



# The Comedian as the Letter D: Erasmus Darwin's Comic Materialism (Archives Internationales D'Histoire Des Idées Minor)

*D.M. Hassler*

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The Child is father of the Man; And I could wish my days to be Bound each to each by natural piety.  
William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" Wallace Stevens said somewhere that the theory of poetry is the life of poetry.<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin, who likes poetry, "recognized that at the cost of losing his appreciation of poetry and other things that delighted him in his youth, his mind had become a 'machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts.'"<sup>2</sup> Somewhere in between the polar positions of Stevens' extreme aesthetic belief and Darwin's extreme mechanistic belief lies the aesthetics of empirical thought and the whole modern Romantic tradition. There have been men in between who were both mechanists and poets, who both believed in automatic material mechanisms and tried to use the imagination. Erasmus Darwin was one of these "in between" figures, and since he lived early (1731-1802) in the modern scientific era he was one of the first. This older Darwin, the grandfather of Charles, has not been given due credit as a transitional figure in the development of the literature of our scientific era. Although historically and in terms of intellectual stature the grandfather was a fanciful child compared to the giant grand son, Erasmus Darwin's habits of thought anticipated one of the most distinguishing characteristics of his grandson. (The genetic suggestive.

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