“Nature,” “Homer,” and “Shakespeare”: Revisiting Pope and Wordsworth on How to Write Poetry
Zhuyu Jiang
Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

ABSTRACT
Both Alexander Pope (1688–1744) and William Wordsworth (1770–1850) proposed their own opinions about how to create poetry. As the representative poet of the school of Romanticism, William Wordsworth is supposed to revise and refine Pope’s ideas, who is the representative of the schools of Neoclassicism and who came earlier than Wordsworth. Pope believed that there are rules and traditions in literary classics, and he emphasized the importance of learning about them and applying them in poets’ creation to make the poetry just and conformed. Wordsworth, who came later, preferred the utmost and fluent expression of personal feelings to rigid adherence to rules and traditions. Yet, if we reexamine the two great critics’ ideas about how to make poetry, we will find that both emphasize a synthesis of rules and feelings, for example Pope’s “Nature” and “Homer,” and Wordsworth’s “Nature” and “Shakespeare.” This essay will reexamine critical works of both Pope and Wordsworth to illuminate how critics from different times give similar ideas about the synthesis of rules and feelings in the creation of poetry.

KEYWORDS
Poetry; Pope; Wordsworth; Nature

Alexander Pope and William Wordsworth both once shared their ideas about how to write poetry in their famous literary critical works. It seems that their ideas are supposed to be contrasted with each other as Pope is the representative of the school of the neoclassicism who favors rules and balance in their poetry that are acquired from the classic, while William Wordsworth, a generation after Pope and the representative...
of Romanticism, wanted to revise their precedents’ over-emphasis on regulations or regularities and draw poets’ attention back to an individual’s “spontaneous” and personal feelings in their poetry creation. Yet when we examine their literary criticism about poetry writing carefully, we find that they share similar ideas rather than comparing with each other with starkly different views. For example, they both mentioned the word “Nature” when talking about how a poet makes poetry and “Nature” of these two great minds and both represent something that is beyond a rational grasp. And they also both notice the synthesis between “Nature” and the classic, which is necessary for poetry creation. For Pope, the counterparts are “Nature” and “Homer.” And for Wordsworth, it is “Nature” and “Shakespeare.” In this paper, I would like to revisit Pope’s and Wordsworth’s major critical works, especially “An Essay on Criticism” and “The Preface to Lyrical Ballads” and try to present how these two great literary minds of different times and schools present similar ideas about the synthesis of Nature, Homer and Shakespeare in creating poetry.

1. Pope: Nature and Homer were the same

Alexander Pope (1688–1744) in his long and intricate poem “An Essay on Criticism” notices first the antithesis between “Nature” and “Homer.” “Nature” here with the capitalized “N” indicates that it is a kind of universal law and general regulation that is beyond human beings’ control or grasp but is indispensable in influencing their literary creation. It seems to be more a divine source of inspiration or sacred rules than personal skills or “individual talent.” This resonates with the “inspiration” that Plato proposed when talking about how poets create poetry. Here is the excerpt concerning the concept of “Nature” from “An Essay on Criticism” by Pope,

First follow NATURE, and your Judgment frame
By her just Standard, which is still the same:
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang’d and Universal Light,
Life, Force, and Beauty, must to all impart,
At once the Source, and End, and Test of Art
Art from that Fund each just Supply provides,
Works without Show, and without Pomp presides:
In some fair Body thus th’ informing Soul
With Spirits feeds, with Vigour fills the whole,
Each Motion guides, and ev’ry Nerve sustains. (Pope 38)

Pope suggests that Nature has the capability to impart “life, force, and beauty” to art. Literary creation and appreciation is refined and regulated by Nature. Nature constitutes and functions as “the source, and end, and text of art.” Pope points out that Nature abides by its own law, which is also conformed to by other existences in the world. From the above quotation, we can also see that Nature, in Pope’s opinion, is a divine symbol, functioning no less miraculously than Muses in literary creation and criticism. To acquire a better judgment and refined taste of literature depends on Nature which is “just,” “unerring,” “divinely bright,” “clear,” and “universal.” Nature
resembles the divine inspiration beyond human grasp in Plato’s discussion about poetry. Both are beyond the scope of human thinking and reasoning and neither can be acquired through conscious and deliberate efforts of studying or learning.

Although Pope admits that something beyond human capability impacts literary creation and the ability to appreciate literary pieces, he reminds us that tradition and the classic also influence individual production of literature and personal tastes of literary criticism. “Homer” is the term that Pope applies when talking about the significance of immersing oneself in and learning from literary classics in one’s literary creation. It is obvious and direct for Pope to use the name “Homer” to refer to literary tradition in his discussion. Here is the paragraph in “An Essay on Criticism” that describes how “Homer” functions in writers’ and critics’ creation and production:

You then whose Judgment the right Course wou’d steer,  
Know well each ANCIENT’s proper Character,  
His Fable, Subject, Scope in ev’ry Page,  
Religion, Country, Genius of his Age:  
Without all these at once before your Eyes,  
Cavil you may, but never Criticize.  
Be Homer’s Works your Study, and Delight,  
Read them by Day, and meditate by Night,  
Thence form your Judgment, thence your Maxims bring,  
And trace the Muses upward to their Spring;  
Still with It self compar’d, his Text peruse;  
And let your Comment be the Mantuan Muse. (Pope 39)

To learn from “Homer” and “Ancient’s proper character” benefits writers and critics. This “right course” “steers” our judgment and tastes. We should “know well” the tradition and classics. To receive education from classic and tradition is a pleasure, as Homer is not only our “study” but also a “delight.” We “read” the classic. We “mediate” to gain more from the classic. The importance of “Homer” lies in the better judgement and tastes we obtain through reading and enjoying the classic. It may also refer to a kind of “skill” or “craft” that Plato suggests when he explains that because of inspiration, poets are deprived of rationality and therefore cannot apply the “techne” and “craft” to their poetry reasonably. Pope also notices the importance of “techne.” When appreciating and explaining a poem, poets are required to soberly recognize the value in it; to know consciously how to appreciate it; and to make clear, rational, and just comments on it. To accomplish this, as Pope suggests in the above argument, poets need to refer to the classic and tradition to equip themselves with these “techniques” and “crafts.”

The supreme authority and assistance that Nature bestows on writers and critics can be as important as the constructive instruction and influence received from literary classics. Instead of making them dichotomies, Pope prefers a synthesis of the two aspects. Unlike Plato who focuses on the negative effect caused by inspiration and emphasizes the negative aspects of the paradoxical relationship between inspiration and poetry, Pope promotes a harmonious combination of the two. Both are indispensable and both are helpful. Pope encourages people to pay attention to the positive interaction and communication between the two rather than focus on the conflict and compromise between the two.
When first young Maro in his boundless Mind
A Work t’ outlast Immortal Rome design’d,
Perhaps he seem’d above the Critick’s Law,
And but from Nature’s Fountains scorn’d to draw:
But when t’ examine ev’ry Part he came,
Nature and Homer were, he found, the same:
Convinc’d, amaz’d, he checks the bold Design,
And Rules as strict his labour’d Work confine,
As if the Stagyrite o’er looked each Line.
Learn hence for Ancient Rules a just Esteem;
To copy Nature is to copy Them. (Pope 39–40)

Pope neither denies the importance of the classic nor does he downgrade the divine and inspirational value of Nature. He suggests the simultaneity as well as the similarity of both, as he concludes that “Nature and Homer were, he found, the same” and “To copy Nature is to copy them.” Pope’s inclination to establish a harmonious and reciprocal relationship between “Nature” and “Homer” is not simply a pluralistic resolution. It is rather an alternative perspective for approaching the paradoxical relationship between these counterparts in literary creation. Plato focuses more on the relationship between inspiration and poetry while Pope emphasizes the affinities between “Nature” and “Homer.” Michael Bruce therefore gives a very precise and accurate summary about Pope’s synthesis of “Nature” and “Homer”:

Pope is the liberal neoclassicist who respects Horace’s recommended “decorum,” but never at the expense of that inspired moment of poetic passion which “gloriously offend[s]” to “snatch a grace beyond the reach of art.” Pope’s commitment to tradition encouraged him to normalize the idiosyncratic; he had no intention, however, of circumscribing genius by “dull receipts.” (Bruce 268)

2. Wordsworth: thoughts are the representatives of past feelings

Pope’s idea reminds us of William Wordsworth’s (1770–1850) opinion. As the iconic figure of the school of Romanticism, Wordsworth highly praises the importance of innate feelings and personal perceptions in poetry creation. The “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is the most commonly acknowledged and representative phrase of Romanticism (Wordsworth, Coleridge, & Scofield 8). It seems that Wordsworth is different from Plato and Pope who attribute literary creation to supernatural and mythical powers like Muses and almighty Nature because Wordsworth emphasizes “the individual.” However, if we look carefully at Wordsworth’s view about poetry creation, we can find similarities between him and Pope. Although the emphasis on individual feelings is related to human beings, it still reveals something that is detached from human reasoning and human will. Subjective feelings can be stimulated unconsciously by external elements that are beyond human control and mastery. They are not rational and manageable but uncertain and instant. In this sense, Wordsworth’s idea resembles those of Pope and Plato. On the other hand, emotional subjectivity is not the only thing that determines how poets create poetry. Like Pope, Wordsworth also touches on how the classic and tradition regulates and refines personal feelings that
are flourishing in the individual creation of literature. This perspective adopted by Wordsworth is rarely noticed or discussed. The question is how does Wordsworth address these two sides at the same time and include them both within the one key word “feelings”?

The power Wordsworth bestows on the word “Nature” is no less magnificent than that of Pope’s concept of “Nature.” Nature, to Wordsworth, has a twofold meaning. First, Nature as Nature is the material world that serves as a sacred shrine of serenity for poets to pursue deeper mediation and to contemplate their primitive feelings and passions. Nature inspires poets not only in the sense that it stimulates their feelings and arouses their inner voices but also because it provides them with an ideal place to grasp the pure and original things and to perceive the innate emotions. Nature, therefore, serves as a sacred shrine for poets where they can mediate, just as Wordsworth argues in his renowned work “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” that when situated within a natural world and a simple life, “the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language” (7). Feelings germinated within this natural simplicity are “elementary” and harmonious. They will be “more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated.” Passions are “more easily comprehended, and are more durable.” Within Nature, poets will achieve a harmonious coexistence with Nature, which is an elevated level for their creation, “because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature.” Similar to Pope, Wordsworth also suggests that Nature functions as an unerring criterion and standard to regulate and refine human beings’ original feelings and emotions. As Wordsworth suggests, true poets strive to mirror genuine simplicity by choosing “incidents and situations from common life.” Poets describe the incidents with “language really used by men” and at the same time poets “throw over them a certain coloring of imagination.” These gestures of poets, however, should never be detached from “the primary laws of our Nature” (7).

Apart from representing the material world of Nature, Nature can also indicate the inner and spiritual world of human minds. In fact, if we trace back to the definitions of “Nature,” we can find an entry that corresponds to what Wordsworth means by “Nature” here. In the Oxford English Dictionary, “Nature” is defined as “senses relating to mental or physical impulses and requirements.”

To further explore the definition and gain more details, we can find an item that reads, “the inherent dominating power or impulse in a person by which character or action is determined, directed, or controlled.” “Nature” can refer to personal and subjective feelings that are generated within human beings. Men are conscious of such feelings and they can deliberately apply such feelings to “character” or “action.” However, how these feelings are stimulated and how they can be acquired is beyond human grasp. They are more like inspiration in Plato’s discussion and Nature in Pope’s argument. They are unconsciously bestowed on human beings that cannot be cultivated intentionally. In fact, “Nature” under this layer of meaning can be interpreted as either innate genius or as inner emotion. Yet regardless of which aspect we emphasize, we will always notice that Nature here is juxtaposed with cultivation and education which is determined by acquired characteristics. Such a presumption can find support from another entry on “Nature,” which defines it as “contrasted with nurture, esp. in Nature and nurture: heredity and environment respectively as influences on, or determinants
of a person’s personality or behavior.” The abstract and inherent power of “Nature” is also contrasted with “action” or “behavior” which is the seeable and external performance that is manageable by human beings themselves. They are subjected to and determined by the “inherent” rather than the other way around. This reminds us of what Aristotle argues in *Poetics*. Aristotle holds a very different perspective. He suggests that the creation of poetry depends on human beings’ craving to imitate. Aristotle uses the word “mimesis” to illustrate how poetry imitates an action or behavior. The reflection should be as accurate as the works of a “craftsman.” The word is compared with “Phantasia” created by Philostratus, meaning “a mental image” (258). This contradicts the definition of “Nature” which we reviewed above. Nature as the inherent and innate is the dominant and steering power and this definition can be referred to when we approach Wordsworth’s discussion about poetry writing.

Romanticists who favor inner voices most must not escape “Nature” with such features. They prioritize “feelings” over “action” and “situation.” Wordsworth emphasizes the significance of the “inherent” for poetry. He determines that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” which traces back to the inherent “organic sensibility” of poets (8). This is in stark contrast with “gross and violent stimulants” which belong to the external world (9). Not only does Wordsworth take the inherent as the essential ingredient and indispensable inspiration for poetry creation, and he also mentions how the inherent have an impact on the external world. He suggests that “the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling” (9). This easily reminds us of the definition given in *The Oxford English Dictionary*: “the inherent dominating power or impulse in a person by which character or action is determined, directed, or controlled.” Feelings, emotions, passions, and sensibility are all advantages that make poets superior to common people. As Wordsworth suggests, a poet is

“[a] man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human Nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him.” (Wordsworth 13)

Although Wordsworth places supreme emphasis on innate feelings and internal voices, he does not make a dichotomy between “Nature” and “nurture.” The “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” does not indicate the wild expression of uncontrolled feelings. “Our continued influxes of feeling,” as Wordsworth suggests, “are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings” (7). This reminds us of Plato’s idea about how inspiration deprives poets of their rationality. Strong feelings do not indicate irrationality. The passion of poets does not entitle them to implement reckless and irresponsible catharsis. Rather, they are regulated and refined by our thoughts and reasoning. Also, the passion of poets is not spontaneous and overwhelming, but rather it takes a milder yet enduring form. Wordsworth suggests that “it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (21) and the recollection of emotion, through “repetition and continuance,” gradually become “habits of mind” (8). He also suggests that “by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a Nature” (8). Such a process described by Wordsworth resembles that of cultivation. Reading and perceiving literary classics is a tranquil moment when our feelings are first
prompted. Constant and repetitive exposure to classics makes us more sensitive to feelings that correspond between different classics and gradually establishes and enhances our tastes and ability to find and appreciate true excellence. Wordsworth suggests that “by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects” (8). Our thoughts which “are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings” are prompted, awakened and refined by classics (8). Classics are representative of human minds that are selected by time and history. They are qualified to purify and improve our minds. What Wordsworth does here is to attach importance to the cultivation and nurturing of our feelings received from exposure to literature classics and traditions. He expressed “no dishonorable melancholy” about the negative tendency at his time and he suggests that men of his time have produced “a craving for extraordinary incident” (9) and the craving has been unreasonably gratified. Even worse is that “to this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves” (9). Wordsworth proceeds to utter his disagreement and pity for this negative trend:

The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. – When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the the feeble endeavour made in these volumes to counteract it. (Wordsworth 9–10)

To Wordsworth, the thirst for degrading stimulations makes people betray “the representative of all our past feelings.” The craving for extraordinary incidents is detached from the excellence reflected through classics like the works of Shakespeare and Milton. Wordsworth, therefore, resonates with Pope and Plato in the sense that he notices the counterparts in the process of literary creation. Feelings and passions are indispensable for poets but sensible thoughts and the conscious cultivation of classics are also irreducible. They modify and direct our feelings.

Although the synthesis of the classic and the individual has been adequately analyzed and supported by arguments made by literary critics from different times, there are still voices that deliberately ignore it and only partially recognize and emphasize one aspect of it. Literary tradition and the classic, for example, is sometimes deliberately regarded as a closed and elite list of fixed works and is reduced to a biased “means of discrimination” that suppresses and eliminates not only individual creativity that tries to renew the list but also creativity from the female gender, especially the female gender, creativity from emerging new disciplines and even creativity from different cultures which are overlooked and ignored. The individual talent or feelings, on the other hand, can also be too emphasized that due respect fails to be paid to literary tradition and the classic that deserves to be inherited and developed after years of selection and examination. Therefore, revisiting the synthesis of “Nature” and “Homer,” and “Nature” and “Shakespeare” helps us to avoid such extreme attempts and aids us in adopting justified attitudes towards tradition and the classic as well as the individual talent and feeling in this ever more diversified and dynamic world.
Notes

1. Plato in *Apology* suggests that “it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets.” It implies twofold of paradoxical meanings: on one hand inspiration is a divine gift which is beyond ordinary people’s grasp; on the other hand, inspiration deprives poets of their rationality and makes them tell lies. See Plato, 1963. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters.* ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 8., and my previous paper – Jiang Zhuyu, 2015. Plato and the book of poetry: the paradoxical relationship between the classic and creativity, *Comparative Literature: East and West,* No. 25.

2. The original words are “By the end of the fifth century we find the poet himself referred to as a poietes (maker), and his art as a techne. Thus in pre-Platonic literature poets are portrayed both as sophoi, ‘wise men’, who have access to knowledge through the inspiration of the Muses, and as skilled craftsmen.” See Murray, Penelope, 1996. Plato on poetry: ion; Republic 376e–398b9; Republic 595–608b10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 8.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Zhuyu Jiang received her BA in English Language and Literature from Tsinghua University, Beijing, and PhD in Comparative Literature from City University of Hong Kong. Currently, she is a faculty member in the Faculty of English Language and Culture in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Her research interest and teaching areas include comparative literary theories about the classic and creativity, British Literature, Art and Philosophy, World Literature, and Translation Studies. Her recent publication includes the following: “Footnotes: Why and How They Become Essential to World Literature” in the journal of *Neohelicon* in Dec. 2015, Vol. 42 and “Plato and The Book of Poetry: The Paradoxical Relationship between The Classic and Creativity,” *Comparative Literature: East and West,* 2016, Vol. 2, No. 25.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Poetics.* Introduction, commentary and appendixes by D.W. Lucas. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968. Print.
Bruce, Michael. “An Essay On Criticism.” In *Encyclopedia of the essay.* New York, NY: Routledge, 2012. Print.
Pope, Alexander. *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry And Prose.* New York, NY: Routledge, 2002. Print.
Wordsworth, William, Samuel, Coleridge, and Martin, Scofield. *Lyrical ballads and other poems.* Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2003. Print.