Romanticism 29.1 (2023): 56–67
DOI: 10.3366/rom.2023.0580

Reforming Taste through Pope's 'celebrated moonlight scene': Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth's 'A Night-Piece'

Octavia Cox

Abstract:
In 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' (1815), Wordsworth condemned Pope's 'celebrated moonlight scene in the Iliad'. Pope's 'passage of descriptive poetry, which at this day finds so many and such ardent admirers', did not impress Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge, all three of whom drew specifically on this verse-paragraph of Pope's to expose what they perceived to be faulty poetic diction and 'corrupted' taste. In the 'Essay, Supplementary', Wordsworth argued that a great poet has 'the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'. This essay argues that Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth teach poetic taste through their challenge to Pope's famous nightpiece. In 'A Night-Piece' Wordsworth engages intimately with Pope's diction, form, and imagery in the moonlight scene in order to contest Popean hegemony.

Keywords: Pope, *Iliad*, moonlight scene, Wordsworth, 'A Night-Piece', Southey, Coleridge, taste.

> The Troops exulting sate in order round,
> And beaming Fires illumin'd all the Ground.
> As when the Moon, refulgent Lamp of Night!
> O'er Heav'ns clear Azure spreads her sacred Light,
> When not a Breath disturbs the deep Serene;
> And not a Cloud o'ercasts the solemn Scene;
> Around her Throne the vivid Planets roll,
> And Stars unnumber'd gild the glowing Pole,
> O'er the dark Trees a yellower Verdure shed,
> And tip with Silver ev'ry Mountain's Head;
> Then shine the Vales, the Rocks in Prospect rise,
> A Flood of Glory bursts from all the Skies:
> The conscious Swains, rejoicing in the Sight,
> Eye the blue Vault, and bless the useful Light.
> (Pope, *Iliad*, VIII. 685–98)[1]

> ———The sky is overcast
> With a continuous cloud of texture close,
> Heavy and wan, all whitened by the Moon,
> Which through that veil is indistinctly seen,
> A dull, contracted circle, yielding light
> So feebly spread that not a shadow falls,
> Chequering the ground, from rock, plant, tree, or tower.
> At length a pleasant instantaneous gleam
> Startles the pensive traveller as he treads
> His lonesome path, with unobserving eye
> Bent earthwards; he looks up—the clouds are split
> Asunder,—and above his head he sees

The clear moon, and the glory of the heavens.
There, in a black-blue vault she sails along,
Followed by multitudes of stars, that, small
And sharp, and bright, along the dark abyss
Drive as she drives;—how fast they wheel away,
Yet vanish not!—the wind is in the tree,
But they are silent;—still they roll along
Immeasurably distant;—and the vault,
Built round by those white clouds, enormous clouds,
Still deepens its unfathomable depth.
At length the Vision closes; and the mind,
Not undisturbed by the delight it feels,
Which slowly settles into peaceful calm, Is left to muse upon the solemn scene.
(Wordsworth, 'A Night-Piece', 1–26)[2]

William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey shared an antipathy to Alexander Pope's Homeric translations (*Iliad* (1715–20) and *Odyssey* (1725–6)). Wordsworth referred to 'the poison of Pope's Homer'.[3] Coleridge revealed 'I do not stand alone in regarding [Pope's 'translation of Homer'] as the main source of our pseudo-poetic diction'.[4] And Southey lamented 'The mischief [that] was effected ... by his Homer', considering that 'no other work in the language so greatly vitiated the diction of English'.[5] Upali Amarasinghe argues that Romanticism's 'new criticism in militant conflict' with Popean taste is perhaps best seen in Southey's discussion of Pope's Homer in the *Quarterly Review* (October 1814).[6] In Southey's estimation, Pope is one of the principal 'causes of the corruption of poetry'.[7] Southey challenged 'the poetical supremacy which Pope so long enjoyed', by claiming that Pope's Homer had brought 'injury to our literature' through its 'perverse style which is calculated to dazzle and mislead' ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 88, 85). Popean 'doctrine', according to Southey, decrees that poetry must 'be ornamented, elevated, embellished and exaggerated' ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 85). Imitators, in 'Taking Pope for their master', have 'culled every thing that was vicious in his style for imitation' ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 88). Those who follow in Pope's 'school' are 'infected' with 'the faults of the age', particularly artificiality at the expense of nature ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 89). Southey disapproves of unnatural poetic diction, instances of which are mere 'common-places of poetry made upon the most approved receipt' ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 88). Such 'approved receipt[s]' for how to make poems (ironically reminiscent of Pope's own injunction to avoid poetic receipts in *Peri Bathous* (1728)) are what needs to be dismantled in order for poetry to flourish anew.[8]

In December 1814 Southey wrote to a friend defending the position articulated in the *Quarterly*. Southey 'read the article with Wordsworth, he as well as I myself felt satisfied that nothing more was said than what was due to our predecessors'.[9] Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge had been busily railing against the hegemonic position of Pope's Homer during the summer of 1814, when Southey was composing his review of Alexander Chalmers's *Works of the English Poets* (1810). The subtitle of Chalmers's work states that it contains 'The Most Approved Translations', including both of Pope's Homers.[10] Chalmers, moreover, reprinted Samuel Johnson's encomium in the 'Life of Pope' that 'the English Iliad' is 'certainly the noblest version of poetry which the world has ever seen' (*Works of the English Poets*, xii. 64). Thus Chalmers elevated the 'two celebrated authors' whom Wordsworth, and Coleridge, held most responsible (especially in these two works, Pope's Homer and Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81)) for the 'inflated style' and 'bad taste in writing which now prevails'.[11] For Wordsworth, Pope's was certainly not a 'Most Approved Translation'. In September 1814 Wordsworth wrote to Robert Anderson–editor of *A Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain* (1792–5), which had also printed both of Pope's Homers[12] – suggesting that Anderson's and

Chalmers's collections were both 'very incomplete' (*Wordsworth Letters*, iii. 152). The 'deficiencies' would be lessened with the inclusion of 'Chapman's Homer', which neither Anderson nor Chalmers had included (*Wordsworth Letters*, iii. 155, 154). Wordsworth had 'talked with several of my Friends Messieurs Coleridge and Southey in particular upon the subject who both participate my desire to see your Edition adequately enlarged... A few days ago I had a conversation with Mr Southey on this subject, and we both agreed that it would be a fortunate thing for the interests of Literature' (*Wordsworth Letters*, iii. 152).

The Lake School's discussions of 'the interests of Literature' and the corruption of proper poetic taste through Pope's Homer in mid-late 1814 would inform Wordsworth's 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', which was written in January 1815, and would be published in *Poems* that April along with 'A Night-Piece'. In 'Essay, Supplementary', Wordsworth expressly set himself against Popean *bad* taste, in order to teach his own *good* poetic taste: 'every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'.[13] Southey and Coleridge also used Pope as a figure through which to discuss proper poetic 'taste'. Southey frames his description of Pope, just as Wordsworth would months later, as 'adverse to … just taste' ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 85). Coleridge, in a January 1812 lecture, in discussing 'Pope's Homer ... shewed its want of propriety & taste with great spirit'.[14] In *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge again criticises Pope's Homer on account of its effect on public 'taste', comparing 'the man who formed and elevated the taste of the public' – here he suggests Wordsworth as an example–with (in the same term as Southey) 'he that corrupted it' – that is, Pope (*Biographia Literaria*, i. 39–40).

Wordsworth had clearly been brooding on the deficiencies of public taste for several years. He wrote, in a private letter to Lady Beaumont, 21 May 1807, concerning the reception of *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), that the general reading public were 'altogether incompetent judges' of poetry, and that the original poet 'must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen' (*Wordsworth Letters*, ii. 150). This view, that a poet 'must teach the art' of poetic reception, taking an active role in 'teach[ing]' the public the taste through which his works were to be enjoyed, is the one publicly reiterated in *Poems* (1815), where Wordsworth teaches poetic taste by comparing himself with the most celebrated exponent of an alternative poetic art. Wordsworth characterises contemporary readers as a 'multitude of unhappy, and misguided, and misguiding beings', for whom 'an entire regeneration must be produced' (*Wordsworth Letters*, ii. 150). Wordsworth will 'guide' this 'regeneration' away from Pope and towards himself. Robert Griffin reminds us that Wordsworth's 'motive in attacking Pope was never disinterested' (*Wordsworth's Pope*, 90). Wordsworth first drafted 'A Night-Piece' in 1798, the same year that he would publicly throw off Popean 'gaudiness and inane phraseology', and thus 'avoid the prevalent fault of the day'.[15] 'Poetry', Wordsworth argued, is 'a word of very disputed meaning' and readers should drop their 'own pre-established [Popean] codes of decision' (*Lyrical Ballads*, 739). Given contemporary Popean taste, 'it must be expected that many lines and phrases', within the *Lyrical Ballads*, 'will not exactly suit [readers'] taste' (*Lyrical Ballads*, 739). Whereas, however, Wordsworth had found it necessary to justify the poetry of *Lyrical Ballads* in not conforming to contemporary 'taste', by 1815, he aspired to direct public 'taste'. If Wordsworth was to create the taste by which he was to be enjoyed, he had simultaneously to subvert the prevailing taste, which still relished Pope. It vexed Wordsworth that Pope's Homer remained enthusiastically esteemed and admired. Even Coleridge could acknowledge that 'Pope's Translation of the Iliad', whatever else it might be, was an 'astonishing product of matchless talent and ingenuity' (*Biographia Literaria*, i. 18). Evidently the 'poison of Pope's Homer' had not yet sufficiently begun to be 'carr[ied] off' (*Wordsworth Letters*, ii. 191). Indeed, Wordsworth was still explicitly setting his own 'taste' against Pope almost a decade later, in January 1824, when he complained of 'the taste of those whose ear is exclusively accommodated to the regularity of Pope's Homer' (*Wordsworth Letters*, iv. 247).

As Alfred Ames notes, all three Lake Poets 'were unprecedented in the vehemence with which they castigated the "night-piece" in Pope's Homer'.[16] Each explicitly critiques the same fêted passage at the end of Book VIII of Pope's *Iliad* (the work that ranked in Coleridge's estimation as the 'main source' of contemporary *un*poetry). By assaulting this paragon directly, the Lake Poets signalled the earnestness of their ambition to loosen the hold of Pope's hegemony and to 'create' a class of readers whose sensibilities were more in sympathy with their own.

In his lecture of 27 January 1812, Coleridge 'analyzed a passage in Pope's Homer (a description of moonlight) ... he introduced this censure with a very insincere eulogium' (*Selections from Robinson*, 120–1). As Coleridge later recalled in *Biographia Literaria*, 'I analyzed sentence by sentence, and almost word by word, the popular lines, "As when the moon, resplendent [*sic*] lamp of light [*sic*]," &c.' in order to expose Pope's 'pseudo-poetic diction' (*Biographia Literaria*, i. 39). In his recollection 'The impression on the audience in general was sudden and evident... that truth so obvious should not have struck them *before*' (*Biographia Literaria*, i. 39). His close-reading of Pope's 'popular lines' was thus used as a tool to expose what he saw as Pope's bad poetic taste. Coleridge 'analyzed' Pope's famous scene 'much in the same way as has been since done, in an excellent article on Chalmers's British Poets in the Quarterly Review', referring to Southey's article (*Biographia Literaria*, i. 39).

In the *Quarterly*, Southey posited that 'perhaps no passage in the whole translation has been more frequently quoted and admired' than 'the description of Night' ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 86). Southey referred to Abraham Rees's recently published article on 'Poetry', which had argued that 'Homer's animated picture of a moonlight and starry night transports us, in our imagination and feeling, to the scene which it exhibits … translated with singular felicity by Mr. Pope'.[17] Co-opting Henry More, Southey retorts 'let's sift the verity | Of [Rees's] opinion' in order to 'crush, toss, rifle this fine phantasie' ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 86). For the Lake Poets, unlike Rees, Pope's moonlight scene was absolutely not 'transport[ing]' in its 'imagination and feeling'. Instead, Pope's 'lines would not appear more extraordinary ... than the imagery to every person who has observed moonlight scenes': Pope's diction, form, and imagery are all 'extraordinary', that is, unnatural ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 87).

Wordsworth, in 'Essay, Supplementary', picks up where Coleridge and Southey left off. Wordsworth disdains Pope's 'translation of the celebrated moonlight scene in the Iliad', on the grounds that it is 'throughout false and contradictory' (*Wordsworth Prose*, iii. 73). That Pope's moonlight scene was so 'celebrated' frustrated Wordsworth, as it had his fellow Lakers:

> ... those [lines] of Pope still retain their hold upon public estimation, – nay, there is not a passage of descriptive poetry, which at this day finds so many and such ardent admirers. Strange to think of an enthusiast, as may have been the case with thousands, reciting those verses under the cope of a moonlight sky, without having his raptures in the least disturbed by the suspicion of their absurdity! –
> (*Wordsworth Prose*, iii. 73–4)

John Keats's early poem 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (composed October 1816) joins the literary conversation by describing how his eyes were opened to the (supposed) absurdities and failings of Pope's Homer. Keats's friend Charles Cowden Clarke reports, in *Recollections of Writers* (1878), that he and Keats spent the evening that inspired Keats's sonnet 'turning to some of the "famousest" passages, as we had scrappily known them in Pope's version', and contrasting them, unfavourably, with 'the Homer of Chapman'. 'Much' had Keats 'travell'd in the realms of gold' (1) in Pope's translation, but only when he 'heard Chapman speak out loud and bold' (8) did he 'breathe' (7) Homer, did Homer come alive for him.[18]

Lord Byron, writing to Leigh Hunt, 30 October 1815, responding to Wordsworth's recent publication, reckoned that 'both he and you[19] go too far against Pope's "So when the

Moon," &c.: it is no translation, I know; but it is not such false description as asserted'.[20] Far from embodying 'false' description, Byron counters Wordsworth's claim by asserting that there is 'no more appropriate expression' than that used in Pope's moonlight scene (*Byron and Contemporaries*, 158). Byron was suspicious of Wordsworth's attempt to reorientate 'popularity', public esteem, and poetic taste, and attributed the latter's 'attack on Pope', and particularly his 'fury against Pope's ... "Moonlight scene in Homer"', to 'a peevish affectation ... despising a popularity which he will never obtain' (*Byron and Contemporaries*, 157–8). Indeed, Lawrence Lipking argues that Wordsworth found it 'singularly galling that people recite Pope with pleasure', and so remained 'haunted by the nightpiece'.[21] The provision of an alternative night-piece poem was thus Wordsworth's attempt to reposition poetic popularity and taste. Critics have remarked on how Wordsworth's 'A Night-Piece' encapsulates elements fundamental to his poetical system.[22] Lipking, observes Griffin, 'has shown very convincingly that . . . "A Night-Piece", is a re-working of the Homeric passage based on Pope, even echoing key words' (*Wordsworth's Pope*, 91), while Timothy Webb likewise acknowledges that '"A night-piece" is related in suggestive ways to the very passage [Wordsworth] singled out for critical attention'.[23] In Harold Mason's analysis, 'A Night-Piece' is a '*hostile* account of Pope's version', with Wordsworth 'attempting to displace' Pope by exposing what 'Pope was not doing'.[24] To appreciate how 'A Night Piece' served Wordsworth's mission to 'displace' Pope and to instruct readers in his new conception of poetic taste, we must examine this 'suggestive' relationship in more detail. Like his fellow Lake Poets, Wordsworth's creative development profited from critiquing Pope's moonlight scene 'sentence by sentence, and almost word by word' (*Biographia Literaria*, i. 39). In the specific ways that his rendering both alludes to Pope's, and yet reacts against it, we discern the lineaments of Wordsworth's broader didactic project.

Coleridge described the symbolic importance of 'moon-light' in his and Wordsworth's conception of poetic 'imagination' and 'the poetry of nature', especially during their first year as neighbours, in 1797–8, at the very time that 'A Night-Piece' was first drafted (*Biographia Literaria*, ii. 1). 'A Night-Piece' was originally composed c.25 January 1798, and accords with Dorothy's journal account:

> The sky spread over with one continuous cloud, whitened by the light of the moon, which, though her dim shape was seen, did not throw forth so strong a light as to chequer the earth with shadows. At once the clouds seemed to cleave asunder, and left her in the centre of a black-blue vault. She sailed along, followed by multitudes of stars, small, and bright, and sharp. Their brightness seemed concentrated, (half-moon).[25]

Lucy Newlyn argues that the two works suggest shared perceptions, shared vocabulary, and perhaps even shared composition.[26] Dorothy was probably herself familiar with the *Iliad*'s moonlight scene. In August 1787 she had received, as a gift from her brothers, 'the Iliad, the Odyssey, works', of which she remarks: 'I am at present [reading] the Iliad and like it very much, My Br[other] W[illia]m read of it' (*Wordsworth Letters*, i. 8). The pair enjoyed reading and, one presumes, discussing Homer together, and April 1790 finds Dorothy 'reading Pope's works' (*Wordsworth Letters*, i. 30). David Chandler argues that 'it is likely that both of them had in mind [Pope's] "translation of the celebrated moonlight scene in the Iliad"' when walking by moonlight in January 1798.[27]

Dorothy's journal of their time at Alfoxden records several moonlight walks, during one of which 'A Night-Piece' was composed.[28] Dorothy describes the scenery as 'a living prospect' of 'wild simplicity' (*Wordsworth Letters*, i. 191). Dorothy's descriptions of Alfoxden's 'wild simplicity', are in contrast to Pope's Homer's, according to Wordsworth, 'destroying of all simplicity' (28 March 1809, *Farington Diary*, v. 132). In his popular *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (1791), Alexander Fraser Tytler 'esteemed the finest night-piece that could be found in poetry', and averred 'How nobly is this picture raised and improved by Mr Pope!'.[29] For Wordsworth, however, the idea that nature is a mere 'picture' to be 'improved' was erroneous. Southey had similarly found Rees's praise of Pope's Homer's 'picture' of

moonlight to be problematic, contending that Pope's 'moonlight scene' describes 'appearances not to be found either in Homer or in nature' (Rees, xxviii. [3]; 'Chalmers's *English Poets*', 87). Tytler's and Rees's enthusiastic endorsement of Pope epitomized contemporary poetic taste, according to the Lake School, in its unwillingness to experience nature as (in Dorothy's words) 'a living prospect' of 'wild simplicity'.

For all his condemnation of Pope's poetry, Wordsworth revealed in his memoir that he had 'committed much of [Pope] to memory ... but his Homer is not Homer, but Pope' (*Memoirs of Wordsworth*, ii. 470). The association between these two thoughts implies that much of what Wordsworth had committed to memory was Pope's Homer. (In 1839, Wordsworth boasted that 'to this day I believe I could repeat with a little previous rummaging of my memory several 1000 lines of Pope'.[30]) Wordsworth's familiarity with Pope's Homer is apparent from his earliest schoolboy works.[31] In his first extant poem, 'Lines on the Bicentenary of Hawkshead School' (composed 1785), Wordsworth self-consciously alludes to Pope's *Iliad*: Wordsworth's 'And fled indignant to the shades of night' (30) adapts Pope's 'The Soul indignant seeks the Realms of Night' (V. 360); Wordsworth's 'The God of Day in all the pomp of Light | Moves through the vault of Heav'n' (39–40) alludes to Pope's 'Now flaming from the *Zenith*, *Sol* had driv'n | His fervid Orb thro' half the Vault of Heav'n (XVI. 938–9); and Wordsworth's 'I gaz'd upon the visionary train | Threw back my eyes return'd and gaz'd again' (25–6), recalls Pope's 'With mournful Eyes they gaze, and gaze again' (XIX. 408). Wordsworth admitted, in his 'Autobiographical Memoranda', that 'These verses were much admired, far more than they deserved, for they were but a tame imitation of Pope'.[32] It was this exercise, Wordsworth claimed, that 'put it into my head to compose verses from the impulse of my own mind' (*Early Poems and Fragments*, 354). At least in Wordsworth's recounting, therefore, the impulse to express his own poetic consciousness was, from the time of his very first writings, bound up with his determination not to be a 'tame imitation of Pope'.

The term 'night-piece' had long been associated with Pope's moonlight scene (see 'Early Criticism of Pope's "Night-Piece"', 265–7). Pope had himself labelled the episode 'the most beautiful Nightpiece that can be found in Poetry' (*Twickenham Pope*, vii. 428). As Lipking notes, the title 'A Night-Piece' 'itself issues a challenge' to Pope's legacy ('Night Thoughts on Literary History', 71).Wordsworth's poem was originally simply titled 'A Fragment'; by re-naming it for publication as 'A Night-Piece', Wordsworth made his 'challenge' explicit. For Pope, Homer 'presents you with a Prospect of the Heavens ... The stars shine, the Air is serene, the World enlighten'd, and the Moon mounted in Glory' (*Twickenham Pope*, vii. 428). For Wordsworth, however, Pope's rendering of Homer had failed to do justice to this vision. Wordsworth thus sought, in 'A Night-Piece', to present the same prospect, but in his own style, to differentiate himself from Pope's precedent.

Wordsworth opens his poem 'The sky is overcast' (1) and closes it 'the solemn scene' (26), alluding to Pope's 'And not a Cloud o'ercasts the solemn Scene' (690). By topping and tailing his poem with allusions to a single line of Pope's, Wordsworth conveys the sense that he fills twenty-six lines with what Pope glosses over in one. From the start, Wordsworth creates an opposition between Pope's language of absence ('not a Cloud'), and his description of the present 'continuous cloud' (2). Wordsworth in fact amended the opening line of the published version to be closer to Pope's 'o'ercast'. Originally, Wordsworth had written 'The sky is overspread', echoing Dorothy's 'The sky spread over'. Mutual inspiration and possible co-authorship left to one side, notably none of Wordsworth's specific engagements with Pope is to be found in Dorothy's journal entry.

Wordsworth writes next of the 'yielding light | So feebly spread that not a shadow falls, | Chequering the ground' (5–7), whereas Pope's light 'tip[s] with Silver ev'ry Mountain's Head; | Then shine the Vales' (694–5). For Wordsworth the shadows do not fall 'from rock, plant, tree' (7); the unadorned list undercuts Pope's more fulsome descriptions of the same things: 'the Rocks in Prospect rise' (695); 'yellower Verdure' (693); 'the dark Trees' (693). Wordsworth's plain unshadowed 'ground' (7) is in contrast to Pope's 'Ground'

where 'beaming Fires illumin'd all' (686). In the plainness of his list Wordsworth implies that Pope's descriptions are plentiful and florid in the wrong places, that Pope's poetry is replete with '*poetic diction*' ('Appendix on Poetic Diction, 1802', *Lyrical Ballads*, 761–5).[33] Pope, on the one hand, skips too easily over lines that warrant greater expansion, while also, on the other, indulges too liberally, as Southey had argued, in unnecessary embellishment and ornament ('Chalmers's *English Poets*', 85). For Wordsworth, Pope's overwrought and showy language corresponds with his shallow feeling for nature, as an object pleasing to the observer, who remains nonetheless always apart from it, never to be absorbed by its elemental forces. Pope's is a nature that 'shine[s]' and 'bursts', that 'gild[s]' and 'tip[s] with Silver', just as Pope's pseudo-poetic diction is brilliant, glittery, and (in Southey's words) 'pinchbeck' (*Works of William Cowper*, ii. 141).

Immediately after Wordsworth's plain list of natural objects ('rock, plant, tree'), 'a pleasant instantaneous gleam | Startles the pensive traveller as he treads | His lonesome path' (8–10). The traveller's 'Startle[ment]' signifies the reciprocity between man and nature: he 'looks' (11), it 'Startles' (9). The movement of living nature within Wordsworth's poem serves to highlight the apparently static scene of Pope's. Pope's 'nature' is an exquisite filigree, but inert, fixed, unmoving, unchanging, unliving.

Southey called Pope's night-piece 'extraordinary' in its unnaturalness, a theme expanded upon by Wordsworth when he pronounces that Pope 'could habitually think that the visible universe was of so little consequence to a poet, that it was scarcely necessary for him to cast his eyes upon it' (*Wordsworth Prose*, iii. 74). 'A Night-Piece' explicitly describes a 'musing man' (original manuscript line 7, *Lyrical Ballads*, 500–1) who begins 'with unobserving eye | Bent earthwards' (10–11), but then 'looks up' (11) and 'sees' (12) nature in a 'Vision' (23). Eighteenth-century poetic 'image[s] of external nature', according to Wordsworth, 'scarcely present ... one from which it can be inferred that the eye of the Poet had been steadily fixed upon his object, much less that his feelings had urged him to work upon it in the spirit of genuine imagination' (*Wordsworth Prose*, iii. 73). For Wordsworth, Pope's 'eye' was not 'steadily fixed upon' 'nature', and he did not 'work upon' nature, because he was not 'urged' by any particular 'feelings' for what he observed. Pope is like the figure within 'A Night-Piece' when his eyes are on the ground – uncomprehending. Such 'external nature' was vitiated not merely by inaccuracy, according to Wordsworth, but by the way that it repudiated the emotional dimension of our encounters with the natural world. Wordsworth bemoans that Pope's *pictura poesis* should be so ardently admired as 'descriptive poetry', and yet be so devoid of affective descriptions of nature.

As Wordsworth conceives it, a poet should 'faithfully and poetically describe the phenomena of nature' (*Wordsworth Prose*, iii. 74). A 'phenomenon' is that 'which appears, or which is perceived or observed', an 'occurrence, or change as perceived through the senses or known intellectually', whereof 'the cause or explanation ... is in question'.[34] It is the 'unfathomable' (22) with which Wordsworth is concerned, and which he finds absent in Pope, who, for all his clever descriptions of natural objects, never succeeds in articulating mankind's sense of wonderment at the splendour of nature. For Wordsworth there is no wonder at nature's brilliance in Pope's poem, there is only brilliant description of things found in nature. 'To what a low state knowledge of the most obvious and important phenomena had sunk', Wordsworth argues, 'is evident from the style in which [Pope] has executed a description of Night in ... the celebrated moonlight scene in the Iliad' (*Wordsworth Prose*, iii. 73).

Pope had epigrammatically depicted 'the vivid Planets roll, | And Stars unnumber'd gild the glowing Pole' (691–2) (a couplet Coleridge thought particularly 'absurd' (*Biographia Literaria*, i. 40)). Wordsworth echoes Pope's diction when he describes nature as 'roll[ing] along' (19). Yet if Pope's planets 'roll', his line form undermines his imagery, because the line ends neatly at the end of the clause, with a comma, and the next line simply starts a new clause. In contrast, Wordsworth's enjambing form deliberately harmonises verse

structure with subject matter: his lines roll with his image, as he notes how the 'multitudes of stars ... roll along | Immeasurably distant' (15–20).

Wordsworth sees nature as a spur to contemplation, and 'A Night-Piece' promotes this view, implying that Pope's poem is defective in that respect. To the Lakers Pope's night-piece contains an excess of unrelated and superficial descriptions: the reader is bombarded with a succession of unrelated tableaux. In Coleridge's terms, Pope's poem contains 'a sorites' of disparate images (*Biographia Literaria*, i. 18). Instead, Wordsworth prefers poetry that looks forwards and backwards within itself, enabling readers to experience the phenomena of nature in all their changeability as the poem progresses. Wordsworth's use of enjambement helps to emphasise this sense of flux: that his poetry is continually flowing and developing in meaning, unlike Pope's closed, self-contained, epigrammatic heroic couplets. In 'Essay, Supplementary' Wordsworth regrets that Pope's contemporaries 'had not been used to feel, or to look for anything in poetry, beyond a *point* of satirical or epigrammatic wit' (*Wordsworth Prose*, iii. 72). 'In Wordsworth's own opinion', and in contrast to Popean taste, 'A Night-Piece' was one of 'his best specimens of blank verse'.[35]

Wordsworth's multiplicity and formal fluidity is evident in his qualifying repetitions of description. In the repeated description 'white clouds, enormous clouds' (21) the different qualities of the clouds are more striking in different moments; he would not have achieved the same effect had he instead written *enormous white clouds*. The traveller's mental movements mirror the movement of the nature he experiences–we see the traveller's mind in action. Wordsworth counterposes these phrases, intended to capture an individual's continuing experience of nature, against the anonymous stationary groups in Pope's poem, who do not interact with the dazzling scene of nature that surrounds them; instead, 'The Troops exalting sate in order' (685).

Wordsworth's 'lonesome' (10) traveller who contemplates the moon 'in a black-blue vault' (14) contrasts with Pope's 'conscious Swains, rejoicing in the Sight, | Eye the blue Vault, and bless the useful Light' (697–8). A recurrent theme in Wordsworth's poetry, particularly evident in 'A Night-Piece', is his device of concentrating collective experience in a solitary figure. Here Wordsworth concerns himself with the relationship between individual and collective experience in a way that Pope does not. Pope's 'conscious Swains' are 'powerless witnesses', the extent of whose agency is to 'rejoic[e]' in and 'bless' the 'useful Light'.[36] In Wordsworth's poem, the focus is on the phenomenon – on the experience produced when our 'unobserving eye | Bent earthwards' 'looks up' and 'sees | The clear moon, and the glory of the heavens' (10–3) – and on the emotional consequences of the experience. Wordsworth's poetic taste requires the individual within the poem to engage directly with nature, 'he sees . . . the glory of the heavens' (12–3), whereas Pope, in the impersonal, abstract terms of the definite article, describes 'the Sight' when 'A Flood of Glory bursts from all the Skies'.

Wordsworth's rendering is, in fact, more in keeping with Homer's original poem, which refers to a single figure: 'the shepherd rejoices in his heart' [Loeb], or 'the shepherd's heart is cheer'd' (William Cowper's 1791 translation, quoted in Southey's review, 'Chalmers's *English Poets*', 87).[37] Cowper had been aggrieved by Pope's choice of 'conscious Swains': 'the word *conscious* seems to be joined with *swain*, merely by right of ancient prescription, and where the blessing is perfectly gratuitous, Homer having mentioned no such matter'.[38] 'By right of ancient prescription' may be satirical, since 'conscious Swains' was seemingly of Pope's own coining, but here Cowper condemns both Pope's infidelity to his original author, and his preference for (apparently) conventional poetic diction over authenticity.[39] '[T]he simplicity, the almost divine simplicity, of Homer is worth more than all the glare and glitter that can be contrived', Cowper continues (*Gentleman's Magazine*, 612). Cowper's craving for 'divine simplicity' aligns with Dorothy's delight in 'wild simplicity' and with Wordsworth's fulmination against Pope for his 'destroying of all simplicity'.

Elsewhere, however, Wordsworth seeks out darker and more mysterious images than

Pope. For Pope's 'Stars unnumber'd gild the glowing Pole' (692), Wordsworth has 'multitudes of stars, that, small | And sharp, and bright, along the dark abyss | Drive as she drives' (15–7). Wordsworth's stars are animated–they 'Drive as [the moon] drives' (17)–where Pope's are ornamental, 'gild[ing] the glowing Pole' star, itself eternal and unchanging. Wordsworth's imagery here is ironically reminiscent of his earlier engagement in 'Lines on the Bicentenary of Hawkshead School', with Pope's *Iliad*'s '*Sol* had driv'n | His fervid Orb' (XVI. 938–9).

In contrast to Pope's moonlit 'Vault' (698), Wordsworth's 'vault, | Built round by those white clouds, enormous clouds, | Still deepens its unfathomable depth' (20–2). Wordsworth drives home his point that Pope's poetry does not have enough 'depth', and that in his own poetry he is constantly looking to delve deeper into what is 'unfathomable', into the world's mysteries. Wordsworth thus plays with Pope's claim, in *Peri Bathous, Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry*, that 'depth' is a failed, and often comic, attempt at sublimity.[40] For Pope, 'depth' is 'the bottom, the end ... the *non plus ultra*' [nothing more beyond] (*Pope Prose*, 186), but for Wordsworth there is always something more beyond; depth can be a genuine route to sublimity in search of the never-ending 'unfathomable'.[41]

Wordsworth highlights in the poem's closing lines the principal differences between his and Pope's poetic visions:

> At length the Vision closes; and the mind,
> Not undisturbed by the delight it feels,
> Which slowly settles into peaceful calm,
> Is left to muse upon the solemn scene.
> (23–6)

The phrase 'Not undisturbed' (24) is a typically Wordsworthian double negation (inherited from Milton). Pope had used simpler negative descriptions for his moonlit prospect: 'When not a Breath... And not a Cloud' inhabit the 'solemn Scene' (689–90). Wordsworth's double negation creates a space in which the feeling of excitement is pregnant with possibilities: 'Not undisturbed' suggests an ambivalence on the part of the narrative voice, which does not experience this disturbance in a straightforwardly frightening or stressful way, but as a moment that opens the potential for enlightenment. Paul Magnuson has noted that double negation often 'signifies a turn within Wordsworth's poetry', as it does here.[42] Wordsworth turns to the crux of his message, that poetry should 'take ... its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity' (1800 'Preface' *Lyrical Ballads*, 756), as 'the mind ... is left to muse' (23–6), with both meanings of 'muse' inflecting the sense. Wordsworth values 'the Vision[ary]' (23) in poetry; he wants to see beyond the surface and 'deepen... depth' (22); hence, he introduces 'the mind' (23) in the closing stages of the poem, to show the effect that nature has on the inner self: 'disturbed' (24), 'delight' (24), 'feels' (24), 'peaceful' (25), 'calm' (25), 'left to muse' (26). In Pope, 'not' even 'a Breath disturbs the deep Serene' of the 'solemn Scene' (689–90), yet Wordsworth–subverting Pope's own diction – turns this into an internal tranquillity, as 'the mind | Not undisturbed... slowly settles into peaceful calm ... to muse upon the solemn scene' (23–6). For Pope, human life does 'not' 'disturb' nature, or vice versa; whereas for Wordsworth, the essence of poetry is, or should lie in, seeking to capture the complex, inexpressible ways in which nature and human life are 'Not undisturbed' by one another.

These words, 'Not undisturbed', survived intact from Wordsworth's original draft, but where the published poem has 'by the delight' (24), the draft had 'by the deep joy' echoing Pope's 'deep Serene' (*Lyrical Ballads*, 500–1). On the other hand, Wordsworth kept the last line of 'A Night Piece', with its direct allusion to Pope – leaving his reader 'to muse upon the solemn scene' – unchanged from the first draft (*Lyrical Ballads*, 494–5). Neither this, nor his other Popean references, appear in Dorothy's contemporaneous account, and there is little doubt that one of the main things Wordsworth wanted his reader 'to muse' upon was a comparison between Pope's well-known vision of a moonlit scene and his own poetic response. Wordsworth, writing in poetic form, was competing with Pope in a way

that Dorothy was not.

Over a decade after the publication of 'A Night Piece', in January 1829, Wordsworth was to extol Pope's 'poetic Imagination', which set him apart from his peers: Pope stood 'alone–as a man most highly gifted' (*Wordsworth Letters*, v. 3). '[U]nluckily', however, Pope 'took the Plain, when the Heights were within his reach' (*Wordsworth Letters*, v. 3). As I have argued here, in 'A Night Piece' we find Wordsworth working through these mixed sentiments of admiration for and frustration with his eminent forebear. Wordsworth believed that Pope's poetry could be lifted to greater 'Heights', and it is in the way that he adopts Pope's imagery, while simultaneously distancing himself from and subverting it, that we see his own distinctive voice, and poetic taste, begin to emerge.

NOTES

1. Alexander Pope, *Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, gen. ed. John Butt (11 vols, London, 1939–69), vii. 428.
2. William Wordsworth, *Poems* (2 vols, London, 1815), i. 301–2.
3. Wordsworth to Walter Scott, 18 January 1808, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. eds. Alan G. Hill, Chester Shaver, and Mary Moorman, 2nd edn (8 vols, Oxford, 1967–93), ii. 191.
4. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (2 vols, London, 1817), i. 39.
5. *Works of William Cowper*, ed. Robert Southey (15 vols, London, 1835[-7]), ii. 141.
6. Upali Amarasinghe, *Dryden and Pope in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1962), 104.
7. Robert Southey, 'Chalmers's *English Poets*', *Quarterly Review*, 12.23 (October 1814), 60–90, 87.
8. Wordsworth also ironically draws on Popean satire in 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', 1815 (Robert Griffin, *Wordsworth's Pope: A Study in Literary Historiography* (Cambridge, 1995), 93–5).
9. Southey to Grosvenor Charles Bedford, 11 December 1814: MS: Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Lett. c. 25 [131].
10. *Works of the English Poets*, ed. Alexander Chalmers (21 vols, London, 1810), xix. 1–281.
11. Joseph Farington, *Farington Diary*, ed. James Greig (8 vols, London, 1922–8), v. 132. Entry for 28 March 1809.
12. *Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain*, ed. Robert Anderson (14 vols, London, 1792–5), xii. 1–289.
13. *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (3 vols, Oxford, 1974), iii. 80.
14. Henry Crabb Robinson, *Selections from the Remains of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Edith J. Morley (Manchester, 1922), 120–1. Robinson attended the lecture.
15. Wordsworth, 'Advertisement' (1798), in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY, 1992), 738–9, 738, 739.
16. Alfred Ames, 'Early Criticism of Pope's "Night-Piece"', *Modern Language Notes*, 60.4 (April 1945), 265–7, 265.
17. *Cyclopædia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, ed. Abraham Rees (45 vols, London, 1802–20), xxviii. [3]. Rees's 28th volume of the *Cyclopædia* which opened with the section on 'Poetry' was first published in 1814.
18. Charles Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers by Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke* (London, 1878), 129; *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1978), 64.
19. In *Feast of the Poets* (London, 1814), Leigh Hunt referred to 'that gorgeous misrepresentation of the exquisite moonlight picture in Homer' (35).
20. Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (London, 1828), 158.
21. Lawrence Lipking, 'Night Thoughts on Literary History', *Literary History: Theory and Practice, Volume Two*, ed. Herbert L. Sussman (Boston, 1984), 59–79, 69.
22. James Kissane, for example, shows that 'A Night-Piece' represents an emblem of Wordsworth's mind (James Kissane, '"A Night-Piece": Wordsworth's Emblem of the

Mind', *Modern Language Notes*, 71.3 (March 1956), 183–5; Beth Darlington describes Wordsworth's use of natural imagery and solitary figures in 'Two Early Texts: *A Night-Piece* and *The Discharged Soldier*', *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Ithaca, 1970), 425–48), and Matthew Brennan argues that the poem borrows from sublime vocabulary and imagery (Matthew Brennan, 'Wordsworth's "A Night-Piece"', *The Explicator*, 42.4 (Summer 1984), 17–8).

23. Timothy Webb, 'Homer and the Romantics', *Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. Robert Fowler (Cambridge, 2004), 287–310, 306.
24. Harold Mason, *To Homer through Pope* (London, 1972), 61, 67.
25. Dorothy Wordsworth, 'Alfoxden Journal', *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, rev. ed. Mary Moorman, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1978), 2.
26. Lucy Newlyn, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: All in Each Other* (Oxford, 2013), 57–9.
27. David Chandler, 'Wordsworth's "A Night-Piece" and Mrs. Barbauld', *Notes and Queries*, 40.1 (March 1993), 40–1, 40.
28. For 25 January 1798, Dorothy records that the Wordsworths 'Went to Poole's after tea' ('Alfoxden Journal', 2). Thomas Poole lived in Nether Stowey. Wordsworth revealed that 'The Night Piece' was 'composed on the road between Nether-Stowey and Alfoxden', so presumably walking home again at night-time (*Memoirs of William Wordsworth, Poet-Laureate*, ed. Christopher Wordsworth (2 vols, London, 1851), i. 104).
29. Alexander Fraser Tytler, *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (London, 1791), 70–1. A third edition was published in 1813.
30. *Barron Field's Memoirs of Wordsworth*, ed. Geoffrey Little (Sydney, 1975), 37 [f.43].
31. Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770–1799* (Cambridge, 1993), 75–6.
32. Wordsworth, *Early Poems and Fragments, 1785–1797*, eds. Carol Landon and Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY, 1997), 354.
33. Wordsworth cites another of Pope's poems, *Messiah* (1712), as one of the worst culprits (*Lyrical Ballads*, 763).
34. *Oxford English Dictionary* https://www.oed.com/.
35. Robinson to James Mottram, 12 September 1857, *Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle, 1808–1866*, ed. Edith Morley (Oxford, 1927), ii. 820.
36. Aaron Santesso, 'The Conscious Swain: Political Pastoral in Pope's Epic', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37.2 (Winter 2004), 253–71, 263. Santesso argues that Pope's depiction of the 'conscious Swains' as 'powerless witnesses' was in fact deeply political, confirming Pope's Tory philosophy of historical decay.
37. Augustus Taber Murray, trans., *Iliad*, new ed. rev. William Wyatt (2 vols, Cambridge, MA, 2014), i. 392–3 [Loeb].
38. William Cowper, 'Critical Remarks on *Pope's Homer*', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 55.8 (August 1785), 610–3, 612.
39. The phrase seems to have appeared only once before in English poetry, in Pope's earlier poem *Windsor-Forest*, 1713 (David Hopkins and Charles Martindale, eds., *Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature. Volume 3: 1660–1790* (Oxford, 2012), 187).
40. Pope, *Prose Works of Alexander Pope, Vol.2, The Major Works, 1725–1744*, ed. Rosemary Cowler (Oxford, 1986), 186–276.
41. Robert Stagg, 'Wordsworth, Pope, and Writing after Bathos', *Essays in Criticism*, 64.1 (January 2014), 29–44.
42. Paul Magnuson, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue* (Princeton, 1988), 23.