A POET IN LOVE—THE COURTSHIP OF CHARLES WESLEY, 1747-1749

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Both John and Charles Wesley sprinkled their letters with verse, usually quotations from their favourite Milton. Occasionally, with John, frequently with Charles, original verse also appears. It is possible to dredge up one of John’s 1724 somewhat artificial efforts at amorous verse, describing the wanderings of Cloe’s favourite flea (supposedly translated from the Latin):

Pleased at his chains, with nimble steps  
He o’er her snowy bosom strayed:  
Now on her panting breast he leaps,  
Now hides between his little head.¹

Deeply felt sexual emotions produced many of Charles Wesley’s original poems, but we find no lines even mildly indiscreet to parallel those of John. This may have been partly due to his strict upbringing, but perhaps more to his daughter’s posthumous editorial pruning. Lacking any such titillating early scraps, Charles’s many love poems are more staid throughout. Yet they are nevertheless charged with a similar passion, and guided into a like lyrical inventiveness, as his early post-conversion religious verse, the best of which has gradually drawn the attention of the literary world. Let us place him in his historical setting.

Charles Wesley was born December 18, 1707, four-and-a-half years after his brother John. Their father Samuel died in 1735, their older brother Samuel in 1739, and their mother in 1742. At Epworth the dominant educational and theological influence upon Charles’s youth had been his mother Susanna, especially as his father the rector spent much time in London from 1701 as the elected proctor or representative in Convocation of the Lincolnshire clergy.

Charles’s adolescence was spent at Westminster School (1716-26), where he was under the sobering influence of his oldest brother Samuel (1690-1739), who frowned on the more lascivious classical verse as unsuitable for schoolboys. Yet Charles seems to have become as familiar as John, not only with Virgil and Horace, but also with Ovid.² Meantime

² From whom he quoted a warning sentence in 1773; it may well have been under Samuel’s tutelage that Charles translated an innocuous passage from Ovid’s Metamorphoses noted in Frank Baker, Representative Verse of Charles Wesley, (London: Epworth, 1962), p. 259.
John was at the Charterhouse School, London (1714-20), whence he entered Christ Church, Oxford (1720-26), where Samuel had preceded him (1711-18) and Charles was to follow him (1726-35).

Charles came to Christ Church only a few months after John had been elected Fellow of Lincoln College. Apparently he came determined to experiment with almost any dubious social pleasures accessible, released from the supervision of his parents and brother Samuel. Later he confessed, "My first year at college I lost in diversions."³ To John's cautionary words in 1726 about the claims of religion Charles replied, "What, would you have me to be a saint all at once?"⁴

In a later autobiographical "Commemorative Hymn" Charles depicted his swings from one extreme of emotion to another:

By passion and by conscience torn,  
A wretch, while yet a child.  
Bolder I with my fellows grew,  
Nor yet to evil ran,  
But envied those who dared break through,  
And copy lawless man:  
From parents' eyes far off removed,  
I still was under Thine,  
And found, for secret sin reproved,  
The government divine. . . .

A thousand vows I fondly made,  
A thousand vows I broke,  
O'erpower'd by sin, and captive led,  
Yet not of Thee forsook. . . .

Here let me pause, and fix mine eye  
On that mysterious Grace!  
Unseen, unfelt, it still was nigh  
Throughout my youthful days. . . .

What but a miracle of grace  
Could keep my soul within  
The mouth of hell, the murtherer's ways,  
The public schools of sin. . . .

I found Thy hand, again beset,  
And saved by grace alone,


⁴John Whitehead, *Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, Vol. 1, 1793, taken over by his colleague as Wesley's literary executor, Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, 2 vols., (London: Kershaw, 1824, 1825), I, p. 152. This latter added a valuable footnote by Moore, which we here quote: "He was odd, eccentric, and what is called absent, in a high degree. Mr. John Wesley told me that he always dreaded his visiting him, notwithstanding their great love to each other—knowing well the derangement of books and papers that would probably ensue."
Where learning keeps its loftiest seat,
And hell its firmest throne:
Satan and sloth had smoothed my way
To pleasure's paradise;
Yet still I paused; afraid to stray,
Or plunge the gulf of vice...

Any youthful indiscretions in verse, however, into which he may well
have ventured, do not appear to have survived his critical eye or that of
his brother John. If they did, they would almost certainly have been
discarded by Sarah Wesley's careful weeding out before his vast manuscript
collections came into the hands of the Methodist Conference in 1829.6

In the winter of 1729 the dominant influence over Charles passed from
Susanna Wesley at Epworth and her son Samuel at Westminster to John.
After a few years of serving his father as curate in Epworth and Wroot,
John Wesley was recalled to his tutorial duties at Lincoln College. He
found a reformed brother Charles, who had become sufficiently serious
to earn the nickname "Methodist,"7 and pioneered in forming groups of
like-minded students, to whose leadership he gladly welcomed John. In
1735 he was ordained to assist John's ministrations as chaplain in Georgia,
while Charles himself was officially appointed James Oglethorpe's
"Secretary for Indian Affairs."8 Their arduous travels and stern spiritual
discipline broke Charles Wesley's health, and on July 26, 1736, he sailed
for England. John's over-anxious zeal and errors in tact drove him to
follow Charles eighteen months later.

The fumbling but disappointed evangelists joined forces again in
London. Under the guidance of Luther and the Moravians, in May 1738
both brothers came to believe in Christ alone for salvation, and an
assurance was given them that they had been saved from sin, and were
being urgently summoned of God to proclaim salvation by faith to all
the world. To this end, when church pulpits were closed to them, they
preached in the open air. To this end they collaborated in a group of three
volumes entitled *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, published in 1739, 1740, and
1742—the classic hymns of Methodism. The authorship was undifferen-
tiated, but those of John were more sober and restrained, those of Charles
exuberant and experimental in their versification, with a greater spiritual
rapture than was called forth by any human emotions he had so far known.

Both John and Charles, as is often the case with eligible young clergy,
had formed targets for designing women, and the last words spoken to

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hereinafter cited as *Poetical Works* followed by the volume and page number.
8Ibid., 20-21.
Charles in Georgia when he handed his resignation as secretary to Ogelthorpe dealt with the problems of a celibate ministry, which both John and Charles had deliberately embraced, though with some misgivings: "On many accounts I should recommend to you marriage, rather than celibacy. You are of a social temper, and would find in a married state the difficulties of working out your salvation exceedingly lessened, and your helps as much increased." (Not until 1743 did Ogelthorpe himself thus ease his own lot—by marrying a wealthy heiress.)

In 1738, when John rejoined Charles in London, the two brothers discussed this issue of marriage seriously, and promised each other that neither of them would either marry or take any steps towards it without first securing the other's consent—a promise which eventually led to Charles' breaking up John's courtship of Grace Murray, which had in fact already advanced to an unusual form of marriage legal at the time. From 1739 onwards, however, both brothers were too heavily involved in a preaching ministry throughout England to consider marriage seriously. Charles's itinerating evangelism took him to Wales, to Northumberland, to the Midlands, to Devon and Cornwall, and eventually to Ireland. This last mission furnished the trigger to unleash the pent-up dam of his uxoriousness.

On August 4, 1747, John Wesley had set out for Ireland, to shore up a society begun in Dublin by Thomas Williams. He was welcomed by William Lunell on the 9th, and speedily realized that the situation was full of both promises and problems. He felt that he himself must speedily return to England, but that there was an urgent opportunity for Charles to take over. On August 21st—John had planned to set sail the following day—Charles's journal recorded: "I received a second summons from my brother, hastening me to Ireland." John seems to have arranged that Charles would meet him halfway, at Builth in Wales, at the home of an old friend, Rev. Edward Phillips (1701-77), rector of Maesmynis. An opportunity for the brothers to discuss the Irish situation was fixed for Friday, August 28. Charles arrived late on Thursday the 27th, and on Friday morning, concluding that John had been "delayed by cross winds," he used the day to preach four sermons, two in the main street at Builth, one in Phillips' church at Maesmynis, and the last in Garth, the home of Marmaduke Gwynne, a devout convert of Howell Harris, and a wealthy and hospitable judge.

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11See A. H. Williams, John Wesley in Wales, (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1971), pp. xxiii-xxiv, 16, 29, etc.
12Ibid., pp. xxiv, 16, 29.
In his journal Charles entered significant words, to be echoed later during his courtship: "Mr. Gwynne came to see me at Mr. Phillips's, with two of his family. My soul seemed pleased to take acquaintance with them." Gwynne apparently decided to take Charles home with him, especially as John was still missing. When John at length arrived, the following day, he recorded: "About noon we came to Builth. At three I preached in the main street, and at Garth in the evening, where I met my brother, going to Ireland."

One of Gwynne's visiting companions at Builth the previous day had certainly been his third daughter, Sally, the other probably her older sister Becky, who never married, but became Sally's confidante during Sally's ensuing courtship by Charles Wesley. On August 28, 1747, when they were thus introduced, Charles was thirty-nine, Sally twenty. In spite of the great difference in their ages, it was a case of love at first sight, as he reminded her eighteen months later: "You have heard me acknowledge that at first sight, 'My soul seemed pleased to take acquaintance with thee.' And never have I found such a nearness to any fellow-creature as to you. O that it may bring us nearer and nearer to God, till we are both swallowed up in the immensity of his love!"

John set out for Bristol on Monday, August 31st—John's Journal says September 1st—but for whatever reason Charles stayed on instead of "hastening to Ireland." He conducted a closing family service at Garth on Wednesday, September 2nd, and "left them in body, not in spirit." He did not arrive in Dublin until September 9th, to find that "the little flock stands fast in the storm of persecution which arose as soon as my brother left them." Charles had his hands fully occupied with a shattered society building, and much uncertainty about the fate of Methodism in Ireland. He wrote his first letter "To Miss Sally Gwynne" on September 17, 1747: "Why did Eternal Wisdom bring us together here, but that we might meet hereafter at his right hand... My heart is deeply engaged for you, and for every one of your sisters... I shall probably see you sooner than I expected in G[arth]. God is still able to deliver his servants out of their trouble. That he can I know; that he will is hid from me." Success rewarded his valiant efforts; he stayed over six months, and even extended his ministry farther afield. In his correspondence with Sally their relationship grew from that of affectionate religious instructor encouraging and exhorting his pupil in her sometimes faltering faith to that of what we might call "spiritual lovers." On November 17th he emphasized this unique relationship: "The Lord has laid your burden upon my heart in a more especial manner: and we shall (I cannot doubt it), we shall rejoice together through all eternity." This he signed, "Your faithful sympathizing brother and friend."

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13MS letter, Feb. 3, 1749.
After six months of unremitting labour in Ireland he was relieved by his brother John. Weary with travel and work, and in great pain from twelve hours of riding and walking in a violent storm, on Friday, March 25, 1748, at 5:00 p.m., he staggered into Garth, and recorded: “All ran to nurse me. I got a little refreshment, and at seven made a feeble attempt to preach. They quickly put me to bed.” For a week he was “exercised with strong pain, notwithstanding all the means used to remove it. My short intervals were filled up with conference, prayer, and singing.” There could remain no doubt about his special relationship with Sally, to which her nursing added a touch of the maternal.

After a little more English itinerating, on August 9, 1748, Charles set out again for Ireland. The two parted as avowed but decorous lovers. Charles established a prayer pact with Sally: “Remember to meet me always on Monday noon, and every evening at five.” There was a new rapturous lilt in his letter to her from Holyhead on August 12th:

“Both you and I have still a baptism to be baptized with. . . . This, this is the one thing needful—not a friend—not health—not life itself, but the pure perfect love of Christ Jesus. O give me love, or else I die! O give me love, and let me die! . . . If you do indeed love me for His sake (and I can as soon doubt of my being alive), O wrestle with that friend of sinners on my behalf, and let him not go until he bless me with the sense of his love. . . . O Eternal Spirit of love, come down into my heart and into my friend's heart, and knit us together in the bond of perfectness. Lead us by the waters of comfort. Swallow up our will in thine. Make ready the bride, and then call us up to the marriage supper of the Lamb!”

New meaning was read into earlier compositions. A letter of September 1748 refers to a poem penned the previous year, and published in his “Redemption Hymns” of 1747:

To S.G.
Can you not join with me in that,
Subsists as in us all one soul,
No power can make us twain;
And mountains rise, and oceans roll
To sever us—in vain!
I feel such union with my fellow-candidates for eternity [that is, Sally and her sister Becky, and possibly Betty] as words cannot express, nor any creature break. At morning and evening and noonday do I call upon God in your behalf, and he heareth the prayer. Fail not to meet me at those times, especially noon. Often Besides in every day doth the Lord bring you to my remembrance, and I experience the sweetness of Christian fellowship. Your prayers are likewise come up for a memorial, and God strengthens me, both in soul and body, for his work. For years I have not found such inward and outward power.”

His next letter, of September 17, 1748—the anniversary of his first to her—underlines the new vigour that had come to him: “Your prayers have strengthened my hands, and been one principal means for my strange uninterrupted success.” And then he takes up the idea of spiritual union outlined in the verse previously quoted—“mountains rise and oceans roll/to
sever use—in vain!” The very phrases creep into the resultant lines, seemingly his first extant love poem, soon to be altered slightly so as to fit it for the lips of Methodist congregations:

Two are better far than one,  
For counsel or for fight!  
How can one be warm alone  
Or serve his God aright?  
Join we then our hearts and hands;  
Haste, my sister, dearest friend,  
Run the way of his commands,  
And keep them to the end! . . .

Who of twain hath made us one  
Maintains our unity;  
Jesus is the cornerstone  
In whom we both agree,  
Servants of our common Lord,  
Sweetly of one heart and mind,  
Who can break a threefold cord,  
Or part whom God hath joined?  
Breathes as in us both one soul,  
When most distinct in place:  
Interposing oceans roll,  
Nor hinder our embrace:  
Each as on his mountain stands,  
Reach our hearts across the flood,  
Join our hearts, if not our hands,  
And sing the pard'ning God. . . .

Such hymns or poems continued to punctuate his letters to Sally, and they were apparently intended not only to be read, but sung. One group of three preserved in the Methodist Archives, Manchester, includes instructions about the tunes to be used, and there are other hints in the letters implying that these poems mingling love divine and human were actually sung by the lovers in private, both as a means of spiritual devotion, but also in order to forge mental links between them during separation.

"Join our hearts, if not our hands." Yes, both lovers ardently longed to join hands also in holy matrimony. Apart from minor problems, two major questions had to be faced. One was whether marriage would hinder Charles's calling as a clergyman engaged in freelance preaching among the Methodists. The other was whether her parents would agree to the match. Before approaching Mr. and Mrs. Gwynne, Charles consulted his brother John, as by promise bound, about his possible marriage. John agreed that it would indeed be appropriate for his brother to marry, and even went so far as to suggest three suitable ladies. Providentially one of

14 See Baker, Representative Verse, pp. 198, 263, 264.
these was Sally Gwynne! On November 11, 1748, the two brothers “con­sulted together about every particular, and were of one heart and mind in all things.”

Thereupon Charles visited Sally’s parents in Wales. Mrs. Gwynne said, “she would rather give her child to Mr. Wesley than to any man in England,” while her husband was content to abide by her decision. To support his cause Charles had suggested—perhaps somewhat airily—that he believed he could furnish an income of a hundred pounds a year to maintain a wife.

There followed visits to several leading Methodists to determine whether his marriage was likely to create any disturbances within Methodist circles. His manuscript poems formed a useful means of broaching the subject of the contemplated union. Thus on December 19, 1748, he wrote to Sally from Lewisham:

“Yesterday I left the Deliberating Hymns with Mrs. Blackwell and Mrs. Dewal. The first question they asked me on my return hither this morning, was whether those hymns were wrote for myself? This drew on a full explanation. They expressed the utmost satisfaction; wondered I should not acknowledge the hand of God in every step, assured me they had guessed the person, even the first time they saw her; rejoiced over her as their future friend; spoke of her just as I think of her; offered their utmost service in every way; and took, in a manner, the whole matter upon themselves. One thing was most remarkable: that they were confident, the matter when public would be attended with the best consequences, would give general satisfaction to the church, and even remove many prejudices of the world’s.”

One of these “deliberating hymns” was copied into the letter by Charles. It reveals perfectly the anxious spirit of his courtship, and his sincere desire to die rather than to betray his spiritual calling:

1. And is there hope for me
   In life’s distracting maze,
   And shall I live on earth to see
   A few unruffled days?
   A man of sorrows I,
   A sufferer from the womb,
   ’Twas all my hope in peace to die,
   And rest within my tomb.

2. How then can I conceive
   A good for me designed,
   The greatest God himself could give
   The parent of mankind?
   A good by sovereign love
   To sinless Adam given

15 Charles Wesley, Journal, II, p. 44.
16 Ibid., II, p. 45.
17 Ibid.
18 See Baker, Representative Verse, MS.79 (see p. 389), including pp. 264-66.
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His joyous paradise t' improve,
   And turn his earth to heaven.

3. God of unbounded grace,
   If yet thou wilt bestow
   On me, the vilest of the race,
   The choicest gift below;
   My drooping heart prepare
   The blessing to receive,
   And bid the child of sad despair
   With confidence believe . . .

6. Thou, Lord, direct my ways,
   On all my counsels shine,
   And lead by thine unerring grace
   This feeble soul of mine;
   Thy pard'ning love reveal
   In proof of thy decree,
   And stamp her with thy Spirit's seal,
   The friend designed for me.

7. With steadfast faith and love
   Let me thy creature take
   As a good angel from above,
   Sent down for Jesus' sake.
   Not to enthrall my will,
   Not to put out my eyes,
   But fix my heart and fire my zeal,
   And lift me to the skies.19

Charles continued to inform Sally about other reactions to their pro­posed marriage. Mrs. Stotesbury's enthusiasm persuaded him that "everyone in the church will rejoice if this thing come to pass"; Rev. George Whitefield agreed, and offered to "come from the farthest part of the earth to perform the ceremony."20

Not everyone was happy, however. Both Charles and Sally had rivals. Rev. Edward Phillips of Builth considered that he had a stronger claim to his close neighbor's hand than did Charles, while one of Charles's London converts was love-sick over him. Occasionally there was bitterness, and jealous tampering with correspondence, so that it seemed that their dreams were to be shattered. Rev. Edward Perronet objected because he felt that Charles should marry one of the Perronet daughters, as "the fittest person in all the church." It was apparently during these troubles that Charles wrote the ten stanzas which appeared in the Methodist Hymn Book, 1933, "Away, my needless fears," of which stanzas 6 and 7 read:

   Why then was I cast down,
   And troubled without cause,
   And trembled at the creature's frown,

19 Ibid., pp. 266-67.
20 MS letter, Dec. 23, 1748.
And feared the threatened loss?
Shall I mistrust His care
My blessings to defend,
Or dread (who cannot lose an hair)
To lose a bosom-friend?
If what I wish is good,
And suits the will divine
By earth and hell in vain withstood,
I know it shall be mine.
Still let them counsel take
To frustrate his decree,
They cannot keep a blessing back
By heaven designed for me. 21

This poem was to appear within a month or two in the greatest literary task Charles had so far undertaken, Hymns and Sacred Poems, published in two volumes in 1749 specifically to finance his forthcoming marriage and family life. On December 27, 1748, he sent Sally the printed Proposals for this work, with a receipt showing her as the first subscriber for them. 22

Another severe blow speedily followed, however. Mrs. Gwynne was not convinced that Charles Wesley's literary ventures, whether past, present, or future, comprised sufficient security for her daughter's maintenance. Rev. Vincent Perronet of Shoreham assured her that the writings of the two brothers would "last and sell while any sense of true religion and learning shall remain among us," and John Wesley settled the issue by himself standing guarantor for the promised hundred pounds per annum. 23 The temporary mislaying of the document embodying the marriage settlement caused Charles Wesley more weeks of agonizing suspense, in which he wavered from doubt to hope, and back again past doubt to despair.

His longest letter to Sally during these troubled days was written January 15-17. It contained one hymn composed while seeking the advice of Vincent Perronet, a hymn finding his only remedy in death, and another (after still more depressing news) in what was for Charles the unusual metre of John Cennick's "Ere I sleep, for every favour," its lighthearted lilt strangely offsetting the solemnity of his mood:

Lord, we long to know thy pleasure,
Lift our eyes To the skies,
Humbly wait thy leisure.
Fixed in solemn expectation
We remain To obtain
Thy determination.

22 For a facsimile see Baker, Representative Verse, facing p. 264.
Bliss or mis'ry never ending
On a word Of our Lord,
Still we see depending.
Crushed with heavy grief and fear
Till thy will Thou reveal,
All thy counsel clear;
Till thine arm make bare before us
Fear remove; Till thy love
To thy heaven restore us.
Calmeﬆ peace and meekest patience
Now impart; Either heart
Fill with supplications. . . .
Blest with perfect resignation
Till we prove All thy love,
All the great salvation.

On January 23rd final consent came. Charles Wesley could hardly
believe that married bliss seemed destined to be his, and on the 26th asked
Sally to join in his prayer:

Father of compassions, hear
For Jesus' sake alone;
If we see thy hand appear,
And mark the work begun,
O confirm the sacred sign,
And all thine outstretched arm made bare,
Send us down the gift divine,
The grace of faith and prayer. . . . [six such stanzas]

A week later he was still dogged by doubt, sending Sally a further prayer
(in seven stanzas):

Thou read'st the care that heaves my breast,
The dread design I now pursue:
But is it good? but is it best?
The thing thyself wouldst have me do?
Then let me all thy pleasure feel,
The love's irrefragable seal. . . .

On March 1st he was writing in similar strain, even after he had ar-
rived at Bristol en route to his bride in Wales. “My heart I send you in
my last hymn made on the road:

O God, my refuge in distress,
My strength and shield, my rock and tower,
Save me from seeming happiness,
And rescue in the prosperous hour. . . .
Thou know'st my every hope and fear,
Thou seest my heart without disguise.
I would not have my comfort here,
Or seek an earthly paradise:
I would not to thy creature cleave,  
Obtain the drop, and lose the sea;  
Thou, thou art all, and thine receive  
Their happiness complete in Thee. . . .

In swift preventing love appear;  
Me from myself this moment save,  
My only chariot be the bier,  
My only bridebed be the grave." . . . [fourteen such stanzas]

So desperate was Charles Wesley that this marriage should not unfit him for the ministry. He seemed destined to make a very uncomfortable bridegroom!

The wedding duly took place on April 8, 1749, and, as might be expected, the bridegroom composed a hymn for the altar. It contains some worthy passages in its forty lines, but one cannot but feel that Charles’s muse had become a little jaded after the exhausting efforts of a trying courtship:

Come, thou everlasting Lord,  
By our trembling hearts adored;  
Come, thou heaven-descended Guest,  
Bidden to the marriage feast.  
Sweetly in the midst appear  
With thy chosen followers here,  
Grant us the peculiar grace,  
Show to all thy glorious face. . . .

Stop the hurrying spirits’ haste,  
Change the souls’ ignoble taste.  
Nature into grace improve,  
Earthly into heavenly love.  
Raise our hearts to things on high,  
To our Bridegroom in the sky,  
Heaven our hope and highest aim,  
Mystic marriage of the Lamb. . . .

One cannot but believe that a more moving marriage prayer appeared in his Hymns and Sacred Poems of 1749, gratefully echoed at the weddings of many British Methodist ministers since that time—including the writer and his colleague Dr. Oliver Beckerlegge. With this we will close:

Thou God of truth and love,  
We seek thy perfect way,  
Ready thy choice to approve,  
Thy providence to obey,  
Enter into thy wise design,  
And sweetly lose our will in thine.

Why hast thou cast our lot  
In the same age and place,  
Or why together brought  
To see each other’s face,
To join with softest sympathy
And mix our friendly souls in thee?

Didst thou not make us one,
That both might one remain,
Together travel on,
And bear each other's pain,
Till both thine utmost goodness prove,
And rise renewed in perfect love?... ,

Then let us ever bear
The blessed end in view,
And join with mutual care
To fight our passage through,
And kindly help each other on
Till both receive the starry crown.

O might Thy Spirit seal
Our souls unto that day,
With all thy fullness fill,
And then transport away,
Away to our eternal rest,
Away to our Redeemer's breast... 24

24Methodist Hymn Book, 1933, No. 716, slightly revised; further revised in Hymns and Psalms, 1983, No. 374. Stanzas 4 and 7 are omitted from both. For the complete poem see Poetical Works, V, pp. 422-3 and Baker, Representative Verse, pp. 200-01.