Wordsworth's use of lunar symbolism: an early theory of poetic participation?

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Abstract. In a time of rising enthusiasm for science, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) advocated for the validity of insights gained through the poet's imaginative engagement with nature. Through an examination of lunar symbolism in Wordsworth's 1805 *Prelude* and 1806/7 *Star-gazers* I argue that this symbolism is key to understanding his innovation in the philosophy of poetry and that this is an early contribution to the idea that there are two valid modes of orientation to the cosmos, causal and participatory. The participatory orientation is particularly important to human experience that engages with the cosmos from a religious or aesthetic perspective.

Introduction

During the long eighteenth century, taken as c. 1688 to 1815, the relationship between poetry and science was evolving with each, at times, informing the other.[1] At the beginning of the period, the work of Isaac Newton (1642-1726/7) had provided laws for celestial motion, gravity and those governing light, inspiring reconsiderations of humanity's relationship to the night sky and the nature of seeing; both of these were explored through poetry.[2] M. H. Abrams has argued that William

[1] Cian Duffy, *The landscapes of the sublime, 1700-1830: classic ground* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 5; Marilyn Gaull, 'Under Romantic Skies: Astronomy and the Poets', *The Wordsworth Circle*, Winter, 1990, Vol. 21, No. 1, 34-41 (p. 34); Clark Lawlor, 'Poetry and Science' in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Christine Gerrad (John Wiley & Sons, 2006), pp.38-52 (p. 39).

[2] Anne Janowitz, '"What a Rich Fund of Images is Treasured up Here": Poetic Commonplaces of the Sublime Universe', *Studies in Romanticism*, Winter, 2005, Vol. 44, No. 4, 469-92 (p. 469).
Frédéric Ogée, 'Nature and Imagination: The Posterity of Addison's 'Pleasures' in British Enlightenment Culture', in *Joseph Addison: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. by Paul Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 272-89; Marjorie

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Wordsworth (1770-1850) was instrumental in a radical shift that occurred in which poetry began to be conceived not as imitation, a 'mirror' of reality, but as a means of expressing the overflowing feelings of the poet, this being a means to illuminate, 'a lamp' rather than a mirror.[3] For Abrams, Wordsworth's approach to poetry places it as a different form of knowledge to science and presents the poetic mind as having the potential to unify with the natural world in a reciprocal relationship.[4] The idea that there are at least two valid orientations to reality, one broadly associated with modern science, and one with more poetic experience, has been taken up within anthropology by Stanley Tambiah. Tambiah proposes that two valid orientations be labelled causality and participation.[5] Causality covers the distancing characteristic of modern science, mathematics and logical reasoning in which the human being attempts to discover quantitative truths about the world from an objective viewpoint.[6] In contrast, participation concerns human experience that finds knowledge through engaging with the world, this experience often being of an aesthetic or religious nature.[7]

Building on the work of Abrams and Tambiah, I argue that Wordsworth's use of lunar symbolism in the 1805 *Prelude* and 1806/7 *Star-gazers* demonstrates his theory of poetry as a valid means of expressing truths found by direct engagement with nature, as valid as those revealed by science, and that this was an early contribution to the idea that there are at least two modes of orientation to the cosmos, causal and participatory. Wordsworth's poetry is not mirror but lamp, but the light it shines by is not that of the sun, but of the moon. I begin by exploring the moon's role in book thirteen of *The Prelude* before discussing Wordsworth's positioning of Newton in relation to the moonlight in book three. The 1805 text of *The Prelude* is used; this was completed during the long eighteenth century and is considered by leading scholars to be

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Hope Nicolson, *Newton Demands the Muse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

[3] M. H. Abrams, *the mirror and the lamp: romantic theory and the critical tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 3, p. 11, p. 21, pp. 47-57.

[4] Abrams, *mirror and the lamp*, p. 58; M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (London: W. W. Norton, 1973), pp. 280-1.

[5] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, science, religion, and the scope of rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 105.

[6] Tambiah, *Magic, science, religion*, p. 105.

[7] Tambiah, *Magic, science, religion*, p. 106.

Wordsworth's finest version of the poem.[8] Finally, I consider Wordsworth's *Star-Gazers* and how his approach to observing the moon differed from contemporary advances in astronomy.

Lunar symbolism in *The Prelude*

The moon plays a critical role in the culmination of *The Prelude*, symbolising the illumination that comes to the mature poet, whose developed powers of imagination allow communion and co-creation with nature in a reciprocal relationship. In book thirteen, the poet (Wordsworth) and his friend have decided to climb Mount Snowdon 'to see the sun / Rise from the top of Snowdon'.[9] But what they see is not the sun, but the moon, which has an overwhelming impact on the narrator:

> And I, as chanced, the foremost of the Band;
> When at my feet the ground appear'd to brighten,
> And with a step or two seem'd brighter still;
> Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
> For instantly a Light upon the turf
> Fell like a flash: I look'd about, and lo!
> The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height
> Immense above my head, and on the shore
> I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
> Which, meek and silent, rested at my feet:[10]

The poet is out at the front of the group when he suddenly sees the ground 'brighten'. The idea of brightening is emphasised almost immediately by the use on the following line of the word 'brighter'; this, along with the 'step or two', vividly conjures up an image of Wordsworth walking step by step into increasing illumination. This walk into increasing light represents an awakening, an awareness of greater knowledge. Yet this is not knowledge which the poet has time to reflect on immediately, for he has no time to ask the cause. Instead, he is overwhelmed by the flash of light. The capitalisation of 'Light' further emphases this word whilst the

[8] Jonathan Bate, *Radical Wordsworth* (London: William Collins, 2020), pp. 7-8; Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth: The Prelude* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 6.
[9] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The 1805 Text*, ed. by Ernest De Selincourt & Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 229 (Book Thirteenth, ll. 4-5).
[10] Wordsworth, *The Prelude,* p. 230 (Book Thirteenth, ll. 35-44).

caesura after 'flash' invites the reader to pause. What is the cause of the light? In contrast to the poet, who has had no time to ruminate, the reader is forced to reflect. This comes as a welcome, although momentary break, for the effect of the blank verse, exacerbated by the enjambment after the 'Light upon the turf' makes it difficult for the reader to take in all that is being read. The overall effect is disconcerting and reflects the poet's own inability in the moment to use understanding to make sense of the experience. The phrase ending in the forceful exclamation of 'lo!' prepares the reader for a surprise.

Given the intention of the party to view the sunrise, the reader expects a vision of the sun rising; this is not what follows. Instead, Wordsworth provides critical lines about the moon standing 'naked' in the sky, 'at height' and 'Immense' above the poet's head. This description of the moon is the heart of the paragraph, the crucial moment of revelation. The word 'naked' stands out; the moon is fully revealed, exposing herself to the observer. Wordsworth can know her in a way that is not ordinarily possible. The scene is one of awe and silence, with the quietness of the 'huge sea of mist' conjuring up a vivid image of Wordsworth amazed, silenced, and overwhelmed by the beauty and magnificence of the encounter with the naked moon. Wordsworth's replacement of the expected sun by an illumination brought by the moon is highly significant. Following Plato (c. 427-348 BCE), western culture had a strong tradition of linking the light of the sun to philosophical truth and reason, to understanding.[11] The moon, in contrast, had associations with imagination, romance and lunacy, the latter word derived from the Latin word for the moon. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, had grouped poets with lovers and lunatics:

> The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact…
> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven[12]

[11] Plato, *The Republic, Book VI*, trans by Benjamin Jowett, available at https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.7.vi.html [accessed 31 July 2024]; Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 42, p. 50.

[12] William Shakespeare, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', in ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 311-34 (p. 329) (V.1.7-13).

Imagination is the link between the poet and all things 'lunar' including lunatics and the moon herself. In selecting the light of the moon, Wordsworth aligns the poet and poetry with imagination and a way of seeing that it different from the light of understanding symbolised by the sun.

For Wordsworth, the poet's eye is not the only one of significance. He personifies the moon, giving her agency; she is looking back at the poet:

> Meanwhile, the Moon look'd down upon this shew
> In single glory, and we stood, the mist
> Touching our very feet; and from the shore
> At distance not the third part of a mile[13]

It is the moon which alone takes the glory, demonstrated by the 'single glory'. She, symbol of imaginative insight, is solitary in her nakedness and it is her light, rather than that of the sun, which is sufficient to demonstrate the insight that comes to the developed poetic imagination. The reciprocity of the relationship comes through powerfully in the assignment of the verb 'look'd' to the moon. She is active; just as the poet has walked to meet her, she has chosen to fully reveal herself at that moment. Nature meets human being in mutual communion.

The developed imagination of the mature poet is not the only ingredient of this meeting with nature. Understanding is also required in the form of meditation and reflection, and it is this understanding that will allow the experience to be later captured in poetry. Following the vision of the moon, Wordsworth starts a new paragraph, separating the description of the encounter from the more philosophical thoughts which follow:

> A meditation rose in me that night
> Upon the lonely Mountain when the scene
> Had pass'd away, and it appear'd to me
> The perfect image of mighty Mind,
> Of one that feeds upon infinity,[14]

Wordsworth reflects and comes to the view that he has experienced a 'mighty Mind', one with an infinite quality, its greatness emphasised through the alliteration. Wordsworth leaves the reader in no doubt that his encounter with nature has facilitated a powerful meeting of minds, human

[13] Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 230 (Thirteenth book ll. 52-5).
[14] Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, pp. 229-30 (Thirteenth book ll. 66-70).

and infinite, with his conception of this powerful mind distinguished by its ability to both perceive and create the world it inhabits. The juxtaposition of the lunar scene with the philosophical musings underlines Wordsworth's assertion in his 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

> I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity[15]

The meditation that follows the powerful lunar scene uses reflection and understanding to process the imaginative experience. Both processes are required for successful poetry. For Wordsworth, poetry is a combination of imagination and understanding.

Wordsworth enhances the power of the lunar scene by evoking the aesthetic of the sublime, a concept reworked by Edmund Burke (1729-1797) in 1759.[16] Arguing that pain and danger are the most powerful emotions, Burke suggested that if these emotions are experienced at a distance, such as being mediated through poetry, they can bring delight.[17] The concept explores the border of imagination and understanding. The idea comes from the understanding, but a sublime experience involves imagination and overwhelm of the rational mind. Some of the characteristics which can evoke the sublime, according to Burke, are infinity, visions of the night, power, darkness, solitude and silence.[18] Burke explicitly draws out the potential of the magnificence of the night sky to evoke the sublime, stating that the 'starry heaven, though it occurs so very frequently to our view, never fails to excite an idea of grandeur'.[19] The lunar scene brings out many of these qualities. The power of the vision is clearly overwhelming, and thus contains sufficient emotional overwhelm to qualify for the sublime. The poet is alone as he steps into the moonlight, and solitude is emphasised by the words 'lonely Mountain'. Silence is emphasised by the 'meek and silent' mist; darkness, prior to the poet coming into the light of the moon, is present, as is the idea of infinity both through the sky and the encounter with the mighty mind.

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[15] William Wordsworth, 'Preface 1800 version (with 1802 variants)' in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett & A. R. Jones (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 286-314 (p. 307).
[16] Edmund Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1759).
[17] Burke, *A philosophical enquiry*, p. 58-60, 70-1, p. 104.
[18] Burke, *A philosophical enquiry*, p. 107-10, p. 125.
[19] Burke, *A philosophical enquiry*, p. 140.

Wordsworth's poetry promotes the idea that the poet's mind can commune with nature in a reciprocal relationship; this is a clear example of what Tambiah, writing in the twentieth century, describes as participation; for Tambiah, participation occurs when 'persons, groups, animals, places, and natural phenomena are in a relation of contiguity'.[20] The poet is in contact with the moon in *The Prelude* in a mutual relationship, that is, in a contiguous manner; poet participates with nature in a reciprocal meeting of minds. Tambiah's representations of participation include a sense of cosmic oneness and language of unity and holism.[21] In his encounter with the moon on Snowdon, Wordsworth is at one with nature. His conception of the poetic mind's ability to find truth through imagination recalled with understanding anticipates later anthropological ideas on the validity of non-causal methods of finding out about the world, underscoring the brilliance of his radical move.

Wordsworth, Newton and moonlight

Wordsworth's evocation of the moon as having agency and being reflective of a nature with a mind that can commune with human beings strongly contrasted ideas of the moon in Newton's scientific discoveries. In 1687 Newton had written:

> I wished to show by these computations of the lunar motions that the lunar motions can be computed from their causes by the theory of gravity. By the same theory I found, in addition, that the annual equation of the mean motion of the moon arises from the varying dilatation [and contraction] of the orbit of the moon produced by the force of the sun…[22]

The moon is treated as a celestial object subject to Newton's theory of gravity with its motion corresponding to natural laws and subordinate to the greater gravitational pull of the sun. This is not a moon with personality, with the power to commune with the human mind. A purely scientific view of the moon sees it neither as animate nor unpredictable, for the moon's motion is governed by laws of nature expressible through mathematical equations. From this perspective, the moon's ability to evoke

[20] Tambiah, *Magic, science, religion*, p. 107.
[21] Tambiah, *Magic, science, religion*, p. 109.
[22] Isaac Newton, *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. by Bernard Cohen & Anne Whitman (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 515.

sublime experience is reduced, for her motion is understood as part of the harmonious pattern of the heavens, reducing her mystery and power to surprise. Newton's scientific presentation of the moon sharply contrasts Wordsworth's later sublime evocation. Wordsworth captures his participatory experience through engaged imagination whilst the scientist strives to find truth from a distanced perspective.

In 1730 the poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744) had written:

> Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night
> God said, Let Newton be! And all was light[23]

This captured the sense that Newton had shone a bright light on the mysteries of nature; he had conquered the mysterious night, the realm of the moon, with the light of reason, explaining mathematically the motion of celestial bodies. Newton's 1704 *Opticks* had penetrated the secrets of sunlight itself, using a prism to demarcate the colours of the rainbow:

> In Summer, when the Sun's Light uses to be strongest, I place a Prism at the Hole of the Window-shut…[24]

Newton's method was to use 'Reason and Experiments' to come to his conclusions, setting out his thinking in a logical way, with results derived from definitions and axioms.[25] This was an approach dominated by understanding. Whilst imagination had its part in his scientific work, such as the story of his having been inspired by a falling apple whilst musing on this theory of gravity, his principal method was one of detachment, with his findings logically following from the results of his experiments and reasoning.[26] In Tambiah's terms Newton's approach falls under the causal orientation to the world. This approach is concerned with 'distancing and neutrality', with 'the construction of scientific knowledge' and 'explanation of events'.[27] From such a perspective, the moon is merely an

[23] Alexander Pope, 'Epitaph: Intended for Sir Isaac Newton' (1730), quoted on <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/sir-isaac-newton> [accessed 13 July 2024].
[24] Isaac Newton, *Opticks*, (London: Amazon, 2023), p. 101 (Experiment 8, *First Book of Opticks*).
[25] Newton, *Opticks*, p. 15.
[26] James Gleick, *Isaac Newton* (London: Harper Perennial, 2003), p. 56.
[27] Tambiah, *Magic, science, religion*, p. 109.

object of nature with properties that can be scientifically evaluated; she is not a being capable of communing with the human mind.

Newton had brought the light of the sun, of reason and understanding, to the secrets of nature and penetrated the secrets of sunlight itself, but Wordsworth, radically, subordinates Newton to the moonlight. In book three of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth writes:

> And, from my Bedroom, I in moonlight nights
> Could see, right opposite, a few yards off,
> The antechapel, where the Statue stood
> Of Newton, with his Prism and silent Face.[28]

Wordsworth is recalling how, during his university days, he could see Newton's statue in the antechapel of Trinity College, Cambridge, from his neighbouring college, St. John's. He chooses to present his vision of Newton, however, through the mediation of the moonlight. Wordsworth recalls seeing Newton only during nights when the moon shines brightly. The implication is that Newton is viewed when the poetic imagination, associated with the moon, is at the height of its power. Significantly, in this light, Newton is immobile and silent. As a marble statue, Newton has no voice, no contribution to the poetic way of encountering nature. He holds his prism, the object that has enabled him to penetrate the secrets of sunlight and vision, but in the moonlight he does not speak. The prism yields up the secrets of light when it is combined with sunlight, but it does not reveal the secrets of the moonlight, the domain of poetry and the imagination; it does not speak of insight that comes through Wordsworth's way of seeing. Wordsworth, in presenting Newton thus, indicates that Newton's genius does not necessarily give the entire truth about the world, particularly the truth related to the night, to the moon, poetry and the imagination. In Tambiah's language, Newton's thought belongs to the causal domain whilst Wordsworth's is in the participatory.

Wordsworth's innovation in positioning poetry as a different way of finding truth to that of science is made clearer by contrasting the response to Newton by an earlier major eighteenth century poet. James Thomson's 1730 *The Seasons* played an important role in diffusing Newtonian natural philosophy.[29] Thomson had taught natural philosophy (science) at

[28] Wordsworth, *Prelude*, p. 35 (Third, ll. 56-9).
[29] Philip Connell, 'Newtonian Physico-Theology and the Varieties of Whiggism in James Thomson's *The Seasons'*, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (March 2009), 1-28 (p. 1).

Edinburgh University and his poetry has been praised for his accurate understanding of Newton's ideas.[30] Thomson took the approach of incorporating Newtonian philosophy into his poems, partly viewing his role as poet to educate readers in the new advances in thinking. In relation to the celestial realm, Thomson promoted the idea of Newton's laws which helped to understand the motion of bodies like comets, previously thought to be portents of disaster given what had seemed to be their sudden and irregular appearance in the night sky:

> With awful Train projected o'er the Heavens,
> The guilty Nations tremble. But, above
> Those superstitious Horrors that enslave
> The fond sequacious Herd, to mystic Faith
> And blind Amazement prone, th' enlighten'd Few,
> Whose Godlike Minds Philosophy exalts,
> The glorious Stranger hail. They feel a Joy[31]

Thomson recognises the fear that a comet inspires, referring to the 'awful Train' of its tail, and the belief it heralded disaster for those who deserved punishment, 'the guilty Nations tremble'. But he uses his poem to quell such superstitions and to applaud those who are enlightened by Newtonian philosophy, those who have 'Godlike Minds'. Such minds will understand why the comet moves and appears sporadically as it does, not by chance but according to laws which Newton has discovered. Thus does the mind enlightened by science find joy in seeing the comet, rather than fear. Thomson uses his poetry to communicate the truths of science, to mirror the latest ideas on reality. In his tribute poem to Newton of 1735, Thomson writes of the taming of the moon:

> He also fix'd the wandering *Queen of Night*,
> Whether she wanes into a scanty orb,
> Or, waxing broad, with her pale shadowy light,

[30] Christine Gerrad, 'James Thomson, The Seasons' in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry* ed. by Christine Gerrad (London: John Wiley & sons, 2006), pp.197-208 (p. 201); Shaun Irlam, *Elatics: The Poetics of Enthusiasm in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 118.
[31] James Thomson, *The Seasons*, ed. by James Sambrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 138 (ll. 1710-6).

In a soft deluge overflows the sky.[32]

For Thomson, the moon, the Queen of the Night, has been fixed by Newton's laws. She may appear mysterious and changeable, to wander in the sky, but in fact she can be tracked through mathematical equations. Her sublimity is superficial for she is understandable to those who are familiar with scientific theory. Thomson goes on to refer to the moon's gravitational impact on the tides, 'Why now the mighty mass of water swells…'[33] He uses poetic language to explain Newton's science rather than using poetry to express truths that come from a developed poetic imagination.

Wordsworth's different approach to Thomson's was not due to a lack of mathematical or scientific knowledge. At Hawkshead Grammar School Wordsworth was taught both mathematics and Newtonian physics and his mathematics was so good that at Cambridge he was deemed to be one year ahead of other students in this subject.[34] His old headmaster at Hawkshead is reported to have found Wordsworth poring over a book 'so absorbed' he did not notice the headmaster coming in – the book in question was Newton's *Opticks*.[35] Wordsworth's positioning of Newton is not due to a lack of familiarity with scientific innovation but to a philosophical difference from poets such as Thomson. For Wordsworth, Newton cannot bring light to the way of seeing that comes through the seasoned poet's eye, the way of seeing that relates to imagination and moonlight. For Wordsworth, regardless of scientific developments, the moon retains her power to evoke sublime encounters. This is possible through approaching her from the right state of mind; in Wordsworth's terms this is poetic imagination, in Tambiah's participatory consciousness.

Wordsworth, Herschel and *Star-gazers*

Wordsworth had clearly distinguished himself in his depiction of nature from earlier eighteenth-century poets like Thomson, but contemporary developments in astronomy potentially blurred the relationship between

[32] James Thomson, 'A POEM Sacred to the MEMORY of Sir *ISAAC NEWTON*' available at < https://www.eighteenthcenturypoetry.org/works/o3549-w0060.shtml> [accessed 17 July 2024], ll. 46-49.
[33] Thomson, 'Poem sacred to the memory of Sir Isaac Newton', l. 52.
[34] John Purkis, *Wordsworth* (Hardlow, Essex: Longman, 1986), p. 13.
[35] Juliet Barker (ed.) *William Wordsworth: A Life in Letters* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 7.

science and poetry, understanding and imagination. This raises the question of whether Wordsworth's innovation in poetry was a temporary split from science, or whether poetry and science were drawing closer together by the end of the long eighteenth century.

Based in Bath from 1766, the musician turned astronomer William Herschel (1738-1822) used innovative reflecting telescopes, which had been made possible through Newton's advances in optics, to discover the planet Uranus in 1781.[36] His first love however had been for the moon which he suspected was inhabited; he wrote poetically to the Astronomer Royal in 1780, 'The Earth acts the part of a Carriage, a heavenly waggon to carry about the more delicate Moon… [37] Herschel's phrasing of the moon as delicate and carried by the 'heavenly waggon' of the earth, conceived as carriage, indicates that he was not averse to the charms of the moon in an imaginative sense. Indeed, Herschel's cosmology was far from mechanistic; in 1789 he wrote that 'This method of viewing the heavens seems to throw them into a new kind of light. They now are seen to resemble a luxuriant garden'.[38] Appreciating the organic nature of the heavens, Herschel was close to Wordsworth's poetic perception that human beings and nature were sufficiently similar in constitution to relate to each other. Like Wordsworth, Herschel believed that the search for truth required both imagination and understanding. In 1785 he wrote of the need for balance; whilst too much 'fanciful imagination' would lead to 'going wide from the path of truth and nature', observations without any unifying conjecture would not lead to sufficient advance.[39] One of Herschel's key insights, that seeing in a particular way was a skill that required development, was very like that of Wordsworth. As Richard Holmes puts it, for Herschel:

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[36] Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic generation discovered the beauty and terror of science* (London: Harper*Press*, 2009), p. 60-3,

[37] William Herschel, quoted in Holmes, *Age of Wonder*, pp. 62-3.

[38] William Herschel, '1789: Remarks on the construction of the heavens', written 1 May 1789' in Michael Hoskin, *The Construction of the Heavens: William Herschel's Cosmology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.136-45 (p. 136).

[39] William Herschel, '1785: On the construction of the Heavens', written 1 January 1785, in Hoskin, *Construction of the Heavens*, pp. 114-5 (p. 114).

> visual images did not simply fall upon the optic nerve… the eye constantly interpreted what it saw, especially when using the higher powers of magnification. The astronomer had to *learn* to see.[40]

Learning to see was exactly what Wordsworth was advocating in the sphere of poetry, in which the mind of the mature poet could commune with nature directly. The superior vision of the poet, so aptly portrayed in the sublime encounter with the moon at the top of Snowdon, was a pure evocation of learning to see in a particular manner. The two lovers of the moon, Herschel and Wordsworth, had arrived at similar truths through different means, one through scientific endeavour and the other through the poetic imagination.

The similarity in Herschel and Wordsworth's insights does not however change Wordsworth's innovation in promoting poetry as a path to truth different to that of science. This is clearly seen from his poem *Star-Gazers*, composed in 1806 and published in 1807, in which he directly tackles the issue of astronomers gazing at the moon through telescopes:[41]

> WHAT crowd is this? What have we here! We must not pass it by;
> A Telescope upon its frame, and pointed to the sky:[42]

The ironic opening, exacerbated by the capitalised 'what' and exclamation mark, pretends to surprise and wonder. The lines conjure up the spectacle of the crowd gathered to see a show and sarcastically tell the reader that such a show should not be passed by. The reader wonders what remarkable thing the crowd are gathering to see and the answer, of a telescope on its frame, is underwhelming.

The third stanza explains the target of the telescope is the moon:

> Is nothing of that radiant pomp so good as we have here?
> Or gives a thing but small delight that never can be dear?
> The silver moon with all her vales, and hills of mightiest fame,
> Doth she betray us when they're seen? or are they but a name?[43]

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[40] Holmes, *Age of Wonder*, p. 116.
[41] William Wordsworth, 'Star-Gazers', in ed. by Ernest De Selincourt *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. 2: Poems Founded on the Affections; Poems on the Naming of Places; Poems of the Fancy; Poems of the Imagination*, Second Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. 219-20.
[42] Wordsworth, 'Star-Gazers', p. 219 (ll. 1-2).
[43] Wordsworth, 'Star-Gazers', p. 219 (ll. 15-9).

Wordsworth writes of the 'small delight' of seeing the moon through the telescope and questions whether viewing her vales and hills reveals her true nature. The moon through the telescope is only superficially naked unlike his encounter on Snowdon. He poses the question of betrayal suggesting that what is seen is not the true nature of the moon despite her being 'seen' through an instrument that magnifies her surface to the human eye. From the causal, scientific perspective, more should be learnt about the moon from this approach. Wordsworth questions this; in the 'are they but a name?' he suggests that what is learnt about the vales and hills is of little value. As he has already written in *The Prelude*, the moon will show herself in a true sense, in all her nakedness, to the human being with a sufficiently developed imagination. The crowds can take their turn to look through the telescope, but if their imaginative faculties are insufficiently developed, they will never encounter the truth that Wordsworth has perceived.

The theme of the inadequacy of looking at the moon through a telescope is underlined by the final verse:

> Whatever be the cause, 'tis sure that they who pry and pore
> Seem to meet with little gain, seem less happy than before:
> One after One they take their turn, nor have I one espied
> That doth not slackly go away, as if dissatisfied.[44]

Wordsworth points to the dissatisfaction of the viewers who look through the telescope, trying to gain the secrets of the moon through this technology. The alliteration 'pry and pore' gives a sharpness to his critique of their action. The viewers are going beyond their remit in trying to penetrate the secrets of the moon in this manner and inevitably remain unsatiated. In fact, they are less happy than previously; trying to understand the moon in this way has diminished their pleasure in her. Sabina Beckman has suggested it is the noise of the street and show-like atmosphere that may prevent true appreciation of what is seen through the telescope.[45] Yet this does not fully account for Wordsworth's displeasure. His critique goes further than this; for Wordsworth, a more satisfying understanding of the moon comes through an imaginative encounter, not through scientific observation.

[44] Wordsworth, 'Star-Gazers', p. 220 (ll. 31-4).
[45] Sabina Beckman, '"Star-Gazers": The Carnival-Urban Man and the Poetic Imagination' *CLA Journal*, March, 1981, Vol. 24, No. 3, 321-8 (p. 326).

As seen through *Star-Gazers*, Wordsworth's participatory perspective stems from a different orientation to the world to that of Herschel, despite the similarity of their insights. Each orientation starts from a different premise; in the language of modern anthropology Wordsworth's is participatory, beginning from an engaged imagination, whilst Herschel's is causal, commencing with detached observation, of seeking to understand through rational processes. Tambiah recognises that both orientations have some commonality; both depend upon the senses, 'both are projected on the experiential and symbolizing capacities of the same sensory modalities of man'.[46] Furthermore, as Tambiah makes clear, 'elements of participation are not lacking in scientific discourses, and features of causality are not necessarily absent in participatory enactments'.[47] Both poetry and science utilise imagination and understanding but Wordsworth's poetry goes beyond a mirroring of nature as conceived by science to insights found only from the light of the imagination. Wordsworth viewed the truth available to the poet as wider than that which science could bring:

> The Man of Science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion.[48]

For Wordsworth, poetry was a valid means of conveying the truth perceived by the poetic imagination. This type of illumination, of 'lamp', was symbolised in his poetry by the light of the moon and was available to those with developed powers of imagination. This was a clear evocation of later anthropological ideas on the validity of a participatory orientation to the world, contrasting the causal, scientific approach.

Conclusion

I have argued that an examination of Wordsworth's lunar symbolism in *The Prelude* and *Star-Gazers* clearly illustrates his thesis that the poetic imagination represents a way of seeing, a path to truth, which is as valid as that of science. Wordsworth's innovation marked a clear separation between poetry and science in the long eighteenth century and prefigured ideas of twentieth-century anthropologists on two orientations to the world: causal and participatory. Whilst the former covers the detached perspective

[46] Tambiah, *Magic, science, religion*, p. 108.
[47] Tambiah, *Magic, science, religion*, p. 109-10.
[48] Wordsworth, 'Preface 1800 version (with 1802 variants)', p. 301.

of modern science, the latter refers to the engaged human being actively participating with nature.

Building on the work of Abrams, I have argued that lunar symbolism is critical to understanding Wordsworth's radical innovation in poetry in the long eighteenth century. The sublime lunar revelation of book thirteen of the 1805 *Prelude* brilliantly captures how the poet's mature mind can commune with nature in reciprocal relationship. The naked moon, replacing the expected sun, brings a revelatory experience which is later captured in poetry with the aid of understanding. Newton brought the light of reason to the natural world through his mathematical laws and optical experiments with the prism, but Wordsworth subordinates him to the moonlight, a light associated with poetry and the imagination. This contrasts earlier eighteenth-century poets such as Thomson who used poetry to teach and mirror Newton's natural philosophy, writing of a tamed moon in the process.

Astronomers like Herschel, contemporary to Wordsworth, arrived at similar insights on the importance of learning to see, the organic nature of the heavens and the importance of employing both imagination and understanding in any search for truth. However, Wordsworth's innovation in poetry was undiminished for in *Star-gazers* he presents viewing the moon through the telescope as superficial and unsatisfying, starkly contrasting the lunar encounter on Snowdon. For Wordsworth, to truly see the moon requires a developed poetic imagination. This is what anthropologist Tambiah would later call participatory knowledge, in contrast to a causal, scientific approach to truth. Wordsworth was an early innovator in expressing such ideas and did so through his brilliant deployment of lunar symbolism.