



PROFESSOR WILSON

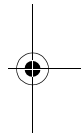
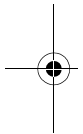
First published in *Instructor*, IV, 1850, pp. 353–6, under the occasional series heading 'Portrait Gallery', facing an engraving of Wilson, the professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and a key contributor to *Blackwood's*. There are three manuscripts, as follows:

MS A: Berg Collection, New York Public Library (in MS 213027B – 213036B – not individually numbered). This single sheet gives a variation of the opening paragraph.

MS B: Berg Collection, New York Public Library (in MS 213027B – 213036B – not individually numbered), a sheet measuring 150 by 175 mm, with writing in black ink on one side; and another sheet, torn, measuring 85 by 170 mm, with writing in black ink on both sides. This is transcribed on pp. 241–2 ('Wilson at Oxford').

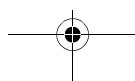
MS C: Worcester College, Oxford, MS 211, a sheet measuring 230 by 380 mm, folded with writing in black ink on both sides. This is transcribed on pp. 243–4 ('Youthful Indiscretions of Professor Wilson').

This essay is referred to in a fragment in the National Library of Scotland (NLS MS 21239 f. 64 v.), transcribed on p. 245.



THERE are many Newtons in England: yet, for all that, there is but one Newton for earth and the children of earth; which Newton is Isaac, and Kepler¹ is his prophet.* There are many Wilsons in Scotland, and indeed many out of Scotland: yet, for all that, Mother Earth and her children recognise but one,

* I use the word *prophet* in the ordinary sense. Yet in strictness this is not the primary sense. Primarily it means and Scripturally it means – *interpreter of the divine purposes and thoughts*. If those purposes and thoughts should happen to lurk in mysterious doctrines of religion, then the prophet is simply an *exegetes*, or expounder. But, it is true, if they lurk in the dark mazes of time and futurity unrolling itself from the central present, then the prophet means a seer or reader of the future, in our ordinary modern sense. But this modern sense is neither the Mahometan sense, nor that which prevails in the New Testament. Mahomet is the prophet of God – not in the sense of predictor from afar, but as the organ of communication between God and man, or revealer of the divine will. In St Paul, again, gifts of prophecy mean uniformly any extraordinary qualifications for unfolding the meaning of Scripture doctrines, or introducing light and coherency amongst their elements, and perhaps *never* the qualifications for inspired foresight. In the true sense of the word, therefore, Newton was the prophet of Kepler, *i.e.* the exegetic commentator on Kepler, not Kepler of Newton. But the best policy in this world is – to think with the wise, and (generally speaking) to talk with the vulgar.





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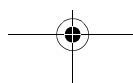
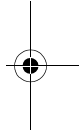
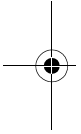
which one sits in the Edinburgh chair of Moral Philosophy.² And, when *that* is said, all is said; is there anything to say more? Yes, there is an infinity to say, but no need to say it.

Caetera norunt

Et Tagus, et Ganges, forsan et Antipodes.³

Such a radiance, which extinguishes all lesser lights, has its own evils. If a man like Mr Touchwood of the *Hottle* in 'St Ronan's Well'⁴ should find his way to *Tim-* (or to *Tom-*) *bucktoo*, no matter which, for *Tim* and *Tom* are very like each other (especially *Tim*) – in that case, he might have occasion to draw a bill upon England. And such a bill would assuredly find its way to its destination. The drawer of the bill might probably be intercepted on his homeward route, but the bill would *not*. Now, if this bill were drawn upon 'John Wilson,' *tout court*, not a post-office in Christendom would scruple to forward it to the Professor. The Professor, in reply, would indorse upon it '*no effects*.' But in the end he would pay it, for his heart would yearn with brotherly admiration towards a man who had thumped his way to the very navel of Africa.

This mention, by the way, of Timbuctoo, forced upon us by an illustration, suddenly reminds us that the Professor himself, in the stage of early manhood, was self-dedicated to the adventure of Timbuctoo. What reasons arose to disturb this African scheme, it is strange that we have forgotten, or else that we have never heard. Possibly Major Houghton's fate⁵ may have recalled Wilson, in the midst of his youthful enthusiasm, to that natural but afflicting fear which, 'like the raven o'er the infected house,'⁶ sweeps at intervals over the martial hopes of most young soldiers, viz., the fear – not of death – but of death incurred for no commensurate return, and with no rememberable circumstances. To die, to die early, *that* belongs to the chances of the profession which the soldier has adopted. But to die as an *aide-de-camp* in the act of riding across a field of battle with some unimportant order that has not even been delivered – to feel that a sacrifice so vast for the sufferer will not stir a ripple on the surface of that mighty national interest for which the sacrifice has been made – that it is which, in such a case, makes the pang of dying. Wilson had seen Mungo Park;⁷ from him he must have learned the sort of razor's-edge on which the traveller walks in the interior of Africa. The trackless forest, the unbridged river, the howling wilderness, the fierce Mahometan bigotry of the Moor, the lawlessness of the Pagan native, the long succession of petty despots – looking upon you with cruel contempt if you travel as a poor man, looking upon you with respect but as a god-send ripe for wrecking if you travel as a rich one – all these chances of ruin, with the climate superadded, leave too little of rational hopefulness to such an enterprise for sustaining those genial spirits without which nothing of that nature can prosper. A certain proportion of anxiety or even of gloomy fear is a stimulant: but in this excess they become killing as the frost of Labrador. Or, if not, only where a





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man has a demon within him. Such a demon had Park.* And a far mightier demon had Wilson, but luckily for us all, a demon that haunted the mind with objects more thoroughly intellectual.

Wilson was born, we believe, in Paisley. It is the Scottish custom, through the want of great public schools for the higher branches of education, that universities, to their own great injury, are called upon to undertake the function of schools. It follows from this that mere schoolboys are in Scotland sent to college; whereas, on our English system, none go to Oxford or Cambridge but young men ranging from eighteen to twenty. Agreeably to this Scottish usage, Wilson was sent at a boyish age to the university of Glasgow, and for some years was placed under the care of Professor Jardine.⁹ From Glasgow, and, we believe, in his eighteenth year, he was transferred to Oxford. The college which he selected was Magdalen, of which college Addison¹⁰ had been an *alumnus*. Here he entered as a *gentleman-commoner*, and in fact could not do otherwise; for Magdalen receives no others, except indeed those who are on the foundation, and who come thither by right of election. The very existence of such a class as gentlemen-commoners has been angrily complained of, as an undue concession of license, or privilege, or distinction to mere wealth, when all distinction should naturally rise out of learning or intellectual superiority. But the institution had probably a laudable and a wise origin. The elder sons of wealthy families, who needed no professional employments, had no particular motive for resorting to the universities; and one motive they had against it, viz., that they must thus come under a severer code of discipline than when living at home. In order, therefore, to conciliate this class, and to attract them into association with those who would inevitably give them some tincture of literary tastes and knowledge, an easier yoke, as regarded attendance upon lectures and other college exercises, was imposed upon all who, by assuming the higher expenditure of *gentlemen-commoners*,[†] professed themselves to be rich

* *Park*. – It is painful, but at the same time it is affecting, for the multitudes who respect the memory of Park, to know that this brave man's ruin was accomplished through a weak place in his own heart. Park, upon his second expedition, was placed in a most trying condition. We all know the fable of the traveller that resisted Boreas and his storms – his hail, his sleet, and his blustering blasts: *there* the traveller was strong; but he could not resist Phoebus,⁸ could not resist his flattering gales, and his luxurious wooings. He yielded to the fascinations of love, what he had refused to the defiances of malice. Such temptations had Park to face when, for the second time, he reached the coast of Africa. Had the world frowned upon him, as once upon the same coast it *did*, then he would have found a nobility in his own desolation. *That* he could have faced; and, without false bias, could have chosen what was best on the whole. But it happened that the African Association of London had shown him great confidence and great liberality. His sensitive generosity could not support the painful thought – that, by delaying his expedition, he might seem to be abusing their kindness. He precipitated his motions, therefore, by one entire half-year. That original error threw him upon the wrong season, and drew after it the final error which led to the conflict in which he perished.

† *Gentlemen-commoners*. – The name is derived from our Oxford word *commons*, which in ordinary parlance means whatever is furnished at the public dinner-table, or (in those colleges which still retain public suppers) at the supper-table. Reflecting at this moment upon the word,





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enough for living without a profession. The purpose had been, as we have no doubt, to diffuse the liberalities of literature throughout the great body of the landed aristocracy; and for many generations, as it would be easy to show, that object had been respectably accomplished; for our old traditional portrait of the English country gentleman, from Fielding¹¹ downwards to this ultra-democratic day, is a vulgar libel and a lie of malice. So far from being the bigoted and obtuse order described in popular harangues, the landed gentry of England has ever been the wisest order amongst us, and much ahead of the commercial body.

From Oxford, on returning to Scotland, Wilson rejoined his mother, then living in Queen Street, Edinburgh. He adopted the law as his nominal profession, with no fixed resolution, perhaps, to practise it. About 1814, we believe, he was called to the bar. In 1818, he became Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh; and, we think, it was in the previous year that 'Blackwood's Magazine' was established, which, from the seventh number downwards (though latterly by intermitting fits), has continued to draw more memorable support from *him* than ever journal did from the pen of an individual writer. He was not the editor of that journal at any time. The late Mr Blackwood,¹² a sagacious and energetic man, was his own editor; but Wilson was its intellectual Atlas, and very probably, in one sense, its creator, viz., that he might be the first suggester (as undoubtedly he was at one time the sole executive realiser) of that great innovating principle started by this journal, under which it oscillated pretty equally between human life on the one hand and literature on the other.

Out of these magazine articles has been drawn the occasion of a grave reproach to Professor Wilson. Had he, it is said, thrown the same weight of energy, and the same fiery genius into a less desultory shape, it is hard to compute how enormous and systematic a book he might have written. *That* is true: had he worked a little at the book every day of his life, on the principle of the Greek painter – *nulla dies sine linea*¹³ – by this time the book would have towered into that altitude as to require long ladders and scaffoldings for studying it; and, like the Vicar of Wakefield's family picture,¹⁴ could find its way into no human chambers without pulling down the sides of the house. In the foot-notes, where the street lamps would keep him in order, the Professor might have carried on soberly enough. But in the upper part of the page, where he would feel himself striding away *in nubibus*,¹⁵ oh crimini! what lark-

we should presume it to be the first two syllables colloquially corrupted of the Latin *commensalia*. A commoner is one who is a *fellow-tablet*, who eats his *commensalia* in company with other undergraduate students. A gentleman-commoner is one who by right may claim to be a fellow-tablet with the governing part of the college; although in large colleges, where this order is extensive enough to justify such an arrangement, the gentlemen-commoners dine at a separate table. In Cambridge they bear the name of *fellow-commoners*.

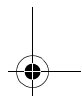
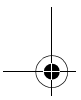




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ings there would have been, what speers with the Aurora Borealis? What a rise he would have taken out of us poor wretches below! The man in the moon would have been frightened into *apogee* by the menaces of the crutch. And, after all, the book never *could* have been suffered to stay at home; it must have been exported to central Asia on Dr Johnson's principle, who said to Miss Knight,^{*16} a young Englishwoman of very large dimensions, when she communicated to the doctor her design to live on the Continent, 'Do, my dear, by all means – really you are too big for an island.' Certainly, awful thoughts of capsizing flit across the fancy, when one sees too vast a hulk shipped on board our tight little Britannic ark. But, speaking seriously, the whole doctrine, from which exhales this charge against the Professor of misapplied powers, calls for revision. Wise was that old Grecian who said – Μεγα βιβλιον, μεγα κακον¹⁸ – Big book, big nuisance! For books are the military 'baggage' of the human understanding in its endless march. And what is baggage? Once in a hundred times it ministers to our marching necessities; but for the other ninety-nine times it embarrasses the agility of our movement. And the Romans, therefore, who are the oldest and the best authorities on all military questions, expressed the upshot of these conflicting tendencies in the legionary baggage by calling it *impedimenta*, mere hindrances. They tolerated it, and why did they do *that*? Because, in the case 99 + 1 the baggage might happen to be absolutely indispensable. For the mere possibility of that one case, which, *when* it came, would not be evaded, they endured what was a nuisance through all the other cases. But they took a comic revenge by deriving the name from the ninety-nine cases where the baggage was a nuisance, rather than from the hundredth where it might chance to be the salvation of the army. To the author of every big book, so far from regarding him as a benefactor, the torture ought to be administered instantly by this interrogative dilemma: Is there anything new (which is not false) in your book? If he says – *no*, then you have a man, by his own confession, ripe for the gallows. If he says – *yes*, then you reply: What a wretch in that case must you be, that have hidden a thing, which you suppose important to mankind, in that great wilderness of a book, where I and other honest men must spend half a life in running about to find it! It is, besides, the remark of a clever French writer in our own days,¹⁹ that hardly any of the cardinal works, upon which revolve the capital interests of man, are large works. Plato, for instance, has but one of his many works large enough to fill a small *octavo*. Aristotle, as to bulk, is a mere pamphleteer, if you except perhaps four works; and each of those might easily be crowded into a *duodecimo*. Neither Shakspeare nor Milton²⁰ has written any long work. Newton's 'Principia,'²¹ indeed, makes a small quarto; but this arises from its large type and its diagrams: it might be printed in a pocket shape. And, besides all this, even when a book *is* a large one, we usually

* *Miss Knight*. – This young lady had offered her homage to Dr Johnson by extending his 'Rasselas' into a sequel entitled 'Dinarbas.'¹⁷



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become acquainted with it but by extracts or by abstracts and abridgements. All poets of any length are read by snatches and fragments, when once they have ascended to great popularity; so that the logic of the reproach against Professor Wilson is like that logic which Mr Bald,²² the Scottish engineer, complained of in the female servants of Edinburgh. 'They insist,' said he, 'upon having large blocks of coal furnished to them; they will not put up with any that are less: and yet every morning the Cynic, who delights in laughing at female caprices, may hear these same women down in areas braying to pieces the unmanageable blocks, and using severe labour, for no purpose on earth but at last to bring the coal into that very state in which, without any labour at all, they might have had it from our collieries.'²³ So of Professor Wilson's works – they lie now in short and detached papers – that is, in the very state fitted for reading; and, if he had hearkened to his counsellors, they would have been conglutinated into one vast block, needing a quarryman's or a miner's skill to make them tractable for household use.

In so hasty a sketch of Professor Wilson, where it is inevitable to dismiss without notice much that is interesting, there is yet one aspect of his public pretensions which, having been unusually misrepresented, ought to be brought under a stronger light of examination: we mean his relation to the chair of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh. It is sometimes alleged, in disparagement of Professor Wilson, by comparison with his two immediate predecessors, Mr Dugald Stewart and Dr Thomas Brown,²⁴ that *they* did, but that he does *not*, come forward with original contributions to philosophy. He is allowed the credit of lecturing splendidly; but the complaint is, that he does not place his own name on the roll of independent philosophers. There is some opening to demurs in this invidious statement, even as regards the facts. The quality of Wilson's lectures cannot be estimated, except by those who have attended them, as none have been made public. On the other hand, Mr Dugald Stewart and Dr Thomas Brown are *not* the original philosophers which the objection supposes them. To have been multiplied, through repeated editions, is no argument even of notoriety or momentary acceptance; for these editions, both at home and in America, have been absorbed by students, on whom it was compulsory to become purchasers of the books used in their academic studies. At present, when it has almost ceased to be any recommendation to these writers that once they belonged to the Whig party, and when their personal connections are fast disappearing, it is no longer doubtful that the interest in their works is undermined. Professor Ferrier of St Andrews,²⁵ one of the subtlest intellects in modern speculation, has found himself compelled to speak with severity of both; and since then, in his edition of Reid, Sir William Hamilton²⁶ (who chooses to lay himself under some restraint in reference to Mr Stewart) has not scrupled to speak with open disrespect of Dr Brown; once as regards a case of plagiarism; once upon that vast umbrageousness of superfluous wordiness which is so distressing to all readers of his works. Even the reputation, therefore, of these men shows signs

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of giving way. But that is nothing: on other grounds, and in defiance of reputation the most flourishing, we have always felt that the first battery of sound logic unmasked against Dr Brown must be fatal. That man *could* not be a philosopher who wrote the preposterous paper against Kant in an early number of the 'Edinburgh Review.'²⁷ In reviewing a Prussian, he had not even mastered the German language, and was indebted to a Frenchman for the monstrous conceits which he imputed to the great founder of the critical philosophy. Mr Dugald Stewart is so much the less vulnerable as he happens to be the more eclectic; in the little that is strictly his own, he is *not* less vulnerable. And it embitters the resentment against these men, that both spoke with unmeasured illiberality, and with entire ignorance of philosophers the most distinguished in the last century.

From these men, at least, Professor Wilson will have nothing to fear. He, which is a great blessing, will have nothing to *recant*; and assuredly, that man who has ever been the most generous of literary men, and sometimes the most magnanimous and self-conquering in estimating the merits of his contemporaries, will never cause a blush upon the faces of his descendants, by putting it in the power of an enemy to upbraid them with unbecoming language of scorn applied by *him* to illustrious extenders of knowledge. 'If,' will be the language of those descendants, 'if our ancestor *did*, as a professor, write nothing more than splendid abstracts of philosophy in its several sections, in other words a history of philosophy, even *that* is something beyond a vulgar valuation – a service to philosophy which few, indeed, have ever been in a condition to attempt. Even so, no man can doubt that he would be found a thousand times more impressive than the dull, though most respectable, Brucker, than Tennemann, that Tiedemann (not Tediousmann), than Buhle,²⁸ and so forth. If he did no more than cause to transmigrate into new forms old or neglected opinions, it is not certain that in this office the philosopher, whom custom treats as the secondary mind, does not often transcend his principal. It is, at least, beyond a doubt that Jeremy Taylor and Paul Richter,²⁹ both of whom Professor Wilson at times recalls, oftentimes, in reporting an opinion from an old cloistered casuist, or from a dyspeptic schoolman blinking upon Aristotle with a farthing rushlight, lighted it up with a triple glory of haloes, such as the dull originator could never have comprehended. If, therefore,' it will be said, 'Professor Wilson did no more than reanimate the fading and exorcise the dead, even *so* his station as a philosopher is not necessarily a lower one.'

True; but upon *that* a word or two. We have been hitherto assuming for facts the allegations put forward – sometimes by the careless, sometimes by the interested and malignant. Now let us look out for another version of the facts.

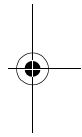
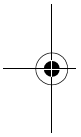
Our own version we beg to introduce by a short preface. The British universities *are*, but the German universities are *not* connected with the maintenance of the national faith. The reasons of this difference rest upon historical and political grounds. But the *consequences* of this difference are, that



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the British professor in any faculty bearing on theology is under conscientious restraints, which a little further on we will explain, such as the German professor does not recognise, and is not by any public summons called upon to recognise.

It is ordinarily supposed, and no person has argued the case upon that footing with more bitterness or more narrowness of view than Lord Brougham,³⁰ that Oxford, when imposing a subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the English Church, means or wishes to lay a restraint upon the free movement of the subscriber's intellect. But the true theory of that exaction is this – that Oxford, aiming at no such flagrant impossibility, seeks to bind over the student, by obligations of honour and by reverence for the sanctity of a promise, to do – what? Is it that he will not stray in thought beyond the limits staked out by the Thirty-Nine Articles? *That* is a promise which no man could be sure of keeping; a promise, therefore, which an honest man would not deliberately make, and which, for the same reason, no honest body of men would seek to exact. Not this, not the promise to believe as the Church of England believes, but the promise that he will not publish or manifest his secret aberrations from this standard, is the promise involved in the student's subscription. Now, mark the effects of this. Oxford has thus preoccupied the mind of the student with a resisting force as regards the heaviest temptation to tamper with dangerous forms of opinion, religious or irreligious, during that period when the judgment is most rash, and the examination most limited. The heaviest temptation lies through the vanity connected with the conscious eccentricity and hardihood of bold freethinking. But this vanity cannot be gratified in Oxford; it is doomed to be starved, unless through a criminal breach of fidelity to engagements solemnly contracted. That oath, which, and which only, was sacred in the eyes of a chivalrous French king, viz., *Foi du gentilhomme*, is thus made to reinforce and rivet the oath (more binding, as might seem, but under the circumstances far less so) of *Foi du chretien*.³¹ For a case of conscientious conviction may be imagined which would liberate the student from this latter oath applied to his *creed*: but no case can be imagined which would liberate him from the other oath, enforcing the obligation to silence. Oxford, therefore, applies a twofold check to any free-thinking pruriencies in the student's mind: 1st, She quells them summarily, *à parte post*, by means of the guarantee which she holds from him; 2dly, She silently represses the growth of such pruriencies, *à parte ante*,³² by exacting bonds against all available uses of such dallyings with heresy or infidelity. Now, on the other hand, in the German universities generally, these restraints on excesses of free-thinking do not exist. The course of study leads, at every point, into religious questions, or questions applicable to religion. All modes of philosophical speculation, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, connect themselves with religion. There is no interdict or embargo laid upon the wildest novelties, in this direction. The English subscription had been meant to operate simply in that way; simply to secure an *armistitium*, a suspension of feuds, in a place where such





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feuds were disrespectful to the institutions of the land, or might be perilous – and in a stage of life when they would too often operate as pledges given prematurely by young men to opinions which afterwards, in riper intellect, they might see reason, but not have the candour or the courage to abandon.

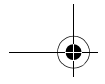
It follows, from this state of things, that a German professor is thrown upon his discretion and his own individual conscience for the quality of his teaching. But the British professor is thrown upon a public conscience, embodied in usages adapted to the institutions of his country. In Edinburgh, it is true, the students are not bound by subscriptions to any Confession of Faith. But that the whole course of instruction, or at least of that instruction which emanates from the chair of Moral Philosophy, is understood to be connected with the religion of the land, appears from this – that the theological students – those who are to fill the ministerial office in the churches of Scotland – cannot arrive at that station without a certificate of having attended the Moral Philosophy Lectures. There is, therefore, a secret understanding which imposes upon the professor a duty of adapting his lectures to this call upon him. He is not left at liberty to amuse himself with scholastic subtleties; and those who *have* done so, should be viewed as deserters of their duty. He is called upon to give such a *representative* account of current philosophy as may lay open those amongst its treasures which are most in harmony with Christian wisdom, and may arm the future clergyman against its most contagious errors. For Fichte or for Schelling³³ the path was open to mere Athenian subtlety upon any subject that might most tax their own ingenuity, or that of their hearers. But the British professor of moral philosophy is straitened by more solemn obligations:

‘Nobis non licet esse tam disertis,
Qui musas colimus severiores.’³⁴

Hence it would be no just blame, but the highest praise, to Professor Wilson if his lectures really *did* wear the character imputed to him – of being rich and eloquent abstracts, rather than scholastic exercitations in untried paths. We speak in the dark as to the facts; but at the same time we offer a new version, a new mode of interpreting, the alleged facts – supposing them to have been accurately stated.

Is *that* all? No; there is another, and a far ampler philosophy – a philosophy of human nature, like the philosophy of Shakspeare, and of Jeremy Taylor, and of Edmund Burke, which is scattered through the miscellaneous papers of Professor Wilson. Such philosophy by its very nature is of a far higher and more aspiring nature than any which lingers upon mere scholastic conundrums. It is a philosophy that cannot be presented in *abstract* forms, but hides itself as an *incarnation* in voluminous mazes of eloquence and poetic feeling. Look for this amongst the *critical* essays of Professor Wilson, which, for continual glimpses and revelations of hidden truth, are perhaps absolutely unmatched. By such philosophy, his various courses of lectures – we speak on





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the authority of many of his highest students – are throughout distinguished; and more especially those numerous disquisitions on Man's Moral Being, his Passions, his Affections, and his Imagination, in which Professor Wilson displays his own genius – its originality and power.

With this brief sketch of one who walks in the van of men the most memorable and original that have adorned our memorable and original age, we conclude by saying, in a spirit of simplicity and fidelity to the truth, that from Professor Wilson's papers in 'Blackwood,' but above all from his meditative examinations of great poets, Greek and English, may be formed a *florilegium* of thoughts, the most profound and the most gorgeously illustrated that exist in human composition.

Of his poems or his prose tales,³⁵ we have not spoken: our space was limited; and, as regards the poems in particular, there appeared some time ago in this very journal a separate critique upon them, from whom proceeding we know not, but executed with great feeling and ability.³⁶

