec', even at sixteen he distrusts common opinion and demonstrates a daring contemporaneity in his evaluation of poetry. Meanwhile Jeffrey struggles vigilantly to maintain the authority of traditional codes of criticism and what he envisages as indisputably correct forms of poetic composition. He believes that the poetry that dispenses with these can only boast a hollow claim to authenticity:

The disciples of this school boast much of its originality, and seem to value themselves very highly, for having broken loose from the bondage of ancient authority, and re-asserted the independence of genius. Originality, however, we are persuaded, is rarer than mere alteration; and a man may change a good master for a bad one, without finding himself at all nearer to independence.

Jeffrey lambasts the 'school', whom he was later to term the 'Lakers'; irresponsible newly liberated slaves drunk on 'originality' and 'genius' – words then associated with dangerous and radical thought.

It is worth noting the parallels in Wilson and Jeffrey's diction; inflammatory language, associated with 'bondage', 'fetters'. It exhorts Miltonic vigilance against the tyrannical enemies of poetry.

This retaliatory, politicised sensationalism echoes the 'flyting' techniques prevalent in the debating chamber of the Speculative Society. Sir Walter Scott, who was one of the earliest members of the society, offers useful impressions that help to envisage the preoccupations of the neophyte Edinburgh *literati*; eager young advocates, sharpening their appetite for the bar:

It is well known that in Edinburgh one great spur to emulation among youthful students is in those associations called *literary societies*, formed not only for the purpose of debate, but of composition. These undoubtedly have some disadvantages, where a bold, petulant, and disputatious temper happens to be combined with considerable information and talent. Still, however, in order to such a person being actually spoiled by his mixing in such debates, his talents must be of a very rare nature, or his effrontery must be proof to every species of assault; for there is generally, in a well-selected society of this nature, talent sufficient to meet the forwardest, and satire enough to penetrate the most undaunted.⁴¹

Jeffrey actually heard Scott reading an essay on ballads on the night of his first admission to the society. In his *Thalaba* review Jeffrey continues in censorious tone, citing the new poetic school's adherence to such misguided criteria as the philosophy of Rousseau, the 'simplicity and energy of

⁴¹ JG Lockhart *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, (Edinburgh 1871).

... Schiller' and the 'homeliness of Cowper's language' as threats to poetry. For Jeffrey though, by far the worst of the symptoms is the 'affectation of simplicity and familiarity of language'.

This is the first explicit response to Wordsworth's revised Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, published only a few months before in June 1802. Here Wordsworth states his intention to focus on 'incidents of common life';

Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated⁴²

Jeffrey scorns this obvious flouting of established principles of poetic diction. Wordsworth's claim to be selecting language really spoken by men is anathema to him. Just as it would be completely unnatural for Wordsworth to have nymphs and fauns sporting in the ruins of Tintern Abbey, for Jeffrey common people are not appropriate matter to poetry. The reviewer's statement recalls the argument advanced in Joseph Warton's comments in his *Essay on Pope* about the place of the sublime and the pathetic in poetry.⁴³ He derides the efforts of the new poets to find an artless expression. However 'noble and conscientious' the intention of these poets, their efforts to arouse sentiments purely sourced in nature is flawed for:

there are passages in all poems, that can neither be pathetic nor sublime; and that, on these occasions, a neglect of the embellishments of language is very apt to produce absolute meanness and insipidity. The language of passion, indeed, can scarcely be deficient in elevation; and when an author is wanting in that particular, he may commonly be presumed to have failed in the truth, as well as the dignity of his expression.

Wilson, enthuses over the aspirations of this new school. He rehearses the characteristics of their works and praises their descriptions of the sublime, maintaining that there is little to recommend us to Pope's compositions for such qualities:

Many Poems lately published contain thoughts strikingly grand and exalted;—descriptions of external scenery awful and sublime;—and delineations of various feelings of the heart marked by their delicacy and refinement. Now, these are qualities which the greatest admirers of Pope must confess do not in any remarkable degree belong to him,—although the possession of them adds much to the excellence of a Poet.

⁴² Brett and Jones (1991), 245.

⁴³ Joseph Warton, *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope* (1756).

Wilson's comments on the absence of nature as inspiration in Pope's poetry anticipate the controversy sparked between William Lisle Bowles and Thomas Campbell, following the former's edition of Pope's work in 1806, as to whether art or nature provided the better materials for poetry⁴⁴. The debate was to continue for many years and 'the botheration about Pope' was even disputed in the *Blackwood's Magazine* satires, *Noctes Ambrosianae*, many years later⁴⁵; when Christopher North and the Ettrick Shepherd tussle over the question 'Was Pope a Poet?'

For Jeffrey's taste, the poetry of the 'awful' and 'sublime' is altogether too dangerously the product of 'eternal strainings and distortions'. He longs for the soothing placidity of less daunting landscapes. While he concedes some need for the presence of untamed natural environment, he does not wish to linger transported in contemplation:

a whole poem cannot be made up of striking passages ... sensations produced by sublimity, are never so powerful and entire, as when they are allowed to subside and revive, in a slow and spontaneous succession. It is delightful, now and then, to meet a rugged mountain, or a roaring stream; but where there is no sunny slope, nor shaded plain, to relieve them—where all is beetling cliff and yawning abyss, and the landscape presents nothing on every side but prodigies and terrors—the head is apt to grow giddy, and the heart to languish for the repose and security of a less elevated region.

The shift in thought from Jeffrey's neo-classical principles to the philosophy Wordsworth sets out in his 1801 Preface, marks what M. H. Abrams describes as the movement from the rhetorical and pragmatic towards the expressive and primitivistic.⁴⁶ It is a point when 'the concept of urgency and overflow of feeling moves from being only a subordinate element of poetic theory to becoming central to the whole'.⁴⁷ To Jeffrey the transformation represents a 'debasement of all those feelings which poetry is designed to communicate'. These poetic sensibilities were, he believed, epitomised in Pope's work, which in turn became the paradigm upon which those writing later in the century modelled their work.

⁴⁴ Bowles' preface to this edition was based on the critical stance promoted by his teacher Joseph Warton in his *Essay* which in turn courted a response from Byron in his 1821 'Letter on W. L. Bowles's *Strictures on Pope*'.

⁴⁵ *Noctes Ambrosianae*, vol 1, 12.

⁴⁶ M.H. Abrams *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford 1953), 34.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

Although, like Jeffrey, he is cautious and attributes merit to tradition where it is due, Wilson is eagerly receptive to new ideas. He is careful to recognise the excellence of Pope's contribution to poetry but he warns against the prejudice that might lead his reader to disregard the work of other poets:

We should admire Pope for the beauties his poems disclose, and all allow these to be both numerous and great.—But we ought to guard against considering what we do not find in his species of Poetry to be deviations from Nature, else we will fall into many grievous mistakes.—

Posthumously the merits of Pope's work were equated with the height of Augustan achievement. At the turn of the 19th-century he was still held up as the greatest poet. Many years after Wilson wrote this Preface and under very different circumstances, he comments that 'Pope ... was an ethereal character—and played on his own harp with finest taste, and wonderful execution.'⁴⁶ And for the purposes of his Preface he ends his comments on the poet on a safe note:

Let us observe the great rule of justice, which is so general as to admit of no exceptions, "Give every man his own",—and reflect that whatever is foolishly bestowed upon one, is erroneously taken from another.—

Continuing the diatribe against the modern poets, Wilson accuses Southey of letting the side of good poetry down by carrying his ideas of reform and liberty after the French revolution too far. Doubtless, referring to *Thalaba the Destroyer*, Southey's orientalist fantasy, he has added to this error by falling:

into another equally if not more pernicious. He has ventured into the inextricable mazes of romance and improbability and clothed in language frequently beautiful and descriptive the wildest ideas, and the most impossible incidents.

Next Coleridge and 'some of the brightest luminaries of the present day' come under fire for undermining the interests of poetry for the same reasons. In order to prove his point, in typical speculative manner, Wilson goes on to weigh in the balance the importance of posterity and the lesser new poets, who have not had a chance to be tested by time. He claims that they are enjoying a small amount of celebrity on the basis of insignificant work that could never be

⁴⁶ 'An Hour's Talk About Poetry': *Works*, vol 9, 226.

compared to that of the past. Throughout his discussion of these poets though, he is never specific as to which works he puts on either side of the scale. He wants to defend contemporary poetry, thus demonstrating his 'modernity' while showing his appreciation for convention.

He then opens up the question of whether nature has been fully covered in poetry. Part of the distaste for modern poetry, which Wilson cites, is an assumption that nothing new need be said on the subject, since it would simply be the repetition of tried and tested themes in different language. But having led us into this debate he immediately dismisses anyone with this view as misguided. These are not, he states, the people to champion the cause of poetry. And he goes on to make his most explicit statement of literary allegiance. Drawing a line between the two schools of thought – old and new – he castigates the new 'versifiers' 'fluttering in the uncertain sunshine of feeble applause' because they diminish his heroes. Here he is unequivocal and lists these as the poets Pye⁴⁹, MacNeil⁵⁰, and Richardson⁵¹ whose work only serves to lessen the impact of the talents of his favourites, Southey, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Campbell and Bowles⁵².

In their work:

It is perfectly impossible that we can hesitate for a single moment, in declaring, that many thoughts, sentiments and feelings are there to be seen, which were never before hinted at, but which, the instant we hear them, we are forced by an irresistible impulse to pronounce original, natural and delightful.

⁴⁹ Henry James Pye (1745-1813) He was made poet laureate in 1790, perhaps as a reward for his faithful support of Pitt in the House of Commons. The appointment was looked on as ridiculous, and his birthday odes were a continual source of contempt. His most elaborate poem was an epic *Alfred* (1801).

⁵⁰ Possibly Hector MacNeil (1745-1818), a Scottish poet and one time editor of the *Scots Magazine*. In 1789, he published *The Harp, a Legendary Tale* which brought him some acclaim and in 1795 his most well known poem, *Scotland's Skaith, or the history o' Will and Jean; ower true a Tale*.

⁵¹ Possibly William Richardson (1743-1814). He was Professor of Humanities at Glasgow, in whose class Wilson had first enrolled. His *Poems: chiefly rural* had gone into several editions after its first publication in 1774 and in 1801 he published *The Maid of Lochlin; a lyrical drama with lyrical odes*. Richardson also wrote and published a defence of Macpherson's 'Ossian'.

⁵² William Lisle Bowles 1762–1850, English poet, cleric, and literary critic. In 1818 he became chaplain to the prince regent, and in 1828 canon residentiary of Salisbury Cathedral. He won the admiration of Coleridge with the melancholy, rather emotional verse included in *Fourteen Sonnets* (1789). Bowles's other poetry includes *The Battle of the Nile* (1799), *The Sorrows of Switzerland* (1801), and *The Spirit of Discovery* (1804). In 1806 Bowles published an edition of Pope that was highly critical of the poet and his work; this led to an acrimonious controversy with Byron.

Having proved his argument, this provides Wilson with the opportunity to opine on a wider scale, as he characteristically opens the debate into a treatise on man, aesthetics throughout history and no less than 'the aspect of the whole universe'!

In the preface to the 'Margaret' poems, Wilson appears to focus on three distinctive elements of new poetry, perhaps most simply described as the power of the imagination, nature and the self. He clearly has the form and content of *Lyrical Ballads* in mind here. Southey's *Poems* (1797) and Bowles also provide models; there are influences of both volumes as models for the content of the 'Margaret' poems. And he was certainly aware of other recent publications such as Coleridge's *Poems on Various Subjects* and Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders*.

A catalogue of the library of Jardine's Logic Class⁵³, at Glasgow College lists among its titles a poem that had a great impact on Wilson. Thomas Campbell's⁵⁴ enormously successful, *Pleasures of Hope* was published to great acclaim in 1799 and was described in a periodical review of 1822 as 'the connecting link between the past and the present school of poetry. It is written in the metre and manner of the first, and with the glow, animation and energy of the other'⁵⁵. The poem abounds with the 'sort of emotional hyperbole and over-emphasis of language, which was what Campbell regarded as the very essence of poetry'⁵⁶. Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey were unanimous in thinking Campbell's poem over-rated, its language was confused and ideas too orthodox. But Wilson evidently admired *The Pleasures of Hope* and writes an ostentatious continuation of the poem in his 'The Immortality of the Soul' (66), which opens with a quotation from Campbell's poem, 'Inspiring thought of rapture yet to be'⁵⁷

Campbell's poem was inspired by the wild sea and landscapes of the Hebrides but it lacks the philosophical considerations of the effect of nature upon the imagination, examined by the

⁵³ GUL Sp Coll, DL.12.20.

⁵⁴ Thomas Campbell, was only five years senior to Wilson and was also from Glasgow. The two men became great friends in later life.

⁵⁵ *The Album*, vol 1, (1822), 21.

⁵⁶ A.D Harvey, *English Poetry in a Changing Society 1780-1825*, (London 1980), 74.

⁵⁷ Thomas Campbell, *The Pleasures of Hope; with other poems* (Edinburgh 1799).

Romantics. But from Wilson's point of view, the poem perfectly met the criteria he sought for successful poetry. Campbell uses 'descriptions of external scenery awful and sublime' and these fascinate Wilson. They are qualities he clearly identifies as lacking in Pope's poetry. But Campbell also employs high-blown diction, crowding phrases and an exclamatory tone that is alien to the efforts of intimacy and simplicity of Wordsworth and Coleridge. This was very much to the public taste, and the volume ran to ten editions. Wilson too, always seems to have an eye for public taste. At least, despite his comments in the Preface to the 'Margaret' poems, it is Campbell's style that Wilson more often imitates. And here we can clearly see the seedbed of Wilson's later literary products. *The Isle of Palms* and *City of the Plague* were both immensely successful volumes and highly praised by Jeffrey and Byron, among others. But despite the subject matter and poetic idiom, they never really approached the essence of Romantic thought set out in Wordsworth's Preface.

Other books of particular importance in the library of the Logic Class tell us something of the subjects under discussion in Jardine's classes. Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* and James Macpherson's *The Poems of Ossian* are vital clues to what Wilson may have been reading. Blair had a great impact upon the 'Ossian' debate and Jardine's teachings borrow distinctive elements from his work. Blair is interested in the impact of the untamed landscape upon the intellectual development of the mind. Like many other scholars of his day, he supported the authenticity of Macpherson's translations from Ossian. This was demonstrated in his defence of the poems published in 1762. The Ossianic translations had caught the imagination of those poets receptive to the idea that primitive instincts, without the affectations or rules of civilised society, produced a powerful and intuitive lyricism.

Elemental nature, with man as its focus, increasingly provided the materials with which poets such as Wordsworth worked. This was a version of nature without any of the refinements of neoclassicism. Rousseau, amongst others, had promoted the value of this portrayal of unmannered society; the noble savage in a condition of dignified, natural artlessness. But such

concepts unnerved Jeffrey, who believed them dangerous and misguided and that 'poverty made men ridiculous'.

Many of these ideas are to be found in Blair's *The Poems of Ossian - A Critical Dissertation* written in the 1760s. In a passage that must have stirred the heart of the young Wordsworth, Blair praises the powerful effect of the Ossian poems and recognises the importance of the landscape against in which they are set:

the events recorded, are all serious and grave; the scenery throughout, wild and Romantic. The extended heath by the sea shore; the mountain shaded with mist; the torrent rushing through a solitary valley; the scattered oaks, and the tombs of warriors overgrown with moss; We find not in Ossian, an imagination that sports itself, and dresses out gay trifles to please the fancy. His poetry more perhaps than that of any other writer, deserves to be styled *The Poetry of the Heart* [sic]. It is a heart penetrated with noble sentiments, and with a heart that grows, and kindles the fancy; a heart that is full, and pours itself forth. Ossian did not write, like modern poets, to please readers and critics. He sung from the love of poetry and song.⁵⁶

In the light of these ideas, Wilson sometimes grasps the opportunity to release his poetry from Augustan embellishment and looks towards the imagination and nature as pure sources. One of the most accomplished poems of the 'Margaret' volume is entitled 'Caledonia' (89), its name evocative of a mythic Ossianic past. Here Wilson conflates Thomson, Campbell and Wordsworth in a powerful elegy set against the Scottish landscape upon which he powerfully invokes the spirit of Ossian:

Spirit of Ossian! That in ancient time
Dared undismayed Parnassian heights to climb,
Bright flowed the torrent of thy powerful song
The flowery meads of poetry along,
With magic hand thou swept'st the magic lyre
Thy dim eyes brightening with celestial fire,
And while the glow of genius warm'd thy breast
And nameless feelings thy high soul impress'd,
Thy mind with vast, transporting rapture fraught
[?Played] like a meteor in embodied thought,
Burst with majestic glory on the sight
And poured a flood of everlasting light!
Thy native hills array'd in snowy pride
Round whose broad base the murmuring waters glide,
The fiery glory of an evening sky,
The sun descending from his throne on high,
The mellow lustre of the dewy star

⁵⁶ James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian, with a Critical Dissertation* by Hugh Blair (Edinburgh 1762).

Now scarcely seen, now twinkling from afar,
 The lengthening shadows by the mountain made
 Flinging their [?arch] gigantic o'er the glade,
 The whispering winds at noon that gently breathe
 With notes of music o'er the gloomy heath,
 Moulded thy Soul to feelings pleasing power
 And bathed thy heart in inspirations shower
 Till thy eye brightened and thy course begun
 Scotia was sad "a world without a Sun"! (253-278)

There is a clear recognition here of the Wordsworthian dictum that poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'⁵⁹ and Wilson goes further in reaching out in an attempt to recreate a kind of passion, inspired by the meeting of 'the grand and exalted', nature and the imagination; elements he astutely identifies in his Preface. Wordsworth insists that the emotion recollected in tranquillity 'gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.' By superimposing the Ossianic legend on the intractable landscape Wilson successfully produces the 'solemn attention in the mind and prepares it for the 'great and extraordinary events' Blair describes;

Thy mind with vast, transporting rapture fraught
 Played like a meteor in embodied thought (260-261)

Undoubtedly recalling his class discussions with Jardine, Wilson here again draws on the primitivism of Rousseau's noble savage and Ossian, claiming that even in the most uncivilised times poetry has always been man's most effective form of self-expression; the mirror in which he looks into his soul. Poetry in these times contains a raw, awakened energy, which once refined, has a civilising influence. Just as laws and government have tamed the violent and brutish nature of man, the refinements of polite behaviour have calmed the passion of love in women, making impulse submit to reason. So, he goes on, instincts can be modified, such that genuine and false expression cannot be distinguished. It is the poet's task to define what is excessive and what are 'the genuine dictates of nature'. As far as the Wilson writing the Preface is concerned, Wordsworth is the man to 'rectify' the feelings of human nature and has clearly proved that

⁵⁹ Brett and Jones (1991) 246.

there are genuine poets for whom 'nature's funds are inexhaustible' and who are able to help us discover new things about ourselves.

Sensing that his argument is sinking into excessive hyperbole, Wilson begins to wind down his Preface. But not without a precocious flourish. He claims that we will never fully understand, nor cease to appreciate, the countless forms of external nature and the 'void immense'. [Mis]quoting Prospero, these universal truths will not dissolve like the 'baseless fabric of a vision'⁶⁰. Fearing he has not fully emphasised his point, he parries once more with a biblical broadside, claiming that these ideas are the result of 'some unseen power...the still small voice of inspiration'. And in a final appeal to his reader, he puts up his foil, begging that we will remain alive to the sentiments contained in his poetic effusions and the innocence of his pleasure in writing them.

In fact, it is in Wilson's Preface that we find the antecedents of the literary struggle engaged in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine* between Wilson, Jeffrey and Wordsworth over the next three decades. In Wilson's Preface, there is an audible and strident reaction to Jeffrey's review. The vigilant tone of the passage is typical of Wilson's later criticism. He exhorts the reader against holding the Augustan to be the ideal model for poetry; demonstrating a confident grasp of one of the topical literary debates of his day.

The forceful defence of the new poets in the Preface, the self-conscious confidence of his literary dialectic and the stylistic range of the poems contained in the volume show us a mind attempting to draw together ideas under different influences. In his discussion of Pope and the new poets, Wilson tries to produce clear principles of poetry from disparate traditions. He attempts to synthesise the aesthetic standards of the eighteenth-century with emerging philosophies of the poetry of his day. This results in a treatise that, amongst others, bears the impress of

⁶⁰ Shakespeare, *Tempest*, Act IV, scene I:
Our revels are now ended. These our actors
As I foretold you, were all spirits,
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision (148-150)

Wordsworth's Prefaces to *Lyrical Ballads*, Jeffrey's review and Jardine's⁶¹ literary theories.

Remarkably for such a perilous task, it ultimately succeeds in making an original contribution to literary thought and this lies not least in its bold originality.

⁶¹ see page 5n.

I once intended to have written a few verses, begging any person who may chance to read the following Poems, to treat them with indulgence. But upon endeavouring to do so, I found it more difficult to write such verses well, than to compose any of the poetical essays in whose behalf I wish'd to speak. I know that it is, and I daresay ever will be, a general
5 opinion, that Poetry possessing merely a moderate Share of merit, is unworthy of Perusal. I have always been accustomed to consider this Idea rather unreasonable, and had it met with the approbation of my Judgement, I should most certainly never have expressed my feelings in Poetry. As long as this opinion, whether it be erroneous or not, possesses the public mind, no Poems should be published that do not contain beauties so striking or original, as to claim instant
10 approbation and applause. But should the force of this prohibition extend also to the writing of verses? And providing we do not offend other people, may we not be allowed to please ourselves? This much I know, that to clothe in the language of Poetry and passion, those simple and delightful feelings, which exist in the breast of all Mankind, is an innocent and I will venture to affirm an instructive amusement. When the mind is under the influence of strong and violent
15 emotion, or soothed into tranquillity by calm feelings of peace and happiness, to breathe into poetical enunciation, the Essence of our Spirits affords exquisite delight at the present time, and raises a memorial of our joy more lasting than the fragile Tablets of Memory. It is pleasing to compare the effusions of actual feeling with the emotions that rise in the mind from contemplating these effusions; and by their comparison our Sensibility is excited by ideal grief
20 without the pain of new Suffering. Our joys and our griefs are all recalled to our remembrance; we [surpass] the limits of Time, and live over again the happiest moments of our Life. Such is the pleasure that the young poet derives from the effusions of his Soul; nor upon consideration will it be found that such pleasure is unaccompanied with useful lessons to the heart. It presents objects calculated to hinder Sensibility from having only a transient influence upon the spirit, and
25 by impressing them in living characters upon the heart, keeps open the sources of every amiable and interesting feeling. When we contemplate in a state of calmness and tranquillity the emotions that we delineated in a State of violent excitement, we learn not to deem these emotions

unnatural, but to consider the difference of our situation as the cause of the difference in our judgement. This teaches us prudence and caution in our opinion of other Poems than our own, and corrects our Taste by regulating our feeling. Poetry therefore whether view'd in the light of amusement or instruction, pleasure or utility ought to meet with the kind approbation of every virtuous Man, as long as it refrains from exciting loose and improper sentiments, nor degenerates into the vehicle of vice and licentiousness.

This simple view of the subject has convinced me of the injustice of regarding with an unfavourable eye all Poetry that does not appear to be the production of extraordinary Genius. But there are other grounds on which the same Idea may be defended. In the sister arts of Music and Painting this extreme fastidiousness of taste is not carried to so great a length; and yet if we acted consistently the same rule would be extended to them. It is not indeed difficult to perceive from what this severe rule of criticism regarding poetical composition originally proceeded. During the Augustan Age, when the Roman Empire had emerged from barbarity and savage torpor, there arose many Men of fine taste and great genius, that dispelled the clouds of ignorance which had so long hung over them, and restored human nature to its true dignity. The necessary effect of the general attention which was paid to literature and especially to the belles-lettres, during this period, was an immense crowd of authors, who servilely trod in the steps of those who preceded them, and repeated their Sentiments so often and with so great dramatical impropriety, that what was once beautiful became at last disgusting. The History of Rome shows us how prevalent a taste for Poetry was among all ranks of people, and what immense numbers were Poets by Profession. The miserable jargon which was thus thrown upon the public, became such a nuisance, that the severest rules of criticism were laid down, and the most unmerciful treatment shown to bad Poetry, that the evil might be crushed before it arrived at a more formidable height. These rules, the severity of which ought to have relaxed, when the evil it was their object to remedy was removed, were on the contrary retained with additional force, and being sanctioned by the public voice, left so deep and lasting impressions upon the national mind, that every attempt to obliterate them, has proved ineffectual. So great is the inveteracy of universal prejudice! With regard to the propriety of these rules of criticism laid down by the

Roman writers, it is needless here to speak; but this much I should apprehend is certain, that a deeper insight into the human heart, a more insinuating manner of finding entrance into the Soul, have been discovered by the modern Poets, than ever were displayed during the most enlightened periods of Greece and Rome, and that therefore a less superstitious reverence
60 should be paid to the Laws of their critics.

There are some subjects of Poetry accompanied with so many difficulties, that it is almost impossible to write well upon them, that is, to convey a distinct and vivid conception of them to others. The person who has stood amid the beauties of Nature during the breathing silence of a Moonlight Evening, who has felt within their breast the magic light of the Stars of
65 heaven, and been regaled with the pensive music of winds and waters, knows how exquisite is that Melancholy that seems to descend from the Stars, and makes him abandon every earthly and grovelling Sentiment. Is it to be supposed that no Poet ever felt the Influence of such a Situation? No surely: We may reasonably conclude that in the enthusiastic bosom of a child of Song, such feelings must exist in full perfection. Yet do we find any delineation of such feelings in their
70 works? Allusions to them we may often observe, but I believe there is not among our English Poets anything like a complete analysis of such emotions. And must we refuse that person any merit at all, who though he has failed to give a perfect delineation of these feelings, has notwithstanding expressed them more clearly than has hitherto been done? If we [acted] agreeably to Justice we would not refuse him praise, but we would, if we acted agreeably to the
75 established rules of criticism. Equity requires that before we judge of the execution, we should take into consideration the difficulty, -- besides what ought to go still farther the novelty and originality of the design.— Another cause of too great severity shown towards poetical composition, is, that we are not sufficiently careful to distinguish between Poetry with faults, and what is not in fact Poetry at all. If a composition written in consistency with the rules of metrical
80 language and versification, be totally devoid of Interest, and neither delineate not excite any pleasing feeling, we are wrong in calling it a bad Poem, since it has no pretensions whatever even to that appellation. It should be thrown aside with contempt and consigned to eternal oblivion. If on the other hand, a Poem interest us by delineating some interesting emotion, we ought to

commend it, even though it should be in many respects imperfect, in spite of the vengeance
85 denounced against all mediocre Poetry. The first we ought to treat as an Impostor—the other as
an amiable though erring being. Punishment should be inflicted upon the one; mercy and the
soothing voice of comfort should be the portion of the other.

I have thus endeavoured to show that to condemn indiscriminately all poetry that is not
demonstrative of extraordinary genius is unjust and illiberal. I thought it necessary to mention
90 my opinion upon this that none might read these Poems with a different Idea, because if they do,
I am certain that they will be disappointed. If the reasoning I have used has failed to convince the
person who has now read it, let him condemn these Poems but spare their Author; because
whatever his opinion may be, it cannot prevent me from receiving pleasure from writing verses,
and as long as that pleasure interferes not with that of another, I have an indisputable right to
95 indulge in it. I trust, that I do not write in this manner from any affectation of modesty which to
me is more disgusting than impudent confidence. I know pretty accurately the real merit of the
following little Poems, from the opinion of one¹ whose judgement, taste and feeling I highly
respect, and who I am sure has too much of the upright Spirit of inflexible Honour, with reason
either to praise or to censure, to flatter or depress. But I also know that the Sentiments of that
100 person, are widely-different from the common opinion of Poetry, and that what pleased or
coincided with these sentiments, may disgust or be indifferent to other people.—

There is another point of Speculation which I have been revolving in my mind for this
some time past, and which as it is ultimately connected with the present subject, may not be
improperly discussed in this place, I mean, the very low opinion which is generally entertained of
105 the Poetry of the present day.—

That poetical genius is rapidly declining, is a complaint that has been often repeated during the
close of the last century, and the confidence with which the fact has been asserted, has probably
served in no small degree to impress the public mind with a conviction of its existence. The
110 effects of this prejudice, must be highly disadvantageous to the progress of the fine arts, and

¹ Margaret Mitchelson.

therefore ought to be guarded against by every person who takes an interest in the advancement of Literature. The continuance of it will probably occasion the decline of poetical Genius, and give just grounds for that complaint, which is in the present day altogether unreasonable. As long as a Poem is condemned merely because of the Sentiments contained in it, and the Style in which
115 it is written, are different from former productions;—as long as its' similarity to what is called the old School, not its' own merit, is made the criterion by which we judge of its' excellence, it is the nature of things absolutely impossible, that the art of Poetry can be progressive. Genius will be laid under fetters to which it cannot submit; the expression of strong and violent emotion must be regulated not by the impulse of Passion, but by the cold rules of unfeeling criticism. New
120 modes of thinking will be despised; original views of any subject will be deemed unnatural and extravagant; and every exertion to enlarge the sphere of the domain of Poetry, will be treated with contempt, for no other reason than because the same thing had not been done formerly.

Considering the state of Society in which we now live, this prejudice seems the more surprizing. Greater encouragement never was given to Literature in general than during the close
125 of the eighteenth-century . Discoveries have been made in every department of Science unknown in former times; systems long established have been exploded; errors and mistakes have been detected; new principles have been established upon certain and indisputable grounds, and the Sun of Philosophy has been freed from all the clouds and vapours that formerly obscured its splendour.—

Poetry alone seems to have remained stationary, not in reality, but in the public opinion; and while every encouragement is given to all other parts of Literature, it seems neglected and every effort to render it more perfect, regarded as an unnecessary and useless encroachment. To trace the causes of this in a full and comprehensive manner, would be accompanied with much difficulty and require very extensive Information. A few of the leading causes are obvious
135 enough however, and come within the reach of every Person's observation.

The vivacity of Pope's Imagination;—the fluency and comprehensiveness of his expression;—the captivating antithesis of his Style;—and the unequalled harmony of his numbers, have justly made him an universal favourite and placed his name high in the scale of excellence.

But it must be confessed that Pope was deficient in Fire, in energy of thought; in great and
140 exalted sentiments; in pure and refined feelings, qualities very essential in the character of a real
Poet.—

The admiration bestowed upon his writings was by far too great; and the general
enthusiasm was so violent, that the Poetry of Pope, was considered as the Summit of Perfection,
and made the standard by which poetical merit should afterwards be estimated. I would
145 therefore attribute the neglect shown towards Poems of the present day in a great measure to
an unjustifiable admiration of this truly fascinating writer. His writing made an era in the History
of Poetry, which was no doubt productive of many advantages. But they also occasioned a servile
and disgusting Imitation, highly prejudicial to the improvement of Poetry. The public taste was
thus insensibly formed upon one model—and in many respects not a good one.—Many Poems
150 lately published contain thoughts strikingly grand and exalted;—descriptions of external scenery
awful and sublime;—and delineations of various feelings of the heart marked by their delicacy and
refinement. Now, these are qualities which the greatest admirers of Pope must confess do not in
any remarkable degree belong to him,—although the possession of them adds much to the
excellence of a Poet. We should admire Pope for the beauties his poems disclose, and all allow
155 these to be both numerous and great.—But we ought to guard against considering what we do
not find in his species of Poetry to be deviations from Nature, else we will fall into many grievous
mistakes.—Let us observe the great rule of justice, which is so general as to admit of no
exceptions, “Give every man his own”,—and reflect that whatever is foolishly bestowed upon
one, is [?erroneously] taken from another.—

160 Extensive as the effects of this cause may be upon the public taste, I believe the
misapplication of real talent has occasioned more mischief than any thin else to the interests of
Poetry. Some of the first Poets of the age have, one would think, have done every thing in their
power to diminish and destroy the talents with which Providence has gifted them. Southey a man
whose genius is of the highest kind, affords a strong and striking illustration of this
165 truth.—Endowed by Nature with a generous and independent Soul, he beheld with detestation
the bloody systems of modern policy and entered with enthusiasm into the views of the first

French revolutionists. But he carried his ideas of reform and liberty to a most dangerous height, and made that the office of a Poet, which belongs exclusively to the Politician. It is not surprising that mid the virulent animosity of party spirit, and the jarring interests of different factions in the state, the [?blighted] Genius was in some measure obscured in the mists of Envy and detraction, and unable to make its' beams conspicuous. After he had extricated himself from one Error, he seems to have fallen into another equally if not more pernicious. He has ventured into the inextricable mazes of Romance and Improbability and clothed in language frequently beautiful and descriptive the wildest Ideas, and the most impossible incidents.—It is not to be expected, that the public will take the trouble of seeking through a bushel of chaff for a few grains of barley; or seek for the real strokes of nature amid the immensity of unnatural fiction.—

The evil done to the Interests of Poetry by such productions is incalculable; the injury done to your own character very likely irretrievably established.—The same observations with some restrictions may be applied to Coleridge, and some of the brightest luminaries of the present day.—Such productions may please some, but their reputation never can be permanent.—

In comparing the Poetry of the present day with that of the old school, no care has been taken to avoid an error, which turns the scale greatly to the side of the former.—All those persons who wrote mere verses during the last age, are forgot; their names have sunk into oblivion; their productions have never reached us.—Those only distinguished by superior talent, and who were the boast of Genius and the ornament of their country, have stood the test of time and been handed down with honour, to Posterity. Every thing therefore put into the balance in favour of the Poetry of the last Age possesses weight and helps to turn the scale. But with poetry of the present day, the case is widely different. Versifiers, who are doomed never to be enrolled into the book of Fame, are at present fluttering in the uncertain sunshine of feeble applause—and their gaudy and tinsel ornaments serve in some measure to direct our attention from objects more justly entitled to it.—These are put into the balance along with real merit, but instead of adding any thing to the weight, they in reality diminish it. In the one case, all is pure bullion; in the other, there is a great quantity of useless dross. It is easy to see which scale will

195 preponderate. But in future times the comparison will be more equal. Posterity will be the most impartial judges; and that the decision they will give, will be widely different from the one now passed, is surely an expectation that there is good grounds for entertaining.

But though the causes I have now mentioned, have undoubtedly served greatly to prejudice the public Mind against the Poetry of the present day, it may be affirmed with
200 considerable confidence, that the chief reason of this perversion of Taste, arises from an erroneous opinion adopted not only by the vulgar but more refined, that every circumstance striking in Nature has been seized upon and embellished by former authors. Observing the many evident imitations of former writers with which some late productions abound, they consider this as an argument in support of their opinion,—and conclude that henceforth Poetry can be
205 only a mere repetition of thoughts long ago given to the public, expressed in different language and arrangement. . . . It is easy to perceive that any conclusion drawn from the Poems of persons of this kind, relative to the state of true poetical genius in the present day, must be perfectly erroneous.—Such persons surely are not those who are to support the declining honours of Poetry. We must look for new thoughts to a Wordsworth, a Southey, a Coleridge, a Campbell
210 or a Bowles, not to the puny insignificant efforts of a Pye, a Knight, a Macneil, or a Richardson². If we do so with candour and impartiality, and if we possess a single spark of feeling or the slightest knowledge of any tender emotions of the heart, it is perfectly impossible that we can hesitate for a single moment, in declaring, that many thoughts, sentiments and feelings are there to be seen, which were never before hinted at, but which, the instant we hear them, we are forced by an
215 irresistible impulse to pronounce original, natural and delightful.—

But instead of proving at present from references to particular passages in these Poets, that there are subjects left untouched by former writers capable of high poetical embellishment, a thing which could be easily done, let us take a wider view of the subject, and prove that this must be the case, from the constitution of the human mind, from the appearances of external
220 nature, and the aspect of the whole Universe.

² see page 40n ff.

In every Age and in every quarter of the world, the strong and violent emotions of the heart, have naturally become the first subjects of poetical composition.—When the placid state of the Mind has been ruffled by some unexpected storm; when common trains of thought have given way to the irregular workings of Passion; when the slumbering sympathies or antipathies of the Soul have been awakened, Mankind have uniformly abandoned the [beaten] way of expressing their thoughts, and have had recourse to the impassioned style of poetical enunciation.—In rude nations, where Men free and unrestrained by the refinements of luxury, and the shackles of regular government, indulge immoderately in the most violent passions of nature, Poetry is the mirror that reflects the features of their Minds, marked, striking and unbending. Their Souls are either violently affected by every circumstance calculated to make an impression upon them, or altogether untouched by them. The uncultivated Savage is a being altogether unacquainted with moderation. His mind is either in a state of high fermentation, or lulled into complete indolence and inactivity. It is on this account that the Poetry of rude nations contains such fire and energy;— that all feeble and relaxed thoughts are excluded;—that force prevails more than softness;—and a stern ferocious vehemence more than the effusions of tenderness. Resentment fierce and terrible, or Love violent and boisterous, are the two great characteristics of uncultivated Poetry.——They are those passions of the Soul which exist in greatest force previous to the refinement of manners;—which are the most deeply implanted into the human heart;—and for whose gratification objects are most numerous during periods of barbarism and Savageness.—

When the State of Society has become more civilised;—when the refinements of luxury have been introduced;—and the stern inflexibility of manners prevalent in a rude country, converted into polite submissiveness, the general features of poetical composition undergo a very important change.—The dispositions, the passions, and the feelings of human nature lose that force and violence which they formerly possessed. Circumstances in the situation of Society, in the established form of its government, and the customs of the people, produce a most surprising alteration, on the complexion of the mind, both with regard to its mode of thinking and its peculiar way of feeling.—The establishment of Law for the redress of grievances tends to

moderate the violence of resentment and bring under subjection every emotion of that kind.

250 Customs and regulations relative to the connection of the Sexes;—ideas of delicacy and modesty that naturally arise;—and the consequent necessity of such qualities in the female character, serve in great measure to moderate the violence of the passion of Love, and to bring it more under the control of reason, than the involuntary impulses of natural desire. At least, whatever change may take place in the nature of the human frame, the expression of feelings of this kind is rendered less luxuriant. We see therefore how the feelings of the mind, which owing to their
255 superior violence, must always be the subject of poetry, are made liable to great changes in different States of Society. That the poetry of rude and civilized countries therefore, must always be widely different, is naturally to be expected. In countries that have emerged from barbarism to civilization, we accordingly find that this change has uniformly taken place. In advanced Society, we are presented with delineations of the softer feelings, of emotions highly delicate and
260 refined.—In so far therefore is this alteration a good one. But it must be remembered that excessive refinement often produces unjustifiable deviations from Nature. False ideas of delicacy are entertained which render the delineation of the most interesting feelings of nature coarse and offensive. Those notions which have been instilled into our minds, by the hand of refinement and artificial sentiment, incorporating with the real feelings of our nature, become in progress of
265 time, as it were a part of them, and incapable of being distinguished. In the Poetry therefore of every country false feelings must frequently exist; and concealed too under the specious garb of refined Sensibility. Here then is a wide and extensive field for the exercise of poetical Genius. To root out such evils requires not merely those powers of language, that brilliancy of Imagination and warmth of sensibility, requisite in the character of a great Poet;—but before any person can
270 expect to succeed in such an arduous attempt, he must strip his mind of all artificial feelings, and draw a line of separation between the false emotions of excessive refinement, and the genuine dictates of Nature. He must look abroad to those scenes where the corruptions of luxury have not penetrated; where the heart owns no emotions that are not hallowed at the fount of
275 Nature; where Man exists in his native dignity and simplicity. As long as this task is unperformed, it is ridiculous to say, that the subjects of Poetry are all exhausted. To accomplish this design, to

rectify the feelings of human nature, to show Mankind what they ought to feel, and point out what they ought to avoid, has been attempted by a Man well-qualified for the task, and whose efforts have hitherto been crowned with the most complete success. Wordsworth a man whom
280 Genius must admire, simplicity venerate and Nature love, has shown that the present age is not destitute of Poets; and that though a band of mean imitators have by running into every mistake formerly known, given rise to the Idea that Poetry is no longer progressive, nature's funds are inexhaustible, and filled with stores that will endure to all eternity. Have not the efforts of
285 Philosophy, been employed these several thousand years to explain the principles of action, to trace the operations of the human mind, and discover the Springs of Intellect and feeling? And does any one suppose that the Sun of philosophy has yet reached the meridian? Is not the knowledge we possess of the human Mind narrow and insignificant? And are we doomed always to remain thus stationary? Will not "the mystery of the unintelligible world" be in some future period entirely lightened? If we reason from experience the event must sooner or later take
290 place. How then is it possible to say that all the subjects of Poetry are exhausted? What pray are the Subjects of Poetry? Are they what the common opinion supposes them to be? Must the artificial complaints of love-sick swains, descriptions of feelings which some people have imagined, but never entertained,—extravagant pictures of beauty,—unnatural metaphors, and distorted language still continue to constitute what is called Poetry? Can any end be imposed
295 upon the infinite combination of feelings which continually are arising in the mind, exist for awhile and perhaps cease for ever? As long as the human mind exists, as long as its' operations are not suspended, and objects present to influence these, will there be subjects for Poetry; nor is it possible that they can ever be exhausted, since the delineation of one feeling will excite another in endless succession.—

300 Such is the case with the constitution of the mind. That the same thing takes place with regard to external nature, is a proposition to my mind so completely self-evident, that it might have the appearance of Pedantry formally to advance arguments in its support or confirmation.—

"Look then abroad thro' Nature to the range
Of Planets, Suns and adamantine Spheres

305 Wheeling unshaken thro' the void immense"³

And then declare that human comprehension can ever grasp all the varieties and immensities of the Universe!—or that our knowledge will ever become so extensive as to number all the Stars of heaven! Will the great moving Spirit of things ever cease to delight the Mind? Will the changes of seasons, the varieties of the elements, the beauty of visible objects, the smell of eternal

310 fragrance, the sounds of winds and waters, the universal harmony of Nature ever be to the Soul things cold and indifferent? It is to be most devoutly hoped, and confidently trusted that they never will—but that as long as Life animates the human frame, and the forms of external nature exist, the influence of the latter will be felt upon the power of the former, will awaken the Song of the Poet and be the great source of felicity to the human race. The Book of Nature possesses
315 no limited number of pages; they are infinite like the spirit of their divine author, and farther we proceed, we find "the beauty still more beautiful". The Infinity of the Universe is indeed the grand basis of Virtue, of the hope of Immortality, and the Life to come. When our mortal frames have mouldered into clay, the reward of virtue will perhaps be an inconceivable expansion of our mental powers;—our Souls unrestrained by the fetters of Sense will have a glorious view of the
320 whole System of the Universe;—we will penetrate into depths of the law of nature;—our Spirits will be nearly assimilated to the nature of Deity! On this principle we must grant that the Universe as it now appears is never to decay. The elements are not to melt away with fervent heat, "the great Globe itself and all which it inherit shall not dissolve, nor like the baseless fabric of a vision leave not a wreck behind."⁴ The ravages of Winter are done away, by the genial
325 approach of Spring;—and nature goes on from decay to bloom in endless succession. What need is there to suppose that all these fair varieties must fade and cease to be? Can we imagine any thing more perfect than the present System of the Universe?

Why therefore be anxious to destroy it? Nature I trust will always remain the same, through all the ages of eternity, and the reward of the great and of the Good, will be with an omniscient eye

³ cf Mark Akenside (1721-1770), *The Pleasures of Imagination*, l:
Look then abroad through nature, to the range
Of planets, suns, and adamantine spheres
Wheeling unshaken through the void immense (486-488)

⁴ see page 45n.

330 to behold its' beauties through the illimitable extent of infinite space and time. But these
speculations delightful as they are must be relinquished; else they would carry me far away from
the subject which I have been considering. Reader! Whoever thou art! that now contempest
these sentiments—may I trust that thou feelest their magic! Soothing to the Soul is the hope of
Immortality! Extatic is the glance that penetrates into the glory of the Skies and the land of the
335 departed! Dost thou feel within thy breast the swell of contempt, that I should speak of heaven
near the productions of my own little heart! Reader, it is the privilege, it is the charter of
humanity to think every moment upon the God that created us! It is the charm of every woe,
the purifier of every emotion! If during the happy moments that these effusions were poured
forth, I felt within the core of my heart the influence of some unseen power, and heard the still
340 small voice of Inspiration, pleasing ever will be the remembrance of such joy, and sacred the
words that recall it into being! Reader farewell! Think that happiness consists in Innocence, and
that no line was ever written in vain that soothed to peace the Spirit of one being, or brought to
his mind the pleasing though mournful image of past transports!

Poems dedicated to Margaret Mitchelson

Thy heart can melt at pity's tale¹
 And pause upon the words of woe!
 Then, take this gift tho' small, sincere,
 'Tis all my spirit can bestow—

If these lines any charm possess
 Oh! may thine eye these beauties see!
 That sometimes thou mayest think of one
 Who loves to think always of thee!

Poems on various subjects by John Wilson

—Thou , sweet poetry, thou loveliest maid
 Still first to fly where sensual joys invade
 Unfit in these degenerate times of shame
 To catch the heart, or strike for honest fame—
 Dear charming nymph, neglected and descried
 My shame in crowds, my solitary pride-
 Thou source of all my bliss and all my woe!

¹ cf William Collins, 'Ode occasioned by the death of Mr Thomson'.

To
Margaret Mitchelson,

The following little Poems,
Which owe any beauty they possess
To the delicacy of her feelings,
And the emotions she has inspired,
Are as a small mark
Of his esteem and regard
inscribed
By her warmest friend and sincerest admirer
John Wilson

If this small offering of a grateful heart
The thrill of pleasure to thy soul impart
Or teach it e'er that magic charm to feel
Which thy tongue knows so sweetly to reveal,
5 Blessed be the breathing language of the line
That speaks of grace and virtues such as thine,
Blessed be those hours when warm'd by love and thee
I poured the verse in trembling ecstasy!
Oh that the music which these lines contain
10 Flowed like the murmurs of thy holy strain
When thy soft voice clear-swelling loves to pour
The tones of feeling in her pensive hour!
Oh would a flame my ardent song inspire
Bright as thy spirit's melancholy fire
15 Pure as the beam that lights thy speaking eye!
And sadly-soothing as thy gentle sigh!
Oh that the thoughts which breathe within thy soul
Would o'er my page their fairy colours roll
That every heart of feeling mould might see
20 The child of nature pictured fair in thee!
If, in my verse thine eye one thought perceive
Whose mournful impulse makes thy heart to grieve,
To thee I owe that thought of holy kind
Thy sigh awoke it and thy tear refined!
25 When mid the silence of a summer night
The moon and stars pour forth a beauteous light
And balmy gales that murmur as they blow
Breathe o'er the soul the magic hues of woe,
A strange, mysterious swell will oft intrude
30 Born on the speaking calm of solitude,
The spirit drops a solitary tear
Feels that its last best dwelling is not here!
So mid the joy that poesy inspires
And inspirations mild celestial fires
35 When the fresh air that circles round the grove
Makes the soul melt in ecstasy of love,

A soothing hope has filled my trembling soul
And fluttering wishes to my spirit stole,
That when my heart was imaged on my line
40 Its purest features might resemble thine!

15 see page 136, line 22n.

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¹ The page numbers in brackets relate to how the poems appear in the original manuscript.

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A Poem on the Immortality of the Soul

Inspiring thought of rapture yet to be...

The epigraph is taken from Thomas Campbell's 1799 poem *The Pleasures of Hope*. Wilson expands Campbell's theme, recognising hope as simply a finite quality – part only of transitory mortality, where it remains. Wilson's poem suggests that human joys are ultimately superseded by the eternal status of the soul. Wilson uses the first-hand experiences of his father's and sister's deaths to give it a personal resonance. He goes beyond Campbell's themes by recognising an inexorable spiritual energy that ties the physical and intellectual actions of man to an infinite soul. Wilson uses the contribution to humanity of the penal reformer John Howard¹ and scientist Isaac Newton² to exemplify this connection between the temporal and the eternal. James Thomson's *The Seasons*, one of Wilson's strongest influences and models, was one of the first poems that actually describes nature in the light of Newtonian scientific principles. In his poem 'To the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton inscribed to the Right Hon. Horace Walpole', (*The Poetical Works* 1830), Thomson eulogises Newton's scientific breakthroughs in physics and astronomy. Another recognisable influence here is Pope's *Essay on Man*. The poem also reconstructs traditional views of natural order under the terms of Newtonian principles of rational harmony.

From Europe's borders to the farthest Ind¹
From cultured sages to the rudest mind,
Where giant Ganges rolls his golden tide
To Lapland's plains arrayed in snowy pride,
5 One heaven-sprung impulse reigns without control
And nature's language swells the labouring soul².
The hope of bliss mid regions of the sky
Dries the salt tear and stops the rising sigh,
The generous flame in every bosom glows
10 And cheers the wretched smiling thro' their woes.

O'er every realm the flaming star of day
Flings from his throne the splendour of his joy
Reflects his glories on a grateful world
By laws eternal round his centre hurl'd;
15 His radiant beams the soul of grief illumine³
Revive the sombre sadness of the tomb,
And with strong magic to the soul impart
Pleasure's sweet balsam on misfortune's dart.
So o'er the globe has nature poured her light
20 And burst the barriers of doubt's gloomy night
With angel hand unveiled to mortal eye

¹ see line 197n.

² see line 149n.

The blissful visions of futurity,⁴
Has taught our souls fair regions to explore
Far as the thought can reach or fancy soar,
25 And fondly thinking on the heavenly mind
To leave the splendour of this world behind.⁵

Did joy triumphant on her votaries smile
Say then could heaven this pleasing hope inspire
Raise in the heart an ever-burning fire,
30 And with her whispering every woe beguile,
Then hurl the victim to the silent grave
Where the sad yew's funereal branches wave,
While round his bier the wailing mourners weep
Doomed to repose in death's eternal sleep?
35 When from the touch of God's creative hand
Mankind arose at heaven's supreme command,
When life's first breath their mortal frames inspired
And with pure flames their bosoms all were fired,
Were they ordained with fruitless hopes to burn
40 Misfortune's shock with bitter woe to mourn,
Nor e'er in happier times triumphant rise
And quit the tomb where their frail body lies?
Why in the heart excite the vain desire
And kindle bright hope's transitory fire?
45 With heavenly light each fluttering heart illumine
That points beyond the chaos of the tomb?
Why o'er the world in ev'ry distant clime
From Afric's sands to Europe's cliffs sublime,
Does nature love in accents⁶ mild to roll
50 Her soothing murmurs o'er the parting soul?
Yes! there are realms of rapture and of joy
No gnawing cares our transports⁷ to alloy
Where mind unfettered by its garb of clay
Shall feel the glory of eternal day,
55 Fly o'er the flaming bounds of space and time
And breathe the blessings of a happier clime!

If with the groans that rend the fainting heart
The soul's pure flame for ever must depart,
If this mean garb of transitory clay
60 The sport of grief, the victim of decay,
Be the sole source of feeling and of thought
Of pure intelligence with rapture fraught,
Then vice may triumph, virtue must obey
And bend beneath the tyrants iron sway.
65 The eternal mind, the universal cause
Must rule the world with weak and partial laws,
Create to torture, raise but to destroy
And dash with gall the pleasing cup of joy.
When vice unpunished, here assumes the sway
70 When base men prosper, and the good decay,
When Rome's proud tyrant sees the world his own
And Cato bleeds unpitied and unknown⁸,
When unavenged the pious victim dies
Is heaven all righteous, or can God be wise?
75 Cease the vain doubt! and know th'eternal will
That first created man, upholds him still,
In future worlds profusely good at last
Shall by the future, rectify the past,
Withdraw the veil of sense from mortal sight
80 And prove to erring man "that all is right"⁹.

Go! view yon wretch whose mean and sordid mind
Nor warmed by virtue, nor by taste refined,
Spurns with contempt the grandeur of the soul
And meek-eyed virtue's soft and sweet controul!
85 Pollutes with guilt and crime the human name
And tinges nature's burning cheek with shame!
Yet o'er this guilty wretched impious head
Has fortune smiling all her blessings shed,
Poured from her horn fair plenty's copious stream
90 And shone irradiant¹⁰ with her brightest beam!
High swells his breast with glittering wealth elate
The pomp of power and pageantry of state,

The fire of pride shines darkly in his eye
 The poor he scorns and stalks exulting by,
 95 A servile band live on his princely smile
 Bleed for his comfort, for his pleasures toil,
 He scorns their grief, neglects their fervent prayers,
 And steeps their heart in misery and despair—
 Immortal hope in thee the good descry
 100 The magic charm that makes it sweet to die,
 That calms the anguish of the panting heart
 And soothe[s] to peace the spirit e'er it part!
 But does thy star the tide of transport roll
 Deep o'er the precincts of this wretch's Soul?
 105 When maniac sickness views his near decease
 A voice is heard! but does it whisper peace?
 When lowly droops the hoary sinner's head
 When health and vigour from his frame have fled,
 When a thick film o'er-spread his aching eyes
 110 And anguish speaks in deep and hollow sighs,
 Relentless conscience rears her fiendish form
 And muttering howls amid the rising storm¹¹,
 Firm in her grasp her cruel scourge appears
 Wet with an ever-pouring flood of tears,
 115 And while her eyes with flash horrific glare
 They dart the fiery torments of despair.
 Eternal providence! thy hand is here
 Let mankind learn to worship and revere
 In holy awe before thy shrine to bend
 120 Before the sweeping blasts of death descend!

 Now, mark the land where sad misfortune dwells
 Mark, with what throbs the negro's¹² bosom swells,
 The piercing fury of his glaring eye
 The ghastly horror of his bursting sigh!
 125 The burning tears that down his dark cheek roll
 Speaking the anguish of a fiery soul!
 Chained to earth these injured slaves survey
 A world of bliss beyond this Milky Way,

Point to the clouds and as their breath expires
130 Feel all the joy of hope's eternal fires!
There shall the slave to liberty restored
And those dear rights his soul had e'er adored,
Exulting on improvement's soaring pinions rise
High as the path of light that girds his native skies.

135 Say, can that primal vivifying¹³ ray
The source of Life, itself by time decay?
That spark thro' which we move, we feel, we see,¹⁴
Obscured its lustre, fade and cease to be!
Behold the day star blazing in the heaven

140 And orbs sublime in pomp terrific driven,
Unnumbered worlds by mortals yet untrod
Revolving round the empyreal¹⁵ throne of God!
Doomed unto death, could Newton's¹⁶ soul aspire
To catch the flame of heaven's eternal fire,

145 In fancy hear the music of the spheres
Harmonious murmuring for a world of years,
And led by science view each radiant star
Wheel round its orbit, rushing from afar?
No; let men blindly err in sullen pride

150 Let sceptics doubt, let infidels deride,
Yet that bright spark which warm'd his frail abode
Was drawn from heaven, the bounty of a God!
Glowed bright awhile within its house of clay
Then burst with transport on eternal day.

155 Though Newton's genius, grand and unconfined
By science nurtured and deep thought refined,
Played like a meteor in the burning sky
Charmed all the world and dazzled every eye,
Then closed its lustre mid the gloom of night

160 And left us darkling 'reft of heaven-born light,
Though bright-eyed science o'er the sage's head
Her hallowed gifts with rich luxuriance shed,
And as he roamed mid fancies vast and wild

With rapture claimed him as her darling child,
165 There still remain to grace this humble earth,
Souls greatly good to which chance ne'er gave birth,
Who eagle-eyed forsake this barren clime
Exulting soar thro' worlds and orbs sublime,
Behold the limits of each flaming star
170 Rolling all-glorious in its burning car¹⁷,
And prove immortal souls to mankind given
By flashing o'er the world the glowing pomp of heaven!

Why roam aloft through ether's dazzling realm
If death destroy and every transport whelm?
175 Why glows the flame of genius in the heart
If with death's groan, its lustre must depart?
Why burst unnumbered worlds upon the view
If when we bid this transient life adieu,
No brighter prospects swell before our eyes
180 No blissful state mid regions of the skies?
If this uncertain station here below
Be all by heaven ordained for man to know,
Why left imperfect in a middle state¹⁸
The child of dust, yet soaring to be great?
185 Why formed superiour to his station here
Boundless his mind, yet limited his sphere,
Too wise to sit while worlds around him shine
A calm spectator to the vast design,
Too dark thus clouded with the veil of sense
190 To scan the wonders of omnipotence?
And must that soul when this terrestrial chain
Shall cease to bind and sense no more constrain
Slumber in dust below? or still pursue
Those happier worlds it loved on earth to view?
195 Survey fresh skies by fancy yet untrod
And purified from guilt behold a God?

Did Howard¹⁹ pierce the dungeons of despair
Where loathed disease breathed noxious through the air,

View the fixed langour of misfortune's eye
 200 And shuddering hear the horror-breathing sigh,
 Seek the dark cell where frantic sorrow pined
 Gaze on the ruins of the human mind,
 And when this fleeing world has passed away²⁰,
 Its glories sunk in desolate decay,
 205 Shall no bliss shine with everlasting light
 To chase the fiends of peril and affright,
 Pour on his soul high rapture's purest stream
 And flash across the heart heaven's brightest beam?
 Shall he²¹ whose boundless soul in one embrace
 210 Clasp'd with warm transport all the human race,
 Made the sad sum of misery his own
 From Iceland's borders to the torrid zone²²,
 Unseen by heaven sink in the dreary tomb
 Involved in dread annihilation's gloom,
 215 And no bright spark of that celestial fire
 To heaven's fair mansions clothed with light aspire,
 Mid realms of bliss with purer flame to glow
 Far from the frown of misery or woe?
 Yes righteous man, thy soul shall never die
 220 Though quenched the ardour of thy beaming eye,
 But soaring high through rolling orbs sublime
 Crush the stern power of ever-circling time,
 Waked by the touch of heaven's transforming hand
 That soul shall yet with purer flames expand,
 225 Swell with the transport of an angel's mind
 By the vast power of deity refined,
 Look through all nature with omniscient eye
 The wide immensity of space descry,
 Ne'er mourn the shock of agonising pains
 230 But melt with rapture of celestial strains
 Bound with the ecstasy of high delight
 And live triumphant mid eternal light!

 What dastard soul with coldness would destroy
 This dawn of bliss, this radiant sun of joy?

235 Sink to the shades of dark oblivious rest
 Those holy transports that delight the breast?
 And wish to heave the last convulsive groan
 Then sleep for ever 'neath a mouldering stone?
 Ye feeble sons²³ of arrogance and pride
 240 Roll high the torrent of your sceptic tide,
 Crush the warm rapture that swells thro' the soul
 When o'er the fancy brightest visions roll!
 But know, those transports are denied to you
 When dying virtue breathes the sad adieu,
 245 That mildly gleam beneath a shower of tears
 And gild with radiance soft the noon of years!
 To you, this world and all its pompous show,
 Must prove the source of never-ceasing woe,
 Must hold a prospect to the eager sight
 250 That soon will sink in everlasting night
 Those friends that charmed life's gay and fairy morn
 From your fond breasts by death for ever torn,
 Must wound your heart with misery's fullest pang
 And harrow up your soul²⁴ with poisonous fang!
 255 To you no hope by providence is given
 To rise from earth and seek the paths of heaven!

 That there are regions where the virtuous dwell
 These holy feelings of the bosom tell,
 That on the structure of the spirit turn
 260 And while they charm it, make it love to mourn!
 Hast thou not felt mid twilight's silent gloom
 When nature sleeps more dreary than the tomb,
 And scarce heard winds a pensive joy impart
 That murmurs softly at the throbbing heart,
 265 Hast thou not felt a holy calm desire
 From this loud world unheeded to retire,
 And wrapt in solitude profound and wild
 Speak with those souls that charmed thee when a child
 And while their words thy soul in rapture steep
 270 Look on their forms, enchanted smile and weep!

Sad is the tear a pitying heart has shed
 When sorrow's gloom hung o'er a parents head,
 And dire the groan that heaves the beating breast
 When a loved parent²⁵ sinks in endless rest!
 275 The last meek smile that glistened in his eye
 His cheek's cold paleness, and his farewell sigh,
 The faint word murmuring on his parting breath
 And mingling softly with the groans of death,
 Dart o'er the Soul the burning pang of woe
 280 And calm the joy that brightest hopes bestow!
 Yet can the heart with deepest anguish torn
 Dry up its tears, and cease awhile to mourn
 With sacred fire the languid eye illumine
 And wipe the bitter tear that wets the tomb!
 285 Shall death's cold hand each magic charm destroy
 Crush every hope and wither every joy?
 With darkness cloud bright rapture's dazzling lay
 And whelm each transport in a grave of clay?
 Ye that have felt religion's holy flame
 290 Whose hearts have owned the magic of a name,
 Whose tears have flowed when fainting virtue died,
 Can speak the joy by angel hope supplied!
 Yes! when your souls with heav'nly feelings swell,
 Range through the skies where blessed spirits dwell,
 295 Nature's deep voice breathes forth a solemn strain
 That mingles pleasure with the pang of pain,
 It whispers peace in suffering's trying hour
 Each slumbering passion owns its sovereign power
 Till fairy visions o'er the fancy roll
 300 And swell with joy the heaven-aspiring soul!
 In those blest realms of everlasting light
 Ne'er shall the gloom of danger's stormy night,
 Spread o'er the heart the chilling gales of woe
 No sigh shall burst, no bitter tear shall flow,
 305 While those dear friends our souls had blessed before
 Blending with ours shall weep and die no more!²⁶

1 *Ind India.*

cf Milton *Paradise Lost*, ll 1-2:

High on a Throne of Royal State, which far
Outshone the wealth of Ormus and of Ind (*Paradise Lost*, 1674).

Samuel Johnson opens his poem *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, with a similarly panoramic global prospect

Let Observation with extensive View

Survey Mankind from China to Peru (*The Complete English Poems*, 1791).

6 cf William Mason (1725-1797) *Caractacus*, 13-14

Surely there is a hidden power, that reigns

'Mid the lonely majesty of untam'd nature (*The Works*, 1811).

14 *illumine* light up.

22 cf Mark Akenside (1721-1770), *The Pleasures of Imagination*, l, 486-7

Celestial Venus, with divinest airs,

Invites the soul to never-fading joy. (*The Poems*, 1772).

27 Wilson suggests that the instincts of both science and creativity have their source in a spiritual power, which returns the soul to its source.

49 *accents* tones.

53 *transports* reveries.

73 Cato the Younger, (95-46 BC) politician who struggled against the triumvirate of Julius Caesar and ended up supporting Pompey, after whose defeat at Thessaly, he committed suicide. Addison wrote of Cato in *The Spectator*.

80 cf. Pope *Essay on Man*, l, 284-9:

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;

All Discord, harmony not understood;

All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;

All partial Evil, universal Good:

And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,

One truth is clear, 'Whatever IS, is RIGHT. (*The Works*, 1736)

90 *irradiant* sending forth radiant light.

112 cf William Collins, 'Ode to Fear', 20-21:

Whilst Vengeance in the lurid air

Lifts her red arm, exposed and bare (*The Poems*, 1969).

122 The theme of slavery and the plight of transported slaves is repeated in Wilson's poem in this volume, 'The Song of the Dying Slave', a response to Wordsworth's 'Convict' and Southey's 'Female Convict'. Like 'The Song of the Dying Slave', this poem envisages a noble release from bondage through death. This idea is repeated in Southey's sonnet 'Why dost thou beat thy breast and rend thine hair'. Both Robert Mayo's survey of contemporary magazine poetry (Mayo (1954)) and Helen Thomas' *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* (CUP 2000), note that slavery, reform and land ownership were familiar subject matter among popular magazine poets.

135 *vivifying* life giving.

cf Christopher Smart, *The Hop Garden*, l, 294, 'bright Phoebus vivifying ray' (*Poems*, 1791).

137 cf Acts 17: 28, 'In Him we live, and move, and have our being.'

142 *empyrean* celestial.

149 cf James Thomson's 'Ode to the Memory of Isaac Newton' and Thomas Campbell, *The Pleasures of Hope*, l, 127-8:

Lo! Newton, priest of Nature, shines afar;

Scans the wide world, and numbers every star! (*The Pleasures of Hope*, 1799)

After Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) published his *Optics* in 1704, colour and light became a recurring theme in much eighteenth-century poetry.

170 cf Samuel Johnson 'An Evening Ode to Stella', ll: 'Phoebus drives his burning car'.

184 cf Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, ll, 2: 'this Isthmuth of a middle state'.

197 John Howard (1726-90), dissenting philanthropist. Having been captured and imprisoned in France in 1756, he devoted his life to prison reform. His influential *State of Prisons in England and Wales, with Preliminary Observations, and an Account of Some Foreign Prisons*, was published 1777. Robert Mayo notes that, like slavery (see note to line 122 above), the fate of prisoners and the need for the reform of the penal code became a popular subject for poets. The death of John Howard 'had brought a rash of poems about the conditions of prison life' (Mayo (1954), 503).

203 cf William Collins, 'Ode to Fear', 48-49:

Say, wilt thou shroud in haunted cell,

Where gloomy Rape and Murder dwell? (*The Poems*, 1969).

209 *he* Howard.

213 *torrid zone*, the area of the earth's surface between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn.

239 cf William Dodd (1729-97), 'Thoughts in Prison Commenced Sunday Evening February 23', 103, 'thy feeble sons/struggling with sin' (*Thoughts in Prison*, 1793).

254 cf Hamlet: 1,3, 2-3:

I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word

Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood.

274 In 1797, at the age of twelve, Wilson was summoned home to watch his father die. According to his daughter's biography, he fainted at the sight of the coffin. The same year his sister died.

306 cf Thomas Gray, *Sonnet on the death of Richard West*, 13-14:

I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,

And weep the more because I weep in vain (*The Poems*, 1969).

Henry and Helen

This poem follows familiar literary tropes of reunion and reconciliation; here the soldier returns from the field of battle to the rural idyll of childhood, where he is reunited with his betrothed. This theme of return to the place of childhood is found in Wordsworth's *The Brothers* which first appeared in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The tale of the errant faithful hero's reunion with his chaste lover and the domestic tableau of the boy and his father are familiar set-pieces in sentimental eighteenth-century poetry and ballads. Typically Wilson draws upon his personal experience of loss, in the death of the father and love in the reunion of Henry and Helen. Here he uses the literary model of Wordsworth's *The Brothers* by using different voices within the poem. Wilson also draws a parallel with the death of Henry's father and the loss of childhood in nature, as Wordsworth does with the death of James in *The Brothers*.

There may be some that never dropped a tear
In holy sadness: nor poured forth the plaint
When pleasing grief thrilled¹ thro' the melted soul;
That never knew the luxury of woe
5 Nor the calm transport of a swelling sigh!
For them no rapture dawns, no syren's voice
Breathes through her mellow horn the soothing strain²
That leads the soul to heav'n! no tender prayer
Borne on the murmurs of the twilight gale
10 Gives to the breeze their love-subjected heart,
Or charms the listening ear of some fair maid
With the fond warbling of pure passion's vows—
I ask not such a heart, and rather joy
In the bright sunshine of a summer day
15 Though oftimes darken'd with a passing cloud,
Than in the settled but depressing gloom
Of a bleak wintry sky!
Though this short tale may meet the scornful glance
Of pride's disdainful eye—nor wake one thought
20 To sympathy allied, the feeling heart
Will hear with pity of a poor man's woes
And think that sorrow is to him as dire
As to the glittering son of pomp and power!³

Long had the battle raged, and many a heart
25 That once had bounded with the pulse of joy
Now wept some friend stretch'd on a foreign shore
While tears suffused those wan and hollow cheeks

Where oft had played the pleasure-beaming smile!
 Each low-born man that fell on Egypt's⁴ sands
 30 Beneath the sabre or the scorching sun
 Had some far off dear to his panting heart,
 Some that on bended knees did offer up
 To heaven, the fervent prayer for his return.
 Oft round the blazing fire a circle form'd,
 35 They spoke of him whom glory called away,
 (His absence adding lustre to his virtues)
 And fondly hoped to clasp him in their arms
 Gaze on his scars with throbbing gratitude
 Fall on his face and weep their souls away!
 40 Ah! hope, delusive hope had filled their hearts⁵
 With sorrow gilded by the tear of joy—
 Infused a balm into their wounded souls
 E'er long to wake the bitter pang of anguish!
 On burning sands the wounded soldier fell
 No kindred spirit near, to aid and pity him!
 45 The limpid stream that murmur'd thro' the lawn
 Before his father's cot, the lowly seat
 Where oft he sat upon his father's knee
 Received the good man's smile, played with his locks
 And heard the tale that thrilled his tender heart—
 50 The dear companions of his early years
 Of whom he took a sad and last farewell,
 Rush on his thought—tears bathe his manly cheek
 We'll meet in heav'n he cries and sinks in death.

 When peace again return'd her gentle sway
 55 And shed her blessings o'er a blooming land,
 The toil-worn soldier hails his native home
 With fondly-fluttering heart—and seeks the glade
 Where his loved parents dwell—he views the smoke
 Slow-curling from the cot—the well known bark
 60 Of his old faithful dog salutes his ear,
 Each whispering breeze that gently murmurs by
 Each songster's strain that dies along the vale

Remind him of his youth—the starting tear
Falls on his father's neck—it cheers his heart
65 Smiles mixed with sighs beam in each tearful eye
The cottage stands on earth a blissful heaven.

Fair shone the morn and every balmy gale
Breathed mildly thro' the many-twinkling leaves.
The gentle murmur of the willowy stream
70 Winding along the deep-sequestered scene,
And blending softly with the dying notes
Melodious warbling through the moving wood,
Made soothing music to the feeling soul,
Infused a wish to listen unto death
75 And with the fainting tones to melt away.

Beneath a shadowy bower whose wreathing roots
Drink of the passing stream—that sparkling bright
Reflects the ivy twisting round the thorn—
A stranger sat—and in his wistful eye
80 The tear did glitter—but it seem'd to flow
From sorrow dearer than the thrill of joy.
The gentle smile that played around his lips
Was like the moonshine on a summer eve
Soft-quivering o'er the deep, it beam'd awhile
85 Then faded mild away! It mark'd a heart
Where hope and trembling held alternate sway.
It was his native home; the very bower
In which he sat, had from his infant hand
Receiv'd its form—had often been the scene
90 Of many a simple sport—its dark recess
Had often hid him from his young companions
Seeking each corner for the wary boy.⁶
And here in riper years he won the heart
Of lovely Helen, pressed her snow-white hand
95 Felt its warm touch thrill rapture to his soul
While her meek eye in silence told her bliss!

Had Helen died? he trembled at the thought
If she was gone, he wished no more to be!
When hope did whisper peace—the hills and trees
100 The verdant meadows and the hawthorn row
Seem'd all array'd in joy and gaeity—
When fear did damp his soul—all nature seem'd
To mourn in silent sadness and present
A visage doubled with the gloom of death!
105 Each one he saw, he fancied was a friend
Till his approach dissolv'd the dear delusion—
And when he would have spoke and asked the fate
Of those he held most dear—his heart did fail
Imperfect words died on his faltering tongue
110 Each traveller passed—and still his fears remained!⁷

At last one came whose faintly-beaming eye
And musing step bespoke a feeling heart—
Her downcast look did move the soul with pity
And prompt the willing sigh—but when she rais'd
115 Her mild and pensive eye, a pearly tear
was seen to shine—diffusing o'er the soul
The hallow'd charms of deepest sympathy!
Towards the shade—she bends her lingering steps,
But oft she turn'd—gazed on the glittering stream
120 And softly-smiling heaved a piteous sigh!

Though kindred souls mid joy's ecstatic train
Oft court a fond alliance—yet in grief
A stranger magic binds their swelling heart.
With fluttering breast she reach'd the shady bower,
125 And there beheld the gloomy face of woe—
She would have fled—but gentle-breathing words
Now reached her ear, and flung across her heart
Their potent charm—
She paused and listened to the mournful sound.⁸

Soldier⁹

130 Oh! if that breast contain as soft a heart—
As speaks within thine eye—if that pale cheek
Denoting pity for another's woe
Be the true index of a holy soul
That heeds the sorrow preying on itself
135 Less than the pain *that* sorrow may occasion,
To you, as to the saving lights of heav'n
The nighted traveller turns his eager view,
My wounded spirit looks for sacred peace,¹⁰
For tears and sighs of sweetest sympathy!

Young Woman

140 Taught by the tear that oft has dimmed these eyes
How sad and bitter is the pang of grief—
My heart has learned to heave for others' pain
And make their sorrows mournful as my own!
But stranger! is the eye for ever moist
145 Fitted to beam soft quiet o'er the soul
That pines in lonely anguish? Is the heart
For ever fluttering with the rising throb
Likely to soothe the sorrows of another?

Soldier

Yes! Thou mayest tell me of my dearest friends
150 For though a wanderer through a world of woe
I have some friends but whether still in life
Or sleeping peaceful in the silent grave—
I wish to know but tremble much to hear!
This bower is suited well for tales of grief—
155 Alas! so wildly sweet—so sadly silent!¹¹

Young Woman

Yes stranger! silence ever whispers there
Though once the scene of rapture, peace and love.

Soldier

O tell me what thou knowest about this bower

For tales of woe are tales of joy to me!

Young Woman

- 160 Oft in this scene by contemplation led¹²
There rested one whose holy mind was cast
In virtue's finest mould—the whispering breeze
At summer eve that fans the gurgling stream
Swells by its breath the gently-heaving wave
165 That silent sinks into a placid calm—
So o'er his heart did feeling's magic power
Spread the soft swell that raised the bursting sigh,
Then melted sweetly in a shower of tears!
He loved to see the pale moon's glimmering ray
170 Shed thro' the tears her twilight-charming beam.
Upon the rill below—that glittered bright
Beneath the willowy bank—and oft the tear
Fell in the running brook whose soothing sound
Harmonious murmur'd with his frequent sigh—
175 Each scene of nature beam'd across his soul
The rapturous light of love—and in this bower
He told his passion to a kindred soul.....

Soldier

- And do these lovers still survive on earth
To taste the joys of pure and virtuous love?
180 Or has she died whose rapture-beaming eye
To Henry gave.....

Young Woman

- Henry! O stranger knowest thou aught of him,
And I will bless thee—pray for thee to heav'n?
Oh I will love thee, and my tears of joy
185 Will plead thy cause before th'Almighty's throne
Yet ... thou mayest tell me of my husband dear
And send me sorrowing to the dreary tomb!
Oh speak not! Gracious God! Thy looks foretell
That Henry sleeps upon an early bier!

190 Oh! My ill-fated husband! Thou art dead
And yet I lift my head in God's creation.

Soldier

He lives! Thy Henry lives! and in thy arms
Now proves the bliss of an indulgent heav'n!
Ah! Helen why so pale! Why cold this hand!
195 Why drops the head! and closed the languid eye?
Look on thy husband! Cheer him with a smile
And still survive to bless and to be blessed.

Helen

Oh spare my aching sight ye lights of heav'n!
Where am I? Art thou my long-lost Henry's shadow?
200 Yes! Well I knew that we should meet at last!
'Tis but a dream! But ah how very sweet!
I know that bower—it grows upon the earth—
Thou art indeed my Henry! I know thee now
Thou ne'er shall leave me more—we'll die together,
205 And in one grave our bodies shall be laid—
A moment's joy like this blots from my mind
Whole years of grief—and makes them fade away
Like to the shapeless visions of the night
That scare awhile—then seem ne'er to have been.

Henry

210 But ah! My Helen! Faded is the rose
That graced thy damask cheek—the lily, pale
And dewy with the evening balms of heav'n
Now seems to smile—
The wasting breath of sadness and of woe
215 Crept gently-heaving to your breast,
And impulses of sad but sweetest kind
Have spread their hues along thy pallid cheek.
And has the purple bloom of youth forsook
Thy beauteous face—has pensive melancholy
220 Spread her wild magic and her paly hues,

Because thy husband far from thee and thine
Slept, wrapt in danger mid the tented field?

Helen

Though sorrow's iron hand has grasp'd my heart
And forc'd the deep sigh for my Henry's fate
225 Yet will I dry my tears— and smile again!
The feeble floweret bends its lonely head
Beneath the chilly blast—its' bloom departs
It falls still smiling in the vale of death!
But when the whispering breeze of balmy eve
230 Diffusing odours as it murmurs by
Fans its pale quivering leaves, it starts to life
Clad in the freshness of returning bloom!
So drooped my form beneath the cruel frown
Of stern adversity, and withering died away!
235 But thy dear smile dispels the fatal gloom
With joy illumes the visage of despair.

Henry

I've been where thundering billows sought the skies
And clouds tempestuous dimmed the streamy light
Of the bright star of day! Yet even there
240 My soul did think of Helen! if she still lived.
I trembled at the yawning gulf below
And wished for life to soothe her aching breast—
For oft I saw thee bending o'er our child
With all the silent eloquence of sorrow,
245 While on the sweet babe's face a tear would fall
Soft as the dew upon an opening flower,
Which with a trembling touch thou wipest away
Lest thou should'st break upon his balmy sleep.
Thy mournful voice did soothe his soul to rest
250 As the meek linnet's warbling cheers her brood
Though sadly-sorrowing o'er a murdered mate!
But oft a darker prospect would intrude,
And my heart sickened, when I thought of thee

Laid in an early grave—of thy last glance
255 That vainly wished to meet thy Henry's eye—
And cheer his bosom with thy parting smile!
Oh heav'n that moment did I wish to die
And leave a world where sadness must prevail,
Since 'reft of that fair orb that both diffus'd
260 The dazzling radiance of the rising moon
And the meek splendour of an evening sky!

Helen

When those blessed days I once had led with thee
Rushed on my musing heart—when former bliss
265 Served but to make my present grief more bitter,
I traced the features in my infant's face,
And while a tear most sad and yet most sweet
Fell on his smiling cheek, I kiss'd the child
And pray'd that heaven would make the innocent
270 More happy than his father! The artless child
With lisping words dear to a mother's heart
Pronounc'd the name of father, while his arms
Clasp'd round my neck! I felt a rising hope
That heaven would save my husband for my son,
275 And dry the salt tear from my aching eyes!
When angry blasts howl'd round my humble cot
I often thought upon thy cruel fate
Careering dauntless o'er the billowy main—
Ah husband! fearful were my dreams
280 In midnight's dreary hour; and many a tear
Bathed my sad pillow till the orient moon
Had streaked the mountains with its varying hues.
And even then I wildly thought of thee
Exposed to all the dangers of the deep—
285 And struggling helpless on the mountain wave!
But Heaven in kindness oftimes raised my soul
With hope's transporting light; in fancy's dream
I clasped my Henry to my heaving breast
Was gladdened with his smile, and in his arms

290 Forgot the tears a womanish heart had shed—
These were the joys of heav'n—thy soothing voice
Was sweeter than the angels star-born strain
That mid the shades of death salutes the ear
Of fainting virtue, beaming on the soul
295 The glories of salvation!

Henry

And does my father still survive on earth
Or has his grey head sought the mould'ring clay?
On that sad morn I left my native vale
Lured by the gay accoutrements of war,
300 I marked the salt tear glistening in his eye
When the farewell did tremble on his lips!
For well he knew he'd never see me more—
I could not speak—I grasped his feeble hand
Looked on his aged face and though I wept
305 In bitter anguish—seemed as if I smiled,
Then left th'abodes of happiness and peace!¹³

Helen

Yes! He is gone but to a better world!
And had he only seen his Henry's face
Without regret his soul had sunk to peace!
310 But many an hour of bliss he found in thee!¹⁴
Though distant from his glance and in his dreams
I've seen the soft smile play around his lips
Have heard him say "My Henry" and when he woke
Though grieved to find thee gone, yet still did joy
315 Illume his gentle eye, for in his slumbers
He had seen his son, had heard him speak,
And felt the name of "Father" thrill his heart!
His life was virtue and his death was peace!
I often seek the good man's simple tomb
320 And melt away in mournful ecstasy!
And though my mind oft thought of gloomy things
And held communion with the silent dead,

Yet brighter thoughts would flash across my soul
Mourning thy father, I did think of thee
325 Hastening to wipe the salt tear from my cheek
Though shedding some on thy own father's grave!

Henry

Oh God! Oh God! I feel I am no man!
E'en now I hear the tone of yonder bell
Borne on the gale, come far into my soul!—
330 With hollow voice it told the tale of death,
And while the tear extorted by despair
So dims my eye, that everything around
Remains unseen by me—I almost wish
That all the fair varieties of nature,
335 Green plains, deep groves, and gently-murmuring sounds
Would fade and cease to be!
Now sinks into the dark and gloomy grave
My father's coffin— and with it descends
My broken heart! O Heav'n thou may'st be just
340 But these tears tell that thou art also cruel!
That e'en in death my father thou wert happy,
A tender daughter caught thy fainting sigh
And with an angel's voice and look of heaven
Did smooth the way that led thy soul to bliss!
345 Thy noon of life was radiant and serene!
This may in part assuage these bitter tears
Which e'en thou Helen can'st not wipe away!

Helen

Calm as the last gleam of the silvery moon
Soft fading o'er the deep—or the faint note
350 Of some lone warbler during evening silence
Melting away so slowly that the ear
Scarce knows when it is gone, is the last breath
Of dying virtue! oh how very sweet
To hear the last words of a dying saint!
355 To mark the mildness of his eye—the smile

That e'en makes the face of death most lovely!
I felt as if I ne'er had lived before,
A new existence burst with warmest transport
On my soul! I loved to think of gloomy things—
360 I thought of death and almost wished to die!
Some nameless feeling and some secret joy
Mingled with grief, hung o'er my pensive heart!
While twilight stillness, sounds of murmuring streams
And forms of nature in her saddest mood,
365 Such as tall trees waving at dusty eve
Soft-burning stars and slowly-passing clouds
Have fed with most delightful nourishment
My musing soul—and every thought I have
Is stamped with features born of rural sounds
370 And sights which nature fashions amid woods
Dark groves and shadowy mountains!

Henry

And when grey evening spreads her dusky hues
O'er hills and vales, and every jarring sound
Expires before her silence-breathing reign¹⁵,
375 Then hand in hand, we'll wind along the grove¹⁶
That skirts the mansions of the slumb'ring dead
And while the whispering of the running stream
And the sweet music of the dying gale
Breathe o'er the soul a holy, holy sadness—
380 Sitting upon the turf that hides the head
Of my dear father, altho' tears will flow
Yet they will be the sacred tears of rapture!
We will speak of him—think on his goodness
The silence of the air, the trees slow-waved
385 Will sweetly seem for him to grieve—our souls
Will rise to sacred fervour, and our wish
When death's cold hand shall lay us in the grave
Will be to lead a life and die like him
And see from heav'n our sorrowing children
390 Dropping the tear upon our mingling clay!

3 thrilled, piercing, vibrating, pulsating or quivering.

7 cf William Collins, 'An Ode for Music', 57-61:

With eyes up-raised, as one inspired,
Pale Melancholy sat retired,
And from her wild sequestered seat,
In notes by distance made more sweet,
Poured through the mellow horn her pensive soul.

23 Wilson refers to Adam Smith's dictum that: 'The man whose sympathy keeps time to my grief, cannot but admit the reasonableness of my sorrow' (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Glasgow 1759), I). Wilson suggests, as Wordsworth has done that men have a natural feeling of 'sympathy' towards one another.

29 Britain and France were at war in 1798. The Scottish regiments, The Black Watch and 2nd Cameronians were involved in a successful amphibious assault on the Napoleonic forces at Alexandria. This defeat of France led to a truce and the government set about dismantling and standing down all the Volunteer forces (see 'Lines Addressed to the Glasgow Volunteers').

40 cf Stephen Duck, 'Felix and Constance, 590-592:

The conscious Pains an absent Lover bears,
Despair, fallacious Hope, and anxious Fears,
For want of Words, were painted with their Tears.
And when, at length, their crystal Sluices ceas'd,
The joyful Hero thus the Nymph address'd: (*Poems from Various Occasions* 1736).

92 cf Wordsworth, 'Nutting', 16, 'I came to one dear nook/ unvisited' (*Lyrical Ballads*, 1993)

110 cf Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', lines 77-9.

129 cf Milton, *Paradise Lost*, B, 1-2:

The Angel ended, and in Adam's ear
so charming left his voice.

129 Following the model of *The Brothers*, here Wilson makes the transition to dialogue form.

138 cf Wordsworth, 'Lines Written above Tintern Abbey', 24-49.

155 cf Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', lines 120ff. Leonard asks the priest to tell him who lies in the graveyard.

160 cf Thomas Gray, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', 45-46:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire (*The Poems* 1969).

306 cf Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village', 371-372:

The good old sire the first prepared to go
To new found worlds (*The Poems*, 1969).

310 cf Wordsworth, 'Michael', 345, 'And all thy life has been my daily joy'.

374 cf William Collins, 'Ode to Evening' (463).

375 cf Milton, *Paradise Lost* XII, 637-638:

In either hand the hast'ning angel caught
Our ling'ring Parents.

Caledonia

The poem presents an heroic, if sentimental, version of the highlander and the Scottish Highlands, seen to exemplify the romanticised history of Scotland. Wilson conflates the short-lived Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745 and the legends of Ossian. The poem eulogises these unreliable versions of history and legend against the wild landscape and characterises these events as moments that define a sense of national identity:

Those sacred ties that link all humankind
And kindled souls in pleasing union bind (78-79)

As such, the description of the landscape, poeticising the mythic inheritance of an ancient people, is a perfect vehicle to address the question he puts to Wordsworth later in 1802:

May not the face of external nature through different quarters of the globe, account for the dispositions of different nations? May not mountains forests, plains, groves, and lakes, as much as the temperature of the atmosphere, or the form of government, produce important effects upon the human soul, and may not the difference subsisting between the former of these in different countries, produce as much diversity among the inhabitants as any varieties among the latter?¹

Like Burns' 'The Vision'², the Highland landscape and climate and the turbulent history of Scotland provide powerful inspiration for the poet:

And when the bard, or hoary sage,
Charm or instruct the future age,
They bind the wild poetic rage
In energy (31-34)

The triumphalism of this kind of poetry is familiar. Wilson's poem embraces the influences of Pope, Thomson, Burns, and Macpherson. And for a setting he looks to recent history. In 1745 The Jacobite army of Prince Charles Edward Stuart was routed at Culloden by Hanoverian troops under the Duke of Cumberland. Following this defeat, the culture of the Highlands was proscribed; the wearing of tartan was prohibited and the area was garrisoned by the 'redcoats' (a period reawakened by Scott's *Waverley Novels*). In the decades that followed there was much interest among literary scholars in recovering the ancient heritage of the peoples of the Scottish Highlands.

In 1759, James Macpherson (1736-1796) was encouraged by the playwright John Home (who himself sentimentalised Scottish history in his highly melodramatic *Douglas*), to produce the first of his 'translations' of ancient Gaelic poetry. In 1765 these were published collectively as *The Works of Ossian*. The authenticity of the 'translations' divided the scholars of the day (including Dr Johnson and David Hume) and it was only after Macpherson's death, following an inquiry carried out by the Highland Society, that they were proved to be an invention. An entry in Wilson's commonplace book of 2 June 1802³ notes his reading of 'Laing's *History of Scotland*'⁴ which contains a 'Dissertation on The Supposed authenticity of Ossian's Poems'. Despite their fraudulence Laing recognises the importance of their contribution to Scottish literature:

The most bigoted must acknowledge, that the refined poetry which they admire so much was more likely to be produced by a cultivated genius of the present, than by an illiterate bard of the third century; and the reputed countrymen of Ossian may rest satisfied with this consolation; that the Highlands of Scotland have at least given birth to an Epic poet in Modern times.

Wilson recognises the importance of the Ossian poems as the proper legacy of a nation struggling to come to terms with its history and champions the courage and resilience of the people who fought for their freedom from Roman times.

¹ WLMS A. i (published with permission of the Wordsworth Library).

² James Kinsley ed. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (Oxford 1968).

³ Gordon (1862) vol 1, 24.

⁴ Malcolm Laing's *History of Scotland; from the union of the Crowns on the accession of James VI to the throne of England to the union of the kingdoms in the reign of Queen Anne with two dissertations, historical and critical, on the Gowry Conspiracy, and on the supposed authenticity of Ossian's Poems*, (1800)

Wilson sees a correlation between the struggle for survival against the harsh natural conditions and political oppression. The work of James Macpherson, authentic or not, is clearly the natural response to this struggle.

The poem opens with a rebuke to Jeffrey for his attack on the Lake Poets when reviewing Southey's *Thalaba* in the October 1802 opening issue of the *Edinburgh Review*:

It is delightful, now and then, to meet with a rugged mountain, or a roaring stream; but where there is no sunny slope, nor shaded plain, to relieve them—where all is beetling cliff and yawning abyss, and landscape presents nothing on every side but prodigies and terrors—the head is apt to grow giddy, and heart to languish for the repose and security of a less elevated region.

As well as Burns and Macpherson, Wilson finds models for his set-piece imagery in James Thomson's *The Seasons* and in Grahame's *Rural Calendar*. Thomson in 'Autumn' recognises the effect of the landscape on the poet:

And here a while the Muse,
High hovering o'er the broad cerulean scene,
Sees Caledonia, in romantic view:
Her airy mountains, from the waving main,
Invested with a keen diffusive sky,
Breathing the soul acute; (876-881)

Though narrow souls¹ thy hills sublime disdain
Thy towering rocks and far-extended plain
Though mid the horror of the howling storm
Thy guardian spirits rear their awful form,
5 Enthroned on cliffs magnificently high
Whose hoary summits mingle with the sky,
Yet where thy heights their shadowy grandeur throw
In pomp majestic o'er the dell below,
Mirth, peace and happiness delight to dwell,
10 And while soft strains of wildest music swell,
Thy hardy sons magnanimous though rude
By luxury's sweet prison unsubdued,
Hail with light heart the day-star's orient hue,
Till his last splendour glimmer on the view,
15 Then seek their homes the scene of placid rest
While bounding transports leap within their breast.
Though for thy sons no golden harvests rise
No purple clouds slow-wheeling o'er the skies,
Though the mild zephyr seldom smile on thee
20 With dewy breath to fan the waving tree,
Though with the thunder's voice thy hills be riven
And seeping blasts deform the face of heaven,
Though mid the welkin² vivid lightnings gleam,

And rolling torrents swell the foamy stream,
25 Yet still with thee the gentler virtues stray
And vice has sunk in desolate decay,
Or towards realms where wealth her toils has spread,
O'er thy huge crags on sounding pinions fled!
Though wild thy scenes and boisterous thy clime
30 Yet well I love thy frowning rocks sublime,³
And when far distant from thy awful view
Will memory's living page thy striking charms renew?⁴

Mark yon mean cottage on the mountain's brow⁵
Round whose low roof the howling tempests blow,
35 The black'ning thatch, the scarce-seen veering smoke
The poultry fence by storm-beat cattle broke,
An aged tree poor shelter to the door,
Whose naked boughs the winter's fury tore!
A scene of nature desolate and rude
40 The bleak domain of dreary solitude!
Say, does thine eye this cot with scorn survey
Offspring of pride, thou clod of breathing clay?
Does humble life no heartfelt bliss afford?
Or is a shepherd poorer than a Lord?
45 The spacious splendour of the lofty dome
Whose pompous walls, the lights of art illumé,⁶
Where mirth and revelry delight to reign,
And raise aloft the Bacchanalian strain,
Where beauty triumphs o'er the servile throng
50 And to the notes of music glides along,
Ne'er views real transports burning in the eye,
Nor bliss unmingled with the frequent sigh!
Ideal pains the magic charm destroy
And cloud the sunshine of delusive joy;
55 Envy and malice rule with evil power
And discord frowns mid pleasure's transient hour,
Till the bright realms of mirth and rapture seem
The faint creation of a wayward dream!
But on the mountains wild and craggy side

60 The power of peace and happiness abide,
 The stings of conscience never rankle here,
 Nor memory ask the tribute of a tear,
 Calm as the sunbeams on the water play
 At the mild to-fall⁷ of a summer day,
 65 The thrill of pleasure trembles in the breast
 As the eye closes in oblivious rest!
 And does the shepherd in his cottage know
 Those social sweets that make a heav'n below?
 Can his heart bound at love's ecstatic tale
 70 Soft as the murmurs of the twilight gale?
 When souls congenial meet—or bid adieu
 Do tears of feeling drop—soft as the pearly dew?
 Yes e'en in nature's cold and wild retreats
 Where precious balm distill no breathing sweets,
 75 Where shifting vapours cloud the stormy sky
 And the stream murmurs strange and sullen by,
 Those sacred ties that link all humankind
 And kindled souls in pleasing union bind,
 Exist unweakened by refinement's art
 80 And rule the strongest in the purest heart!
 When blooming youth has deck'd the virgins cheek
 When the heart flutters— and when eyeballs speak;
 When the fond bosom owns the pleasing flame
 And learns to feel the magic of a name,
 85 In some lone dell for love and transport made
 In boundless forest, or romantic glade
 As the wild cuckoo warbles from the steep
 And the pale moonbeam glitters on the deep,
 I hear the vows of pure and artless love
 90 Approving angels listening from above,
 View the warm tear of melting rapture roll
 And the soft warfare of the heaving soul!
 No words adorned by art's dissembling tongue
 Such as the music of the poets' sung,
 95 That breathe sweet poison carefully refin'd
 But own no kindred with the simple mind

Flow from their lips; but nature reigns alone
 Each look, each feeling, and each word her own!
 When nature's eloquence has won the heart,
 100 And maiden fears, and trembling hopes depart,
 When tranced in bliss the ardent lovers prove
 The joys ecstatic of parental love,
 Then ties unknown before their reign begin
 Heav'n lights the eye; and transports bound within,
 105 Feeling and nature reign without controul
 O'er all the secret chambers of the soul!
 When winter rears his rough and hoary head
 His staff a naked thorn, the snow his bed
 And he has bound within his iron chain
 110 The stream that rolls along the bleak domain,
 The anxious wife while tears bedim her eye,
 Hears the hoarse tempest howling through the sky
 Thinks on the dangers of her husband's doom
 Wandering all-dreary through the thick'ning gloom,
 115 O'er hills that slumber mid untrodden snow
 The torrent howling thro' the clefts below,
 Lifts up her hands to heav'n in earnest prayer,
 While hope scarce triumphs o'er her deep despair!
 The infant smiling on her trembling knee
 120 From the sad whisperings of reflection free,
 With childish love oft-looking in her face
 His little arms clasp'd in a fond embrace,
 The cheerful blazing of the crackling fire,
 Fitted with joy the bosom to inspire,
 125 The cricket chirping sweetly on the hearth
 Delightful inmate full of constant mirth,
 Afford no comfort to her anxious breast
 No opiate dose to lull her woes to rest,
 Sad is her heart—her husband far away!
 130 Lonely her home—without one friendly stay!
 But hark! A footstep patters at the door—
 She smiles and tears are fled for evermore,
 "My husband" with a joyful voice she cries

Her spirit beaming in her brightening eyes,—
 135 All care forgot she drinks full draughts of bliss
 Hangs on his neck; and shares the long-drawn kiss
 Words fail; but silence tells their mutual joy
 No kind reproaches yet their peace alloy,
 They revel mid those nameless transports giv'n
 140 To mankind in the prodigality of heav'n!

 Not thus; when o'er the snowy mountains hoar
 Thy sons rebellious rolled war's thund'ring roar,
 When to the fight with savage howl they sprung
 And the loud pibroch⁸ thro' thy caverns rung
 145 While streamy lightning flash'd in every eye,
 And bristly spears blaz'd dreadful to the sky!
 Each sullen brook and wild-resounding cave
 Thy knell funereal and thy warriors grave,
 Each groan that heav'd the patriot's fluttering heart
 150 The life-blood streaming round the murd'rous dart,
 Each look that glared in agonizing death,
 And words half-uttered with the parting breath,
 Swelled high the tide of Caledonian rage
 And [?nerv'd] the drooping arm of feeble age!—
 155 O'er Falkirk's⁹ plains the shafts of freedom flew
 As the fierce Southron¹⁰ bade the world adieu,
 Victorious march'd thy furious clans along
 And rais'd to heav'n the fervent warrior song,
 Down to the earth tyrannic pride was hurl'd
 160 And freedom's meteor flag to the rude winds unfurl'd!
 When silent evening shed her balmy dew
 And clothed the landscape in its roseate hue,
 When the pale moon shone faintly thro' the trees
 That shook slow-waving to the passing breeze,
 165 While mingling sounds of birds and murmuring flood
 Stole in sweet music thro' the vocal woods,
 Then gaily rung the rapture-breathing lyre,
 Responsive to the eyes that glow'd with fire,
 Love, mirth and joy reign'd in each fluttering breast,

170 And grief assuag'd sunk in forgetful rest!
The sun that rose deform'd with frowning clouds
And saw brave warriors wrapt in bloody shrouds,
E'er its dim glories sought the western wave,
View'd tranquil safety deck the patriot grave,
175 While burning words raise loud the echoing song
Dying far-distant heathy glens among,
And as the sable shade of night descends
With the wild strains of wand'ring spirits blends.

Short was the gleam that deck'd the face of heav'n,
180 Swift fled the peace to Caledonia giv'n,
The hope of triumph glisten'd in the eye
But soon the tear was shed, and heav'd the sigh,
Conquest and glory sat on every crest,
But soon despair reign'd o'er each prostrate breast,
185 Oppression's waves in devastating swell
Roll'd o'er each slopy hill and darksome dell,
The patriot spirit sunk in wide decay
And ruin's stormy night frown'd at the fall of day!

Culloden!¹¹ scene of cruelty and death
190 Thou heard'st the murmur of the parting breath,
Sawest the dim fury of each closing eye
That looked with anguish on the fading sky,
When rout and ruin siez'd their long array,
And carnage triumph'd on that bloody day,
195 When William's¹² host embattled on the plain
Rushed to the fight, as music's warlike strain
Rung through the wood, with loud and savage sound
And fiery coursers beat the trembling ground!
Each Gorgon feature of relentless war
200 Looked with a sullen smile from murder's car,
She poured her fiends innumerably strong
Scotia's green plains and flowery vales along;
Far flashed the red artillery thro' the heav'n
With thundering peals the shudd'ring hills are riv'n,

205 Vast meteors glare in Scotia's troubled sky
Her freedom sinks, her boldest warriors die,
The widows shriek, the orphan's piteous wail
Load with wild terror every passing gale;
The night broods awful o'er the gory plain;
210 And mixed with heroes groans expires the warlike strain!

Unhappy Prince! sad was thy early fate
And dark the morn that ushered in thy state,
Doom'd thro' the world an exile'd man to roam
No sheltering spot to call thy native home,
215 No soothing tongue to lull thy woes to sleep
Till thy pierc'd bosom had forgot to weep!
Rude on thy breast the tempest's fury blew
On thy pale cheek still hung the chilling dew,
The barren heath affords a stormy bed
220 A mossy stone a pillow to thy head,
The winds of heav'n as merciless as man
To mix in elemental strife began!
While the loud tempests o'er the wildness rave
Thy bosom panted for the silent grave,
225 Where pains are hushed and wasting sorrows cease,
And the cold tenant lies in everlasting peace!

Long, o'er the mountains scowling famine flew
And the wild winds of desolation blew,
Long, weeping widows absent children mourn
230 And much-loved Lords doom'd never to return¹³,
But now the march of ever-circling time
Has carried plenty to thy brightening clime,
Wiped from each eye the sorrow-speaking tear
And smoothed the wrinkled visage of despair,
235 Within the precincts of the warriors tomb
Now plenteous harvests wave in rip'ning bloom,
Where falchions¹⁴ gleam'd and gasping chieftans dy'd—
Mid shades of morning mist the peaceful cot's [?descried]!
Nurtured mid wilds magnificent and vast,

240 Beneath the empire of the tyrant blast,
 Where nature shows her aspect most sublime
 And smiles and frowns with ever-varying clime,
 Where darksome clouds roll thro' the troubl'd sky
 And winds and torrents murmur hoarsely by,
 245 The genius¹⁵ of thy children unconfin'd
 By those restraints that fetter down the mind,
 Free as the first beams of the dawning morn,
 That glancing-bright the distant hills adorn
 Thro' fancy's realms on daring pinions soar
 250 And wheel through regions unexplor'd before,
 Flash o'er the world the living light of song
 And roll the wid'ning stream of poesy along!
 Spirit of Ossian! That in ancient time
 Dared undismayed Parnassian heights to climb,
 255 Bright flow'd the torrent of thy powerful song
 The flowery meads of poetry along,
 With magic hand thou swept'st the magic lyre
 Thy dim eyes brightening with celestial fire,
 And while the glow of genius warm'd thy breast
 260 And nameless feelings thy high soul impress'd,
 Thy mind with vast, transporting rapture fraught
 [?Played] like a meteor in embodied thought,
 Burst with majestic glory on the sight
 And poured a flood of everlasting light!
 265 Thy native hills array'd in snowy pride
 Round whose broad base the murmuring waters glide,
 The fiery glory of an evening sky,
 The sun descending from his throne on high,
 The mellow lustre of the dewy star
 270 Now scarcely seen, now twinkling from afar,
 The lengthening shadows by the mountain made
 Flinging their [?arch] gigantic o'er the glade,
 The whispering winds at noon that gently breathe
 With notes of music o'er the gloomy heath,
 275 Moulded thy soul to feelings pleasing power
 And bathed thy heart in inspirations shower

Till thy eye brightened and thy course begun
 Scotia was sad "a world without a Sun"!¹⁶
 When foreign chiefs thy native land assail'd¹⁷
 280 Then sinewy limbs in clashing armour mail'd
 When murder frowning from her [?iron] car
 Let loose the blood-hounds of relentless war,
 Thy arm held high the broad avenging brand
 And beam'd salvation on thy native land,
 285 Rush'd on those chiefs who dared thy heights to climb
 And hurls them headlong from the rock sublime,
 While thy fierce clans with might resistless [?pour]
 The thundering battle's devastating roar!
 But ah! stretch'd bloody on the lonely wild
 290 Thy Oscar¹⁸ lay—thy brave, thy beauteous child!—
 His bosom wounded by the Danish spear
 Sunk on the earth bedew'd with many a tear;
 And while his head lay pillow'd on a corse
 Died like a blooming flower beneath the winter force!
 295 How oft when breezes murmur'd o'er the sea
 And rustled wildly through the quivering tree,
 When silence brooded o'er the swelling wave
 Calm as the peaceful slumber of the grave,
 Far from thy children and thy humble home
 300 Long the bare beach thy musing footsteps roam,
 Gaze on the endless heaving of the deep
 And fearless tread the rude and dizzy steep,
 While tears of sad reflection dim the eye
 And anguish mourns delirious on a sigh,
 305 "Oscar my son! the darling of my heart
 "Why from this bosom did thy form depart?
 "Why closed thy eyelids in the shades of death
 "No parent near to catch thy parting breath?
 "With bitter tears thy manly limbs bedew,
 310 "And groan in agony the last adieu?
 "Lay the green sod with softness on thy head
 "And pour his spirit on the gallant dead?

Thy children dead—insulted by the foe
A friendless wanderer thro' a world of woe,
315 Thy native land by rude contention torn
And murder glaring on each rising morn,
Thy spirit sunk in sorrowful decay
And mourn'd the setting sun of pleasure's cloudless day!
Thy harp that erst¹⁹ had rung with cheerful sound,
320 Broken the strings—lies tuneless on the ground;
Or mingling with the breezes as they blow
Rings with the mournful tones of never-ending woe!

Ye that will blindly err in sullen pride
And the rude strains of genius still deride,
325 Who scorn the honor of your native land
And cold, unfeeling, narrow sceptics stand,
Can nature sink degraded to the earth,
And all the fire to which she e'er gave birth
Extinguished mingle with insensate clay
330 And feebly glimmering die unseen away?
Can she no bright'ning energies impart
To light the precincts of the untaught heart?
O'er fancy's page her burning transports roll
And thrill with mournful ecstasy the soul?
335 Does the rude bosom own no tender ties
No tear e'er glitter in the peasant's eyes?
Do sorrows triumph and do friends expire
And still no object the fond heart desire?
Unmoved alike to sever and to meet
340 Is no vow bending, and is no home sweet?
Yes! nature slumbers, but can never fade
She reigns alike in city and in glade,
Her rays the cultured haunts of men illumine
And clothe the naked heath with beauteous bloom,
345 Spirits untaught with purest flames may glow
Exult in transport, or dissolve in woe,
Their ardent thoughts with energy express
And deck their feelings in a pensive dress.

Earth, air and ocean, hold their charms to view
350 Poetic souls their winding stores pursue,
Mingle their spirits with the form of things
And sail delighted on the morning's wings—
Then read aloud the soul-enchancing strain
The care of sorrow and the balm of pain,
355 Till nameless feelings crowd the swelling breast
E'en by the burden of their joy opprest!
Such strains have flow'd from Ossian's [?tuneful] tongue
That virgins heard, and youthful warriors sung
When sober evening glittered on the rills
360 Meandering wild down Caledonia's hills,
And pensive silence from her dripping cave
Came soft as spirit's issuing from the grave!
O'er Caledonia's hills and boundless plains
The darksome night of superstition reigns,
365 And hideous forms in fancy's garb array'd
Howl mid the quiet of the shadowy glade,
Sail in the roaring of the wintry blast
And sweep with flagging [?pinions] o'er the waste!

O'er glen and mountain broods the gloomy night,
370 No twinkling star emits a mellow light,
The storm raves loud along th'Atlantic shore
And oft the spirits of the water roar,
The rain descending from the hill's dim brow
Sweeps desolately o'er the plain below,
375 All nature trembles with the sudden shock,
Ruin sits ghastly on a bellying rock
That huge and wild o'erhangs the troubled deep,
And dreams of death and shipwreck in his sleep!
The gifted wizard-seer far in a cave
380 In lonely horrors awful as the grave,
Where never shines the splendour of the day
To drive the darkness and the damp away,
Hears the mad world of waters in its rage
And nature elemental warfare wage,

385 View desolation o'er the billows stride
And sink the sailor in the whelming tide!
The vessel foundered—and with poisonous breath
The angry spirit spread the gales of death,
Bade the fierce ocean o'er the topmast roll
390 And savage winds the hollow death-bell toll!
Now gliding sadly o'er the watery plain
Where once convulsed with fate-inflicting pain,
The sailor ghosts in wild and sullen mood
On the dark-heaving ocean constant brood,
395 Shriek on the wave with soul-appalling cry
And hover hideous mid the lurid sky,
The wind's hoarse murmur mingles with the moan
And foaming waves return the horror-breathing groan!

With eyes of flame the wayward seer descries
400 Those angry spirits sailing thro' the skies,
Whose blasting powers the evening sky deform
Roll the long thunder, brew the awful storm,
Glare thro' the lightning's pale and flitting hue
And burst with yells upon the [?gifted] view!—

405 The lonely shepherd on the mountains far
Hears the strange uproar of unwonted war,
Starts from his slumber at the thrilling sound
And eyes with fear the welkin blazing round;
To shun the tempest's overpow'ring shock
410 He seeks the shade of some protecting rock,
And while the cliffs with thund'ring voice are riv'n
Lifts up his eyes in silent prayer to heav'n!
Alas! the stream that murmurs down the dale,
The breathing incense of the vernal gale,

415 The radiant beauties of the orb of night
Bathing the mountains in her streamy light,
The tear of rapture in affection's eye
The snowy bosom and the panting sigh,
Will ne'er again with soothing magic roll

420 The tide of transport on his bounding soul,

The fiends of night dart on their destin'd prey
And from his eyeballs fade life's undulating day!

O'er those bleak hills where eagles wing their way²⁰
And dart like lightning on their trembling prey,
425 Where scattered flocks in silent slumbers lie
Like paly clouds amid the evening sky,
Where oft is heard the shepherd's distant horn,
Awakening echo at the dawn of morn,
Where startled grouse loud-whirring thro' the air
430 Raise from her den the crouching timid hare,
Disease²¹ n'er sinks the form in sad decay
But health exerts an universal sway;—
Each drop that falls, and every breeze that blows
Wipe the salt tear, and hush desponding woes,
435 Adorn the cheek with melancholy grace
And flush with fitting warmth the faded face,
Till wasted nature clad in mournful bloom
Falls, soft as evening dew, into the tomb—
Meek as the radiance of the moon's pale beam
440 That charms awhile then dies along the stream.

Long may ye live in happiness and peace
Till the last fluttering of your bosom cease!
Free as the gale that fans your hills of snow
Calm as the murmuring stream that flows below;
445 May no loud ravings of misfortune's storm
The cloudless radiance of your lives deform,
Nor guileful vice with mean and cunning art
Diffuse its fatal poison o'er the heart!
But still may virtue on your mountains stray
450 And pour a flood of intellectual day!
Still at the hour of evening from the steep
View the sun's fiery colours on the deep;
Hear the faint rippling of the breaking wave,
And the white surge the lonely sea-beach lave!
455 Gaze on the wide expanse of main and sky

With bounding rapture, and a poet's eye!
The roll the tide of wild heroic song
Your peaceful vales and deep'ning glades among;
Pure blaze the splendour of your lamp of light

460 Till nature's self has sunk in overwhelming night!—

1 Probably Francis Jeffrey (see headnote).

23 *welkin* the vault formed by the sky.

30 cf James Beattie *The Minstrel*, *Poems on Several Occasions*, 1776.

32 cf William Collins, 'Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands', 185-187:

Proceed, in forceful sounds and colours bold

The native legends of thy land rehearse;

To such adapt thy lyre and suit thy powerful verse.

33-138 The tableau of the shepherd toiling against the elements recalls an identical episode in 'Winter' in *The Seasons* (lines 265-328). In both poems the shepherd is a sentimentalised motif of human courage set in contrast those who seem to live painless lives and for Wilson, those (like Jeffrey) who dismiss the subject of the poor as a fit subject for poetry. Where Thomson asks in proto-romantic tenor, lines 326-8:

Ah! little think they, while they dance along,

How many feel, this very moment, death,

And all the sad variety of pain (*Complete Poetical Works*, 1951)

Wilson affirms (42-44):

Say, does thine eye this cot with scorn survey

Offspring of pride, thou clod of breathing clay?

46 The *aurora borealis* or 'northern lights', can be seen in the far north-west of Scotland during the summer.

64 *to-fall* the end of the day or beginning of evening.

cf William Collins, 'Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands'

For him in vain at to-fall of the day,

His babes shall linger,

144 *piobrach* the mournful tune played on the bagpipes, usually played after battle or to raise martial spirits.

155 The Battle of Falkirk was a brief respite in the falling fortunes of the Jacobite army. Having retreated northwards from Derby and planning a siege on Stirling Castle, the Jacobites under Lord George Murray led an attack on General Henry Hawley's troops at Falkirk. The government side lost hundreds in less than an hour, while the Scots suffered only minor losses.

156 *Southron*, generally a term used by the Scots to describe the English, here refers to the Hanoverian army.

189 Following their success at Falkirk, Prince Charles' army retreated further into the Highlands. In an ill-conceived pitched battle at Culloden Moor on 16 April 1746, they were routed by Cumberland's cavalry, thus beginning the dispersal of the Jacobites, and the flight of the Prince.

195 William of Orange

230 The many Highland chiefs who were forced to flee Scotland after the failure of the 1745 uprising.

237 *falchion* a short broad sword used in medieval times — the claymore was a more usual weapon among the Scots in the eighteenth century.

245 James Macpherson, author of the translations of *Ossian*, who was himself raised in the Highlands.

277 cf Thomas Campbell, *The Pleasures of Hope*, 2, 21-24

And say, without our hopes, without our fears,

Without the home that plighted love endears,

Without the smile from partial beauty won,

Oh! what were man?—a world without a sun. (*Poems* 1792)

278 The Viking invaders from Scandinavia.

290 *Oscar* (*Oscar* in Macpherson) was the son of *Ossian*.

319 *erst* at first, formerly (possibly a pun on *Erse*, the Gaelic language).

423 cf James Grahame, *The Rural Calendar*, 'August', 3-4:

No woodland note is heard, save where the hawk

High from her eyry, skims in circling flight.

431 [... disease]

To a Lady Weeping at a Tragedy

Sacred to feeling are the tears
That dim the radiance of the eye
And hallowed is that gift of woe
A sad and soothing sigh!

5 Though lovely be the vermell¹ cheek
And winning be the angel face
Unless its features are adorn'd
With melancholy grace,

The heart ne'er owns its sovereign power
10 Nor kindles with a heavenly flame,
Nor softly-beating learns to feel
The magic of a name!

But when the sigh of pity heaves
And sorrow speaks in pensive hue
15 And tears as pure as angels' weep
The melting eye bedew,

Then beauty steals into the heart,
Mild as the balmy breath of Eve,
Reposes in the fluttering breast
20 And teaches it to grieve!

Then Anna² do not hide those tears
For they are sacred tears to me,
The sigh that swells thy bosom thrills
My soul with ecstasy!

¹ *vermell* crimson.

² In the 'Margaret' poems, Wilson uses the names Anna, Mary, Jessy and Helen, as idealised female subjects. This is a common trope in the poems and songs of Burns.

A Fragment

In the list of contents, Wilson gives his poem the title, 'The disturbed Spirit, a fragment'. Here he is following a familiar trend in magazine poetry, identified by Robert Mayo in 'The Contemporaneity of the Lyrical Ballads', (PMLA 69 (1954), 486-522). The fragment was often 'a scene or episode detached from some larger work, usually imaginary...affording a mere glimpse into the life of a darker or a more barbarous age.' Wilson continues the Gothic model, with his haunting theme of darkness and revenge and here imitates the anapaestic metre of Wordsworth's 'The Convict', published in *The Morning Post* on 14 December 1797. In the 19th-century the use of anapaestic metre was what A.D. Harvey describes as an 'epoch making literary phenomenon. Its use imposes strict limitations on the composition of the poem, as well as insisting on a 'lulling, musical rhythm', such that 'anapaests put sound before sense.'¹ Wilson rises to the challenge and the metre adds an exaggerated melodrama to the ghoulish poem.

Why gleams not the moon on you, mountains of heath,
While her radiance illumines the sky,
Nor zephyrs at twilight soft-murmuring breathe
While the dews on the green valleys lie?

5 Why strange howls the storm mid the darkness of night
And thunders roll loud through the heav'n,
As each wild savage cave and high-towring [?]ght
Resound, and with uproar are riv'n?

No bird ever flew o'er its dark gloomy brow
10 No flock ever grazed on its side,
O'er the fragments of rocks that lie scattered below
Flows a silent though swift-rolling tide.

And oft from the mouth of a moss cover'd cave,
Shrieks mingled with laughter arise,
15 While along the deep cavern the hollow winds rave,
And bloody clouds wheel thro' the skies.

If the watchdog at midnight the horrid yell hears
Convulsed are his shuddering limbs,
He howls in dismay, half-arrested his ears,
20 While terror his eyeballs bedims!

¹ A. D. Harvey, *English Poetry in a Changing Society 1780-1825*, (London 1980), 26.

The shepherd oft starts from his pallet of straw
Mid the gloom of his lone midnight hour,
His heart throbs and trembles with deep stricken awe
For 'tis then that bad spirits have power—

25 When the shadows of night have envelop'd the hill
And nature is hid in their gloom,
When the kingdom of darkness is silent and still
As the peace of the mouldering tomb,

Then are heard at a distance the shrieks of despair,
30 That fill with wild tumult the dell,
And loud with disturbance the motionless air,
As strangely and loudly they swell!

'Tis said on that mountain foul murder was done
Or flowed a warm torrent of blood,
35 That stained the soft shades of the fiery sun
And mingled its hue with the flood!

And oft on the point of yon high tow'ring steep
With eyeballs of flame a wild form,
Resides, when all mortals are shrouded in sleep,
40 And laughs at the voice of the storm!

Those eyeballs once glittered with murder's red gleam
That arm the long dagger uprear'd;
That hand rudely tore at the blood-clotted hair
That bosom no dying shrieks fear'd!

45 He looks on that torrent that thunders beneath,
And shudders and groans at the sight,
He looks with despair on the red bloody heath
That scares the deep darkness of night.—

No prayer ever mounts for his hell tortur'd soul

50 No tear ever drops for his sake—

The Slave

In the list of contents, Wilson gives this poem the title 'The song of the shipwrecked slave'. It has clear parallels to Southey's sonnet, 'Why dost thou beat thy breast and rend thine hair', (*Poetical Works* 1838) a poem that also records the death at sea of a slave. Southey, like Wilson, adds pathos to the scene by imagining the bereaved distant wife and family. Here Wilson employs the anapaest again,¹ which is an attempt to give his poem a sense of eerie foreboding.

Ye wild winds of heav'n full hoarsely you rave,
As o'er the vast billows¹ you sweep,
While thunder stalks forth from his echoing cave,
And lightnings illumine the deep!

5 The mariner starts at the heart-rending sound
As the tempest howls loud thro' the sky,
While the broad-blazing welkin² spreads horror around
He wafts his despair on a sigh.

Alas! to his bosom is nature still dear,
10 For friends does his heart dare to feel—
Can the rapture of sighing, the bliss of a tear
To his soul with strong energy steal?

The heart-thrilling hopes of a far-distant wife,
His offspring in childhoods' soft bloom
15 Makes the sailor still prize the treasures of life
And affrighted recoil from the tomb!

But welcome ye storms to the fetter-bound slave,
Ye thunderbolts burst on his head,
Oppression ne'er frowns on the realms of the grave
20 Nor cruelty trample the dead!

Ye band of oppressors yon huge mountain wave,
Now tow'ring aloft to the sky
Is big with destruction, no efforts can save,
Ye fiends how I smile when you die!

¹ see page 104 headnote.

25 Dear shades of my Parents I hasten to you
Now clothed in the glory of heav'n;
But know to this breast e'er I murmured adieu
Revenge and dread triumph were giv'n!

2 billows waves.
7 welkin sky.

The Orphan

In the contents, this titled 'The Prayer of the Orphan'. The orphan is another familiar trope of poetry of the time, where the voice of the deserted child pleads for the pity of the imaginary passer-by¹. The innocence of the subject and simplicity of diction would have had particular resonance for the 'orphan maid' Margaret Mitchelson.

Ah! Hast thou a sad tear to shed,
Or a sigh for sorrow to heave,
Then mourn for a poor orphan child
Whose woes there are none to relieve!

5 No father have I in my grief,
To taste of delight from his eye,
The mother's fond bosom to press
And share her deplorable¹ sigh!

I ne'er knew the smile of a friend
10 Nor the bliss of a pitying look
O'er the world an outcast I roam
By the sunshine of fortune forsook—

Mid the gloom of a wintry sky
I press the cold ground for my bed;
15 While storms and the pitiless rain
Rave wild round my innocent head;

Ah! stranger a trifle bestow
Remember a destitute child,
I see in your eye pity's tear
20 I see you are gentle and mild!

Your name will ascend in my prayer
When warm'd by religion I kneel,
For though I'm neglected and poor

¹ cf MG Lewis 'The Orphan's Prayer' (*The Poems*, 1812), 54.

Yet stranger this bosom can feel—

25 When cold and when wet with the rain,
 Still I'll fondly think upon you;
 In my dreams your pitying form,
 Will seem to bid me adieu!

 When charity mourns for my woes
30 Faint pleasure may speak in my eye
 But comfortless want and despair
 Soon chase the sweet smile with a sigh!

 Ah! cease ye salt torrents to flow
35 Thou heart be content with thy doom,
 Mid this world the tempest may beat
 But peace is the lot of the tomb!

 Oh! hast thou a salt tear to shed
 Or a sigh for sorrow to heave
40 Then pity a poor orphan child
 Whose woes there are none to relieve!

8 *deplorable* miserable or wretched.

The Fate of Beauty

Oft have we seen the lovely rose expand
Unveil its' beauties to the gazing eye,
The dewy-spangled leaves by zephyrs⁴ fanned
That thro' the glade in whispering murmurs sigh!

5 But Ah! how soon it lost its graceful bloom
And sunk depressed upon its' lowly bed,
The chilling damps have cast a fatal gloom
And ruthless all its' boasted beauties shed!

So have we seen soft beauty's sparkling eye
10 Exult awhile in admiration's rays,
Resistless prompt the bosom-bursting sigh
And draw from every heart unsought for praise!

But soon contempt the cruel spoiler came
And eyed askance the quickly-fading bloom,
15 He came and beauty felt his fearful name
And swooned and died and sunk into the tomb.

⁴ zephyrs these are light westerly breezes, especially personified in poetry.

Feeling at parting from a beloved object

The setting sun's bright mellow ray
That trembles on the western steep,
Before its' lingering fires decay
Or sink extinguished in the deep,

5 Glows with more enchanting light
Than flaming mid the noontide sky,
And sweeter is the fall of night
Than rosy morning's sparkling eye!

So is the parting look of love
10 When sorrow prompts the pensive tear,
And the eye raised to heaven above
In silence speaks that love sincere,

More sadly-pleasing to the heart
Than the bright glance of rapture's eye,
15 And sweeter far to weep and part
Than melt in love's wild ecstasy!

But while mid twilight's shade we pause
Live on the lovely forms around
And as the sun's last light withdraws
20 Listen to melancholy sound,

We hope tomorrow's evening sun
With radiance soft will gild the sky,
And when his fiery course is run
Again delight illumine the eye!

25 When beauty smiling thro' her tears
Comes mildly on the Lover's view,
And like the evening Star appears
More beautiful breathing forth adieu,

30 The hope that we will meet again
With mutual ardour in our breast,
Gives joy to sorrow's mournful strain
And soothes the troubled Soul to rest!

Lines on hearing a lady play upon the harp

Wilson examines the nature of profound feelings and the sadness of the parting glimpse of a loved one. He re-shapes some of the ideas in Coleridge's 'The Aeolian Harp'. The poem describes how the emotion, which is often more exquisite than the love itself, is tempered by the hope of renewal, conjured by the sound of the harp, here played by a woman rather than the breeze.

- What plaintive strains of heaven-born music flow
To prompt the sigh of sad yet pleasing woe,
While softly-murmuring on the gales of eve
They sweetly seem for some lost friend to grieve.
- 5 Fleeting and transient as the moon's pale beam
That mildly glimmering fades along the stream!
Oh! if some wretch oppress with grief and pain
Heard the wild music of that breathing strain,
And felt within his captivated soul
- 10 The holy tones of murmuring magic roll,
His cheek that marked the victim of the tomb
Would glow once more with health's unwonted bloom,
While every throb of anguish soothed to peace
The stormy tumult of his heart would cease
- 15 Where regions tinged with nature's loveliest hue
Refine the spirit of the pure Hindoo¹,
And fancy pours from her secluded cell
The balmy tide of rapture's wildest swell,
'Tis said that music's melancholy strain
- 20 Recalls those peaceful thoughts to life again,
Whose impulse charmed the feelings of our mind,
While mid the gardens of the bless'd reclined,
We listened to the murmur of the skies
And the soft tones that breathed in Paradise!—
- 25 The whispering breath of joy-diffusing morn
The linnet warbling from the whitening thorn,
The distant gurgling of the mossy rill²
Meandering wildly down the sloping hill,
The listening ear mid nature's beauty hail
- 30 Breathing melodious through the shadowy vale!

Yet e'en these sounds less pensive joy impart
Diffuse less magic o'er the trembling heart,
Than when the harp's electric³ murmurs rise
Soft as the tones of panting beauties sighs!

35 Then every note is harmonized to joy
No jarring sound the rapture to alloy,
Each fainting tone leaves pleasure's smile behind
And charms with melody the slowly-passing wind.

Say can the cold, the dull unfeeling mind
40 Nor warmed by genius nor by taste refin'd,
That never burn'd with virtue's purest glow
Nor felt the transport of indulging woe,
Sweep with soft touch the gently-quivering string,

Till fairy tribes be fluttering on the wing,
45 And o'er the soul with holy art diffuse
The mournful warblings of the pensive muse?
No; Music's charms with taste and genius join'd
To warm and feeling hearts are close confin'd;
To them belong those sparks of sacred fire
50 Our tears that prompt, our pity that inspire;
At woe we mourn, at bursting fury start
And own thy sway o'er all our troubled heart!

And thou fair Lady whose angelic hand
Inspires the smile of pleasure's airy band,
55 With magic touch awakes the slumb'ring soul
And o'er the fancy melting transports roll
E'en now I see thee bending o'er thy lyre
Thy fine eye fraught with feeling's liquid fire,
And o'er the strings convey with heav'nly power
60 Heart-thrilling sounds in music's favourite hour!
Till memory's prospect fading from my view
I feel the blissful sight no longer true
But like a dream to pining mortals giv'n—
The grace and bounty of indulgent heav'n!
65 Thus while envelop'd with the gloom of night

On fancy's wings we soar to realms of light
O'er leap the flaming bounds of space and time
And breathe the blessings of a happier clime—
Soft strains of music soothe our ravish'd sense
70 Unmingled pleasure to the soul dispense;
Refine the mind from every earth-born thought
And raise ideals with pure rapture fraught,
But soon alas! the glorious vision flies
When sleep unveils his bandage from our eyes—
75 Our bliss departs—and far-fled transports seem
An uncreated form, a shapeless dream!

16 *hindoo* Indian.

27 *rill* stream.

33 *cf* Coleridge "The Aeolian Harp", 44-48:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all (*Lyrical Ballads*, 1993).

Song

In the list of contents, Wilson lists the poem as 'Anna, a song'.

Soft are the fading tints of eve
The distant hills adorning,
And soft the zephyrs balmy breath
That hails the smile of morning!

5 Yet softer is the magic glow
My Anna's cheek o'erspreading,
Softer the sigh that heaves her breast
While tears in silence shedding!

O'er twilight stillness nature's hues
10 A holy charm diffusing
With potent power the heart enthrall
On sorrow sadly musing!

The tears that shine in Anna's¹ eyes
A pure and sacred treasure;
15 Beaming with smiles flung o'er the soul
Such calm and pensive pleasure!

No grief can wound my placid breast,
While Anna gently smiling
Swells sweetly sad an angel strain
20 All earth-born cares beguiling!

When life's night star serenely burns
A faded lustre lending,
One grave will hold our mould'ring frames
In death's cold mansion blending.

¹ see page 104n.

cf Burns song, 'Anna, thy charms':

Anna thy charms my bosom fire,
And waste my soul with care;
But ah! how bootless to admire
When fated to despair! (*The Poems and Songs*, 1968).

Love

If e'er this earth becomes a heaven
And rapture triumph's o'er the heart,
'Tis when the smile of grace is giv'n
To rob the poison from Love's dart!

5 Then does his power with pleasing sway
Rule o'er the feelings of the Mind,
Calm as the suns of setting day
By twilight's dewy breath refin'd!

With tranquil thought we feed the flame,
10 In fancy every feature trace,
Kindle with rapture with one name
See heav'n reflected in our face.

Though clouds o'er cast Life's dawning morn,
And the rude winds of sorrow rise,
15 If smiles fair Jessy's¹ brow adorn,
And softness glisten in her eyes;

My heart no misery will disarm,
But transport reign instead of care,
And free from all but Love's alarm,
20 I'll bid farewell to cold despair.

But should e'en Jessy prove unkind
And view my constant love with scorn,
Corroding grief will pierce my Mind,
My peace destroy'd, a wretch forlorn!

25 The gentle murmur of the stream
The music of the passing breeze,
The glimmering moon's pale yellow beam
The rustling of slow-waving trees,

Will heave my bosom with a sigh
30 And memory's cruel power renew
While fancy's fleeting visions die
And melt away like morning dew!

Oh! pity then the Lover's state
Whose happiness depends on you
35 Nor let it be his cruel fate
To bid thy smiles and peace adieu!

Can aught but kindness ever dwell
Within a form so heav'nly fair
Say! Can that snowy bosom swell
40 And love and joy not kindle there!

That eye denotes a feeling Soul
Mild as the beam with which it glows—
Oh! more the pearly tear would roll
And glisten for another's woes!

45 No language can express my love
Nor feelings that still tremble here,
But those high powers that rule above
Behold it fervent and sincere!

Mid Nature's wild and balmy shade
50 Where Bothwell's² hoary ruins rise,
Mid every deep, romantic glade
Where scarce are seen the cloudless skies,

When morning's purple light appears
And wanton gales the forest wave
55 When twilight smiling thro' her tears,
Reigns peaceful as the silent grave,—

Like some kind angel clothed in light
Meek as the dewy star of eve,

Thy Image floats before my sight,

60 And whispers me no more to grieve

15 *Jessy* – diminutive for another idealised rustic female (see note 101). Here *Jessy* may also be a pet-name for Margaret, as Wilson is specific about Bothwell Castle, somewhere they visited frequently together.

50 Bothwell Castle, see page 146 *headnote*.

Florentine

Another example of a Gothic 'fragment'; here we encounter the rejected lover as he expires, forlorn and desolate. Wilson may be borrowing this theme of the lonely or wandering troubadour from the medievalised romance of *The Minstrel or the Progress of Genius* by James Beattie (1735-1803).

When Cynthia¹ pale emits a glimmering ray
And scented dews from heaven's dim arch distill
While pensive silence holds her dreary sway
O'er gloomy dell, and cloud enveloped hill,

5 Down yon clear stream that gently murmurs bye
With waters glittering to the orbs soft beam,
With heavy heart young Florentine would hye²
And wander in the wilds of Fancy's dream.

He roamed with heedless steps these groves among
10 And fondly heard the streamlets rising swell,
Wept at each songster's rapture-breathing song
And joyed with cheerless solitude to dwell!

He view'd the rivulet gently glide away
Beneath the turf with waving willows clad
15 And to its murmurs tuned a melting lay
That flowed in numbers amorous and sad.

He saw the pearly drop bedew the flower,
And trembling smile upon the quivering leaf,
He thought of love, and stay'd the tear to pour
20 In all the mournful ecstasy of grief!

Though sweet the tears of early summer's morn
That grace the primrose in the shadowy grove,
Yet sweeter far to Florentine forlorn,
Did memory's heart-thrilling raptures prove!

25 A maid he loved endow'd with charms divine
With tearful softness glistening in her eye;
O'er her fair brow the auburn ringlets shine

And to the breeze in flutt'ring murmur sigh!

Ah! cruel fair you drove him to despair,
30 And wrapt his Soul in misery's murky gloom,
Unpitying listened to his ardent prayer
And sent him weeping to an early tomb!

When e'er the lurid lightnings fired the sky
And heav'n's dark dome the muttering thunders sway,
35 He view'd the waste with frenzy-glaring eye,
And sought the tow'ring mountains craggy steep.

Forlorn he sat, and eyed with maniac stare
The forked flash of vivid lightning play
Regardless braved its soul-appalling glare,
40 For far had fled bright reason's high-prized day!

The foamy torrents hoarse-resounding roar
In horrid pomp careering on the wind
The angry blasts that thro' the tempests soar
Gave horror-mingled pleasure to his mind!

45 All earthly thoughts his heaving breast forsook
The present crushed all memory of the past,
He blessed the peal heav'n's tott'ring dome that shook,
And fearless mingled with the angry blast!

May the sweet violet on his grave arise
50 May roses blossom in eternal bloom,
While warbling larks long-lingering on the sky
With plaintive notes mourn o'er a lover's tomb.

Ye bleating lambkins spare the turf so green,
The hallow'd turf that moulders o'er his head
55 Ye fairy forms at pensive twilight seen
Sing peaceful hymns in honour of the dead!

Ye woe-worn hearts no joyous thoughts that know
That feel the bitter thorn in beauties rose,
Here stay your willing steps, indulge your woe,
60 Where o'er his frame the weepy daisy grows!

Soft-dying notes, each incense-breathing gale
Most sadly mingling with the streamlet's swell
The listening ear at sober eve will hail,
A lover's funeral dirge and mournful knell!

60 And shouldst thou Helen³ turn thy melting eye
On the lone sod that hides his mouldering frame,
Ah! deign to heave one sympathetic sigh
And in soft accents breathe thy lover's name!

If round the turf still floats his airy shade,
70 And loves at twilight still to linger near,
On angel wings to hover round the glade
Where oft the sigh was heav'd and shed the tear—

Thy plaintive tones may soothing bliss impart
E'en to the precincts of an angel's breast,
75 And the soft grief that murmurs at thy heart
With magic power lull all his woes to rest!

1 *Cynthia* the moon.

7 *hye* go.

60 *see* page 104n.

Parental Affection

The shout of triumph floats upon the air,
The village bells send forth a merry sound,
While to each eye the power of happiness
Imparts a brighter beam. The very children
5 Partake the general joy and cry aloud,
"The English Fleet has gain'd the Victory!"¹
All cares dismissed, and every frown dispell'd
The day is giv'n to mirth and idleness!

Why sits that old man with a pensive look
10 Like one in musing sorrow, with his eye
Fixed sometimes on the ground, and sometimes raised
To heav'n, as with a wish of supplication?
He hears no music from the many bells
Nor does the joyful song of victory
15 Reach his sad heart. It seems as if his soul
Dwelt in some other place, and left its frame
Insensible and motionless.

His son some three years since had gone to sea
And was a sailor in the Admiral's ship
20 During the very time of this engagement
But whether he was living or had fall'n
No tidings yet had reach'd his fathers ears!²

¹ In 1793 there were significant English naval victories at Cape St. Vincent, and Battle of the Nile.

² cf. Wordsworth's 'The Sailor's Mother' *The Poetical Works* 1849-1850, 239 and 'Old Man Travelling', *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798, 190.

On the Death of Dr Lockhart

In the *Scots Magazine* for March 1802 appears an obituary to the Reverend Dr William Lockhart, minister of St Andrew's Church, Glasgow, who died:

in the 58th year of his age, and the 30th of his ministry. While highly esteemed and beloved by his congregation, the integrity of his private character, and unwearied assiduity in doing good, gained him the esteem of all ranks, and endeared him in a particular manner to the poor and needy, who were the daily objects of his charity and beneficence.

George Jardine also mentions Lockhart's death in a letter to The Rev Robert Hunter, 17 February 1802¹:

...within these few days an old and worthy friend Dr Lockhart... was carried off by some fatal Branches of Apoplexy—he was suddenly taken ill on the Saturday and died on the Monday Evening thereafter—much and most sincerely regretted by every description of persons here.

Another manuscript version of this poem is in existence², with the title 'Verses on the Death of Dr Lockhart' and dated 12 March 1802, which suggests that it was presented after his death. There are some changes in the version in the 'Margaret' volume, which given its destination seems likely to have been the second version. This might lend further indications as to when the volume was written, and leaves the time closer to the other great composition of that year, Wilson's letter to Wordsworth in late May. The textual emendations of the MS version (ii) are indicated in the footnotes.

When worth and learning bid the world farewell
And seek their God mid regions of the sky
Congenial souls with deepest sorrow swell
And with a tear bedim the glistening eye!

5 No more shall pure religion's simple strain
From Lockhart's lips¹ in sweet devotion flow,
To soothe the heart opprest with grief and pain
To calm each sigh and banish every woe!

Soft was his heart when suppliant misery pled
10 Profuse his hand each suffering to relieve,
The poor oft prayed for blessings on his head
And at the good man's smile forgot to grieve!

¹ GUL SpColl Ms Gen 507/120

² Glasgow, Mitchell Library MS

Mild were his manners in domestic life
No jarring passions e'er disturbed his soul,
15 There peace still dwelt²—far fled discordant strife
O'er every heart his winning kindness stole!

Ye who have seen the holy man ascend
And breathe to heav'n the rapture-speaking prayer,
Now o'er his grave in mournful silence bend
20 And heave the groan extorted by despair—

Yet will that God he loved on Earth to praise
Regard his weeping friends with pitying eye,
Chear³ their sad hearts with hope's transporting rays
Dry up their tears and hush the rising sigh.

25 When a loved child by sickness torn from rest
Poured her sad moanings on thy listening ear,
A sorrowing sigh escaped thy aching breast
And dashed thy meek eye with the glistening⁴ tear.

Though patient virtue calm'd the pain of death
30 And smoothed the way that led thy soul to bliss
No son was nigh to catch thy parting breath
And press thy pale cheek with a parting⁵ kiss!

Thy weeping wife to whom in every throe
The power to soothe⁶ the sense of pain was giv'n,
35 Thus friendless left amid a world of woe
Deplored the stroke that led thy soul to heav'n!

When death's cold hand dissolves this mortal frame
And frees the spirit from its frail abode,
Our souls will feel⁷ pure and sacred flame
40 And meet with Lockhart at the throne of God!⁸⁹

6 (ii) life.

15 (ii) dwells.

23 (ii) cheer.

28 (ii) bitter.

32 (ii) farewell.

34 (ii) charm.

39 (ii) with a.

40 (ii) The poem is signed by 'Academicus John Wilson, Aged Sixteen, Glasgow College'.

Lines suggested by the fate of Governor Wall

Joseph Wall (1737-1802), Governor of Goree (Senegal), was executed on 28 January 1802 having been found guilty of murder. Wall had one of his troops flogged so brutally that he died; the case attracted considerable public interest at the time. Here Wilson focuses on the pain of those who mourn for him.

To worth and genius let the tear be shed
And weeping flowerets on their grave be spread,
There let the good with musing steps repair
And breathe their sorrows thro' the balmy air
5 The gales of eve will mingle with their moan
And gently murmur o'er the sculptur'd stone!
But who shall heave the bosom bursting sigh
Or teach the tear to tremble in the eye,
For him whose heart ne'er felt pure virtue's glow
10 Nor sigh'd in sorrow at another's woe,
But, stain'd with crimes sunk in disgraceful death
And mid revilings drew his latest breath?
Yet tho' for him no pitying tear be shed
No hallow'd turf laid softly on his head,
15 Though strangers mourn not his gloomy fate
And careless all his sufferings relate—
There are alas! of deeply sorrowing heart
Some that did sigh e'en from this man to part,
Some that did lull him to forgetful sleep
20 And when he woke, hang on his neck and weep—
With faltering tongue breath'd forth a sad farewell
And trembling issued from his cold damp cell—
To these let tearful pity give relief
And calm the pangs of agonizing grief—
25 Lull to repose the torments of their soul
And wipe the drops of anguish as they roll!

Verses addressed to the Glasgow Volunteers—on their retiring from that station, the duties of which they had so honourably discharged, and generously bestowing the remaining part of their funds on the Infirmary of this City.

Thomas Campbell also wrote a poem entitled, 'Lines on the Glasgow Volunteers – Daily Exercising in Full Uniform on the College-Green' (*Works* 1907). The College made a contribution for national defence in March 1798, towards the raising of a volunteer militia in response to the threat of invasion from Napoleon in the form of a £300 subscription. 'Millar, the professor of Law, protested against this, holding that the academic funds were intended for particular uses of the University, that any occasional surplus was not meant for the use of the nation at large or for fleets or armies'¹. Here it is clear that the remaining funds after the standing down of the Volunteers were donated to the City Infirmary, an act of charity celebrated by Wilson. Richard Cronin notes that since the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, the raising of regiments had been outlawed. However invasions from Napoleon were thought to be a real threat and Scott himself had helped to raise the Border Light Horse. On 14 October 1803, Scott wrote 'God has left us entirely to our own means of defence, for we have not above one regiment of the line in all our ancient kingdom. In the meanwhile we are doing our best to prepare ourselves for a contest, which, perhaps is not far distant.'²

When the fell demons of confusion hurl'd
The bolts of discord o'er a trembling world,
When lawless anarchy rear'd high his head
And fixed his throne on mountains of the dead
5 Mid blooming regions once the monarch's pride
Rolled the dark [torrent] of apprehensions tide
Thro' every realm the dire contagion flew
And peace despairing bade mankind adieu.
Mid this dread scene of ruin and decay
10 O'er the rich plains of Britain's favor'd Isle
Freedom still shed her bliss-diffusing smile,
Poured forth a stream of everlasting light
And scared the friends of peril and affright.
Her gallant sons in one determined band
15 Averted danger from a grateful land,
Resistless crushed oppressions giant arm
Shielded their laws from faction's fierce alarm,
Till peace again her joyous reign resum'd
And with her light Britannia's shores illum'd
20 Ye firm supporters of your country's cause
Who rose for Order, Liberty and Laws,
With saviour-hand upheld a monarch's throne

¹ James Coutts, *A History of the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow 1909), 239.

² Richard Cronin, 'Walter Scott and Anti-Gallican Minstrelsy', *ELH* 66 (1999), 863-883, 37n

And crushed the noxious seeds of discord sown,
A virtuous prince¹ will venerate your name
25 A nation's blessing far diffuse your fame,
While conscious virtue throbbing at your heart
Will yield that joy which generous deeds impart!

Within those hearts where patriot feelings swell
The milder virtues oft delight to dwell—
30 To soothe the pangs of agonizing grief
To pining sickness bring unhop'd relief,
To wipe the tear from misery's pallid face
And clothe the cheek with health's returning grace—
From threat'ning death the wasted frame to save
35 These are the pleasures of the truly brave!
The smile soft-beaming in the languid eye
The mournful music of misfortune's sigh,
The orphan's blessing and the widow's prayer
Mid twilight stillness wafted thro' the air,
40 Pale sickness rescued from the silent tomb
Adorn'd anew with rigors roseate bloom,
The gleam of joy seen thro' a shower of tears
And virtue blessed beneath a load of years,
With angel hand will sweetest joy bestow
45 On those who sadly muse on human woe,
Who charm'd by feeling's holy magic, gave
The dying comfort and the dead a grave.

24 The Prince of Wales, later George IV.

Osmond

At the end of the poem Wilson signed the following note 'The above verses were intended to ridicule W.G. Lewis's *Style of Poetry*,—but they have failed. J.W.' He is in fact referring to M.G (Matthew Gregory) 'Monk' Lewis (1775-1818) who was named after his own sensational novel *The Monk*. Lewis's macabre Gothic ballad 'Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogine', is Wilson's model here. The fair Imogine was sworn to Alonzo, but during his absence in the crusades, she married another. At the wedding feast Alonzo's ghost appears and takes her to her death. This story clearly recalls Banquo's appearance at the feast in *Macbeth*. Picking up this theme and narrative style, Wilson attempts to imitate the ghoulish simplicity of the poem. Lewis's poem uses the anapaestic metre¹ while Wilson's is an awkward conflation of ballad measure and anapaest.

Tw'as night—and gloomy was the sky
No star was seen to shine—
The thunder roar'd loud from a dark-frowning cloud
All hearts trembled Osmond but thine!

5 The spirit of the mountain-height
Shriek'd mid the sweeping blast—
And a gleam of pale light broke the gloom of the night
As Osmond the old chapel past.

A new-dug grave was yawning wide
10 Near it a grey tomb-stone
The darkness could not hide what lay by its side
A skeleton bare to the bone.

A dagger, deep with blood imbued
Lay near the mouth of the grave,
15 The grass was with gore bedew'd and the helmet was hew'd
That lay by the bones of the brave!

Aye! there wilt thou lie, while the tempest howls bye
With a horrible smile Osmond said,
The breast of the skeleton uttered a sigh
20 And loud clanked the bones of the dead.

¹ see page 108 headnote

Ha! rattled those bones? Aye murder will speak
And blood for blood must be given¹,
Earl Osmond full wisely this church yard you seek
To hell shall your Spirit be driven!

25 Your lady was guiltless and guiltless I felt
And know that I once was thy brother,
Yes murderer! a story of horror I tell
This corse was the son of thy mother.

The blood left his cheek—not a word could he speak,
30 And groaning and shudd'ring he died—
Then down dropt his corse² with a dull hollow sound
By the skeleton's bare bloody side

²² Shakespeare, *Macbeth* III, iv, 132: 'It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood'.

³¹ corse corpse.

The Pains of Memory¹

Other poems of the period bear the same title: Bernard Barton's (1784-1849) *The Pains of Memory; A Fragment* and Robert Merry (1755-1798) *The Pains of Memory*. The influential *Pleasures of Memory* by Samuel Rogers came out in 1792, its title suggested by Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of the Imagination*² and Thomas Warton's *The Pleasures of Melancholy*. This inspired a number of other *Pleasures* including Thomas Campbell's *Pleasures of Hope*. Here Wilson's poem is a response to the deaths of his father and sister in 1797 and a sympathetic subject for Margaret Mitchelson, herself an orphan.

Can rapture start luxurious from the clay
Where the sad relics of a friend decay?
Is bliss e'er found beside the silent tomb
Where waves the drooping yew's funereal gloom?
Does rapture glisten in the falling tear
5 That memory sheds upon a parent's bier?
Or the last smile that bright'ned in his eye
Prompt us to heave the sad but soothing sigh?
Ah no! with groans that murmur o'er the dead
The smile of transport has for ever fled!
10 In wailing accents weeping mourners rave
On the fresh turf that decks a parent's grave!
The tears that wet an orphan's stedfast eye
Speak the sad wish to languish and to die—
While wandering helpless thro' a world of woe
15 He weeps for joys that orphans never know!
He thinks of days when kindling rapture smiled
And love parental every grief beguiled,
When pity fluttered in his trembling heart
And sorrow aimed her harmless mimic dart!
20 When pleasure ruled the transitory hour
And dwelt within his lowly infant bower!

¹ cf Thomas Campbell *The Pleasures of Hope*, Book I, 239-248:

And say, when summon'd from the world and thee,
I lay my head beneath the willow tree,
Wilt thou, sweet mourner! at my stone appear,
And soothe my parted spirit lingering near?
Oh, wilt thou come at evening hour to shed,
The tears of Memory o'er my narrow bed;
With aching temples on thy hand reclined,
Muse on the last farewell I leave behind,
Breathe a deep sigh to winds that murmur low,
And think on all my love, and all my woe?

² see 58n.

When youthful ardour warm'd his careless breast
With gentle flame to soothe his soul to rest!
But now no hope, no transport lingers there
25 He lives on grief and nourishes despair,
Reclines desponding on the tomb-stone grey
And thinks how fast his father's bones decay!
A Memory! spare his wild and frenzied mind
Nor in thy iron chain his feelings bind,
30 Blot from the evils of thy pictur'd page
Those woes that reason knows not to assuage,
Make the dark colours of his fate to seem
The faint creation of a wayward dream!

The sun shines bright, the sky is clear

Wilson celebrates 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'¹ and the return to a place of natural beauty, the pastoral idyll of childhood experience, a scene familiar to the memory. Wilson clearly recalls Wordsworth's *Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey*, where in the physical return to a familiar landscape, the poet charts his intellectual growth against a setting of rural domesticity.

The sun shines bright, the sky is clear
Joy smiles upon the vernal year,
Nature in simple stole array'd
Roams mid each field and vocal glade,
Her impulses, like evening dew
5 When light has bade the world adieu
Sink calm upon the musing soul,
While o'er the fancy visions roll
Of breathing sounds, of varying shade
That charm the spirit while they fade!
10 The breath of nature to the mind
Wafts feelings sacred and refined
Pure as the balmy airs of heav'n
Soft as the dying gales of even!
The splendour of a summer sun
15 Where half his radiant course is run
Infuses peace into the breast
And lulls each anxious thought to rest,
Till every fibre of our frame
Quiver with transport at his flame
20 And all mean grovelling feelings scar'd away
The soul bathes in a flood of intellectual day!

The spirit through the speaking eye¹
Receives the image of the sky,
And every feature of the scene
25 So bright, so mellow, so serene!
The breezes as they float along
Mixed with some warbler's dying song,
The stream that murmurs as it flows
Trees rustling as the zephyr blows,

¹ Brett and Jones (1991) 266.

30 The soothing noise of bleating flocks
 Straying all sportive o'er the rocks,
 The shepherd piping in the glen
 Far from the busy haunts of men,
 While o'er the summit of the hill
 35 Is heard his dog's bark short and shrill,
 All thrill the soul with feelings pure and holy
 Now tranced in madd'ning joy, and now most melancholy
 Each snow-white cloud that in the skies
 Like a close flock reposing lies,
 40 A long-lost pleasing friend appears
 Returning with the lapse of years!
 When memory from her lone cell pours
 The pictures of forgotten hours,
 And makes swift-rolling time to seem
 45 The faint creation of a dream!
 The image of that happy day
 Comes on the heart with brighter ray,
 When first that snow-white cloud was seen
 Those sunny hues with dazzling shene!
 50 And, clothed with all the mirror's truth
 We view those fairy forms that charmed us in our youth!

 At last we bid the scene adieu!
 As silently its charms withdrew—
 They sunk (like music on the ear
 55 That strives the silent notes to hear)
 Most sweetly on the pensive mind
 And tho' the scene be gone—its magic stays behind.

24 The model here is the tale of Lavinia and Palamon in 'Autumn' of James Thomson's *The Seasons* which includes the lines:
 Here ceased the youth: yet still his speaking eye
 Expressed the sacred triumph of his soul,

Wilson compares the story of the young swain and the orphaned Lavinia his own relationship with Margaret Mitchelson.
 cf. Wilson's 'speaking eye' with the 'musing ear' in Southey's paean to Winter, *Ode Written on the First of December 1793* (Poems
 1797).

I know some people in this world

I know some people in this world
Who happier are than me
And in whose place my heart has wish'd
Most earnestly to be.

5 And when I come to make the change
My resolution dies
For fairer prospects than my own
Before my fancy rise.

My very sorrows precious seem
10 Nor would I wish to part
With feelings and those mournful thoughts
That oft distress the heart.

"Wilt thou not taste unmingled bliss
"Exclaims a small still voice ..
15 "I give thee peace and and happiness
Behold and take thy choice."¹

"Observe the man of constant mirth
Who laughs his time away
And with a smile upon his face
20 Will sink into decay!"

I own he's happy, yet this man
Grant heav'n I ne'er may be
I envy not the senseless joy
Of everlasting glee.

25 "Behold the man of passion's calm
Of judgment clear and strong
Who follows still the beaten track
Nor wishes to go wrong."

I know he happier is than me
30 And free from all my sorrow,
Yet in the place of this wise man
I would not be tomorrow.

"Behold the man of equal mind
Of temper still the same,
35 Whose conduct many a one will praise
And none can ever blame."

Yet ev'n him I would not be
Though I can scarce tell why—
I hate the dull unvarying fire
40 That always lights the eye.

Now, some may call me proud and vain
Despising every other—
No friend—unless thou art the same
I would not call thee brother.

45 The man who would exchange his lot
With any upon Earth,
Must have received of Nature's store
Small portion at his birth.

Round every heart of human mould
50 A magic chain is twined
That links us strongly to ourselves
And some of humankind—

We love these friends with such a love
And comprehensive heart
55 That nought can e'er prevail on us
From their embrace to part.

We think we love our friends much more
Than any else can do
And since the thought so pleasing is
60 We cherish it as true.

Ah! who would then their station change
And form connections new
Forget those souls we blessed in youth
And bid them long adieu.

65 I love some beings far too well
Without them e'er to live,
If they were lost—to this sad heart
The world no joy could give.

Though sorrow then may urge her power
70 And rob my soul of rest,
As long as they to me survive
I'll ne'er be much opprest.

To change my state with any one
And leave these friends behind
80 Would speak a cold unfeeling breast
A wild, distempered mind.

16 | Kings: 19.

A Wish

- Where nature in her wildest mood
Steals softly on the musing eye
And breathes the charm of solitude
There may I live and die!
- 5 May no rude sound disturb the glade
Where oft my wand'ring footsteps stray
No music but by nature made
At the mild close of day!
- The dewy star of pensive eve
10 Will light the lonely fairy scene
And the rich yellow moonbeams leave
Their magic on the green!
- Each dying tone that comes from heav'n
Will sing with holy sound to me
15 And to my Soul the bliss be giv'n
Of angel melody!
- Hark the wild strain! O swell once more
Ye gales that through the valley stole
Silence ensues!—the sound is o'er
20 Deep sunk into my soul.
- Oh! may these airs of balmy breath
These varying shades of saddest hue
That loveliest see when near to death
Oft bid this scene adieu!
- 25 And there is one of holy mind
Whose virtues few have ever known
Her soul by evening gales refin'd

Most exquisite its tone!

30 She loves to pause mid wild retreats
And longer mid the lights eve
To taste the balm of Nature's sweets
In ecstasy to grieve!

35 The waning moon's pale-quivering ray
Not softer than her melting eye
Nor breezes at the fall of day
More gentle than her sigh—

40 Her heart is purer than the dew
On the light wings of twilight born
Speaks in a face of finer hue
Than the first dawn of morn!

The very trees that wave around
Meet with a portion of her love
And hallow'd is the sacred ground
In the dark silent grove!

45 And she can brighten with a smile
That shoots along my trembling frame
And every woe on earth beguile
Save my soul's constant flame!

50 Her spirit wanders wild and free
Through airy haunts of purest mirth
And can partake of joyful glee
Like beings of this earth!

Sweet is her smile and sweet her tear
In thrilling union as they blend
55 And oh! how sweet her voice to hear
The sounds from heav'n descend!

If to this spot her beaming eye
Its' meek pathetic light should give
In every cloud that sails the sky
60 A stronger charm would live!

Her breathing thoughts would mould my own
Which mixed with hers would purer be
Partake her spirit's plaintive tone
By silent sympathy!

The living scene would fill her heart
65 With powerful feelings strange and holy
Her lips these feelings would impart
More wildly-melancholy!

We scarce would know we lived on earth
So happy would our moments be
70 And think that heav'n alone gave birth
To such high ecstasy!

And then to meet an angel's love
The lustre of an angel's eye
And feel within her bosom move
75 The softly throbbing sigh!

To press a hand of limpid snow
The burning blushes of a face
Where fear and hopes alternate know
Unutterable grace!

80 Oh me! this bliss can ne'er be mine
For cruel is my destiny
The radiance of her eyes may shine
But never shine on me!

Yet will I feed the soothing flame

85 Though fate this fond request deny
 And while I hear one lovely name
 In peace both live and die!

The Child of Misfortune

Alas! for the breast that swells with a sigh
That bounded with transports but mourns their decay
Unwilling to live, although fearing to die
And pining o'er raptures now fled far away!

5 Though sunshine may sometimes illumine the heart
And hope's airy calours¹ soft-shaded appear
Yet faint is the pleasure this vision imparts
The smile of content is soon chased by a tear!

Remembrance of peace can afford no relief
10 The pang of sad sorrow these musings bestow
Our prospect is clouded with shadows of grief
The past is lost pleasure—the future is woe!

The smiling of fortune may banish some sighs
And soothe to forgetfulness hearts worn by care,
15 The tear will still tremble within these sad eyes
Once beaming with love, but now fix'd in despair!

Though nature's soft beauties be sunk in decay
And blasted the pride of the once flowery plain
Their blossoms spring forth with the sun's cheering day
20 And music resounds thro' the vallies again!

The joys of my bosom no spring can renew
To me with its sunshine no rapture's return
Ye fair forms of nature a mournful adieu
I haste to repose mid the peace of the urn!

¹*calours* possible variation on *colors* gases or mis-spelling of colours

Mary

Fair shone the sun on Sugar hill¹
And sweetly breath'd the balmy morn
Low-murmuring flowed the limpid rill²
While music stole from every thorn---

5 So calm, so silent was the air
That heavenly peace hung o'er my soul
I felt her impulses so fair
Deep o'er my quiet spirit roll.

My Mary's hand I fondly press
10 I feel its' touch thrill thro' my heart
Her tears of joy, her soft distress
A still and pensive joy impart.

The sunshine darting o'er the stream
With magic hues the scene imprest
15 When Mary smiled its' radiant beam
Play'd mildly in my peaceful breast!

The music of her syren strain
Was like the dying gales of eve
It calmed the throbbing heart of pain
20 Yet made it willing still to grieve!

Fair nature's impulse swell'd her mind
To every heaven-fraught feeling true
By twilight's dewy breath refined
And notes that bade the world adieu—

25 I told my love: a mutual flame
Glow'd in my Mary's snowy breast
Her cheek was ting'd with maiden shame
Her meek eye told me she was blest!

But soon the fairy vision fled
30 Soon clouds deform'd the radiant sky
In [?vain] delight her blossoms spread
They charm awhile, then withering die!

At Summer eve the flowerets close
Beneath the whispering zephyr's breath
35 So Anna³ sunk in sweet repose
And beauteous smiled in gentle death!

The last glance of her melting eye
Beam'd pleasure on my sorrowing heart
Smiles mingling with her dying sigh
40 In rapture steep'd fell misery's dart!

Now oft I tread the dreary grove
Bedew the rustling leaves with tears
Where first she own'd her virgin love
With trembling hope's heart-thrilling fears!

45 No voice now charms my listening ear
The once-loved boughs all-joyless wave
Remembrance asks the bitter tear
My hope is in the silent grave!

1 *Sugar hill* a fictitious place, signifying childish innocence.

3 *rill* rivulet or stream.

35 *seepage* slow movement of water out of the ground

To a young lady who had said that she was not a good judge of Poetry¹

Tis true that art's unmeaning skill
No dwelling in thy heart can find
Nor senseless words thy bosom thrill
Nor critic's chains thy feelings bind.

5 Yet when the tears of rapture fall
And kindred spirits melt in love
At nature's soft and murmuring call
Within thy bosom transports move—

And thou can'st feel another's woe
10 More than the tortures of thy own
And many a holy sigh bestow
And many a sigh of magic tone!

When sever'd by the stroke of death
From the fond beam of friendship's eye
15 The mourner speaks with flutt'ring breath
With hopes and wishes soon to die—

The swell of sorrow in thy breast
Has stopp'd the words to misery due
And while thy hand that bosom breast¹
20 Thy cheek was graced with paly hue!

Oft when the pensive orb of night
Hung in the heaven serenely fair
Diffusing far a stream of light
To charm the mild and silent air,
25 Its beam within thy bosom play'd
Trembling and quivering o'er thy soul
While gales complaining in the glade
Unnoticed to thy spirit stole!

¹ Addressed to Margaret Mitchelson.

Each breeze that blows has charms for thee
30 Unknown to souls of vulgar form
Though soft thy heart, yet can'st thou see
Ev'n beauty in the roaring storm!

And thou hast feelings none can name
Emotions that thou ne'er can'st tell
35 Has felt a strange mysterious flame
A sweet unutterable swell!

Since thou art nature's darling child
And oft thy cheek the tear bedews
Since oft thy hallow'd soul runs wild
40 Mid sounds and forms and fairy hues

To thy pure heart will poesy
Still be the source of high-wrought pleasures
And in thy breast each Line will be
Possessed of new and unknown treasures!

19 Using the word 'pressed' here rather than repeating 'breast' would make more sense

Lines written at Bothwell Castle

The ruins of 13th-century Bothwell Castle, sit on the banks of the River Clyde. The imposing ruins were the subject of several poems in the period. MG Lewis included 'Bothwell's Bonny Jane' in *Tales of Wonder* (1805), Walter Scott wrote 'Bothwell Castle' (*The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott ... Complete in One Volume with Introductions and Notes* (1841)). Wordsworth's 'Bothwell Castle' appeared as number XVIII in *Yarrow Revisited, and other Poems*, in *The Poetical Works* (1849-1850). Wilson and Margaret Mitchelson (the 'Maid of Dychmont' after Dechmont Hill overlooking the castle) often walked in the countryside surrounding Bothwell.

The moon shone mildly on the stream
Its radiance trembling mid the trees
Which waving through the dusky eve
Shook to the whispering breeze!

5 O'er antique Bothwell's hoary towers
Hung the pale stream of mellow light
Or flashing on the ruined walls
Broke on the gloom of night.

In solemn silence nature lay
10 No jarring sounds disturbed the glade
The noise of waters murmuring on
Enchanting music made.

The stars that glittered on the sky
The scarce-heard gales that sadly blew
15 With melancholy cadence swelled
Then bade the world adieu!

Spread their wild magic o'er my heart
And spoke within my tranquil eye,
Till strangely-mingled feelings rose
20 One sad and heavenly sigh!

I felt the scene within my soul
Its dying sounds, its varying hue,
The quivering lustre of the moon
The sky of mildest blue!

25 I thought of one, my hope my joy,

Whose soul was pure as airs from heav'n
To the soft anguish of whose eye
The light of love was given!

When gazing on the twilight scene
30 With meek reflected tints imprest,
Her pensive image deeply sunk
Like music in my breast.

Her voice breathed on each mournful gale,
The star that decked the evening sky
35 Shining thro' drops of glittering dew
Beamed like her tearful eye.

The form was airy fancy's child
The offspring of a musing dream,
But ne'er did eye of living mould
40 Glow with a brighter beam.

The words she spoke, were fancied sounds
Deluding the enraptured ear,
But sweeter words from nature's lips
No lover e'er shall hear!

45 Light as the twilight gale her form,
Seemed in the balmy air to float,
And more delightful was its grace
When fading far remote.

The warm touch of her trembling hand
50 Was coinage of a lover's brain,
Yet will no hand of purer snow
E'er thrill my heart again.

My vows were paid to empty air
Unheard the throbbing of my breath,
55 Yet will their fetters bind my soul

Till my eyes close in death.

The twinkling lights of silent heaven

The moon that sweetly beam'd above

The breeze that fanned my lonely brow

60 Were witness to my love.

The scene that heard my vow of faith

Will aye be hallowed ground to me

And Bothwell's hoary ruin fill

My soul with ecstasy!

Lines written at Cruikstone Castle shortly after being there with a young lady

Cruikstone or Crookston Castle is situated in Pollock, a suburb of Glasgow, not far from the Royal Burgh of Paisley, where Wilson was born. Lord Darnley, the husband of Mary, Queen of Scots, owned the castle. It was a frequent refuge from court life for the Queen. Being close to Glasgow, it seems that Wilson walked here with Margaret Mitchelson. The castle by then was owned by Sir John Maxwell of Pollock, a contemporary of Wilson and a fellow pupil and fishing partner at Mount Pleasant. The poem has an immediacy and fervency that suggests that it was written as a response to a specific occasion, at a central moment in the love affair. He sets his relationship with Margaret against the tragic union of Mary Stuart and Lord Darnley, as they wander in the ruins.

Hail spirits of these wild retreats
Now hoary with the snows of time!
Or robed in nature's breathing sweets
Or wandering o'er her cliffs sublime!

5 O'er my deep-musing bosom fling
The purest balsam¹ of thy shrine
And mingling with the hues of spring
Let all thy holy beauties shine!

If 'long the streamlet's margin green
10 My wandering feet at noontide stray
Or mingling mid the ruin'd scene
I mark these ancient towers decay,

Let every impulse from thy [?T...illeg]
Partake of nature's sacred fire
15 Nor let this paradise in vain
The feelings of my soul inspire!

Wide o'er the heaven the star of day
Reflects a stream of splendid light
Careering mid his flaming way
20 In omnipresent grandeur bright.

Beneath his rays the waters gleam
His radiance trembling on their breast,
Yet every tree and mountain seem
With undulating light imprest.

25 The feather[?ed] songster's dulcet note
Mixed with the wildly-swelling gale
In fairy cadence slowly float
Along the deep-sequestered vale.

And oft to make the scene more wild
30 The rook hoarse-cawing o'er my head
Sails round the tow'r majestic piled
With moveless pinions widely-spread!

The ruined walls with moss o'ergrown
Rear high their pomp in reverend pride
35 While wild-flowers by their genius sown
Bloom hanging on this hoary side.

Huge fragments of the falling tower
The lovely vale beneath bestrew,
Memorials of a better hour!
40 Deep-mark'd with time's corrosive hue!

Upon these fragments of the pile
The unassuming shrub appears
Bright-glancing to the morning's smile
The dewy lustre of its' tears.

45 Here oft the pensive linnnet sings
While lingering near its little nest
Preparing soon to stretch its wings
The dew-drop glittering on its breast.

The music of its artless song
50 A better lesson may impart
Than words from Wisdom's fluent tongue
That stop before they reach the heart.

This seems a spot where one might live

And pity all the world beside
55 Or rather, not one thought would give
To scenes where wealth and care abide.

The spirit of the breathing balm
Would flow thro' every throbbing vein
The eloquence of silent calm
60 Refine and purify the brain.

The day-star's all pervading light
Would elevate the swelling soul,
And the mild empress of the night
The tide of pensive feeling roll.

[... stanza del - illeg]

65 Oft when the silent world of night
Sacred to passion's soothing fire,
Shining thro' flakes of mellow light
Bade lovers to these glens retire;

Charmed by the sound of murmuring streams
70 And breezy tones that swept the glade,
And the moon's pale and quivering beams
That mildly o'er the waters played,

Amid these deep'ning dells so wild
Where frowns the rock in grandeur rude,
75 In solemn majesty up-piled
The hallowed haunts of solitude!

[...stanza del - illeg]

The moonbeam glancing through the dell
Soft on her lovely visage played,
80 While her cheeks blush and bosom's swell
The hopes and fears of love betray'd!

The beauteous lustre of her² eye
Trembles in Darnley's³ eager breast,
And the sweet music of her sigh
85 Sunk in his spirit deep imprest!

The past was a forgotten dream
The future what could never be,
To him, time's limits seem
An endless now of ecstasy!

90 May every heart of feeling mould
Indulge in such-high throbbing love,
May every word by passion told,
Such wild and kindred transports move!

But may no tear of grief succeed
95 The sigh poured forth in amorous languish,
And may the feeling heart ne'er bleed
Torn with the stings of madd'ning anguish.

And oh! let every tender heart
Pronounce a mild and gentle doom,
100 On her⁴ whose beauteous mortal part
Now moulders in the silent tomb.

Could vengeance light his demon fire
Within the soft blue of her eye?
Or change into the burst of ire
105 The music of her breathing sigh?

If every heart were mild as thine,
Margaret⁵, fair nature's darling child,
In every eye did radiance shine
So sweetly-sad, serenely-mild!

110 From obloquy's⁶ dark gloomy cell

An injured Queen we might yet save,
While justice big with feeling's swell
Would drop a tear upon her grave—

Then would not thought of cruel mood
115 E'er rise within this sacred scene,
To break the charm of solitude,
And dim the radiance of the green!

Though bright the sky and fair the scene
That bursts upon my charmed view,
120 The memory of what has been
Imparts a finer softer hue!

The clouds along the sky that float
Through light as pure as pity's tear
The tones that in the glen remote
125 Come faintly on the listening ear!

Clear to my memory convey
The sight of pleasures that are gone
The image of a blissful day
For ever lost, too swiftly flown!

130 With Marg'ret on that happy hour
I roamed along this holy dell
Reclining near the ruin'd tower
Felt many a pleasing nameless swell!

Her voice is sweet as Nature's breath
135 Her eye like morning's earliest ray
When tones alluring in their death
Rule o'er the glade with lulling sway!

When blending with the passing gale
That voice breathed forth its' sweetest sound
140 Filling with ecstasy the vale

And all the balmy air around!

Nature a stronger charm possess
That ever thrilled my heart before,
And deep into my heaving breast

145 Infused a more delightful store!

The stilly tone and sunny hue
When trembling in her pensive mind
Came to my ear and musing view
With every harsher shade refined!

150 The hoary ruin frowning near
Made our souls exquisite sad
While steadfast hope and mingled fear
Made the indulging spirit glad!

We spoke of life beyond the grave
155 Of worlds unseen by human eye
Where floods of endless radiance lave
The spirit never doom'd to die!

Methought an angel from her sphere
Had dropt to whisper words of peace
160 To tell of worlds unheard of here
When time and space extinguished cease!

When gazing on her pensive face
And listening to her gentle breath
So near a soul of angel grace
165 How could I think of endless death?

That eye may lose its sparkling light
That voice its' soft and mellow tone
The beauteous bud disease may blight
Its' fragrance lost, its' magic flown!

170 But can that spirit e'er decay
That seems removed from all on earth?
Or cease to shine that holy ray
To which heaven only could give birth?

Her words were eloquent to speak
175 Of sacred joys beyond the grave—
While hope illumed her lovely cheek
Her ebon tresses lightly wave!

Yet though her words sunk in my heart
And strengthened every hope of heaven
180 Did to my soul a joy impart
Like the sweet voice of balmy even,

I needed not while she was there
Such solace to my musing mind,
Her spirit beaming pure and fair
185 By nature's plastic hand refin'd,

Like a bright star mid evening gloom
That lights the traveller on his way
Pointed to realms beyond the tomb
The splendour of eternal day!

190 And oh! how sweet in heaven above
To meet with her array'd in light
To kindle with an angel's love
And dwell for ever within her sight!

Yes Marg'ret much I owe to thee!
195 More than this tongue can ever tell
The thrill of high-born ecstasy
The spirit's wild mysterious swell!

Whene'er unhallow'd thoughts intrude
And who from thoughts like these are free?

200 Amid the haunts of solitude
My spirit fondly turns to thee!

Then like some spirit's fairy wand
That cures the breast by passion tore
Quick does the thought of thy soft hand

205 The quiet of my soul restore!

The language of the ancient sage
My virtue clothe in fairest dress
And on the time-defying page
[?His] musing spirit deep impress.

210 But thou can'st show the living mind
Where virtue keeps her sapphire throne
More exquisitely-bright refined
Than ancient sage has ever known.

Who on the fair expanse of sky
215 Can always keep his charmed view,
Where snow-white clouds reposing lie
Mid boundless fields of mildest blue,

And not within his bosom feel
A purer and a sweeter glow
220 Such thoughts as he can ne'er reveal
A mingled thrill of joy and woe?

Yet can the glorious hues of heaven
No stronger bliss to me impart,
Than soft tones to thy language given
225 And the meek lustre of thy heart!

Though fabling poets still have sung
Of feelings [that they did not know]⁷,
And music whispered from their tongue
Of pleasing though of feigned woe,

230 Ne'er shall I pour into thy ear
Feelings that never charmed my heart
Nor shalt thou be condemned to hear
The voice of flattery's hateful art!

Yet sure the voice of gratitude
235 In still small accents aye may rise
The pleasing flow of saddest mood
That came in sorrow from thy eyes!

Full many an hour of bliss with thee
Have flown unnoticed o'er my head
240 And thro' both mirth and sympathy
By thee have I been often led!

When distant far from thee I roam
A stranger on another shore
Ah! many a sigh will wander home
245 To Albion's⁶ towering cliffs so hoar!

Nor will I e'er forget that day
By Cruikstone's wildly-ruin'd wall,
That to my mind when far away
Will many a pleasing thought recall!

250 A solitary tear may flow
And fond remembrance mournful be
Yet will her burning lamp bestow
A sad and blissful glimpse of thee!

⁶ *balsam* a plant commonly found on the banks of streams traditionally used for its healing properties.

⁸² Mary, Queen of Scots.

⁸³ *Darnley* Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, Mary, Queen of Scots husband from 1565-1567.

¹⁰⁰ Mary, Queen of Scots.

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Mitchelson.

¹¹⁰ *obloquy* calumny, slander. Mary, Queen of Scots reputation had suffered a downturn in recent Scottish History.

²²⁷ In the MS version there is a deletion here: [~~to their breasts unknown~~].

²²⁵ *Albion* an archaic term for Britain. From the latin for white, an allusion to the chalk cliffs of Dover.

Lines Written in Kenmore Hermitage

Wilson appears to be conflating Kenmore, the village at the head of Loch Tay and The Hermitage, at Dunkeld, a folly built for the Duke of Atholl in the eighteenth-century, built above a waterfall on the River Braan. Both are spectacular parts of Scotland, and perfectly fit the idealised sylvan sanctuary which Wilson describes in the poem. The poem opens in irregular Pindaric ode form (the most famous example is Thomas Gray's 'The Progress of Poesy'), which uses stanzas of different line lengths, reflecting the changes of mood in the poem. There are echoes too, of Thomson's *Seasons* (see note).

Come goddess of the pensive eye
With paly cheeks and flowing hair,
While the soft zephyr murmurs bye
And fragrance scents the dewy air!
5 Shed thy wild magic o'er my musing mind
By glimmering twilights dewy breath refined,
And while slow-fading mid the grove remote
The dying tones of some lone warbler float,
Melting so gradual on the ear
10 That the rapt soul strives still to hear,
The mildly-whispering strain
Recalled to life again,
The melancholy clad in simple stole
Sink sweet as music on my soul
15 That while the notes bid this vain world adieu
A sadly-soothing tear my cheek may soft bedew!

The mournful whisper of the stream
Blends with the slowly-passing gale,
While the pale moon with silvery beam
20 Flings its' mild radiance o'er the dale!
And sparkling stars their mellow lustre dart
With gentle influence o'er the fluttering heart!
Through waving boughs flashes the varying sheen
Spreading its colours o'er the solemn scene!
25 While wildly through the deep'ning dell
Strange fairy strains at distance swell
As from th'Eolian lyre!
That charm as they expire!
What forms celestial bliss the sight
30 Glide scarce-seen thro' the shades of night

And o'er the heart with power resistless throw
Thy impulses, O melancholy, tinged with woe!

Oh pleasing power I feel thy sway!
Meek as the balmy breath of heaven,
35 When every vestige of the day
Has sunk beneath the gloom of even!
The busy hum of worldly cares and fear
In distant sounds comes faintly on my ear,
While silence issuing from her dripping cave
40 Reigns through the night deep, solemn as the grave!
Who would destroy the blissful dream
Or cloud fair fancy's radiant beam,
That sheds a trembling light
On the enraptured sight
45 Till all the world seem to decay
And earthly wishes melt away
And o'er the soul a holy feeling reigns
The source of pensive joy, the friend of pleasing pains!

'Tis then that nature's solemn stole,
50 And feelings born of prospects rude
With rapture fill the high-wrought soul
Most sweetly-sad mid solitude!
During the calm and lonely hour of even
We leave the earth and soar aloft to heaven,
55 'Tis then that holy truths divinely sung
Breathe on the soul and tremble on the tongue,
And though our mournful spirits grieve
Touched by the sympathy of eve,
Yet sorrow in the breast
60 Pours the sweet balm of rest
Till burning-soft our glowing eye
Glances athwart the starry sky,
While gently falls on every throbbing vein
A balmy shower of pleasure born on gales of woe!

65 O melancholy by thy power
 Our souls rest mid the domes of heaven,
 While wandering thro' the gloomy bower
 We feed that hope to mortals given!
 Born on the viewless winds we seek the skies
 70 Where radiant glories strike our aching eyes,
 And soaring high thro' Ether's² milky way
 Burst with transport on eternal day!
 Again we meet a parents eye
 No more to weep, to part, to die,
 75 But rapt with heav'nly joy
 Where grief will ne'er annoy,
 In bliss we join the angel choir
 And strike with hallow'd hand the lyre,
 These are thy trains of thought, O melancholy
 80 To the pure soul, most sad, most sweet, most holy!

 Yes! at that still and lonely hour
 When tuning-wild his warbling throat,
 The pensive night-bird loves to pour
 In soothing strains his dying note!
 85 By hope's expanded pinions born on high
 We rise to mansions built amid the sky,
 And mingling with the angels' choral strain
 Float, light as air, in God's eternal train!
 There no salt tear nor bursting sigh
 90 Shall heave the breast, or dim the eye,
 But rapture's kindling fire
 The holy soul inspire,
 With bursting streams of radiant light
 Enlarge the fondly-gazing sight,
 95 And flashing-bright thro' heaven's eternal dome
 Fling life and burning transport o'er the opening tomb!

 Ye pleasing scenes that fondly roll
 Extatic feeling's powerful swell
 With downy pinions³ o'er the soul,

100 And lure us to the hermit's cell,
Where musing meditation sits alone
Mid silence pouring forth her plaintive moan,
Who has not felt your spirit-stirring sway
When every earthly impulse dies away,
105 And soft as music's breathing strain
That calms the throbbing heart of pain?
Who would these joys forgo
The luxury of woe,
Wipe the pure tear from feeling's eye
110 And sternly hush the rising sigh?
In wanton pleasure's luring smiles
Her balmy breath and syren⁴ wiles?
Faint is the joy her melting eyes bestow!
And sure the greatest transport is the thrill of woe!
115 Yes! I have known a father's smile
Who watched my steps with kindly care
That joyed each suffering to beguile
And every evening breathed the prayer
That gracious heaven would bless my infant head
120 And with the flower of peace my couch o'erspread!
My feet in virtue's blooming garden guide
And teach me still in innocence to glide!
And I have seen a sister's face
Arrayed in melancholy grace,
125 Where joy and sorrow joined
Bespoke the feeling mind,
Have seen the tear bedim her eye
Her snowy bosom heave the sigh,
When pity told in mournful strains
130 Of wants and woes and endless pains!
In tearful joy I blessed the heavenly sign
"Oh God! that every heart were innocent as thine"
But swift the blissful moment fled!
Those eyes are closed, those accents still,
135 A Father moulders with the dead,
That used my breast with joy to fill!

While every rosy spring that rolls away
 Sees various verdure grace his heedless clay!
 Thou too my sister art for ever gone!
 140 Thy cheek's sweet bloom and breathing beauty flown!
 Scarce had a father got thy tear
 Till thou didst grace an early bier,
 Like a too beauteous flower
 Beneath a cruel shower!
 145 When laid into the silent grave
 Where now the lonely rank weeds wave,
 Unconscious of the throbbing pain
 That stung thy brother's frenzied brain,
 For thee loud swelled the anguish-speaking sigh—
 150 "O gracious God! that infant innocence should die!"
 But meditation by thy power
 Remembrance e'en of deepest woe,
 In feeling's calm and silent hour,
 Can rapture's thrilling throb bestow!
 155 Then pleasure's wrapt in dark oblivion's night
 Return all-blooming on the charmed sight,
 I see a father's transport-beaming eye
 Bright as the star that lights the evening sky,
 A sister fair in youthful bloom
 160 Breaks from the slumbers of the tomb,
 While heaven on her cheek
 In silence seems to speak,
 Her angel voice born on the air,
 Drowns every impulse of despair,
 165 Soothes my soul to sweetest rest
 Trembles in my fluttering breast,
 And while her tongue the bliss of heaven reveals
 What sad delightful joy the pensive spirit feels.

 Thou woody vale and lonely dell⁵
 170 Thou [?vivid] arch and moss-gown cell,
 Thou smoothly flowing glassy stream
 That silently reflects the beam

Of evening's star; thou whisp'ring breeze
That sobbest wild among the trees,
175 Thou songster sweet that lingering near
Breathed thy spirit in my ear,
Thou waterfall whose distant sound
Seems to make silence more profound,
Ye rocks majestic, rude and hoar,
180 Who oft have heard the sullen roar
Of wintry floods descending fast
Responsive to the furious blast;
Ye reverend oaks whose branches wide⁶
Fling their long shadow o'er the lide,
185 Whose heaven-aspiring top appears
Clothed in the pomp of countless years;
Ye yawning caverns dark and deep,
Within the bosom of the steep
Where oft when Sol's⁷ bright fires decay
190 The little elves and fairies stray
With glittering targe⁸ and golden lance
To thread the wheeling mazy dance;
Ye coral cells beneath the wave
Where water-nymphs their beauties lave⁹,
195 Whence issuing soft at fall of night
As the moon shines most wildly-bright
Strange tones of swelling cadence rise
To meet the murmurs of the skies;
Waked at music's holiest spring
200 Soothing to rest your languid king¹⁰!
Alas from you this soul must sever!
At least for long, perhaps for ever!
Yet will these impulses so calm
That steep my soul in breathing balm,
205 And make the thoughtful spirit holy
By the sweet touch of melancholy,
Deep-sunken in my musing breast
In living character imprest,
Oft tell of these wild retreats

210 This sacred haunt of softest sweets;
And oft mid pleasure's noisy crew
Reflection's eye will turn to you,
And every vicious swell assuage
By sight of *Kenmore Hermitage!*

38 *Eolian lyre* the Aeolian harp, a stringed instrument hung in trees to produce a musical sound.

71 *Ether* the heavens.

99 *pinions* wings.

112 *syren* siren; bewitching.

169 cf from line 173 for sub-Miltonic elevated language lines 469ff in 'Summer', Thomson's *The Seasons*.

183 see *above*.

189 *Sol* the sun.

191 *targe* shield or buckler.

194 *lave* wash or bathe.

200 *king* refers to the sun or Sol (line 189).

Lines written by Moonlight

The title of this poem in the contents page is 'Lines written at Evening' (see note page 9). The melancholic poet writing under moonlight is a familiar topos in eighteenth-century poetry as in Thomas Campbell's 'Moonlight'¹ and Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard'².

And can this scene of beauty e'er decay!
Fade on the vision and with silent pace
Forsake the world, till every thing around
Be wrapt in dark impenetrable shade!
5 Thou orb of night whose soft and mellow beam
 With trembling lustre bathes the starry sky
 In light ineffable, diffusing far
 A magic charm to thrill the raptured soul,
 At one time seen in bright unclouded pomp
10 Pouring a flood of liquid radiance!
 And now retired beneath a snowy cloud
 More lovely to the eye because half-seen!
 Beneath thy ray oh I could sit for ever,
 With pity muse upon this idle world
15 Converse in fancy with some holy soul
 Of nature's finest mould—and soothe my heart
 With the sweet hope of immortality!

Oh! that my soul were tranquil as the sky
Through which thou hold'st thy way! pure as the light
20 Thou pourest on a slumb'ring world, that makes
 The realm of heaven to seem so wondrous fair,
 That the charmed spirit by its influence
 Becomes more like the mind of deity!
 Each flake¹ of light that falls upon the earth
25 Or plays upon the visage of the sky
 Comes far into my heart and shows its form
 Alas! too earthly for a scene like this!

How sad and solemn is this evening scene!
Both far and near a lulling sound is heard

¹ Thomas Campbell, *The Complete Poetical Works* (1907), 308.

² Thomas Gray, *The Poems* (1969), 117.

30 Of rustling trees, waved by the whispering gale
While to their sound of fairy melody
Accords the rivulets faint mournful tone

By distance made most truly exquisite!
There seems a spirit in the breathing air,
35 That steals unnoticed to the pensive heart
And stamps the lovely image of itself
In living character so deep imprest
That the mind's eye turned always inwardly
Feasts on the features of its own formation!

30 Such is the magic used by beauteous nature
To purify from every grosser thought,
The cleansed spirits of her votaries!
She flashes bright across their mental view
The starry firmament and all its host
35 Of suns and moons and planets far remote
Whose light has never visited this earth
But fills an universe by us unknown
With pure offulgence², floating round the throne
Of the omniscient, everlasting one
40 Whose great, pervading, universal spirit
Breathes in all things, our God, our deity!

Ye northern lights whose wide-diffusing sheen,
Stretched in long lines across the azure vault
Of shining heaven! Much my spirit longs
45 To scan the wondrous essence of your being!
Are ye the radiant fire-cemented thrones
Of blessed angels sailing thro' the skies
In all the blaze of immortality,
And in the kindness of enlarged souls
50 Pouring upon the much-admiring world
The heavenly grandeur of their habitation!?
Or are ye countless myriads of stars
Hung higher in the vast expanse of space

Than Newton's soul³ or Galileo's tube⁴
55 Have ever taught our bosoms to aspire!
Blazing in such unintermitted light
That through the boundless regions of the air
Your mingling rays seem one vast glittering flood,
Of trembling radiance, too magnificent
60 For mortal beings long to contemplate!
Such are the kindling thoughts that fill the soul
At evening's sweet and silence-breathing hour
With high-wrought ecstasy! Such are the thoughts
That Plato in his philosophic mind
65 Delighted to revolve, e'er yet the sun
Of science had attained meridian⁵ lustre
Or mankind learned to lift their hoping souls
High as the milky way! And such the thoughts
That Wordsworth bard and darling child of nature
70 Has felt within his captivated soul
And flashed upon the fond-admiring heart
Clothed in the garb of heavenly poesy!

If mid a scene so fair we turn our minds
From heaven's bright concave, to this humble earth
75 This spot so mean, so insignificant!
We think at least of those whose holy souls
Accord with such profusion of delight!
If in the musings of our pensive heart
The graceful form of female elegance
80 Come like the dying tones of melody,
With soul-subduing smiles and breathing sighs
Fraught⁶ with the magic eloquence of nature,
The power of love with stronger majesty
Sits on his throne and scatters round his gifts
85 With such a winning and enslaving grace
That soon the charmed spirits melts away
In such a flood of heavenly ecstasy
As makes the past to seem a fading dream
Of feeble happiness!

90 Now darker shadows gather round my head!
Still is the beetle's drowsy heedless hum!
And e'en the boding owl retires to rest⁷
To fit his hollow melancholy moan
To hail the rising morn! darkness adieu!

95 For at thy rude approach the stars have fled
And all the glowing beauties of the night!

24 *flake* shard.

38 *effulgent* shining forth brilliantly; resplendent.

54 Issac Newton, espoused unorthodox theological views and believed the Trinity to be a religious heresy. He published *The Mathematical Principles of Philosophy*, his masterwork on the theory of universal gravitation, fluids and mechanics.

54 Galileo is credited with having developed the first telescope, which he presented to the Venetian senate in 1609.

66 *meridian* noon.

82 *fraught* attended by.

92 *cf* Thomas Gray's 'Elegy written in a Country Churchyard', 7-10:

Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;
Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain.

The address of Prince Charles to his army before the battle of Culloden¹

In April 1746, the Battle of Culloden was the final defeat of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, signalling the end of the Jacobite uprising of 1745. Having been forced into retreat by the English army under the Duke of Cumberland, but still hoping for reinforcements from France, Charles resolved to oppose the Hanoverian advance in pitched battle on Culloden Moor. The battle was over in an hour, the Jacobite army routed and the Prince forced to flee.

Let the trumpet be sounded, the standard unfurl'd
And brandished each warrior's blade
Let us flash on the eye of a wondering-world
A phalanx¹ for freedom array'd.

5 Remember those deeds that emblay² on your name
At Falkirk³ the field where in triumph you stood
When amid the dim smoke and the merciless flame
The bold Suthron⁴ fell, or fled covered with shame
O'er mountains dissolv'd with blood.

10 Remember your homes mid those regions of peace
Where the foot of oppression ne'er trod
Till the wide-spreading conquests of tyranny cease
Vow ne'er to behold that abode!

Let your cannon loud-thund'ring mid their array
15 As rapid as light'ning mortality spread
Let ruin and havoc reign lords of the day
Till their wasted battallions like snow melt away
and the living scarce equal the dead!

To the combat advance!—to conquer or die
20 Let the banners of liberty wave
Let them float in the wind or in blood let them lie
A glorious shroud to the brave!

The trumpet has sounded, rush on to the fight
Like the tempest that sweeps o'er you mountains of snow
25 Destruction will frown on the fall of the night
And when morning appears, there will burst on your sight

¹ see page 89 headnote.

The pride of oppression laid low!

4 *phalanx* a formation of infantry carrying overlapping shields and long spears.

5 *emblay* adorn.

6 The Battle of Falkirk. See page 103, line 153*n*.

8 *Suthron* English.

—Loveliness

**Needs not the foreign aid of ornament
But is when unadorn'd, adorn'd the most—¹**

The thoughts from Shakespeare

Wilson here conflates a theme from Thomson's *The Seasons* and the 'Barge speech' from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which Enobarbus regales Agrippa and Maecenas with Cleopatra's unsurpassed beauty.

Who to the pomp of burnish'd gold¹
With gilt would add a brighter hue
Or strive to clothe in finer mould
The diamond sparkling to the view?

5 Can all the boasted power of art
Refine the lily's spotless snow
Or paint a brighter shade impart
To flowers that in the valley blow?

Can aught² increase the sweet perfume
10 That rows of purple violets shed
Or add a richer, milder bloom
When breathing on their balmy bed?

Can aught bestow a smoother face
To ice that sleeps upon the stream
15 Or give more melancholy grace
To the moon's soft-reflected beam?

The arch that spans the glittering sky
Adorn'd with nature's varying hue
In magic colours meets the eye
20 Through glancing clouds of mellow dew—

¹ James Thomson, *The Seasons*, 'Autumn', 204-6:
...for loveliness
Needs not the foreign aid of ornament,
But is when unadorned adorned the most.

Wilson returns to the story of Lavinia and Palemon, where Thomson is describing the heroine's natural beauty.

Say could the pencil's finest line
Give beauty to this radiant bow
Or match those lovely tints that shine
Reflected on the mountain's brow?

25 Who with a taper would adorn
The sun in pomp meridian³ bright
Or hold unto the eye of morn
The glimmering of a waxen light?

Then Jessy⁴, scorn to grace thy frame

30 With the vain aid of gaudy art
For nature's magic love will claim
And sink like music in my heart.

1 cf Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2, 201-4:
The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Burned on the water; the poop was beaten gold;
Purpled the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them. (Arden)

11 *aught* anything.

26 *meridian* midday (lit).

29 see page 104n.

Petition of the Mearn's Muir

As a boy, Wilson lived at Mount Pleasant with the Rev George McLatchie the minister of Mearnskirik. Wilson writes about the time he spent here in his 'Recreations of Christopher North'; the descriptions of his boyhood which appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*. From these essays we learn much about the characters, customs and countryside of Newton Mearns. The Mearn's Muir is the bleak, low rolling moorland that was the focal point of local gatherings¹ and far into which the young Wilson walked to fish and shoot. McLatchie was responsible for completing the entry for the Parish of Mearns in the *Statistical Account of Scotland 1791-1799*². Of the Mearns Muir he writes:

The commony belonging to the heritors is about 1600 acres in extent. It is always covered with the most beautiful verdure, and produces very good grass and clover, without any heath or bent...there are three lochs, well stocked with fish.

In his successful narrative poem *The Convict* published in 1816, Wilson includes a song about the old Castle of Mearns Muir³. In the *Statistical Account* McLatchie writes:

'It is a large square tower, situated on a rocky eminence, and commanding an extensive and beautiful prospect'.

Dark is the sky that shrouds my hills
And cold the blast that sweeps their brow
And noisy are the moorland rills!
That murmur hoarse thro' wreathes of snow!

5 Here nature wears her poorest stole
And meets all-bleak the traveller's eye
Here oft the echoing thunders roll
And light'nings flash along the sky—

No tree affords its sheltering shade
10 From burning heat or piercing cold
No flowers in summer's pride array'd
Show to the sun their leaves of gold!

Seldom the balmy zephyrs breathe
Around my rocks of giant height
15 Or whisper o'er the gloomy heath
To hail the dewy fall of night—

¹ 'May Day': *Works*, vol 2, 1-37.

² Sir John Sinclair ed., *The Statistical Account of Scotland 1791-1799*, vol 7, Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire, (Edinburgh 1791-99) 74.

³ John Wilson, *The Convict*, Part I: scene ii, 5-44. Published in 'The Poems' (Edinburgh 1825).

When every vestige of the day
Has bid the darken'd world adieu
And the moon's pale yellow ray
20 Shines mild thro' clouds of azure hue—

The beauteous stream of trembling light
Behind thick vapours oft retires
And leaves the empire of the night
Depriv'd of all her heavenly fires!

25 Yet traveller view with kindly eyes
The prospect of my bleak domains
The darkness of my changeful skies
My snowy hills and rushy plains!

The spot where all is peace revere
30 Where guilt and misery never dwell
With holy musing linger near
Nor haste to bid the scene farewell—

To those who live these hills among
This wild a paradise appears
35 And still the charm becomes more strong
From infancy till hoary years—

In early life I see them stray
Free as the light wings of the gale
And when life's lingering fires decay
40 They die within their native vale—

Nor vainly think that nature's power
Ne'er warms their breast with purest fire
Nor kindling rapture's blissful hour
The feelings of their breasts inspire—

45 Here nature reigns despising art
(The senseless show of idiot grace)

Steals soft into the open heart
 And speaks within the peasants' face—

Full oft I hear the artless vow
 50 Breathed fondly in the raptur'd ear
 While maiden blushes tinge the brow
 And silent drops the pensive tear—

In some deep glen at close of day
 Sighs of warm transport oft arise
 55 And ardent loves soul-beaming sway
 Bright glows within their melting eyes.

Then traveller think not that time lost
 Nor void of lessons to the mind
 When my bleak plains and hills you cross
 60 Or on some mossy seat reclined!

If thou art one in active life
 Pursuing honor's high career
 Think that the fiends of noise and strife
 Have never blown their clarion² here—

65 If thou art one of martial soul
 The fiery son of rugged war—
 —My hills ne'er heard artillery roll
 Nor shook with murder's iron car³—

If thou art nature's darling childe⁴
 70 And view her with a poet's eye
 Some impulse from a trackless wild
 May charm thy bosom e'er it die—

Then traveller whoe'er thou be
 That passest bye in solitude,
 75 Bleak are my hills yet mayest thou see
 Much beauty in a scene so rude!

3 *rills* small brook; rivulet.

64 *clarion* shrill sound; trumpet call.

68 *cf* Thomas Campbell, *The Pleasures of Hope*, I, 35-36:

When murder bared his arm, and rampant War
Yoked the red dragons of her iron car;

69 *cf* Robert Burns, "The Lass o' Ballochmyle", 19-22:

When roving thro' the garden gay,
Or wand'ring in the lonely wild;
But woman, Nature's darling child—
There all her charms she does compile!

Lines written in a Glen during a Moonlight Evening¹

This opens the personal colloquy with Margaret on the intense emotions that passed between her and Wilson. He attempts to fuse the internal and external experience of the beauty of natural surroundings and the melancholy he subsequently feels for their love.

- If nature to thy mind impart
A portion of her purest fire,
Reign o'er each feeling of the heart
And hallow every fond desire—
- 5 Then view these lines with musing eye
Think on the feelings they contain
And if thy bosom heave one sigh
Oh hallowed be the pleasing pain!
- 10 Say, canst thou feel a twilight scene
Those sorrows sprung from pensive eve
When ev'n the dew that wets the green
Prevails upon the soul to grieve!
- 15 Has evening's soft and mellow star
E'er flung its' magic thro' thy breast
Or the sun shining from afar
When silent sinking in the west!
- 20 The murmuring breezes as they blow
And trees wild-waving in the glade
Sing a sweet song of melting woe
And tinge the mind with sorrows shade—
- We wish that hour to last for ever
And think its transports ne'er can die
Turn from the thought we e'er must sever
And view no more the dusky sky—
- 25 We sit and muse and sigh and smile

¹ see page 182 *headnote*. In the list of contents this poem is listed as 'Lines written in a Glen by Moonlight'.

While grief and rapture strangely blend
While fairy sounds all care beguile
And pleasures from the heav'ns descend.

And if the power of love intrude
30 To thrill the soul with trembling light
Oh! doubly sweet is solitude
The lonely silence of the night!

Then nature's shape and varying hue
Breathe magic stronger than their own
35 Then softer is the falling dew
More exquisite each dying tone!

Look how the moonbeam shines so pale
So radiant every dewy star,
So sweetly sad each balmy gale
40 Swelling like music from afar!

Why is the spirit not more holy
And purer every feeling there
This thought awakens melancholy
Reproach is in the silent air!

45 Since not so heavenly as the sky
Array'd in mild and paly gold
Our souls oft heave the hoping sigh
And wish they were of purer mould!

When the fair vault of heav'n appears
50 Bathed in a stream of liquid light
Distilling soft a shower of tears
The sacred treasures of the night—

Though this blest scene delight reveal
Unmingled with the throb of sorrow
55 Yet those emotions some can feel

Their magic from our frailties borrow

The moon is shining in the heav'n
A bright and holy lustre lending
The hour to breathing tones is giv'n
60 In pure refining union blending!

My spirit sleeps in soothing rest
Calm mid a lonely dell I lie
Yet ev'n by nature's charms opprest
This heart oft flutters with a sigh---

65 The cause of this dost thou enquire
Perchance it seems most strange to thee
If nature's power thy soul inspire
Thou wilt no reason ask from me!

Answer

As a direct response to the previous poem 'Lines written in a Glen during a Moonlight Evening' the only written record we have from Margaret Mitchelson¹. In the opening line, Margaret sustains the imagery from Wilson's poem. These poems, like those that follow, seem to suggest an unhappy acceptance of their imminent parting.

If Nature's power my soul inspire
Why Wilson dost thou ask of me,
Can'st thou believe that holy fire
With partial gift is given thee?

5 That heavenly spark of purest light
Has spread its' influence o'er my soul,
And sounds mid silence of the night
In lowly murmurs softly stole.

Like thee, I then have felt my mind
10 Too earthly for a scene so fair
Too much wrapt up in humankind
To taste of bliss devoid of care!

But when bereft of earthly mould
And purified by heav'nly light
15 Our spirits fled to bliss untold
Shall taste and feel each pure delight!

Then ask not why our spirits soar
Beyond the powers to us are given,
20 Content while here we'll seek no more
*But look for bliss supreme in heav'n!

*The above beautiful and simple lines were written by a young Lady, of the delicacy of whose feelings they are a more convincing proof, than anything I could say.—J.W

¹ see page 9.

The Feelings of Love

This is one of the most passionate of the love poems, expressing a palpable sense of frustration and sexual desire, describing the physical effect of love on the young man. Wilson is explicit about his feelings for Margaret and the poem depicts the despair he feels at ultimately having his intimate attentions refused by the older woman.

- Of burning love's delusive flame
O let the peaceful youth beware,
Whene'er the bosom feels its power
No quiet lingers there!
- 5 Then fame's bright vision fades away
And heav'n-born wisdom prostrate lies
While one fair being robed in light
Still floats before his eyes!
- Involv'd in dreams of airy joy
10 He hangs enraptur'd o'er her form
No thoughts by cautious prudence fram'd
The cloudless scene deform!
- The smile with winning magic fraught
The eye where love and softness dwell
15 The cheek adorn'd with finest hues
The bosom's snowy swell!
- The warbling of her syren voice
Breathed gently in the listening ear,
Sweet as the music nature makes
20 To hail the early year—
- All bathe his soul in love's pure stream
By sorrowing ecstasy refined
And when they cease to be, all leave
Their image on his mind!
- 25 When near the treasure of his soul
How fleetly pass the hours away
How bright appears the face of morn

At the first dawn of day!

When distant from her angel form
30 How slow each moment passes by—
No zephyr wantons thro' the glade
No sunshine lights the sky!

His soul forsakes its listless frame
Reposes on his love's fair breast
35 In fancy's rapture-breathing dream
Sinks in her arms to rest!

The charm is o'er—he wakes from bliss
From the sweet smile and melting eye,
From the deep blush of virgin grace
40 The long-drawn swelling sigh!

He flies to shades of darkest gloom
Where the trees waving o'er the stream
Show thro' their branches chequering-mild!
The moon's pale mellow beam!

45 In thrilling meditation lost
He wanders thro' the shadowy grove
Amid the pensive tints of eve
Indulging all in Love!

Or on the willowy bank reclin'd
50 Where the wild violet appears
With sighs increasing swell the breeze
Augment the brook with tears!

The trembling light of twinkling stars
Plays softly in the lover's breast,
55 And airs that languish as they blow
Oft lull his soul to rest—

The plaintive sound of evening tones
Flows deep into his fluttering heart
And streams that murmur as they run
60 Force to his love impart!

The beauty of the silent scene
Tingles thro' every throbbing vein
O'er every fibre guides the thrill
Of loves ecstatic pain!

65 Sleep flies the lovers anxious couch
Which many bitter tears bedew
The balmy touch of sweet repose
Bids his moist eyes adieu!

And sometimes thoughts of saddest kind
70 His quickly-beating heart oppress
Thoughts which the mind can well conceive
But no tongue can express!

He thinks of death along with love
75 And often starts with boding fears
And like a pale and airy form
His well-belov'd appears!

O Love! these are thine agonies
That reason knows not to control
80 Thou rulest with a cruel hand
The empire of the soul!

And often with the thoughts of love
Will sad regrets and hopes intrude,
And self-reproach will wound the heart
85 In musing solitude!

The one that reigns within his soul
 Is pure as twilight's pensive light
 Mild as the ray, the evening star
 Sheds on the silent night!

90 From this fair form his eye retires
 And meets his own wild-fluttering breast
 And mid a crowd of faults beholds
 Her image deep imprest!

Her virtue seem of brighter mould
 95 When contemplated near his own
 More pure the image of her soul
 More exquisite its tone!

E'en mid the thrill of purest bliss
 He heaves the sad and sorrowing sigh
 100 And with the fondest love of life
 Feels a strong wish to die!

His soul is tremblingly alive
 To every glance and every word
 The melting eye or haughty look
 105 A kindred throb afford!

If liquid lustre mildly beam
 Within his angel's pensive eye
 Where the tear shines mid orbs of blue
 Like dew-drops mid the sky;

110 O'er all his spirit breathes a power
 Like evening music pure and holy
 Soft as the summer gales of heav'n
 And still more melancholy!

But if he view the frown of scorn
115 Or triumph's mean disdainful smile
Or meet a transitory glance
Of self-applauding guile—

Poor victim! in his throbbing breast
How beats his fluttering swelling heart
120 While from his cheek and sunken eye
The hues of peace depart!

But are these feelings all his love?
The only sources of his pain
Do they alone, shoot quivering fires
125 Along his madd'ing brain?

Such transports let us all revere
For they are nature's purest store
Entranced in bliss, the shrine of love
Let every one adore!

130 But ye whose bounding hearts have felt
The swelling waves of passion's sea
And all on fire have pour'd the vow
Of burning ecstasy,

Oh you can tell what floods of joy
135 What scorching beams of fiery bliss
Rush thro' the soul from one embrace
One spirit-breathing kiss!

The snowy hand lock'd in your own
The bosom's quickly-beating swell
140 Where rioting on heav'nly grace
Warm hopes and wishes dwell—

The eye that swims with undropt tears
The flitting blush that dyes the cheek
The tender languish, and the yielding smile
145 That eloquently speak—

Short rapture o'er the shivering frame,
While bounding rolls the boiling blood,
And steep the captivated soul
In passion's eddying flood!

150 Art thou composed of living mould
Thou virtuous dame of sullen eye
Whose cold and stagnate blood adorns
A cheek of yellow dye?²

And dost thou view such rapturous joy
155 With prudish and contemptuous glance
Nor feel within thy glowing veins
The bounding transport dance?

Outrageously chaste art thou
Poor twig of nature's erring plan
160 Go, live but for thyself alone
Not for the bliss of man!³

Feel not the swell of passion's breast
The dalliance of a burning kiss
Go, reptile, perish, vile and sour
165 Divorced from love and bliss!

But thou of softly-burning eye
Of snowy and tumultuous breast
Of balmy breath and throbbing sigh
By fears and hopes opprest!

170 Who oft hast felt the fiery glow
Rush rapid o'er thy burning cheek
The ecstasy of passion's throe
In speechless silence speak!

Let thou whose ardent soul can feel
175 The holy charm of fond desire,
Judge if these lines this charm reveal
With love's ecstatic fire!

43 *chequering* causing to dapple; ie the moonlight.

153 *dye* colour (the OED cites Wilson's use of the word in the phrase 'wings and crests of rainbow dye').

161 *cf* Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3, 1, 151: 'Get thee to a nunnery'.

The Farewell

Although this poem was presumably written by Wilson with his imminent departure from Glasgow to Oxford in mind, it is generalised as a common experience for British women of the day whose lovers went to make their fortune with the East India Company. It also has echoes of Flora Macdonald's lament for Bonnie Prince Charlie as he flees to France. Ironically Margaret Mitchelson had herself seen the departure of a previous lover called Pagan (see Chapter 1, p12) into army service abroad. Wilson of course, typically solipsistic, fantasises how his loss will affect Margaret, displacing and perhaps pre-empting his own fears of losing her, once he had gone to University in England.

How sad the change that fleeting moments bring
The smile of rapture fled on fluttering wing!
Scarce had joy pour'd her mild and splendid ray
Till mid a shower of tears she fled away
And left this breast once beaming with her light
5 Dark as the gloom of winter's dreary night!
On one dear form these moistened eyes would dwell
While soft and sweetly magic feelings swell
And as his words in thrilling accents flow
Drink of delight drawn from the fount of woe!
10 But now for winds and breathing gales I pray
To waft my peace and that bright form away
Soon will the heaving waves of ocean roll
Between my Edward and my hopeless soul,
Yet many a thought will cross the raving sea
15 Though distant far, this heart still points to thee,
And as the sun when fading into night
Reflects a stream of soft and pensive light
So thou when ceasing from my wistful view
Will seem more dear when breathing forth adieu!

20 Ye clouds forsake the calm and placid sky
And leave it beauteous as his beaming eye!
Ye winds of heaven be lull'd to gentle rest
Breathe soft as sorrows whispering in his breast!
May the smooth surface of the slumbering deep
25 No longer foam but sink in peaceful sleep!
And every breeze that murmurs o'er the main
Expire as mild as music's dying strain!
When India's shores burst grateful on his view

And mountains tinged with summer's varying hue,
30 When his heart pants to touch the destined shore
Rocked by the waves and toss'd by storms no more
Ye heavens assume your most enchanting smile
The woes that swell his bursting heart beguile
And while ye shed the silent sweets of eve
35 Oh! charm his soul, till it forget to grieve!
And say when 'neath the green Savannah's shade
Near some clear stream at balmy twilight laid—
Roaming thro' groves array'd in purple bloom
Whose golden leaves the breezy path illumine
40 Where songsters fluttering on the gaudy wing
Chaunt choral music mid eternal spring—
—Viewing the vault of heav'n serene appear
Soft as the glitter of a falling tear—
Alas! wilt thou a mournful thought bestow
45 On one who fondly feeds her wasting woe?—
Withhold thy vision from the fairy sky
Pause on her form and heave a single sigh?
Arrest the course of transports madd'ning stream
And joy to sink in sorrow's musing dream?
50 To hearts like thine that holy raptures feel
Reflection's tear will sweetest bliss reveal!

But if that thought should to thy tender heart
Delicious anguish on a sigh impart,
Thy melted soul in painful sorrow steep
55 Lull thee to grief—and make thee wake to weep,
Oh heaven forbid! that any thought of mine
With evil touch should ever poison thine!
Infuse the pang of misery in a breast
Where peace, where happiness should ever rest!
60 Let no vain wish the peace of heav'n destroy
Preserve the kindling glance of smiling joy
That single thought will soothe this bosom's fear
And mingle pleasure with the starting tear!

Edward farewell! already blows the gale
65 That wafts from Britain's shore the less'ning sail!
But though thy form escape my straining view
Still will my mind the precious bark pursue,
And when the sun's oppressive glories shine
In downward splendour on the burning line—
70 I'll wish for airs to fan thy manly brow
And gentle waves to murmur from below
Till by their sounds entranced in sweet repose
This heart alone will flutter at thy woes!
And oh! should heaven permit thy glad return
75 And this fond bosom e'er forget to mourn,
Should thy dear form array'd in native charms
Dry up my tears and hush these sad alarms
This world of grief might smile in beauteous bloom
Fair as those regions placed beyond the tomb,
80 Where every jarring passion soothed to rest
Virtue is happy and misfortune bles

The following manuscript is bound into the endpapers of the volume¹

O sweet the silken Shannon¹ pours
And inland murmur round her shores
With [blooming] groves that smile
Then oft the Poet stops to hear
5 Music delightful to his ear
From many a fairy Isle

But sweeter far than song of stream
By poet heard in lonely mearn²
In Erin's beauteous land,
10 The sounds from thy dear lips that flow
As sportive mirth, or pensive no
Thy awful tones command

Then let the Maid of that Flood
Conceal her head in darksome mood
15 And peacer smiles again
Another Shannon charms our view
Hers lovlier shape and fairer hue
And far more witching strain

¹ The Shannon is a river in Ireland

² *mearn* this is a term Wilson coins. He lived in Newton Mearns as a boy. It can broadly be taken to mean 'moor'. See the poem 'Petition of the Mearn's Muir', page 178.

¹ It is not clear if this manuscript was intended for the volume or added later. There is no watermark. The poem seems to be a first draft, dashed off without any corrections.

My Dear Sir¹

You may perhaps be surprised to see yourself addressed in this manner by one who never had the happiness of being in company with you, and whose knowledge of your character is drawn solely from the perusal of your Poems. But[,]² sir[,] though I am not personally acquainted with you, I may almost venture to affirm[,] that the qualities of your soul are not unknown to me—In your Poems I discovered such marks of delicate feeling, such benevolence of disposition, and such knowledge of human nature, as made an impression on my mind that nothing will ever efface—and while I felt my soul refined by the sentiments contained in them, and filled with those delightful emotions which it would be almost impossible to describe, I entertained for you an attachment made up love, and admiration. Reflection³ upon that *delight*⁴ which I enjoyed from reading your Poems, will ever make me regard you with gratitude, and the consciousness of feeling those emotions you delineate, makes me proud to regard your character with esteem and admiration. In whatever view you regard my behaviour⁵ in writing this letter—whether you consider it as the effect of ignorance and conceit, or correct taste and refined feeling, I will[,] in my own mind[,] be satisfied with your opinion. To receive a letter from you afford me more happiness than any occurrence in this world save the happiness of my friends—and greatly enhance the pleasure I receive from reading your Lyrical ballads⁶. Your silence would certainly distress me—but still I would have the happiness to think, that the neglect even of the virtuous cannot extinguish the sparks of sensibility, or diminish the luxury arising from refined emotions. That luxury, sir, I have enjoyed[,] that luxury⁷ your Poems have afforded me—and for this reason do I now⁸ address you. Accept my thanks for the raptures you have occasioned me—and however much you may be inclined to despise me, know at least that these thanks are sincere and fervent.

To you[,] sir, Mankind are indebted for a species of poetry, which will continue to afford pleasure, while respect is paid to virtuous feelings—and while sensibility continues to pour forth tears of rapture. The flimsy ornaments of language[,] used to conceal meanness⁹, and want of feeling, may captivate for a short time the ignorant and the¹⁰ unwary—but true taste will

discover the imposture[,] and expose the authors of it to merited contempt. The real feelings of human nature, expressed in simple and forcible language, will, on the contrary, please only those who are capable of entertaining them—and in proportion to the attention which we pay to the faithful delineation of such feelings will be the enjoyment derived from them. That poetry[,] therefore[,] which is the language of Nature, is certain of immortality, provided circumstances do not occur to pervert the feelings of humanity, and occasion a complete revolution in the government¹¹ of the Mind.—

That your Poetry is the language of Nature, in my opinion, admits of no doubt. Both the thoughts and expressions may be tried by that standard. You have seized upon those feelings that most deeply interest the heart—and that also come within the sphere of common observation. You do not write merely for the pleasure of philosophers and men of improved taste, but for all who think,—for all who feel.— If we have ever known the happiness arising from parental or fraternal love—if we have ever known that delightful sympathy of souls connecting persons of different sexes,¹²—if we have ever dropped a tear at the death of friends,—or grieved for the misfortune of others—if¹³ in short we have ever felt the more amiable emotions of human nature—it is impossible to read your¹⁴ Poems without being greatly interested, and frequently in raptures. Your¹⁵ sentiments, feelings, and thoughts are therefore exactly such as ought to constitute the subject of poetry and cannot fail of exciting interest in every heart.—

But[,] sir, your merit does not solely consist in delineating the real features of the human mind, under those different aspects it assumes[,] when under the influence of various passions, and feelings—you have[,] in a manner truly admirable, explained a circumstance[,] very important in its effects upon the soul when agitated, that has indeed been frequently alluded to, but never generally adopted by any Author, in tracing the progress of emotions.—¹⁶ I mean that wonderful effect which the appearances of external nature, have upon the mind when in a state of strong feeling. We must all have been sensible, that when under the influence of grief, nature¹⁷ when arrayed in her gayest attire, appears to us dull and gloomy—and that when our hearts bound with joy, her most deformed prospects seldom fail of pleasing. This disposition of the mind to

assimilate the appearances of external nature to its own situation[,] is a fine subject for poetic allusion, and in several Poems you have employed it with a most electrifying Effect. But you have not stopped here. You¹⁸ have shown the effect which the qualities of external nature have, in forming the human mind—and have presented us with several characters whose particular bias¹⁹ arose from that situation in which they were planted with respect to the scenery of nature. This Idea is inexpressibly beautiful, and though[,] I confess[,] that to me it appeared to border upon fiction when I first considered it, yet at this moment I am convinced of its foundation on²⁰ nature, and its great importance in accounting for various phenomena in the human Mind. It serves to explain those diversities in the structure of the mind, which have baffled all the ingenuity of philosophers to account for. It serves to overturn the Theories of men who have attempted to write on human nature, without a knowledge of the causes that affect it, and who have discovered greater eagerness to show their own subtlety than arrive at the acquisition of truth. May not the face of external nature through different quarters of the globe, account for the dispositions of different nations? May not mountains[,] forests, plains, groves, and lakes, as much as the temperature of the atmosphere, or the form of government, produce important effects upon the human soul, and may not the difference subsisting between the former of these in different countries, produce as much diversity among the inhabitants as any varieties among the latter? The effect you have shown to take place in particular cases so much to my satisfaction[,] most certainly may be extended so far as to authorise²¹ general inferences. This [I]dea has no doubt struck you—and I trust that if it be founded on nature, your mind[,] so long accustomed to philosophical investigation[,] will perceive how far it may be carried, and what consequences are likely to result from it.—Your Poems, sir, are of very great advantage to the world, from containing in them a system of philosophy, that regards one of the most curious subjects of investigation,—and at the same time one of the most important. But your Poems may not be considered merely in a philosophical light, or even as containing refined and natural feelings—they present us with a body of morality of the purest kind. They represent the enjoyment resulting from the cultivation of the social affections of our nature;— they inculcate a conscientious regard to the rights of our fellow men;—they show that every creature on the

face of the [E]arth is entitled in some measure to our kindness;—they prove that in every mind[,] however depraved²² there exist some qualities deserving our esteem—they point out the proper way to happiness—they show that such a thing as perfect misery does not exist—they flash on our souls conviction of immortality—considered therefore in this view, Lyrical ballads²³ is, to use your own words, the book which I value next to my bible²⁴—and though I may perhaps never have the happiness of seeing you, yet I shall²⁵ always consider you as a friend[,] who has by his instructions done me a service which it never can be in my power to repay. Your instructions have afforded me inexpressible pleasure,---it will be my own fault if I do not reap from them much advantage.

I have said, sir, that in your Poems you have adhered strictly to natural feelings, and described what comes within the range of every person's observation. It is from following out this plan that[,] in my estimation[,] you have surpassed every poet both of ancient and modern times. But to me it appears that in the execution of this design you have inadvertently fallen into an Error, the effects of which are[,] however[,] exceedingly trivial. No feeling, no state of mind, ought[,] in my opinion[,] to become the subject of poetry, that does not please. Pleasure may[,] indeed[,] be produced in many ways, and by means that at first sight appear calculated to accomplish a very different end. Tragedy of the deepest kind produces pleasure of a high nature. To point out the causes of this would be foreign to the purpose. But we may lay this down as a general rule, that no description can please, where the sympathies of our soul are not excited, and no narration interest where we do not enter into the feelings of some of the parties concerned. On this principle[,] many feelings which are undoubtedly natural²⁶, are improper subjects of poetry, and many situations[,] no²⁷ less natural, incapable of being described so as to produce the grand effect of poetical composition. This, sir, I would apprehend is reasonable—and founded on the constitution of the human mind. There are a thousand occurrences happening every day, which do not in the least interest an unconcerned spectator—though they no doubt occasion various emotions in the breast to whom they immediately relate. To describe these in poetry would be improper.—Now[,] sir, I think that in several cases you have fallen into this Error. You have described feelings with which I cannot

sympathise²⁸—and situations in which I take no interest. I know that I can relish your beauties—and that makes me think that I can also perceive your faults. But in this matter I have not trusted wholly to my own judgement, but heard the sentiments of men whose feelings I admired[,] and whose understanding I respected. In a few cases[,] then, I think that even you have failed to excite interest.—In the poem entitled the Idiot boy²⁹, your intention, as you inform us in your preface, was to trace the maternal passion through its more subtle windings. This design is no doubt accompanied with much difficulty, but[,] if properly executed, cannot fail of interesting the heart. But[,] sir[,] in my opinion, the manner in which you have executed this plan, has frustrated the end you intended to produce by it. The³⁰ affection of Betty Foy, has nothing in it, to excite interest. It exhibits merely the effects of that instinctive feeling inherent in the constitution of every animal. The excessive fondness of the mother disgusts us—and prevents us from sympathising with her. We are unable to enter into her feelings—we cannot conceive ourselves actuated by the same feelings, and consequently take little or no interest in her situation. The object of her affection is indeed her son—and in that relation much consists—but then he is represented as totally destitute of any attachment towards her—the state of his mind is represented as perfectly deplorable—and[,] in short[,] to me it appears almost unnatural that a person in a state of complete idiotism, should excite the warmest feelings of attachment in the breast even of his mother. This much I know, that among all the people ever I knew to have read this poem[,] I never met one who did not rise rather displeas'd from the perusal of it—and the only cause I could assign for it was the one now mentioned. This inability to receive pleasure from descriptions such as that of the Idiot boy, is I am convinced founded upon established feelings of human nature, and the principle of it constitutes as I daresay you recollect, the leading feature of Smith[']s Theory of Moral Sentiments. I therefore think that in the choice of this subject, you have committed an error. You never deviate from nature,—in you that it would be impossible, but in this case[,] you have delineated feelings which[,] though natural[,] do not please—but which create a certain degree of disgust and contempt. With regard to the manner in which you have executed your plan, I think too great praise cannot be bestowed upon your talents. You have most admirably delineated the idiotism of the boys

mind—and the situations in which you place him are perfectly calculated to display it. The various thoughts that pass through the mothers mind, are highly descriptive of her foolish fondness— her extravagant fears— and her ardent hopes. The manner in which you show how bodily sufferings are frequently removed by mental anxieties or pleasures, in the description of the cure of Betty Foy's female friend, is excessively well managed—and serves to establish a very curious and important Truth. In short[,] every thing you proposed to execute has been executed in a masterly manner. The fault, if there be one, lies in the plan, not in the execution. This poem I have heard recommended as one in your best manner, and accordingly it is frequently read under³¹ this belief. The judgement formed of it, is consequently erroneous. Many people are displeased with the performance—but they are not careful to distinguish faults in the plan, from faults in the execution—and the consequence is[,] that they form an improper opinion of your genius. In reading any composition, most certainly the pleasure we receive arises almost wholly from the sentiments,³² thoughts and descriptions contained in it. A secondary pleasure arises from admiration of those talents requisite to the production of it. In reading the Idiot boy³³, all persons who allow themselves to think[,] must admire your talents—But they regret that they have been so employed—and while they esteem the Author, they cannot help being displeased with his performance.

I have seen a most excellent painting of an Idiot—but it excited³⁴ in me inexpressible disgust. I was struck with the excellence of the picture³⁵—I admired the talents of the artist—but I had no other source of pleasure. The poem of the idiot boy³⁶ produced upon me an effect in every respect similar. I find that my remarks upon several of your other Poems must be reserved for another letter. If you think this one deserves an answer—a letter from Wordsworth would be to me a treasure. If your silence tells me that my letter was beneath your notice, you will never again be troubled by one whom you consider as an ignorant admirer. But[,] if your mind be as amiable as it is reflected in your Poems—you will make allowance³⁷ for defects that age may supply[,] and make a fellow creature³⁷ happy, by dedicating a few moments to the instructions of an admirer and sincere friend John Wilson

May 24. 1802

¹ The changes listed (unless otherwise noted) as endnotes are those where the changes made by Gordon to the original version may alter the meaning.

² All the punctuation added by Mrs Gordon has been placed in square brackets.

³ I have edited Wilson's inconsistent capitalisation (particularly his 'S'), otherwise I have followed Mrs Gordon except where I think she makes a significant change in emphasis.

³ ... admiration: reflection...

⁴ ... that delight[no ital]...

⁵ Where brackets open with JW, this indicates a mis-spelling in the original: [JW...behavior...]

⁶ ...*Lyrical Ballads*...

⁷ ... That luxury [no ital], sir, I have enjoyed; that luxury your Poems...

⁸ ... I now address you...

⁹ [JW...meanness...]... conceal meanness of thought, and want of feeling...

¹⁰ ... and the unwary...

¹¹ Certain words on the manuscript are underlined in pencil [ul], which I assume to be the annotation of Gordon after the letter was sent to her by Wordsworth's son: ...in the government[ul] of...

¹² ... of different sex...

¹³ ...if[no ital] in short...

¹⁴ ...to read your ul] Poems...

¹⁵ ... and frequently in raptures; your sentiments...

¹⁶ ...emotions,...

¹⁷ ... influence of grief, Nature...

¹⁸ ...But you have not stopped here, you have shown the effect

¹⁹ [JW ...bias...]

²⁰ ...in...

²¹ ...authorize...

²² ... to our kindness. They prove that in every mind, however depraved...

²³ ...*Lyrical Ballads*...

²⁴ ...Bible...

²⁵ ... will...

²⁶ ...natural[ul]...

²⁷ ...no[ul]...

²⁸ ...sympathize...

²⁹ ...'The Idiot Boy'...

³⁰ ...produce by it; the ...

³¹ ...read in this belief...

³² ...sentiment...

³³ ...'The Idiot Boy'...

³⁴ ...but it created in me...

³⁵ Mrs Gordon omits this sentence.

³⁶ ...'The Idiot Boy'...

³⁷ ...fellow-creature

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