

THE PRIVATE LIFE  
DOROTHY WORDSWORTH'S JOURNALS

By RACHEL MAYER BROWNSTEIN

Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals have been read mostly by William Wordsworthians: they tell something about how her brother wrote poems, and they describe some of the things he wrote poems about in paragraphs which are commonly presented to classes as the raw material the poet reworked, like a photograph of the bridge at Arles. They also contain minutiae for those who are curious about William's significant but not quite scandalous relationship with his sister, and tidbits about mighty poets: Coleridge liked to eat rose hips, and it was Dorothy, not William, who painted the walls of Dove Cottage. There are many lovely descriptions of nature, and some years ago a professor lifted a few, had them set as it were poetically, and published them as Dorothy Wordsworth's poems.<sup>1</sup> More frequently professors praise her as a prose stylist, meaning she wrote good sentences; some of these are occasionally extracted from the Journals and anthologized for students of English Romanticism, who will observe that she shared many of her brother's enthusiasms and preoccupations.

In a sense this is as it should be. Dorothy Wordsworth did spend her whole life as William's satellite, and her journals do seem to be an uneven collection of fragments, capsule summaries of whole dull days ("We walked in the morning to Easedale. In the evening we had cheerful letters from Coleridge and Sara" [p. 81])<sup>2</sup> alternating with ex-

<sup>1</sup> *Poetry of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Hyman Eigerman (New York, 1940).

<sup>2</sup> Quotations are from the standard edition, *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1941), unless otherwise noted, page references are to volume I, which contains the Alfoxden Journal (1798) and the Grasmere Journal (1800-1802).

haustive descriptions of small matters. They were never published in her lifetime, and the one she did begin to prepare for publication—the *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland (A.D. 1803)*—is less interesting than the earlier diaries written when she was living with William before his marriage, first at Alfoxden and then at Dove Cottage in Grasmere. It would seem perverse, in a period that revels in revelations, to “discover” Dorothy Wordsworth, whose details are so rarely of the kind called intimate. Yet she is interesting because of our curiosity about how people really spend their days, what really is important to them, the earnest, puzzled, unimaginative, inchoate but not idle curiosity that makes people look for the meaning of life in talk shows and interviews and confessional essays and published diaries. Her only subject is her private life: not what happened to her and her friends, or between them, but the single phenomena—the landscape, usually, the weather and light and the country people—that she observed and attempted to understand by describing them. She wrote things down in order to comprehend them, to keep them—for a lot of reasons.

Beginning a journal when her brothers William and John have gone off for a time from Grasmere, she writes in an unusually confessional mood: “I resolved to write a journal of the time till W. and J. return, and I set about keeping my resolve, because I will not quarrel with myself, and because I shall give Wm. pleasure by it when he comes home again” (p. 37). William was to gain profit as well as pleasure, for Dorothy was devoted to his ambition. “He asks me,” she writes obediently later on, “to set down the story of Barbara Wilkinson’s turtle dove” (p. 104). He valued her perceptions, and they both wanted them recorded against the time the poet would make them his. Sometimes the scheme backfired:

After tea I read to William that account of the little boy belonging to the tall woman, and an unlucky thing it was, for he could not escape from those very words, and so he could not write the poem. He left it unfinished, and went tired to bed. In our walk from Rydale he had got warmed with the subject. and had half cast the poem. (p. 123)

Their relationship at its most equitable, although not its most artistically successful, produced collaboration:

*April 17th.* . . . I saw a robin chasing a scarlet butterfly this morning.

[April] 18th, Sunday. I lay in bed late, again a mild grey morning, with rising vapours. We sate in the orchard. William wrote the poem on *The Robin and the Butterfly*. I went to drink tea at Luff's. . . . William met me at Rydale. . . . We sate up late. He met me with the conclusion of the poem of the Robin. I read it to him in bed. We left out some lines. (pp. 134-35)

But Dorothy's Journal is not simply a notebook for William's use, any more than it is merely a record of her days. By the way it orders matters, every diary creates a world that is different from the "real" one. In a letter to a friend, Dorothy sketched her life at Grasmere:

With respect to passing our time I [can] [not?] tell you how we pass it because though our employ [ments are] not very various yet they are irregular. We walk [every] day and at all times of the day, we row upon the wate[r], and in the summer sit a great part of our time under the apple trees of the orchard or in a wood close by the lake-side. William writes verses, John goes a fishing, and we read the books we have and such as we can procure. I read German, partly as preparatory to translating, but I am unfit for the task alone, and William is better employed so I do not know when it will turn to much account. If Wms name rises amongst the Book-sellers we shall have no occasion for it. We often have our friends calling in upon us.<sup>3</sup>

Things seem much more even, leisurely, and convivial than one would guess from the Journals: in the Journal world a walk is an event, a day's whole value is the hour spent looking at a lake, and the cement between days, money or anxieties or growing relationships, expectations, or desires, is most of the time left out. Mixed dull and bright details amid spaces and silences present a person always strenuously choosing what may be significant, discriminating among the facts of life. Her letters are those of a rather ordinary, chatty woman. Apparently she talked too fast and moved awkwardly among people; her best self was not social.<sup>4</sup> The life her Journal records is the private one of a woman sifting details for meaning. Bareness and intensity characterize the Journal: impressions, views, anecdotes are recorded as if out of con-

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth to Jane Marshall, September 10 and 12, 1800, in *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787-1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed., rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), p. 300.

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, ed. David Masson (London, 1896), II, 229-302, for a sketch of Dorothy Wordsworth.

text, with rare conclusions drawn. There is a strong undertow, meanwhile, of the humdrum as she tells the most trivial things—she had, William said, an “exquisite regard for common things” (*The Prelude*, 14.262)—and then again nothing, really, about her days. A fascinating truth lives in the alternating flat and excited fragments, in the fidelity to the separate, solitary experience, and the pervasive, conflicting impulse to find unity and coherence.

One might be tempted to dismiss the fact that the Journals are for the most part a clutter of separate phenomena, to conclude that that is simply a necessary consequence of the journal form, but Dorothy insists on separating and particularizing. She collects, for instance, natural juxtapositions:

*February 1st.* About two hours before dinner, set forward towards Mr. Bartholemew’s. The wind blew so keen in our faces that we felt ourselves inclined to seek the covert of the wood. There we had a warm shelter, gathered a burthen of large rotten boughs blown down by the wind of the preceding night. The sun shone clear, but all at once a heavy blackness hung over the sea. The trees almost *roared*, and the ground seemed in motion with the multitudes of dancing leaves, which made a rustling sound, distinct from that of the trees. Still the asses pastured in quietness under the hollies, undisturbed by these forerunners of the storm. The wind beat furiously against us as we returned. Full moon. She rose in uncommon majesty over the sea, slowly ascending through the clouds. Sat with the window open an hour in the moonlight. (p. 6)

She does not say how she felt, how a poet needs must feel, what she thought as she sat by the window; she simply, meticulously observes, and only her words and her rhythms, as they change, are clues to her personal responses. The absence of interpretation or explanation, her failure to connect, explicitly, her own feelings with what she observes and finds important enough to write down, is more startling in a passage written during her brother’s courtship of Mary Hutchinson, a hard time for her:

The ground covered with snow. Walked to T. Wilkinson’s and sent for letters. The woman brought me one from William and Mary. It was a sharp, windy night. Thomas Wilkinson came with me to Barton, and questioned me like a catechizer all the way. Every question was like the snapping of a little thread about my heart—I was so

full of thought of my half-read letter and other things. I was glad when he left me. Then I had time to look at the moon while I was thinking over my own thoughts. The moon travelled through the clouds, tinging them yellow as she passed along, with two stars near her, one larger than the other. These stars grew or diminished as they passed from, or went into, the clouds. At this time William, as I found the next day, was riding by himself between Middleham and Barnard Castle, having parted from Mary. (p. 130)

Dorothy chose not to spell out the earthly parallel to what she saw in the sky. Her reticence serves us well: the bold connection between the (same) man on horseback and the traveling moon is made as persuasively as in "Strange Fits of Passion," and the suggestion that Mary and Dorothy are like the two stars attending on the moon is effectively disturbing. With the observations that one is larger than the other and that the size of both is affected by the clouds which the moon for its part grandly dominates, "tinging them yellow as she passed along," Dorothy sketches her terrible, probably true perception of the shiftings and measurings that were going on as her brother made his choice. One does not want to know much more about all these things; perhaps it is a revelation of incest that the reader, magically made courteous, fears. And this odd absence of curiosity seems familiar: not only the details of moon and man on horseback in this passage remind us of "Strange Fits of Passion." The world of the Alfoxden-Grasmere Journals has the pellucid-elusive quality of the world of the Lucy poems. About Lucy and Dorothy, who if not identical were very closely related, we learn everything and nothing. Intimacy is out of the question, and so is concealment, and reticence is logical and right.

Sometimes the writer surprises us in a different way by leaving out her own feelings. Calmly writing about the contrasting textures of life, Dorothy Wordsworth in her dispassion seems to lack humanity: she observes "interesting groups of human creatures, the young frisking and dancing in the sun, the elder quietly drinking in the life and soul of the sun and air" (p. 12). The observer is a creature apart. No cloud of sympathy dims the details of the poverty she often describes; a lack of connectives, an uncertainty of sequence, and a catalogue of detail reveal the plight of her afflicted "human creatures" in an appalling light:

When William and I returned from accompanying Jones, we met an old man almost double. He had on a coat, thrown over his shoulders, above his waistcoat and coat. Under this he carried a bundle,

and had an apron on and a night-cap. His face was interesting. He had dark eyes and a long nose. John, who afterwards met him at Wytheburn, took him for a Jew. He was of Scotch parents, but had been born in the army. He had had a wife, and "a good woman, and it pleased God to bless us with ten children". All these were dead but one, of whom he had not heard for many years, a sailor. His trade was to gather leeches, but now leeches are scarce, and he had not strength for it. He lived by begging, and was making his way to Carlisle, where he should buy a few godly books to sell. He said leeches were very scarce, partly owing to this dry season, but many years they have been scarce—he supposed it owing to their being much sought after, that they did not breed fast, and were of slow growth. Leeches were formerly 2s. 6d. [per] 100; they are now 30s. He had been hurt in driving a cart, his leg broke, his body driven over, his skull fractured. He felt no pain till he recovered from his first insensibility. It was then late in the evening, when the light was just going away. (p. 63)

Dorothy's description proceeds, like her brother's, from the casual through the superficial to the terrible fixed economic and biological facts of the old man's life and finally to a strange dreamy coda. In "Resolution and Independence" the old man is admired for his endurance, and then he is brilliantly transformed into an emblem full of meaning:

The old Man still stood talking by my side;  
 But now his voice to me was like a stream  
 Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;  
 And the whole body of the Man did seem  
 Like one whom I had met with in a dream;  
 Or like a man from some far region sent,  
 To give me human strength, by apt admonishment.

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;  
 And hope that is unwilling to be fed;  
 Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;  
 And mighty Poets in their misery dead.  
 —Perplexed, and longing to be comforted,  
 My question eagerly did I renew,  
 "How is it that you live, and what is it you do?"

He with a smile did then his words repeat;  
 And said that, gathering leeches, far and wide  
 He travelled; stirring thus about his feet  
 The waters of the pools where they abide.

“Once I could meet with them on every side;  
 But they have dwindled long by slow decay;  
 Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may.”

While he was talking thus, the lonely place,  
 The old Man's shape, and speech—all troubled me:  
 In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace  
 About the weary moors continually,  
 Wandering about alone and silently.

The poem ends with the memory rather than the facts: the old man is remarkable and useful as he functions in the mind of the poet who has seen him. We must assume that Dorothy, because she kept a journal, was preoccupied with memory also; but the journal form, for one thing, does not breed speculation about tomorrow's version of what was seen today, or today's of yesterday's. One memorializes to forestall the possibility that memory will distort matters in transforming them. Dorothy's emphasis is always on how much one can see of what is going on, how much order one can impose on it while it happens. As she listened to the old man, Dorothy was interested in how much sense he himself could make of his condition. Her brother apparently telescoped the remark that leeches were “of slow growth” and the other details of the explanation into the rather opaque “slow decay.” Dorothy records the man's own ideas, what his mind makes of what his senses transmit. The last three sentences of her description are suggestively placed. The old man's past accident, so painful as to prevent him from feeling pain, is tacitly related to the less dramatic but more totally devastating tragedy of his life. Is his deadpan recital of biological facts and economic figures a kind of insensibility, or does it indicate mastery of his condition? She seems to suggest the fading light of the old man's days, of his vision, as she concludes that “It was then late in the evening, when the light was just going away.” The time to which “then” refers is uncertain; possibly the diarist means to suggest the ambiguities threatening to cloud her own clear recital of facts.

Sometimes Dorothy does not stop at quoting fragments, but borrows the language of the poor and uneducated for narrative, to convey the manner in which they try to organize and apprehend their lives. Her skill is impressive:

Aggy Fisher was talking with me on Monday morning, 21st of June, about her son. She went on—Old Mary Watson was at Goan's there when the child died. I had never seen her before since her son was

drowned last summer, "we were all in trouble and trouble opens folks' hearts". She began to tell about her daughter that's married to Leonard Holmes, how now that sickness is come upon him they are breaking down and failing in the world. Debts are coming in every day, and he can do nothing, and they fret and jar together. One day he came riding over to Grasmere—I wondered what was the matter, and I resolved to speak to him when he came back. He was as pale as a ghost, and he did not suffer the horse to gang quicker than a snail could crawl. He had come over in a trick of passion to auld Mary to tell her she might take her own again, her daughter and the bairns. Mary replied nobly (said Aggy) that she would not part man and wife, but that all should come together, and she would keep them while she had anything. Old Mary went to see them at Ambleside afterwards, and he begged her pardon. Aggy observed that they would never have known this sorrow, if it had pleased God to take him off suddenly. (p. 162)

Her respect for the people and their language is evident in the care she takes with it: how beautifully done this ennobled bit of gossip is! Dorothy's peasants are the only people in her *Journal* who have momentous experiences. They are at the mercy of God and accidents, but made wise by suffering and watching others suffer. She must have had a strong desire to leave a record of their obscure lives: her longest piece of writing on a single subject is a moving account of the tragic deaths of George and Sarah Green, a local couple who left numerous children.<sup>5</sup> The people with whom she shared tea and surely, in some cases, confidences—the Hutchinsons and the Coleridges, Loughs and Lloyds—impart no anecdotes or bits of wisdom to her pages. For the most part they occur simply as names, companions, incidental to the relationship between the journalist and the world she regards. Their problems and ideas are not proper subject matter for a journal which does not weigh alternative decisions or lives, or mull over relationships. In the world of the *Grasmere Journal* the events are these: fleeting impressions are caught in words, and complex feelings are broken down into the clear, separate, "real" phenomena that provoke them, and people try to make sense of what they perceive.

Dorothy characteristically isolates something significant between pauses; often, she slows her sentence rhythms to indicate a new dimension of sensibility, an increment of solemnity and meaning:

<sup>5</sup> *George and Sarah Green: A Narrative*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford, 1936).



Walked about the squire's grounds. Quaint waterfalls about, about which Nature was very successfully striving to make beautiful what art had deformed—ruins, hermitages, etc. etc. In spite of all these things, the dell romantic and beautiful, though everywhere planted with unnaturalised trees. Happily we cannot shape the huge hills, or carve out the valleys according to our fancy. (p. 15)

Went upon Helvellyn, glorious glorious sights. The sea at Cartmel. The Scotch mountains beyond the sea to the right. Whiteside large, and round, and very soft, and green, behind us. (p. 78)

William is gone to Keswick. Mary went with him to the top of the Rays. She is returned, and is now sitting near me by the fire. It is a breathless, grey day, that leaves the golden woods of autumn quiet in their own tranquillity, stately and beautiful in their decaying; the lake is a perfect mirror. (p. 184)

She and William were great walkers who must have stopped often at a sight that caused them intense feeling. Geoffrey Hartman's study of Wordsworth's poetry begins with a sketch of the poet as a paused traveler confronted by a striking sight which, in melting or nearly melting away under the intensity of his gaze, leads him to confront himself.<sup>6</sup> Lacking her brother's power to see, or at least to write about, the process of experiencing, Dorothy like him tends to pause before suggesting another, a more transcendent realm which echoes to and from feeling. What most often causes her to stop and seek perfect words are water, moonlight, and reflections or shadows. Through these most Romantic phenomena she often gleams intimations of a visionary world, where life is more intense. In the following painstaking description of winds on water, she strains toward absolute preciseness as if a perfect record of what she saw would perfectly capture an uncertain immanent meaning:

We amused ourselves for a long time in watching the breezes, some as if they came from the bottom of the lake, spread in a circle, brushing along the surface of the water, and growing more delicate, as it were thinner, and of a *paler* colour till they died away. Others spread out like a peacock's tail, and some went right forward this way and that in all directions. The lake was still where these breezes were not, but they made it all alive. (p. 105)

By the way it proceeds the passage suggests that movement can become

<sup>6</sup> *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven, 1964)

life: the breezes first simply "came," then "spread," then more actively are seen "brushing," as if organically "growing," until they "died." The comparison to the spreading of a peacock's tail subtly endows the breezes with will, preparing for the conclusion that they *made* the lake "alive."

When she is inspired to write otherwise—to cease leaning on little definite facts and contrasts—she is less successful:

As we came along Ambleside vale in the twilight it was a grave evening. There was something in the air that compelled me to serious thought—the hills were large, closed in by the sky. It was nearly dark when I parted from the Lloyds, that is night was come on, and the moon was overcast. But, as I climbed Moss, the moon came out from behind a mountain mass of black clouds. O, the unutterable darkness of the sky, and the earth below the moon! and the glorious brightness of the moon itself! There was a vivid sparkling streak of light at this end of Rydale water, but the rest was very dark, and Loughrigg Fell and Silver How were white and bright, as if they were covered with hoar frost. The moon retired again, and appeared and disappeared several times before I reached home. Once there was no moonlight to be seen but upon the island-house and the promontory of the island where it stands. "That needs must be a holy place", etc. etc. I had many very exquisite feelings, and when I saw this lowly Building in the waters, among the dark and lofty hills, with that bright, soft light upon it, it made me more than half a poet. I was tired when I reached home, and could not sit down to reading, and tried to write verses, but alas! I gave up expecting William, and went soon to bed. (pp. 126-27)

A whole poet would have talked about those "many very exquisite feelings"; that reticence which so often charms the reader disappoints him here. The world strikes the writer, who cannot manage to think herself a poet and who furthermore is mostly engrossed in waiting up for her beloved, as more poetical than she, and it defeats her. It was not always so. When she was not thinking of the superiority of verse and William, Dorothy Wordsworth could make moonlight and water beautifully her own with a homely, remarkable image: "The moon shone like herrings in the water" (p. 70).

Illusions exalted her to insight. A careful, even sometimes tediously obsessive observer of real things, Dorothy valued "unreal" or contradictory appearances deriving from them. In these Journals there are pervasive traces of the theme or paradox of her brother's poetry: the tangible

and the spiritual, the natural and the imaginary, the ordinary and the sublime connect more and less convincingly, provocatively. Reflections, shadows, and insubstantial mists are always most *alive*: "The shapes of the mist, slowly moving along, exquisitely beautiful; passing over the sheep they almost seemed to have more of life than those quiet creatures" (p. 11).<sup>7</sup> One is reminded of the "asses pastured in quietness under the hollies" she described a few days earlier, also animals that seemed less alive than air currents. Animals recur as foils to the other, more spiritual world suggested by the elements, the light, or the weather:

As I lay down on the grass, I observed the glittering silver line on the ridge of the backs of the sheep, owing to their situation respecting the sun, which made them look beautiful, but with something of strangeness, like animals of another kind, as if belonging to a more splendid world. (p. 140)

She collects instances of reflections, illusory similitudes. One reminds her of another: "The sheep on the island, reflected in the water, like the grey deer we saw in Gowbarrow Park" (p. 134). She is interested in the visual phenomena which make the world seem less tangible, fleshly, and mortal: "We watched the crows at a little distance from us become white as silver as they flew in the sunshine, and when they went still further, they looked like shapes of water passing over the green fields" (p. 134). An airy or watery vision seems monitory, indicative of a different spiritual world that is mysteriously linked to the real one:

As we were going along we were stopped at once, at the distance perhaps of 50 yards from our favourite birch tree. It was yielding to the gusty wind with all its tender twigs, the sun shone upon it, and it glanced in the wind like a flying sunshiny shower. It was a tree in shape, with stem and branches, but it was like a Spirit of water. The sun went in, and it resumed its purplish appearance, the twigs still yielding to the wind, but not so visibly to us. The other birch trees that were near it looked bright and chearful, but it was a creature by its own self among them. (p. 82)

<sup>7</sup> Compare this, from her *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*: "We walked up to the house and stood some minutes watching the swallows that flew about restlessly, and flung their shadows upon the sun-bright walls of the old building; the shadows glanced and twinkled, interchanged and crossed each other, expanded and shrunk up, appeared and disappeared every instant; as I observed to Wm. and Coleridge, seeming more like living things than the birds themselves" (pp. 195-96).

Animated, unique, resembling an alien element, paradoxical in its essence ("a flying sunshiny shower," "a Spirit of water," "creature by its own self"), the birch tree might have been planted among the "hedgerows, hardly hedgerows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild" near Tintern Abbey. It is one of those phenomena which dramatically arrest the attention and direct it to "something far more deeply interfused" which inheres in "all living things" and may be released by the imagination to become a greater reality.

As illusion is vital in the Journal world of carefully noted "real" appearances, so melting is the countervalue to detached precise discriminating. Dorothy Wordsworth several times uses the curious image of melted gemstones.<sup>8</sup> And often she tells of vigils that ended in ecstasy when the study of nature and the search for words melted away, and everything melted together:

We lay upon the sloping turf. Earth and sky were so lovely that they melted our very hearts. The sky to the north was of a chastened yet rich yellow, fading into pale blue, and streaked and scattered over with steady islands of purple, melting away into shades of pink. It made my heart almost feel like a vision to me. (p. 161)

We lay sidelong upon the turf, and gazed on the landscape till it melted into more than natural loveliness. (p. 10)

She writes of this same scene that it is "magnificent . . . , *curiously* spread out for even minute inspection, though so extensive that the mind is afraid to calculate its bounds" (p. 10). Thirty-three years later, on June 7, 1831, the young Elizabeth Barrett described a vista similarly in her Journal: "My mind seemed spread north south east & west over the surface of those extended lands: and, to gather it up again into its usual compass, was an effort."<sup>9</sup> Both ladies were distressed, one suspects, by what they felt as the demands of expansiveness; both were denizens of a tiny hedgerowed England. If anything, Dorothy Wordsworth,

<sup>8</sup> "[The] purple waves brighter than precious stones, for ever melting away upon the sands" (p. 174). "It was like what I should suppose an underground cave or temple to be, with a dripping or moist roof, and the moonlight entering in upon it by some means or other, and yet the colours were more like the colours of melted gems" (pp. 277-78). "Never shall I forget the first view of the stream of the Rhine from the bank, and between the side openings of the bridge—rapid in motion, pure, bright and green as liquid emeralds!—and wherever the water dashed against tree, stone, or pillar of the bridge, the sparkling and the whiteness of the foam, melting into, and blended with, the green, can hardly be imagined by any one who has not seen the Rhine" (*Journal of a Tour on the Continent* [1820], II, 88)

<sup>9</sup> *Diary by E.B.B.: The Unpublished Diary of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1831-1832*, ed. P. Kelley and R. Hudson (Athens, Ohio, 1969), p. 7.

"afraid" to extend her vision in the first place, seems from this to have been the more unregenerately narrow. The Journals she wrote on the Continent—including the *Journal of Visit to Hamburgh, etc.* of 1798—and in Scotland reveal a maiden English traveler, suspicious, scared, nosy, and homesick. She clucks about dirt and manners and the size of rooms and the lack of bells and the price of food and its quality. And indefatigably, in the rocky, barren highlands of Scotland, she seeks out nooks in which she can build a fantasy cottage to be happy ever after with William and flowers; and when nooks and islands are lacking, a picturesque Scotsman, wrapped cozily in a plaid, pleases her by lending a requisite lie to a harsh, alien scene. In part this is simply the fashion of the time, workaday Romanticism, and in part it is spinsterish and insular, the less attractive side of her personality. She is more to our taste when she excitedly glimpses a freer, less tidy, and less tangible world:

The night was wild. There was a strange mountain lightness, when we were at the top of the White Moss. I have often observed it there in the evenings, being between the two valleys. There is more of the sky there than any other place. It has a strange effect sometimes along with the obscurity of evening or night. It seems almost like a peculiar *sort* of light. (pp. 108-109)

At home in the security of Grasmere she could best tolerate the insecurity of ecstasy:

Grasmere looked so beautiful that my heart was almost melted away. (p. 50)

When we passed through the village of Wensley my heart was melted away with dear recollections—the bridge, the little water-spout, the steep hill, the church. They are among the most vivid of my own inner visions, for they were the first objects that I saw after we were left to ourselves, and had turned our whole hearts to Grasmere as a home in which we were to rest. (p. 180)

One hears sad retrospective accents of farewell in that passage, which was written after Dorothy's return to Grasmere with the newly married William and Mary. Mary's presence changed her home, and after 1802 Dorothy wrote only about unfamiliar places in travel journals a good deal less unique than what she wrote when "we were left to ourselves."

The Alfoxden-Grasmere Journal contains a skeletal story of Doro-

thy's and William's perfect intimacy, his unexplained marriage and her wrenching loss, and finally the queer peace the three Wordsworths made together. Because it is told in rare and muted bits the story of Dorothy's love is extraordinarily touching:

Now for my walk. I *will* be busy. I *will* look well, and be well when he comes back to me. O the Darling! Here is one of his bitten apples. I can hardly find in my heart to throw it into the fire. (p. 119)

After dinner we made a pillow of my shoulder—I read to him and my Beloved slept. (p. 125)

It is about 10 o'clock, a quiet night. The fire flutters, and the watch ticks. I hear nothing else save the breathing of my Beloved, and he now and then pushes his book forward, and turns over a leaf. (p. 128)

When they were about to leave for the Hutchinson home and the wedding there, Dorothy wrote frantically of Dove Cottage as if she were never to return:

O, beautiful place! Dear Mary, William. The horse is come—Friday morning—so I must give over. William is eating his broth. I must prepare to go. The swallows, I must leave them, the well, the garden, the roses, all. Dear creatures!! they sang last night after I was in bed—seemed to be singing to one another, just before they settled to rest for the night. Well, I must go. Farewell. (p. 168)

Then, excess of emotion gives way to a more moving self-control:

On Monday, 4th October 1802, my brother William was married to Mary Hutchinson. I slept a good deal of the night, and rose fresh and well in the morning. At a little after 8 o'clock I saw them go down the avenue towards the church. William had parted from me upstairs. When they were absent my dear little Sara prepared the breakfast. I kept myself as quiet as I could, but when I saw the two men running up the walk, coming to tell us it was over, I could stand it no longer, and threw myself on the bed, where I lay in stillness, neither hearing or seeing anything till Sara came upstairs to me, and said, "They are coming". This forced me from the bed where I lay, and I moved, I knew not how, straight forward, faster than my strength could carry me, till I met my beloved William, and fell upon his bosom. (p. 176)

They came back together to Grasmere: on the way, "Wm. fell asleep, lying upon my breast, and I upon Mary" (p. 181). Dorothy wrote in her Journal for a few months much as she had done before the wedding, but it ends abruptly with a passage written five days after she made this childlike resolution: "I will take a nice Calais Book, and *will* for the future write regularly and, if I can, legibly; so much for this my resolution on *Tuesday* night, January 11th, 1803" (p. 188). As usual, she knew better than she thought she did: the Journal ends on time, with perfect dramatic propriety, after finishing the story and suggesting how all would live ever after.

One is tempted to speculate that Dorothy Wordsworth did not fall apart when her brother married because of those qualities she exhibits in her Journal: a steady hold on real details, an ability to take a rather distant view of human events, to keep things separate and precise. Her respect for the moments in her days implies not only that they were precious because spent with William, but also that Dorothy was committed to the process, the business, of living as most people are devoted to a goal they see at its end. It is not altogether fair to conclude that she gave up a life of her own for her brother's sake. If any literary ambition she might have had shrank in the shadow of William's, at the same time his shadow nourished her and this book.<sup>10</sup>

On Tuesday, June 1, 1802, Dorothy Wordsworth, a very short woman, wrote ingenuously about a flower:

The columbine was growing upon the rocks; here and there a solitary plant, sheltered and shaded by the tufts and bowers of trees. It

<sup>10</sup> These days, of course, Dorothy is talked about, along with Alice James, as a talented sister who automatically deferred to male siblings. Much earlier De Quincey speculated that Dorothy would have been better off if she had published and engaged in the business of being a literary lady. He observes that the profession of literature is the only one open to men and women alike. Writing with the knowledge of her tragic physical and then mental deterioration after an illness which struck her at forty-seven, he says that professional cares would have made Dorothy look to the future with salutary effect (*Collected Writings*, II, 300). Certainly Dorothy suffered terribly in her last years, and possibly that was because she had lived so dependently, making—and indeed having—little that was specifically hers. Her relationship with her brother must have been involved in her lack of productivity and perhaps also in her decline, as it certainly was in her good work during the good years.

On the subject of Dorothy's amateurism, it is interesting to note de Selincourt's comment about her revision of the *Journal of the Tour Made in Scotland*: "in preparing it for press Dorothy submitted it to far too drastic a revision. In her desire to make it, as she thought, more suitable for the general public, she removed from it many of those intimate personal touches to which it owes so much of its value, whilst at the same time she 'wrote it up', giving it here and there a pomposity of phrasing which is a poor exchange for the simplicity and directness of the earlier text" (Preface to *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, I, xii)

is a graceful slender creature, a female seeking retirement, and growing freest and most graceful where it is most alone. I observed that the more shaded plants were always the tallest. (p. 151)

She does not, of course, make the connection, but one thinks of the Lucy who was likened to "A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye," and of her counterpart. Did Dorothy see in the "female" columbine a version of herself, who sought a protected retirement not in the service of any goal or task but simply to grow privately, free and graceful, as tall as possible? She made no usual girl's progress from father to husband, remaining constant instead to one brother, beside whom she briefly flourished and then, apparently contented, just lived. During her four best years she wrote a unique chronicle of quiet days, which grew through those days by simple accretion, as organically as anything written can grow. In it, the homely events that make and delimit a tiny, tame life are distinguished as if to affirm their solidity. Among them she records perceptions that expand into greater meaning—glimpses of reflections and illusions—insights into the boundaries of sublunary life. Nature stirs her to wonder and to words in an attempt to apprehend it before it dissolves into time; she watches it carefully for signs of the seam between reality and illusion, weighing fact and metaphor. Unambitious, she rarely organizes quantities of data, and for the most part fragment follows fragment. The journal form, unpretentious and dogged, loose but self-limiting, unfinished, with the smell of the private writing room forever about it, is admirably suited to what Dorothy Wordsworth had to say.

*Brooklyn College*  
*City University of New York*



