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Rhyme and Reason: Erasmus Darwin's Romanticism

Noel Jackson

More remarkable, it may seem, than the sudden disappearance of scientific poetry from the late-eighteenth-century English literary landscape is the fact that it was ever widely read in the first place. “Philosophical poetry,” as it was then known, and especially the work of its most famous practitioner, Erasmus Darwin, has been scorned as a gimmicky, tedious, frequently laughable exercise. This ugly stepsister of didactic verse amalgamates poetic fancy and scientific fact, yoking versified descriptions to prose notes detailing the contemporary state of research in natural philosophy, industrial technology, botany, chemistry, and medicine, to name only a few subjects of this poetry. In an often-cited letter to John Thelwall, Samuel Taylor Coleridge boasted of his catholic taste in poetry, professing an almost equal appreciation for “the *head* and fancy of Akenside, and the *heart* and fancy of Bowles,” among others¹—but none for such fanciful productions of the brain as Darwin’s paean to the steam engine, in part 1 of *The Botanic Garden, The Economy of Vegetation*.² Coleridge’s disappointed wish, recorded

¹ Coleridge to Thelwall, December 17, 1796, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–71), 1:279. Hereafter cited as *STCL*. Coleridge’s opinion of *The Botanic Garden* is concise enough: “I absolutely nauseate Darwin’s poem” (Coleridge to Thelwall, May 13, 1796, in *STCL*, 1:216).

² Darwin published part 2 of the poem, *The Loves of the Plants*, first, in 1789. *The Economy of Vegetation* appeared in 1791 as part 1 of *The Botanic Garden: A Poem, in Two*

some twenty years later, for William Wordsworth to have produced in *The Recluse* “the *first* and *only* true Phil. Poem in existence” indicates a pointed though implicit refusal to recognize the poet who was inarguably the most popular British “philosophical Poet” of the late eighteenth century.³

In perhaps his best-known phrase, read by critics both early and late as a definitive account of his authorial ambitions, Darwin announced in the “Advertisement” to *The Botanic Garden* his intention “to inlist Imagination under the banner of Science” (*EV*, v; *LP*, i). Here he promotes a harmonious if manifestly unequal union of science and poetry, comparable perhaps to the example of the midcentury philosophical poet whom Coleridge praises by name, Mark Akenside. Far from effecting a genuine reconciliation of “the *head* and fancy,” as Coleridge credits Akenside with doing in *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744), Darwin is generally regarded as subordinating imagination, and canons of poetic taste to boot, to the scientific aim and artifice of his poetry. Concerned more with shoring up his scientific theories than with revivifying a moribund Popean style, Darwin demonstrates a “tendency toward rationalist abstraction” held by some to characterize a “degenerate intellectual and poetic tradition that taught the Romantics . . . as much through negative as through positive example.”⁴ Darwin’s failure to resolve what Plato called the “ancient quarrel” between philosophers and poets seems in this sense to have been so spectacularly decisive as to discourage further attempts at this reconciliatory gesture, and so the genre of philosophical poetry fell into disrepute and relative obscurity only

Parts . . . with Philosophical Notes (rpt. New York: Garland, 1978). The two parts of *The Botanic Garden* are hereafter cited as *EV* and *LP*, followed by canto and line numbers; prefatory material and Darwin’s notes to the poem are cited by page number. For Darwin’s description of the steam engine see *EV*, 1.253–96.

³ Coleridge to Wordsworth, May 30, 1815, in *STCL*, 4:574. See also the January 15, 1804, letter to Richard Sharp in which Coleridge predicts that Wordsworth will be remembered as “the first and greatest philosophical Poet” (*STCL*, 2:1034); and Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2:156. On Coleridge’s vision for Wordsworth’s composition of “the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHIC POEM” see Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge’s Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 171–76; and Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–4, 23–24, 54.

⁴ Donald H. Reiman, introduction to the reprint edition of *The Botanic Garden*, xiv.

a few years after the apex of Darwin's fame. Thus Coleridge claims a measure of critical prescience when he reports—as a young man, and at the height of Darwin's fame—comparing the older poet's work to a “Russian palace of ice, glittering, cold, and transitory” (*Biographia Literaria*, 1:20).

As if to confirm Coleridge's prophecy, readers continue to rehearse a narrative of Darwin's transitory fame and of the forces that accounted for the virtual disappearance of philosophical poetry at the dawn of the nineteenth century. No less a reader than his grandson, Charles, recalls, in the engaging *Life of Erasmus Darwin* (1879), “old men who spoke with a degree of enthusiasm about his poetry, quite incomprehensible at the present day. . . . Notwithstanding the former high estimation of his poetry by men of all kinds in England, no one of the present generation reads, as it appears, a single line of it.”⁵ Two decades earlier, in *The Origin of Species* (1859), Charles famously emphasized the extreme improbability of preserving vast changes in nature over a short period of time; appropriately, then, he now marvels at “so complete a reversal of judgment within a few years”—“a remarkable phenomenon” even by the standards of inconstant public taste (33–34). As in many later versions of this tale, Charles is clear on the short- and long-term agents responsible for Erasmus's obscurity. Although “the downfall of his fame as a poet was chiefly caused by the publication of the well-known parody the ‘Loves of the Triangles’” in the *Anti-Jacobin* (1798), Charles notes concurrently a widespread shift in public taste “under the guidance of Wordsworth and Coleridge,” through whose tutelage poetry was recognized as “chiefly concerned with the feelings and deeper workings of the mind”—that is, as resisting the “abstract rationalism” of which Erasmus was guilty (34). At stake in this account is not merely Erasmus's popularity as a poet but the extinction of a poetic species of which he was the representative. After reaching its “inglorious climax” in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the philosophical poem was discredited, subsumed by other poetic forms and modes of expression, and largely forgotten.⁶

⁵ Charles Darwin, *The Life of Erasmus Darwin*, ed. Desmond King-Hele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 32, 33–34.

⁶ William Powell Jones refers to the “inglorious climax” of late-eighteenth-century scientific poetry in *The Rhetoric of Science: A Study of Scientific Ideas and Imagery in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 213.

Charles Darwin's capsule summary of Erasmus's "downfall" is, in addition to being a strongly Darwinian narrative in its own right, a story that has persisted more or less intact from its inception in the Romantic period. But as an account of the forces that drove into obscurity the "new Darwinian school of English poetry," how accurate is it?⁷ Despite predicting the impermanence of Darwin's fame, Coleridge denied that any change in early-nineteenth-century literary tastes—if indeed, he hastened to add, there had been such a change—was attributable to a so-called Lake school of poets.⁸ More recently, Darwin's poetry has enjoyed a considerable revival, prompted mostly by a resurgence of interest in the forms of Romantic natural history.⁹ Attending in most cases to the radical political implications of Darwin's science (a radicalism espoused in Darwin's own verses in support of the American and French Revolutions [EV, 2.355–94]), this scholarship emphasizes the range of ideological reactions to Darwin's poetry, including of course the famous *Anti-Jacobin* parody, whose "true motive" has been described as "political not aesthetic."¹⁰

Although they present valuable contexts for the controversies around Darwin's work in the 1790s, such accounts tacitly affirm rather than challenge a long-standing view of his aesthetics as essentially *anti-aesthetic* and of the poet himself as interested in poetry only insofar as it brought attention to his scientific (or political) system. The political and aesthetic briefs against Darwin are obviously related at some level—conservative writers parodied the excesses and artifice of his

⁷ *Edinburgh Review* 4 (1804): 238.

⁸ Coleridge insisted that neither Robert Southey's writings nor his own had "furnished the original occasion to this fiction of a *new school* of poetry, and of clamors against its supposed founders and proselytes." "As little do I believe," Coleridge continued, "that 'Mr. WORDSWORTH'S Lyrical Ballads' were in *themselves* the cause" (*Biographia Literaria*, 1:69).

⁹ See, e.g., Alan Bewell, "'Jacobin Plants': Botany as Social Theory in the 1790s," *Wordsworth Circle* 20, no. 3 (1989): 132–39; Janet Browne, "Botany for Gentlemen: Erasmus Darwin and *The Loves of the Plants*," *Isis* 80 (1989): 592–621; Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760–1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), esp. 22–27; and Tim Fulford, "Coleridge, Darwin, Linnaeus: The Sexual Politics of Botany," *Wordsworth Circle* 28, no. 3 (1997): 124–29.

¹⁰ David Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 61–62.

style, and Coleridge (for instance) detested his evolutionism—but for the most part they continue to be regarded, as in Charles Darwin's account, as separate impulses occurring simultaneously. The poetics of *The Botanic Garden*, its status as an aesthetic as opposed to a purely scientific artifact, and the formal logic of the genre its author popularized have received scant historical attention.¹¹

Though to speak of “the poetry and aesthetics of Erasmus Darwin,” as James Venable Logan did in the 1930s, may seem hopelessly quaint, the present essay seeks to redress an imbalance in historicist commentary on Darwin by doing exactly that.¹² I want to show how *The Botanic Garden* was identified as a dangerously radical text not solely because of its content but because of the compound logic of its form. Exemplifying a literary genre that effected a more perfect union of scientific reason and the poetic imagination, Darwin's poem conjoins *as* poetry the aesthetic and political aims of his work in a purposeful way that, while unmistakable to the conservative critics who attacked him, has largely escaped contemporary critical notice. On this basis I wish to provide a framework for understanding how the philosophical poem emerges as a touchstone for debates over the legitimacy of perfectibilist schemes of political improvement during the period of the French Revolution. I approach this task by considering Darwin's self-conscious relationship to the Roman poem that furnished a model for the cooperative labor of reason and imagination. Lucretius's *De rerum natura* (ca. 55 BC), a long treatment of Epicurean principles, inspired a raft of similarly ambitious poems that sought, with varying degrees of praise or blame for its

¹¹ Jerome McGann insists that “an historicist move towards sentimental poetry—an effort to see it on its own terms—is a *sine qua non* for a fully critical recovery of the work” (*The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1996], 120; on Darwin see 131–34), but contextualist analyses of Darwin's poetry have generally failed to heed this call. For an important exception to the general neglect of Darwin's poetics in historicist scholarship see the following essays by Theresa M. Kelley, both examining a “quirky alliance between taxonomic inquiry and Romantic poetics”: “Romantic Exemplarity: Botany and ‘Material’ Culture,” in *Romantic Science: The Literary Forms of Natural History*, ed. Noah Heringman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 223–54 (quotation on 248); “Romantic Nature Bites Back: Adorno and Romantic Natural History,” *European Romantic Review* 15 (2004): 193–203.

¹² James Venable Logan, *The Poetry and Aesthetics of Erasmus Darwin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1936).

author, to illuminate some matter of scientific understanding.¹³ Such experiments in verse responded most obviously to Horace's praise for the poet who combined profit and pleasure (*miscuit utili dulci*), "at once delighting and instructing the reader" (*Ars poetica*, ll. 343–44);¹⁴ while generally condemning Lucretius's atheism, philosophical poets of the eighteenth century looked to his poem as the practical realization of that ideal. In popularizing this convention for the modern age, Darwin set a precedent and a challenge for the Romantic poets who came of age in the years of his fame and sought models for creating in defiance of this legacy "the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHICAL POEM" (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2:156).¹⁵

As proponents of a rigorously materialist philosophy, Lucretius and Epicurus were controversial figures in this period, informing Darwin's radical political commitments and much other radical writing of the Romantic period.¹⁶ Beginning from an alternate premise, I hope to show how Darwin's poem indicates, via the example of *De rerum natura*, a vitally political role for *poetry* through its endorsement of pleasure as both the ground of knowledge and the end of human action. This broadly Epicurean commitment informs the instrumental aesthetic logic of the philosophical poem—poetry, in Lucretius's famous metaphor, is the honey that makes the wormwood of Epicureanism easier to swallow—but also complicates the self-evidence of its rationalist ends,

¹³ Lucretius's influence on eighteenth-century British poetry is considerable. For commentary see George Depue Hadzsits, *Lucretius and His Influence* (London: Harrap, 1935); T. J. B. Spencer, "Lucretius and the Scientific Poem in English," in *Lucretius*, ed. D. R. Dudley (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 131–64; Bernard Fabian, "Pope and Lucretius: Observations on 'An Essay on Man,'" *Modern Language Review* 74 (1979): 524–37; and *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. 254–73.

¹⁴ Horace, *Satires, Epistles, and Ars poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 479.

¹⁵ Darwin's influence on the early Romantic poets is an important subject on which, despite Desmond King-Hele's pioneering work (*Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986], 62–147), a great deal remains to be said. For more recent studies see Fulford; and Nicola Trott, "Wordsworth's Loves of the Plants," in *1800: The New Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Nicola Trott and Seamus Perry (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 141–68.

¹⁶ On this subject see Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. 44–79.

inserting an essential ambivalence into the poet's aspiration to accommodate pleasure to the purposes of instruction. Notwithstanding his stated aims, then, Darwin and also his keenest contemporary readers knew how actively imagination, and the affects associated with it, might resist "inlist[ment] . . . under the banner of Science."

Just as significantly, Darwin defines this Epicurean pleasure project as a vitally ethical imperative, parting ways with his classical predecessors in maintaining the social responsibilities that the instinct to pleasure entails. On these grounds his philosophical poetry was read as an attempt to make reason consistent with and answerable to the nascently utilitarian principle that maximizing social pleasure was the paramount objective of political theory and practice. Darwin's immense popularity was thus one of the first and most significant literary casualties of the conservative assault on such greatest-happiness perfectibilism in art and politics. In vilifying his work for the rationalist ends that it supposedly served, his conservative readers gave posterity a narrative that not only shaped subsequent readings of his poetry but helped establish the terms by which Romanticism defined itself as a legitimate alternative.

Lucretius and the Pleasures of the Didactic

Darwin's poetry has long been understood to draw its design and many of its scientific precepts from the Roman poet whom the *Critical Review* named "the father of Latin poetry, and the first didactic poet that ever existed."¹⁷ From 1682, when Thomas Creech published the first (and, until 1805, only) complete translation of *De rerum natura*, readers had at hand an "Englisht" model for the boldly rational program of the philosophical poet. That reviewers intermittently suspected or accused Darwin of plagiarizing portions of *The Botanic Garden* from earlier eighteenth-century philosophical poems—from Henry Brooke's *Universal Beauty* (1735) to John Sargent's *Mine* (1785)—testifies, if to nothing else, to how common in this period were such poems along broadly conceived Lucretian lines.

¹⁷ *Critical Review*, n.s., 28 (1800): 253. On the Lucretian dimensions of *The Botanic Garden* see, e.g., Logan, 121–23; and Priestman, 63–66. Desmond King-Hele remarks that Darwin "was indebted more to Lucretius than to any modern poet" (*Erasmus Darwin: A Life of Unequaled Achievement* [London: Giles de la Mare, 1999], 265).

Early in *De rerum natura* Lucretius presents to Memmius a famous apology that inspired the work of philosophical poets both sympathetic to and critical of his materialist orientation.¹⁸ Lucretius's comparison of poetry to honey disguising the wormwood of Epicureanism provides a model for the poet's tactical deployment of verse as a medium of rational instruction:

tho my Subject's *dark*, my Verse is *clear*,
 And *sweet*, with fancy flowing every where:
 And this design'd. For as Physicians use
 In giving Children Draughts of Bitter Juice,
 To make them take it, tinge the Cup with sweet,
 To cheat the Lip: this first they *eager* meet,
 And then drink on, and take the bitter Draught,
 And so are harmlessly *deceiv'd*, not *caught*:
 For by this cheat they get their health, their ease,
 Their vigour, strength, and battle the Disease.
 So since our Methods of *Philosophy*
 Seem harsh to some, since most our Maxims flie,
 I thought it was the fittest way to dress
 These rigid Principles in pleasing Verse,
 With fancy sweetning them; to bribe thy mind
 To read my Books, and lead it on to find
 The Nature of the World, the Rise of Things,
 And what vast profit to that knowledge brings.
 (1.933–50; cf. 4.8–25)¹⁹

Lucretius's honeyed-cup simile suggests for poetry the auxiliary role of seducing (or duping) Memmius into imbibing the Epicurean system. In Creech's translation (and in terms anticipating John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"), fancy is a "cheat," enticing readers to take a harsh medicine from which, having once accepted this controversial philosophy, they will "get their health, their ease." This last term corresponds to *ataraxia*, the tranquillity of mind whose attainment is the end of Epicureanism. Thus the freely acknowledged cunning of Lucretius's

¹⁸ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, rev. Martin Ferguson Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 78, 276–78.

¹⁹ *Titus Lucretius Carus: His Six Books of Epicurean Philosophy, Done into English Verse, with Notes*. By T. Creech, *Late Fellow of All-Souls Colledge in Oxford*, 5th ed. (London, 1712), 29.

deception is analogous to the harmless deceit of the poetry itself, which contains the potential hazards of such trickery and subordinates them to the reparatory aim of the philosophical system they promote.

Lucretius's account of poetry as a conduit to philosophy furnishes an obvious model for *The Botanic Garden*, whose "general design," as Darwin states, "is to inlist Imagination under the banner of Science; and to lead her votaries from the looser analogies, which dress out the imagery of poetry, to the stricter ones, which form the ratiocination of philosophy" (*EV*, v; *LP*, i). This strongly Lucretian sense of poetic purpose, which Darwin had formulated in reference to his poem as early as 1781, was one of the first features for which he was recognized as the preeminent philosophical poet of his day.²⁰ In 1789 the *Critical Review* lauded him for "adorn[ing] his poems with characteristic descriptions, which, in the uncouth language of Linnaeus, are harsh and displeasing."²¹ Darwin the "poetical philosopher" (also "the ingenious bard of botany") stands in relation to Linnaean science much as Lucretius sees himself in relation to the Epicurean system.²² Situating itself at "the vestibule of that delightful science" (*LP*, i), Darwin's poetry leads by the pleasure it affords "the ratiocination of philosophy"—at which point, one might suspect, it exhausts its utility and may be dispensed with. As the *Critical Review* imagines this hypothetical ascent from pleasure to instruction in the uninformed reader of Darwin's poem, "what at first began in amusement, may terminate in scientific acquisition."²³

That Lucretius appears to subordinate poetry to philosophy suggests their separability, which in turn suggested for Romantic readers such as Coleridge a basis on which to critique the philosophical poem. Apart from its atheism, in other words, and just as damning to the Roman poet, *De rerum natura* offended on purely aesthetic grounds in seeming to deny the imagination a central and not merely ancillary relationship to the work of reason. No doubt Coleridge had Lucretius

²⁰ See Darwin to Joseph Banks, October 24, 1781: "The design of the poem was to induce ladies and other unemploy'd scholars to study Botany, by putting many of the agreeable botanical facts into the notes" (*The Letters of Erasmus Darwin*, ed. Desmond King-Hele [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 116–17).

²¹ *Critical Review* 68 (1789): 375.

²² *Critical Review*, n.s., 6 (1792): 162; *Monthly Review*, n.s., 11 (1793): 183.

²³ *Critical Review* 68 (1789): 376.

in mind when in 1817 he found Darwin's poetry "characterized not so much by poetic thought, as by thoughts *translated* into the language of poetry" (*Biographia Literaria*, 1:19). For Coleridge in 1815, Wordsworth's status as perhaps the first genuine philosophical poet was explicitly measured against the negative example of Lucretius: "Whatever in Lucretius is Poetry is not philosophical, whatever is philosophical is not Poetry—and in the very pride of confident hope I looked forward to the Recluse, as the *first* and *only* true Phil. Poem" (*STCL*, 4:574).

But poetry, as George Santayana famously wrote in connection with the above-quoted passage, "cannot be spread upon things like butter"; accordingly, "Lucretius does himself an injustice" by describing his poetry as merely sweetening the truths of philosophy when in actuality he furnishes "the medium through which we see" the truths themselves.²⁴ Thus classicists frequently cite Coleridge's injunction against Lucretius—which may have been a commonplace of this period²⁵—as representative of a wrongheaded interpretation that construes "philosophy" and "poetry" as separable terms in the poet's work. Against a (Coleridgean) conception of Lucretius's poetry as strictly subordinate to and only marginally affiliated with his philosophical program, recent scholars of Latin didactic verse emphasize the status of poetry in *De rerum natura* as "an eminently suitable vehicle to convey Epicurus' teachings to the potential disciple."²⁶ One central claim of this scholarship is that Lucretius's poetry instructs by illuminating invisible processes of nature, giving body to abstract ideas through analogy, metaphor, and other figurative language. Poetry provides thereby crucial assistance to philosophy by embodying truths not otherwise apprehensible to the senses.²⁷ A second claim, largely encompassing the first,

²⁴ George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1910), 9.

²⁵ See the following comment on Lucretius (from a review of John Mason Good's 1805 translation) in the *Edinburgh Review* 10 (1807): 221: "It has been said of him, that when he put on the philosopher, he put off the poet; and laid aside his philosophy, in like manner, when he chose to be poetical."

²⁶ Monica Gale, *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 141.

²⁷ On the late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century view that Virgil's *Georgics* presents vehicles or "mediums" for opening up unexplored connections to the senses see Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17–37.

is that by such rhetorical strategies Lucretius evokes and implicitly ratifies the Epicurean tenet that pleasure is a criterion of philosophical truth. Without positing a necessary relationship between poetry and truth, “the Lucretian speaker is deliberately attempting, as it were, to ‘Epicureanize’ poetry, that is, to present this problematic medium as something that makes perfect sense from an Epicurean point of view.”²⁸ Through a sensuous language designed to conduct the reader from readily apprehensible to recondite truths of nature, Lucretius shows that the pleasures of poetry and of writing poetry (the poet’s *dulcis labor* [e.g., 2.730, 3.419]) are broadly consistent with the epistemological and ethical foundations of Epicurean thought and on this ground are centrally related to the work of philosophy.

None of this, of course, could be expected to satisfy Coleridge, whose insistence that the faculties called forth in poetry should be “*combined, intimately combined & unified*” demands a closer (though dialectically nonidentical) fusion of reason and imagination than Lucretius’s parallelism of philosophy and the poetic art offers.²⁹ By the same token, Lucretius’s designation of a central role for imaginative pleasure, and his claim for the philosophical gains that follow naturally from its pursuit, suggests an important context for Darwin’s philosophical poetry, which is often described as a mere prop to the serious and entertaining matter of his scientific notes. Darwin’s debt to Lucretius has been noted in reference to his materialist philosophy of mind, to his rejection of the superstitious beliefs of antiquity, and to his atomistic (and proto-evolutionist) vision of the universe as coalescing eons before the advent of humankind, continuously evolving, and eventually falling into destruction. First, however, Darwin signals his indebtedness to Epicureanism by espousing its eudemonic ends. Epicurus enters, via the notes, in annotations of lines written in fact by Anna Seward, Darwin’s friend and (later) memoirist.³⁰ To Seward’s depiction of the sensitive soul who, akin to the “fair flower[,] expands it’s [*sic*] lucid form / To

²⁸ Katharina Volk, *The Poetics of Latin Didactic: Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, Manilius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 99.

²⁹ Coleridge to William Sotheby, September 10, 1802, in *STCL*, 2:864.

³⁰ On Darwin’s unacknowledged borrowing see Anna Seward, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin, Chiefly during His Residence in Lichfield, with Anecdotes of His Friends, and Criticisms on His Writings* (London, 1804), 127–32.

meet the sun, and shuts it to the storm,” Darwin appends the following note: “It seems to have been the original design of the philosophy of Epicurus to render the mind exquisitely sensible to agreeable sensations, and equally insensible to disagreeable ones” (*EV*, 2n).

It is not my intention to ask whether Darwin’s observation, in the first footnote of this extensively annotated poem, is an accurate account of Epicurus’s position on pleasure (indeed, we have reason to believe that it is).³¹ Given Darwin’s endorsement of this Epicurean principle, however, and in view of the epistemological and ethical purposes to which Lucretius applies that principle in his apology for versifying the Epicurean system, it may not be mere frivolity to attend to a counter-intuitively aestheticist strain in Darwin’s work. His approach to the genre that he popularized—and that Romantic readers closely associated with his name and fame—promotes poetry not as subordinate to philosophical ratiocination but as its unlikely ground.

Imagining Flowers (Particularly *Polyandria Trigynia*)

As Monica Gale describes the instrumental aesthetic logic of *De rerum natura*, Lucretius “evaluates poetry as a pleasure worthy to be chosen, since it is one that will result in a greater pleasure in the long run, if his conversion of Memmius is successful” (149). Such was also Darwin’s explicit purpose in writing *The Botanic Garden*, and characterizes the terms in which early reviewers read and lauded *The Loves of the Plants*, the first of its two parts to be published. For Darwin, however, as for his contemporary David Hume, sensation, passion, and imagination are active properties of reason and not exceptions to it; pleasure, and the pleasures of imagination in particular, is not the other of reason but its constituent ground. The art by which the poet instructs the reader is first to be found, then, not in “the ratiocination of philosophy” but in the process by which “a train of ideas is suggested to our imaginations, which interests us so much by the pain or pleasure it affords” (*LP*, 55). As Darwin wrote of his posthumously published poem *The Temple of Nature* (1803), the philosophical poem “does not pretend to

³¹ On the unprecedented role accorded to pleasure in Epicurus’s philosophy see esp. J. C. B. Gosling and C. C. W. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 345–413.

instruct by deep researches of reasoning; its aim is simply to amuse.”³² Darwin's stated purpose to lead from the “looser analogies” of poetry to the “stricter ones” of science suggests in this sense not the subservience of poetry to science but, on the contrary, the process by which imagination provides a catalyst for the researches of science, pointing out truths that science only later confirms.³³

Through his insistence on the nonidentical yet correspondent registers of literary and scientific analogy, and his ascription of “a remarkable *scientific* function to poetic discourse” (McGann, 131), Darwin at once affirms and resists the philosophical ends to which Lucretius subordinates verse. In the “Proem” to *The Loves of the Plants*, Darwin characterizes his work as an endeavor to endow plants with human attributes, thereby setting in reverse the transformations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (x). By the same token, the notion that plants *are* in fact percipient, and that the analogy between the vegetable and animal kingdoms is more than “merely” figurative, is repeatedly emphasized by Darwin, who affirms the sensibility of plants throughout his published work, from his preface to the Lichfield Botanical Society's translation of Carolus Linnaeus's *Genera Plantarum* (1787)³⁴ to the final book published in his lifetime, *Phytologia; or, The Philosophy of Agriculture and Gardening* (1800). In his first sustained discussion of plant life in *The Economy of Vegetation*,

³² Erasmus Darwin, preface to *The Temple of Nature*, in *The Golden Age, [and] The Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society*, 2 vols. in 1 (New York: Garland, 1978), n.p.

³³ For Elaine Scarry, whose essay “Imagining Flowers” inspires the title of this section, imagination is simultaneously counterfactual, having reference to objects that are not (or not yet) existent, and “counterfactual,” establishing the correspondence of these imaginary objects with the “givenness of the perceptible world” (*Dreaming by the Book* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999], 38). Robert Kaufman reflects as well on a mutually counterfactual and counterfactual role for imagination in his account of literature's “quasi-conceptuality,” in which “the aesthetic, rather than being determined by, provides *the form for* conceptual, purposeful thought or cognition” (“Red Kant; or, The Persistence of the Third *Critique* in Adorno and Jameson,” *Critical Inquiry* 26 [2000]: 711). Such notions, widely attributed to Immanuel Kant and the Romantic poets, are anticipated by Darwin's account of poetry's constitutive role in scientific research.

³⁴ “Vegetables are, in truth, an inferior order of Animals, connected to the lower tribes of Insects, . . . whose faculties of motion and sensation are scarcely superior to those of the petals of many flowers, or to the leaves of the sensitive plant” (Carolus Linnaeus, *The Families of Plants*, trans. Lichfield Botanical Society, 2 vols. [Lichfield, 1787], 1:xix).

Darwin describes the emergence of a plant from a seed and the hatching of a crocodile from an egg as fully analogous processes:

In bright veins the silvery Sap ascends,
 And reflux blood in milky eddies bends;
 While, spread in air, the leaves respiring play,
 Or drink the golden quintessence of day.
 —So from his shell on Delta's shower-less isle
 Bursts into life the Monster of the Nile. . . .

(*EV*, 4.419–24)

A previous generation of philosophical poets had observed the “half animate” character of plants, constructing similarly elaborate poetic analogies between the plant and animal kingdoms on that basis.³⁵ As Darwin's readers have long noted, however, his poem was the first to marshal the elements of Linnaean natural history in support of a “strong analogy” between the plant and animal realms (*EV*, 109).³⁶ Several celebrated passages of Darwin's *Loves of the Plants*, most famously his description of the mimosa or sensitive plant that “feels, alive through all her tender form” (*LP*, 1.301–16, quotation from 305), are written explicitly to ratify the notion that plants, no less than animals, “are endued with sensation, or that each bud has a common sensorium, and is furnished with a brain or a central place where its nerves were connected” (*EV*, 149n; see also 205n).

While Darwin maintains that such poetic analogies complement his philosophical aims, his distinction between the analogies of literature and philosophy suggested the separability of the poetry from the rational ends to which it was ostensibly designed to serve as a “vestibule” (*LP*, 93).³⁷ Indeed, some critics accused Darwin of patently abus-

³⁵ “Thus answer'ng lively, to organic Sense, / The Plants half animate, their Pow'rs dispense; / The Mouth's Analogy their Root displays, / And for th' intestine Viscera purveys, / Their Liquors thro' respondent Vessels flow, / And Organ like, their fibrous Membranes grow” (Henry Brooke, *Universal Beauty: A Poem* [London, 1735], 15 [3.228–33]).

³⁶ On eighteenth-century conceptions of plant sensibility and Darwin's strong version of this claim see Philip C. Ritterbush, *Overtures to Biology: The Speculations of Eighteenth-Century Naturalists* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 144–64.

³⁷ Robert N. Ross observes that “in his poem, Darwin was occupied chiefly with the vestibule which he adorned with pretty images so exquisitely that those images were taken as Darwin's ends instead of as his means” (“To Charm Thy Curious Eye”:

ing poetic ornament in masquerade as a form of rational instruction. In an otherwise favorable review of *The Economy of Vegetation*, an anonymous contributor to the *Critical Review* singled out for opprobrium the accompanying note to a passage in which Darwin describes the sensibility of plants (3.427–40; 148–49n):

That part of the canto, with the note accompanying it, designed to show that the bending of the leaf, to “shoot off” the showers or dew-drops, and the closing of some leaves to prevent the accumulation, is effected by the connection of the muscles with a sensitive sensorium, rather than the necessary mechanical effects of irritation, is not very satisfactory. It may be admitted in poetry, and even then be allowed with the usual licence of “quidlibet audendi”; but should not have formed a part of the notes.³⁸

The reviewer invokes a maxim cited by Horace—“Pictoribus atque poetis quidlibet audendi semper fuit æqua potestas” (“Painters and poets,” you say, “have always had an equal right in hazarding everything”) (*Ars poetica*, ll. 9–10; pp. 450, 451)—in defense of poetic license. Even granting the illimitability of this license in poetry, however (as Horace himself does not), the reviewer cavils at its extension into the philosophical notes to Darwin's poem. The fanciful notions that are admissible in poetry are inadmissible and even condemnable when presented as probable fact.

Darwin would admit no such violation, of course, as his personified flowers correspond closely with his scientific assumptions regarding the sensibility of plants. Yet he was often suspected of practicing a dubious aestheticism, using sensuous figurative language to constitute and give license to his scientific ideas. In 1804 Coleridge chastised

Erasmus Darwin's Poetry at the Vestibule of Knowledge,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 [1971]: 390). Ross argues that this was a thorough misreading of Darwin's purposes; I suggest, on the contrary, that Darwin's readers were exactly right. On the “figurative mayhem” engendered by Darwin's movement between the analogical procedures of poetry and science see Kelley, “Romantic Nature Bites Back,” 201; Catherine Packham, “The Science and Poetry of Animation: Personification, Analogy, and Erasmus Darwin's *Loves of the Plants*,” *Romanticism* 10 (2004): 191–208; and Dahlia Porter, “Scientific Analogy and Literary Taxonomy in Darwin's *Loves of the Plants*,” *European Romantic Review* 18 (2007): 213–21.

³⁸ *Critical Review*, n.s., 6 (1792): 168.

him not for “abstract rationalism,” as one might expect, but for having given free rein to his poetic fancy: “Darwin’s Pain from Milk! O mercy! the blindness of the man! — & it is *Imagination*, forsooth, that misled him! too much *poetry* in his philosophy! — this abject deadness of all the sense of the Obscure & Indefinite, this superstitious Fetisch Worship of lazy or fascinated *Fancy*! O this indeed deserves to be dwelt on.”³⁹ In Coleridge’s account, the philosophical apparatus of *The Botanic Garden* is marred not by too little but by “too much *poetry*”; Darwin’s reliance on the physical senses—and his conception of poetry as directed “principally to the eye” (*LP*, 49–50)—is derided as “blindness”; and the scientist’s rational poetics is disparaged as but a more covert and self-deluding form of “Fetisch Worship.” Though it was only in his 1811–12 lectures on poetry that this subject is “dwelt on” further by Coleridge,⁴⁰ an anonymous author in 1803 offered similar strictures in the newly established *Edinburgh Review*. “In estimating the merits of Dr Darwin’s work,” the reviewer writes, “it is difficult, and perhaps would be impossible, to separate the characters of the poet and the philosopher.” At a moment when Darwin’s fame is already showing “the visible symptoms of decay,” however, the reviewer pronounces him more suited to be—and more apt to be remembered as—a poet rather than a philosopher. In a judgment almost opposite to the terms in which the poet is remembered today, the reviewer declares that Darwin’s “reveries in science”—as fanciful as his poetic descriptions, and most likely erected on the foundation of those “looser analogies”—“have probably no other chance of being saved from oblivion, but by having been ‘married to immortal verse.’”⁴¹

Darwin’s Epicurean Politics

While Darwin’s defense of poetry may be read as launching a critique of the standard that Lucretius established for the philosophical poem,

³⁹ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957–2002), vol. 2, entry 2325 and n.

⁴⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures, 1808–1819, on Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 1:206–7, 2:471.

⁴¹ *Edinburgh Review* 2 (1803): 492, 491, 501. The reviewer quotes John Milton’s “L’Allegro.”

his emphasis on the interests attached to pain and pleasure is consistent with the philosophical project of *De rerum natura*, inasmuch as this emphasis represents both an outgrowth and a logical extension of Darwin's self-identified Epicureanism. To please or "amuse" the reader is no more incidental to Darwin's philosophical purpose than it is to his poetry. He regrounds philosophy as a broadly aesthetic enterprise; poetic and philosophical aims merge under the sign of pleasure.

Darwin's ambition "to render the mind exquisitely sensible to agreeable sensations, and equally insensible to disagreeable ones"—and to do so in a poetry often judged intermittently pleasurable at best—may not strike the modern reader as representing a substantive political position, much less a significant threat to crown and country. But Darwin's modernized Epicureanism was recognized as a key expression of his perfectibilist political commitment. His proto-utilitarian social vision hinges on the maximization of pleasure and encompasses the work of "the poetical philosopher" as a procurer of such pleasures.⁴²

An important passage in *The Economy of Vegetation* grounds Darwin's moral vision on the conviction that plants are "endued with sensation." His terms are at once derived and distinguished from Lucretius. The poet's fanciful account of the nymphs who "close the timorous floret's golden bell" against cold or rain is accompanied by a note ascribing this contraction of the plant's muscles to "a disagreeable *sensation*" (*EV*, 3.440; 149n). In one of many passages illustrating the reversibility of his analogies between animals and plants, Darwin further describes the responsiveness of the flower as a model for humankind's moral responsibility toward the spectacle of suffering humanity:

So should young SYMPATHY, in female form,
Climb the tall rock, spectatress of the storm;
Life's sinking wrecks with secret sighs deplore,
And bleed for others' woes, Herself on shore;
To friendless Virtue, gasping on the strand,

⁴² On the intellectual antecedents of utilitarianism see the classic study by Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism*, trans. Mary Morris (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), esp. 5–34. On the eudemonic goals that united political economists and their nineteenth-century literary antagonists see Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Bare her warm heart, her virgin arms expand . . .

 Grief's cureless wounds with lenient balms asswage,
 Or prop with firmer staff the steps of Age.
 (EV, 3.441–50)

Darwin's passage alludes to the celebrated proem to book 2 of *De rerum natura* in which the attainment of *ataraxia* by the Epicurean philosopher is compared to the pleasure of contemplating a shipwreck while standing safely on shore (2.1–4). As Epicurus sets relief from pain as one of the highest pleasures available to humankind, Lucretius describes in affirming this creed the philosophical eminence from which even the contemplation of others' struggles can be pleasurable to the philosophical mind. In a sensitive meditation on this passage, Hans Blumenberg emphasizes how the poet's metaphor for the "indifference of theory" confronts on its own ground "reality's indifference to man," dispelling the "dread and darkness of the mind" (*terrorem animi tenebrasque* [2.59]) through the imposition of philosophical distance.⁴³ The attainment of this blessed calm precludes for Lucretius all active engagement in public affairs. For Darwin, however, the endowments of the sensitive soul permit no such elevation above the scenes of "life's sinking wrecks." Nor if possible, Darwin insists, should one wish to obtain distance from what Wordsworth calls, in a strongly Lucretian turn of phrase, "the fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world."⁴⁴ On the contrary,

⁴³ Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 27. Blumenberg contrasts this Lucretian trope to a more modern philosophical stance in which the philosopher refuses or is denied the safe vantage of the Lucretian spectator. On the centrality of this anti-Lucretian metaphor to William Cowper's *Task* (1785) see Goodman, 91–92. I follow here R. E. Latham's translation of Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), 61–62.

⁴⁴ William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1965), 115 (ll. 53–54). Focusing on the conditions by which the philosopher's *ataraxia* is wrested from the welter of lived experience, "Tintern Abbey" presents the attainment of Lucretian tranquillity as an ongoing process rather than a stable eminence from which the speaker can look on in contemplation. For discussion of Wordsworth as a Lucretian poet see Santayana, 59–61; Paul Kelley, "Wordsworth and Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*," *Notes and Queries*, n.s., 30 (1983): 219–22; Willard Spiegelman, "Some Lucretian Elements in Wordsworth,"

attention to the sufferings of others necessitates active engagement in public life by a “spectatress” who is far more than a mere spectator *ab extra*.⁴⁵

In revising Lucretius's metaphor, Darwin assigns a clear social imperative to its Epicurean message. By capitalizing on analogies between the vegetable and animal kingdoms, his frequent conjectures on the sensibility of plants gave license to an ameliorist vision in which “all the productions of nature are in their progress to greater perfection” (*LP*, 8n) — or, as a satirist mocked Darwin's perfectibilism, “While Plants turn Animals, Man, happy Man, / To ages shall extend Life's lengthen'd span.”⁴⁶ Sensibility is the source, pleasure the goal, and the continuity of the plant and animal kingdoms the expressive vehicle for his leveling politics.

By far the most significant attack along these lines, and a work that similarly seized on Darwin's conception of plants as “susceptible of joy and woe,” was “The Loves of the Triangles,” appearing in three numbers of the *Anti-Jacobin* in the spring of 1798.⁴⁷ This “mathematical and philosophical poem,” as the parody is subtitled, takes aim at Darwin's laughable (and patently Lucretian) presumption to make “the *heavy* artillery of a DIDACTIC POEM” the medium for promoting the eudemonic ends of the modern Epicurean philosopher (180). The poet's faith in the “*eternal and absolute* PERFECTIBILITY of MAN” — a principle that, as Darwin insists, is deduced from the continuity of the vegetable and

Comparative Literature 37 (1985): 27–49; and Robin C. Dix, “Wordsworth and Lucretius: The Psychological Impact of Creech's Translation,” *English Language Notes* 39, no. 4 (2002): 25–33.

⁴⁵ As he remarked in the *Table Talk* of July 21, 1832, Coleridge wished Wordsworth “never to have abandoned the contemplative position. . . . His proper title is *Spectator ab extra*” (*Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring, 2 vols. [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990], 2:178).

⁴⁶ Anonymous, *The Golden Age: A Poetical Epistle from Erasmus D— —N, M.D. to Thomas Beddoes, M.D.* (London, 1794), 8.

⁴⁷ On Darwin's alleged account of plants as “differing only in name, . . . susceptible of joy and woe,” see *Golden Age*, 7–8. “The Loves of the Triangles” appeared in the *Anti-Jacobin*; or, *Weekly Examiner*, April 16, 1798, 179–82; April 23, 1798, 188–89; and May 7, 1798, 204–6. George Canning's famous parody is anticipated by the work of his father, George père, who in 1766 translated into English verse the *Anti-Lucretius* by the Cardinal de Polignac.

animal kingdoms—is, rather, described by the *Anti-Jacobin* as the premise underwriting his scientific ideas as well as his aesthetico-political agenda (180). As the *Anti-Jacobin* remarks in one of many parodic notes to the poem, Darwin's science and poetry alike suggest means by which "the sphere of our disagreeable sensations may be, in future, considerably enlarged" (205n). Standing on their head the terms of Darwin's avowedly Epicurean project, "The Loves of the Triangles" at once inverts the poet's claim and recognizes the serious aspirations of his work.

The End(s) of the Philosophical Poem and the Rise of Romanticism

Though Darwin affirmed that his aim as a poet was "simply to amuse," conservative readers perceived clearly the political design implicit in that phrase. The goal of "inlist[ing] Imagination under the banner of Science" was translated into starkly political terms as a way to bend a philosophy of pleasure to the service of rational political reform. The *Anti-Jacobin* launched its famous assault, universally regarded as fatal to Darwin's fame and posthumous reputation, as a critique of the genre that he had modernized and made overwhelmingly popular; his fusion of the *dulce* and the *utile* was recognized both as extending the pleasures of imagination well past their proper bounds and—in terms deceptively described by the poet—as instructing its readers on subjects far beyond that of the Linnaean sexual system. Because the means of Darwin's poetry (to give pleasure to, excite the passions of, and expand the sensibilities of his readership) were perceived as closely aligned with its ideological ends, his vilification as a "radical poet" meant the levying of charges against his politics as well as against the poetry in which his seditious designs were cloaked.

If the *Anti-Jacobin's* parody represented the most extensive and influential reaction against Darwin, a lengthy article in its successor journal, the *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, exhibited with particular clarity the point to which this reaction tended. The nominal occasion of the article (published two years after "The Loves of the Triangles") was Gilbert Wakefield's publication of an annotated Latin edition of *De rerum natura* (1796–97). As introductory to the purposes of this belated review, the *Anti-Jacobin* appends a critical essay that sketches the his-

tory of didactic poetry from Empedocles to the present.⁴⁸ Working on the model of Joseph Trapp, whose *Lectures on Poetry* (1742) categorized by subject matter the various types of didactic verse, and in a vaguely historicist vein that anticipates the more famous essays on poetry by Thomas Love Peacock and Percy Bysshe Shelley, the *Anti-Jacobin* presents a critical taxonomy in which the major types of didactic poetry correspond loosely to prevailing social attitudes and states of society: first comes poetry on “the business and pleasures of life,” appropriate to the interests of a simpler, predominantly agrarian society; next, “philology,” or verse appealing to more polished literary tastes; lastly, “philosophy” (which subject could never have been explored “but at a period of civilization” [249]), which includes the separate categories of scientific and morally preceptive poetry.

In discussing the former category of philosophical verse (in which *De rerum natura* is given pride of place), the *Anti-Jacobin*'s rambling synoptic history grinds to a halt, and its survey of didactic poetry devolves into a lengthy critique not only of *The Botanic Garden*—“a philosophic production which has been said to rival the poem of Lucretius, and seems to have been composed in the gardens of Epicurus” (252)—but of continued efforts by modern poets to effect a “union of philosophy with poetry” (249). “To associate the slow decisions of abstract reason with the rapid effusions of fancy; to blend scientific discovery with poetic invention” are, according to the *Anti-Jacobin*, tasks that Lucretius may have mastered but at which the vast majority of his modern imitators fail miserably. As the earlier parody mocked the stated aim of Darwin's poem—“to enlist the IMAGINATION under the banners of GEOMETRY” (180)—so the *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* epigrammatically inverts this phrase, silently correcting its martial rhetoric in favor of the language of the domestic conduct manual: “Imagination refuses to be enlisted under the banner of science; though science may sometimes be brought forward, not unhappily, under the conduct of imagination” (253).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, March 1800, 241–58; *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, May 1800, 132–41.

⁴⁹ Unsurprisingly, the *Anti-Jacobin*'s review of Luke Booker's *Hop-Garden: A Didactic Poem* (1799) seizes on the generic appellation of Booker's poem as an occasion to attack Darwin further: “We do not, generally speaking, think the restraints necessarily

The *Anti-Jacobin* was, of course, not alone in its wish to preserve the boundaries between science and poetry, and I do not mean to suggest that authors needed to share the journal's political views to perceive the inadequacy of poetry for instructing on subjects belonging more properly to the sciences. In 1795, for instance, Anna Barbauld introduced Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination* by disclaiming the ambitions of modern poets to communicate "unknown truths" better suited to "abstruse speculation." (Barbauld's laconic remark on Darwin's description of the cotton mill [*LP*, 2.85–104]—"His verse is a piece of mechanism as complete in its kind as that which he describes"—is faint praise indeed for this "artificial species of excellence.")⁵⁰ Barbauld's insistence that "the Muse would make a very indifferent school-mistress" ("Essay," iv) is broadly representative of an emergent skepticism toward poetry's capacity to provide direct instruction on any topic whatsoever and anticipates Romanticism's rejection of didacticism (in theory if not in practice).

While speaking in one sense for the spirit of the age, however, the *Anti-Jacobin* article is significant for the generality of its charges against the hybrid ambitions of the philosophical poem. Since that poet is greatest, we are told, who "paints to us from his immediate feelings," the fatal flaw of didactic verse is that it violates the dictum that "*in order to write successfully, we should feel vividly*" (247). Accordingly, *The Botanic Garden* is read as a project doomed in advance by the preposterousness of its aim to extend a source of human interest into subjects for which no vivid feeling is possible ("How is it possible to enter into the feelings of plants?" [255]). Here, then, in different guise, is the emphasis on the "feelings and deeper workings of the mind" (in Charles Darwin's phrase) that countless readers have identified as the soul and expression of Romantic poetry. *The Botanic Garden* is attacked for the coldly rational principles that it supposedly serves, vilified as abstract machinery symptomatic of "this affectedly philosophical age" (255). Along with other contemporary attacks, the *Anti-Jacobin* essay condemns philosoph-

attendant on poetry, favourable to the illustration of any subject of science" (*Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, April 1800, 537).

⁵⁰ Anna Barbauld, "Essay on Akenside's Poem on the Pleasures of Imagination," in *The Pleasures of Imagination, by Mark Akenside, M.D. to Which Is Prefixed a Critical Essay on the Poem by Mrs. Barbauld* (London, 1795), ii.

ical poetry as politically corrupt in the very logic of its form, and in its formal pretensions to logic especially. "I never chose, in various nature strong, / Logick for verse, or history for song," proclaims Thomas James Mathias in *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794–97), a declaration in which faithfulness to the autonomy of "verse" is made virtually synonymous with the creed of the English patriot and his loyalty to the political cause against France.⁵¹

Suggesting the future direction of these literary tastes, and the aesthetics that Romantic poets will hold up as a corrective ideal to poetry such as Darwin's, the *Anti-Jacobin* concludes its discussion of *The Botanic Garden* with a caution to aspiring poets: "It becomes every lover of the Muse to watch the inroads of science, with an eye of jealousy: it behoves [*sic*] him to check her influence, lest the intermixture of scientific discovery with poetic invention should become fashionable, and every spark of poetry at length be quenched in the phlegm of philosophy" (255). The path that lay beyond this utterance runs straight through many of the major statements of Romantic and early Victorian literary aesthetics: Wordsworth's distinction between the poet and the man of science in the 1802 preface, Coleridge's definition of poetry as the antithesis of science, William Hazlitt's (or Peacock's, or Keats's, etc.) vision of natural philosophy as hostile to the spirit of poetry, Thomas De Quincey's distinction between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. That Darwin's own writings attribute to the aesthetic a similarly constituent status with respect to the claims of reason— independent, however, of the critique of scientific understanding that underwrites all of these later statements— would seem, in retrospect, nugatory. The fire from which "Romanticism" sprang to life as an alternative to cold reason was kindled not so much at the urging of Wordsworth and Coleridge but from the funeral pyre of Darwin's legacy (as both a sacrificial offering and a burning at the stake).

I suggest in concluding that the literary history I have traced here, preceding and also anticipating these influential formulations of Romantic aesthetics, may provide a context in which to read the letter (ca. September 10, 1799) in which Coleridge first articulated his vision

⁵¹ [Thomas James Mathias,] *The Pursuits of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues; With Notes*, 5th ed. (London, 1798), 245 (dialogue 4, ll. 75–76).

for the philosophical poem to which he urged Wordsworth to devote his energies. The letter, which survives only as a fragment, is well known: “I wish you would write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary *philosophes*” (*STCL*, 1:527). The precedent and ideological inverse to the politically defaulted condition of “epicurean selfishness” would be represented to Coleridge most clearly by the Epicurean program of Darwin’s *philosophical* poetry. Appropriately, then, the dialectician Coleridge sets the cure for this condition in the *pharmakon* of the philosophical poem, a form that in the days approaching 18 Brumaire appeared urgently in need of reinvention. But while Coleridge looked to Wordsworth as the poet to renovate and redeem this discredited genre (nourishing this hope well beyond the probability of its fulfillment), the damage had in a sense already been done. Wordsworth’s notorious inability or unwillingness to complete *The Recluse*, and thus to write what Coleridge continued to maintain would be “the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHIC POEM,” may attest not to a loss of faith or to his own lack of confidence in this endeavor but to his consciousness of the multiple pasts of a genre that could not or should not be revived.

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