

### Appendix 5.16: from Richard Polwhele, Review of Wakefield's Lucretius in *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 5 (March 1800)

This review article is not restricted to Wakefield's Lucretius but, in that context, offers a range of "sketches of the principal Didactic poets, that have flourished, or still exist, in different ages and countries" (p. 242).

Richard Polwhele (1760–1838) is identified as the author of this review in Emily Lorraine de Montluzin, *The Anti-Jacobins 1798–1800: The Early Contributors to the Anti-Jacobin Review* (London, Macmillan, 1988, p. 186). Polwhele, author and Anglican clergyman, published poetry, topography, sermons, translations of ancient Greek writers, and contributions to journals such as *The Gentleman's Magazine* and *The Anti-Jacobin Review*. He is now best known for *The Unsex'd Females* (1798). Polwhele had made the acquaintance of ED's son Erasmus in 1780 and wrote commendatory verses for *The Botanic Garden*, published in Volume 1, *The Economy of Vegetation*, 1795 and 1799 (see Appendix 1.5).

Titus Lucretius Carus (ca. 99–ca. 55 BCE), Roman author, wrote *De Rerum Natura* [On the Nature of Things], a poem in six books which represents the philosophy of Epicurus and the atomic theory of Democritus. It was a major influence on subsequent didactic verse. For Christian readers, it was a controversial text due to its opposition to religion and superstition, its materialism, and its frank discussion of sexual passion.

Gilbert Wakefield (1756–1801), biblical scholar and religious controversialist, published many works of classical and biblical translation, as well as editions of English literary works and writing on religion and politics. His Latin edition of Lucretius was published in three volumes in 1796–1797. In 1798 he (along with his publisher and ED's, Joseph Johnson), was convicted for seditious libel for the pamphlet he wrote in reply to Richard Watson, Bishop of Landaff's *An Address to the People of Great Britain*. In the pamphlet he argued against the counter-revolutionary war with France and voiced the oppression of the British poor. He was imprisoned until 1801.

Selections copied from "ART. I. *T. Lucretii Cari De rerum Naturâ Libros Sex [... by] Gilbertus Wakefield [...]*." *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 5 (March 1800): pp. 241–58.

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We haste to announce a philosophic production which has been said to rival the poem of Lucretius, and seems to have been composed in the gardens of Epicurus,<sup>1</sup> which displays to us the infant Cupid playing at the feet of Flora, and the four elements doing homage to her charms! It is a recent poem of our own country; "*the Botanic Garden*," or "*the Loves of the Plants*," one of the most popular performances, perhaps, that have been published for many years. But, however,<sup>2</sup> widely his poetic fame may have spread *per ora virum*,<sup>3</sup> Dr. Darwin comes to us, we confess, in a very "questionable shape;" not, indeed, like the ghost in Hamlet; he stands not a steady spectre before our eyes: nor can we ask him, whether he bring "airs from heaven or blasts

from hell;”<sup>4</sup> since he is evidently proud of having imported both. And no sooner have we been refreshed by the ambrosial fragrance of the skies, than we are poisoned by the pestilential breath of Avernus.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Darwin’s poetic character is, certainly, equivocal. It is only the fashion of the day, perhaps, that will adjudge to Darwin the palm of poetry: but fashion is fluctuating and capricious; whilst the principles of taste are immutable. Lest, however, the brilliant, though momentary success of “the Botanic Garden,” should so dazzle the

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younger votaries of the muse, as to occasion a misapplication of their talents, we shall beg permission to bring, fully to their view, the false colours with which it is invested. A kind of faery lustre seems to surround it—a visionary light, through the medium of which, we fancy that we perceive symmetry and beauty. But, dissipate this luminous atmosphere, and the whole is disproportioned; all is without form—all is chaos. The few remarks that we have cursorily made on “the Botanic Garden,” shall be distributed as follows. 1. *The subject of the poem*. 2. *The constituent and essential parts*. 3. *The style*. 4. *The versification*. 5. *The poetry*. —1. For the *subject* of the poem, it is, in our opinion, ill-chosen. Imagination refuses to be enlisted under the banner of science; though science may sometimes be brought forward, not unhappily, under the conduct of imagination.<sup>6</sup> To discriminate, poetically, the 24 classes of the vegetable world; to mark the 120 orders into which those classes are divided, the 2,000 families or genera which those orders contain, and the 20,000 species which these families or genera include, would be impracticable; consequently, to treat well of botany in verse is impossible. What then has Dr. Darwin done? Why, he talks obscurely of the physiology of the plants, and the operation of the elements; and then quaintly describes the loves of the plants; explaining, as he fancies, the sexual system of Linnæus, with the remarkable properties of any particular plants. But this is neither botany nor poetry. The botanist would disdain such flimsiness: and the poet would reject such incongruities. Nothing more clearly proves, that the subject is unmanageable, than the want of connection throughout the poem, and the multiplicity of notes that are continually obtruded upon us. The poem is without order or method; and, setting the notes aside, we defy any person to explain the scientific part of it, however deep may have been his researches in the botanico-poetic gardens of Lichfield. We shall insist on this point no longer; since by his constant recurrence to prose, in order to explain what is inexplicable in verse, the author stands self-convicted of having attempted what it is impossible to perform.— 2. As to *the construction and essentials* of the poem, we have already intimated, that its parts but ill accord: it has neither beginning, middle, nor end. Fireballs and animal incubation<sup>7</sup>—Bolognian stone and Memnon’s harp—Electric eel and Medusa—Lady in love and gunpowder—Cornmills and coining—Flying chariots and the labours of Hercules—Hesperian dragon and Halo round the heads of saints—Professor Richman and Cupid—the great egg of night and sympathetic inks—Jupiter and Semele, and Elijah on

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Mount Carmel—Mars and Venus caught by Vulcan, and St. Peter delivered from prison—Grotto of Mermaid, and the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire—Jupiter and Juno, and the character<sup>8</sup> of Miss Jones—Caravan drinking, and nymphs like water-spiders—Death of Mr. Day, and destruction of Sennacharib’s army—Seeds within Seeds, and the royal family.—A whale and

sensibility—Nebuchadnezzar and Miss Crewe—Moses and Mr. Howard—Nightmare and harlots—Shedreck, Mescheck, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, and a lady enclosed in a fig; these, “gentle reader, are presented to thy view, as light and shades dancing on a whited canvas;” these are “the little pictures” which thou art invited to contemplate—“connected only,” it seems, “by a light festoon of ribbons.”<sup>9</sup> Such is the author’s own modest confession! Yet, even his slight festoon of ribbons is, to our gross vision, more delicately woven than the Gossamer glistening in air. The films,<sup>10</sup> before our eyes must be purged with euphrasy,<sup>11</sup> from the bards enchanted garden, before we can discern this exquisitely fine connection. In short, our judgement of the poem is, that it is made up of ingredients that are absolutely heterogeneous, and will never mix. On another view, the science of the Botanic Garden is a dark heavy cloud; and the poetry, a glittering heap of gems, some faintly tintured, others, a little muddy or discoloured; but the rest transparent, beautifully brilliant, and of the first water.— 3. If we examine the *style* of the Botanic Garden, we perceive no roughnesses: all is correct—all is polished. Yet affectation reigns through the whole: the poet is, every where, upon stilts. His style, in short, is unnatural; and he seems conscious of it: for, in order to relieve the tortured attention of his readers, he has recourse to a pitiful expedient. He descends, at the close of a canto, to a plain prose conversation with his bookseller, which he terms an interlude. This is a poor stage trick, unworthy a good writer.— 4. In the mean time, the *versification* of this poem is disgustingly uniform: It is smooth but monotonous. Pope’s<sup>12</sup> lines are said to run in one unvaried tenour: but there are many changes in Pope. Examining, however, six lines only, in any page of Darwin, we may immediately judge of the texture of his versification. The book may open anywhere. By a kind of *sortes virgilianæ*,<sup>13</sup> we are directed to the 36th page of the 2d part.

“The sleepy path her *plighted* swain pursues,  
And tracks her *light* steps o’er the imprinted dews,  
*Delighted* Hymen gives his torch to blaze,  
Winds round the crags, and *lights* the mazy ways;  
Sheds o’er their secret vows his influence chaste,  
And decks with roses the admiring waste.”<sup>14</sup>

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This mode of using the nominative case and the verb obtains throughout the poem. But we have marked several words in the above extract as clashing, or repetitions of the same sound—a rare fault in the Botanic Garden. 5. We now come to the last topic---the *poetry*; for the *language* of which, many of Darwin’s epithets are, undoubtedly, new, but not always chaste. They are often borrowed from the works of art. Johnson was too nice in objecting to such epithets—*Velvet* may be admissible as applied to a *lawn*. But we would not advise the poet to draw his illustrations or images, too frequently, from mercers shops or manufactories. As to the *sentiment*, the impersonation of the plants has a very disagreeable quaintness. How is it possible to enter into the feelings of plants? Are we not, in a manner insulted, when seriously called upon, to sympathize with herbs and flowers in their secret sighs? Are we for a moment interested in the “gay hopes and amorous sorrows of the mead?”<sup>15</sup> What a burlesque on love, the most charming, the most poetical, of our passions! “The Loves of the Triangles,” are scarcely less acceptable to the Cyprian goddess.<sup>16</sup> In fine, the Botanic Garden, as a poem, cannot be approved; but it may be justly termed, a collection of beautiful little pictures. Thus, we have regularly, though rapidly, gone over this curious production; pointing out its defects, rather than its beauties; because we would refer the former to this affectedly philosophical age, and place to the account of the times, the errors of a gentleman, whose ingenuity and scientific knowledge are unquestionable. It

becomes every lover of the Muse to watch the inroads of science, with an eye of jealousy: it behoves 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.\*

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\* Many a tolerable poet has been *spoiled* already, by an injudicious imitation, or rather mimicry of Darwin. In his “Vales of *Wever*,” for instance, Mr. Gisbourne,<sup>17</sup> aping the *Loves of the Plants*, has proved himself a clever *weaver* of his soft silver gossamery stuff—if a bad pun may be indulged to us: but the prettyisms of mock-poetry are worthy only of a pun from criticism.

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<sup>1</sup> Epicurus (c. 341–c.270 BCE), Greek philosopher, whose ideas are reflected in Lucretius. Epicurus argued that pleasure (or absence of pain) is essential to a good life and is the measure of all actions.

<sup>2</sup> Comma in original

<sup>3</sup> Latin for “by the mouths of men”; a reference to Ennius, *Epigrammata* [Epigrams], 2a, on his renown after death as a poet: “volito vivos per ora virum” [I live, flying about upon the lips of men] (Ennius, *Minor Works*, trans. Sander M. Goldberg and Gesine Manuwald, Loeb Classical Library).

<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.4.45, 48.

<sup>5</sup> A lake near Naples; in Roman mythology, it led to the underworld. “Avernus” means “without birds,” because it was believed the lake’s poisoned waters would kill any bird that tried to fly over it.

<sup>6</sup> Paraphrased from *LOTP*, Advertisement, and from Polwhele, *The Unsex’d Females*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> This is a list of actual topics in *The Economy of Vegetation* and *The Loves of the Plants*, many of which do follow each other, more or less.

<sup>8</sup> It is “Charities of Miss Jones” in the “Argument of the Third Canto” of *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791).

<sup>9</sup> *LOTP*, Proem.

<sup>10</sup> Comma in original

<sup>11</sup> A plant used for medicine to treat conditions of the eye.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Pope (1688–1744).

<sup>13</sup> Literally, Virgilian lots (as in drawing lots); divination by random selection of a passage in Virgil.

<sup>14</sup> *LOTP* I:355–60, with “sleepy” for ED’s “steepy”

<sup>15</sup> *LOTP* I:6.

<sup>16</sup> Cyprus was associated with worship of Aphrodite and Venus, the Greek and Roman goddesses of love, sexual desire, and beauty.

<sup>17</sup> *The Vales of Wever, A Loco-Descriptive Poem* (1797) by John Gisborne (1770–1851), ED’s step-son-in-law. In 1792, Gisborne married Millicent Pole, the daughter of ED’s second wife, Elizabeth, by her previous husband. Like ED, they lived in Derbyshire.