



MARY WILKINSON

Elizabeth Mary Wilkinson

1909–2001

THE OUTSTANDING SCHOLAR of German humanism, Professor Elizabeth M. Wilkinson, died on 2 January 2001 at the age of 91. She was one of the greatest, and—across the whole spectrum of the humanities—one of the most highly regarded, scholars of German culture this country has produced, in particular because of her illuminating work, both historical and theoretical, on German Classicism, which did much to bring home its living significance. All who knew her were impressed by the depth and breadth of mind that she brought to bear on her work. As the large gathering of successive generations of her students and colleagues, convened at University College London on 16 March 2001, showed unambivalently, she will be fondly remembered as a teacher of genius who combined in a uniquely charismatic way sheer intellectual excitement, tender (and patient) regard for the development of individual students, and a passionate—sometimes fierce—dedication to the resolution of first-order problems. At a time when the term ‘scholarship’ is used more and more, even in university circles, in the debased sense of ‘background knowledge’, and is being replaced by ‘research’ (in the equally debased, journalistic sense of the mere elicitation of information), it is appropriate to celebrate the inspiring scholarly leadership she provided in post-war *Germanistik*, both in person and in print, by virtue of her clear articulation of the ethical, intellectual and therefore pedagogic importance of what it was she professed. In these days of intense intercultural engagement, the analysis of the position of non-German germanists that she offered to the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, on

receiving the 1975 'Prize for Foreign *Germanistik*', seems, for example, uncannily prescient of our present condition:

Every non-German germanist should, in my opinion, foster a stereoscopic approach. He should keep one eye firmly on the subject and try to approach the level of German *Germanisten*. The other eye he should keep on his countrymen and try, by whatever means, to bring home to them German culture in such a way that they assimilate what is other. If, later, he accepts the proposal of making available to a German public what originally was meant only for his fellow countrymen, then this should only be undertaken in the spirit of Goethe's 'repeated reflexion', of what he dubbed in the broadest sense of the term, 'World Literature'.¹

This is the Mary Wilkinson of whom British germanists have every reason to be proud: unambiguously precise about highly complex matters, and uncompromisingly committed to a position once she had thought it through. She was unswervingly loyal to those who she believed shared her faith in the pedagogic and cultural value of what she liked to call 'perennial humanism', reformulated for the modern world in Weimar Classicism. Indeed her highly productive collaborations—not only with her partner of thirty-seven years, L. A. Willoughby, but also with younger colleagues (with George Wells, Kathleen Coburn, and Brian Rowley, for example)—are testimony to her conviction that scholarship is a shared, communal activity, one best practised in open debate and discussion. But she had no time in intellectual life for 'the Third Way', if what was meant by that was a diplomatic fudge. Her whole orientation was to identifying and tackling the conceptual problem rather than to finding a form of words which might obfuscate it—very much in the spirit of Goethe's saying, taken from his *Wilhelm Meister*:

Truth, so it is said, is situated at the central point between two opposing views. Not at all! The problem lies between the two, that which is beyond our range of vision, eternally active life, contemplated in repose.²

Mary Wilkinson's heartfelt devotion to such intellectual virtues did not make her a predictably comfortable and reassuring interlocutor; but it was the mainspring of that lucid argumentation, high scholarly sophistication, and superb writing-style that she was able to sustain for fifty-odd years, and for which her colleagues honoured her. 'Altogether

¹ Elizabeth M. Wilkinson, 'Preis für Germanistik im Ausland: Dankrede', *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung: Jahrbuch* (1975), 18–23 (p. 22).

² *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Maxims and Reflections*, ed. Peter Hutchinson and trans. Elizabeth Stopp (London, 1998), p. 82. Henceforth referred to as *Maxims and Reflections*.

I am suspicious', she wrote in her tribute to Thomas Mann on his death in 1955, 'of the postulated dichotomy between abstractions and concretions, between theory and practice. The bearing they have on each other is incredibly close and fascinatingly complex.'³ Her rare combination of theoretical rigour, long historical perspective, and astonishingly accurate aesthetic insight (*Anschauung*) ensure that, for many years to come, her work will be an exhilarating source of lively, scholarly education.

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Mary Wilkinson was fond of reminding her audiences of her Yorkshire background. Born in Keighley on 17 September 1909, she considered the Brontës' moors (and, later, Jane Eyre's study of Schiller's 'crabbed but glorious Deutsch') formative influences on her life. But her aim was not simply to emphasise the Northerner's traditionally high evaluation of plain speaking (a trait which she believed had been powerfully reinforced by her attendance at Whalley Range High School in Manchester). Her yet more serious intent was to underline what she came to discover and articulate as one of the foundational tenets of Weimar Classicism. 'Coming from a background which afforded little in the way of cultural experiences', as she put it in her Inaugural Lecture, delivered at University College London on 25 October 1962,⁴ and though lacking the advantage of imbibing with her mother's milk and at her parents' knee those implicit criteria and standards which issue eventually in what we call taste, she was profoundly grateful to be in a position to authenticate Goethe's and Schiller's conviction that 'aesthetic education was to start far earlier than our encounters with art' (*Inaugural*, p. 24), 'in the indifferent and undifferentiated spheres of physical life . . . in our first apprehensions of shapes and spatial relations, our early preferences for performing one and the same natural act in this way rather than another' (p. 23). When she did eventually engage with art, her sensitivity to the delights of its different media, born of her early training in the physical-mental prehension of the significances presented to sense, led to a lifelong love of music (which at one point she intended to study on a scholarship to the Royal Academy) and, above all, to a passion for poetry which possessed her to the very

³ 'Aesthetic Excursus on Thomas Mann's *Akribie*', *Germanic Review*, 31 (1956), 225–35 (225).

⁴ *In Praise of Aesthetics* (London, 1963), p. 10. Henceforth referred to as *Inaugural*.

end. From her earliest childhood on, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Coleridge—to be joined in her youth by novelists such as D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and, above all, Thomas Mann—informed, at the deepest level, her sense of what literature is and can be.

She came late to Goethe.⁵ Prompted by motives ‘far too unacademic to be recounted’ (*Inaugural*, p. 12), she was, in her own words, ‘deflected’ away from her first loves of biology, history, and English into German—which she started from scratch in 1929—as an undergraduate at Bedford College, by her teacher, J. G. Robertson. He also tempted her back from a spell of school-teaching at Clapham High School and Southampton Grammar School, to undertake research, on an Amy Lady Tate Studentship (1937–9), under the supervision of another of those formidable women who have done so much to shape and establish German studies in this country, Edna Purdie. Her thesis on a comparatively unknown German figure of the eighteenth century, an uncle of the Romantic critics August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, entitled ‘A critical Study of Johann Elias Schlegel’s aesthetic and dramatic Theory’, was accepted by the University of London for the degree of Ph.D. in 1943. The intense reflection on the fundamental principles involved in doing humanistic scholarship which work on her doctorate prompted issued in two precepts that were to inform her scholarly output for the rest of her life. On the one hand, the long and arduous coming-to-terms which she undertook, not just with the relevant secondary literature on her topic but with thinkers of the stature of Ernst Cassirer, J. M. Thorburn, Samuel Alexander, F. O. Nolte, and—above all—Susan Stebbing and Edward Bullough, her chief teachers in logic and aesthetics (*Inaugural*, pp. 25–6), gave rigorous intellectual expression to a characteristically conscientious concern with presenting to the critical reader the method, and the methodology, of research. It also yielded results that are truly significant, because they are illuminatingly set in the relevant theoretical and historical perspectives, without, as a consequence, either over- or under-estimation of their importance. The revised version of her thesis, *Johann Elias Schlegel: A German Pioneer in Aesthetics* (Oxford, 1945), awarded the Robertson Prize of the University of London (and reprinted in 1973 in Germany [Darmstadt], with a second Preface) emphatically marked the end of Mary Wilkinson’s scholarly apprenticeship.

⁵ ‘Goethe’s Poetry’, *German Life and Letters* (henceforth referred to as *GLL*), 2 (1949), 316–29; re-published in Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*, 2nd edn. (London, 1970), pp. 20–34; German version: *Goethe: Dichter und Denker* (Frankfurt, 1974).

Inspired by Susan Stebbing's answer to the question posed on the outbreak of the Second World War, of what she would now do—'carry on with my work'—Mary Wilkinson, after a spell of driving an ambulance in London, gave her first lectures, as a Temporary Assistant Lecturer, in Aberystwyth, where the German Department of University College London (which she joined in 1940) had been relocated. It was here that she embarked on a remarkable thirty-seven-year collaboration with her former teacher L. A. Willoughby, whom she had first met at a student party in 1931. Most of the profoundly insightful, epoch-making, post-war essays on Goethe which they wrote together, sometimes in collaboration, always in consultation, after 1946, were collected in what became a famous book, *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*, published in 1962, a year after her appointment to the Chair of German at University College London.

Her first study (1946) of Goethe's *Tasso*, as 'the Tragedy of the Poet'—like the second, published three years later with the characteristic sub-title, 'An Inquiry into Critical Method'—was soon re-published in Germany; and both established her international reputation for a compelling combination of astonishingly perceptive close-reading with revealing, authoritative historical and theoretical contextualisation.⁶ Further essays on Goethe-as-thinker—'On the Varying Modes of Goethe's Thought' and the Henriette Hertz Trust Annual Lecture on a Master Mind, delivered to the British Academy on 11 July 1951, entitled 'Goethe's Concept of Form'—are masterly deployments of the high level of intellectual refinement to which she had trained herself in the preceding decade or so. But perhaps no essay of this period better exemplifies the quality of her scholarship than 'The Relation of Form and Meaning in Goethe's *Egmont*',⁷ described by the distinguished American critic and

⁶ 'Goethe's *Tasso*: The Tragedy of the Poet', *Publications of the English Goethe Society* (henceforth referred to as *PEGS*), NS, 15 (1946), 96–127; German version: 'Goethe: *Tasso*', in *Das Deutsche Drama vom Barock bis zur Gegenwart: Interpretationen*, ed. Benno von Wiese, 2 vols. (Düsseldorf, 1958), 1, pp. 193–214 and 486–89. "'Tasso—ein gesteigerter Werther'" in the light of Goethe's Principle of 'Steigerung': An Inquiry into Critical Method', *Modern Language Review* (henceforth referred to as *MLR*), 44 (1949), 305–28; German version: "'Tasso—ein gesteigerter Werther' im Licht von Goethes Prinzip der Steigerung: Eine Untersuchung zur Frage der kritischen Methode", trans. Ernst Grumach, *Goethe: Neue Folge des Jahrbuchs der Goethe-Gesellschaft*, 13 (1951), 28–58. Both essays are reprinted in *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*, pp. 75–94 and 185–213.

⁷ 'The Relation of Form and Meaning in Goethe's *Egmont*', *PEGS*, NS, 18 (1949), 149–82; German version: 'Sprachliche Feinstruktur in Goethe's 'Egmont': Zur Beziehung zwischen Gestalt und Gehalt', in *Begriffsbestimmung der Klassik und des Klassischen*, ed. Heinz Otto Burger, *Wege der Forschung*, 210 (Darmstadt, 1972), pp. 353–90. The essay is reprinted in *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*, pp. 55–74.

theoretician John Ellis as ‘one of the most brilliant and sophisticated pieces of criticism ever written—on Goethe or any other figure’.⁸ For here the fruit of the difficult apprenticeship to which she had dedicated herself—an apparently uncanny ability to read the mind of her author in a wholly original and convincing way—is at its most exemplary.

And it is entirely typical of Wilkinson’s restless pursuit of truth that she so quickly came to question the conceptual adequacy of the theoretical underpinnings of this particular essay. Modification, in the face of both textual and contextual fact, of the regulative principles she had worked out in preparing her first book was her constant concern. So much is clear, for example, from the thorough, fundamental, book-reviews she undertook in the 1950s and 60s. Whether she was considering Agnes Arber’s meticulous scrutiny of Goethe’s science⁹ or Barker Fairley’s brilliant, if flawed, *Study of Goethe*;¹⁰ Emil Staiger’s theory of poetics¹¹ or F. O. Nolte’s ground-breaking accounts of eighteenth-century criticism and aesthetics¹²—her preoccupation was with two theoretical problems about which, she felt, a lack of clarity was hindering progress in understanding the cultural significance of German classicism: the Form–Content problem, and the question of aesthetic Illusion, as distinct from any other type. The re-thinking which this critical stance entailed, vis-à-vis her own work and that of others which she most respected, did not in any way hinder her productivity; indeed, as in the case of the Introduction to her immensely successful edition of Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* (Oxford, 1944), it stimulated her to reflect on the pedagogic

⁸ John M. Ellis, ‘The Vexed Question of Egmont’s Political Judgement’, in *Tradition and Creation: Essays in Honour of Elizabeth M. Wilkinson*, ed. C. P. Magill, Brian A. Rowley, and Christopher J. Smith—henceforth referred to as *Tradition and Creation*—(Leeds, 1978), pp. 116–30 (p. 120). (This *Festschrift* contains an informative biographical introduction, and an excellent bibliography by Ann C. Weaver.)

⁹ Review of Agnes Arber, *Goethe’s Botany*; Maria Schindler and Eleanor C. Merry, *Pure Colour*; and L. A. Willoughby, *Unity and Continuity in Goethe*, *PEGS*, NS, 16 (1947), 120–4, and of Agnes Arber, *Goethe’s Botany*, *MLR*, 43, 556–8.

¹⁰ Review of Barker Fairley, *A Study of Goethe*, *PEGS*, NS, 17 (1948), 173–85.

¹¹ Review of Emil Staiger, *Grundbegriffe der Poetik*, *MLR*, 44 (1949), 433–7.

¹² Review of F. O. Nolte, *Lessing’s Laokoon*, *MLR*, 37 (1942), 230–2, and of his *Art and Reality*, *MLR*, 39 (1944), 401–2. The former review is reprinted in Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, *Models of Wholeness: Some Attitudes to Language, Art and Life in the Age of Goethe*, ed. Jeremy Adler, Martin Swales and Ann Weaver, *British and Irish Studies in German Language and Literature*, 30 (Oxford, 2002), pp. 17–19. (See the editors’ sensitively accurate Introduction to this companion-volume of *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*.) Henceforth referred to as *Models of Wholeness*.

benefits of inevitably problematic literary interpretation¹³ and its rightful place in university education.¹⁴ Moreover, precisely because she saw that such intellectual problems reflected vital issues of human existence, she relished opportunities to popularise her findings in such publications as *The Radio Times* and *The Listener*, and in BBC radio broadcasts during the Goethe anniversary celebrations in 1949.¹⁵

In her scholarly work proper the quest for a solution to the foxing question of how form ‘*as such* but an intellectual abstraction’, in order to be aesthetic, yet *appears* to be ‘inextricably interwoven with content’—as she formulated it in 1944¹⁶—took two, complementary, directions. On the one hand, she took a predominantly historical approach; on the other, a predominantly theoretical. Consciously and deliberately she tested the theoretical conclusions she had so far reached by applying them to problematic aspects of Thomas Mann,¹⁷ of Coleridge,¹⁸ and of Herder.¹⁹ In her reading of *Joseph und seine Brüder* and *Doktor Faustus* (as of William Faulkner’s story *The Bear*) she found welcome corroboration of what she was gleaning from abstract study of eighteenth-century Weimar aesthetic theory: that the ‘content’ (*Inhalt*) an artist uses to create his work is quite different from the ‘content’ (*Gehalt*) the work has in terms of significance; and that what is created is a ‘semblance’ (*Schein*), a frank illusion with no pretence to ‘real’ content.²⁰ The work, in collaboration with Kathleen

¹³ See, for example, ‘Group Work in the Interpretation of a Poem by Hölderlin’, *GLL*, NS, 4 (1951), 248–60; German version: ‘Gemeinschaftsarbeit bei der Textinterpretation eines Hölderlin-Gedichtes’, trans. K. W. Maurer, *Studium Generale*, 5 (1952), 74–82.

¹⁴ (With B. A. Rowley) ‘Testing Candidates for a University Course in Language and Literature’, *Modern Languages*, 42 (1961), 56–64.

¹⁵ See, for example, ‘Goethe’s *Egmont* might have been written for us’, *The Radio Times*, 22 April 1949, p. 4; ‘Goethe’s Art and Practice of Living’, *The Listener*, 10 Nov. 1949, pp. 801–2.

¹⁶ Review of Nolte’s *Art and Reality*, 401; cf. *Models of Wholeness*, p. 19.

¹⁷ See above, n. 3; and her speech to P. E. N. Club Memorial Meeting for Thomas Mann (5 Oct. 1955), *P. E. N. News*, 192 (1956), 27–32.

¹⁸ See her transcriptions, translation, and annotation of German entries in *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, vol. 1, 1794–1804 (London, 1957), two parts; vol. 2, 1804–1808 (New York, 1961), two parts; and ‘Coleridge und Deutschland, 1794–1804: Zum ersten Band der Gesamtausgabe seiner *Notebooks*’, in *Forschungsprobleme der vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte*, 2, ed. Fritz Ernst and Kurt Wais (Tübingen, 1958), pp. 7–23.

¹⁹ (With L. A. Willoughby) ‘Goethe to Herder, July 1722: Some Problems of Pedagogic Presentation’, *GLL*, NS, 15 (1961), 110–22, and ‘The Blind Man and The Poet: An Early Stage in Goethe’s Quest for Form’, in *German Studies presented to Walter Horace Bruford* (London, 1962), pp. 29–57; German version: ‘Der Blinde und der Dichter: Der junge Goethe auf der Suche nach der Form’, trans. Peter Hasler, *Goethe Jahrbuch*, 91 (1974), 33–57. Both essays are reprinted in *Models of Wholeness*, pp. 127–42 and 99–125 respectively.

²⁰ See above, n. 3, 230.

Coburn, on Coleridge's *Notebooks*, which she began in 1947, came to fruition over the next fifteen years or so. But the confirmation which Coleridge's reading of his German contemporaries provided of her own interpretations underpinned her sense of the fundamental rightness of the positions she had worked out. Furthermore, her explorations in collaboration with L. A. Willoughby of Herder's investigation of the psycho-physical foundations of a specifically aesthetic sense of form gave her an unshakeable conviction of having come at least close to discovering the truth of the matter. But, characteristically, she was under no illusion that she possessed the whole truth. She continued to test her historical findings in terms of the 'virtuous spiral' she saw at work in scholarship: the thought of the past and modern theorising dynamically related in reciprocal subordination, now the one, now the other gaining ascendancy (*Inaugural*, pp. 25–6). Like Herder, she 'never lost sight of structure when investigating genesis' (*ibid.*, p. 17) or of genesis when investigating structure. By drawing on contemporary aesthetic theories (in particular, the work of Susanne K. Langer, itself indebted to the theorising of the German eighteenth century, mediated in part by Edward Bullough and J. M. Thorburn) she arrived at a more precisely formulated account of some of the central concepts of German classicism than was hitherto available—even to eighteenth-century thinkers themselves. In principle, such progressive refinement is open-ended: as current theory develops, so historical insight may grow. In short, by a skilful interplay of history and theory, she arrived at an understanding of Weimar aesthetics, which is open to further re-thinking in the light of whatever 'postmodern' consciousness is yet to come, once brought to bear on emerging historical knowledge.

The upshot of Mary Wilkinson's scholarly reflection during this middle period of her career was a powerful theory, rooted in her mastery of key texts of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century debate on the role of the aesthetic. It was Goethe's and Schiller's shared conviction that objectification of the inner life is the distinctive function of all art: 'the poet', as Herder had it in opposition to Lessing, 'should express feelings'.²¹ 'Feeling' in the eighteenth century had a much wider meaning than it has today, encompassing what T. S. Eliot called 'felt-thought', the whole continuum from tactile sensation to thought—i.e. thought not yet reduced to the either-or categories of discursive language and, thus,

²¹ See 'Schiller's Concept of *Schein* in the Light of Recent Aesthetics', *German Quarterly*, 28 (1955), 219–27 (225).

highly ambivalent. A work of art, like any other aesthetic phenomenon, articulates such feeling by providing, for our contemplation, an analogue of the felt-life within, something which can be achieved only if this analogue—this ‘semblance’ (*Schein*)—exhibits the same sensuous-abstract quality as the felt-thought it is designed to express. Where this illusion is achieved the direct benefit for our minds is twofold. On the one hand we gain in self-awareness, and self-control. On the other, aesthetic insight is knowledge and, like any form of freshly acquired knowledge, enables us to conceive the world with a new tool. Commonly shared but dimly apprehended feelings become, through aesthetic experience, no less shared but now articulated ‘convictions’ or ‘attitudes’—*Gesinnungen*—upon which we act and base our reasoning, but to which (for the reason that they are still in part tethered to sensation) we find it impossible to give adequate intellectual expression. Such sensuous-abstract schemata permit us to ‘see into the life of things’. *Gehalt*—‘content’ in the sense of ‘import’—is that aspect of our felt-life that the work of art ‘contains’ for us. Feeling, Susanne Langer argues, has distinctive patterns; it exhibits what she calls a ‘morphology’:²² the structure of the inner life is an organic, developmental one in which thinking-feeling-bodily sensation are interfused. And it is in constant interaction with the external world: we internalise ideas and impressions—what Goethe and Schiller called *Stoff* (‘content’ in the sense of ‘material’)—by aligning them with the felt, dynamic, patterns at work within us. Because of different life-experiences the felt-life of one individual will, to a lesser or greater extent, differ from that of another. But, because we share the same, or at least a similar, natural, cultural, or social environment, the overlap will be considerable. The more fundamental and encompassing the felt-thought an aesthetic object articulates, the more ‘universal’ its appeal will be, the greater its significance. If what is within us is to be projected outwards on to it, the aesthetic phenomenon must exhibit the same organic structure as the morphology of our inner life; it must, as Schiller argued, evince ‘manifest freedom’ (*Freiheit in der Erscheinung*): it must appear to be both self-regulating and self-regulated. In order to achieve this, peculiarly aesthetic, illusion, the relations established in the aesthetic object must inhere in the medium used, so that its aesthetic order does not appear to be imposed from outside, but *seems* rather to be immanent in the object itself.

²² Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (New York, 1961), pp. 92 and 202.

Her profound grasp of the nub of Weimar aesthetics—a sensitivity alive to the subtleties that enable an aesthetic phenomenon to *seem* to transcend history—gave to everything that Mary Wilkinson undertook from the early 1960s on (for example, her article on Goethe, which has graced successive editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* since 1964) its inner form, from her administrative duties through her teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate level to her intense preoccupation, first with Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and then with Goethe's *Faust*. Indeed, the edition of the former which she and L. A. Willoughby published at the Clarendon Press in 1967 is unthinkable without this underlying conceptual coherence, which lends to their accurate, elegant translation into modern English, their Glossary of Terms, their Commentary, and, above all, their long, strenuously argued, Introduction an intellectual integrity that gives new life to Schiller's thinking.²³ As she put it herself (*Inaugural*, p. 10): 'the question . . . is not *Whether* theory? but *What* theory—and how? Half-baked and half-conscious? Or lucidly thought through and applied with discrimination?' Since 1955, thanks to Visiting Professorships at Chicago, Columbia (1956), and Cornell (where, from 1967, she was appointed Professor-at-Large), her insistence on the reciprocal subordination of historical and textual evidence to a thoroughly worked-out and clearly stated theory had been dubbed in many a German department across America as 'doing a Wilk'! And lecture-tours in the 1960s ensured that 'die Wilkinson' became a well-known figure in Germany too. Her settled judgement, that theory is intrinsic to perception and that its conscious elaboration promotes rather than inhibits spontaneity of feeling, is the burden—along with tracing the filiation of key concepts of Weimar aesthetics to Bullough and Langer amongst others—of the Introduction to her edition of Edward Bullough's hitherto unpublished Cambridge lectures of 1907/8 on 'The Modern Conception of Aesthetics', plus his two most seminal essays: "'Psychical Distance" as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle' and 'Mind and Medium in Art'.²⁴ But it was by elaborating, in collaboration with L. A. Willoughby, her hard-won theoretical stance in making their case in the Introduction to Schiller's *Aesthetic Education* (1967) for the relevance to our present

²³ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. with an Introduction, Commentary, and Glossary of Terms by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1982), pp. xxxviii–xxxix, lxvi–lxviii, cxiv, 306–7, and 308. Henceforth referred to as *Aesthetic Education*.

²⁴ Edward Bullough, *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays*, 2nd edn. (Westport, CT, 1977).

condition of his cultural theory, that Wilkinson brought home, not only to fellow germanists but, as the widespread positive reception of their bilingual edition made clear, to philosophers, cultural historians, and educationists as well, the full power and complexity of the enduring significance of Weimar Classicism's central tenet, namely that becoming truly human requires aesthetic education.

Wilkinson and Willoughby's edition of *Aesthetic Education*, with its superb facing-page English translation, deeply erudite and enlightening Commentary, and now indispensable Glossary of Terms, became, on its second edition in 1982, the best-selling germanistic book published as an OUP paperback. And, like all of her work, it had been a long time in the making. Ever since their joint 1944 edition of his play *Kabale und Liebe*, Schiller had been a focus of their work; and since the early 1950s they had been wrestling with the conceptual and stylistic difficulties presented by Schiller's *Aesthetic Education*, originally with the intention of producing an edition for his Bicentenary of 1959. In the event, they decided on a translation-with-commentary because 'before . . . a frankly interpretative rendering . . . can be undertaken, not only the general tenor of Schiller's thesis, but the details of his argument and the peculiarities of his method, need to be exposed to the critical debate of scholars in many fields—and not just those trained in the German tradition either'.²⁵ An essay by Wilkinson, first published in Germany in 1959, discussed some of the major problems raised in translating Schiller's eighteenth-century idiom,²⁶ and was closely followed by a series of articles on significantly problematic aspects of Schiller's thought, both conceptual and contextual.²⁷ As always, keen to engage in debate with other scholars, open to new currents of thought (like the 1960s enthusiasm for Marshall McLuhan and the revisionist accounts of the European Enlightenment then emerging)—not for nothing did she diligently attend Frank Kermode's University College seminars on French Structuralism at about this time!—and tenaciously

²⁵ Friedrich Schiller, *Kabale und Liebe*, ed. with an Introduction and Notes (Oxford, 1944). *Aesthetic Education*, Preface, p. vi. Cf. Appendix II: 'Translators and Translation', pp. 338–47.

²⁶ 'Zur Sprache und Struktur der Ästhetischen Briefe', *Akzente*, 6 (1959), 389–418; German version of: 'Reflections after Translating Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*', in *Schiller: Bicentenary Lectures*, ed. F. Norman (London, 1960), pp. 46–82.

²⁷ 'Schiller und die Idee der Aufklärung', *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, 4 (1960), 42–59; *Schiller: Poet or Philosopher?*, Special Taylorian Lecture (17 Nov. 1959) (Oxford, 1961) (reprinted in *Models of Wholeness*, pp. 69–97); 'Schiller and the Gutenberg Galaxy: A Question of Appropriate Contexts', *GLL*, NS, 18 (1965), 309–18 (reprinted in *Models of Wholeness*, pp. 181–193). Cf. (with L. A. Willoughby) 'Nachlese zu Schillers Ästhetik. Auf Wegen der Herausgeber', *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, 11 (1967), 374–403.

anchored in the grammatical, rhetorical, logical, and aesthetic, detail of her text, Wilkinson succeeded in re-presenting Schiller's arguments in a mode which caught the interest of her contemporaries, at home and abroad: a German book-version of the Introduction, Glossary and Appendices to their joint edition appeared in 1977.²⁸

After producing, with L. A. Willoughby, a masterful, short, account of the logic of Schiller's conception of 'wholeness' in human life,²⁹ Mary Wilkinson felt she had done for the moment all she could to explicate Schiller's thought, and turned back to Goethe, and his *Faust*. Like her work on Schiller, the development of what was announced in 1973 to be a theory of *Faust* as 'Tragedy in the Diachronic Mode' had a long history.³⁰ An early article on the traditional theological material built into the First Part of the play was deeply unfashionable on its first appearance in the 1950s heyday of New Criticism, with its exclusive interest in what the Germans call *werkimmanente Interpretation* ('reading restricted to the work in itself'); and it likewise seemed to owe its new-found popularity in the 1970s to the swing in fashion to the other extreme, that of 'tradition-hunting' for its own sake.³¹ Given the pervasive advocacy on all sides today for 'literary (and cultural) theory', it might seem that Wilkinson's three great essays on *Faust* of 1957, 1971, and 1973 are poised to enjoy another bout of fashionable acceptance.³² But her interest in theory is a predominantly practical one; she held, with Goethe, that 'theory in and of itself is of no use' (*Maxims and Reflections*, p. 70), and that its chief value lies in raising sensibility to the level of clear, and therefore, *applicable*, principles. It would be difficult to find better illustrations of Wilkinson's typically practical theorising than her three *Faust* studies.

²⁸ *Schillers Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen: Eine Einführung* (Munich, 1977).

²⁹ "'The Whole Man' in Schiller's Theory of Culture and Society: On the Virtue of a Plurality of Models', in *Essays in German Language, Culture and Society*, ed. Siegbert S. Praver, R. Hinton Thomas, and Leonard Forster (London, 1969), pp. 177–210. Repr. in *Models of Wholeness*, pp. 233–68.

³⁰ See 'Goethe's *Faust*: Tragedy in the Diachronic Mode', *PEGS*, NS, 42, (1973), 116–74 (136–44).

³¹ 'The Theological Basis of Faust's Credo', *GLL*, NS, 10 (1957), 229–39; German version: 'Theologischer Stoff und dichterischer Gehalt in Fausts sogenanntem Credo', in *Goethe und die Tradition*, ed. Hans Reiss, Wissenschaftliche Paperbacks, Literaturwissenschaft, 19 (Frankfurt, 1972), pp. 242–58, repr. in *Aufsätze zu Goethes 'Faust I'*, ed. Werner Keller, Wege der Forschung, 145 (Darmstadt, 1974), pp. 551–71. Cf. above, n. 30, 139–41.

³² The second of these three articles is: 'Faust in der Logosscene—Willkürlicher Übersetzer oder geschulter Exeget? Wie, zu welchem Ende—und für wen—schreibt man heutzutage einen Kommentar?', in *Dichtung, Sprache, Gesellschaft: Akten des IV. Internationalen Germanistenkongresses 1970 in Princeton*, ed. Victor Lange and Hans-Gert Roloff (Frankfurt, 1971), pp. 115–24.

Her argument, *in nuce*, is that, at all levels of the text, *Faust* invites a double response: on the one hand, to the ‘synchronic’ dimension of the (illusory) ‘presence’ which it shares with all other fictional works; and, on the other, to a ‘diachronic’ dimension, deliberately contrived by Goethe, that opens up to the reader’s/spectator’s critical contemplation the perennially recurrent structures of Western modes of feeling, thinking, doing, and being. Her concern is to account for a salient fact of the text, noted by successive commentators: namely, that whether *Faust* is dealing with theology or economics, with the dramaturgy of the theatre or poetological semiotics, its astonishing wealth of material is always redolent of the whole length of Western history. In arguing that Goethe is out to trace the ramifications of those constituent forms of our shared cultural inheritance, recurring, in a non-successive, ahistorical, pattern, Wilkinson affirms the relevance of the greatest text in the German language to a generation which sees itself as inhabiting a postmodern age which seeks in such works as Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World* or Richard Tarnas’s *Passion of the Western Mind* orientation in the otherwise bewildering welter of cultural forms that have come down to us.

The intellectual excitement generated in and by Mary Wilkinson’s writings also accompanied her into the classroom. In crucial ways she was the perfect teacher at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (and was proud of the Diploma in Education she was awarded at Oxford in 1933). Her instruction in translation from German into English was a model of how to instil the difficult discipline of giving due weight to grammatical, lexical, logical, and rhetorical values in interpreting written (and oral) language. Her view of grammar, for instance, as a repository of age-old human thought, always to be respected, if not always adhered to, was a liberation to a generation of students disoriented by the ‘alternate’ grammars which flourished in the wake of the Chomsky revolution. In seminars and lectures the back-and-forth of genuine exchange—she also put her own positions to the test in class—engaged head and heart alike, in order, as she had it, ‘to set the feeling expressed in art before the eye of the mind’. Her continued reflections in print on the pedagogic value of language and literature as a university subject were the precipitate of her own teaching experience.³³ Even her negative comments (perhaps in part

³³ ‘Vox Collegii’, *New Phineas*, 22, n. 2 (1963), 2–5; ‘On Being Seen and Not Heard’, Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association (3 Jan. 1964), *Modern Languages*, 45 (1964), 4–13; ‘On Teaching Prescribed Texts: Further to the “Form-Content” Problem’, *Modern Languages*, 55 (1974), 105–16.

because of the beauty of her copper-plate hand-writing) had the effect (and intention) of promoting independence of mind, because they were always argued for. What has become known as 'perceptionism' was brought home in the 1960s in her first-year seminar at University College. Jane Abercrombie's *Anatomy of Judgement*, Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, Susanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key* and *Feeling and Form* were recommended reading for a Critical Methods course in which Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg* formed the basis of an induction into the rigours, and delights, of aesthetic analysis. During the same period Wilkinson's University of London Intercollegiate lectures on Goethe's poetry opened her students' eyes to a world of meaning in poems which until then had meant very little indeed to the majority of them. Elisabeth Sewell's *The Structure of Poetry* and Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction* (again recommended reading) duly corroborated and confirmed a mode of analysis whose power of illumination her students marvelled at and sought to imitate. Further lectures on Herder's and Schiller's theories of popularisation not only showed how stylistic analysis could illuminate discourse other than poetry; they also revealed the (not least, politically significant) uses to which ancient rhetoric could be put. Her students learned, too, to appreciate the crucial importance of appropriate historical perspectives for the understanding of both aesthetic and non-aesthetic phenomena. Listening to her lecture on *Faust* sharpened awareness of a living tradition reaching back to the Fall of Troy; just as her lecture-series on 'The Temper of the Eighteenth Century' brought alive the complex of cultural interrelations that constitutes the European Enlightenment, one that was clearly not reducible to the narrowly conceived and over-neat categories of orthodox literary history.

It was, however, as a supervisor of postgraduates that Mary Wilkinson, at least in later life, was at her very best. She chaired a postgraduate Methodology Seminar held weekly throughout the academic year at London University's Institute of Germanic Studies. Sitting there of a Tuesday evening, listening and participating in discussions on problems of stylistic criteria, of defining value in literature, of relating form and function, problems 'of working in advance of one's ability to formulate precisely what it is one is doing'—problems, always *problems!*—the apprentice scholar began to grasp the essential difference between undergraduate and postgraduate work: to understand that scholarship is a communal activity in which each individual scholar makes a contribution inasmuch as she or he solves a genuine problem, however limited in scope. It meant, by coming to terms with others, adding a bit to what is known,

a small contribution, which not many feel called to make. Everything scholarly is provisional and open-ended, and should issue in passing on to others problems at a slightly higher level of accurate formulation than had been the case at the start of one's investigations. Moreover, the intercommunication between scholars is furthered immeasurably if one's method is presented as unambiguously and frankly as possible; for the whole art of scholarship consists in the transposition from a quantitatively unmanageable body of data to a qualitatively meaningful one. These, and other lessons, were not taught simply by edifying maxim or inspiring example; they were also forcefully inculcated by stern admonition, as may be demonstrated by the following excerpt from a comment of Mary Wilkinson's, typical of many, written on the first draft of a Ph.D. chapter in 1970:

Scholarship, in my view, does not consist in starting from scratch with the primary materials of one's subject in order to arrive at a position already established by earlier scholars. Such positions, if agreed with, should simply be taken over, acknowledged, and—where necessary—an explanation of why one agrees with them given. If one disagrees, one should either dispute them—or modify them: in the latter case shewing [sic] exactly where and why one diverges. [Anything less than that] is not scholarship.

Informing all of this was what Max Black called 'the morality of scholarship': 'persistence in keeping the mind in a state of disciplined sanity'. And since it was a discipline to which she subjected herself, the result amongst her students was deep reverence and love.³⁴

The same dutiful commitment to the fundamental validity of what she professed informed, too, Mary Wilkinson's administrative work. As long-standing Secretary of the University of London's Board of Germanic Languages and Literatures (1946–52) and as Head of University College's Department of German in the early 1960s, she introduced many new elements into the London syllabus, including from 1970 a quite independent undergraduate curriculum at University College. What was common to all these innovations was an emphasis on textual analysis as the nodal point of broader, historico-cultural study. Like Goethe's Egmont, she combined a scrupulous concern to perform her duties with a no less conscientious repudiation of what she saw as the innumerable, time-wasting trivialities of daily administration. And while it is true that for her the peaks of German literary culture were Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, Heine,

³⁴ Max Black, *The Morality of Scholarship* (Ithaca, 1967), p. 4; cf. the Editors' insightful obituary, *PEGS*, ns, 71 (2001), 1–4.

and Thomas Mann, her personal taste did not in any way dictate her appointment-policy as Head of Department: she engaged distinguished teachers and researchers in the medieval period, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as in her own field of specialisation—many of whom went on to occupy Chairs of German at home and abroad. But perhaps her most memorable, and enduring, administrative contribution was to the English Goethe Society, which she served in various capacities from 1945 on: most notably as Editor (1953–71), as President (1974–85), and as Vice-President (from 1986 until her death).

Mary Wilkinson's helpfulness to, and patience with, younger colleagues helped ensure that her sense of the human importance of scholarship as the open-ended and inherently difficult process of apprehending, at all levels, the interrelation of multifaceted cultural phenomena, was passed on to succeeding generations. She never forgot to acknowledge her own formative influences, and she impressed upon others the need to see the work of the individual scholar as a contribution to a group-effort, both past and present. The motto, 'Ist Fortzusetzen' ('To Be Continued')—taken from the end of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* of 1829, which its editors have given to the newly published collection of some of her and Willoughby's finest essays, *Models of Wholeness*—nicely captures her view of scholarship as provisional and dependent on the scholarly community for further development. In a 1968 article on *Wilhelm Meister* she and Willoughby offered their findings to others, since 'we ourselves are unlikely to put [these raw materials] to either of the uses mentioned in our sub-title'.³⁵ And six years later they provided, explicitly for the further consideration of other scholars, a sketch of the largely untold story of the filiation of Weimar Classicism down through the Russian Formalists to French (and American) Structuralists, emphasising the consequent damaging distortion caused by such a lack of historical perspective.³⁶ Amongst much else, this paper alone has stimulated a research project, supported by an AHRB Large Research Grant, in the Department of German and the Centre for Intercultural Studies at the University of Glasgow investigating the intellectual background of Ernst Cassirer's theory of culture with

³⁵ 'Having and Being, or Bourgeois versus Nobility: Notes for a Chapter on Social and Cultural History or for a Commentary on *Wilhelm Meister*', *GLL*, NS, 22 (1968), 101–5 (101); reprinted in *Models of Wholeness*, pp. 227–32 (p. 227).

³⁶ 'Missing Links or Whatever Happened to Weimar Classicism?', in 'Erfahrung und Überlieferung': *Festschrift for C. P. Magill*, ed. Hinrich Siefken and Alan Robinson, Trivium Special Publications, 1 (Cardiff, 1974), pp. 57–74.

reference to Weimar Classicism and subsequent German cultural theorists. Indeed, Wilkinson's impact on *Germanistik* has been immense: work by Jeremy Adler, Paul Bishop, Ilse Graham, Martin Swales, Hans R. Vaget, and David Wellbery—to mention but a few, distinguished examples—would be unthinkable without her. Moreover, partly because of her work on Coleridge, her writing has resonated far beyond the confines of German Studies. Lore Metzger's acknowledgement, in a study of English Romantic poetry, of her indebtedness to Wilkinson's 'exemplary scholarship' is indicative of broad influence which has continued unabated.³⁷

To those who knew her, Mary Wilkinson was an inspiring, and occasionally daunting, presence on the academic stage, on account of both her warm, and magnetic, personality, which evinced an incredible liveliness of spirit well into late old age, and her indomitable character, which enabled her to wage a successful battle against cancer from her late fifties on. After her retirement from her Chair in 1976 she continued to work, giving lectures to the Conference of University Teachers of German ('The "Scandal" of Literature', in 1980) and to the English Goethe Society (her Presidential Address entitled 'Perception as Process: Goethe's Treatment of "Auf dem See"—with an Excursus on Emblematics', in 1976 and her valedictory address, 'To Estonia, With Love: Reflections on the Name and Nature of Scholarship by a Rank Outsider', in 1989); chairing the special joint meeting of CUTG and EGS in 1982 at Queen Mary College, London to mark the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Goethe's death, in connection with which she broadcast on both Radio 3 and German radio. She also edited a collection of essays by various hands, celebrating the 1982 Goethe-Year, to which she contributed a piece of her own, 'Sexual Attitudes in Goethe's Life and Works'. She had been refining the lecture version of this since the late 1960s, during which time, no doubt because of its theme—and the fact that she drew on a *Playboy* translation of Goethe's poem, 'The Diary'—it had gained almost mythical status. The printed version, like the radio broadcasts on the same topic, revealed its central topic to be, by contrast, Goethe's theory and practice of Renunciation (*Entsagung*).³⁸

³⁷ Lore Metzger, *One Foot In Eden: Modes of Pastoral in Romantic Poetry* (Chapel Hill, 1986), pp. xiv–xv and 11–12; cf. Morag Harris, *Emily Dickinson in Time* (London, 1999) and *The Garden of Language and the Loaded Gun: Linguistic Transformations in Romantic Aesthetics* (New York, 2002), passim.

³⁸ *Goethe Revisited: Lectures delivered in sundry places and on various dates to mark the 150th anniversary of Goethe's death* (New York, 1983; London, 1984), pp. 171–84.

She received many honours during her career: in 1965 she was awarded the Gold Medal of the Goethe-Institut; the following year the honorary degree of LL.D. was conferred on her by Smith College, Massachusetts; in 1971 she received an honorary D.Litt. from the University of Kent; in 1972 she was made a Fellow of the British Academy; the Academy of Sciences at Göttingen elected her Corresponding Member in 1973; a year later she was awarded the Prize for German Studies Abroad, and in 1976 elected Corresponding Member, by the German Academy for Language and Literature; and Bedford College, London elected her to an Honorary Fellowship in 1985. The honour that might have meant most to her—Fellowship of her beloved University College—she declined on the eve of her retirement, in protest at what she saw as misguided leadership. She took great pleasure in the *Festschrift*, aptly titled *Tradition and Creation*, presented to her in 1978 by colleagues and friends and containing contributions by fellow germanists and former students. Perhaps, characteristically, what she seemed most proud of in her later years was the twenty-first successful supervision of a Ph.D. written by a student of hers.³⁹

But the death of her partner, Leonard Willoughby, in 1977 hit her very hard indeed. Of course she rallied to write up the notes he had left of the first Bithell Memorial Lecture which he had held the previous year, and for which, to her immense pride and joy, an extra large lecture-hall had had to be sought to accommodate his extraordinarily big audience; and she also managed to pen an elegant, delightful, obituary for the German Academy.⁴⁰ In truth she was devastated; and she found it impossible to continue work on their grand study of 'The Age of Goethe' which had reached the draft-typescript stage. She continued to attend regularly meetings of the English Goethe Society, and remained fascinated by new developments in the Humanities, including the Derrida-derived 'deconstructionism' of the late 1970s and 1980s (to which she was not entirely unsympathetic, noting its partial similarities to Goethean modes of thought). She remained a delightful social companion, full of concern for those people and ideas she loved. Declining health, however, made her increasingly reclusive. Appalled on occasion by what she saw as the threat

³⁹ Heidi Hanna Robinson, 'The Growth of a Myth: An Examination of English Responses to Schiller's Theory of Culture', Ph.D. thesis (University College London, 1981).

⁴⁰ L. A. Willoughby, 'Wine That Maketh Glad . . .' *The Interplay of Reality and Symbol in Goethe's Life and Work* (London, 1977), also published in *PEGS*, NS 47 (1976-7), 68-133; 'Gedenkworte für Leonard Ashley Willoughby', *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung: Jahrbuch* (1978), 128-33.

to achieved scholarly standards posed by an insipid coincidence of the commercialisation of scholarship on the one side and, on the other, the flood of publications advocating theory for theory's sake, she nonetheless rejoiced in any advances she discerned in the diffusion of educational principles that had their roots in classical Weimar. And she never lost, even in the last few years afflicted by Alzheimer's disease, the child's wonder at the beauty of the world. Throughout her life she would affirm with Goethe's Lynkeus in the Second Part of *Faust*: 'let [life] be what it may, still it was so beautiful!' ('Es sei wie es wolle/ Es war doch so schön!').

R. H. STEPHENSON

University of Glasgow