Appendix 5.7: from Isaac D'Israeli, *Curiosities of Literature* (1794)

Isaac D'Israeli (1766–1848) was a writer of satires, poetry, romances, and novels, but came to specialize in, and be best known for, popular books on literature and history. He was the father of Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881), novelist and Prime Minister of Britain.

His *Curiosities of Literature consisting of Anecdotes, Characters, Sketches, and Observations, Literary Critical, and Historical*, was first published in 1791, revised and expanded in later editions (growing from one substantial volume to five), and often reprinted through the nineteenth century. The discussion of *The Botanic Garden* first appeared in the 1794 edition, was revised in 1807, and further revised in 1823. The revisions reflect ED's changing reputation, and so the first and last versions (1794 and 1823) are included here.

Texts copied from:

Isaac D'Israeli. *Curiosities of Literature, consisting of Anecdotes, Characters, Sketches, and Observations, Literary Critical, and Historical*. 4th ed. Vol. 2. London: H. Murray, 1794.

Isaac Disraeli. *Curiosities of Literature.* 7th ed. Vol. 3. London: John Murray, 1823.

1794 version

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PHILOSOPHICAL DESCRIPTIVE POEMS.

IN the present age, little distinguished for the originality of its poetic compositions, the BOTANIC GARDEN has appeared. It seems, indeed, to have opened a new route through the trodden groves of Parnassus. The poet, who shall rashly venture to wrestle with such a rival, will be exposed to the derision of the *Arena*; for it will be long before a writer shall appear, who to all the prodigality of IMAGINATION shall unite all the minute accuracy of SCIENCE. It is a performance which makes a prominent figure in our national poetry. If it be permitted to censure (however slightly) productions of such eminent felicity, it may be observed, that the excessive polish of the verse to some will appear by much too high to be endured throughout a long composition; it is cer-

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tain, that in poems of length, a versification which is not too florid for certain delicate *opusculæ*,[1] offends by its brilliancy. The Abbé du Bos has finely expressed one of the grand requisites of poetry, by 'LA POESIE DU STYLE;'[2] this is Gray's 'WORDS THAT BURN.'[3] For the most perfect example of such a style in a composition of length, the HOMER of POPE[4] may be opposed to any poem in any language. The *Botanic Garden*, allowing much for the nature of its topics, to me appears to have passed that happy limit which Pope regarded. What is the consequence? Every

one admires while he reads, but he cannot read long. The conspicuous blemish of this fine poem, is a certain sameness which prevails throughout the work, and which it would not have been difficult to obviate, had a little plot or fable been invented to connect, in some degree, its numerous descriptions, and to animate the whole by a pervading interest. A slight thread is requisite to bind these beautiful flowers.

Descriptive poetry should always be relieved by a skilful intermixture of passages, which are addressed to the heart, as well as

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to the imagination: constant description fatigues; it gives too violent an exercise to the mind, and must always be considered as one of the inferior branches of poetry. Of this both Thomson[5] and Goldsmith[6] were sensible. In their beautiful descriptive poems they knew the art of animating the pictures of FANCY with the glow of SENTIMENT. The delightful poet of the *Botanic Garden* has occasionally interspersed some interesting appeals to the human heart; and while we feel their magic effect, we wish they had been more frequent.

Whatever may be thought of the originality of this poem, it has been preceded by others of a congenial disposition; but they have hitherto been confined to *one object*, which the poet selected from the works of nature, to embellish with all the splendour of poetic imagination. I have collected the titles of most of such poems which I could meet with.

[...]

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The judicious authors of the Memoirs of Trevoux[7] observe, in their review of the poem on *Gold*, above-mentioned,[8] 'That poems of this kind have the advantage of instructing us very agreeably. All that has been most remarkably said on the subject is united, compressed in a luminous order, and dressed in all the agreeable graces of poetry. Such writers have no little difficulties to encounter; the expression costs them dear; and still more, to give a dry topic an agreeable form, and to elevate the meanness of the subject without falling into another extreme. In the other kinds of poetry, the matter aids genius; here we must possess an abundance to display it.'

If it was thus difficult for a Jesuit, who reposed on the bosom of literature, to evince his talents on the subject of *Gold*, what must have been the difficulties of the elegant physician who has composed the *Botanic Garden* amidst the distraction of daily avocations, and in which is mind has grasped the productions of nature, and the compositions of art, while it embellished whatever it touched! To express our sense

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of such a versatility of poetic talents, it will become us to contemplate the beauties of this poem in silent admiration.

1823 version

PHILOSOPHICAL DESCRIPTIVE POEMS.

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THE BOTANIC GARDEN once appeared to open a new route through the trodden groves of Parnassus. The poet, with a prodigality of IMAGINATION, united all the minute accuracy of SCIENCE. It is a highly-repolished labour, and was in the

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mind and in the hand of its author for twenty years before its first publication. The excessive polish of the verse has appeared too high to be endured throughout a long composition; it is certain that, in poems of length, a versification, which is not too florid for lyrical composition, will weary by its brilliancy. Darwin, inasmuch as a rich philosophical fancy constitutes a poet, possesses the entire art of poetry; no one has carried the curious mechanism of verse and the artificial magic of poetical diction to higher perfection. His volcanic head flamed with imagination, but his torpid heart slept unawakened by passion. His standard of poetry is by much too limited; he supposed that the essence of poetry is something of which a painter can make a picture. A picturesque verse was with him a verse completely poetical. But the language of the passions has no connexion with this principle; in truth, what he delineates as poetry itself, is but one of its provinces. Deceived by his illusive standard, he has composed a poem which is perpetually fancy, and never passion. Hence his processional splendour fatigues, and his descriptive ingenuity comes at length to be deficient in novelty, and all the miracles of art cannot supply us with one touch of nature.

Descriptive poetry should be relieved by a skilful intermixture of passages addressed to the heart

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as well as to the imagination: uniform description satiates; and has been considered as one of the inferior branches of poetry. Of this both Thomson and Goldsmith were sensible. In their beautiful descriptive poems they knew the art of animating the pictures of FANCY with the glow of SENTIMENT.

Whatever may be thought of the originality of this poem, it has been preceded by others of a congenial disposition. Brooke's's poem on "Universal Beauty,"[9] published about 1735, presents us with the very model of Darwin's versification; and the Latin poem of De la Croix, in 1727, intitled "*Connubia Florum*," with his subject. There also exists a race of poems which have hitherto been confined to *one object*, which the poet selected from the works of nature, to embellish with all the splendour of poetic imagination. I have collected some titles.

[A slightly revised list of philosophical descriptive poems follows, and the quotation on the poem on *Gold*, but the final paragraph on ED from 1794 is deleted.]

[1] Short or minor literary works.

[2] Jean-Baptise Du Bos (1670–1742), author of *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719), translated into English by Thomas Nugent as *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting* (1748).

[3] Thomas Gray (1716–1771), "The Progress of Poesy. A Pindaric Ode" (1757):

> Hark, his hands the lyre explore!
> Bright-eyed Fancy hovering o'er
> Scatters from her pictured urn
> Thoughts that breathe, and words that burn.
> But ah! 'tis heard no more–" (3.3, 1. 107–11).

[4] Alexander Pope (1688–1744) translated Homer into English heroic couplets. He published his translation of the *Iliad* in 6 volumes over the years 1715–1720, and of the *Odyssey*, with two collaborators, Elijah Fenton (1683–1730) and William Broome (bap. 1689, d. 1745), in 5 volumes, 1725–1726. These translations were immensely successful and widely read.

[5] James Thomson (1700–1748), best known for *The Seasons*, first published 1726–1730, revised 1744.

[6] Oliver Goldsmith (1728?–1774), whose poems include *The Deserted Village* (1770).

[7] *Mémoires de Trévoux* was a French journal of arts and sciences published 1701–1767.

[8] In the paragraphs omitted here, D'Israeli had given a list of philosophical descriptive poems, including "a little poem on *Gold*, by P. Le Fevre" (p. 61).

[9] Henry Brooke (c. 1703–1783), *Universal Beauty* (1735). An 1804 reviewer of Seward's *Memoirs* pointed out the close resemblance, but without knowing Brooke's name. (Review of Anna Seward, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin*. *Edinburgh Review* Vol. 4, no. 7, April 1804, pp. 230–41; see pp. 238–39.)