

‘Playful force’ in Erasmus Darwin’s *Botanic Garden*

Criticising bad Augustan poetry for ‘circumlocution in excelsis’, Cecil Deane held up for ridicule the following couplet, supposedly from Darwin’s two-part *Botanic Garden*:

Metallic Blade, wedded to ligneous Rod
Wherewith the rustic Swain upturns the Sod (Deane, p.5)

The lines literally fail to call a spade a spade. They stand the poetic commonplace of a ‘rustic Swain’ against a tasteless wedding metaphor, with the prosaic ‘ligneous’ clashing with the coarse ‘Sod’. Although these lines are probably a joke of W.K. Wimsatt’s (Wimsatt, p.143), it is telling that they have been attributed to Darwin, with a critic sympathetic to *Garden* admitting that they ‘certainly [are] consistent with Darwin’s style’ (Hassler, p.118). Modern consensus emphasises the clumsiness of Darwin’s diction; even King-Hele, Darwin’s greatest champion, grants that the *Garden* is tedious when it describes ‘familiar actions in ponderous scientific terms’ (King-Hele, p.133).

Whilst Powell Jones also points out the poem’s inelegance, he argues from another angle, maintaining that ‘science, especially botany, had by 1790 become too technical to be treated as a suitable subject for poetry’ (Powell Jones, p.212). In other words, by the time that *Garden* was published, the depth of scientific discovery meant that a discipline like botany would necessarily fail to figure in poetic terms — Powell Jones terms this the ‘didactic dilemma’. So on the one hand there is the view that Darwin failed when he imported an unsuitably ‘ponderous’ scientific vocabulary into his otherwise brilliant poem; on the other there is the reciprocal idea that he failed when he attempted to crudely poeticise the rich, technical Linnean classification in the first place.

Yet these perspectives are thrown into sharp relief by the reflections of the Romantic poets, who were enamoured of Darwin’s verse as youths and came to dislike it for other reasons. Wordsworth declared that his ‘natural tendencies [had been] under an injurious influence from the dazzling manner of Darwin’ (Wordsworth, p.170). Others were suspicious of the ‘dazzling manner’ from the start; William Godwin exhorted Shelley to stop reading Darwin’s poetry, writing that it was characterised by little more than a ‘perpetual sparkle and glittering’ (Shelley, p.216).

The Romantic characterisation of the poetry as glittering emptiness is manifestly incompatible with modern descriptions that note its ‘ponderous’ heaviness. This reading of the *Garden* will suggest that, insofar as the poem is a textual approximation of a real botanic garden, it is able to accommodate such a range of positions since it is a collocation of a huge diversity of forms and linguistic registers. The assorted material of the poem poses difficulties as to how it should be perceived, for its functioning principle is a ‘playful forc[ing]’ (*Economy*, III.203) together of elements that resists reductive manners of apprehension.

Botanic gardens tend to be arranged ‘in a scheme that emphasizes natural relationships’ between plants, balancing the tendency towards taxonomical order with aesthetic ‘eye appeal’ (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). They encapsulate a tension between apparent naturalness and the great amount of artifice that is actually required to create the ‘artfully ordered [...] profusion and confusion’ (Browne, p.608). Darwin was writing at a time when, as documented by Walpole in his 1780 treatise *On Modern Gardening*, artificially natural gardens that lacked central axes were replacing ‘symmetrical and unnatural’ gardens across Britain (Walpole, p.527). Prest contends that

botanic gardens were efforts to reconstruct the ultimate natural garden, the Garden of Eden, which contained the epitome of all the luxurious flora in the world (Prest, p.42). *The Loves of the Plants* draws an explicit parallel between such 'exotic plants' and poetic words or phrases borrowed from external sources — the 'Poet' character in the third Interlude remarks metaphorically that the 'mixture [of the exotic plants] with the native ones, I hope, adds beauty to my Botanic Garden' (p.132). From this it can be gathered that the aesthetic appeal of the whole emerges from the individual specimen's place as part of a heterogeneous system. The following investigation of *Garden*, categorised by its interrelating forms — verse, interludes and footnotes — will trace the ways in which the poem enacts the 'profusion and confusion' of a real botanic garden.

The visual nature of *Garden's* verse derived from Darwin's sympathy for Lord Kames's theory of 'ideal presence', which argued that the best poems worked like moving paintings, where 'the force of language consists in raising complete images which have the power to convert [the reader] as it were into a spectator, beholding every thing that passes' (Kames, p.329). *Garden* in this light includes long lists of parallel imperatives that function as descriptives, conveying progressively accumulating catalogues of nature:

Glitter, ye Glow-worms, on your mossy beds;
Descend, ye Spiders, on your lengthen'd threads;
Slide here, ye horned Snails, with varnish'd shells;
Ye Bee-nymphs, listen in your waxen cells! (*Loves*, I.27–30)

The objective of providing unencumbered access to the imagery is reflected in the evasion of ambiguities and grammatical confusions. Employment of devices such as penultimate words that end with the same consonant (lengthen'd/varnish'd) and parallel words and structures (ye, on your) further augments the ease of reading. The heroic couplets face becoming tiresome, but the monotony is tempered by the last line here, for instance, with its reverse of predicate and subject. Darwin gradually layers the images by importing into the garden a mélange of Rosicrucian figures, scientific terminology, and most strikingly, romance narratives of damsels and lustful squires:

The chaste TROPAEO leaves her secret bed; [...]
Eight watchful swains along the lawns of night
With amorous steps pursue the virgin light. (*Loves*, IV.45,47–48)

In this visual annexing of flowers to lovers the poem was seen to be doing something daringly innovative, 'peeping through the keyholes of all the seraglios in the universe' in Walpole's enthusiastic expression (Harman, p.209). Walpole's choice of words is significant: he captures the exhaustiveness of Darwin's *Garden* while simultaneously hinting at the recurring interest of the images via 'peeping' and 'seraglio', which render the voyeuristic pleasure of experiencing exoticism from a secure location. At a time when contemporaries like William Withering were employing euphemisms to disguise the implications of Linnaeus's ideas (Browne, p.599), Darwin's fluently visual poeticising of Linnaean taxonomy promised to ornament the act of looking at flowers in real life too.

Yet to focus so intently on the visual aspect of the *Garden* is to ignore the obtrusive formal role played by the interludes. The interludes, their name alone signalling their seriousness as opposed to the ludus/playing of the poetry, undertake to philosophically justify the poet's act of 'writ[ing] principally to the eye' (*Loves*, pp.41–42). Like the pictures of flowers, they at first seem

to indicate a deficiency in the poetry. The strongly visual couplets, which could be speaking for themselves, are broken away from in lieu of a prose dialogue that fields an increasingly involved critique of the verse:

Bookseller. Your verses, Mr. Botanist, consist of *pure description*, I hope there is *sense* in the notes.

Poet. I am only a flower-painter, or occasionally attempt a landskip; and leave the human figure with the subjects of history to abler artists. (*Loves*, p.40)

Although the Romantics would echo the opening comment of the Bookseller, his questioning becomes increasingly passive as the interlude proceeds, while the Poet's modesty dissolves into a lengthy discourse on the Kamesian apparatus underlying the poetry. There is a growing feeling that the 'sense' of the text lies within this discourse rather than in the verse — the verse appears to be just a demonstration of Darwin's philosophical premises. Landscape gardens and parks were often considered to be precisely this: 'aesthetic artefacts' explained through philosophy (Williamson, p.119). The interludes, consequently, contain the terms of the verse's vindication, maintaining that poetry can accomplish verisimilitude as no other form can: the Poet draws a comparison between the way that he 'writes principally to the eye' whilst 'the Prose-writer uses more abstracted terms' (p.42). This places the two forms in a complementary relationship that reflects the balance of varied elements in a botanic garden. The antithesis also draws attention to the ironic fact that the 'Poet' is most conspicuous in the prose. The interludes alone make up 28 of the 165 pages of the text; combined with the copious footnotes and additional notes, the prose almost predominates over the poetry.

The footnotes meanwhile exist in a far more problematical relationship to the verse. Occupying large spaces on most pages of *Garden*, they are a tug on the reader's attention, and in explicating the scientific rationale behind the poetry, cause the reader to temporarily abandon the images that she is supposed to have cultivated. The footnotes also threaten to overthrow the formal hegemony of the verse — after all, the Advertisement states *Garden's* didactic aim of 'inlist[ing] Imagination under the banner of Science'. And yet insofar as the footnotes are inherently subordinate to the verse, they can generally be ignored by a reader uninterested in obsolete science or Lichfieldian inventors. The footnotes provide close inspections of particular items in the garden, inspections that the reader will make only if the items interest her so much that she is willing to sacrifice her comprehensive view of the garden. This underscores the insularity of at least one reading of the poem, for Powell Jones's concept of the 'didactic dilemma' is conditional on a very high valuation of the science in the footnotes. Even if the footnotes *are* perused, many of them turn out to be risqué to the extent that they verge on being 'Science under the banner of Imagination':

as soon as the pistil grows tall enough to burst open the keel-leaf, or hood of the flower, it bends itself round in an instant, like a French horn, and inserts its head, or stigma, amongst the lower or mature set of males. (*Loves*, p.5)

Darwin's pointed exchange of just about every scientific term for an innuendo here — except, for propriety's sake, 'pistil' — shows how he tries to make even the didactic strain of the science entertainingly titillating. From the formal level, down to the level of individual words, Darwin offers alternatives, allowing the reader to chart either a scientific, salacious, or most likely varied course through *Garden*.

In the chemical reactions sequence in *Economy*, the poem's preoccupying 'betrothal' of science to other textual material rises to a crescendo:

NYMPHS! YOUR bright squadrons watch with chemic eyes
The cold-elastic vapours, as they rise;
With playful force arrest them as they pass,
And to *pure* AIR betroth the *flaming* GAS. (*Economy*, III.201–4)

Just as the nymphs employ 'playful force' to explosively react hydrogen and oxygen, in this 'profusion and confusion' of linguistic registers, military 'squadrons' collide with scientific 'cold-elastic vapours' and sensual 'rapturous arms'. As has been argued, the interrelating forms of the poem function in a similar manner: the verse, interludes and footnotes fulfil divergent roles, necessitating delimited paths through their resources. Thus critical assessments of the *Garden* tend to call attention to the critic's own parochialism; at least Byron seemed aware of alternative plots when he declared in 1819 that 'the scenery is [the poem's] sole recommendation' (*Byron*, IV, p.474). Priestman, on the other hand, in specifically seeking examples of atheistic 'subversion', makes the mistake of calling perhaps the most intriguing element of the poem, its structure — its tense interplay of forms — 'lightly inconsequential' (Priestman, p.63). This essay's reading, in remaining sensitive to the ways in which the poem performs its title, has shown that *Garden's* structure is anything but inconsequential, and that in fact an approach to the *Garden* that concentrates on its 'playful force' and the way that it incites such disparate assessments is one of the only means of gaining vantage over the poem's various matter.

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