## Appendix 5.20: D. M. Moir, "On the Darwinian School of Poetry," *The Edinburgh Magazine* 2 (April 1818)

David Macbeth Moir (1798–1851) was a physician and writer. He was personal physician to William Blackwood (1776–1834) and was among the influential contributors to *Blackwood's Magazine* in its first decades. Moir is best known for the Scottish stories he wrote for *Blackwood's*, published together under the title *The Autobiography of Mansie Waugh* (1828). He also published poetry, medical works, and a biography of his friend, the novelist John Galt (1779–1839), who was also a colonial developer of Southwestern Ontario, Canada.

Some of the material in this article reappears in Moir's *Sketches of the Poetical Literature of the Past Half-Century in Six Lectures* (1851).

Text copied from D. M. Moir, "On the Darwinian School of Poetry," *The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany; A New Series of the Scots Magazine* 2 (April 1818).

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DESULTORY ESSAYS ON SUBJECTS
CONNECTED WITH LITERATURE.

No. II.

*On the Darwinian School of Poetry*.

"Others for language all their care express,
And value books, as women men, for dress:
Their praise is still—'The style is excellent;'
The sense they humbly take upon content."
POPE.[1]

IN matter, and in manner, the Lake[2] and Darwinian schools of poetry are the very antipodes of each other,—hostile in all their doctrines, and opposite in every characteristic. The one endeavours, and too often succeeds, in debasing what is naturally dignified and lofty, by meanness of style, and triteness of simile, and puerility of descriptions: it clothes Achilles once more in female habiliments,[3] and sets Hercules to the distaff.[4] The other endeavours—if we may be allowed the simile—to buoy up the materials of prose into the etherial regions of poetry, by putting them into the car of an air balloon, not expanded by the divine afflatus, but by means of hydrogenous gas, while the aeronaut, as he ascends, waves his embroidered flag, and scatters among the gaping crowd below, gold leaf, and tinsel, and roses. The one reminds us of Cincinnatus,[5] who, after having held the helm of state, and led the armies of his country to victory, sighed for unambitious retirement, and threw off the ensigns of office, and withdrew from the bustle of cabinets and camps, to the tranquillity of his little farm; and the other to Aben Hassan,[6] in the Arabian Tales, who was transported from the tavern to the palace, when under

the influence of a somniferous potion, and awoke amid the music of a morning serenade, and surrounded with all the splendours of mock royalty.

Were it not for the similes, which are, however, too frequently pressed into the service, the Botanic Garden and the Temple of Nature,[7] with all their luxuriant description, and splendid imagery, and pompous versification, would be the most tedious and uninteresting performances;—the only redeeming virtue would be found in the notes. The subjects, abstract-

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edly considered, wholly preclude all passion, pathos, and sympathy, which are unquestionably among the more fascinating elements that enter into the composition of poetry. What end could be gained by describing in verse the machinery of a cotton-mill,[8] or the improvements on the steam-engine?[9] If Dr Darwin intended to excite pleasurable feelings in his readers, he might unquestionably have chosen a more appropriate subject; if instruction was his aim, he could have attained it far more commodiously in prose. We are told, indeed, that "it is the design of the Botanic Garden to enlist Imagination under the banner of Science, and to lead her votaries from the looser analogies that dress out the imagery of poetry, to the stricter ones, which form the ratiocinations of philosophy."[10] But the great end of poetry is here forgotten; we look on, and are dazzled; but we have no emotion of any kind. The loves of the plants are wholly different from the metamorphoses of Ovid,[11] because, in the latter, the transmutation is merely a secondary object, both in the eyes of the poet, and in the estimation of the reader. Since the heroine or hero must fall off from all intellectual grandeur, and cease to excite all moral sympathy, we are wholly indifferent, if they must be transformed, into what it may be—an animal, or a stone, or a plant. We are told, indeed, that Ajax stabbed himself, and that his blood was turned into the violet;[12] but Ovid, with characteristic sagacity, previously gives us a peep at the assembled court, and tickles our ears with the shouts of the soldiery, and touches our hearts with the eloquence of the champions, as they relate their "hair-breadth 'scapes by flood and field,"[13] and all the important services they had rendered to their country.[14]

From among a hundred glaring instances, which we could adduce from the Botanic Garden, in proof of our allegations, and of the utter unfitness of the subject for poetical delineation, we will only call the attention of the reader to a very few specimens.

"Nymphs! you disjoin, unite, condense, expand,
And give new wonders to the chemist's hand;
On tepid clouds of rising steam aspire,
And fix in sulphur all his solid fire;

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With boundless spring elastic airs unfold,
Or fill the fine vacuities of gold;
With sudden flash vitrescent sparks reveal,
By fierce collision from the flint and steel;
Or mark with shining letters Kunkel's name
In the pale phosphor's self-consuming flame.
So the chaste heart of some enchanted maid
Shines with insidious light, by Love betrayed,
Round her pale bosom plays the young Desire,
And slow she wastes by self-consuming fire."

*Economy of Veget*. Canto I. 223.[15]

How different, and how unpoetical is the occupation of these nymphs, when compared with the fairies of the Midsummer Night's Dream, or with the sylphs in the Rape of the Lock!—Again,

"You bid gold-leaves in crystal lantherns held,
Approach attracted, and recede repell'd;
While paper nymphs instinct with motion rise,
And dancing fauns the admiring Sage surprise," &c.
Canto I. 85.[16]

No one surely, now, will have the effrontery to dispute the axiom of the Darwinians, that description constitutes poetry. Again,

"Led by the Sage, lo! Britain's sons shall guide
Huge sea-balloons beneath the tossing tide," &c.
Canto iv. 207.[17]

It appears verily now to be beyond all doubt, that the ancients have exhausted all the subjects capable of poetical embellishment, and that there is no chance in modern times of being distinguished in literature, or of composing "singularly wild, and original, and beautiful"[18] poetry, without being fantastic. We have had poems on the "Loves of the Triangles," and on "Washing Days,"[19] and "Ironing Days;" and we do not despair of yet being delighted with "The Laws of England, rendered into heroic verse," or "Human Anatomy Illustrated," in a poem of ten cantos.

The parts of the Botanic Garden worthy of admiration, are—without an exception that strikes us,—only those passages that are subsidiary to the main object of the poem, and in-

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troduced by way of simile, or for the purpose of illustration. We do not think of the Purple Foxglove, but of Philanthropy and Howard;[20] we do not think of the embryo seeds, but of Herschel and the starry firmament;[21] not of the Carline Thistle, but of the ascent of Montgolfier;[22] not of the Orchis, but of Eliza and the Battle of Minden;[23] and not of the vegetable poisons, but of the desolation of Palmyra![24]

As the chief excellence of dramatic representation is exhibited in "suiting the action to the word," so the principal extrinsic excellence of poetry consists in "suiting the word to the action;"[25]—but, by the Darwinian school, this is wholly overlooked. Subjects that are naturally low are artificially exalted, stilted into eminence, and loaded with epithet and embellishment; and, whether lofty or trivial, interesting or repulsive, are clothed, by the same unsparing hand, in the most gaudy and gorgeous colouring, without respect to persons or discrimination of subject. If a beggar were to be introduced, it would be in a tattered laced coat; and if "a slaughterer of horned cattle,"[26] he would go through his operations in a high style, and make a speech. In fact, we are invited to a mere scenic exhibition, a panorama of picturesque and fanciful objects, where we have the soft and the rugged, the Bay of Naples and Loch-Lomond by moonlight, and the Devil's Bridge and the frowning precipices of the Alps expanded before us, without being obliged to encounter the fatigues or difficulties of travel, and where we may be charmed with the puppet mummery of a sea-fight, without being exposed to the actual dangers of death or

captivity. In all the greater poets we have feeling and fancy combined, and, though they can look on the beauties of Nature with a gifted eye, they are not, by the possession of this capacity, excluded from penetrating into the secrets of the inner man, and from describing the wonders of the intellectual world.—Here, however, every thing is material, and nothing spiritual; all is addressed to the eye or to the ear; the heart is never touched, nor the affections called into play, nor the passions awakened from the dreamless lethargy of torpor and tranquillity.

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The following specimen we think highly characteristic of Darwin's finer manner, as it combines a beautiful allegory with some of the chaster graces and peculiar excellencies of his style. It is from the Fourth Canto of the Economy of Vegetation, 189.[27]

"So in Sicilia's ever-blooming shade,
When playful Proserpine from Ceres stray'd,
Led with unwary step her virgin trains
O'er Etna's steeps, and Enna's golden plains;
Pluck'd with fair hand the silver-blossom'd bower,
And purpled mead,—herself a fairer flower;
Sudden, unseen amid the twilight glade,
Rush'd gloomy Dis, and seiz'd the trembling maid.—
Her starting damsels sprung from mossy seats,
Dropp'd from their gauzy laps the gather'd sweets,
Clung round the struggling nymph, with piercing cries
Pursued the chariot, and invok'd the skies;—
Pleased as he grasps her in his iron arms,
Frights with soft sighs, with tender words alarms,
The wheels descending roll'd in smoky rings,
Infernal Cupids flapp'd their demon wings;
Earth with deep yawn receiv'd the Fair, amaz'd,
And far in night celestial beauty blaz'd."

Bating some of the epithets, we think this very fine indeed;—but in how much fewer words, and in what a different manner, does Milton tell the same story!

"That fair field
Of Enna, where Proserpine gathering flowers,
Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
Was gather'd."——[28]

We shall only add another extract, which approaches the confines of sublimity. The idea of the gradual extinction of the planetary system is too like a passage in Ossian[29] to be altogether accidental.* He is apostro-

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* "Have thy sisters fallen from heaven? Are they who rejoiced with thee at night no more?—Yes! they have fallen, fair light! and thou dost often retire to mourn. But thou thyself shalt fail one night, and leave thy blue path in heaven. The stars will then lift their green heads;

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phizing the stars, after alluding to the discoveries of Herschel.

"Roll on, ye stars! exult in youthful prime,
Mark with bright curves the printless steps of Time;
Near and more near your beamy cars approach,
And lessening orbs on lessening orbs encroach;—
Flowers of the sky! ye too to age must yield,
Frail as your silken sisters of the field!
Star after star from heaven's high arch shall rush,
Suns sink on suns, and systems systems crush,
Headlong, extinct, to one dark centre fall,
And death, and night, and chaos, mingle all!
—Till o'er the wreck, emerging from the storm,
Immortal Nature lifts her changeful form,
Mounts from her funeral pyre on wings of flame,
And soars and shines, another and the same."
*Ec. of Veg.* c. 4. 371.[30]

In the style of the Botanic Garden, we find much to praise, and a great deal to censure. No poet in our language—not even Dryden[31] excepted—has given such an extent of modulation to the heroic couplet,—or rung, upon the same specified quantity of syllables, such a variety of changes. But there is little delicacy or nicety of discrimination evinced in the selection, or in the arrangement of the materials, for the production of this effect. As is too frequently the case with those who are denominated, technically, fine singers, the sense is made wholly subservient to the sound; they are not very solicitous about your being acquainted with the tenor of the sentiment, provided they can charm you with the melody of the tones. Every thing is overloaded with ornament; and, where you expect to find internal beauty, you too frequently discover that it is merely the dazzling glitter of the drapery. When a Gre-

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they who are ashamed in thy presence will rejoice." *Dar-thula*.

Since we have pointed out a seeming imitation of Darwin's, it is but justice to add, that the concluding paragraph of the Pleasures of Hope[32] bears a great resemblance to some passages in the above extract.

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cian matron is brought before you, instead of beholding the robes of snowy white, and the elegance of simplicity, you have her cheeks bedaubed with rouge, and her ringlets filleted up by means of an embroidered ribbon, and a golden cincture about her waist, and a scarf of purple thrown over her shoulders. You expect to find the dignified majesty and serene countenance of Minerva,[33] and you are introduced to the luxurious court of the Queen of Paphos.[34] How similar is the Darwinian, and yet how unlike in reality, to the exquisite modulation of the style of Campbell, which rises and falls with the subject; now sinking with the melancholy accents of grief, and now soaring on the wings of impassioned eloquence; lofty and low by fits, like the breeze-borne sound of the cataract, or like the night wind dallying with the chords of an Eolian lyre![35]

To conclude: We have no wish to depreciate Darwin; all that we wanted to show was, that he is but a sectary in poetry; for a poet, as he is one of the oracles of Nature, must speak, in a common language, on a subject interesting to the fancy and affections. If he has pathos without

imagination, he is not a master in the art; and, if he has this latter qualification without feeling, his title to that rank is equally deficient. Darwin displays no intensity of emotion, and no intimate acquaintance with the latent springs of human conduct; but, in the mechanical structure of verse, and the powers of description, he has few superiors within the range of British poetry. M.

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[1] Alexander Pope (1688–1744), *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), lines 305–08.
[2] The Lake School of poets included William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), and Robert Southey (1774–1843).
[3] Achilles' mother Thetis, knowing he would die if he went to fight at Troy, disguised her young son as a girl and had him live in the women's quarters in the court of King Lycomedes on Scyros, an island in the Aegean.
[4] As punishment for a crime, Zeus sold Hercules/Heracles as a slave to Omphale, queen of Lydia. She dressed him as a woman and made him do the domestic work of spinning while she took on his lion's skin and club. (It was not an ordinary lion's skin, but that of the monstrous Nemean lion slain by Heracles as the first of his twelve labours.) The story is told by Ovid in *Heroides* (9:101–18), and features in *LOTP* IV:285–98, but with Heracles's wife Deianira substituted for Omphale.
[5] Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus was a Roman consul in 460 BCE. In 458, when a Roman army was besieged by the Aequi, he was called from plowing his land to be appointed dictator. In the space of fifteen days he gathered soldiers, defeated the Aequi, resigned his position, and went back to his agricultural work. Cincinnatus became a legendary example of Roman values.
[6] Abou Hassan from "The Sleeper Awakened," a story in the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*.
[7] ED's *The Temple of Nature; or, the Origin of Society: A Poem. with Philosophical Notes* was posthumously published by Joseph Johnson in 1803.
[8] *LOTP* II:85–104.
[9] *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) I:253–88.
[10] *LOTP*, Advertisement.
[11] Cf. *LOTP*, Proem.
[12] Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 13:387–98; actually not the violet but the hyacinth.
[13] Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.3.156–57: "Of moving accidents by flood and field, / Of hairbreadth 'scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach."
[14] Preceding the death of Ajax in *Metamorphoses* 13 is a rather heated debate between Ajax and Ulysses over who should inherit the arms of Achilles (who died at the end of Book 12). Each boasts of himself and criticizes the other.
[15] *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) I:223–36.
[16] Erroneous reference; *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) I:345–48.
[17] *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) IV:195–96. (IV:207–08 in 1799.)
[18] George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824), in a note to *The Siege of Corinth* (1816, line 476n.), describes *Christabel* (1816) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) as "that wild and singularly original and beautiful poem."
[19] "Washing Day" (1797) by Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825). There do not appear to have been any other poems by that title, or any poem titled "Ironing Day."
[20] *LOTP* II:423–32, 439–72.
[21] *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) IV:351–408.
[22] *LOTP* II:7–62.
[23] *LOTP* III:259–62, 269–326.
[24] *LOTP* III:179–218.
[25] Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.2: Hamlet advises the players, "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature."
[26] Quotation untraceable.

[27] *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) IV:177–94. (IV:189–206 in 1799.)
[28] *Paradise Lost* 4:268–71.
[29] Poems by James Macpherson (1736–1796) presented as translations from the ancient Gaelic poet Ossian. The poem quoted in the note, *Dar-thula*, appears in *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem, In Six Books: Together with Several Other Poems, Composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal* (1762), pp. 155–71.
[30] *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) IV:367–80. (IV:379–92 in 1799. The lines on Herschel, not quoted, begin at 371 in 1799.)
[31] John Dryden (1631–1700).
[32] *The Pleasures of Hope* (1799), a poem by Thomas Campbell (1777–1844).
[33] Roman goddess of wisdom, handicrafts, and war, identified with the Greek Athene.
[34] Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love.
[35] Also known as an Aeolian harp, an instrument that produces music when a breeze passes over the strings.