The genesis of the poem, ‘A Character’, merits a more exhaustive study than I can
give here, but it is relevant to attempt briefly to describe that stub in the Christabel
MS. There is no writing for an inch from the top of the recto page and the first line
that appears is slightly indented; this probably indicates space for a title and the
opening of a poem. From here to the bottom of the page are the beginnings of six
evenly-spaced quatrains. The first three have not been identified; the last three are
stanzas 1, 2, and 4 of ‘A Character’. (When Wordsworth wrote out ‘A Character’ in
its full version of five stanzas, first, late in the Christabel MS., and, secondly, in
MS.18A, he retained this original stanza order, i.e. 1, 2, 4, 3, 5, but in 18A he
indicated that stanzas 3 and 4 were to be reversed.) We can have no certainty about
what was on the verso of the page, as, except for an ‘ing’ just over half way down —
probably ‘doing’ at the end of line 18 of ‘The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale’ — no line
endings have clearly remained. The stub of the following page contains quatrains
from the last-named poem beginning at line 25. Thus, it is at least possible that three
verses from ‘A Character’ were once a part of a version of ‘The Farmer’. It may be
no accident that the two poems, beyond their general similarity in form and manner,
share an element: when ‘The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale’ was first published in the
Morning Post for 21 July 1800, it had as its sub-title, the words, ‘A Character’ (a point
not noted by De Selincourt, see my article, ‘Wordsworth’s Poetry and Stuart’s
of Tilsbury Vale’ suffered a kind of fission before 21 July, and that out of this came
the origins of ‘Poor Susan’ (as Professor Reed notes), ‘The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale’
as we now have it, and ‘A Character’.

The Bird in the Brittle Grass

The bird in the brittle grass
Mirrors its dryness.
In a hot season
Dust, it seems, must echo dust
And plumage fade with flowers.

At a sound, though, dull wings beat
And the air vibrates to a shriller blue
As bird flashes to branch,
Hangs there a moment bright
Then dies again to drabness.

Why wonder at it?
Stillness hides self-beauty
That only flares from movement.
Like you, he’d sooner stay safe
Than lovely.

Alan McLean