“MORE THAN HALF A POET”:
VOCATIONAL PHILANTHROPY
AND DOROTHY WORDSWORTH’S
GRASMERE JOURNALS

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The way criticism has treated Dorothy Wordsworth has all to do with the way she represents herself, her writing, and her brother in her journals. Scholars have labored to understand the function of the Grasmere Journal and of “Dorothy Wordsworth” as a representation of nineteenth-century womanhood. Whether characterizing her as a domestic subject, novice writer or helpmate, scholarship has focused primarily on her failure to realize herself, develop her talent, or establish her own home. We perceive Dorothy Wordsworth as William did, and therefore draw many parallels between them: we look at the accuracy of Dorothy’s “real sketches” which William uses to create his poetry; the “subverted genius” who allowed her devotion to William to subvert her own creative powers; the “domestic dome” which encompasses Dorothy’s material labors and William’s literary endeavors. Dorothy Wordsworth has also been used as an example of an early nineteenth-century woman with a suffocated unconscious who either could not—due to social sanctions—or would not—due to psychological sanctions—compete with her brother William in the public sphere of literary discourse; she thus subverted the development of her literary talents by nurturing his. Other scholars have looked at her writing as an exercise in the “rhetoric of feeling” in which her writing actively asserts her own identity in defiance of William’s portrayal of her. However, reading the Grasmere Journal as a record of what Dorothy Wordsworth failed to do, of what she helped William to do, or even reading the journal as a covert act of defiance, misses its most important productive function; Dorothy Wordsworth produces a function for women’s writing, as well as a way of reading, which still shapes the critical evaluation of her and her texts.

I am not claiming that these readings are incorrect; in fact, they are the correct effect her journals sought to produce. While all of these analyses attempt to understand the feminine “experience” of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an important connection is missing between her writing (the journals) and her life (the apparent content of the journals). Attention is not paid to the way the relationship between genre and what Dorothy

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Wordsworth chooses as the “real” of her life produce “Dorothy Wordsworth”—the benevolent, domestic model of womanhood who is the ideal collaborator for William. My argument is that Dorothy Wordsworth’s writing participates in what I call “vocational” philanthropy—a special calling to women to “love mankind.” Her journal exemplifies the “philanthropy” of spirit to which women were to ascribe. Philanthropy is meant here in the eighteenth-century sense: to “love mankind,” to show “practical benevolence towards men in general”; the primary definition is one of benevolent feeling, not necessarily action (OED 774). Using the paradigm of vocational philanthropy, we can understand both the generic function of the journal and the benevolent model produced by it: they inscribe the necessity for continual individual improvement of the poor, of home, of discourse. In the Grasmere Journal, we see the result of this philanthropic ideal. Dorothy Wordsworth maintains a superior benevolent, middle-class position in relationship to the laboring classes, whose appearance weaves through the entries, because she can articulate their level of material needs and determine their worthiness for personal amelioration. Similarly, she maintains her value to her brother in their household and in the Wordsworth circle, because of her inscription of her continual improvement of their home and his manuscripts. The Grasmere Journal serves as a record of a feminine, benevolent, middling-class subjectivity and of her philanthropic efforts, both of which are structured by an ideology of improvement. This subject position and her articulation of her actions enables her to draw distinctions between different levels of literacy for the poor and for women, and between the “georgic” of domestic production, which at its center includes writing, and the aesthetic production of literature—a professional endeavor. Unceasing improvement is ensured by the construction, within the journal genre, of gender and class limits, enabling aesthetic and professional intervention to complete, and therefore improve, Dorothy Wordsworth, William Wordsworth, their writing, their home and the poor of Grasmere.

Thus, Dorothy Wordsworth’s writing is an interesting extension of the notion of literacy as a form of social control, which manifests itself in the private realm but with public consequences (Armstrong 91): both domestic supervision and philanthropic work have become discursive work, and are seen as the domain of the feminine. These are considered “labors of love” rather than labors necessary to ensure the survival of the family. Thus, Dorothy Wordsworth’s discursive work is positioned against the material work of the laboring classes and, conversely, the “professional” or aesthetic work of her brother’s literary endeavors. While many other scholars have commented that benevolence is “natural” to the middle-class woman’s private sphere, it is that “naturalness” which is questioned. The Grasmere Journal is a site of philanthropic intervention, positioning feminine writing as social practice: literacy is a special feminine “duty” that links together supervision of others, supervision of the household and self-supervision. This duty reinforces the social function of “improvement” of the “self” particular to the literary culture that shapes Romanticism.

In order to highlight how unceasing improvement is a product of both the journal genre and a site of feminine benevolent intervention, I will examine the social function of philanthropy present in the Grasmere Journal. Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal discloses the benevolent ideology of “Lady Bountiful,” but it is transformed because of the way she privately practices philanthropy, and because of the medium through which we come to know about it—her journals. The journal defines behaviors, values, acts which will “improve” individuals, perhaps not monetarily but morally. This kind of “vocational”
philanthropy exists in contrast to the forms of “associated” philanthropy of the mid-eighteenth century which, by investing large sums of capital, built hospitals, prisons, workhouses and schools. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, “self-help” philanthropy offered opportunities for women to enter a growing arena of public involvement. Philanthropy was practiced as a private, and even discursive act, rather than as a joint-stock endeavor. The Grasmere Journal is evidence—a record if you will—of this relatively new function of philanthropy and forms a discourse which helps to define it. The “private” genre of the journal demonstrates philanthropy as an internalized, “natural” part of benevolent, middle-class, feminine identity. Thus, individual amelioration is at the heart of private philanthropy—both for the philanthropist and her object of improvement.

To D. Wordsworth, social amelioration becomes her “vocation”: her feelings, duties, and beliefs all correspond to what she thinks is her special feminine capacity to rationalize, sympathize, and normalize the social sphere she supervises. But this social sphere extends beyond the Wordsworths’ circle to include townspeople, servants, and beggars that dot the landscape of the Lake District.

These laborers and beggars are not coincidental to the content of the Grasmere Journal; they are not, in other words, merely part of the scenery on which D. Wordsworth comments. These people enable her to play a particular “philanthropic” role, one that appears seamless within the journals—so seamless, in fact, that few scholars have commented upon why these people appear, except to note where W. Wordsworth has taken the “beggars” or other transients out of D. Wordsworth’s original (con)text and used them for his poetic material. However, the passages which deal with the “social meaning” and effect of poverty on people, specifically, are key to understanding the triad of a specific kind of feminine subjectivity—one that exhibits familial love, charity and domesticity based on class difference.

Take, for example, the May 27, 1800 excerpt from the Grasmere Journals:

On Tuesday, May 27th, a very tall woman, tall much beyond the measure of tall women, called at the door. She had on a very long brown cloak and a very white cap, without bonnet; her face was excessively brown, but it had plainly once been fair. She led a little bare-footed child about 2 years old by the hand, and said her husband, who was a tinker, was gone before with the other children. I gave her a piece of bread. Afterwards on my road to Ambleside . . . I saw her husband sitting by the roadside. . . . The man did not beg. I passed on and about 1/4 of a mile further I saw two boys before me, one about 10, the other about 8. . . . They were wild figures, not very ragged, but without shoes and stockings. . . . They continued at play till I drew very near, and then they addressed me with the begging cant and the whining voice of sorrow. I said “I served your mother this morning.” (The Boys were so like the woman who had called at the door that I could not be mistaken.) “O!” says the elder, “you could not serve my mother for she’s dead, and my father’s on at the next town—he’s a potter.” I persisted in my assertion, and that I would give them nothing. Says the elder, “Come, let’s away,” and away they flew like lightning. (47)

While the boys beg at Matthew Harrison’s house, D. Wordsworth confirms her suspicion that the boys had been lying because she “met in the street the mother driving her asses; in the two panniers of one of which were the two little children, whom she was chiding and threatening with a wand” (47). This passage highlights the degree to which D. Wordsworth can distinguish between “beggars” who are truthful but hungry, and those who are simply lying and trying to manipulate the privileged people in the Wordsworths’ position. She claims that the “very tall woman” was “without bonnet” indicating her poor condition, and that she had “once been fair” but now was “excessively brown” leading one to conclude that she is a transient. She does not mention whether this woman actually
“asked” for a piece of bread or some charity, and this seems important to D. Wordsworth. For the boys, the woman’s children, actually asked for charity, characterized by D. Wordsworth as the “begging cant and whining voice of sorrow.” Based on this puerile display and her description of the boys as “wild” but obviously poor—“without shoes and stockings”—she decides not to “serve” the boys by stating that she “served” their mother this morning; her duty had been done. Her duty is not necessarily the act of giving food or money, but the decision as to whom to give food or money. This decision, of course, is an act of power. As Dorice Williams Elliott has pointed out, in the “economy of charity” women maintain a position of power and authority only if the “poor remain poor” (186).

D. Wordsworth’s decision maintains her commitment to helping the poor—the mother was “served”—but is equally committed to keeping a “paternalistic” or, rather, maternalistic relationship towards the poor.

The decision is based on the “inarticulation” of needs, rather than the “articulation” of them. Inarticulation, in the Grasmere Journal, does not signify a denial of needs, but higher moral integrity, which proves that you deserve what you did not ask for. It is much like the Shepherd’s paradox in Hannah More’s moral tale The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain, which portrays a self-reliant, good shepherd who deserves help because he does not “think” he needs it. Thus, a distinction is made between people who deserve to have their needs satisfied and those who do not; this decision is based on whether and in what ways those needs are articulated. In the passage above, distinctions are stated in terms of growth: the mature, appropriate behavior of the poor adults receives D. Wordsworth’s attention and reward; but the immature and boisterous children receive her indignation. But this also creates a cultural distinction between those of the middle classes and those of the lower classes: the middle classes can desire things that exceed material necessities; for instance, the Wordsworths can set up a household at Grasmere, have enough food to give away, and have the time to attend to “luxuries” such as personal hygiene and decorous refinements such as wearing a bonnet. The lower orders, however, must attend to more basic gratifications just as the beggars roam the landscape struggling to satisfy “real” material needs. The distinction is borne out in the description of the beggars, which highlights what is “missing,” according to D. Wordsworth’s perspective, from that which should normally be present—a bonnet, shoes, stockings, food, fair skin. She thus constructs the “beggars” as the antithesis to middle-class life, but who, nevertheless, must be integrated into its cultural and discursive landscape.

D. Wordsworth’s journal entry goes beyond simply accepting beggars as a “natural” part of the landscape, or turning them into aesthetic objects designed to evoke pathos as W. Wordsworth does in his poem Beggars. The passage is, on the one hand, one example within the Grasmere Journal of a retelling, or cataloguing, of D. Wordsworth’s charitable acts to those beneath her in economic and social status whom she deems worthy; that worthiness is based on the correct kinds of “articulation” by the lower orders and whether their behavior evokes the correct kind of sympathy from her. D. Wordsworth’s narration of her rational ability to discern truthful needs and her possession of the moral integrity to decide to act is designed to testify to her own feminine virtue. But on the other hand, the passage constructs significant class distinctions that are based on cultural perceptions of the effects of poverty. Because the genre of the journal has a “real” referent, one that is not transformed by the imagination into a “higher,” aesthetic perception of consciousness (a gendered “inarticulation” that will be discussed below), the journal can describe
distinctions between an inarticulate class, or one that does not articulate their needs properly, and a literary culture in which writing, reading, and propriety in conversation are central to social and economic life. Thus, for D. Wordsworth, feeling charitable, as well as the giving of charity, has at its center distinctions of class and gender based on literacy.

Obviously, Dorothy Wordsworth understood the societal ramifications of poverty, just as she understood her feminine, middle-class position and her role within the culture of philanthropy. Before any of the journals were written, she wrote to her friend Jane Pollard in 1789 about the establishment of her Sunday school where she instructed children “only” in “reading and spelling and they get off prayers hymns and catechism” (De Selincourt and Moorman 26). William Wilberforce, an avid supporter of Hannah More’s philanthropic endeavors, had apparently underwritten the financial expense of D. Wordsworth’s enterprise (26). She had intended “a more extensive plan” which would include teaching “spinning, knitting &c in the week days, and I am to assist her on Sundays, when they are to be taught to read” (26). But the school was not to materialize. As Lucinda Cole and Richard Swartz have noted, D. Wordsworth’s interest in Sunday schools continued throughout her life: she encouraged their establishment and occasionally taught reading (153). In addition, in 1808 D. Wordsworth’s narrative George and Sarah Green was undertaken to financially support the orphaned children of the Greens, the Wordsworths’ neighbors at Grasmere. Her hope was that through the subscriptions, a modest education might be enabled and the children would be placed in “respectable” families until they were fit to go into service or be apprenticed (18). Given the context of these other philanthropic endeavors, the entries in D. Wordsworth’s Grasmere Journal that deal explicitly with portrayals of poverty have less to do with fodder for W. Wordsworth’s poetic imagination, or, as Anita Hemphill McCormick has argued, Wordsworth’s identification with the powerless and displaced poor, and more to do with constructing a particular representation of middle-class benevolent womanhood (483). How she establishes this representation of womanhood as “representative” of vocational philanthropy through the Grasmere Journal is the special “subject” of the genre.

By the early nineteenth century, D. Wordsworth’s choice of genre highlighted her respect for, and implicitly demanded recognition of, her femininity. To be the private “invisible hand” who writes journals describes an internalization of feminine cultural codes (defined by the activities she chose to represent in her Grasmere Journal) and ideas of appropriate literacy. She expresses this concern in a letter written to Mrs. Catherine Clarkson, a friend who urged her to publish what we know as George and Sarah Green: A Narrative, in order to amass a profit to give to the orphaned children of the title characters:

I cannot have that narrative published. My reasons are entirely disconnected with myself, much as I should detest the idea of setting myself up as an Author. I should not object on that score as, if it had been an invention of my own it might have been published without a name, and nobody would have thought of me. But on account of the family of Greens I cannot consent. . . . [B]y publishing the narrative, I should bring the children forward to notice as individuals, and we know not what injurious effects this might have upon them. (De Selincourt 353–354)

Her unwillingness to enter the visible industry of literary publication must not be thought of as a question of the subversion of talent or devotion to William, but one of feminine power: she does not need to call attention to herself as an author because she can have more “practical” influence as a woman whose special duty is to “help” these children through her ability to write well. She clearly perceives authorship, and the notoriety it brings, to be a display of vulgar productivity, complicit with motivations of profit—a clearly masculine domain in her view, rather than one of middle-class vocation. The story’s
broader publication might also have brought monetary rewards that would have exceeded the amount necessary to keep the children in their appropriate class. The private circulation of the narrative had already raised a sufficient amount of money to secure the children’s modest living conditions and their education at a charity school. D. Wordsworth felt that this should be sufficient reward for the children, and for her.

As this incident illustrates, D. Wordsworth’s concern with privacy is more of a concern with transgression: the corruption of the children’s social and economic values and the corruption of her sphere of domestic influence. Hovering between the public and private spheres, she used her writing to maintain and ameliorate the hardships of these laboring-class children. Her literary and discursive endeavors are vocational, rather than professional, as well as philanthropic. Like many other women writers at the time, D. Wordsworth would be “ungendered” and “unclassed” by the authorship of a widespread publication, corrupting herself by displaying the “affectation” of literary pursuit. Circulation of a text among a private group of subscribers retains her bourgeois propriety, her domestic desires, while still providing for her desire to “help” the children. Perhaps we can use this framework to understand the production of the journals as a propitious choice of genre in this light, one which allows her a controlled amount of “display” and yet engages the public, and one which maintains her femininity and economic dependence.

This discursive incident also illustrates her belief in the responsibility and benevolence of women of the middle classes to help the lower classes, but it is D. Wordsworth who can speak for them. Without any other way to secure a trust for the children, D. Wordsworth voluntarily writes a narrative on their behalf; their vulgar utterances and lowly experience could be transformed into a proper testament to the worthiness of relief for the children. The object of this narrative is to emotionally inspire those in a different economic position to believe it is ethically appropriate to give money to these children; it is on her authority that they believe in the children’s worthiness. In the same way, her journal provides a record book of her charitable sensitivity. These children in particular, but the many stories of beggars and poverty-stricken men and women in the Grasmere Journals, attest to D. Wordsworth’s “practical” use of aesthetics as “a special kind of ethical work” (Cole and Swartz 154). D. Wordsworth’s ability to use description, dialect, and poetic idioms in these passages make her texts seem like expressive sentiments of a “natural” poet. But she is, rather, a journalist whose appeal is to the “real” of social conditions. The value she ascribes to her texts is her ability to articulate what she perceives as “real” and as the domain of womanhood, i.e. the real social problems of the poor and, as we will examine next, the work of domestic and literary production. Her solution for these representations of the “real” is the ideology of improvement—the poor will be helped by philanthropy, a home will be improved by domestic labor, and all persons will be bettered by her “ethic of care.”

The amelioration of the poor in the Grasmere Journal is only one example of how “Dorothy Wordsworth” functions as the benevolent, domestic model of womanhood. Continual improvement begins at home; D. Wordsworth represents herself as the “improver” of her home, family, and discourse. Together with the representations of philanthropy, the recounting of domestic improvements exhibits a “usefulness” and “ethic of care” that traverses both the public and private terrain of Grasmere. The Grasmere Journal thus serves us with a record of how the ideology of improvement constructs a feminine subjectivity, and reproduces that subjectivity for William, his family, and eventually a reading public.
As Kurt Heinzelman has observed, the *Grasmere Journal* has a “georgic vision” (54). That “georgic vision” is manifested in the daily domestic activities that Dorothy Wordsworth, primarily, and William, secondarily, engage in. Heinzelman notes that William Wordsworth locates qualities such as manners, simplicity, candor and comfort and focuses them into “household laws” which emphasize “individual work and the cultural value of vocation” (55). Thus, “domestic activity” becomes the “infrastructure of support for creativity” (55).

Both domestic activity and poetic, or at least discursive, production are linked—domesticity and literacy—within the “georgic vision” of the *Grasmere Journal*. While Heinzelman recounts how “Dorothy” was cast by W. Wordsworth in the role of “improver” of the “(male) personality,” I will focus on D. Wordsworth’s role as an “improver” of her home, family, discourse, and community.

While it may seem that D. Wordsworth appeared the emblematic middle-class woman of her day—sympathetic, charitable, and preeminently domestic—it is important to remember that these qualities become naturalized in the *Grasmere Journal*’s ideological work, because the realms in which they are depicted are the “private” culture of the middle-class woman—family, charity, and domesticity (Cole and Swartz 153). In many passages in the journal, these three realms almost blur into one another because they seem to us to be a “natural” cultural consequence of femininity at that time. But it is the generic logic of the journal that weaves together these three realms constructing them into the feminine subject who is Dorothy Wordsworth. Through these qualities, she literally writes a “real” self that is at once domestic (useful and practical), tied to family (beloved) and philanthropic (charitable). To this end, her discursive work becomes “vocational” much in the same way that W. Wordsworth’s poetry has been described (Wolfson 12–13).

Not surprisingly then, household duties, discursive production, and philanthropic work are also the three categories of activity catalogued in the *Grasmere Journal*. Thus, the ideology of improvement is the central structuring mechanism for the journal. Raymond Williams has explained the socioeconomic lineage of “improvement” which overlaps “making a profit” from the cultivation of land with regard to agrarian capitalism, a definition specifically used in the eighteenth century, and the more general usage from the seventeenth century onwards of “making something better” (161). The overlapping definition is important in the journal because, when at Grasmere, the Wordsworths are extended leaseholders for the first time, and thus had a vested interest in “improving” their property, employing a servant to help with the duties of the household, and making themselves a social part of the community. Because their improvement of the land transforms it into cultivated property, their home at Grasmere achieves a particular value to the Wordsworths, through laborious activities like gardening, landscaping, weeding:

“hoed the first row of peas, weeded, etc., etc., sat hard to mending till evening” (*Grasmere* 38); “W. cut down the winter cherry tree. I sowed french beans and weeded” (46);

“Sauntered a good deal in the garden, bound carpets, mended old clothes . . . dried linen. Molly weeded turnips, John stuck the peas” (40).

These images of property improvement are countered by other images of its cultivation or lack thereof. For example, while W. Wordsworth writes a poem “descriptive of the sights and sounds we saw and heard,” D. Wordsworth describes contrasting scenes of nature. The first is a description of the “natural” landscape which includes “the gentle flowing of the stream, the glittering, lively lake, green fields without a living creature to be seen on them” (133). The second is a description of laborers cultivating former pastureland: “the people
were at work ploughing, harrowing and sowing; lasses spreading dung. . . . We then went on, passed two sisters at work (they first passed us), one with two pitchforks in her hand, the other had a spade. We had some talk with them.” (133). While W. Wordsworth focuses on the “natural,” D. Wordsworth lauds both the “natural” and cultivated landscapes. Her description is juxtaposed to another unnatural landscape:

Then we went to the Island. . . . The shrubs have been cut away in some parts of the island. I observed to the boatman that I did not think it improved. He replied: “We think it is, for one could hardly see the house before.” It seems to me to be, however, no better than it was. They have made no natural glades; it is merely a lawn with a few miserable young trees, standing as if they were half-starved. There are no sheep, no cattle upon these lawns. It is neither one thing or another—neither natural, not wholly cultivated and artificial, which it was before. (155)

Improvement of one’s property is an aesthetic concept, one that has to do with taste and execution. Improving one’s home must be executed properly and tirelessly; otherwise, the trees will not grow, and the lawn will be inhospitable to even cattle and sheep, let alone people.

Along with the cultivation of property is the cultivation of home life. D. Wordsworth details her domestic activities within the house, again with the intention of improving her family’s comfort—mending, laundring, baking, canning, etc. These acts are useful, just as improving the property is, because they provide for the health and welfare of the household. She also lists expenses for the upkeep of the household in keeping with the historical function of the journal as an account book (Nussbaum 23–25). Preoccupations with health concerns and, relatedly, the exercise of walking—to get food and letters, to make visits to the community—are also chronicled. If the ideology of improvement structures the activity in the journal, then health-related activities become an important tool in confirming when her or William’s health is impeded or has improved after a “headache” or other illness. All these domestic and familial concerns seem “natural” to us because they construct the “real” in a particular and familiar way—one that normalizes activities performed by, or at least supervised by, women for the comfort and improvement of family members.

Her day is regulated by an ebb and flow of activities which are, importantly, repetitive. Alan Liu has commented on the repetitiveness of the Journal as a kind of “rhythm” which seeks to represent the “truly continuous line of human identity” (121). However, the repetition of activity that Wordsworth’s journal depicts is representative of the “real” labors which need Wordsworth’s attention and labor on a continuing basis. The similarity of activity exists because she normalizes and catalogues the necessary tasks that a middle-class woman must repeatedly accomplish. Some of these tasks can be accomplished by herself—self-regulatory exercises such as gardening, gathering vegetables, laundring, mending; others must be done by Molly, her servant. D. Wordsworth has supervisory control over the activities and events at Grasmere. She is omnipresent in the workings of the “everyday” activities. Though Margaret Homans suggests that D. Wordsworth’s neglect of the “I” is indicative of a “tendency to omit a central or prominent self in her journals,” and sees it primarily as a fragmentation of self-identity (Women Writers 73), the lack of the “I” suggests pervasive supervisory control over the domestic duties as well as control over their descriptions in her journal. Thus, the “neglect” of the “I” is not necessarily a “fragmentation” of self-identity, but the construction of an identity defined by the ever-present domestic duties and her capacity to improve her home. The “I” of the Grasmere Journal is always assumed, giving D. Wordsworth omnipresence in the domestic sphere.
The second prominent activity is discourse production and circulation, and this activity takes a variety of different forms. D. Wordsworth chronicles the flow of manuscripts—copying and recopying poems and other writing by W. Wordsworth at various stages of composition and publication; writing and receiving letters from her brothers and a variety of friends, including Catherine Clarkson, S.T. Coleridge, Mary Hutchinson; reading and discussing a variety of different texts from Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* to W. Wordsworth’s “The Leech Gatherer”; and, of course, D. Wordsworth’s own textual productions, one of which is her journal which she attends to as a necessary household duty. The integration of domestic activity and the production of discourse—her own and W. Wordsworth’s—has been a topic of much scholarly discussion. But for our purpose it is essential to see that literacy binds D. Wordsworth’s household with the middle-class community that the journal represents. Every experience is transcribed into one kind of discourse or another; and those discourses are read and sometimes scrutinized. Discourse production and circulation becomes a “natural” part of the flow of domestic activity. In the Wordsworth household, writing produces more writing: letters produce more letters, reading produces writing, D. Wordsworth’s journal entries help W. Wordsworth produce poems, her copying of the poems produce a manuscript for publication, etc. That these various kinds of writings will “improve” the well-being of the members of the community is the impetus—the household will run more efficiently (it is certainly depicted as the hub of activity), the letters will console and improve D. Wordsworth’s dejected spirits (especially when W. Wordsworth is far from home), writing poetry and publishing it will ameliorate the “minds” of the public. Those who find themselves “outside” literacy are, consequently, “outside” the “natural” flow of feminine domesticity and the middling classes. Those who find themselves “outside” are the laboring classes and, most notably in the *Grasmere Journal*, the destitute.

Thus, the third activity, though little discussed in scholarship, is the constant insertion of short descriptions of the poor and D. Wordsworth’s interaction with them. In these entries, more than at any other point in the journal, she comes closest to narrative. She chronicles the problem of debt and poverty in the Grasmere countryside, which W. Wordsworth aestheticizes in the *Beggar* and in *Home at Grasmere*. She notes more abstract considerations of class in a few entries, but mostly she narrates her interactions with the poor. In the very first entry, below her “resolve to write a journal,” she writes “at Rydale, a woman of the village, stout and well dressed, begged a half-penny; she had said she had never done it before, but these hard times!” (37). A little below this passage, in the same entry, D. Wordsworth tells her first “beggar” story:

A young woman begged at the door—she had come from Manchester on Sunday morn with two shillings and a slip of paper which she supposed a Bank note—it was a cheat. She had buried her husband and three children within a year and a half—all in one grave—burying very dear—paupers all put in one place—20 shillings paid for as much ground as will bury a man—a stone to be put over it or the right will be lost—11/6 each time the ground is opened. (38)

At this point and throughout the *Grasmere Journal*, D. Wordsworth catalogues her interaction with the poor, sometimes with sympathy, other times without, sometimes stating the amount of money or piece of food she gave, sometimes noting she gave nothing, sometimes saying nothing at all. That she takes such care in narrating the penury in the Lake Distinct at all is important. On the one hand, it makes poverty seem a “natural” part of domestic life, which she has some duty to ameliorate by listening to the
unprivileged’s stories. These are practical actions on which feeling and moral judgment turns. On the other hand, it articulates the trials or the manipulations of the poor as a contrast to the workings of her home as she depicts it in the rest of the journal. Their stories are not her stories. She is able to articulate and distance their infelicitous activities of begging from her own more productive and stable home life. Thus, D. Wordsworth’s supervision extends from the sphere of domestic endeavor to discourse production about the poor: she circulates goods and money to the poor, who traverse the countryside of the Lake Distinct and village of Grasmere, as an extension of her domestic duty while circulating a text about them in the Wordsworth circle.

Because the flow of these daily activities has no particular hierarchical importance in each entry, they seem preeminently personal—a reflection of the reality they describe. As both Liu and Heinzelman have noted, this is an effect of the “autobiographical present” which, of course, lay within the foundations of genre in which she worked. The autobiographical present “normalizes” this kind of activity by chronicling it; but unlike Liu and Heinzelman, I do not think the activity has any particular narrative to it. That she does not create a narrative—a more formal autobiography—is important. The Grasmere Journal exists as a record of strictly middle-class, feminine duties, which produces an always-improving domestic sphere, and is not a record of self-revelation, conflict resolution, subjective development or aesthetic contemplation.

Notice how the three activities—domestic accomplishments for personal and home improvements, the prominence of reading and composition to improve the mind, and the hardships of poverty from which D. Wordsworth’s farming neighbors suffer—are encapsulated in one entry from the journal:

[November] 24th [1801], Tuesday. A rainy morning. We all were well except that my head ached a little, and I took my breakfast in bed. I read a little of Chaucer, prepared the goose for dinner, and then we all walked out. I was obliged to return for my fur tippet and spencer, it was so cold. . . . I saw a solitary butter-flower in the wood. I found it not easy to get over the stepping stones. Reached home at dinner time. Sent Peggy Ashburner some goose. She sent me some honey, with a thousand thanks. “Alas! the gratitude of men has,” etc. I went in to set her right about this, and sate a while with her. She talked about Thomas’s having sold his land. “Ay” says she, “I said many a time he’s not come fra London to buy our land, however.” Then she told me with what pains and industry they had made up their taxes, interest, etc., etc., how they all got up at 5 o’clock in the morning to spin and Thomas carded, and that they had paid off a hundred pounds of the interest. . . . We sate by the fire without work for some time, then Mary read a Poem of Daniel upon Learning. After tea Wm. read Spenser, now and then a little aloud to us. We were making his waistcoat. We had a note from Mrs. C., with bad news from poor C.—very ill. (82–83)

In the passage, D. Wordsworth is the very nexus of activity: all familial lines and community ties intersect at her home. D. Wordsworth depicts it as a closed, almost cloistered community: domestic production produces “some goose” or William’s “waistcoat” which is exchanged in the middling-class domestic economy for the payment of gratitude and love. Thus, the home runs on its own “beloved” impetus: “I shall be beloved; I want no more” (151). The domestic work accomplished in the journal are the “labors of love” that Liu mentions, to be contrasted with the manual labor of Peggy and Thomas Ashburner who must wake up at 5 o’clock every morning in order to produce yarn even though Molly, the Wordsworths’ servant-girl, mentions that Peggy is “very ill, but one does not know how long she may last” (83). For the Wordsworths, daily activity is ordered by something constitutively different than that of the Ashburners—not by necessity, but by the idea of improvement: if D. Wordsworth is ill, she can breakfast in bed, reading Chaucer, until she feels well enough to prepare the goose for
dinner. By sending the goose to the Ashburners’ home, she can help improve Peggy’s health, and “set her right” about the “gratitude of men.” And William, Dorothy and Mary can participate in the pleasure of reading “Daniel upon Learning” and Spenser, and learn of Coleridge’s poor health through his letters. Therefore, rather than having the flow of events dictate her activities as with the Ashburners, she enacts these daily events—the domestic space begins and ends with her control over that space, improving herself and the lives of her family and community around her.

And, most importantly, these daily events and activities are perpetuated by her love—her love of man and “mankind.” It is not the activity itself that the reader is propelled to contemplate and value, but the value assigned to the activity as a reified labor of love put into place by the regulatory presence of D. Wordsworth. Love and improvement, rather than the manual labor and monetary exchange, are linked as the required motivation for labor in the feminized, middle-class domestic economy. And the happy home she depicts in the Grasmere Journal is, of course, the intended result of her labor. She is therefore an indispensable member of the family; her position is central because domestic labor emanates from her love. Domestic labor is not naturalized, but the labor of love represented by domesticity and community responsibility in the journal is.

Therefore, when D. Wordsworth designates her brother as a reader for her journal, “I shall give Wm. pleasure by it when he comes home again” (37), she assumes that her writing will have a certain and particular value to him. Pleasure will remind him of the value of “home,” one that is explicitly linked to the presence of Dorothy, and with her writing. In presenting herself in this way, the “pleasure” that W. Wordsworth and we, as readers, take from the journals becomes a twofold rhetorical move. Pleasure comes from the material improvement of his life as a result of her labors of love, but pleasure is also an aesthetic effect that comes from reading about and enjoying “Dorothy” as the feminine “center” of the domestic and community circle. The Grasmere Journal heuristically teaches him to recognize the feminine position as domestically and communally valuable, while he is occupied with other, more aesthetic, matters. Her writing creates for W. Wordsworth a vision of home to which he can return again and again in his poetry, and a vision of woman as a natural, sympathetic being who improves man, family, home, and the lowly.

Therefore, D. Wordsworth’s Grasmere Journal defines different sites of discursive intervention for herself and for William. If the ideology of improvement structures the journal, the genre also creates spaces of gendered “inarticulation,” just as we saw that it created spaces for class “inarticulation.” It is true that D. Wordsworth’s articulations have limits, limits of capabilities, of subjectivity, and of discursive value, but they are productive acts of power. Improvement requires limits. The journal as a record-book makes sense of “home life” so that W. Wordsworth can be comforted by remembering home, so that W. Wordsworth can fill in the “gaps” of her narratives in the journals, be moved to (re)write poetry, plant a garden, remember a scene when they walked in the fields—in other words, to “improve” his poetry, his home, himself. That it seems to us a “beloved” response to take care of W. Wordsworth, his wife, children and household, that it seems to us a “benevolent” response to help the needy, that it seems to us a “rational” desire to transcribe and criticize his poems, and read literature with and to him are all “effects” that her discourse seeks to produce. These are Dorothy Wordsworth’s articulations, the writing that gives W. Wordsworth “pleasure.” The question is not necessarily whether the journals are “real”
transcripts, or if they are a testimony of who Wordsworth is as a “real” individual; these questions are beside the point. The journal produces a kind of writing that ensures that an individual, whether it be the beggar, William or Dorothy, has depths that are hidden and capacities that need patient improvement.

For her critics, this has been the salient point. She and her journal have been sites of professional intervention, producing, as I am now, knowledge of Dorothy Wordsworth and her writing, just as William Wordsworth had created a poem from Dorothy’s journal entries. It is D. Wordsworth who calls herself “more than half a poet” while gazing upon the moon on White Moss Common (Grasmere 126–127), but her aesthetic contemplation only lingers long enough for her transcription of the scene in her journal, or so she writes:

But, as I climbed Moss [sic], the moon came out from behind a mountain mass of black clouds . . . Once there was no moonlight to be seen but upon the island-house . . . “That needs must be a holy place”. . . . 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. (126–127)

Her inability to produce poetry is particularly highlighted in this passage; her ability to articulate this inability, though, is what is so interesting. The ability to write a passage recounting momentary aesthetic contemplation about the “island-house” is the productive activity in the Grasmere Journal. Though writing is recounted as a constituent part of middling-class life, her poetic “inarticulation” is a productive site of her writing because it tells us about gendered distinctions of discursive value. Her process of “making sense” of her “real” life categorizes discourse into very literally private/feminine and public/masculine realms of articulation. In fact, this is one of the purposes of the journals themselves: to catalogue, to order, to reinforce what is proper for women and valuable about middle-class culture (what we have learned to call the “real”) and what is the stuff of more contemplative and aesthetic concerns. In her journals she categorizes the path of “usefulness” for women, which centrally includes writing and philanthropic feeling, and the path of “aestheticism” for men, which centrally includes poetry.

Take for example D. Wordsworth’s passage about the beggars with which we began our discussion. While the journal entry recounts an actual occurrence of philanthropy, W. Wordsworth’s poem Beggars, based on the journal entry, functions to improve or exercise the middle-class reader’s aesthetic sensibilities. In Beggars, the lack of material necessities is not highlighted; the reader is moved to feel pity for some lost time or landscape, and not for the beggars’ poverty. The “I” in the poem admits to the same skepticism about the woman’s story: “—On English Land/Such woes I knew could never be,” and yet he gives her charity anyway because she “was beautiful to see; a Weed of glorious feature!” (W. Wordsworth 243). By reading W. Wordsworth’s poem, the reader is impelled to feel; by reading D. Wordsworth’s journal entry, the reader is impelled to believe in the writer’s benevolence and judicious action. The latter teaches one about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Action and feeling are therefore separated according to gender: literary women are proprietors of behavior while literary men are proprietors of feeling. That is why she calls herself “half a poet” and, consequently, so do we.

Dorothy Wordsworth emerges as a woman who reads and writes herself into literary existence just as a new social model for femininity is emerging; her most prominent form of literary production—the journal—is most functional to the task. If we look at the
Journal in this way, we can see how D. Wordsworth has been read as a “subjected,” “suppressed” or “repressed” female, or as Anne K. Mellor has argued, as “a model of alterity” (157), because the feminine subject produced within that journal is necessarily constructed as always incomplete. Within the journal, D. Wordsworth writes herself as a subject that will always be in a state of “becoming”: to grow, to improve or to help others improve. But paradoxically, because of her “inarticulation”—of her “real” feelings, her “real” thoughts—readers look for what she is not—as Dorothy Wordsworth does with the beggars. She is a model of femininity that is defined in terms of the possibility of “improvement,” of “completeness,” of “development”; therefore, D. Wordsworth seems “real.” D. Wordsworth is the “half poet” who “recollects” her “own visions” but one who is not able to turn them into poetry:

—I was not quite well. 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. (180)

She is able, however, to turn these “visions” into W. Wordsworth’s recollections, by keeping her journal; she turns his heart to home at Grasmere. Thus, the way she writes about herself—her interior construction—enables W. Wordsworth to produce value for categories that define “higher consciousness” and “complete” subject development, and a whole and complete literary development, both of which scholars have been looking for in D. Wordsworth. Her text allows W. Wordsworth to “gaze” upon her as an under-developed and “natural” subject; conversely, her text also allows W. Wordsworth to transform the beggar woman into a figure of pathos who could not “become.” Thus, what D. Wordsworth articulates and what she does not articulate is a clue to how her philanthropic vocation—her special duty to improve man and mankind—produces her relation to the relations of production in both a material sense (W. Wordsworth’s poetic production which financially supports their home) and an ideological sense (D. Wordsworth’s construction of an interior feminine subjectivity through writing her journal). She is the individual who is “evermore about to be.”

To this end, D. Wordsworth continually devalues her responsibility for her texts and her subjectivity. She is not an “authorizing subject” of her own discourse; she disowns the property of her text and the “self” through discourse. The function that we, as post-Romantic readers, have assigned to journal writing valorizes the private, artless writer—the “authentic” self in its bare, natural state. We have assumed that this is the “pleasure” which D. Wordsworth wanted W. Wordsworth to value in his reading of the Journals. And we would be correct; not because it is true, but because she used the journal to categorize what is “real” and what is “imaginative,” what is proper to a masculine sphere of discourse, and what is proper to a feminine sphere of discourse. Textual responsibility is personalized and addressed to a family member, rather than inserted within a larger public discourse, and affection can be displayed discreetly in duties, i.e., labors of love, performed for the family as well as for the poor. Writing texts is a philanthropic vocation for D. Wordsworth, but one borne of a newly constructed feminine responsibility.

This signals an effective gendered division of discursive labors for the Wordsworths: while D. Wordsworth’s journal catalogues her improvement of “real” bodily labors, W. Wordsworth labors to improve the “feelings” of mankind. For D. Wordsworth, the refinement of feeling
should be left for men, such as W. Wordsworth, to write about. He will complete the gaps created by her text, create poems from her “sketches” and write to ameliorate the aesthetic sensitivities of the middle-classes. D. Wordsworth’s writing is purposely non-poetic: it is designed for “useful” feeling and not “sentimental” musings. The Grasmere Journal produces an “internalization” of the ideology of improvement, and the journal’s success is measured by our own natural acceptance of this woman’s benevolence.

As when D. Wordsworth judges her own “inarticulation,” when we look at the Grasmere Journal, we tend to judge it on the basis of what it lacks: form, narrative, and metaphor, etc. We attempt to read it as if it were a “literary” discourse. Consequently, we find D. Wordsworth’s discourse lacking—lacking creativity and subjective development, leading the reader to draw conclusions about the repression or suppression of her imagination and human development. However, the point of D. Wordsworth’s journal is to catalogue, categorize and order “reality” in a particular way: according to levels of literacy for genders and for classes. In other words, she defines a “good” subject for poetry and a “good” subject for charity, a “proper” articulation for a middle-class woman, and an “improper” articulation for laboring-class woman or man. She defines who writes, who can tell stories and, most importantly, how those stories can be told. These distinctions produce “Dorothy Wordsworth” (our cultural product) as “half a poet,” which becomes a characteristically feminine position within the Romantic aesthetic. What she does not, cannot, and chooses not to articulate becomes the Grasmere Journal’s central ideological function, and creates the distinctions of gendered literacy and class identity.

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NOTES

1 For example, see Abrams 383–397; Woof. Throughout the standard edition of The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth, Ernest de Selincourt footnotes which poems by W. Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge drew upon Dorothy Wordsworth’s entries.

2 For example, see Homans, Bearing the Word; Alexander; McGavran.

3 For example, see Liu.

4 For example, see Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity; Levin.

5 For a recent feminist version of this “Romantic” relationship, see Elizabeth Fay, who argues that W. Wordsworth’s poetic efforts were the result of a poetic collaboration between William and Dorothy, which enabled William to “perform” the role of poet, while Dorothy performed the role of poetic chronicler of “real scenes.” Fay effectively decenteres W. Wordsworth as the univocal voice of his poetry, and reinserts a more complicated version of D. Wordsworth that does not reinvoke William’s version of Dorothy as his poetic muse or the “rural maiden,” but rather enables her to contribute her own “imagination and poetic voice” to William’s work, using him to inspire her own. The “Wordsworth” we know as readers is thus a product of this aesthetic relationship that is “composed” through writing both poetry and the journals. Though a complex re-reading of the William–Dorothy relationship and its literary production, it still casts the argument in “Romantic” terms: Dorothy “sees” the real and thus she is still “half a poet” while William is “always evermore about to be” with the help of Dorothy’s perceptive vision of the “real.”

6 For example, see McCormick.

7 All eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century citations in the OED express philanthropy as primarily a “feeling,” rather than our common contemporary understanding in which philanthropy is synonymous with doing good deeds or giving money.

8 I am using the term “ideology” developed by Louis Althusser. This definition posits that ideology represents “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence” (162). Given the conflicting definitions of the term and various interpretations of Althusser’s thesis on ideology, it is important to note that ideologies are not “born” in apparatuses or in discourse. They are “born” in a class’s “condition of existence, their practices, their experience of the [class struggle]” (186). Subjective experience is the mechanism through which ideology is not
only experienced, but also produced and reproduced: that is, ideology (in general) is a “structure” required by society in order to understand and “represent” it. Discourse, in turn, manifests ideologues, allowing discourse to represent reality through an ideological lens.

To avoid the condescending standard practice of referring to “Dorothy” in relation to Wordsworth, I will refer to her as D. Wordsworth and William Wordsworth as W. Wordsworth. Referring to her as “Dorothy” only highlights the personal discourse that the essay is attempting to deconstruct.

“Associated philanthropy” is a term given by historians to the early to mid-eighteenth-century philanthropy, which was modeled upon joint-stock ventures. For example, David Owen states that charity “capital” was accumulated from donors by subscription and invested in building “conspicuous monuments”: a system of charity and Sunday schools; a variety of hospitals for the sick, infirm, pregnant as well as for foundlings and prostitutes; building workhouses for debtors; building churches and prisons; and the formations of charitable and voluntary “Societies” (4–12).

As Linda Colley states, “. . . in Britain the boundaries supposedly separating men and women were, in fact, unstable and becoming more so” (25). One of the ways in which women were becoming more publicly active in the course of the eighteenth century is through philanthropic endeavor, in which “female reformers [presented] themselves as embodiments of virtue and high morality . . . Invoking woman’s superior morality and virtue proved enormously helpful because it converted their desire to act into an overwhelming duty to do so” (277).

Felicity Nussbaum provides a useful framework in which to understand gender within a “private” autobiographical genre: “when we write ourselves and our experience, the language we use derives from our own subjectivity, but that subjectivity is constituted in social relations. Eighteenth-century women who represent their subjectivity were, however, caught in mimicking the dominant ideologies of themselves. Their self-fashionings were inevitably bound up in cultural definitions of gender—those assumed, prescribed, and embedded in their consciousness—as well as in their subversive thoughts and acts of resistance to those definitions” (133). Nussbaum points to a formation of an interior feminine subjectivity that is portrayed in discourse as authoritative, natural and truthfully self-evident, but once investigated might reveal a social construction of gender drawn from ideologies internalized so that gender identity is thought to be natural and truthfully self-evident. The interiority of a subject, then, is connected with an internalization of particular discursive forms, ideas and perceptions. If that interiority is defined in terms of privacy—individual thoughts, feelings, desires—then the genre of the journal links the interiority of the private self with the public needs that seek to interrogate that interiority.

Susan Levin also emphasizes D. Wordsworth’s identification with these women and her anxiety about the “possible disintegration” of her own position in W. Wordsworth’s thoughts, affections and home before and after his marriage to Mary Hutchinson (21–22).

Anne K. Mellor uses Carol Gilligan’s terms “ethic of care” which “insists on the primacy of the family or the community and their attendant practical responsibilities” (3). It is this concept on which Mellor bases her Romantic model of feminine alterity one that is based on “sympathy and likeness.” But again, that sympathy and likeness is constructed by texts like D. Wordsworth’s Grasmere Journal.

Dove Cottage was rented from John Benson of Tail End, see Gill 169.

According to Arthur Ponsonby, historically, the “journal” and “diary” have been interchangeably (5). Ponsonby also suggests that the journal had a domestic purpose as a household record. Ordinary activities, such as domestic details, food, accounts of marriages and births, travel, health, weather are events that would be commonly found in journals written before and after D. Wordsworth’s (14–24). He does not, however, suggest that this purpose becomes gendered at a certain point in history.

For another opposing view, see Pamela Woof who claims Wordsworth’s “identity is ‘absorbed’ in self-forgetfulness” (41).

D. Wordsworth mentions the divisions between the “rich” and poor (Grasmere 40); upper- and middling-class distinctions (62–63); and the benevolence of the middling-class woman (99–100).

Elizabeth Fay uses an alternate understanding of “becoming” in the Wordsworthian aesthetic which largely hinges on the notion of “performativity” (109–154). I am, however, arguing that Dorothy Wordsworth’s “becoming” is an effect of her discourse which seeks to produce an understanding of the female subject that is in a constant state of “improvement,” or the improvement of others that comes to be understood as natural. As Clifford Siskin has argued, the desire for “ongoing revision” of the self is a particularly Romantic phenomenon that structures how we come to know ourselves (13).

In “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault notes that “the author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: . . . this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable” (123). But Dorothy Wordsworth’s discourse functions differently, because her particular genre is “immediate” and “consumable” by a reader, but not by publication in the usual sense.

Cole and Swartz note that the conformity to the journal is an internalization of the “commitment to the spread of literacy” defined in terms of Hannah More’s philanthropic projects, with the “corresponding prohibition against women writing poetry” (153).
Works Cited


