Appendix 5.23: from Robert Southey, Review of *Collective Works of the late Dr. Sayers* in *The Quarterly Review* 35 (January 1827)

Robert Southey (1774–1843), poet and reviewer, became Poet Laureate in 1813. He was associated with William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) as the Lake School of Poets. He is best known for "The Story of the Three Bears" (from Vol. 4 of his miscellany *The Doctor* (1834–1837)) and his epics *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), *Madoc* (1805), and *The Curse of Kehama* (1810). He was a regular contributor to *The Quarterly Review* from its beginning in 1809 until 1839.

Frank Sayers (1763–1817), poet and scholar, established his poetic reputation with *Dramatic Sketches of the Ancient Northern Mythology* (1790), published by ED's publisher Joseph Johnson (1738–1809) and admired by Southey.

William Taylor (1765–1836), reviewer and translator, was a close friend of Sayers from their days together at the school at Palgrave run by Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825). A specialist in German literature, his translations include Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1793) and Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* (1805).

Selections copied from "ART. VIII.—*Collective Works of the late* Dr. Sayers; *to which have been prefixed some Biographic Particulars.* By William Taylor, of Norwich. 2 vols. Norwich. 1823" in *The Quarterly Review* 35 (January 1827): pp. 175–220.

[p. 197]

Such of our readers as recollect what the state of our literature was five-and-thirty years ago, will not be surprised at seeing the names of Cowper,[1] Darwin, and Merry,[2] classed together, as having been then each in full sail upon the stream of celebrity, which very soon floated two of them, by a short cut, into the dead sea.

It would not be possible to name three poets who are more curiously dissimilar to each other.

[…]

[p. 198]

Darwin's popularity has past away as irrecoverably as poor Merry's; but the poet who studies his art will read the Botanic Garden, and profit by it; for Darwin was an artist, and if he failed to construct a monument for himself sublimer than the pyramids, and more durable than brass, it was not for want of patient labour in 'building the lofty rhyme.'[3] Neither was it for any deficiency of skill, learning, or ability: he was a man of eminent talents and great attainments, and no poet ever succeeded more fully in executing a work according to his own standard of excellence. But the theory was false, and therefore it failed in practice. He thought that he could improve upon the versification of Pope,[4] as much as Pope had improved upon the versification of a former age, and that this was to be done by giving the utmost finish to every line, superadding

the highest varnish to the brightest colouring; making every word picturesque as well as significant, and the whole poem sonorous and splendid in all its parts. His own philosophy should have taught him, that such an intention would of necessity defeat itself, and that poetry, like painting, must have its relief—its shade, as well as its light. The dead level of Burnet's antediluvian world,[5] (beautifully as he has imagined it,) though embellished with the most successful culture, and blest with perpetual spring, would be woefully inferior, in poetical and picturesque effect, to a land of hills and dales; still more so to one of lakes and mountains. The subject of his poem

[p. 199]

was not more judiciously chosen than the style; but it contributed greatly to the short-lived popularity which he obtained. The 'Botanic Garden' was an attractive name for all those who amused themselves with botany, or who found, in the cultivation of flowers, what has not unfitly been called the most innocent and most healthful of enjoyments; and this includes, in our days, a large portion of those whom poets, in all ages, have been ambitious to please—the more refined and intellectual part of the female world. Pleased with a work which was designed at the same time to embellish and elevate their favourite pursuit, and delighted with the scientific information which the text, and still more the commentary, conveyed to them, in a popular and elegant form, the botanists of the conservatory and the *boudoir* were delighted with the episodical parts of the poem, which relate to human feelings and to real life, and they persuaded themselves that they admired the whole. The materialists of fine literature also, who always applaud most that which is most mechanical, because it is most upon a level with their own comprehension, and can be measured by rule, extolled it as the perfection of the art; and the perfection of such art certainly it was. But no poetry can maintain its ground, unless it be addressed to the understanding or the affections. An attempt was made, in the 'Loves of the Plants,' to combine the grace of fiction with the gravity of science; and the result presents a heterogeneous mixture which neither satisfies the judgement nor pleases the fancy. The design, indeed, is neither imaginative nor fanciful; what it exhibits as poetical machinery being but laboured allegory at best, and more frequently an allegorical riddle, preposterous in itself, and wearying from its perpetual repetition. Even the better parts of the poem—the long similes without similitude—ceased to please when they had ceased to dazzle. Darwin had the eye and the ear of a poet, and the creative mind; but his writings have served to show that these are of little avail without the heart; and the heart was wanting in him.

The germ of his versification may be traced in Prior;[6] and it was shown some years ago in the Edinburgh Review,[7] that the same manner[8] was applied to the same kind of subject, long before Darwin was heard of, by Henry Brook, a man of original genius and great powers, though now better known as the author of 'The Fool of Quality,'[9] than for his poems.

The style which Darwin has adopted and perfected was too elaborate to find followers, even when it was most applauded.

[p. 200]

The only work in professed imitation of his manner was written by his friend Dr. Beddoes.[10] It originated in a stratagem, 'which,' says Beddoes,[11] 'if not entirely innocent, can be charged only with the guilt of presumption. In order to impose upon a few of their common acquaintance, the

writer, in a few passages at least, attempted to assume the style of the most elegant of modern poets, and was encouraged by some degree of success to extend his design.' […] Mr. Fosbrooke,[12] whose mind was more poetical, and his pursuits more favourable to poetry, has told us, that in composing his 'Economy of Monastic Life,' he proceeded 'upon Darwin's doctrine, of using only precise images of picturesque effect, chiefly founded upon the sense of vision.'[13] Without such an intimation, it would never have been discovered that Mr. Fosbrooke had written upon so false a theory. The very remembrance of 'blind Thamyris and blind Mæonides'[14] might have made him hesitate before he adopted it, and the slightest consideration will suffice for showing its futility. Except in these instances, and in some University prize-poems, Darwin appears to have produced no effect upon the style of his contemporaries, nor upon any of the rising generation.

The old fashion of introducing a poem with recommendatory verses was followed by Darwin, after it had been for nearly a century in disuse. […] Among those which Darwin has published are some by Hayley and Cowper, signifying their equal and great admiration of one whose surpassing merit they willingly acknowledged. Hayley's popularity was at that time on the wane, and he could not but have perceived, that, in proportion as the highly-adorned style of Darwin was admired and applauded, his own writings would sink in the estimation of the public; but his mind in this respect was truly generous, and it seems never to have been darkened by a shade of envy. That Cowper should have expressed the same

[p. 201]

sincere admiration is more extraordinary, because he must have felt, more than Hayley was capable of feeling, the defects of a poem in which art was everywhere obtrusive, and the life and feeling of poetry nowhere to be found.

[…]

[p. 204]

Merry's verses were like the froth and bubbles of a rapid and shallow stream. Poetry proceeded in him from an empty mind, as in Darwin it did from a full one. Darwin's bore the stamp of his own character, but that of the age also not less decidedly: it embodied the material philosophy of the day, and, like it, was gross, earthly, and anti-spiritual; but it was the work of deliberation, thought, knowledge, and patient labour. Cowper's was a natural strain, proceeding from a playful temper and a serious heart: neither he, nor his disciple, Hurdis,[15] seems to have felt the slightest impulse of vanity or ambition; it was as natural for them to give utterance to their feelings in verse, as for the birds to sing. Sayers had nothing in common with either of these, his contemporaries, except that, like Darwin, he was ambitious of fame as a poet, and, like him, was willing to bestow upon his compositions all the careful correction necessary for bringing them to the standard of perfection.

[1] William Cowper (1731–1800), poet, best known for *The Task* (1785) and his contributions to *Olney Hymns* (1779).

[2] Robert Merry (1755–1798), poet and dramatist, best known as the central figure of the Della Cruscan group of poets, synonymous with sentimental and ornamented verse. The other main participants in the Della Cruscan coterie were Hester Thrale Piozzi (1741–1821), Hannah Cowley (1743–1809), and Mary Robinson (1757/8–1800). The Della Cruscans became targets of conservative critics William Gifford (1756–1826) and Thomas James Mathias (1753/4–1835).
[3] John Milton (1608–1674), *Lycidas* (1638), line 11 ("build the lofty rhyme").
[4] Alexander Pope (1688–1744). See *LOTP*, first Interlude, p. 50.
[5] A reference to *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (first published in 1681 in Latin and in 1684 in English) by Thomas Burnet (1635–1715).
[6] Matthew Prior (1664–1721).
[7] *Edinburgh Review* 4 (April 1804), "Art. XVIII. *Memoirs of the Life of Dr Darwin, chiefly during his residence at Lichfield; with Anecdotes of his Friends, and Criticisms on his Writings*. By Anna Seward. London. 1804." pp. 230–41. The reference is to pp. 238–41. The reviewer gives several quotations from *Universal Beauty* (1735) by Henry Brooke (ca. 1703–1783), but is unaware of the author's name (the poem was published anonymously).
[8] Footnote in the original, omitted here.
[9] Brooke's *The Fool of Quality* is a five-volume novel of sensibility published 1766–1770.
[10] Thomas Beddoes (1760–1808), chemist, physician, and writer. A friend of ED, he studied at the University of Edinburgh with ED's son Robert, and married Anna Edgeworth, daughter of ED's close friend and fellow Lunar Society member Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and sister of Maria Edgeworth. Beddoes was also an acquaintance of Southey, who along with Coleridge participated in the experiments with nitrous oxide by Beddoes and his assistant Humphry Davy (1778–1829) in 1799. The poem Southey refers to is *Alexander's Expedition Down the Hydaspes & the Indus to the Indian Ocean* (1792).
[11] Quoted from the Advertisement to Beddoes' *Alexander's Expedition Down the Hydaspes & the Indus to the Indian Ocean* (1792), p. iii.
[12] Thomas Dudley Fosbrooke (1770–1842), antiquary. The work Southey refers to is *The Economy of Monastic Life, (As It Existed in England) A Poem* (1795).
[13] Quotation from Fosbrooke's *Companion to the Wye Tour. Ariconesia; or Archæological Sketches* (1821), p. 181.
[14] Milton refers to these two blind poets in *Paradise Lost* 3:35. Thamyris was a poet who challenged the Muses to a contest; he lost, and the Muses took away his sight and his powers of song. Mæonides is an epithet of Homer, reputed to have been blind.
[15] James Hurdis (bap. 1763–d.1801).