Night became a literary topic of the acutest interest during the early decades of the eighteenth century. Only at night did the stars’ lucent argument on behalf of a universal, providential order stand fully revealed. Yet night, too, was the period when imagination—sponsor of dreams, delusions, and fantasies—held sway. When the sun set the question arose as to whether reason or imagination possessed the greater power. Would Newton’s glorious truth be seen arrayed across the heavens? Or would the clouds of fancy obscure that glory with a melancholic gloom?

British and British-American writers tested their mental dispositions in nocturnal verse to discover whether lucid reason or the more troublesome imagination would prevail. Some British writers—Thomas Parnell, Robert Blair, Bishop Porteus, Charles Emily—employed the “night piece” to complain about man’s inability to transcend his situation in “this world of sin and death.” Others—James Thomson, John Gay, and David Mallet—sought to redeem night by viewing it as an essential component in nature’s harmony. In America the “night piece” became a particularly important vehicle for expressing a pessimistic view of the relation of man to nature. Four of the more ambitious works of colonial American belles lettres—James Ralph’s Night (1728), Richard Lewis’s “A Journey from Patapsco in Maryland to Annapolis, April 4, 1730,” Thomas Godfrey, Jr.’s The

The author wishes to thank the Citadel Development Foundation for its generous support of the research for this study.


2 Thomson and Gay will be treated in this study. David Mallet, “The Excursion,” in The British Poets (Cheswick, 1822), XLVIII.
Court of Fancy (1762), and Philip Freneau’s “The House of Night” (1779)—made use of nocturnal circumstances to critique human capacity. All four poems were composed by residents of the middle colonies; and all had a connection, either through publication or through composition, with Philadelphia.3

The works of James Ralph and Richard Lewis responded to the vision of nature, human nature, and night expressed in Thomson’s The Seasons (1726-30). At issue was the question of whether human faculties could comprehend the design of nature and whether knowledge of its design could harmonize the human mind. Ralph and Lewis argued that human nature suffered too great a derangement to be harmonized by a sense of order derived from the study of

3 Philadelphia serves as the locus of this study because of its rich tradition of physico-theological speculation during the eighteenth century. Although the contributions to this tradition of Franklin (and, to a lesser extent, James Logan, Joseph Breintnall, and Ebenezer Kinnersley) have to be recognized (e.g., see Brooke Hindle’s 1976 collection, Early American Science), the poetic literature of physico-theology remains relatively obscure. As in New England, literary speculation about the order of nature was published by philomaths as instructional matter in almanacs. Jacob Taylor’s “Compend of Astronomical History” contained in his 1723 ephemeris inaugurated the local poetic literature on the subject. Five years later Henry Brooke (the Delaware politician and wit, not the Irish novelist and physico-theologian) composed a scientific lyric on the sun in Leeds, The American Almanac . . . for 1728. These optimistic musings predate Franklin’s prose ruminations on deistic subjects and the physico-theological extracts from British poets which adorn issues of Poor Richard. The writings of James Ralph and Richard Lewis, examined in this essay, afford a contrast to the optimism of Franklin, Brooke, and Taylor. A middle ground between the two perspectives was struck by William Smith, director of the Philadelphia Academy, in two lyrics published anonymously in the Pennsylvania Gazette: “On Light” in the issue of April 30, 1752 (#1073, J. A. Leo Lemay, A Calendar of American Poetry . . . Through 1765; my attribution) and “On the surprizing Scenes of the Creation,” in the paper for July 5, 1753 (Lemay, #1140). Smith trained the next generation of Philadelphia poets—Nathaniel Evans, Francis Hopkinson, Jacob Duché, and Thomas Godfrey—and served as an intellectual broker for a network of bellettrists extending to Annapolis in the South and Princeton to the North. His American Magazine (1757-58) featured physico-theological poetry by Joseph Shippen (“Winter, A Poem,” February, 1758) and his pupils. Attempting to rival the efforts of the Philadelphians, Princeton’s poets, particularly Benjamin Young Prime, published their works in the New American Magazine among other New Jersey periodicals. Philip Freneau developed as a poet at Princeton during the era when Philadelphia’s example loomed large in student consciousness. He lived to see the principal collections of his poetry published in Philadelphia by Bailey in 1786 and 1788. Freneau’s contributions to the physico-theological debate will be treated in some detail at the end of this study.
nature. Furthermore, they denied the neoclassic belief that art born of human imagination could reform any inadequacy of man or nature.

All four colonial poets thought the problem of human nature lay in the flawed constitution of the imagination. The instability of fancy—its tendency to delusion, uncontrolled passion, moodiness—subverted the possibility of any harmonious relation with the sensible world. In Godfrey's *The Court of Fancy* the extent of the failure of imagination is found to be too great to be redeemed by reason or grace. Philip Freneau, unwilling to go to Godfrey's philosophical extreme, attempted to accommodate a traditional view of the benighted condition of man in a world governed by death with an impersonal vision of the world as an arena of physical change that transcends death through a procession of constant mutation. Freneau's failure to synthesize Christian doctrine with natural philosophy dramatized the central tension disturbing the American poetry of night during the 1700s: the personal orientation of Reformed Christianity and Lockean psychology could never be accommodated with the impersonal view of nature projected by Newtonian science if the human faculty of apprehension—the imagination—could not be governed by reason nor conformed to the reasonable design inscribed in nature.

That a pessimistic assessment of man's relation to nature took form in colonial America is not remarkable. What is noteworthy, however, is that the persons who promoted the sense of a dark possibility were major proponents of belletrism, that literary tendency we associate with "enlightened thought" and the myth of America's "rising glory." In what ways did these Americans reject the enlarged sense of human capacity and optimistic view of providence promulgated by English contemporaries? On what grounds did these American poets maintain their vision of darkness amid their myths of rising glory?

Before turning to the American poems, I shall briefly survey the positive attitudes about night. No poetry manifested greater optimism than the verse of the physico-theologians—such writers as Henry Brooke and Moses Browne who took the image of a benevolently ordered cosmos to extremes in "Universal Beauty" (1734-36) and "Essay on the Universe" (1735). In British America their verse was

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4 Browne's "Essay" became familiar to British Americans who read Franklin's extracts
popularized by philomaths who used excerpts for the literary matter in almanacs. Brooke and Browne used night to illustrate the beneficial prevalence of light in nature:

High from his seat the solar glory heaves,
(whose image fires the horizontal waves)
Abridging, shears the sable robe of night,
And through the globe protracts the cheerful light. (Brooke, II:65)

Here the image of the universe as a radiant, divinely reasoned system—that image refracted from Newton’s Opticks—has been elaborated into a vision of radical optimism.

Despite its faithfulness to the doctrine of cosmic optimism, the poetry of physico-theology did not strike the mass of English readers as satisfactory. It ignored the fact that providence had arranged that man be periodically deprived of illumination. A more circumspect body of poetry envisioned nature and night in terms of a balance of contending forces. The greatness of Thomson’s The Seasons for many readers lay in its success in illustrating the systemic equipose of these forces. The meridian light of Summer balanced the sublime darkness of night in Winter. Nature, as comprehended by Thomson, mixed the ordinary and the sublime, the lucent and the obscure, the regulated and the accidental, and the glorious and the debased. Many poets adopted this view of natural order, and many applied the principle of a “balanced variety” in their explorations of the qualities of night. As Matthew Prior had observed in Solomon,

Pitchy and dark the night sometimes appears
Friend to our Woe, and parent of our fears;
Our joys and wonder sometimes she excites,
With stars unnumber’d and eternal lights.5

Negative qualities were recognized, yet the larger sense of the beneficial order of nature was not surrendered. John Gay noted in the opening lines of “A Contemplation on Night,”

Whether amid the gloom of night I stray,

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Or my glad eyes enjoy revolving day,
Still Nature's various face informs my sense,
Of an all-wise, all-powerful Providence.⁶

Christians of rigorous temper found Gay's allusions to providence too easy. They did not doubt that providence was all-wise and all-powerful; they doubted man's capacity to comprehend its designs. In "this world" the contention between opposing forces—sin and grace, evil and good, death and life, darkness and light—did not resolve in a comfortable equipoise. Man and nature had fallen. Nothing of "this world" could bring light to this world's darkness. Nevertheless, there existed (to borrow the title of one of Isaac Watts's lyrics) a "Hope in Darkness." God had intervened in the fallen world, offering His Son. "A Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5) So the rigorous Christian poet, too, entertained an optimism in his meditations on night. "The hour of darkness is but short, / Faith be thy life, and patience thy support, / The morning brings thee joy."⁷

Summarizing, we see that night played various roles: it served as a foil for the noontide vision of universal beauty projected by physicotheology; it assumed the full symbolic weight of sin and death in a Christian poetry that dramatized our need for "the Light of the world"; or, it figured in its combination of harmful and beneficial qualities the harmony of mixed elements constituting nature as a whole. Americans' trepidations concerning the symbolic significance of night may be seen in their attempts to envision night as a mixed entity, for in their failure to render an unproblematic view of night's benefits, we can read a disbelief in or at least a doubt about the philosophical notion that nature was designed in a manner comprehensible to human reason. The failure of reason may be seen clearly in the two earliest American poems to consider night philosophically: James Ralph's Night and Richard Lewis's "A Journey from Patapsco in Maryland to Annapolis."

James Ralph's Night and Richard Lewis's "Journey" grew out of

⁷ Isaac Watts, "Hope in Darkness," The British Poets (Cheswick, 1822), XLV:177.
the poetic reconsideration of nature begun by James Thomson in *Winter* (1726), the first of his *Seasons*. Both works imitated *Winter* in viewing landscape, the face of nature, as an emblem of God's cosmological design, rather than viewing it as a hieroglyph of history. Prospect poetry, that species of verse initiated by John Denham's *Coopers Hill* (1641) and perfected in Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713), had figured the countryside's meaning in terms of the historical events it hosted. Thomson opposed the imposition of purely political significance upon natural phenomena. For Thomson a profounder message had been inscribed in the features of nature and in the passage of the seasons: “These, as they change, Almighty Father! these / Are but the varied God. The rolling year / is full of thee.”

Both Ralph and Lewis joined Thomson in seeing nature as the “varied” pattern of divinity. To represent nature's variety sufficiently, Thomson and his followers depicted nature's variation over time as well as its varied aspect in a locality.

Time works cyclically in nature, rather than as a linear span or epoch (as human history represents it). Thus the “round” of seasons dictated Thomson's format, and each season represented a period in the cycle of day—Spring as morning, Summer as noon, Autumn as evening, and Winter as night. Ralph and Lewis adjusted the cyclical format to fit their individual projects. Ralph examined night’s qualities in each of the four seasons, devoting a book to each season. “Revolving time, with restless toil, / Thro' all the seasons turns the circling year, / and varies ev'ry scene with gradual change.”

Lewis viewed nature over the course of a day in April when the seasonal contrasts, the disparities between warmth and chill, dryness and wetness, seemed greatest.

Thomson had not finished *Autumn*, nor the final “A Hymn on the Seasons,” when James Ralph published *The Night* in 1728. The architectural harmony of *The Seasons*, therefore, was not fully apparent to the American. Since each season presented a distinctive view of nature, and since *Winter*, the first and most famous of the sections, gave its particular emphasis to nature’s sublime aspects, Ralph derived

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a more volatile image of nature from Thomson than later imitators—Robert Colvill, John Cunningham, or Joseph Cottle.\textsuperscript{10} Ralph grasped the structural principle of creation that Thomson had presented—that creation entailed a play of contending forces. But Ralph found in this arrangement cause for dissatisfaction with the worldly state: “various woes pollute all earthly bliss, / And rule the nations with alternate sway” (p. 6). Instead of being in a state of equipoise, the forces of nature operate in such a way that either bliss or woe is in ascendancy. Ralph did not assume the philosophical perspective that Thomson displayed in the “Hymn,” in which the various conditions of nature appeared in their cyclic harmony. Instead, Ralph assumed the more immediate perspective of “the Wanderer” who endures the many afflictions and few felicities of Thomson’s \textit{Winter}. Thus, Ralph did not offer the “rational delight” of philosophical poetry, which traces the regular design of nature; rather, he presented the “awful pleasures” and “wonders” of nature’s dark face. These “awful pleasures” were the affects inspired by the sublime.

By 1728 the sublime had been a central literary concern for half a century. Boileau’s translation (1674) of Longinus’s \textit{Peri Hupsous} had ignited interest throughout Europe in the power of certain images to inspire passion. Longinus’s concentration on specific passages and incidents in literary works—rather than on general matters of form, fable, and character—led critics and poets to consider what subjects could inspire the intesnest feelings. Subsequently, men of letters began to evaluate the role imagination played in communicating passion.\textsuperscript{11} The actions deemed to possess the greatest ability to inspire wonder were those which violated a reader’s sense of normality—catastrophes, prodigies, miracles, and epiphanies. Christian theology had long consigned these sorts of incidents to the category of “extraordinary providence.”\textsuperscript{12} (Common providence encompassed those operations of nature which occur regularly.) \textit{The Seasons} described nature as a


mixture of extraordinary and ordinary providence. Ralph’s *Night*,
which viewed nature primarily in terms of its sublime aspects, featured
the extraordinary. In doing so, it implicitly posed a question about
human psychology: if the human psyche has been attuned to pay
particular attention and if it experiences its most vivid emotions in
response to what is disruptive and extraordinary, it would appear that
humans have a constitutional hunger for disturbance. The imagination
yearns to be troubled. Ralph’s argument in the first book of *Night*
illustrated the problem.

The subject is night in spring. The poet begins by making the
usual associations of spring with gladsome happenings—sylvan choirs
singing songs of joy, enchanted starlight shedding beauty on a dark-
ened world. “But various woes pollute all earthly bliss” (p. 7). A
wintry shower blasts the budding flowers with cold. A noxious wind
“spreads it’s [sic] bane / Resistless o’er the vegetable world” (p. 8).
As Ralph passes from the vegetable world to the animal, and from
the animal to the human, the “alternate sway” of felicity and affliction
is figured repeatedly. Figured in mythological emblems, the conflict
occurs in the alternate domination of Venus and Mars in the conduct
of human affairs. First, Ralph depicts the passions of nocturnal lovers
in “mutual pleasures lost” (pp. 11-12); then he represents “dread
Mars” at work, inspiring contending armies with bloodlust (pp. 13-
15). Mankind, it would seem, is fated to suffer a perpetual alternating
submission to bliss or terror. In hope of relief from this situation, the
poet requests his guardian angel to remove him from the Old World
to the New. Ralph, an expatriate of Pennsylvania working in England,
looks nostalgically for relief toward his old home.

There lost
In peace, and silence my contented soul
May slumber life away remote from war. . . .
—There nature pours with lavish hand her sweets,
And in profusion ev’ry blessing gives. (p. 16)

For Ralph America served as a natural utopia, much as ancient Greece
did for English pastoral poets. In the New World the benefits of
nature existed in such profusion that one should have enjoyed com-
forting sleep at night—the “thoughtless” repose of the savage man
of nature. Yet even in America the problem of man’s relationship to
nature remained:
can the murmurs of descending floods,
And mingled fragrance of the blooming earth,
Or secret shades, and solitude relieve
The inborn sorrows, and perplexing cares
Which torture deep the miserable soul? (p. 17)

No, Ralph contended. Man is too much troubled by an innate inclination to spiritual darkness. “Black melancholy glooms his mournful thought.” This dark state of mind, besides troubling the soul, infected nature, giving a “dreadful horror to the night.” The first book of Night closed with a glimpse of nature’s being contaminated by a malignancy born of human mind.

That nature’s felicity can be ruined by the mind is an ancient commonplace. According to Robert Burton in The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621), the melancholic imagination could overthrow reality, both by projecting delusions to supplant it and by inspiring man to change nature to accord with his fantasy. Burton, like many late Renaissance thinkers, associated problems of the psyche with problems of the spirit. He observed that the “impulsive cause” of man’s melancholic violation of nature arose from “the sin of our first parent Adam, in eating of the forbidden fruit.”13 Indeed, Adam’s fall could be interpreted as an allegory of man’s capacity to debase nature, for besides tainting his soul, Adam forfeited for mankind the paradise of Eden. Since Adam had been given stewardship over nature (Genesis 1:28), his fall entailed the fall of nature, too. Paradise was lost.

Martin Battestin has argued that the great project of English neoclassical verse was to restore paradise by means of art.14 To accomplish this, the poet had to assume the role of the creator and in his work call into being a world which enjoyed a new golden age under the “providence of wit.” As Pope indicated in “Spring” of his Pastorals, the paradise of poetry is radiant, rural, and abounding in gracious, loving harmony. As Pope’s Dunciad indicated, chaos would ensue when art failed or thought became obscure.

Let there be darkness! (the dread pow’r shall say)

All shall be darkness, as it ne'er were Day;
To their first Chaos Wit's vain works shall fall,
And universal Dulness cover all.\textsuperscript{15}

Pope linked the perversion of creation with the wild disharmony of the sublime; he here inverts the \textit{fiat lux} of Genesis, the passage Longinus cited as the quintessence of sublimity, to serve as the logos of Chaos.

The problem of sublimity was that it situated the poet in his humanity. To feel the overwhelming force of nature, or to thrill at God's glory, was to confirm one's human point of view, where imagination mediates experience, and experience inspires unruly passion. The aspiration to be the creator of a poetic paradise was frustrated, for the exaltation of a divine perspective was prevented. Pope's \textit{Dunciad} was fraught with this problem. He solved the perplexity by casting off the divine role of creator and assuming the other task of the gods—judgment. As the voice of judgment, Pope condemned those poets who ruined their creations by indulging in chaotic fancy. Thomson resolved the problem of perspective in a different way, by employing a multiple point of view. He comprehends in the "Hymn" the divine harmony of nature through the course of time, but he also apprehends in the body of \textit{The Seasons} the momentary hurts, excitements, and serendipities of human experience.\textsuperscript{16}

James Ralph adopted the human dimension of Thomson's picture of nature, amplifying it so that all human feeling was sublime, and nature seemed an arena of contending passions. The landscape mirrored the violence of the human psyche, if it did not arise directly from that violence. Ralph allowed none of the order and circumspection of neoclassical metaphysics. If anything, he reasserted the anxious situation of the sinful human in the Christian literature of confession. Yet the poem was not truly Christian. The psyche had replaced the soul as the human locus of the problem of nature. Earth was featured as the principal arena in which supernatural force was expressed. In \textit{Night} Ralph gave voice to all the human fallibility, unruly passion, and natural disorder that Pope condemned in \textit{The


\textsuperscript{16} Ralph Cohen, \textit{The Unfolding of the Seasons} (Baltimore, 1970), 6-7.
Dunciad. In later editions of the satire, Pope took notice of Ralph’s work: “Silence, ye wolves, while Ralph to Cynthia howls / And makes Night hideous,—answer him, ye owls.”

Pope could dismiss Ralph’s poem in two lines. Richard Lewis’s “A Journey from Patapsco in Maryland to Annapolis” was so artful in its pernicious doctrine that Pope gave it lengthier treatment. Pope wrote:

Yet by some object ev’ry brain is stirr’d;  
The dull may waken to a Humming-bird;  
The most recluse, discreetly open’d, find  
Congenial matter in the Cockle-kind;  
The mind, in Metaphysics at a loss;  
May wander in a wilderness of Moss;  
The head that turns at super-lunar things,  
Poiz’d with a tail, may steer on Wilkins’ wings.  
Oh! would the Sons of men once their Eyes  
And reason giv’n them but to study Flies. (IV:465-66)

The passage appears to be a general satire of those scientific virtuosi who make metaphysical speculations founded on the observation of insignificant objects such as cockles or hummingbirds. But if we turn to what Lewis had said about the hummingbird, we can discover the true grounds of Pope’s objection:

Thus whirring round he flies, and varying still  
He mocks the Poet’s and the Painter’s Skill;  
Who may for ever strive with fruitless Pains  
To catch and fix those beauteous changeful Strains. (p. 669)

The hummingbird symbolized the inadequacy of art to represent nature’s varying aspects. Its colors changed so rapidly, its beauty shone so transiently that it could not be fixed in a human creation. Pope’s ambition to recompose nature into the artful perfection of a poem would have been forestalled by this creation, which did not permit imitation. Pope responded in a passage on the butterfly:

It fled, I follow’d; now in hope, now pain;

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It stopt, I stopt; It mov’d, I mov’d again.
At last it fix’d, twas on what plant it pleas’d,
And where it fix’d, the beauteous bird I seiz’d. (lines 427-30)

Lewis’s project in “A Journey” is, according to J. A. Leo Lemay, a “religious affirmation . . . made in the face of, and partly by including and transcending, the major modern currents of thought”—Lockean psychology, Cartesian philosophy, and Newtonian science. Lemay argues that the poem embodies the anxiety that arose when religious personalism attempted to confront the impersonal view of nature presented by science. Instead of discovering harmony between macrocosm and microcosm, Lewis found dissonance. Consider the passage in which the poet allegorized his day’s experience in terms of the pattern of his life:

My working Fancy helps me to survey
In the just picture of this April Day,
My Life o’er past, a Course of thirty years,
Blest with few Joys, perplex’d with num’rous Cares.

In the dim Twilight of our Infancy,
Scarce can the Eye surrounding Objects see.
Then thoughtless Childhood leads us pleas’d and gay,
In Life’s fair Morning thro’ a flow’ry Way:

Yet the poet’s sorrowful experience did not extinguish hope for a better future. When his survey rounded to evening, his contemplation turned to prayer. He hoped to enjoy the modest comfort and retired life of virtue favored by so many English poets of Horatian proclivity. Looking beyond that modest life, Lewis hoped that

as the setting Sun withdrew his Light,
To rise on other Worlds serene and bright,
Cheerful may I resign my vital Breath,
Nor anxious tremble at th’ approach of Death. (lines 323-26)

Lewis permitted himself only a glimpse of what might lie in store

at journey's end. That glimpse came when Lewis cast his eyes heav-
enwards. There he beheld the hand of God immediately present.
Time contracted as Lewis experienced sublime illumination.

struck with amaze I cry,
Almighty Lord! Whom Heav'n and Earth proclaim
The Author of their universal Frame,
Wilt thou vouchsafe to view the Son of Man,
The Creature, who but Yesterday began
Thro' animated Clay to draw his Breath,
Tomorrow doom'd a Prey to ruthless Death! (lines 341-47)

Man's confrontation with the heavens has long been an occasion of ultimate knowledge. The Greek hermeticists, the Chaldean astrologers, the medieval prognosticators had found fate written in the stars. Reformed Christians encountered in the constellations the "conspicuous powers which God shows forth in his creatures." John Calvin, for instance, contemplated God as the Artificer "who stationed, arranged, and fitted together the starry host of heaven in such wonderful order that nothing more beautiful in appearance can be imagined."  


Into the World by thy bright Presence tost,
Am in th' Immensity of Nature lost. (lines 348-52)

For Lewis, Newton's confirmation of the regularity of the heavens—"Obedient thro' their circling Course on high"—amplified the dreadful import of the night sky. By demonstrating the obedience of the celestial bodies, Newton showed that nothing, not even a comet, could evade the providential design. Thus death—the most troublesome and "ruthless" element of that design—could not be escaped. Questions arose at this point for the poet: in the breadth of creation what could one individual mean to God? Was the individual, like the poet, "lost" in the "Immensity of Nature"? These questions did not permit Lewis to embrace the optimism of those British poets who celebrated man's significance because of his ability to comprehend God's universal design. Rather, they led to a more acute sense of man's insignificance before God's creation. Lewis confirmed the Christian locus of man in fear, humility, and awe before God.

We may be surprised that scientific knowledge of the heavens should be employed as a vehicle for inspiring sublime emotion—that the fruits of reason should be amazement and terror. Yet we cannot doubt that Lewis and subsequent American writers used science in such a way. No writer explored the sublime uses of natural philosophy with greater energy than Rev. William Smith, the first Provost of the College of Philadelphia and America's foremost Anglican intellectual during the 1750s and 1760s. In *A General Idea of the College of Mirania*, a utopian prospectus for a scheme of higher education, Smith inquired rhetorically,

How were our Minds dilated and exalted when in the Study of Astronomy, he led us to consider the heavenly Bodies? And how little did every Thing we were wont to fancy great then appear to us? Even the terraqueous Globe on which we dwell, with all its Kingdoms and boasted Grandeur seem'd in our Eye but a small Point in the Solar-System? The Solar-System itself dwindled into Naught when compar'd with the numerous Systems of those Stars that in a clear Night stud the Cerulean! All these Systems again were lost in the vast Expanse when compared with the Infinity of Systems which Philosophy's purer Eye can descry beyond the Reach of all Optics! And thus, while he taught us to rise from System to System, beyond all definite Space, till we were lost in the Imagination, and at the same Time convinc'd us,
Smith translated his doctrine into verse, entitling his poem “On the surprizing Scenes of the Creation” (1753). During that same year, he assumed directorship of the Philadelphia Academy. He stood in a position to indoctrinate the rising generation in his vision of the uses of science.

The poets among his pupils seem to have attempted a night piece at some time. Francis Hopkinson explored the devotional mood in night in stanzas 23 through 30 of “Hermitage,” the melancholic aspect of “Il Pensoroso.” Nathaniel Evans left an unfinished night piece among his posthumous papers. Thomas Godfrey, Jr., employed night as a circumstance in several meditations on human imagination. Provost Smith’s influence may be seen most clearly in Godfrey’s early lyric, “A Night Piece.” Several stanzas merit quotation.

Rich in expression, how sublimely bright,
Those lucent arguments above us shine!
Now, Atheist! Now lift up thy wondering sight
And own the great creating pow’r divine.

Heav’n! what a throng, what a dread endless train,
Of complicated wonders yield surprize!
Systems on systems, systems yet again,
And suns on suns, continually arise!

Too daring thought! Give o’er thy vain emprize,
Nor rashly pry—at humble distance gaze!
Should heav’n unveil those beauties to our eyes
The dazzled sense would sink beneath the blaze.

But leave the glories of heav’n’s spang’d dome,
And thy slow-steps to dreary church-yards lead;
There lean attentive on yon marble tomb,
And learn instruction from the silent dead.

How dismal is this place! whilst round I gaze,
What chilling fears my thoughtful soul invade!

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Exaggerating fancy shrubs doth raise,
To dreadful spectres gliding cross the shade.\(^{23}\)

Godfrey’s imagination failed in its attempt to measure the extent of God’s creative “expression.” Conscience interposed, instructing fancy to return to earth or risk destroying “sense” in the “blaze” of God’s beauty. The poet’s thought descended from the heavens to a “dreary churchyard.” The historical significance of this fall is notable. During the 1740s, Christian poets began to reckon a greater power in the imagination. When Edward Young, for instance, looked to the heavens in the ninth night of his *Night Thoughts*, his sublime feeling did not relegate him wholly to human inadequacy: “My heart, at once, it humbles and exalts; / Lays it in dust, and calls it to the skies. / Who sees it unexalted? or unawed.”\(^{24}\) For Young the imaginative exploration of the heavens entailed a liberation from human inadequacy.\(^{25}\)

Godrey, writing a generation after Young, reasserted the incapacity of man’s imagination. From the exalted heights of Young’s heaven, the poet fell into the dreary landscape of that other great nocturnal poem of the 1740s, Robert Blair’s *The Grave*. Grounded, Godfrey brought all the machinery of the graveyard school into play: the tomb, the dismal atmosphere, the ghosts. The discomfort of “this place” turned critical when the poet realized that his fancy failed, exaggerating experience into delusion. Addressing night in the penultimate stanza, Godfrey observed,

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\begin{align*}
\text{led by thee, imagination roves,} \\
\text{On tow’ring pinion seeks some distant world;} \\
\text{Or wanders pleas’d thro soft enamel’d groves,} \\
\text{Or down the dreadful precipice is hurl’d.}
\end{align*}
\]


\(^{25}\) Consider Young’s lines asserting that “The soul of man was made to walk the skies; / Delightful outlet of her prison here! / There, disencumber’d from her chains, the ties / Of toys terrestrial, she can rove at large; / There, freely can respire, dilate, extend, / In full proportion let loose all her powers.” See Guy Laprevotte, “Demonstration et poesie dans la ‘Nuit IX’ de Young,” *Bulletin de la Société d’Etudes Anglo-Americaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe Siecles* 14 (June 1982): 64-66.
Here Godfrey recognized the mixed constitution of the imagination—that it had the capacity to project both good and bad images. Yet Godfrey stressed fancy’s negative capacity by giving its dreadful aspect the final say. In the optimistic neoclassical literature of the imagination—in Akenside’s *The Pleasures of the Imagination* or Joseph Wharton’s “Ode to Fancy,” for instance—the order of possibilities is reversed. First we view the “baleful tincture” fancy cast over reason, but the poet leaves us with the image of imagination’s “soft enamel’d groves” lingering in the mind’s eye.

Godfrey’s trepidations about fancy grew with his confidence about his art, coming to fruition in his major nondramatic composition, *The Court of Fancy* (1762). The poem represented a vision in which a poet allegorizes his own faculty of creation as the goddess Fancy. Night falls and in dream the poet enters into Fancy’s domain. He seeks wisdom, as do most wandering poets in vision poetry, but the instruction he receives is that sorrowful knowledge, which Chaucer and Pope had gathered before him, that the poet must suffer the afflictions of an arbitrary fate. Godfrey used Chaucer’s “Hous of Fame” and Pope’s “The Temple of Fame” as models for his allegory. Godfrey, however, internalized Chaucer’s and Pope’s vision of fate. They saw fate tainting a poet’s fame with false rumor; Godfrey saw a poet’s afflictions inscribed in his own psychology—in fancy’s tendency to give way to delusion. Godfrey did preserve an important aspect of the older poets’ vision: he shared a belief that the disasters which befall a poet somehow lie beyond the influence of a poet’s will. The decrees of Fame and Fancy are the dictates of goddesses, as are the decrees of Rumor and Delusion, Fame and Fancy’s metamorphosed counterparts.

What strikes a reader about Godfrey’s poem is the power he ascribes to imagination. Fancy is represented as the preeminent power in the universe. Earlier poets had not believed imagination to be so powerful. The anonymous English author of “The Palace of Fancy,” an allegory published in *The London Magazine* (August, 1737), wrote of Fancy, “The Angry gods expell’d her from their eyes, / And left her to possess the lower skies.” In Godfrey’s poem Fancy controls the gods,

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projecting the ancient pantheons on the compass points of her dome. When the dreaming poet visits Fancy’s abode, he casts his eyes around the circuit of the dome and grows increasingly disconcerted, for he notices that bards are placed amid the groupings of gods. Among the Egyptian gods, for instance—those “monkeys and serpents raised to deities”—he saw “Maimed Memnon” who “seem’d on his harp to play.” The implication of this arrangement horrifies the poet, for he realizes that poets, the foremost agents of the imagination, generated the gods out of fancy. The poem later illustrates just how these fanciful gods hold enthralled the poets who made them and the mass of humanity who follow them.

Godfrey’s vision of the pagan gods—critical, yet not Christian—owes something to the skeptical critique of ancient religion that developed shortly before the composition of the poem with David Hume’s “The Natural History of Religion.” Hume in this essay explained the origin of polytheism by reconstructing the mental situation of early man. Hume believed that mankind possessed a “universal tendency . . . to conceive all beings like themselves.” Early man’s projective inclinations were not limited to anthropomorphizing deities. “The vulgar polytheist . . . deifies every part of the universe, and conceives all the conspicuous productions of nature, to be themselves so many real divinities. The sun, moon, and stars are all gods according to his system: Fountains are inhabited by nymphs, the trees by hamadryads: Even monkies, dogs, cats, and other animals, often become sacred in his eyes, and strike him with religious veneration.”

Hume’s ridicule of the fanciful nature of polytheism exhibited the elevated perspective of philosophy. Godfrey as a poet bore a more direct responsibility for the imaginative genesis of the gods; thus, he could not escape in philosophic elevation involvement in the problem these afflictive creations posed. The poet in The Court of Fancy becomes a captive of his faculty of creation, incapable of escaping its delusive effects. The poem closes with a desperate prayer for release from the vision. The poet hopes that judgment or some other power might intervene to limit the constant mutation of fancy. Yet in the body of the poem he indicated that there is no heaven to call upon other

than that depicted on Fancy's dome. Godfrey leaves the prayer unanswered, the poet unreleased at verse's end.

In Godfrey's hands the neoclassical doctrine of the poet's being a maker and his poetry a creation analogous to God's takes a dark turn. Addison's view that the capable imagination "has something in it like creation . . . [which] bestows a kind of existence, and draws up to the reader's view several objects which are not be found in being" is rendered dreadful. 28 Because some of these "several objects" are the gods themselves, the poet becomes culpable for the bad results of creation. Between the poet and his divine creations a paradoxical relationship exists, much like that between a dreamer and his dream; the poet enjoys ultimate creative potency, yet suffers powerlessness before the products of his creation. The ambivalent situation reflects the mixed nature of the human psyche. Godfrey offers no hope of escape from the human dilemma in any supernatural other. Nor does Godfrey attempt to inspire in his readers a sense of security in the natural order. Quite the contrary—throughout the poem he subverts the favorite emblem of Newtonian poetry, the "solar round," to symbolize the confusion of nature. He figures the circle of confusion repeatedly—in the dreamer's frustrated attempt to free himself from a forest's "intricate mazes round," in the poet's tossing of his eyes "wildly round" in the moment of his inspiration by Fancy, in the collapse of his vocation as poet as his eyes traverse the compass of pagan deities on Fancy's dome, in the revolution of his allegorized faculties from Fancy to Delusion. No firm axis exists in Godfrey's universe around which an orbit could stabilize. When Delusion supplants Fancy at the focus of the dome, her usurpation is marked by the spread of "amazement in the sky." The heavens, where a younger Godfrey discovered the "lucent argument" on behalf of providential order, had come unglued.

The latitude of thought permitted by Provost Smith's Anglican circle at the College of Philadelphia during the 1750s may have allowed Godfrey to venture into the terrifying regions beyond skepticism. Such liberty of thought, however, was not condoned at the

28 Joseph Addison, The Spectator, #421 (July 3, 1712).
next collegiate center to influence American letters—Princeton. There doctrines of Reformed Christianity instructed inquiry and constrained belletristic experiment. The constraints did not always conduce to good art. We can see the ill effects in Philip Freneau’s “The House of Night: A Vision,” a last major poem on night composed in colonial America.  

Freneau announced early in his poem that his task was to deal with nature’s negative aspect.

Let others draw from smiling skies their theme,
And tell of climes that boast unfading light,
I draw a darker scene, replete with gloom,
I sing the horrors of the House of Night. (p. 101)

Like Godfrey before him, Freneau discovered the dark aspect of nature in dream, where Fancy plays its “wild delusive part so well” and where “reason holds no sway.” Unfortunately the disorder of fancy proved so great that Freneau’s poem failed to cohere. Despite several revisions, the poet never resolved the contradiction of his thought about night. He wished on one hand to dramatize, as Blair and the other English graveyard poets did, Death’s sovereignty in the world. Freneau made death a character in the poem and allowed him a set speech:

“Six thousand years has sovereign sway been mine,
“None, but myself, can real glory claim;
“Great Regent of the world I reign’d alone,
“And princes trembled when my mandate came.

Freneau also wished to illustrate the Christian paradox, the death of Death. Yet since he wished to show this in terms of the Lucretian principle that “Death is no more than once unceasing change,” he could not represent that event in which death dies for Christians, the resurrection. Freneau offered in its place an allegory. Death is personified “and represented as on his dying bed.” Some bedside interviews allow Freneau to reflect on Death’s career of devastation and murder. There is also occasion for moralizing on the inhumanity of

undertakers and the viciousness of George III. After Death has expired and been escorted from this world amidst a picturesque, gothic funeral train, the visionary apparatus disappears, and the poem offers several philosophical reflections. The reflections are meant to instill in the reader a resignation in the face of death, by observing that "New forms arise, while other forms decay, / Yet all is Life throughout creation's range."

One can see in Freneau's contradictory impulses the fundamental tension that troubled American poets throughout the eighteenth century. He wished to present an intuition of man's constitutional inadequacy in the face of nature—his subjection to death and his own unreasonable nature. Yet he wished to recognize the promise, extended by natural philosophy, that nature manifested an order that could ultimately redeem man from the disorder of his own nature. Ralph, Lewis, Godfrey, and Freneau encountered this promise to deny its worth—Ralph and Godfrey on psychological grounds, Lewis and Freneau on grounds psycho-spiritual. Freneau may have viewed the mutability of nature as the sign of the dominion of Life in creation. This mutability, however, provided little consolation, for

Too nearly join'd to sickness, toils and pains,
(Perhaps for former crimes imprison'd here)
True to itself the immortal soul remains,
And seeks new mansions in the starry sphere.

Freneau left man gazing heavenwards, yearning for his spiritual home in the stars.

Freneau in later years would overcome his gnostic yearning for the heavens. Swedenborg's theology would make him believe that divine truths had irradiated "our world below" and that, "Enlighten'd Reason proves that God is ONE; / As that, concent'red in itself, a sphere, / Illumes all nature with its radiance here."30 Night, too, would lose its negative import for him. "Thou are the time of reflection, favorable to the poet and philosopher . . . Fools, and idiots, and men destitute of ideas, only shun thee."31 Finally, the disordered imagination itself

would be redeemed when the individual bound his desires by the corporate will of the public.

The act of revolution freed fancy from its self-serving indulgence. The American Revolution, however, did not free every poet from anxiety about the place of man in nature. Nor did the rising glory of America dispel the glooms of night for American belletteristic writers. If anything, the night piece grew more popular in the 1780s and 1790s. John Blair Linn, a Philadelphian, adapted the genre to make it a vehicle for revolutionary self-understanding, identifying the violence of the nation’s birth with dark, Ossianic vitality. Other poets (William Smith, the lawyer, of Philadelphia; William H. Brown of Massachusetts) cultivated the nocturnal mood as a gesture of aesthetic sensibility. The vast popularity of Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751) and William Shenstone’s various elegies (1764) prepared readers for the efflorescence of nocturnal verse after the distractions of war had ceased. In the hands of minor poets (Joseph Hazard of Litchfield, for example), the troublesome theme of human incapacity shrunk to decorative melancholy. The sublimity and pessimism of Ralph, Lewis, Godfrey, and Freneau would be vitiated in a fashion for poetic gothicism. One must look to prose—to the fictions of Philadelphian Charles Brockden Brown and Baltimorean John Neal—to discover a profound exploration of the meaning of darkness, the symbolism of night.