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# Alice in Wonderland: Dorothy Wordsworth's Search for Poetic Identity in Wordsworthian Nature

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**Alice in Wonderland:  
Dorothy Wordsworth's Search for Poetic Identity in Wordsworthian Nature**

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English Honors Thesis  
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## Introduction

Behind every great man is a woman. Too often is this clichéd sentiment applied to Dorothy Wordsworth, sister and muse to the revered Romantic poet William Wordsworth. Relegating Dorothy to a complementary role is easy, since she did not intend for her writing to be published (nor did she even acknowledge herself as a poet) and devoted herself to helping William Wordsworth in his own work. However, it is also problematic because one thus negates her active efforts to engage with William's poetry, as well as the symbiotic nature of their writing. Regardless of her reluctance to embrace the title of "poet," Dorothy was a prolific writer. Even in the last years of her life, when her mind had deteriorated so much that she became unrecognizable to many of her closest friends and family, she was said to have held a pen to paper until the moment she no longer had the physical strength to lift it.

Wordsworth scholars and critics often refer to Samuel Crosthwaite's 1833 painting of Dorothy as a conclusive portrait of her and her ceaseless writing. Pamela Woof, in *Dorothy Wordsworth: Wonders of the Everyday*, remarks on Crosthwaite's depiction of her eyes, which

are bright and look out at the world. Samuel Crosthwaite, a local self-taught artist, was at the house to paint Wordsworth, whose eyes in the several portraits we have of him, in contrast to Dorothy's, look downwards and within. She looks inquiringly... this oil, which hangs permanently at Rydal Mount, with its pens, paper and ink and the open watching eyes of its sitter, emphasizes the fact that in all the years between, and indeed beyond, the accompaniment of all Dorothy Wordsworth's interactions with the world was writing. (xvi)

In Crosthwaite's painting, Dorothy's eyes are piercing, a dark grey that somehow shines even among the bright oranges and yellows of her clothing and the furniture in the background.

Crosthwaite has painted her as if she was bathed in a soft, white light that cuts abruptly across

the dark recesses of the room. Instead of gazing upward and away, toward some transcendental, inaccessible truth only she can understand, she remains grounded in the present, in her connection to us. Her expression is still, but charged, both inviting and unyieldingly inquisitive.

Woof's comments on the difference between the directions of William's and Dorothy's gazes in their portraits embodies a strikingly similar divergence between their writing styles. Dorothy's gaze seeks to record, measure, compare—to *preserve* what she saw in front of her, while William, with his head bowed, looking “downward and within,” sought to change and shape his reality. Both writers were preoccupied with Nature (a feminized, poetic entity, as opposed to “nature,” the physical landscape) and its role in the relationship between humans and creative energy or inspiration. As a result, William's desire to mold Nature sometimes results in fraught tension, as he struggles to reconcile his own creative power as a poet with his adulation of Nature. Dorothy, on the other hand, is unconcerned with wresting dominance from Nature's grasp. By no means does this imply that Dorothy did not have a troubled relationship with Nature, only that the source of her agitation stems from difficulties in comprehending nature (as opposed to apprehending nature). But to understand the unique relationship between William and Dorothy, one must not only delineate the obvious differences—in their writing, gender, profession—but also examine how their writing intersected as a result of their complicated, entwined pasts, which had lasting effects on both of them.

The roots of William's and Dorothy's co-dependency on each other can be traced back to the melancholy opening chapter of their lives. William and Dorothy were separated as children by the death of their mother, and grew up apart from each other, though they maintained contact through letters. They would only be physically reunited later in their adult lives. Dorothy's

brothers were sent to boarding school at Hawkshead, located in the Lake District, while Dorothy, as per her late mother's wishes, was raised separately by her mother's second cousin, Elizabeth Threlkeld in Halifax, Yorkshire. Beleaguered by the difficulties of trying to sustain family bonds that were so suddenly torn, Dorothy and William reveal in their respective writings the same intense yearning for a sense of belonging that they could attach to a single, physical location. Dorothy often gave voice to her longings in letters to friends by building houses with words, detailing how she and William would fashion each room to their exact wishes:

I see my Brother fired with the idea of leading his sister to such a retreat as Fancy ever ready at our call hastens to assist us in painting; our parlor is in a moment furnished; our garden is adorned by magic; the roses and honeysuckles spring at our command, the wood behind the house lifts at once its head and furnishes us with a winter's shelter and a summer's noonday shade. (Selincourt, 3)

The intensity of Dorothy's desire is palpable and matched by William's enthusiasm. In the same letter, Dorothy quotes William's words to her: "Oh my dear, dear sister with what transport shall I again meet you, with what rapture shall I again wear out the day in your sight." Clearly, the siblings shared a mutual craving for each other's presence that was only sharpened by prolonged absence. Lucy Newlyn describes how they "plotted their pasts through experience according to archetypal patterns, measuring the quality of each temporary home against the original, which figured in their fantasies as a lost paradise" (Newlyn, 5). Their habit of writing to, for, and with each other was an important part of a collaborative effort to rebuild that "lost paradise," and so create for themselves a real home.

For Dorothy, this search for a permanent home even resonated in the close relationships she formed with people other than William. Elizabeth Threlkeld proved a kind and devoted

caretaker, but Dorothy all the same could not help feeling abandoned by the world, having been torn from her mother, and apparently forgotten by her father and her brothers. While her siblings lived with their father until his death six years later, Dorothy was never allowed back to the family home in Cockermouth, for reasons that would elude her for the rest of her life. To this day, the motive behind her father's abandonment of her remains unknown. The staggering twin losses of both parents and siblings shaped Dorothy's early childhood by catalyzing a perpetual desire to form lasting emotional bonds with people. Frances Wilson observes that "when she loved, she never let go; attachment for Dorothy was a continuation of selfhood" (Wilson, 36). The anxiety caused by desiring constant "attachment" would reverberate through her writing long after her reunion with William.

Perhaps nostalgic for her own missing family, Dorothy was immediately attracted to her Aunt's bustling, happy neighbors, the Pollards, who had six daughters of their own. Dorothy formed a special attachment to Jane Pollard, the closest to her in age, and they remained steadfast friends for life. The letters that Dorothy wrote to Jane reveal a passionate young woman with turbulent hopes and fears who seems at times absent in the controlled, remote sentences of her journals, written several years later by a more mature adult. These letters exemplify Dorothy's emotional insecurities and constant need to be reassured of mutual friendship:

I have thought there is one who perhaps at this moment is thinking of me as having forgotten our friendship, forgotten to love her; Ah! How have these thoughts affected me, but I will proceed to lay before you my excuses, I hope they are such as will insure my pardon.  
(Selincourt, 1)

In the same letter, dated summer of 1787, she describes to Jane her reunion with her brothers – but as soon as she reconstructs this reunion, she immediately begins to break it down again,



looking ahead to when they will be separated: “I can bear the ill-nature of all my relations, for the affection of my Brothers consoles me in all my griefs, but how soon alas! Shall I be deprived of this consolation! And how soon shall I again become melancholy, even more melancholy than before” (Selincourt, 2). For Dorothy, joy and sorrow are indivisible, so that the pleasure of reconciliation is never free from the “melancholy” of parting. Her journals record many such farewells between her and William. William often went traveling without her, so that her writing appears to track the cyclical ebbing and flowing of Dorothy’s emotions, which were directed by William’s departures much as the tides follow the moon.



Joshua Rothman recently wrote an article for the *New Yorker* on William Wordsworth in which he discusses a book by H.J. Jackson on the concept of literary fame. Rothman muses that “William Wordsworth died a hundred and sixty-five years ago next week, on April 23, 1850. Why is he still so famous? The obvious answer is that he was a genius. But genius isn’t, in itself, enough to guarantee the sort of lasting, exalted fame that Wordsworth enjoys.” This applies precisely to Dorothy, who wrote arguably as well as William did, and yet remained relatively obscure until her journals were published almost fifty years after her death. Why? It is tempting to explain Dorothy’s anonymity as a result of a hostile environment made up of social conditions that trapped women in the house, and a famous brother who, perhaps jealous of her writing talents, blocked her from a literary career—such a view is hardly unprecedented. Many women artists, authors, and musicians throughout history are seen as having been jilted of the opportunity to achieve their full potential on account of their gender.

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel comes to mind, Dorothy's contemporary in terms of both time period and a relationship with a more celebrated brother, Felix Mendelssohn (who 'borrowed' her work to be published under his own name, just as some critics believe William might have done with Dorothy). The most commonly vaunted depiction of Hensel, as Marian Wilson Kimber describes, claims that:

Fanny, equally talented as her brother Felix, was denied by her patriarchal father the professional career in music to which she aspired and was not allowed to publish her music by her repressive brother. Her music was allowed to appear only under her brother's name. Her "voice" was effectively silenced by men, and her early death tragically ended her attempts to publish, so that she and her music were lost to history. (113)

This portrait of Fanny could easily be applied to Dorothy. But Kimber reminds us that the act of accepting Fanny's and Dorothy's suppression at face value is to adopt a patriarchal view of these women, assuming that the men in their lives had blanket control over them (116). Kimber's sentiment implies not only that this patriarchal view defeats the purpose of feminist critique, but also that scholars who attempt to view women in such a light are really expressing "*their* frustration, rather than hers," at the social context of these women's lives (125). To avoid this trap, my thesis does not attempt to refute or assert the matter of Dorothy's suppression, nor does it explain why she does not share her brother's status as genius poet. Instead, I only intend to examine how the Wordsworths' distinct understandings of Nature as a poetic entity converge and diverge in their writing, in an exploration of their personal relationship. I do not imply that gender did not play a role in their relationship, merely that gender did not impose a strict hierarchy that placed William above Dorothy.

I owe a lot to Margaret Homans and her book *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson*—Homans was the first (Dorothy) Wordsworth scholar that I had ever read. In the chapter devoted to Dorothy Wordsworth, Homans outlines Dorothy's struggle to find poetic identity as an outcome of her relationship with her brother's poetic world, as well as her own aversion to poetic identification itself. In a sharp summary of the complex dilemma that Dorothy faces in writing about nature, Homans observes that

William Wordsworth's feminization of nature is the most obvious example of sexual polarization in the literary tradition that would have shaped women poets' conception of poetry. When nature is Mother Nature for Wordsworth, she is valued because she is what the poet is not... As the object of the poet's love, Mother Nature is the necessary complement to his imaginative project, the grounding of an imagination so powerful that it risks abstraction without her. (13)

William's establishment of Nature as maternal prevents Dorothy from assimilating into William's poetic world. As William's sister, Dorothy can never take up Nature's mantle as the all-powerful mother figure, but neither can she fashion Nature into a masculine presence and still remain in harmony with William. Homans explores how this tension manifests itself in Dorothy's poetic and prose works, whether she wills it or not.

I found the seeds of my thesis in Homans' close-text, cross-analysis of William's "Nutting" and Dorothy's "A Winter's Ramble in Gramsere Vale," which she compares in order to reveal the shifting boundaries between William's and Dorothy's poetic conceptions of Nature. Homans asserts that Nature and maiden, feminine figures that William often evokes in his poetry, exist to "let the boy...mature" in "Nutting." Dorothy, Homans writes, presents a "speaker who is passive relative to a preternaturally active landscape. She is 'lured' and 'led' by 'a little winding

path” (51). Dorothy never considers the speakers in her poetry—or herself, for that matter—as possessing any power over nature. In my thesis, I extend Homans’ analysis of “Nutting” and “A Winter’s Ramble in Grasmere” to a motley collection of other poems and works by Dorothy and William. I believe my work ultimately refutes Homans’ notion that Dorothy was inevitably denied access to William’s Nature. I argue instead that William’s explorations of the maiden figure, who plays both a contrapuntal and complementary role to Nature, position Dorothy—the real maiden in William’s life—as a direct link to Nature. As the conduit that allows the poet access to Nature, Dorothy is an inherent part of William’s Nature. Reading Homans on Dorothy, I was reminded of Lewis Carroll’s Alice, wandering through a similarly confusing, sometimes hostile, yet utterly enchanting world. Like Alice, Dorothy tries on different roles, different bodies, different shapes, attempting to find the one that will finally fit. . . The title stuck.

While I grounded my thesis in close-reading, the Wordsworths’ unique relationship makes it impossible to ignore the biographical aspect of their writing. In the first chapter (“Daydream in Gold: William and Dorothy Wordsworth as Divergent Speakers”), I began by exploring their writing as a system of interdependency by outlining the impact that distance had on their relationship to each other. Separated in childhood and reunited as adults, their search for a home together in their real lives wound its way into their writing. In this chapter I also compared William’s poem “I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud” with Dorothy’s journal entry on the same topic as an introduction to the stylistic differences in their written voices.

In the second chapter (“Caged Birds: William Wordsworth’s Poetic Treatment of Women in Nature,”) I examined William’s treatment of feminine figures in his poetry. Like Homans, I found that even as William sets Mother Nature up as a superior entity, he simultaneously tries to

maintain power over Nature: “he views her with a son’s mixture of devoted love and resistance to the constraints she would place on his imaginative freedom. She is no more than what he allows her to be” (Homans, 13). The maiden is both instrumental and a hindrance to this procedure, as William vacillates between evoking the maiden as the Petrarchal absent lover and as a celestial muse.

In the last chapter, I turned finally to Dorothy’s own poetry about Nature in the last chapter (“Through the Looking Glass: Dorothy Wordsworth’s Conception of Passivity toward Mother Nature”), with the purpose of exploring how Dorothy reacted to a confrontation with Nature as inflexibly maternal—a being that permanently occupied a role in William’s heart that she could never take the place of. In *Becoming Wordsworthian*, Elizabeth Fay observes that

In the case of Dorothy as listener, not only is the maiden (1) bound to Nature and (2) overly sensitive herself to multiple voicings, but (3) she has been trained to read by the very brother whose words address her. Indeed it is in her journals most all, texts written for a communal eye, that layered voicing occurs: prosed voices interact and intersect, descriptions sit next to lists of chores and accounts of others’ dialogues, and William’s thoughts, postures, hopes are interlaced with Dorothy’s own. (40-41)

Hence, my foray into William’s poetry is not meant as a divergence from Dorothy’s work, nor does it indicate that Dorothy’s writing only has substance when read with William’s. Rather, I intend to show that it is only in the juxtaposition of their work, in the “multiple voicings,” that one can begin to see the fractures in their seemingly blissful relationship, as well as the intense sense of solace they found only in each other, in spite of these discontinuities. In Dorothy’s poetry, I discovered the frustration that Homans discerns, but also calm acceptance and a willingness to embrace the struggle with Nature and with William itself as just another way of interacting with her beloved brother.

In the process of writing this thesis, I was lucky enough to receive a Schiff Fellowship from Wellesley College, which provided funds for a trip to the Lake District in March. Brisk, windy, and watery-sunned, the Lake District hadn't yet made the shift to spring—but I thought it looked wonderful in grey. At that time of the year, the Lake District was generally quiet, with few tourists about. I had some secluded walks all to myself. Nature in the Lake District was a perpetual stream of impressions, all at once distant and intimate, tangible and unreal. Not a poet myself, I still felt some inkling of the creative force lying dormant in those still, glassy lakes, in those jagged peaks, and in the houses and cottages nestled into the hills like so many surprising plants. It is present in the lines that cut across the smooth surface of water, rippling the reflected sky into a painter's smeared palette of grey, white, blue. It is present in the Wordsworths' garden at Dove Cottage, with its winding stone path that meanders in a lopsided circle to nowhere, that leads one home again. Dorothy, with eyes far more discerning than my own, must have seen all this and beyond. How she wrote in response to nature reveals more of her character than any painting could hope to.

## Chapter 1: Daydream in Gold

### *William and Dorothy Wordsworth as Divergent Speakers*

While Dorothy wrote a number of poems (some of which William published in his collections), she is far better known for her prose, of which the *Grasmere Journals* are the most celebrated. As Pamela Woof, editor of the most recent edition of the journal, succinctly summarizes, “There is simply nothing like it anywhere else” (*Grasmere Journals*, ix). The writing within the four notebooks that make up the *Grasmere Journals* reveals a keenly observant eye, as capable as William’s at unearthing beauty from the seemingly mundane seclusion of the Lake District, where Dorothy and William were living together at the time she wrote the *Grasmere Journals*. Paper was expensive then, so she wrote the *Grasmere Journals*, dated 1800 - 1803, on notebooks that she and William had already used in previous writing endeavors. Dorothy’s role as amanuensis and her thrifty recycling of used notebooks has propagated the perception that Dorothy was simply an editor to William’s genius. However, to think of Dorothy as a mere scribe is to ignore how their writing wove together and how their poetic identities developed, entwined, and merged.

While Dorothy was equally overjoyed to be reconciled with all of her brothers at the age of twenty-three, she cultivated an extraordinary kinship with William that in time overshadowed even her fondness for her beloved aunt, Elizabeth Threlkend. After Dorothy began living together with William, she spared little time to visit her aging relative, having transferred all her devotion to her brother. In the letter to Jane Pollard where she describes the house that she and William might one day share, she frames her fantasy with the presence of her brother: “I see my Brother fired with the idea of leading his sister to such a retreat” (*Selincourt* 1). At this point, she

and William were still only newly reunited, and had yet to attain the intense intimacy that they would later share; still, even at this early stage of their relationship, Dorothy is inclined to relegate control over her own imaginative powers to William. She beseeches him to “[lead] his sister to such a retreat,” despite the fact that she has already led herself to this image by writing about it. It is true that Dorothy was financially dependent on him, and would remain so for the rest of her life, but there was no need to make her creative powers subservient to his — and yet, this is how Dorothy positioned herself.

There seems to be no more compelling proof of the extent that Dorothy was attached to William than the fact that the *Grasmere Journals* opens with his name:

“*May 14 1800 [Wednesday].* Wm & John set off into Yorkshire after dinner at 1/2 past 2 o’clock — cold pork in their pockets. I left them at the turning of the Low-wood bay under the trees. My heart was so full that I could hardly speak to W when I gave him a farewell kiss. I sate a long time upon a stone at the margin of the lake, & after a flood of tears my heart was easier. The lake looked to me I know not why dull and melancholy, the weltering on the shores seemed a heavy sound. I walked as long as I could amongst the stones of the shore. The wood rich in flowers.”

The “John” she refers to is her brother John Wordsworth, a sailor by trade, who spent a number of months with Dorothy and William at Dove Cottage. Dorothy’s journal entry records William and John setting off to visit a friend’s newly acquired farm in Gallow Hill; a trip that took them nearly a month. The effect of the journal’s opening is anachronistically cinematographic. Frances Wilson observes that Dorothy describes herself as if she were looking at her reflection, writing that the stone was located at the “foot of the lake,” before crossing that out and altering it to read “the margin of the lake” (Wilson, 27). Dorothy’s careful depiction of space and location here exemplifies the clinical, analytical nature of the writing that dominates the *Grasmere Journals*,



while the sudden outburst encapsulated by “a flood of tears” also demonstrates how her meticulous attention to detail breaks down in the face of overwhelming emotion. Wilson also asserts that “Dorothy wrote as a way of both pushing back the time when William was absent and holding it still when he was there” (Wilson, 14). This certainly seems to be the case here, where after expressing her profound “melancholy,” Dorothy immediately proceeds with a list of all the plants that made the land so “rich in flowers,” and a description of the rest of her evening: “Arrived at home with a bad head-ache, set some slips of privet... It is nine o’clock, I shall soon go to bed.” Inevitably, this steady litany, meant to keep her sorrow at bay, is interrupted by the remembrance of William’s absence and the entry ends abruptly with Dorothy’s almost audible cry: “Oh! that I had a letter from William!”

The entry begins and ends with William. And in the middle of the same entry, Dorothy clearly outlines her intention for starting the *Grasmere Journals* in the first place: “I resolved to write a journal of the time till W & J return, & I set about keeping my resolve because I will not quarrel with myself, & because I shall give Wm pleasure by it when he comes home again.”

While we cannot know how often William actually sat down to read through Dorothy’s writing, it is evident that her work exerted significant influence over his poetry. In the last few lines of the poem, “The Sparrow’s Nest,” William himself spelled out the extent of Dorothy’s command over him:

She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;  
And humble cares, and delicate fears;  
A heart, the fountain of sweet tears;  
And love, and thought, and joy. (17-20)

The line “She gave me eyes, she gave me ears” is the most accurate in describing the relationship between Dorothy’s journal and William’s poetry, as it is believed that William often turned to her work in search of inspiration. This would certainly explain the great variations in the tempo of the journals, as Woolf notes: “It sometimes moves in little rushes when days can be noted with a staccato speed; it sometimes slows own to linger on a single figure” (*Grasmere Journals*, ix). Dorothy is not writing primarily to create a catalogue of her days with William; she is writing to preserve scenes and people that interest her, and might be of interest to her brother. She gives her own emotions and feelings in the *Grasmere Journals* secondary importance – except when she is separated from William, and her faithful record-keeping is devastated by the loss, which she is unable to contain and so spills out onto the page.



Yet despite Dorothy’s vocalization of her intent to align herself with her brother’s aspirations instead of pursuing a career of her own, she reveals in her own writing not only her dependence on William, but also a contradictory independence from his poetic influence. Dorothy’s unique writing style—distinct from her brother’s—is evident in the *Grasmere Journal*. Let’s first consider an entry dated 15th April, 1802, together with one of William’s famed poems, written two years later, “I wandered lonely as a cloud.” These two particular works depict the same scene (a swathe of daffodils growing along the bank of a lake), which facilitates a close comparison of the siblings’ literary style and perception. While they were inspired by the same visual stimulus, they drew contrasting conclusions and revelations from this source, as demonstrated by how different the relationships between the speakers and the flowers are in their respective works. Dorothy and William both infuse the daffodils with highly human and sentient

qualities. However, their treatments of the way the speaker is situated *within* the context of the flowers and the greater physical environment depicted reveal far subtler discrepancies about how each Wordsworth perceives the role of the speaker in writing. William's speaker seeks to recreate—and therefore perhaps to control—the landscape before him, while Dorothy's intentions are to measure, observe and understand it. Note that since nature is not invoked as a "Mother Nature" figure by either Wordsworth, I will refer to nature in this section as simply "nature," the physical environment, and not "Nature," the stylized entity.

First, consider how, in William's poem, the pronoun "I" is always prominent, featuring at least once in each stanza, and multiplying in the last stanza, so that the human presence of the speaker only grows as the poem progresses. However, in Dorothy's journal entry, as the daffodils take on increasingly human characteristics, the human presence of the speaker (both the "we" and the "I") actually grows mute; approximately halfway through the passage, Dorothy completely drops the pronouns that refer to humans. Consequently, our perspectives have actually *inverted* by the time we finish each work. William starts his poem on a very large scale that includes vast entities like the milky way and the clouds, but ends by encapsulating the immensity of the "ten thousand" daffodils within the internal space of his own human heart. For example, in the last stanza of the poem, he reduces the "continuous" daffodils to a "flash upon that inward eye;" his movement from "continuous" flow to a "flash" marks a shift in our perspective of the constancy of the daffodils. William initially presents them as permanent as "stars that shine / And twinkle on the milky way," but by allotting them a space within himself, he places the daffodils at his own beck and call, to be visited as he pleases, which somewhat diminishes their supernatural potency. In contrast, Dorothy starts with minute observations about

how the daffodils are positioned with regard to the lake, the trees, and gradually expands to make a general statement about “simplicity, unity, and life” that Dorothy herself is a part of. This is a crucial distinction between the siblings; both are enriched by their experience with the daffodils, but Dorothy is content with the “unity” of the daffodils, which is, for her, the most beautiful and admirable aspect of the flowers. While Dorothy’s final comment remains controlled, it nonetheless resonates with a solemnity that is as grand as William’s sweeping, emotional gestures about “bliss” and “pleasure.” In contrast, William takes the unified power of the daffodils for himself as a personal source of “the bliss of solitude.” Ironically, he turns to the communal, shared power of the daffodils within his mind when he is alone.

One might begin to question, though, given that Dorothy omits the pronouns “we” and “I” at this point, whether or not humans belong in her vision of that “unity.” Even if William’s absorption of the daffodil’s power as a source of inspiration may seem like appropriation, he is at least emotionally involved with the flowers in an obvious way. If the speaker’s sense of self, embodied by the pronoun “I,” is silent (as it often becomes in Dorothy’s writing) then where has the focus of the piece moved? Where can we find the active energy in Dorothy’s sense of self? William emphasizes how the poet undergoes an emotional transformation — from “lonely as a cloud” to “gay, / In such a jocund company” — as a result of seeing the dancing daffodils. What exactly does William’s speaker find so exhilarating about these daffodils, enough to pull him down from the clouds? Does Dorothy undergo the same transformation in her journal entry?

Dorothy initially describes the daffodils as “the little colony,” which is quaint in comparison to William’s more regal vision of “a host, of golden daffodils.” Fascinatingly, “a host” is not the first description William offers of the daffodils:

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
 That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
 When all at once I saw a crowd,  
 A host, of golden daffodils;  
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (1-6)

In this first stanza, the speaker notices the daffodils as “a crowd,” and then forms an impression of them as “a host.” The word “crowd” feels closer to Dorothy’s concept of a “colony,” with its connotations of activity and community, but William’s revision of this observation to “a host” is more significant. It serves as evidence of how the speaker in William’s poem begins to transfigure the physical environment the moment he begins to process it. Furthermore, the speaker is unafraid to make us aware of this ongoing process of literal revision, since he is as blatant in showing the reader his thinking as he is in declaring himself a poet later in the poem. William’s description is also particularly lofty because he stylizes the yellow color of the daffodils to “golden,” literally gilding them so that they *cannot* be simple, material flowers anymore. Paired with the horn-like shape of the flower itself, the phrase may evoke “a host” of golden clarions; the daffodils seem already abstracted at the beginning of the poem, leaving William’s speaker to do with them as he wishes.

With the caesura in the line, William epitomizes the daffodils’ transition from physical to abstract by separating the phrase “a crowd,” a description of the flowers using relatable, human terms, from the more glorious “host.” William’s choice of the word “golden” also sits in stark contrast with Dorothy’s depiction of them as “yellow” — “yellow” has no tangibility beyond being a color, while the descriptor “golden” carries with it a hint of physical solidity, of the weight of heavy metal that drags the speaker’s perspective down from the skies to examine these

remarkable blooms more closely. Dorothy's "little colony" of daffodils lacks such grandeur — instead, there exists a tender quality of fragility to Dorothy's daffodils that seems wholly absent in William's vision. While William skips over his likening of the daffodils to "a crowd," Dorothy extends her "colony" metaphor by noting how some daffodils "rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow of weariness," and also observes that there are "stragglers" that seem to have been left behind. William omits these areas of weakness in the collective unity of the daffodils, and instead chooses to depict them as a "never-ending line," as "continuous as the stars." There is no need for William to adopt a tender tone in considering the daffodils, precisely because he presents them as invulnerable.

By infusing the daffodils with a sense of invincibility, William gives them a celestial quality that Dorothy's daffodils do not have — Dorothy's style of writing only *enhances* the commonplace quality of her daffodils. While William's diction seems hardly opulent in isolation, it becomes lush in comparison to Dorothy's terser statements. She tempers moments of fantastical exposition with brief, simple sentences, so that we never wander too far from reality. Levin astutely notes that "one way of explaining Dorothy's faithfulness to objects, her continual cataloguing, is a kind of perpetual reality testing" (Levin, 4). For Dorothy, the daffodils do not need to be entities of otherworldly power, as they are in William's poem; she does not need to reinvent reality in order to test it, as William does by immediately abstracting the daffodils. The difference in power between the Wordsworths' versions of the daffodils attests to the way that William seeks to amend nature to his liking, while Dorothy only extends what already exists in nature.

Here, Dorothy's speaker arrives at a revelation only gradually, as demonstrated by the scope of perspective in her journal entry, which expands and contracts very smoothly. She notes the individual daffodils, then she notes the main body of the daffodils as she comes upon it, and then she notes the "stragglers." Dorothy's habit of noting down details that specify the location where these astounding moments of beauty occur (Gowbarrow Park, in this case) further emphasizes that this beauty exists in the real world without violating the laws of reality. She also uses mundane imagery, like "a country turnpike road," which further serves to mute or restrain the element of fantasy in her writing. In contrast, William withholds the name of a physical location, thereby heightening the otherworldly quality of his daffodils. Indeed, the reader literally loses sight of the physical ground in the very first line of the poem, in which William describes the speaker as "a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills." William dispenses with the gradual, tapered appearance of the daffodils that Dorothy documents. He immediately expands the spatial boundaries of the poem in the first line, where the speaker is a cloud, and capable of seeing "ten thousand... at a glance," then abruptly condenses the poem to a tight, internal perspective in the last stanza, where the "ten thousand" daffodils are enclosed within his heart's mind. This swift movement between internal and external, vast and minute, is quite typical of William's style of writing, and the juxtaposition of this passage with his sister's only serves to highlight the speed at which he travels these leaps. Pamela Woof, in *Dorothy Wordsworth: Wonders of the Everyday*, asserts that Dorothy

appears conscious of a double relationship: a life-like humanity in the daffodils and a primal joy and energy in herself that was entirely at one with the joy of the natural world. The power of that elemental dance was perceived only gradually. They saw a few daffodils, she wrote, close

to the water side, and wondered how they had come to grow there and they saw more and yet more. (103)

In William's poem, instead of gradually appearing, or even with any intimation of having even grown from bulbs at all, the daffodils exist as if out of time and place. William claims that "Ten thousand saw I at a glance," which, again, highlights a sensation of impossible vastness. Dorothy remains grounded in the physical landscape she sees before her waking eyes, while Wordsworth's speaker is constantly re-inventing it.

However, it is important to realize that even if Dorothy does not wish to abstract the daffodils in the way that William does, she nevertheless seeks to *organize* the scene using a hierarchy that she understands. For example, she writes that she and William had "fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore & that the little colony had so sprung up." Like William, she seeks to see the daffodils as a whole — not necessarily as invulnerable or perfect, but certainly as unified — and concocts a brief story to replace the origins of the flowers, which she cannot deduce from mere physical observation. Daffodils are generally grown from bulbs, but Dorothy chooses the word "seeds" in her description. While it is possible to germinate daffodil seeds, the entire process is painstakingly difficult and takes years to produce flowers. Dorothy was a voracious reader, and it is entirely possible that she perused a few works about botany. Furthermore, gardening was a part of her daily chores, and she took great pride in tending the plants and flowers flourishing around the cottage she shared with William, so it could definitely be the case that she had tried to grow daffodils from bulb herself. It is evident that even when exploring remote areas of wilderness and uncultivated beauty outside of her home, she can't help but recall her own garden in the external world.



As such, Dorothy does bring her own interest to bear on the daffodils, though not with the same intent that William does in his poem. For example, consider how Dorothy identifies straggling daffodils that grew apart from the rest of the “colony,” which William does not do, and then quickly tells us that “they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity & unity & life of that one busy highway” so that these “stragglers” too are enfolded into the unified whole. And, like William, she is captivated by the sheer multitude of the daffodils, which sets them apart from “the few primroses by the roadside, wood sorrel flowers, the anemone, scentless violets, strawberries, & that starry yellow flower which Mrs. C calls pile wort.” Her specific naming of “Mrs. C,” presumably a neighbor, demonstrates the way she actively acknowledges communication with and learning from other people, since she makes it clear that Mrs. C has taught her to recognize different plants. In stark contrast, William’s speaker is the only human presence in his poem, despite the fact that we already know he was with Dorothy and hence, was not “lonely as a cloud.” Arguably, since Dorothy never quite removes the human qualities from the daffodils, which not only dance and laugh, but are tied to the figure of Mrs. C and to her brother walking beside her, she retains a human presence within her writing without really needing to identify the speaker explicitly (in the form of concrete pronouns).

While both siblings linger on the idea of the daffodils as “dancing,” William extends the energetic motion of the daffodils to the lake by drawing our attention to how “the waves beside them danced.” Dorothy instead draws a distinct line between motion and stillness in her journal entry. Her daffodils “tossed and reeled and danced,” but the lake remains static — this discrimination articulates the clear difference in intent between the siblings. Dorothy uses the word “highway” to describe the swathe of daffodils, emphasizing the notion that for Dorothy,

this spot is only a temporary resting place on a journey to somewhere else. William, however, depicts the “host” of daffodils as an end in itself — in the last stanza of the poem, he muses on how his “inward eye” often travels back to this memory, so that his heart can “[dance] with the daffodils” again. This may be one reason why the presence of Dorothy’s speaker seems to waver in focus as we approach the conclusion of the “simplicity & unity & life” of the daffodils — Dorothy’s speaker has, quite simply, already moved on.

Where is Dorothy’s speaker so anxious to head to, and, in opposition, why is William’s speaker so eager to stay with the daffodils? First, consider how it is not the case that by acknowledging the ability of the flowers to convey the “bliss of solitude,” William’s speaker allows the flowers to be superior to himself. In fact, he relegates them to mere objects to be “gazed” upon, and only seeks to access the “wealth” of the memory when he feels “vacant or in pensive mood.” Vacancy implies that he is no longer entertained by the present, while pensiveness might indicate being troubled by the present—in either case, William’s speaker only accesses the daffodils when he does not want to interact with his present reality. He also refers to the entire vision of the daffodils as “a show,” which again conveys a feeling of a spectacle that he can replay at a whim. Still, William’s speaker does undergo some form of metamorphosis, since it is apparent that the daffodils allow William’s speaker to access the “bliss of solitude,” transforming his loneliness at the beginning of the poem to a sublime “pleasure,” and thereby escape the mundaneness of his “couch.” However, William’s choice of the word “host” in itself has complex implications for William’s perception and valuation of the daffodils. While it implies angelic, divine qualities that resonate with William’s general depiction of the daffodils as otherworldly and invulnerable, it simultaneously evokes the notion of entertainment and

accommodation; another indication that William positions the daffodils in a place of subservience or inferiority to his poetic creativity.

Yet there is a certain potency to the word “host” that sits at odds with William’s attempt to contain the daffodils. The Holy Eucharist (Christian communion, as shared by the Catholic Church and the Church of England) is also commonly referred to as a “host” because the Lord Christ is simultaneously contained, offered and received within the consumed bread and wine. Dorothy and William were both raised Protestant, and William himself developed very nuanced views on Christianity, amongst other religious theories, through intense political participation. Hence, he would have been well aware of the theological ramifications of the word “host.” The subtle implication of sacramental sacrifice on the part of the daffodils—perhaps to William’s poetic appetite—makes his final encapsulation of them within a single “flash upon that inward eye” feel abrupt. This fleeting sensation is emphasized by his claim that when he thinks about them, his “heart with pleasure fills.” The fact that his heart is still capable of being with “pleasure fill[ed]” at the end of the poem means that he has not *already* filled his heart with the “wealth” of the daffodils—they do not have a lasting effect on him. By the end of his poem, William appears more preoccupied with the *human* response to the stimulus of the daffodils, rather than with the daffodils themselves. Dorothy has a human response to the daffodils, and she registers it in her writing, but she does not prioritize it over the daffodils. As Woolf writes, her joy is “entirely at one with the joy” of the daffodils (Wonders of the Everyday, 103).

Does Dorothy’s writing imply more of a reciprocal relationship, or does the “I” (or eye) remain distanced from the environment it observes? Levin offers the intriguing notion that “the writing of ‘I’ must displace the presence of the writer” because it acts as a substitution for the

author, a flesh and blood being, in the literary world of her writing (18). She asserts that Dorothy's avoidance of writing "I" may in fact be interpreted as a "negative assertion" of her presence in her writing because she does not allow the pronoun, as a literary device, to "displace" her (Levin, 18). Hence, precisely by *not* naming her speaker, Dorothy emphasizes the presence of her speaker as much as William does by boldly announcing his speaker as a poet. Kenneth Cervelli proposes that "while Dorothy did, like any writer of her time interested in the picturesque, tend to frame nature linguistically in such a way as to suggest a picture, she nevertheless always made humans a part of that frame" (Cervelli, 19). For example, consider how while Dorothy omits pronouns, she uses words like "looked," which suggest visual perception, and thus, *imply* the presence of the speaker that the eye belongs to. In this manner, she ensures that her most abstract description of the daffodils as "so gay ever glancing ever changing" is firmly understood as the speaker's subjective opinion. She also points out that "This wind blew directly over the lake to them," as a reminder that the dancing motion of the daffodils, which makes them appear so magical have a distinct, physical source which is very much discernible to human perception.

Of course, this is the one of the rooted differences between Dorothy's and William's writing. While William was already a known poet during their time at Grasmere, Dorothy had never meant for many of her works to be published — certainly not her journals. It is not farfetched to think of William's poem as a metaphor for the process of poetry writing. The self-identified poet wanders his thoughts like a solitary cloud in the vast sky until he grasps some scrap of memory or intense feeling that he can evoke and elaborate on in writing, thus turning a

“lonely” task into “bliss” and “pleasure.” Indeed, this evokes the very sentiment that he expresses in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which William defines the nature of poetry:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (Norton Anthology, 303)

Despite her protestations to the contrary, what are Dorothy’s *Grasmere Journals* if not “emotion recollected in tranquility?” Dorothy’s revisions of her own writing demonstrates the “contemplation” of said emotions, and the fact that she (and William as well) used her journal writing as the foundation for her poetry fulfills the transformation of the emotions through “a species of reactions,” which presumably refers to the act of writing.

Despite the evidence that she was highly capable of poetic writing, as demonstrated by her nuanced, poignant entry about the daffodils, which is no less striking than William’s poem, Dorothy avoided identifying herself as a poet throughout the *Grasmere Journals*, save in just one case. In an entry marked March 18, 1802, Dorothy wrote:

But as I climbed Moss the moon came out from behind a Mountain Mass of Black Clouds – O the unutterable darkness of the sky & the Earth below the Moon! & 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 & Loughrigg fell & Silver How were white & bright as if they were covered with hoar frost. The moon retired again & appeared & disappeared several times before I reached home. Once there was no moonlight to be seen but upon the Island house & the promontory of the Island where it stands, ‘That needs must be a holy place’ &c – &c. I had many many exquisite feelings when I saw this lowly Building in the waters among the dark & lofty hills, with that bright soft light upon it – it made me more than half a poet. I was tired when I reached home I could not sit down to reading & tried to write verses but alas! I gave up expecting William & went soon to

bed. Fletcher's carts came home late. (Grasmere Journals, 54)

Even here, she only names herself “more than half a poet,” and she insists that she was “made” so by the landscape. In Dorothy's mind, she does not create, but is created. Her extreme modesty is all the more ironic and poignant given the context of the entry itself, with its distinct pattern of contrast between extremes (light and dark, white and black, high and low) that make her prose so lyrical and moving. Despite her avoidance of identifying herself as a poet, it is evident to us that Dorothy had a wonderful ability to discover and capture detail—this talent carries through in her poetry, which we will examine in Chapter Three.



Perhaps because of Dorothy's self-effacing modesty and her palpable subjugation of herself to William, many critics assert that Dorothy's relationship with William was an ideal and peaceful one, whereby William was all Dorothy needed to be happy. There is much in Dorothy's writing that might suggest otherwise. While Dorothy did choose to center her life on her brother, it was not necessarily an easy existence. The Wordsworths almost always had a servant about the house, but there were plenty of chores for Dorothy to perform. There is certainly evidence of the tireless work involved with being a poet's amanuensis, as she confides in her journal: “Wm left me with a little peat fire – it grew less – I wrote on & was starved. At 2 o'clock I went to put my letters under Fletcher's door. I never felt such a cold night.” She often spent her nights like this, writing William's letters for him, or transcribing his poems; later in the same entry, she confesses that she was afraid to look for food in the pantry “for fear of waking William.” Such harrowing habits inevitably wore her health down, as demonstrated by the worries she perpetually expressed to Jane Pollard about her inconstant weight. Dorothy was thought to have been a

slender woman – given evidence of her frugal, even harsh lifestyle, it is likely that she was quite underweight.

Furthermore, while Dorothy was content to forgo marriage and devote herself to William, William was no stranger to romantic love, and chose to marry Mary Hutchinson, a close friend of Dorothy's. Did this factor into Dorothy's plans when she first began entertaining the notion of living with her brother permanently? She did not entertain the idea of her brother's wife at all in her early letters to Jane or William. It is also prudent to remember that when William began to live with Dorothy at Dove Cottage, he had already experienced a tumultuous relationship with Annette Vallon, the French revolutionary he met during his visit to France in 1791. Hindered by financial woes, William was forced to quit France and return to England in 1793, leaving Annette and their natural daughter Caroline to fend for themselves. Annette wrote him periodically throughout the years, pleading with him to return to France, marry her, and make their family whole. William did little to assuage her worries, and eventually arranged a meeting with her so that he could break the news of his intent to marry Mary. Dorothy was with him on that trip, but she wrote sparingly of it in the *Grasmere Journals*, not much beyond a sentence or two that simply mentioned that they had met with Annette and then parted ways. Surely, a written record of how he broke Annette's heart once and for all was not something William wanted to be reminded of in the years to come, and Dorothy never did anything that might upset her brother.

Perhaps the same was not true for William. When William married Mary and brought her under the roof he shared with Dorothy, he already knew love and loss, and hence, must have been aware that he was subjecting Dorothy to a similar burden. While Dorothy showed no desire to live with anyone but her brother, even after his marriage, there is no doubt that she harbored

conflicting feelings toward this new development. Granted, she had rarely lived *alone* with William, having always shared him with mutual friends like Coleridge, or visiting relatives like their brother John. Still, Dorothy may have initially interpreted the advent of Mary, who would be William's wife, as an unprecedented usurpation of her own position in William's heart. The extent of her turmoil is plain in the journal entry that documents the day of the wedding:

On Monday 4<sup>th</sup> October 1802, my Brother William was married to Mary Hutchinson. I slept a good deal of the night & rose fresh & 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 up stairs. I gave him the wedding ring – with how deep a blessing! I took it from my finger where I had worn it the whole of the night before – he slipped it again on to my finger and blessed me fervently. 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 & threw myself on the bed where I lay in stillness, neither hearing or seeing any thing, till Sara came upstairs to me & said 'They are coming'. This forced me forward, faster than my strength could carry me till I met my beloved William & fell upon his bosom. He & John Hutchinson led me to the house & there I stayed to welcome my dear Mary.

The entry continues with a summary of the rest of the day – pleasant, but written in Dorothy's usual, precise style, and so nothing extraordinary within the context of the journal. The excerpt that most fascinates and confounds scholars is the one above. Exactly what happened between Dorothy and William here? What is the meaning of her peculiar description of temporary paralysis here—if that is what she experienced?

The similarity between this excerpt and journal's opening entry is striking, since in both, Dorothy describes herself descending into state of stasis as a reaction to William's departure from her. In both cases, she knew when William would return, but this time, she was also aware that William would be coming back from his wedding—with Mary at his side. This time, his



return was not a true return to their private haven for two, and it could never be so again. It is little wonder then, that while in the first entry, “the weltering on the shores seemed a heavy sound” to her, here, she is incapable of “hearing or seeing any thing” at all. As readers, our sensation of Dorothy’s loss heightens in the parallel between the phrase “I lay in stillness, neither hearing or seeing any thing” and William’s praise of her in “The Sparrow’s Nest,” where he claims that “She gave me eyes, she gave me ears.” In this moment, at least, Dorothy has given herself over to despair by relinquishing her ability to be William’s eyes and ears. She can sense nothing at all. We see stark evidence of Dorothy’s habit of valuing herself by the amount of devotion and care she can lavish on the people she holds closest to her, and how her self-worth and self-identification collapses in the vacuum of unreciprocated feelings.

F.W. Bateson is credited with germinating the notion of an incestuous relationship between the Wordsworths: “Bateson argues that Wordsworth married to cure himself of his love for his sister and that his decline in poetic power resulted from the rupture of his relationship with Dorothy” (Levin, 245). Many critics also claim to detect a simmering physical passion between Dorothy and William in this particular passage, which is sexualized by the rushed, clandestine nature of their actions, as well as their placement in the bedroom. The odd juxtaposition between the word “blessed,” with its connotations of holy sanctification, and the unbridled ardor captured by the word “fervently” only heightens the sense that an exchange of some sort is occurring between Dorothy and William beyond that of a simple returning of the ring. But why was Dorothy given the ring to wear “the whole of the night before” to begin with? One possibility is that Dorothy had the responsibility of safekeeping the jewelry and she wore it simply to ensure that she would not misplace it. Or is this William trying to reassure Dorothy,

offering the ring first to her as a promise that she would always take precedence in his heart over Mary? The most confusing aspect of this excerpt is that the lines “I gave him the wedding ring... he slipped it again onto my finger & blessed me fervently” were crossed out in the original manuscript of Dorothy’s journal so that it is quite illegible (Wilson, 236). She did not write a new line to replace or alter the one she crossed out, which suggests that Dorothy (or whoever inked over those lines) meant to *erase* the sentences, not correct them, further emphasizing the air of illicit secrecy around the incident.

Helen Darbishire was the first to transcribe this entry in 1958, using infrared light, and her translation was accepted as Dorothy Wordsworth canon until Pamela Woof suggested that the word might read as “softly” instead of “fervently” (Wilson, 235). The word “softly” would lessen the strange tension here somewhat, but the whole incident with the ring remains odd. Still, the accusations of incest that many critics level at the Wordsworths because of this entry (some going so far as to suggest that Dorothy’s “stillness” here is actually a moment of sexual orgasm for her) exaggerate the situation excessively, and are likely unfounded. As Frances Wilson points out, “the relationship between the Wordsworths was organized around a notion of perfect and exclusive brother-sister love that was imaginatively assimilated by them both to the point where it became the source of their creative energy” (Wilson, 166). A consummation of their feelings through sexual activity would have clashed with their idealization of brother-sister love as poetic inspiration, which transcends physical bonds. It is unlikely that either of them would have been willing to thus sully their relationship with sexual intimacy.

Still, there is an uneasy tension in this entry, that is, if not sexual, at least indicative of Dorothy’s awareness that Mary is capable of offering William something that she cannot – that

despite all of the love she has devoted to him, he still must take a wife. Wilson notes how Dorothy's perception of nature begins to alter after William's marriage. In one entry, Dorothy describes the reflections of the trees in lake water as "large golden Flowers – nothing else in color was distinct & separate but all the beautiful colors seemed to be melted into one another" (Wilson, 254). Wilson comments that "down on the lake, nothing is 'distinct & separate', differences dissolve, and everything melts together. Back in the cottage, Dorothy's distinction and difference from the pregnant Mary will become more and more apparent" (Wilson, 254). She increasingly begins to see nature as 'melting' together, which opposes her view of nature as composed of separate elements, as was more the case in the daffodils entry. Dorothy's perception of nature vacillates with the security she feels in her own identity, which was somewhat obscured by Mary's presence. But Dorothy soon overcomes her fear of being forgotten or left behind; she and Mary were inseparable, and she became a devoted aunt to their children. As Woolf writes, "the tears do stop and the writing itself, her activity in the house and garden, her walking, all give strength to her absorption in everyday. The [*Grasmere Journal*] alongside its awareness of pain, has a gladness about it and it celebrates both the home and the valley" (Wonders of the Everyday, 44).

## Chapter 2: Caged Birds

### *William Wordsworth's Poetic Treatment of Women in Nature*

It is easy to fall for the illusion that Dorothy and William—before Mary came in to their lives, at least—spent most of their time together, alone and tucked away within their own private world. But the Wordsworths received numerous visitors, many of whom came to call on William for professional purposes, and they all left Dove Cottage with a remarkable impression of Dorothy Wordsworth. In *Dorothy Wordsworth: Wonders of the Everyday*, Pamela Woof compiles a short collection of letters and descriptions of Dorothy found in the letters and writings of the Wordsworths' close friends and professional acquaintances. Here is a depiction by Thomas De Quincey, the famous essayist and author of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, who commented on Dorothy's

originality and native freshness of intellect, which settled with so bewitching an effect upon some of her writings, and upon many a sudden remark or ejaculation, extorted by something or other that struck her eye, in the clouds, or in coloring, or in accidents of light and shade, of form, or combination of form.  
(72)

As readers, we are already aware of the superb quality of Dorothy's writing, her "originality and native freshness of intellect" which made the daffodils so tangible in writing.

Dorothy's unique presence not only infused her "bewitching" writing, but was also a part of her physical being. Any description of her in writing is helpful to Wordsworth scholars, given that there is no surviving portrait or likeness of young Dorothy, save for a small silhouette.

Consider the following excerpt from a 1997 letter by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who spent years in close proximity with William and Dorothy in the Lake District:

Wordsworth & his exquisite Sister are with me—she is a woman indeed!—in mind, I mean, & heart—for her person is such, that if you expected to see a pretty woman, you would think her ordinary—if you expected to find an ordinary woman, you would think her pretty!—But her manners are simple, ardent, impressive—.

In every motion her most innocent soul  
Outbeams so brightly, that who saw would say,  
Guilt was a thing impossible in her.—

Her informations various—her eye watchful in minutest observation of nature—and her taste a perfect electrometer—it bends, protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties & most recondite faults. (71)

As evident, Dorothy was an intriguing individual who provoked astonishing (and astonished) reactions from her contemporaries, despite her lacking many of the talents expected of young women of her status. Woolf writes in *Wonders of the Everyday* that Dorothy had no knowledge of

“drawing and watercolor sketching like Jane Austen’s heroine of *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor Dashwood, nor music on the drawing room pianoforte like Elinor’s sister Marianne, nor fine embroidery and tapestry-work such as *Mansfield Park*’s indolent Lady Bertram kept in a state of constant tangle” (21-22).

She was charming regardless. Coleridge’s description of her vacillates between the physical, the spiritual and the analytical, with comments on her peculiar physical beauty, her inherent goodness, and her “eye watchful in minutest observation of nature.” She inspired him to spontaneous verse.

Coleridge seems to wholly approve of and admire Dorothy, as did all those of William’s poet friends who met her. Still, the relentless need for these male writers to write about Dorothy

feels strange in itself. While the Coleridge that Dorothy describes is an active one, constantly observing as “a perfect electrometer,” his very likening of her to an inanimate instrument demonstrates how Coleridge’s attempt to define her exact attributes reduces Dorothy to a static object that can be captured with words and set down on paper. Dorothy, however, probably did not care what was written about her, since the only opinion that really mattered was that of her brother. The sentiment was not one-sided, as it is obvious in William’s personal writing (in addition to his public, published writing) that Dorothy was a quintessentially necessary presence for him. In a letter to Henry Crabb Robins dated April 1829, William wrote that “Were she to depart the Phasis of my Moon would be robbed of light to a degree that I have not courage to think of” (*Wonders of the Everyday*, 73). Woof notes that William’s “association of Dorothy with the moon seems inevitable. Like the moon she changed the ways things look,” and so it was that William perceived Dorothy as instrumental to his writing (*Wonders of the Everyday*, 69).

We have ample evidence in Dorothy’s own writing to suggest that William shared most of his literary work with her. Her journals are filled with entries that describe how she transcribed his work; how he recited unfinished pieces to her so they could discuss how he might continue; and we already recognize Dorothy’s daffodil entry as an example of how she contributed actively to William’s writing by putting her own perspective down on paper for his later perusal. But perhaps William’s reliance on Dorothy takes root at an even deeper level than poetic inspiration. Their relationship as sister and brother was so intense that even today, critics often wonder whether it was incestuous, like Byron and his half-sister, Augusta Leigh. But as we’ve already established (in Chapter One), Dorothy’s and William’s relationship is not built on physical dependency, although the mental interweaving that occurred during the writing process can be

considered just as intense as a physical, sexual relationship, particularly within the concept of the gender roles that shape their writing.

Women are a frequent feature of William's poetry, and he manifests the feminine presence in a myriad of different ways. In *Becoming Wordsworthian*, Elizabeth Fay names the figuration of women in Romantic lyrical poetry as the "address-to-women," and comments that

its roots lies in the courtly love lyric, a verse form and theme with which Wordsworth was well acquainted through Shakespeare and the love ballads... The poet-lover, usually discoursing in the lady's absence, reveals the state of his soul and the depth of his desire. He can do so because in a very real sense he does not need her; he himself contains her in his translation of her person into an ideal ego that feeds his imagination more vividly than is possible for the woman herself to accomplish... In loving the woman through his ideal ego, the lover loves himself. (10)

Given that Dorothy considered William's opinion as paramount, it is prudent to first examine William's poetic treatment of women and feminine figures before studying Dorothy's own poetry, since she would have kept his in mind. Hence, within the context of William's relationship with Dorothy, one might take Fay's observations further and ask whether William's written conception of Dorothy as "an ideal ego that feeds his imagination" in *his* poetry had an impact on *her* poetry, and if it did, what that effect was. We will explore these issues in the last chapter—but first, a closer look at William's relationship with women as poetic entities.



Let us consider a collection of William's poems which critics universally refer to as the "Lucy" poems. While William himself did not name or order the poems, critics agree that because of their shared focus on a female figure who is characterized by a carefree youth spent in

nature cut short in an early death, we can group them together canonically. The female figure of Lucy bears a striking resemblance to Dorothy, in terms of an affinity with nature and a disposition inclined to solitude, and many critics have expounded on the numerous similarities between the two women. For example, Lucy Newlyn, in *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: All in Each Other*, observes that:

The verbs evoking nature's silent beneficence—'moulding', and 'passing into'—belong to a vocabulary Dorothy and William shared with Coleridge in the run up to *Lyrical Ballads*. A number of features in the portrait [of Lucy] are also significantly connected with Dorothy's characteristic actions of watching, listening, and feeling... (94)

Of course, there is no way to confirm whether William did think of Lucy as a direct exploration of Dorothy, but the resemblance is so striking at times that critics agree, as Newlyn succinctly summarizes, that there must be a symbolic connection. The Lucy poems thus become a useful platform upon which to examine William's conception and understanding of his sister within the context of Nature in his poetry (William evokes nature as Mother Nature in most of the Lucy poems, so I will refer to nature in this section as "Nature").

Newlyn writes specifically about the poem "Three years she grew in sun and shower," but her comparison can be applied to the other Lucy poems as well. Consider, for example, "She dwelt among the untrodden ways:"

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,  
A Maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
—Fair as a star, when only one



Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know  
 When Lucy ceased to be;  
 But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
 The difference to me!

The “Dove” here is undoubtedly a reference to Dove Cottage, but one fascinating aspect of this poem is that the speaker—who is William, presumably, if we believe the Lucy figure to be an analogy for Dorothy—does not name himself until the last line. This technique is reminiscent of Dorothy’s own poetic reticence and her reluctance to rely on personal pronouns to announce her speaker’s presence within her journal writing. It implies a certain shyness about the speaker, as if he is the one “half hidden from the eye,” instead of the other way around. But the maiden that the speaker has so evocatively described for us now only exists in his memory, since he reveals to us at the end that she has “ceased to be.” The speaker shows us the way to admire her, but she does only remain “half hidden” to us, but actually becomes totally lost to us because she no longer exists in the living world.

William’s description of Lucy in life anticipates the sudden disclosure at the end of the poem that she has already passed away. Consider the phrase “untrodden ways” in the first line, which connotes movement—William thus makes the maiden, who dwells in a place of constant change, a symbol of migration. He specifies the “ways” as “untrodden,” implying that she exists specifically as a conduit not just for progress on an existing journey or project, but for discovery of the entirely new. William emphasizes the maiden’s status as a catalyst for revelation by alluding to the maiden as a source of inspiration, describing her together with “the springs of Dove” (water and stream imagery in both of their poetry so often represent sources of creative

inspiration). And yet his description of the maiden also implies that she is hidden. The word “untrodden” can suggest a new path, but also signifies obscurity, and thus invisibility, which seems a direct reference to the nature of Dorothy’s writing. Her work made a “difference” to William and their close friends, but meant little to anyone outside their immediate circle. The similarity between Dorothy and the maiden in this poem strengthens in consideration of how William’s depiction of the maiden’s uniqueness here is formed in ordinary, everyday terms. He compares the maiden to a violet (a common flower), and also to a star that is fair “when only one / Is shining in the sky.” The maiden is thus obscure, yet understandable and familiar — much like the concept of death itself. Hence, while the announcement of Lucy’s death at the end of the poem is abrupt, it is less surprising than one might think, since William sets her up as a figure in constant flux and change. Death is just the progression of life and Lucy has simply moved on beyond the speaker’s grasp.



The inaccessibility of the maiden may not only be an analogy for the siblings’ relationship, but also gestures towards William’s greater poetic struggle to connect with and understand nature. Elizabeth Fay believes that William “seeks the sister or maiden’s aid for a homeostasis that will enable him to transcend physical sense” (36). Fay implies that William uses Lucy as a method of ordering nature, of finding an equilibrium, or “homeostasis,” with nature that will allow him, as the poet, to rise above nature. How does the maiden’s death in the Lucy poems affect this transcendence? Does it serve as an interruption or a driving force? In the case of “Three years she grew in sun and shower,” in which Nature (the poetic entity, as opposed to

“nature” as physical environment) speaks directly about Lucy, Lucy both impedes and “enable[s]” physical transcendence:

Three years she grew in sun and shower,  
 Then Nature said, “A lovelier flower  
 On earth was never sown;  
 This Child I to myself will take;  
 She shall be mine, and I will make  
 A Lady of my own.

“Myself will to my darling be  
 Both law and impulse: and with me  
 The Girl, in rock and plain,  
 In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,  
 Shall feel an overseeing power  
 To kindle or restrain.” (1-12)

In these first two stanzas, the maiden is simultaneously a subject of Nature as well as a medium for Nature’s power. While Nature is “law and impulse” for the maiden, and so has governance over her feelings, in return, Nature grants her “an overseeing power / To kindle or restrain.” Again, William positions the maiden as a source of inspiration with the ability “to kindle or restrain” creative energy, which softens the subservient implication of Nature making her “A Lady of my own.” Still, William’s conception of the maiden’s agency is ambiguous—she is given a choice (“to kindle or restrain”), but there is no indication that this choice is meaningful, especially given the proliferation of the word “shall,” a command which brooks no flexibility. The maiden *will* retain this “overseeing power,” irrespective of her own desires.

To similar effect, William’s diction is also dominated by words that imply Nature’s shaping and sculpting the maiden for her (Nature’s) own purpose:

“The floating clouds their state shall lend  
 To her; for her the willow bend;  
 Nor shall she fail to see

Even in the motions of the Storm  
 Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form  
 By silent sympathy.

"The stars of midnight shall be dear  
 To her; and she shall lean her ear  
 In many a secret place  
 Where rivulets dance their wayward round,  
 And beauty born of murmuring sound  
 Shall pass into her face. (19-30)

While certain natural objects are subject to the maiden's will—the "floating clouds" and the "willow"—this very subjection works to "mould the Maiden's form." The maiden is transformed by her "sympathy" with nature, and the signs of this transformation manifest physically in the development of her young face, which will become infused with the "beauty born of murmuring sound." Here, William mixes the physical senses by fusing "murmuring sound" with the visual stimulus of the maiden's countenance, reminding us of Fay's point about William's use of the maiden to "transcend physical sense" (Fay, 36). Again, note that there is little tractability here in Nature's commandments, and the maiden *must* "see," *must* act as a receiver of and conduit for Nature's gifts. Fay writes that "the address-to-women poems move to bring the woman addressed to an enclosed place in nature, a grove or bower..." (37) The maiden, already enclosed within the physical space of Nature, may also be trapped within Nature's desires for her.

"Three years she grew in sun and shower" does not end happily, as the speaker reveals that Nature's promises to Lucy culminate in death:

"And vital feelings of delight  
 Shall rear her form to stately height,  
 Her virgin bosom swell;  
 Such thoughts to Lucy I give  
 While she and I together live  
 Here in this happy dell."

Thus Nature spake—The work was done—  
 How soon my Lucy's race was run!  
 She died, and left to me  
 This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;  
 The memory of what has been,  
 And never more will be. (31-42)

In the second-to-last stanza, William makes it evident that Nature meant for Lucy to live a long life, since “stately height” and “bosom” belong on an adult’s body. However, the passage of time in this poem is truly left ambiguous, as Lucy Newlyn comments:

The formal grace of this poem—its gentle iambic rhythms and repeated enjambments, the delayed rhymes which give all the stanzas their closure, like musical phrases—suggests a profound attunement to natural cycles. But although the changing weather is mentioned (shower and storm), there is no reference to the passing seasons: it is as though the girl is absorbed into a perpetual, self-renewing spring. (93)

The last stanza thus comes as a tragic surprise, because Lucy had seemed safely ensconced within Nature’s “perpetual, self-renewing spring,” and thus untouched by ordinary time.

Lucy’s sudden death is made all the more perplexing because Nature falls silent and the speaker is left with only memories “of what has been, / And never more will be.” Perhaps we are meant to interpret her death as the correct culmination of the maiden’s ongoing transformation, which would explain the lack of abject grief on the speaker’s part. On the other hand, Nature’s silence may be taken either as a sudden retraction of promises, or of an inability to prevent her early death. Regardless, the key point here is that no matter which way the maiden turns, she is possessed by some other being; either by the all-encompassing Nature, or by the speaker himself (who names her “*my Lucy*”). Lucy’s lack of possession over her own body and choices in William’s poetry is eerily reminiscent of Coleridge’s description of Dorothy in his letter, which is

almost feverish in its intent to capture and depict. Dorothy, manifested in both poets' imaginations as a paragon of a woman, loses her own voice in the adoring chorus of the male writers around her.



The shorter Lucy poem "A slumber did my spirit seal" further explores the effect of the female figure's death on the relationship between the speaker and Nature:

A slumber did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears:  
She seem'd a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

In this poem, Lucy's death is more of an interruption of her natural powers rather than a natural progression of her life. This is evident in his observation that "No motion has she now, no force; / She neither hears nor sees," which directly opposes his portrayal of her in the other Lucy poems as a being that symbolizes vital energy. Lucy Newlyn writes that "in the gap between first and second stanzas, he passes from wishful oblivion to blank acceptance—a passage as silent, unobtrusive, and inevitable as the death he mourns" (92). Nature too is "silent, unobtrusive," marking a departure from the active role Nature took in "Three years she grew in sun and shower." William also presents Nature as banal here, a predictable "diurnal course / With rocks, and stones, and trees," which alludes to the recurrent idea of the maiden as a conduit to Nature. Without her presence, Nature becomes mundane and obscure again to the speaker—"Nature," a

stylized, formidable entity, becomes simply “nature,” a physical landscape with no personality or purposeful power.

We can connect the notion of Lucy as a fundamental link between poet and nature to the relationship between William and Dorothy, as William very plainly states that Dorothy is a constant source of inspiration, without which his writing would be left wanting: “Were she to depart the Phasis of my Moon would be robbed of light to a degree that I have not courage to think of” (Wonders of the Everyday, 73). Note how William’s descriptions of the maiden in these poems often focus on her physical senses, and her experience of nature (the physical environment) through them. For examples, in “A slumber did my spirit seal,” the speaker thinks that the maiden is capable of evading the “*touch* of early years” (own emphasis), and in “Three years she grew in sun and shower,” the maiden is susceptible to the auditory murmurings of Nature’s rivers and clouds and other “mute insensate things.” That last phrase is particularly indicative of how the maiden’s transcendent power is not necessarily spirituality, but superior physical perception, as she is able to discern “mute” sounds. Again, these are all qualities that we associate with Dorothy. Intriguingly, William’s focus on the the maiden’s spirituality *through* her physicality seems a unique twist on the very idea of transcendence, which we think of as the concept of moving beyond the physical world.

In the poem “I travelled among unknown men,” the last of our selection (there are a few other poems associated with Lucy which I do not include here), Lucy’s death has occurred in the past, and the speaker is reminiscing about her. The poem reveals that Lucy, the feminine figure, is free of neither the poet’s nor Nature’s grasp, even in death:

I travelled among unknown men,

In lands beyond the sea;  
 Nor, England! did I know till then  
 What love I bore to thee.

'Tis past, that melancholy dream!  
 Nor will I quit thy shore  
 A second time; for still I seem  
 To love thee more and more.

Among thy mountains did I feel  
 The joy of my desire;  
 And she I cherished turned her wheel  
 Beside an English fire.

Thy mornings showed, thy nights concealed  
 The bowers where Lucy played;  
 And thine too is the last field  
 That Lucy's eyes surveyed.

Here, notice that William configures Lucy as possessing affinity with both Nature and the domestic—with both the interior and exterior of a home. He juxtaposes, for example, the image of her “[turning] her wheel / Beside an English fire” with one of her having “played” in nature’s “bowers.” This is very much the image of Dorothy that we glean from her own journal records, which often show her mending shirts and picking flowers in the space of one entry. Lucy’s age is hard to define, as she fulfills the matriarchal role of spinning, and yet also relishes frolicking through fields. The rather childish impression left by the image of her playing is also at odds with the subtle sexuality within the speaker’s perspective of her, as demonstrated in William’s rhyming of the word “desire” with “fire.” As with William’s other Lucy poems, we are never clear on what the connection between the speaker and Lucy is, much like how the relationship between William and Dorothy remains perpetually grey around the edges, eluding and defying labels like “siblings” or “lovers” or “poets.” The speaker’s snapshot descriptions of Lucy only



serve to enhance the reader's perception of Lucy as a shimmering illusion, so that the atmosphere of a "melancholy dream," as the speaker puts it, never quite passes, and lingers on in the speaker's very evocation of Lucy.

The speaker's conception of the "melancholy dream" and what that actually refers to is itself hard to decipher, making the tone of the poem puzzling. William poses the link between Lucy's death and the speaker's love for England as a *growing affection* for England. The speaker does not explicitly state his despair at Lucy's death at any time, only offering us, as previously mentioned, vignettes of her that augment her insubstantiality, despite grounding her in physical actions like spinning and running. Hence, reading through the poem in its entirety, one feels that the source of the speaker's grief is misplaced, because the speaker is expressing his grief metaphorically instead of directly. The pain feels distant—it is evident that a significant amount of time has passed since Lucy's death, considering that he has "travelled among unknown men, / In lands beyond the sea." Again, all the potentially negative feelings encapsulated in these two lines are muted and remote, as if the speaker had left them behind on those far away shores. In the present, the speaker is reconciled with Lucy's death, having squared his avoidance of England as the site of her passing with his love of it as the place where she grew up. We do not witness how this transition came to pass within the scope of this poem, but the speaker at least seems peaceful when he considers the "last green field / That Lucy's eyes surveyed" with his own waking eyes.

There is a poignant convergence between the speaker's expression of his own physical viewpoint and that of Lucy's in these very last lines. Ultimately, the maiden disappears from the speaker's scope of view—just as Lucy can never again see that "last green field," so too is Lucy

lost to the speaker. Nature's "mornings showed, thy nights concealed" Lucy in her playtime, and at the end of this game of hide and seek, she is gone. The weight of her loss reverberates through the subdued melancholy of the rest of the poem. All of the Lucy poems, in fact, hint at this deprivation with varying degrees of intensity so that, together, the Lucy poems present the male speaker as someone who relies on Lucy for love, comfort, and poetic inspiration, without whom he becomes despondent and disconnected from Nature—"Nature" reverts to "nature." This serves as a direct metaphor for the relationship between William and Dorothy, but Newlyn also offers the idea that "William is not only remembering the lost years of Dorothy's youth ('lost' in the sense that he did not witness them), but also prophesying the quiet passage of Caroline Vallon from infancy to womanhood" (94). The source of William's sadness and the darkness that hangs over the bright colors of these poems stem from William's already fulfilled fear of separation from his loved ones.



Thus, memory plays an integral role in many of William's poems that involve intimate relationships between the speaker and a female subject. With the female subject often absent, or unaware of the speaker's presence—as was the case in the Lucy poems—the speaker often fixates on the woman's past or potential future, as opposed to her present state. Consider the poem "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour" (henceforth referred to as "Tintern Abbey"), in which the speaker and William are one, and the female subjects are Nature and Dorothy. In the fourth and last section of the poem, William directly addresses Dorothy:

Nor, perchance,  
If I were not thus taught, should I the more

Suffer my genial spirits to decay:  
 For thou art with me, here, upon the banks  
 Of this fair river; though, my dearest Friend,  
 My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch  
 The language of my former heart, and read  
 My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
 Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
 May I behold in thee what I was once,  
 My dear, dear Sister! (112-122)

Notice how immediate Dorothy's presence is here. She is not abstracted to a childish figure, nor to a figure haunted by death—William attempts to present her as herself. Crucially, William describes himself as being able to “catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes.” William finds deep connections between his innermost emotions and Dorothy's physical countenance, which, again, emphasizes Elizabeth Fay's conjecture that William finds “transcendence” in Dorothy. While Dorothy's devotion to William may imply that she may have appreciated William's comparison of her with a less mature version of himself, it still implies that William, in writing about Dorothy, reproduces aspects of his own self (irrespective of whether or not they actually exist in Dorothy too). William himself acknowledges this artistic tendency in earlier lines, defining our relationship with the external world around us as a function “Of eye and ear, both what they half-create, / And what perceive” (107-108). For William, the very act of documenting the world is intrinsically and inseparably tied up with the act of creation, so that his description of Dorothy is (at least in part) William's fabrication and so only a product of his imagination. Specifically, he positions Dorothy as a mirror for his “former heart” that reflects William's past and allows him to rediscover that version of himself.

William is well aware of how temporary his positioning of Dorothy is, which he indicates to the audience by writing imploringly that “Oh! *yet a little while* / May I behold in thee what I was once” (own emphasis). William is always conscious of Dorothy’s existence as a real person outside of his poetry—his explicit recognition makes the poem more tender. As much as William would like to stay in this moment forever, even the act of writing it down in an effort to preserve it is futile because poetic Dorothy is a separate entity from flesh-and-blood Dorothy. Much like the Lucy figure in his Lucy poems, Dorothy, as presented here, is a medium for transportation and transformation, since she is both a reflection of William’s static past, yet also has the potential to grow and to change as her own individual being, beyond William’s poetic conception of her.

To an extent, Nature also fulfills this role of both facilitating and symbolizing metamorphosis:

And this prayer I make,  
 Knowing that Nature never did betray  
 The heart that loved her; ’tis her privilege,  
 Through all the years of this life, to lead  
 From joy to joy: for she can so inform  
 The mind that is within us, so impress  
 With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
 With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,  
 Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
 Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
 The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
 Shall e’er prevail against us, or disturb  
 Our cheerful faith that all which we behold  
 Is full of blessings. (122-135)

In this section of the poem, William describes how Nature shapes human minds. Of particular interest is William’s use of the words “inform,” “impress,” and “feed,” which marks a

progression within the extent of Nature's influence. The word "inform" implies a one-way didactic communication, whereby we are told by Nature what to do or believe in. With the word "impress," William embeds the relationship a little deeper, since the word simultaneously means the evocation of admiring feelings, as well as the physical imprinting of some design or mark on a physical surface. William enhances the notion that the relationship between human and Nature is not simply a mental connection when he describes Nature as "feed[ing] / With lofty thoughts." Here, he links mental influence in the form of "lofty thoughts" with necessary, physical nourishment, which further emphasizes Nature's maternal role. And yet, despite William's placement of humans in a subservient position with respect to Nature, his portrayal of Nature's power is double-edged. While he concedes that it is Nature's "privilege / Through all the years of this life, to lead / From joy to joy," he also praises Nature because she did not "betray / The heart that loved her." The implication is that if Nature had chosen *not* "to lead / From joy to joy," then William's judgement of her may be harsh instead of grateful. As such, despite Nature having incomparable power, she is not untouchable, because within his poetry, William is free to express censure of her, if he wishes to. This already begins to sound familiar, since we discovered a similar sentiment in his poem about the daffodils—William, while worshipping Nature as the source of his poetic gifts, still desires control over Nature.

The immediately subsequent section of the poem returns to Dorothy and elaborates further on her particular relationship with nature:

Therefore let the moon  
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;  
And let the misty mountain winds be free  
To blow against thee: and in after years,  
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured

Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind  
 Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,  
 Thy memory be as a dwelling-place  
 For all sweet sounds and harmonies; (135-143)

The word “therefore” at the beginning of the selection gestures to the previously explored notion that William retains power over Nature (or at least, maintains the appearance of having power over nature) despite setting Nature up as superior. Because Nature has been so kind to him, and did not “betray” him, William will bless Nature’s access to his sister: “*therefore* let the moon / Shine on thee in thy solitary walk” (own emphasis). Notice how this section also mirrors the concept of Nature’s relationship with humans as both physical and mental. Here, William describes how he desires “the moon / Shine on thee” and the “misty mountain winds be free / To blow against thee,” both phrases of which describe Dorothy as a subject acted physically upon by natural elements.

And yet he does not depict Dorothy as wholly passive or uninvolved within Nature. He describes her as taking a “solitary walk,” which gestures toward both her ability to move physically through Nature, as well as her own independent spirit. William also depicts Dorothy’s ties with Nature as mental, by articulating his aspiration for her to become a receptacle for Nature’s “sweet sounds and harmonies.” One fascinating aspect of this description is that while William envisions Dorothy’s maturation in the future (“in after years”), he discusses her “memory” as a “dwelling-place” for Nature. Dorothy’s “memory” in the future would also include the memories she has right now, in the relative past, showing how William extends his concept of physical perception as half imagination to mental perception of one’s own memories, which he presents here as mutable, living beings. William’s concept of being able to alter

memories only emphasizes the notion that he seeks to amend and control Nature. It is also important to clarify that by no means does William intend Dorothy's passivity with respect to Nature—and it truly is passivity in this case, since he illustrates Dorothy's mind as an inanimate object in the form of a house—as a debasement of Dorothy, since he himself has undergone this process (in the earlier parts of the poem). Indeed, it seems an apt description of Dorothy's own writing style, as we have already seen in some of her journal entries her keen, observing eye for detail. William's description of Dorothy here augments the earlier section we examined, when he depicts her “wild eyes” as a reflection of his own past. Here, he intends for her to be a reflection of Nature as well—again, these are all themes that we have already noticed in the Lucy poems.

Dorothy also features in William's poem “The Prelude.” The role that the female subjects play in “The Prelude” is decidedly different from their role in the Lucy poems, which are lyrical in genre. Normative lyrical poems have female subjects that are idealized, studied as though from a distance—longing blooms within that constructed space. “The Prelude” on the other hand, is almost epic in structure and proportion. Accordingly, Dorothy and Nature take on the form of muses, rather than absent lovers. This is also true of “Tintern Abbey.” The role of muse is even more important within the context of “The Prelude” as it is a chronological, autobiographical account of William's own serious doubts about his poetic potential. However, as we observed in “Tintern Abbey,” Dorothy and Nature, even as elevated incarnations of creativity that serve to save William from his uncertainty, are not beyond being changed and shaped by William's writing.

In “The Prelude,” however, William's desire to shape and re-create Dorothy in his own image is replaced by urgent gratitude. Towards the middle of this long work, William writes:

Then it was—  
 Thanks to the bounteous Giver of all good!—  
 That the beloved Sister in whose sight  
 Those days were passed, now speaking in a voice  
 Of sudden admonition—like a brook  
 That did but 'cross' a lonely road, and now  
 Is seen, heard, felt, and caught at every turn,  
 Companion never lost through many a league—  
 Maintained for me a saving intercourse  
 With my true self; for, though bedimmed and changed  
 Much, as it seemed, I was no further changed  
 Than as a clouded and a waning moon:  
 She whispered still that brightness would return;  
 She, in the midst of all, preserved me still  
 A Poet, made me seek beneath that name,  
 And that alone, my office upon earth... (333-348)

William refers to Dorothy as a brook that “is seen, heard, felt, and caught at every turn,” which speaks to the enormous influence that she has on him. The word “caught” however, is surprisingly desperate, particularly in the context of William’s description of himself as “a lonely road,” which connotes an endless, solitary journey. The sensation of being caught is accompanied by the notion of having to *be* caught, either because one has been falling, or has been on the run. The implication here is that Dorothy saved William and “preserved me still / A Poet” — an act William often describes Nature as doing. The parallelism between Dorothy and Nature is also evident in William’s admission that it is because of Dorothy that he is able to maintain “a saving intercourse / With my true self.” Where Lucy in the Lucy poems was capable of facilitating the relationship between poet and Nature, Dorothy is capable of that and more, allowing William to rediscover himself, just as she does in “Tintern Abbey.”

Thus, Dorothy’s poetic identity blends with Nature’s as nurturing, didactic, and maternal —superior, not necessarily in terms of poetic ability, but as a being more capable of giving him



peace and self-confidence than William can on his own. Unlike William, she was “never lost through many a league,” in terms of never leaving William’s side, but also because she unfailingly helped William to find parts of himself:

Where'er my footsteps turned,  
Her voice was like a hidden Bird that sang;  
The thought of her was like a flash of light  
Or an unseen companionship, a breath  
Of fragrance independent of the wind;  
In all my goings, in the new and old  
Of all my meditations... (William Wordsworth, “Home at Grasmere,” 109-15)

### Chapter 3: Through the Looking Glass

#### *Dorothy Wordsworth's Conception of Passivity toward Mother Nature*

Dorothy's sedentariness during her stay at Grasmere (1800-1803) makes this period unique against the backdrop of the other times she spent with William. While she roamed — or “sauntered,” as she put it in her own words — extensively within the Lake District, running errands, studying landscapes, or simply picking flowers, she very rarely joined William on his frequent travels away from home. The *Grasmere Journals* are rich with descriptions of her domestic concerns, of which gardening seemed to take significant precedence over her other daily chores. In the earliest entries of the *Grasmere Journals*, everyday involves work in the garden, mostly completed by Dorothy alone, but sometimes with William too: “In the morning W cut down the winter cherry tree I sowed French Beans & weeded” (The Grasmere Journals, 9). While gardening was an economic necessity (the Wordsworths planted their own vegetables to eat), it was also a physical manifestation of the siblings' shared longing to create a permanent home.

Many critics pick up on the Miltonic undertones of Dorothy and William secreted away in their lush valley home, emphasizing the innocent fecundity implied by their act of growing a garden together. For example, Frances Wilson comments on how, “like Milton's Eve, Dorothy has been translating plants and flowers from the valley to their own patch of land, adding orchids, lemon thyme, and rock ranunculus to the radish and peas” (Wilson, 69-69). The Wordsworths' mixing of domestic, household plants with more extravagant blossoms evokes the quintessentially diverse character of Dove Cottage itself. It was not simply a place for the

siblings to eat and sleep in, like many of their previous dwellings; it also inspired creativity, so that their writing bloomed like the flowers in their carefully tended garden.

In Dorothy's poetry, nature (the physical environment, not Mother Nature) and garden often intertwine, blurring the boundary between external and internal. Recall that William often depicted Lucy—a proxy for Dorothy—as a paragon of both wild, natural power and domesticity. Pamela Woof sees this within Dorothy's own writing as well, observing that “the house inside [as described by Dorothy] seems a continuation of nature outside” (*Wonders of the Everyday*, 66). Consider early lines from Dorothy's poem “Irregular Verses,” addressed to her goddaughter Julia (Jane Pollard's daughter, incidentally), in which she describes her dream of an ideal home:

A cottage in a verdant dell,  
 A foaming stream, a crystal Well,  
 A garden stored with fruit and flowers  
 And sunny seats and shady bowers,  
 A file of hives for humming bees  
 Under a row of stately trees  
 And, sheltering all this faery ground,  
 A belt of hills must wrap it round,  
 Not stern or mountainous, or bare,  
 Nor lacking herbs to scent the air;  
 Nor ancient trees, nor scattered rocks,  
 And pastured by the blameless flocks  
 That print their green tracks to invite  
 Our wanderings to the topmost height. (21-34)

Written in the year 1829, this poem exemplifies Woof's idea that nature and home are inseparable for Dorothy, and that there cannot be one without the other—crucially, they depend on each other for definition.

Notice how Dorothy's description of the cottage is formed entirely in terms of its external surroundings, because she never once brings us inside the house. We are kept back in a mid-

distance vantage point that only increases the allure of the house, because the interior remains a mystery. In the following stanza, Dorothy laments that “Alas! the cottage fled in air, / The streamlet never flowed,” and indeed, we never feel that the cottage is a real place, or that we are meant to imagine it as a definite possibility. Dorothy’s description of the house suggests a dream, which remains insubstantial and fleeting despite the minute details that Dorothy fills its surroundings with — a true “faery ground.” For example, she juxtaposes the “foaming stream,” a natural object, with the image of a “crystal Well.” Even if the word “crystal” refers to the appearance of the water within the well, and not the well itself, it still offers a hint of the magical. Her choice of the word “crystal” also associates a certain monetary value to the well, as it brings to mind the clarity and shine of precious gems. Dorothy thus transforms the well—an ordinary, everyday household object only useful for storing water—into something that sparkles and seduces the eye. As Woolf writes, “she could perceive in nature something more than physical, a glorifying in light and life such as any one of us might be blessed enough to experience” (*Wonders of the Everyday*, 59).

One aspect of this poem that sets it apart from the works that we have previously examined is Dorothy’s shaping of nature *to* the cottage, as opposed to the other way around. In a later poem, “Grasmere — A Fragment,” the cottages of the valley seem almost distinct from human connections and exist as stand-alone objects within the greater physical landscape, the cottage she pictures here is very much designed for human living. This is evident not only in her description of “sunny seats and shady bowers,” or “a garden stored with fruit and flowers,” which turns the garden from an extension of the external, natural landscape into a pantry for humans, but even in her design of the uncultivated lands around the cottage. In “Grasmere — A

Fragment,” she revels in the desolate wildness of one particular cottage — here, she yearns for comfort and security, and so the floras are arranged in a circular fashion around the cottage, forming protective, concentric layers. The word “arranged” is key here, because it shows how Dorothy orders nature according to her own desires. Consider, for example, the proliferation of phrases like “a file,” “a row,” and “a belt,” all of which imply neat structure that is the antithesis of the lush, uncontrolled majesty of the Rock in “Grasmere — A Fragment.” As in “A Sketch,” this poem ends with the perspective of the wanderer panning upward, following the “print” of the sheep flocks as they are let out to pasture among the hills (there are no jagged mountains to shadow the pure joy here).

Still, one must wonder why she decided that such a house was impossible — why did she describe it as an ethereal “faery ground,” as so ethereal? In the next stanza, she writes that

Such was the spot I fondly framed  
 When life was new, and hope untamed:  
 There with my one dear Friend would dwell,  
 Nor wish for aught beyond the dell.  
 Alas! the cottage fled in air,  
 The streamlet never flowed:  
 —Yet did those visions pass away  
 So gently that they seemed to stay,  
 Though in our riper years we each pursued a different way. (35-43)

Dorothy’s referral to William here (who else could she refer to as “my one dear Friend?”) is telling, and allows us to view this poem, just like “Grasmere — A Fragment,” in part as another expression of Dorothy’s constant exploration of her relationship with her brother in writing. In this stanza, she describes her life with William in a few quick strokes, referring to her youthful desires (“When life was new, and hope untamed”), which were soon, if not frustrated, then at least revised by life. As discussed, she did not have William to herself for long periods of time;

their relationship often operated under the influence of another's presence, whether it be a shared ward, as in the case of young Basil Montagu, or with especially close writer friends, like Coleridge. Perhaps her attraction to the desolate cottage in "Grasmere — A Fragment" was less of an attraction to something aesthetically pleasing, and more of an inclination to the familiar sensation of feeling immense loneliness even in the company of others.



Dorothy's poem "Floating Island At Hawkshead, An Incident in the Schemes of Nature" evokes a hierarchical relationship between nature and human communities, which Dorothy uses to offer comments on the general dearth of value humans place on the value of nature. The poem's title, "*Schemes* of Nature" (own emphasis), evokes the objectiveness with which Dorothy sets out her thoughts here by alluding directly to the idea of a plan, and also emphasize Dorothy's inclination to observe, measure, and record. Dorothy begins the poem with a clear establishment of nature's unity and power:

Harmonious powers with nature work  
On sky, earth, river, lake and sea;  
Sunshine and cloud, whirlwind and breeze,  
All in one duteous task agree. (1-4)

In the last line of this stanza, Dorothy especially emphasizes the sentience of nature and a sense of explicit purpose—whether or not humans figure into this "task" is yet unknown here. What also is new here is a sense of the divine, which Dorothy implies in naming "harmonious powers" as a separate force from nature — since the "harmonious powers with nature work" together, they cannot be one entity. Likewise, nature itself seems separate from "sky, earth, river, lake and sea" and the other natural objects that it works "on" with the "harmonious powers." And yet there seems to be no clear hierarchy within this triad of "harmonious powers," nature, and

natural objects, since the sheer multitude of the natural objects that Dorothy lists grants them equal grandeur as the former two powers that are meant to “work” on them.

Still, Dorothy begins to disturb this unity immediately in the next stanza, where she describes how

Once did I see a slip of earth  
By throbbing waves long undermined,  
Loosed from its hold — how, no one knew,  
But all might see it float, obedient to the wind. (5-8)

The words “undermined” and “loosed” sit in direct contention with the harmony that Dorothy emphasizes in the first stanza — she also uses the word “dissevered” to describe the same island in the next stanza, much to the same effect (later, in line 11). The island thus seems anomalous, made distinct not only because of its physical separation from its assigned location, but also in terms of Dorothy’s diction. The quality of the island’s rebellion itself is peculiar, because while the island does undermine the unity of nature and so thwarts nature’s “duteous task,” it remains “obedient to the wind.” One begins to see that even in disturbing nature’s scheme, the island is still a part of a grander system that does not move against nature’s plans, but in tandem with them.

Levin writes that “this fragmentation and disunity, however, exist within nature’s harmony, and there is always the possibility of renewal and regeneration” (128). We can observe this in the fourth movement of the poem, where Dorothy tapers the focus of the poem to explore the inner workings of the island itself:

Food, shelter, safety, there they find;  
There berries ripen, flowerets bloom;  
There insects live their lives — and die;  
A peopled world it is, in size a tiny room. (13-16)

Here, Dorothy invites us to weigh each small, seemingly insignificant aspect of the island as compelling — not in themselves, which is indicated by her choice of nondescript words like “ripen” and “bloom,” but as important components of the cycle of life that we are all a part of. Dorothy returns to the idea of unity, tying inevitable death into a wholesome system. Unlike William in the Lucy poems, Dorothy does not fear death, at least, within the context of it as a part of nature. Where the Lucy poems were driven by the turmoil arising from William’s view of death as the divide that separated Lucy from the nature that she so loved, Dorothy passes over death with barely a murmur—“There insects live their lives—and die,” just as we do, without ceremony.

In this stanza, Dorothy also finally brings humans directly into the picture, framing the existence of insects and flora within the context of “a tiny room.” In *Dorothy Wordsworth’s Ecology*, Kenneth Cervelli writes that “this domestic transformation allows both speaker and reader, who are themselves presumably ensconced in comfortable rooms, to absorb and understand the sometimes uncanny—as well as unremitting—processes of nature” (20). Ironically, though, Dorothy’s metaphor of “a tiny room” gestures not only towards the microcosmic essence of the island made familiar to us in a “domestic transformation,” but also towards a sense of insularity and containment that contradicts the image of unity within the image of the flowers and the insects. This seems to undermine Levin’s belief that “there is always the possibility of renewal and regeneration” in Dorothy’s nature, since Dorothy creates the impression that the island is somehow closed off from the rest of the world. She does not indicate that there is any door to this “tiny room” — or, at least, any that are accessible to



humans. Dorothy augments the island's isolation with the repetition of the word "there," which she chose instead of, say, "here," and hence only serves to increase the sensation of distance between the reader and the island. Dorothy has invited us into the island by describing its aspects in detail, but we are not truly "there" and can only sense it from an unconquerable gap. As with the cottage in "Irregular Verses," the gap between reader and island only enflames the reader's curiosity.

The uneasy feeling of being unable to pinpoint the geographical location of the speaker's perspective within the physical landscape of the poem contrasts starkly with Dorothy's firm placement of herself and her opinions in "Grasmere — A Fragment" (which we will examine shortly). She ends "Floating Island" by remarking:

And thus through many seasons' space  
This little island may survive,  
But nature (though we mark her not)  
Will take away, may cease to give.

Perchance when you are wandering forth  
Upon some vacant sunny day  
Without an object, hope, or fear,  
Thither your eyes may turn — the isle is passed away,

Buried beneath the glittering lake,  
Its place no longer to be found.  
Yet the lost fragments shall remain  
To fertilize some other ground. (17-28)

Her vague declaration of how "all might see" the island in the second stanza of the poem changes here into a direct addressing of the reader in the phrase "though *we* mark her not" (own emphasis). And yet, she simultaneously pulls the poem back into abstractness by not explaining exactly what nature "will take away, may cease to give." It cannot be life, since Dorothy has

already made death and life inextricable and only whole when considered together. Dorothy's phrasing recalls William's proclamation that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her" in "Tintern Abbey," with the implication being that nature "will take away, may cease to give" bounty on individual humans (123-124). Dorothy's portrayal of nature as incomprehensible here is actually a theme that permeates the poem from the very opening lines, since she leaves the details of nature's "duteous task" ambiguous. Levin opines that "Implied throughout this poem, which presents nature not necessarily as explicable but as observable, is the notion that too many people gaze vacantly at nature and so remain unaware of its complexity" (127). When Dorothy speaks of how "thither your eyes may turn — the isle is passed away, / Buried beneath the glittering lake," she is likely not referring to the physical disappearance of the island (since the world she has hitherto described to us is not a supernatural one, where islands can disappear and reappear at will) but to the disappearance of the island's significance from the human mind.

Nature defies human expectations in "Floating Island," much as it does in William's poetry. But instead of struggling against the intangibility of nature, as William does, Dorothy takes it in her stride and does not allow herself to believe that she is capable of anything more than simply noticing and describing the "schemes" of nature. Dorothy observes how the profundity of nature's mechanisms (the very fact that it is beyond human comprehension) can be lost on humans. She equates the danger of not seeing the island with a stagnancy of the mind, of seeing "without an object, hope, or fear." Unlike in "Grasmere—A Fragment," nature does not press her presence on the speaker or the reader, and there is no burbling stream to remind Dorothy to be happy. Still, the poem ends hopefully, lingering on the idea that the "fragments" of

the island might “fertilize some other ground,” and so inspire minds that are more inclined to embracing the sublime bounty of nature.



Dorothy does not always maintain an authoritative, distant tone when discussing Nature as Mother Nature. Susan Levin believes that Dorothy “writes poems that analyze her life as a woman in the Lake District, that set her past fantasies against present realities — her own and those of other women” (111). Mary, in marrying William, was at first an interruption of the direct link that Dorothy had with her brother. The gentle, but insistent intrusion of Mary into the relationship Dorothy had with her brother caused ripples in Dorothy’s journal writing beyond the entry that records the day of their wedding. Whether it be coincidence or not, it seems fitting that many of her descriptions of their garden following the marriage are characterized by rain. Dorothy’s poems never explicitly express any of the frustration that must have accompanied life with William and his wife. For example, consider Dorothy’s poem “Grasmere - A Fragment,” written in 1805, about three years after William and Mary were wed. While the poem’s tone is consistently measured and light throughout, certain details of diction delineate shadows of worry among the leafy trees and flowers that complicate our understanding of how she thought about the relationship between Nature and humans, which in turn serves as a subtle description of the changes in her life with William.

The first two poems we examined demonstrate Dorothy’s understanding of the relationship between herself, nature and the human faculty of creation and imagination. Dorothy’s poem “Grasmere—A Fragment” reveals the most about how she comprehended the triad formed between herself, brother, and Nature—particularly within the context of William’s

recurrent evocations of her as an ideal maiden. Many critics express the belief that Dorothy's poetic voice is inseparable from William's. Stephen Behrendt, in *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community*, for example, asserts that poetry written by women during the Romantic Period "must itself inevitably reveal the character not of the women themselves *but rather of the men* who 'compose' and 'direct' both their creative work and the women themselves" (17). But as the previous poems have already shown us, Dorothy had an intellectual relationship with nature that clearly deviated from William's in terms of how the siblings recognized and reconciled the power of nature as both creative and destructive—the same applies to Dorothy's handling of Nature, as Mother Nature. These subtle differences expand and multiply in "Grasmere—A Fragment."

The poem begins calmly and evenly, with Dorothy implementing a conventional iambic rhythm and a regular rhyme scheme:

Peaceful our valley, fair and green,  
 And beautiful her cottages,  
 Each in its nook, its sheltered hold,  
 Or underneath its tuft of trees.

Many and beautiful they are;  
 But there is one I love best,  
 A lowly shed, in truth, it is,  
 A brother of the rest.

Yet when I sit on rock or hill,  
 Down looking on the valley fair,  
 That cottage with its clustering trees  
 Summons my heart: it settles there. (1-12)

Dorothy's habit of categorizing and sorting is immediately apparent within the first few lines of the poem. She notes that all the cottages, "each in its nook, its sheltered hold," have an allotted

place in the valley — the houses of the Grasmere community don't supplant Nature, but instead integrate into the landscape. The word "sheltered" evokes the sense that the human community is subsequent to the valley. Later in the poem, Dorothy also describes the trees and plants acting as a "screen" for her cottage, which only emphasizes the notion that the human community thrives under the protection of the valley. Like William, Dorothy depicts Nature as possessing consciousness, deliberately shielding humans from its own destructive forces. In William's poetry, Elizabeth Fay writes that "Nature supports the hero's endeavors and nurtures his ambitions. She is his lyric muse and the alternative to the sterner epic inspiration of the archaic mother" (39). Nature operates in the same way in Dorothy's poem. Dorothy's own "heart," as she says, is not exempt from this relationship, since it obeys the "summons" of one particular cottage. Dorothy's language here is reminiscent of William's in the Lucy poems that we've previously looked at, since William too implied that Lucy was powerless against Nature's beckoning. Hence, despite Dorothy's deliberate placement of herself as separate from the valley at the beginning of the poem, an observer simply "Down looking on the valley fair," she also determines that she is irrevocably a part of the valley and the system that governs the relationship between humans and Nature there.

It is no coincidence that she identifies the cottage that fascinates her as decidedly male, "A brother of the rest," since this cottage itself must be Dove Cottage, which she shares with her actual brother, William. Her description of the house as "a lowly shed" also emphasizes the uniqueness of *this* cottage since the word "shed" connotes a place of storage not even fit for living in. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the "fertile fields and hedgerows green" of the other cottages, the land surrounding this one is "rocky steep and bare," where only "moss and lichen

flourish.” Dorothy does not offer an explanation for her inclination for this desolate corner of the otherwise lush valley, save that her “fancies they perchance are wild.” Here, she likely refers to William’s earlier poem “Tintern Abbey,” in which he describes her as possessing “wild eyes” (120):

... in after years,  
 When these wild ecstasies shall be matured  
 Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind  
 Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,  
 Thy memory be as a dwelling-place  
 For all sweet sounds and harmonies... (138-143)

Though the cottage in Dorothy’s poem is “a lowly shed” and not a “mansion,” it still symbolizes all “lovely forms” and is capable of capturing “sweet sounds.” For example, when the “storm comes from the North” and passes through the cottage’s lands, it loses its ferocity and “lingers near that pastoral spot, / And, piping through the mossy walls, / It seems delighted with its lot.” Dorothy sees the cottage as capable of turning the raw, natural power of a storm into mere “piping,” which has musical connotations that resonate particularly with William’s notion of “harmonies” in “Tintern Abbey.” Furthermore, within the context of “Tintern Abbey,” which Dorothy helped to shape and revise, Dorothy’s description of the cottage as a “shed” may be read as poignant instead of self-effacing, since a “shed” is capable of storing the emotions and memories that William beseeches her to retain in “Tintern Abbey.” Recall that we had earlier described William’s positioning of Dorothy as a vessel for Nature as relegating Dorothy to a passive role with respect to Nature. Dorothy’s explanation of her own taste in “Grasmere—A Fragment” as “wild” demonstrates instead that she has an inherent affinity with Nature, and so she is willingly *choosing* to receive Nature—she remains active within her passivity.

This is further evidence that Dorothy consciously responded to William's poetry and further developed his ideas. Her poetic writing was by no means static, or merely an extension of William's. To demonstrate how hard Dorothy worked at her poetry, it is worth noting here that "Grasmere — A Fragment" is an elaborate adaptation of several of Dorothy's earlier, shorter poems into a cohesive, longer work. Consider, for example, the short poem entitled "A Sketch," which comprises of only three stanzas:

There is one Cottage in our Dale,  
In naught distinguish'd from the rest  
Save by a tuft of flourishing trees,  
The shelter of that little nest.

The publick road through Grasmere Vale  
Winds close beside that Cottage small;  
And there 'tis hidden by the trees  
That overhang the orchard wall.

You lose it there — its serpent line  
Is lost in that close household grove —  
A moment lost — and then it mounts  
The craggy hills above.

Dorothy retained most of "A Sketch" in the process of merging it into "Grasmere—A Fragment," such as in the distinguishing of one cottage from the others because of its particular resonance with nature, and the concept of traveling on roads that lead to mysterious ends. Yet there remain profound differences in Dorothy's description of the cottage in the two pieces. While the cottage features prominently in "A Sketch," Dorothy is more fascinated with the "publick road" that "winds" its way through Grasmere Vale. She creates remarkable visual stimulus with the juxtaposition of seen and unseen, as represented by "tuft of flourishing trees" which provide a shifting screen that alternately obscures and reveals the cottage and the road to the speaker as the

wind blows the branches and the draping leaves “that overhang the orchard wall.” Dorothy elongates time here, stretching a passing moment to allow the reader to contemplate infinite variations in what is presented to our mind’s eye.

Dorothy’s handling of pace and juxtaposition of different images in the last stanza is delicate in its exploration of the way the loss of the road behind the trees becomes “a moment lost.” By jumping from visually losing the road behind the “household grove,” to losing “a moment” of time, she extends the relationship between Nature and human to something that is beyond either entity. The vision of the road endlessly delving into the “craggy hills,” into oblivion, is suitably divine. Pamela Woof writes admiringly that Dorothy’s use of the “timeless participle” in this line offers the impression that the “turf continuously loses itself at the road’s edge, finds itself mountain path even while becoming turf again. Dorothy’s description is not of sequential states; it is of imperceptible process, nature permanently in action” (34). Woof gestures towards Dorothy’s impeccable ability to evoke stillness (in the speaker’s quiet observation of the scene) and ceaseless motion (in the perpetual transformation of “turf” into “mountain path”) simultaneously.

The other object that Dorothy focuses on in “Grasmere—A Fragment” is a large rock that she meets while walking in the hills near her cottage when she first arrives at the valley. Dorothy makes a careful note of how she “left my sole companion-friend” (presumably William), but before long, she stumbles upon another presence that interrupts her solitary journey:

Eastward, toward the lofty hills,  
This pathway led me on  
Until I reached a stately Rock,  
With velvet moss o’ergrown.



With russet oak and tufts of fern  
 Its top was richly garlanded;  
 Its sides adorned with eglantine  
 Bedropp'd with hips of glossy red.

There, too, in many a sheltered chink  
 The foxglove's broad leaves flourished fair,  
 And silver birch whose purple twigs  
 Bend to the softest breathing air. (58-68)

The Rock is starkly different from the cottage. Notice that the Rock heralds a sudden change in color palette — where before Dorothy's landscape was dominated by the greens and browns of trees, now we have splashes of more vivid hues in the flowers. This scene still has its share of trees, but they are more ethereal, with silver bark and “purple twigs” so that we are at once transported to another place entirely. There is little to link this Rock with the cottage. Dorothy was fascinated by the bareness of the cottage and the landscape around it, but here, she is entranced instead by the fanciful, supernatural beauty of the grove. Indeed, Dorothy's description of the Rock itself is a direct counterpoint to that of the cottage. While the cottage is masculine, the Rock is distinctly feminine, with “hips of glossy red.” Margaret Homans detects an air of sensuality clinging to that line, noting that “though the ‘hips of glossy red’ refer actually to rose-hips, they contribute to a sense of erotic corporeality” (52). The Rock takes on human characteristics (much like Dorothy's daffodils do), while maintaining physical form as a rock. The gender dichotomy that Dorothy creates with the Rock and the cottage in this poem emphasizes Homans' notion that when Dorothy enters Nature in her poetry, “instead of finding version of her beloved, she finds [William's],” encountering Nature in a wholly feminized profile. Dorothy's characterization of the cottage as a male entity may be an expression of a search for her own counterpart—one that is separate from William's.

Like William, Dorothy feels the need to actively respond to the Rock's serene, feminine beauty, commenting that:

Beneath that Rock my course I stayed,  
And, looking to its summit high,  
"Thou wear'st," said I, "a splendid garb,  
Here winter keeps his revelry.

"Full long a dweller on the Plains,  
I grieved when summer days were gone;  
No more I'll grieve; for Winter here  
Hath pleasure gardens of his own.

"What need of flowers? The splendid moss  
Is gayer than an April mead;  
More rich its hues of various green,  
Orange, and gold, & glittering red."

Notice that Dorothy does not address the Rock as "she," despite the fact that she has already given the rock feminine attributes. By using the more formal pronoun "thou," Dorothy acknowledges that Nature is not limited to her own imagination and definition of it (and its gender). Like the cottages that conform to the shape of the valley, Dorothy's will is subjugate to that of the Rock. This acknowledgement softens the possessive tone inherent in Dorothy's choice of words like "garlanded" and "adorned," which relegate the Rock to a passive position, since these words imply that the Rock was intentionally dressed or decorated by some other being for aesthetic purposes. Again, we can link this back to William's "Tintern Abbey," in which he expresses a wistful desire to "yet a little while" stay with Dorothy in that particular moment, on the banks of the river Wye (line 120). Both Wordsworths are aware of how the inexorable passage of time moves the physical beings that they are describing away from the poets' opinions

of them. Nature diverges from the Wordsworths' poetic conception of Nature even at the same time that the Wordsworths write Nature into their work.

However, Dorothy's reaction to the beauty of this rock still gestures toward a divergence between the relationships that Nature has with her and with William. Susan Levin opines:

Beautiful and fertile, as well as destructive, nature in Dorothy's poetry is consistently orderly. It generates delight, love, and peace and, unlike nature in William's poems, does not terrorize the observer. The component of fear is absent. (111)

Levin here is talking specifically about the poem "Nutting," in which William recalls a moment from his childhood when he destroyed some plants in a grove. Levin offers the assessment that the boy in William's poem was reacting in violence to Nature's feminine presence, which William's speaker perceives as overwhelming—Levin believes that this "component of fear" is not a part of Dorothy's relationship with Nature. The destructive aspect of Nature that Dorothy hints at earlier in her poem, with the mountain overhanging her favored cottage almost menacingly, is wholly muted here. Winter becomes another set of "pleasure gardens" for Dorothy, and the erotic femininity of the Rock does not beguile or intimidate Dorothy as it perhaps would her brother. She is comfortable with both the feminine *and* masculine manifestations of Nature. Dorothy maintains an air of softness to Nature in this poem that echoes the vulnerability of the daffodils she recalled so vividly in her journal entry. While Nature is capable of giving protection, it too is in need of protection. In the Rock's grove, delicate plants rest in "many a sheltered chink," echoing the vision of the valley's cottages "each in its nook," and tree branches "bend to the softest breathing air." Nature is not only "orderly," as Levin observes, but exists in a state of vulnerability that is revealed only to

those who wander off “the public road” (as Dorothy has done), and so willingly enter into Nature’s realm (54).

The end to “Grasmere—A Fragment” offers yet another angle to the matter of Dorothy’s passivity toward nature within her own poetry:

— Beside that gay and lovely Rock  
There came with merry voice  
A foaming streamlet glancing by;  
It seemed to say “Rejoice!”

My youthful wishes all fulfill’d,  
Wishes matured by thoughtful choice,  
I stood an Inmate of this vale  
How could I but rejoice? (69-88)

The word “Inmate” is immediately distinct, since it is one of the few words that Dorothy capitalizes, which characterizes it as one of the keywords of the poem. The negative connotations of the word “Inmate” link to an earlier stanza where Dorothy names herself “A Stranger, Grasmere, in thy vale.” The words “Stranger” and “Inmate” contrast starkly with Dorothy’s other descriptions of interactions with the valley. For example, in the stanza preceding the word “Stranger,” Dorothy marvels at how “The robins warbled, and I heard / One solitary throstle sing,” where “throstle” refers to a thrush. The thrush’s song is “solitary,” but remains nestled within the singing of other birds—it is not segregated from the rest of the natural environment. Hence, the “solitary” song turns out not to be solitary at all, and is only distinct from the other birdsongs by virtue of being a unique sound. Similarly, Dorothy isolates one cottage as her favorite, but it, again, is only one particular part of the greater tapestry that Dorothy presents the valley as. On the other hand, the word “Stranger” takes the notion of solitude in an entirely different direction, as it speaks of alienation and complete separation from the rest of the

landscape. Indeed, Dorothy foreshadows this sentiment with the title of the poem—the word “fragment” implies a splintering fragility that belies the unity of Nature that Dorothy presents within the poem.

Despite having encountered beautiful cottages and this one sublime Rock, Dorothy transforms the word “Stranger” into “Inmate” in the poem’s last stanza, which seems hardly more positive with its connotations of forced entrapment. Does it cast an ominous pallor over the end of the poem that refutes the promise of spring to come? Levin observes that the streamlet’s command to ““Rejoice!” implies the need for such encouragement, implies feelings that are not joyful,” and that there is the possibility for the speaker to disobey and become despondent (153). Here, we brush against the idea of the maiden as trapped between the desires of Nature and of the poet—Dorothy is both maiden and poet in her own work, but she remains subject to external solicitations nonetheless. Fay writes that Dorothy “suffers from the ambivalence the poet exhibits concerning her powerful relation to the archaic mother and her disempowering relation to poetic voice” (39). In some ways, this parallels Dorothy’s own position in William’s household, in terms of her subjectivity to his desires and how she balances her brother’s opinion of her with her own opinion of herself, as well as her contrast with Mary, who may have seemed to inch ever closer to fulfilling the role of “archaic mother” as she grew pregnant again and again. The gracious solemnity with which the Rock is impervious to Dorothy’s attempts to define it poetically is both an expression of Dorothy’s own fortitude to the hardships of her life and an indication of her determination to be happy in the midst of the perpetual struggle to define herself as an independent entity.

This whole poem may be, at least in part, a testament to Dorothy's hardiness, given the proximity of William's and Mary's marriage to when this poem was written. Her comment about grief at the thought "that summer days were gone" may be a reference to her inability to return to days before Mary forever changed the relationship between Dorothy and her brother. The mixed emotions she expressed in her journal entry of the wedding day are also apparent in this poem, which expresses both great joy and great sorrow that, instead of balancing each other out, coalesce into something beyond either mental state. Consider how she marvels that "Here winter keeps his revelry," rejecting the more common associations of winter with stagnancy and inertness. Manifested in the beauty of this Rock, winter is as full of life and possibility as spring. The poem is evidence of Dorothy's firm commitment to renewing faith in her new life with Mary and William, to no longer "grieve" for the loss of the unique intimacy that existed between her and her brother. In the poem, Dorothy walks "Eastward, toward the lofty hills," to where the sun rises — perhaps toward another beginning which may not guarantee happiness, but at least marks out something new and promising.



In conclusion, I'd like to bring briefly to attention Dorothy's writing for children. While Dorothy never had children of her own, she spent a lot of time with young ones, having played a significant part in raising the offspring of people close to her (mostly, her brother's family) and also taught at a local girls' school. Her prose and poetry express a tender and didactic warmth toward children in general. Of course, nature (as the physical environment, less so as Mother Nature) features plenty in the lessons and values she tries to impart through poetry, and again highlights the sentiment she shares with William, that nature can give or take away. Consider the

poem “An address to a child in a high wind,” which follows the circuitous route of the wind as it sweeps over the world:

What way does the wind come? What way does he go?  
 He rides over the water, and over the snow,  
 Through wood, and through vale; and o’er rocky height,  
 Which the goat cannot climb, takes his sounding flight;  
 He tosses about in every bare tree,  
 As, if you look up, you plainly may see;  
 But how he will come, and whither he goes,  
 There’s never a scholar in England knows. (1-8)

Dorothy employs a strict ABAB rhyme structure throughout, creating a driving rhythm that mimics the wind’s relentlessly forward motion. Her wind isn’t orderly or tame — it feels more a part of the wild, desolate nature she depicts in “Grasmere—A Fragment” than in “Irregular Verses.” Dorothy uses the rhyme scheme to provide structure for her child reader in the absence of structure in the natural element she is trying to describe. Another method Dorothy employs to provide comfort and familiarity is to evoke homey imagery and sensations, much like in “Irregular Verses” and even her journal entry on daffodils. Consider how she describes snow as “round as a pillow, and whiter than milk, / And softer than if it were covered with silk,” which triggers the child’s recognition of familiar textures, shapes, and colors and so domesticates the elements into mere ornaments of the home. The world she creates in “An address to a child in a high wind” exemplifies best her ability to find wonder and beauty in everyday, household objects — in their absence, there is “nothing but silence and empty space.”

This is the first time that we’ve seen Dorothy express the absence of human objects within the natural landscape as negative. In “Grasmere — A Fragment,” she celebrates desolation and distance from typical human lifestyles, but recall that that poem is meant as an

expression of her own doubts and hopes, whereas “An address to a child in a high wind” was written for a child. Dorothy, however, does not overly gloss over the destructive power of nature, even in a poem written for children. Consider a later stanza, where she describes the wind crouching menacingly over the cottage:

Hark! over the roof he makes a pause,  
 And growls as if he would fix his claws  
 Right in the slates, and with a huge rattle  
 Drive them down, like men in a battle:  
 —But let him range round; he does us no harm,  
 We build up the fire, we're snug and warm;  
 Old Madam has brought up plenty of coals  
 And the Glazier has closed up all the holes  
 In every window that Johnny broke  
 And the walls are tighter than Molly's new cloak.

The wind here is a multi-formed monster, with the claws of some great beast and the power of “men in a battle.” However, Dorothy’s careful enunciation of childish fears and worries seems to break down here, because while tiger claws might be a normal childhood nightmare, “men in a battle” are much less common. If anything, boys at this age are likely to still idealize warfare, so that the image of “men in a battle” actually constitutes a fantasy instead of a nightmare.

Dorothy’s inclusion of war imagery here is entirely a reference to adult fears instead of childish ones, so that her quick reassurances that the wind cannot harm them are not only directed at the child, but at herself (and, subsequently, any adult readers). The last lines of the poem emphasize the notion that the child is not the only vulnerable presence in the poem, since Dorothy refers to the speaker and child collectively as “we” — “we’ll laugh at his din / Let him seek his own home where it be / Here’s a canny warm house for Johnny and me.” The wind, poised as a threatening force of nature, is expelled from the “canny warm house,” making the distinction



between internal (household) and external (nature outside) clearer than in any of Dorothy's poems that we have seen so far. Dorothy's separation of nature from the interior of the house in an exploration of immature fears (whether they belong to children or adults) meshes well with William's sentiment in "Tintern Abbey" that as minds mature, they should become "a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies" found in nature. The premature mind, as represented in "An address to a child in a high wind," is incapable of comprehending the boundary between external and internal as permeable.

Dorothy also shares William's preoccupation with memory. Notice how Dorothy starts this stanza with the present tense, but soon shifts to the past tense, seeking to distract the frightened child with happier memories. Dorothy refers to an eclectic mixture of recollections that point to both the near and far past. For example, while "Old Madam has brought up plenty of coals" in the past few hours, most likely, Dorothy's mentioning of the Glazier indicates a series of events spanning a wider range of time ("In every window that Johnny broke"). While the damage of the wind is an ever-present threat for the future, Dorothy and the child can take refuge in knowing that these memories, among many others, are *always* safe and secure — the threats of the future cannot touch what they have already shared. Pamela Woof believes that Dorothy's

aim is not 'literature', not poems for public reading. She writes in illness, in confusion, now of the action of opium, now of its reduction, in bodily suffering, and loss and recent memory... The poems and the constant return to lines and snatches from the poems provide for her a way to investigate her own mind. (140-141)

And so, perhaps this thought of refuge at home, with the very warmth and assurance it brings, in itself reveals her deepest wishes and desires, which remain as naive as they were in her schoolgirl days. She writes about the fulfillment of a dream that proves to be the most impossible dream of all: that a cottage can serve as an endless refuge for William and herself from the harsher aspects of their lives, and that they can exist in edenic fashion together forever.

Dorothy did not run from the impossibility of her dream, though, just as she did not shy away from confrontations with her brother's Mother Nature. She understood and participated in the endless cycle of creation and re-creation that was the triad of William, Nature, and Dorothy. As a closing thought, consider the ending to her poem "Thoughts on my Sick-Bed," which is a direct response to William's "Tintern Abbey" and his forecasting therein of Dorothy's future. The poem's ending encapsulates with sweet simplicity Dorothy's acceptance of her brother's conception of Nature, as well as of herself:

No prisoner in this lonely room,  
 I *saw* the green Banks of the Wye,  
 Recalling thy prophetic words,  
 Bard, Brother, Friend from infancy!

No need of motion, or of strength,  
 Or even the breathing air:  
 —I thought of Nature's loveliest scenes;  
 And with Memory I was there. (45-52)

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