



Martin Priestman. *The Poetry of Erasmus Darwin: Enlightened Spaces, Romantic Times*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. xiv + 310 pp. £70.00/\$124.95, hardcover (also available as an e-book).

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

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1 THE life and career of the physician and poet Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles) and his relationships with contemporaries in science, business, and the arts have been extensively discussed over the last fifty years, but Martin Priestman's book represents a major advance in eluci-

dating Darwin's poetic and intellectual accomplishments and in exploring the ways in which he responded to and influenced a wide variety of poets, artists, and thinkers. Even alongside the literary physicist Desmond King-Hele, Darwin's prolific biographer, Priestman seems to be well prepared to deal with Darwin's polymathic polydextrousness, which encompassed interests in the entire range of eighteenth-century natural philosophy and technology, classical and modern poetry and fiction, economics, history, philosophy, visual art, linguistics, semiotics, radical politics, gender and sexuality, and much more. Priestman's own reading straddles disciplines, centuries, and borders, extending far beyond the literature surrounding Darwin himself, and his critical approach reflects and sometimes seems to imitate the omnivorous intellectual habits of his subject: like Darwin, he zooms from minutiae to patterns in the whole history of culture, and he alternates between offering engaging metaphors or easily grasped simplifications and explaining their limitations, often in expansive footnotes like those that crowd into the pages of Darwin's poetry. Without ostentation, he deploys an eclectic assortment of critical and analytical approaches, a version of what he calls Darwin's "magpie intertextuality" (67). The machinery¹ includes a surprisingly useful hybrid of big ideas from Michel Foucault (minus sneering) and Martin Bernal (minus Black Socrates and a lot more) to characterize the broad intellectual trends pivoting around Darwin and leading into the theories of his famous grandson (basically a shift from emphasis on spatially organized knowledge to knowledge organized in time).

2 Even for readers of Blake who have studied *The Loves of the Plants*, Darwin's epic poem on the sex lives of flowers based on the sexual classification system of Linnaeus, and read one or another of King-Hele's books or the more focused studies of Darwin's poetry in relation to Blake,² Priestman's accounts of Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (1789-91)³ in context will be edifying and at least occasionally inspirational: I was continually impressed by his ability to merge

1. A term that Priestman puts to good effect in chapter 5 in analyzing the connections among the mock-epic machinery in Darwin's poems, the mechanisms of nature (including evolution) that the poet was delineating, economic and political machines and machinations, and the technological machinery of the industrialists in Darwin's circle, all of which were evolving, often in concert.

2. *Erasmus Darwin* (1963), *Doctor of Revolution: The Life and Genius of Erasmus Darwin* (1977), *Erasmus Darwin: A Life of Unequalled Achievement* (1999). See also Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: Five Friends Whose Curiosity Changed the World* (2002), Patricia Fara, *Erasmus Darwin: Sex, Science, and Serendipity* (2012), and David Worral, "William Blake and Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden*," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 78 (1974-75): 397-417.

3. *The Loves of the Plants* is the flower-focused section of *The Botanic Garden*.

discussion of Linnaean/Darwinian botanizing and diverse cultural phenomena both inside and outside the poem. In the early chapters he brings together, for instance, Darwin's complex socio-psycho-poetic relationship with his collaborator Emma Crewe, the sexual politics of Ovidian myth and its neoclassical counterparts, Lucretius and eighteenth-century Lucretianism, William Smellie's horrified reaction to Linnaeus's "obscurity" in the 1773 first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the discussions of Otaheitean polygamy inspired by reports from Captain Cook's voyages, Mary Wollstonecraft's love life as lasciviously envisioned by Richard Polwhele, and more.

- 3 Priestman's most distinctive talent among Darwin's modern interpreters is his subtlety as a reader of Darwin's sophisticated neo-Popean verse. He acknowledges the deliberate absurdities that are so striking to modern readers but also shows what drew romantic-era readers to it and points out what else might be worth thinking about, especially things at the edges of both of these audiences' attention. Readers of this journal will probably find that he is less penetrating and original as a reader of Blake, and although he notes several ways in which Blake's works respond in particular and in general to Darwin, he does not explore potential ramifications of Darwin's ideas in the later prophecies or, for the most part, in Blake's visual art (though he does discuss the Fuseli/Blake illustrations for *The Botanic Garden*). But this is a book about Darwin's poetry and the contributions to and consequences of his thought, not an elucidation of Blake's oeuvre. If Blakeans read Darwin and consider his multivalent contexts in Priestman's congenial company, I expect that they will see many more connections, depending on their angle on Blake. For instance, Blake's satirical "experiment picture" called *The Goats*, a lost painting based upon an anecdote about naked native women in a South Seas missionary narrative, has always seemed to me a peculiar subject for Blake (even as a joke), but I realized when reading this book that the story and the picture resonate with a rich cluster of cultural tropes that are juxtaposed in and around Darwin's poems, especially exploration and cultural relativism, debates about sexual mores, sexual and political constructions around race, and the reception of sexual subject matter in art.
- 4 Priestman's observations about Blake's specific debts to Darwin's *Loves* and its even more ambitious companion, *The Economy of Vegetation*,⁴ are persuasive and intellectually satisfying but not terribly surprising—Blake had magpie tendencies of his own, and scholars poking around in con-

4. Although it is volume 2 of the combined work called *The Botanic Garden*, *The Loves of the Plants* was published first, in 1789, and volume 1, *The Economy of Vegetation*, in 1791.

temporary publications of all kinds are used to finding both odd bits and big ideas that probably contributed directly or obliquely to his thinking and to his work. In assessing Darwin's possible influence it is often hard to tell when Blake was picking up something that he expected readers to recognize, or overtly alluding to the same originals, or subtly mining the same esoteric sources; even when there are substantial convergences the two poets may be thinking completely differently about the shared matter, given that Darwin was a devoutly committed materialist and atheist and Blake was decidedly neither. *The Book of Thel* has Darwin all over it, for instance, but the references there to Darwin and his sources are partly satirical. Similarly, the densely ironic layers of sympathetic cogitation that surround the passionate flowers (and flower observers) of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* can be seen as a critique of disengaged neoclassical poetic voices such as the one that dominates in *The Loves of the Plants*.

- 5 Blake was probably one of the first to read Darwin's poem, but everybody else in those days seems to have read *The Loves of the Plants* and later the rest of *The Botanic Garden* as well, many with a smitten attention that seems improbable now. For intellectuals of his era, Darwin was novel but not particularly esoteric; even if, as anxious reactionaries continue to point out, the ideologies underlying his work were shatteringly radical, his audience appears to have responded mostly to the sly but polite surface.
- 6 Some of Priestman's speculations about literary influence on other poets are startling. At the end of the first canto of *The Loves of the Plants*, for instance, Darwin describes the tough life of the fungus *Tremella*, an unprepossessing⁵ life-form that grows near streams and degrades into "a transparent jelly" when it freezes. Perhaps because the fungus reproduces by what Darwin calls "secret" or "clandestine marriage" (spores), and therefore lacks a compelling sex-life to exploit, the poet spared no cliché in dramatizing its gelatinous demise:

On DOVE's green brink the fair TREMELLA stood,
And view'd her playful image in the flood;
To each rude rock, lone dell, and echoing grove
Sung the sweet sorrows of her *secret* love.
"Oh, stay!—return!"—along the sounding shore
Cry'd the sad Naiads,—she return'd no more!—
Now girt with clouds the sullen Evening frown'd,
And withering Eurus swept along the ground;

5. It is, however, more prepossessing than its distant cousin, the alga *Tremella nostoc*, which, Darwin (erroneously) claims in his prose footnote, is not a plant at all but something that comes out of herons that have eaten frogs. Try to make a gripping poem out of *that*. Interestingly, Darwin seems to have been the first to break with Linnaeus in recognizing *Tremella* as a fungus rather than an alga.

The misty moon withdrew her horned light,
 And sunk with Hesper in the skirt of night;
 No dim electric streams, (the northern dawn,)
 With meek effulgence quiver'd o'er the lawn;
 No star benignant shot one transient ray
 To guide or light the wanderer on her way.
 Round the dark craggs the murmuring whirlwinds blow,
 Woods groan above, and waters roar below;
 As o'er the steeps with pausing foot she moves,
 The pitying Dryads shriek amid their groves;
 She flies,—she stops,—she pants—she looks behind,
 And hears a demon howl in every wind.
 —As the bleak blast unfurls her fluttering vest,
 Cold beats the snow upon her shuddering breast;
 Through her numb'd limbs the chill sensations dart,
 And the keen ice-bolt trembles at her heart.
 “I sink, I fall! oh, help me, help!” she cries,
 Her stiffening tongue the unfinish'd sound denies;
 Tear after tear adown her cheek succeeds,
 And pearls of ice bestrew the glittering meads;
 Congealing snows her lingering feet surround,
 Arrest her flight, and root her to the ground;
 With suppliant arms she pours the silent prayer,
 Her suppliant arms hang crystal in the air;
 Pellucid films her shivering neck o'erspread,
 Seal her mute lips, and silver o'er her head,
 Veil her pale bosom, glaze her lifted hands,
 And shrined in ice the beauteous statue stands.
 —DOVE'S azure nymphs on each revolving year
 For fair TREMELLA shed the tender tear;
 With rush-wove crowns in sad procession move,
 And sound the sorrowing shell to hapless love.⁶

This passage appears to have had wider early circulation than any other section of *The Loves of the Plants*, perhaps in part because the episode is much less sexually suggestive than others. In addition to featuring prominently in Darwin's poem, it was printed in its entirety, including all or most of Darwin's prosaic scientific explication, as part of enthusiastic essays in at least two periodicals of 1789, the *Monthly Review* (80 [April 1789]: 340-41) and the *English Review* (14 [July 1789]: 4-5).⁷ Ovidians will recognize in the Tremella excerpt an allusion to Narcissus as well as a version of the rape of Orytheia by chilly Boreas⁸ and related incidents, whereas those tuned to the Blake channel will be reminded of the secret love of the sick rose and the sexual evaporation of the trembling dew of *Thel*, as well as elements of the title page and other features of *Visions of the*

6. *Loves* (1789) 36-38.

7. Discovered using *Google Books*, which turns up several more reprintings of the passage over the next twenty years.

8. “Withering Eurus,” the east wind mentioned in line 8 of the passage, is usually warm, whereas the unnamed “bleak blast” that appears thirteen lines later is probably to be understood as the north wind Boreas, or the “Fiend of Frost” who appears earlier in the poem.

Daughters of Albion, including the mourning nymphs at the end.⁹

7 Priestman suggests ingeniously that Darwin's story of Tremella, who lives and loves obscurely “on Dove's green brink,” not only influenced the language and imagery of Cowper's “The Castaway” but also “arguably” inspired Wordsworth, whose “Lucy Gray” and “She dwelt among the untrodden ways / Beside the springs of Dove” duplicate aspects of Darwin's narrative and capture some of its pathos, with all traces of fungus and neoclassicism (and heron excreta)¹⁰ removed. Even if one dismisses as red herrings the traditional accounts of the Wordsworth poems' origins and accepts Priestman's theory whole, the idea that hapless Lucy might have evolved from a fungus does not greatly affect one's understanding of the poems ... and yet I have a feeling they will never be the same for me.

8 Priestman devotes a chapter to Darwin's relationship with his naughty mental twin, the libertine Richard Payne Knight, and two more to summing up Darwin's place in intellectual history vis-à-vis all the major pre-romantic and romantic poets, with emphasis on the way they fit individually and as a movement into the broad shift from space-based, panoramic knowledge exemplified by the Linnaean taxonomy to the time-based, historical model of reality that was increasingly explicit in Darwin's poetry: here Blake is treated broadly, as an early transitional figure. Other chapters sketch the considerable influence of Darwin's technological, scientific, and historical insights and inventions, and describe his peculiarly inverted political effect, most of which seems to have consisted of horrified reaction to the implications of his materialism and atheism rather than emulation or admiration. (This is a phenomenon that continues to this day: Priestman invites readers to survey, using *Google*, the landscape of more or less paranoid accounts of a vast materialist conspiracy with Erasmus and Charles Darwin at the heart. These are out there, all right, though there is also a lot of material extolling the elder Darwin's accomplishments.)

9 This book is an important contribution to scholarship in several disciplines, and is especially recommended to Blakeans of every kind I can think of, not so much for what we can learn about Blake directly but for what we can learn

9. The stripping away of Tremella's vest by the “bleak blast” is also reminiscent of the aggressive gesture of the impetuous wind-blown male anemone-spirit on the title page of *The Book of Thel*, though this Blakean image was more likely inspired by the passage earlier in canto 1 of *The Loves of the Plants* describing the violent sexual life of the anemone, whose beautiful virgin self is destroyed by the same wind that pollinates her.

10. See note 5.

about the broad intellectual milieu of the turn of that century. It is clearly written, energetic, witty, and carefully edited, though the arrangement of the discussion in broad, overlapping topics leads to a good deal of reiteration, backtracking, and retroactive refinement of arguments. The physical volume is well designed, with a few well-chosen and well-reproduced monochrome images, and in general it justifies the rather steep hardcover price.