Comparatively with my situation in this island for the first 20 months I am now very happy; and yet I often retire to the little pavilion which is my study and bed room, and with my flute in my hand and sometimes tears in my eyes I warble over the little evening song of which I sent thee a copy. Ah my beloved, then my heart overleaps the distance of half a world and wholly embraces thee.¹

So wrote Matthew Flinders to his wife Ann on the 20th November 1805. He had been held captive on Mauritius for nearly two years, and it was four and a half since he had left Ann behind in England. He had had plenty of time to muse on, and formulate justifications for, the decisions he had made which had combined with circumstances beyond his control and led to his confined state.

The little song lyric he wrote and set to an air by Haydn, while couched in conventional poetic language of the time, dramatises one such train of thought. Tellingly, the lyric is addressed to the absent lover by the woman he has left behind – so typical of Flinders to approach a situation from the point of view of the other. The first verse runs:
Dooley: My Evening Song

Why Henry didst thou leave me, thus leave me here to mourn.

Ah cruel thou deceivedst me, I’ll ne’er see thy return.

Thou know’st how much I loved thee, yet could resolve to go.

My grief could nothing move thee, though I was sunk in woe.²

Here we have the plea of the bereft wife, imagined of course by the husband, and poetically distanced as convention demanded by the use of the pseudonym ‘Henry’. The first verse sets up the rhetorical reversal of the second: Flinders shows that he understands his wife’s pain, and this makes his justification all the stronger, with its stirring appeal to duty and obedience:

But why do I thus blame thee, alas thou couldst not stay,

For when stern duty calls thee, thou canst not but obey.

Thy looks bespoke the anguish, the struggle in thy breast …

Further, however, Flinders could not go. He wrote ‘To be completed’ underneath the text. How could he complete this story, when he did not yet know the outcome? Even his rational mind would superstitiously shy away from anticipating a happy ending for his life’s romance. For my arrangement of the piece, I tried, with hindsight, to conjecture the last line he might have written: ‘Though now apart we languish, together will our hearts find rest.’

In performance, I suggest that the flute might first play the tune through, then accompany the singer for the two verses.

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