



Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net

Charles Darwin's *The Life of Erasmus Darwin*

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Abstract

This article addresses the family and intellectual relationship between Charles Darwin and his grandfather Dr Erasmus Darwin. After establishing the publishing history of Charles's 'sketch' of his grandfather's life, the article shows how Charles approaches his subject by a characteristic biological route: the inheritance of family characteristics. His examination of Erasmus's life and work establishes inherited talents, especially that for poetry.

The biography's sub-text is to hint at what Charles himself inherited from his grandfather, especially an interest in natural history. However, Charles throughout his earlier life had been very reticent about any impact Erasmus's writings on biology might have had on his own work. The reticence persists in this sketch and Charles's focus shifts to Erasmus's reputation as a poet, and to certain well-known 'calumnies' of Erasmus's character. Charles's discussion of the poetry reveals as much about himself as it does of Erasmus and the paper concludes with an analysis of Charles's own poetic taste and literary-critical judgments. The article presents evidence for Charles himself being a highly cultivated reader of poetry and a defender of his grandfather's reputation as a poet.

Biographical note

Stuart Harris, b. 1939. Educated at Chesterfield School, King's College Cambridge, London University Institute of Education, and Sheffield University where he gained an M. Phil. degree for his dissertation 'Erasmus Darwin's Enlightenment Epic'. He published this literary study in 2002. He is the author of books on Graham Greene and Singaporean/Malaysian poetry in English, and editor of Erasmus Darwin's longer poems, which he published as *Cosmologia* (2002). He is also publisher and joint editor with Desmond King-Hele of Erasmus Darwin's shorter poems in four booklets: *To Elizabeth, with love* (2008), *The Prince; My Son; Our Hero: Three Elegies* (2009), *Poems of Lichfield and Derby* (2011), and *Poems of School and University* (2012). He was the publisher in 2014 of Desmond King-Hele's book *Erasmus Darwin and Evolution*. Stuart Harris was in turn Assistant Editor at Methuen the publisher,

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London (1965-6), Assistant Master at Chesterfield School (1966-1981), Humanities Co-ordinator with the Singapore Ministry of Education (1982-1995), and Tutor in Literature at Sheffield University (1999-2005). At present he is an independent publisher and a member of the Management Committee of the Erasmus Darwin Foundation.

1. The intellectual nexus between Charles and Erasmus Darwin, grandson and grandfather, is problematical. In July 1837, when Charles began his first *Notebook* on ‘Transmutation of Species’, at the head of the first page he used the title *Zoonomia* (Gruber and Barratt, xx). Was this a tribute to his grandfather’s book of the same name, which describes ‘The Laws of Organic Life’, and an early recognition of an intellectual link? Later in 1859 when Charles published *On the Origin of Species* he made no mention of his grandfather Erasmus Darwin’s work. It was not until the third British edition of 1861 that Charles added the following ambivalent footnote to ‘An Historical Sketch’ which prefaced the main text: “It is curious how largely my grandfather, Dr Erasmus Darwin, anticipated the views and erroneous grounds of opinion of Lamarck [the French evolutionist] in his *Zoonomia* (vol.1, pp.500-510), published in 1794” (xiii-xiv). This is what Charles read in his grandfather’s *Zoonomia*:

Would it be too bold to imagine that in the great length of time since the earth began to exist, perhaps millions of ages before the commencement of the history of mankind, would it be too bold to imagine that all warm-blooded animals have arisen from one living filament, which THE GREAT FIRST CAUSE endued with animality, with the power of acquiring new parts, attended with new propensities, directed by irritations, sensations, volitions, and associations; and thus possessing the faculty of continuing to improve by its own inherent activity, and of delivering down these improvements by generation to its posterity, world without end? (Vol 1, 505)

Indeed, it is not until Charles writes his *Autobiography* in 1879, towards the end of his life, that he can acknowledge an intellectual debt to his grandfather:

I had previously read the *Zoonomia* of my grandfather, in which similar views are maintained, but without producing any effect on me. Nevertheless it is probable that the hearing rather early in life such views maintained and praised may have favoured my upholding them under a different form in my *Origin of Species*. (43)

The fact that this acknowledgment is as much a disclaimer means that we must heed King-Hele’s caveat: “The similarity between the writings of Erasmus and of his grandson Charles may suggest that Charles derived his ideas directly from Erasmus. But this is not so. The story is more complex.” (365). I hope to unfold some small part of this complexity in looking more closely at *Charles Darwin’s The Life of Erasmus Darwin*, as re-edited in its original version by King-Hele in 2003.

2. Charles Darwin’s seventieth birthday, 12 February 1879, was marked by a special edition of the German science journal *Kosmos*. The final article by the journal’s editor, Dr Ernst Krause, was titled ‘Erasmus Darwin, the grandfather and forerunner of Charles Darwin’. By March 9, Charles had written to Krause offering to write a preface to a proposed English translation. By the time the translation was published in November 1879 Charles’s ‘Preface’ had expanded into a 129-page ‘Preliminary Notice’, followed by an 86-page essay by Krause entitled ‘The Scientific Works of Erasmus Darwin’. When Charles received the proofs of his ‘Preliminary Notice’ in July he gave them to his daughter Henrietta and his son Leonard to read. Both thought the text too long and reduced it by nearly a fifth, Henrietta deleting what she thought inappropriate. These deletions included the first reference to Erasmus’s poetry, quotations from that poetry, and the final summary of Erasmus’s achievements including the statement “In his day he was considered a great poet” (Charles Darwin, *The Life*, 11, 88). It seems that Charles’s daughter Henrietta was dismissive of the importance of Erasmus’s poetry in her father’s narrative.
3. After Charles’s death in 1882, his son Francis published a second edition in 1887 and changed the title page to *The Life of Erasmus Darwin by Charles Darwin*. Desmond King-Hele’s 2003 edition restores the deletions and finally establishes its bibliographic credentials, since the book had been previously listed under ‘Krause, Ernst’, even in Charles’s granddaughter Nora Barlow’s edition of his *Autobiography* of 1958.
4. Charles’s biography approaches his grandfather by a biological route: through the inheritance of family characteristics. The very first paragraph of *The Life of Erasmus Darwin* is a public statement of Charles’s purpose in documenting the life of his grandfather. It promises a natural history of the Darwin family:

As the character of a man depends in some degree on the circumstances under which he has been brought up, it will be advisable to give a very short account of the family to which Erasmus belonged. It is more important to show to what extent a man inherits and transmits his characteristic qualities; for every addition, however small, to our knowledge on this head is a public benefit, as well as spreading a belief in inheritance.

(7)

The majority of the biography is spent establishing Erasmus’s inherited talents and individual achievements: as physician, natural philosopher, scientific networker, inventor, philanthropist, and, perhaps most prominently, as a poet. Erasmus is presented as a polymath who worked to develop many of the ideas that would help to initiate the Industrial Revolution, especially through

the Lunar Society of Birmingham. His method of working was experimental and collaborative: his definition of a fool is “a man who never tried an experiment in his life” (35). He was progressive in science (Charles says he was “more ready to admit those new and grand views of chemistry... which were developed towards the close of the last century, than some professed chemists” (36)) and in social matters (he was against the institution of slavery and for the reform of prison conditions). As a poet Erasmus enjoyed pre-eminence in the 1790s and he came close to establishing a Darwinian School of Poetry characterised by carefully constructed heroic couplets and descriptive imagery with a strongly visual element.

5. Before his work on the biography of his grandfather, Charles had begun writing, in 1876, “some sketch of my autobiography” for his children, claiming that “I know that it would have interested me greatly to have read even so short and dull a sketch of the mind of my grandfather written by himself, and what he thought and did and how he worked” (*Autobiography*, 21). In *The Life*, Charles’s public and professional purpose was a celebration of Erasmus, the chief prodigy of the Darwin genealogy; but a more personal motive for writing *The Life* comes out clearly in its ‘Preface’:

It has been the fate of many celebrated men with strongly marked characters to have been grossly calumniated; and few have suffered more in this respect than Erasmus Darwin. The publication of the present essay seemed to me a good opportunity for showing how utterly groundless most of these calumnies were. I hope also to be able to give a truer and fuller, yet far from complete, idea of his general character than has yet appeared. (5-6)

Charles systematically answers these calumnies and demonstrates how Erasmus had been demonised in the closing years of his life and after his death in 1802. The detractors had created a thoroughly disreputable character worthy of an eighteenth-century picaresque novel. The most damning charges were of radical republicanism and atheism. Charles quite rightly feels a strong sense of historical injustice to Erasmus and this was a powerful motive for Charles in writing this family biography. He needed to set the record straight, partly because it was his own lineage, his own descent that was in the firing line; but there was also a danger that the sins of the grandfather would be visited on the grandchild.

6. And this is exactly what had happened. After the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce reviewed the book and he remembered Charles’s grandfather. The Bishop made prominent use of *The Loves of the Triangles*, a satirical attack by the politician

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George Canning in collaboration with George Ellis and John Hookham Frere, launched against Erasmus in 1798. In order to ridicule the evolutionary ideas of the grandson over 60 years later, the Bishop raises the spectre of the grandfather:

For if we go back two generations we find the ingenious grandsire of the author of the *Origin of Species* speculating on the same subject, and almost in the same manner with his more daring descendant. Speaking of the delicate organs of his favourite plants, Dr Darwin tells us: ‘They now acquire blood more oxygenated by the air; obtain the passion and power of reproduction; are sensible to heat, cold, and moisture; and become in reality insects fed with honey. I am acquainted with a philosopher, who, contemplating this subject, thinks it not impossible’ [we beg our readers to notice the exact phrase on which we have so often to remark in the younger Darwin] ‘that the first insects were the anthers or stigmas of flowers, which had by some means loosed themselves from their parent plant; and that many other insects have gradually, in long process of time’ [again we beg special attention to the remarkable foreshadowing of the gradual long-time development of the younger Darwin], ‘been formed from these; some acquiring wings, others fins, and others claws’ [like Mr Darwin’s bats, and fly-catching bears, and crabs], from their ceaseless efforts to procure their food, or to secure themselves from injury. The anthers and stigmas are therefore separate beings.’ (Additional Note xxxix to Darwin’s ‘Botanic Garden’, Wilberforce, 253-4)

The Bishop then recalls the text of Canning’s literary exorcism that was intended to lay Erasmus’s republican and atheistic spirit to rest:

Many of our readers will remember the humour with which Frere and Canning, in *The Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, exposed these philosophical arguments of the last generation. But their illustrations of the system apply so admirably to some of the speculations of the present volume, that we cannot forebear from quoting a few of them. (254)

There follows a substantial quotation from a footnote by Frere and Canning that apes the scientific footnotes Erasmus appended to *The Loves of the Plants*, and the Bishop adds ironic interjections (here in square brackets) which specifically link the grandson with the grandfather:

This filament, after an infinite series of ages [the Darwinian eternity], would begin to ramify, and its oviparous offspring would diversify their former habits, so as to accommodate themselves to the various incunabula, which Nature had prepared for

them [natural selection, that is to say, in our modern phraseology, would now be busily at work.] (254)

The apprehension of a real risk, well justified in the event, which Charles must have felt in publishing *On the Origin of Species*, that his grandfather’s reputation might be used against him, probably accounts for the fact that (as we have seen) Erasmus was not mentioned in the first two British editions. And that it was not until the third edition of 1861 that Charles felt secure enough in his own reputation to venture the following footnote:

It is rather a singular instance of the manner in which similar ideas arise at about the same time, that Goethe in Germany, Dr Darwin in England, and Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire (as we shall immediately see) in France, came to the same conclusion on the origin of species, in the years 1794-5. (*Origin* fn 2, p. xiv)

It is interesting that Charles here links Erasmus with the idea of synchronicity in historical events, perhaps in an attempt to generalize and therefore moderate Erasmus’s possible influence on himself.

7. In 1879 Charles was to write the ‘Preliminary Notice’ of his grandfather’s life while still completing his autobiography. So in a real sense this ‘Preliminary Notice’ could be inserted at the point in his autobiography where he says, “With respect to my Father’s father, the author of *The Botanic Garden*, etc., I have put together all the facts which I could collect in his published *Life*” (*Autobiography*, 37). Perhaps in a similar urge for economy, when he comes to the discussion of Erasmus’s published work in *The Life*, he passes over a full discussion of *Zoonomia* thus: “Dr Krause has given so full, impartial, and interesting an account of the scientific views contained in this and his other works that I need say little on this head” (*The Life*, 35).
8. These views include the subject of evolution as he says in his ‘Preface’ to *The Life*: “I have left it almost wholly to him [Krause] to treat of what Dr Darwin has done in science, more especially in regard to evolution” (6). So we should perhaps insert Krause’s article at this point in *The Life*. This might be a useful corrective, because Charles’s few critical comments on *Zoonomia* tend towards the dismissive: “There is a good deal of psychology in the *Zoonomia*, but I fear that his speculations on this subject cannot be ranked as of much value” (*The Life*, 36). Charles allows some medical importance to the book on the authority of his father Dr Robert Darwin: “my father thought it had much influenced medical practice in England;” adding, “he was of course a partial...judge” (37). But shortly afterwards he seems to revise this opinion downwards: “I

remember only two points, with respect to which my father thought that medical practice in this country had been influenced by the *Zoonomia*” (38).

9. He is kinder to Erasmus’s *Phytologia: or, The Philosophy of Agriculture and Gardening* (1800), crediting the book with insights into microscopy, the individuality of leaves, the importance of bone-meal as a fertilizer, and its argument on the subject of “organic happiness.”¹ Charles allows that his grandfather “was much in advance of his age in his ideas as to sanitary arrangements.” (43) and comes close to acknowledging him as a scientific forerunner thus:

The following sentences are interesting as forecasting the progress of modern thought. In a discussion on ‘The Happiness of Organic Life’ (‘Phytologia’, p.556), after remarking that animals devour vegetables, Dr. Darwin says: “The stronger locomotive animals devour the weaker ones without mercy. Such is the condition of organic nature! Whose first law might be expressed in the words ‘eat or be eaten’, and which would seem to be one great slaughterhouse, one universal scene of rapacity and injustice.”

He proceeds: “Where shall we find a benevolent idea to console us amid so much apparent misery?” He then argues:

Beasts of prey more easily catch and conquer the aged and infirm, and the young ones are defended by their parents... By this contrivance more pleasurable sensation exists in the world... old organisations are transmigrated into younger ones... death cannot so properly be called positive evil as the termination of good.

There is much more of the same kind, and hardly more relevant. He then makes a great leap in his argument, and concludes that all the strata of the world “are monuments of the past felicity of organised nature! and consequently of the benevolence of the deity!” (*The Life*, 41)

10. Hence, though he does see Erasmus’s vision of nature’s cruelty ‘forecasting the progress of modern thought’, Charles will not accept the logic of his grandfather’s theological conclusion. When he comes to Erasmus’s letters, he concludes that “they are mostly uninteresting, and not worth publication” (47).
11. Despite such critiques, it is a fact that Charles Darwin’s *The Life of Erasmus Darwin* is largely defensive in its tone and intention. This is partly dictated by the fact that he sees his grandfather as having been “grossly calumniated”, and that, as he says in his ‘Preface’, “the publication of this present essay seemed to me a good opportunity for showing how groundless most of these calumnies were” (5-6). He is careful to rebut many of the personal attacks on Erasmus by Anna Seward in her *Memoirs of the Life of Dr Darwin*. Charles says, “In 1804 Miss Seward published

her *Life of Dr Darwin*. This was an unfortunate event for his good fame” (70). Charles singles out her account of Erasmus’s reaction to the apparent suicide of his lawyer son, also named Erasmus, in which she accuses the father of a callous attitude to his son’s death. Charles’s rejoinder is blunt: “The whole of this account is absolutely false” (71). Concerning “the calumnies published in 1858 in the *Life of Mrs SchimmelPenninck*,” a member of the wider Darwin-Galton family, Charles’s reaction is equally robust. Mrs SchimmelPenninck was determined to establish Erasmus’s atheism from conversations she overheard as a girl: “Her condemnation was . . . chiefly directed against his avowed disbelief in revelation – in the existence of a God, the soul, and of a future life” (77). Charles is uncompromising in his dismissal of these writers’ prejudice and enmity towards Erasmus. Witnesses are assembled: his own father, Robert; Erasmus’s lifelong friend, Richard Lovell Edgeworth; the Lunar Society’s James Keir; and of course Dr Ernst Krause.

12. *The Life of Erasmus Darwin* is not a hagiography, but it is in many respects an apologia. I should like to illustrate this further through the treatment of one of his grandfather’s greatest achievements: his poetry. At the very outset of this biography Charles says this of Erasmus’s elder brother, Robert:

He had a strong taste for poetry, like his younger brother Erasmus, as I infer from the latter having dedicated a MS. volume of juvenile poems to him, with the words, “By whose example and encouragement my mind was directed to the study of poetry in my very early years.” The two brothers also conversed together in verse. (*The Life*, 11)

This same Robert wrote to Charles’s father following the death of Erasmus in April 1802, that Erasmus “was always fond of poetry” (16).

13. A notable feature of *The Life* is that Charles refers to seven of Erasmus’s shorter poems² together with the two longer poems, *The Botanic Garden* and *The Temple of Nature*, and quotes more than seventy lines from Erasmus’s poetical works. It is evident from this range of references that Charles was familiar with Erasmus’s poetry. Janet Browne notes that as early as 1836 on the *Beagle* voyage he had written from Sydney to John Stevens Henslow, to his second cousin W. Darwin Fox, and again in his diary, a note to the effect that “the scene on the medallion made by Josiah Wedgwood out of clay brought from New South Wales, and the verses written by Erasmus Darwin on ‘Hope’s first visit to Sydney Cove’, in which he prophesied a bright future for the new colony, had all come true” (Browne, 314).

14. Of Erasmus’s time at Cambridge, Charles notes that he studied the classics and continued to do so throughout his life, giving as evidence “the many quotations in his latest work *The Temple of Nature*” (*The Life*, 21). He also tells us how Erasmus’s ‘Elegy on the Death of Prince Frederick’ was written at Cambridge, though published much later in the *European Magazine* (1795) (21). Charles then notes the writing of *The Botanic Garden* and gives four pages to a discussion of its critical and financial success. He provides a personal testimony: “I have myself met with old men who spoke with a degree of enthusiasm about his poetry, quite incomprehensible at the present time” (32).
15. The “highly-cultivated” (Charles’s standard epithet for cultural authorities) Horace Walpole and Richard Lovell Edgeworth are recruited as admirers of Erasmus’s poetry; William Cowper and William Hayley as writers of commendatory verses. Dr Krause, himself “a highly cultivated foreigner”, is of course named as an admirer, and Charles highlights Edgeworth’s prediction “that in future times some critic will arise who shall rediscover *The Botanic Garden*, and build his fame upon the discovery[...] It will shine out again, the admiration of posterity” (33). Charles offers no reservations about this prophecy, and following his comment that “no one of the present generation reads, as it appears, a single line of it,” he expresses genuine surprise: “So complete a reversal of judgment within a few years is a remarkable phenomenon” (33-4). Charles cleverly turns Byron’s damning debunking of Erasmus in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* into a compliment by careful juxtaposition:

That Darwin was a great master of language will hardly be denied. In one of the earliest and best criticisms on his poetry it is said no man “had a more imperial command of words, or could elucidate with such accuracy and elegance the most complex and intricate machinery”. Even Byron called him “a mighty master of unmeaning rhyme.” (34)

Charles quotes substantially from the critical “Interlude” between cantos one and two of *The Loves of the Plants*:

“And as our ideas derived from visible objects are more distinct than those derived from the objects of our other senses, the words expressive of these ideas belonging to vision make up the principle part of poetic language. That is, the poet writes principally for the eye; the prose writer uses more abstracted terms.” (34)

Charles fully understood the nature of his grandfather’s poetic and the cultural paradigm-shift that brought a rejection of the Darwinian School of poetry.

16. Charles was well aware of the consequences of Canning’s ridicule of his grandfather: “But the downfall of his fame as a poet was chiefly caused by the publication of the well-known parody *The Loves of the Triangles*” (34). He was aware too of the gathering strength of the Romantic Movement which was to declare Erasmus’s particular synthesis of Science and Imagination “glittering, cold and transitory” in S. T. Coleridge’s words (*Biographia Literaria*, 10). Charles comments:

No doubt public taste was at this time changing, and becoming more simple and natural. It was generally acknowledged, under the guidance of Wordsworth and Coleridge, that poetry was chiefly concerned with the feelings and deeper workings of the mind; whereas Darwin “maintained that poetry ought chiefly to confine itself to the word-painting of visible objects” (*The Life*, 34).

It is also clear from his *Notebooks* that Charles had read as a younger man the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, leading him to jot down a note on “Wordsworth about sciences being sufficiently habitual to become poetical” (Gruber and Barratt, 273). This was the crux of Wordsworth’s argument against the poetry of Erasmus Darwin that science was not yet “sufficiently habitual” in ordinary life to become material for poetry. This argument around poetics was well understood by Charles. In his youth he was an enthusiastic reader of poetry:

I took much delight in Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s poetry, and can boast that I read the *Excursion* twice through. Formerly Milton’s *Paradise Lost* had been my chief favourite. (*Autobiography*, 71)

And again:

With respect to diversified tastes, independently of science, I was fond of reading various books, and I used to sit for hours reading the historical plays of Shakespeare... I read also other poetry, such as the recently published poems of Byron, Scott, and Thomson’s *Seasons* (38).

That he now read his grandfather’s poetry closely and critically is evident from *The Life*. He provides substantial quotations from *The Botanic Garden* on the subjects of the creation of the universe in canto one of *The Economy of Vegetation* (*The Life*, 32); on slavery from canto three of *The Loves of the Plants* (78) and on prison reform from the same poem, canto two.

17. It is clear also that that he had read carefully the shorter poems, including those that I published in 2008 as *To Elizabeth, with love*. Charles writes:

From the many MS. verses addressed to his second wife, and about her, before they were married, it is evident that Dr Darwin was passionately attached to her[...] [T]hese verses are somewhat less artificial than his published poems. (81)

“Less artificial” is a literary-critical judgment based on wide knowledge of his grandfather’s poetry. Charles also refers to verses (“being of considerable length, and in imitation of the 5th Satire of Persius”) written to the Rev. William Burrow, Headmaster of Chesterfield School, by Erasmus from Cambridge in 1750, and quotes from a College exercise on atheism written in 1751:

Dull atheist, could a giddy dance
Of atoms lawless hurl’d
Construct so wonderful, so wise,
So harmonised a world? (*The Life*, 21)

and from a *Hymn on Prosperity*: “The Lord! How tender is his love” which was published much later in 1795 in *A Collection of Hymns and Psalms*. Charles quotes the first and last verses:

1.

The Lord! How tender is his love,
His justice how august!
Hence, all her fears my soul derives,
There, anchors all her trust.

7.

Oh grant that still with grateful heart
My years resigned may run;
'Tis thine to give or to resume,
And may thy will be done. (62-3)

Charles acknowledges that his grandfather “was certainly a theist” but that “he disbelieved in any revelation” (63). Atheism, of course, had been one of the charges used to discredit Erasmus, and Charles is careful not to support this charge. He says, “Dr Darwin has been frequently called an atheist, apparently as a convenient term of abuse; whereas in every one of his works distinct expressions may be found showing that he fully believed in God as the creator of the universe” (61-2). Charles quotes from a note in *The Temple of Nature* about “the Creator of all things” and from *Zoonomia*: “He concludes the section on ‘Generation’ in the *Zoonomia* with the words of the Psalmist: ‘The heavens declare the Glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handiwork’”

(62). This section on Generation contains, of course, Erasmus's ideas on the development of life, on what his grandson would establish on sound scientific evidence as 'Evolution'.

18. Charles chooses to quote two lengthy passages from *The Botanic Garden* and one shorter extract on slavery. The longer pieces include Erasmus's Newtonian version of Creation in *The Economy of Vegetation*, canto one: a passage framed between two theological statements acknowledging the presence of the Deity:

"Let there be light!" proclaimed the almighty Lord.
Astonish'd Chaos heard the potent word.
Through all his realms the kindling ether runs,
And the mass starts into a million suns.
Earths round each sun with quick explosions burst,
And second planets issue from the first;
Bend, as they journey with projectile force,
In bright ellipses their reluctant course;
Orbs wheel in orbs, round centres centres roll,
And form, self-balanced, one revolving whole.
Onward they move amid their bright abode,
Space without bound, the bosom of their God! (*The Life*, 32)

The other lengthy passage is Erasmus Darwin's tribute to John Howard as prison reformer from *The Loves of the Plants*, canto two:

The spirits of the Good, who bend from high
Wide o'er these earthly scenes their partial eye,
When first, arrayed in Virtue's purest robe,
They saw her Howard traversing the globe,
Mistook a mortal for an Angel-Guest,
And ask'd what Seraph-foot the earth imprest.
Onward he moves! Disease and Death retire,
And murmuring demons hate him, and admire! (86)

The shorter passage on slavery culminates in a direct plea to Parliament to ban it forthwith, in line with the dictates of 'Conscience':

Hear him, ye Senates! Hear this truth sublime.
He, who allows oppression, shares the crime. (78)

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Charles’s choices are designed to place his grandfather in the mainstream of 19th century liberal morality. Perhaps by the same token he chooses not to quote any lines from *The Temple of Nature*, making only four references to this work and those are to Erasmus Darwin’s footnotes, not to the poetry of the four cantos of this great evolutionary poem. It is clear that Charles Darwin was eager to celebrate his grandfather’s virtues and talents but not to claim him as an important influence on his own scientific development as is evidenced in his summary (in which Erasmus as ‘great poet’ is privileged) at the end of *The Life*:

I have now given as faithful an account as I could of the character of my grandfather. His energy was unbounded. In his day he was esteemed a great poet. As a physician, he was eminent in the noble art of alleviating human suffering. He was in advance of his time in urging sanitary arrangements and in inculcating temperance. He was opposed to any restraint of the insane, except as far as was absolutely necessary. He strongly advised a tender system of education. With his prophetic spirit he anticipated many new and now admitted scientific truths, as well as some mechanical inventions. He seemed to be the first man who urged the use of phosphate of lime in agriculture, which has proved of such great importance to the country. He was highly benevolent, and retained the friendship of many distinguished men during his whole life. He strongly insisted on humanity to the lower animals. He earnestly admired philanthropy, and abhorred slavery. But he was unorthodox, and as soon as the grave closed over him he was grossly and often calumniated. Such was the state of Christian feeling in this country at the beginning of the present century; we may at least hope that nothing of the kind now prevails. (88-9)

It is notable here that Charles lists his grandfather’s one time reputation as a poet above his eminence as a physician, natural philosopher, inventor, agriculturist and educationist. Earlier when Charles discusses his grandfather’s poetic publications he is careful to recruit literary authorities such as Horace Walpole, William Cowper, and William Hayley. Charles Darwin lived in a different intellectual climate from that of his grandfather: one in which the two cultures of the arts and the sciences had drifted apart, and Charles knew, of course, that it was in science that he himself had authority.

19. Nevertheless, Charles accurately describes the literary process that discredited his grandfather’s poetry. He acknowledges the revolution in taste brought about by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and identifies the damaging parody, *The Loves of the Triangles*, as not

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only ridiculing Erasmus’s poetic style but also impugning him as a dangerous radical in politics. He continues with a comment that comes very close to a tacit justification of his grandfather’s treatment of plant-parts as little human beings in *The Loves of the Plants*: “the botanist might so view plants and trees – I am sure I remember my pleasure in Kensington Gardens has often been greatly excited by looking at trees as great compound animals” (273). In other words, a scientist might also be a poet. Charles fully understood his grandfather’s poetics – “poetry ought chiefly to confine itself to the word-painting of visible objects” (34) – and he understands also the Romantic Poets’ arguments against its stylistic and emotional limitations. However, Charles may be looking forward to the fulfilment of Wordsworth’s prophecy that one day “The remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist or mineralogist will be as proper objects of the poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed” (Wordsworth, 36). Or at least, he may have hoped that his biography might contribute to a revaluation of his grandfather’s literary achievement at some future date.

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¹ ‘We hence acquire this sublime and interesting idea; that all the calcareous mountains in the world, and all the strata of clay, coal, marl, sand, and iron, which are incumbent on them, are monuments of the past felicity of organized nature! – and consequently of the benevolence of the Deity!’ (*Phytologia*, 556).

² ‘An imitation of the Fifth Satire of Persius’ (21); ‘Elegy on the Death of Prince Frederick’ (21); ‘On Seward’s Edition of Beaumont and Fletcher’s Plays, 1765’(58); ‘Translation of an Epigram of Martial’(59); ‘Ode on the Folly of Atheism’ (62); ‘Hymn: The Lord! How tender’ (63); ‘Ms.Verses Addressed to his Second Wife’ (81).