

Lucy Newlyn, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: "All in each other"*

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Dorothy Wordsworth is undoubtedly one of the best-known female writers in Britain, if not the world, yet her relationship to the literary canon(s) has always been oblique; she has been recognized as a key figure in British Romanticism in large part for her relationship to her brother, rather than for her intrinsic deserts. Yet there is a steadily growing body of scholarship which treats her as a remarkable and important writer in her own right. Key recent developments have been Kenneth Smith's *Dorothy Wordsworth and the Profession of Authorship* (2011), Pamela Woof's *Dorothy Wordsworth: Wonders of the Everyday* (2013), and the book under review (dedicated to Pamela Woof), all three volumes by writers exceptionally attuned to Dorothy's unique sensibility and mode of literary expression. Lucy Newlyn's *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: "All in each other"* (the subtitle from a letter of Coleridge's to the Wordsworths, "You have all in each other") differs from the others in being equally concerned with William, yet it also differs from most traditional scholarship concerned with Dorothy in its insistence on treating the Wordsworth siblings with determined even-handedness, judging them as two great writers whose writings ultimately merge into one body of inextricably interconnected work. As those writings are also intimately related to the siblings' shared lives and emotional needs, we end up with an intricate mesh of autobiography and literature that Newlyn examines in chronological fashion, skillfully weaving in just enough biography to make clear what is involved in the writing. The result is "the first literary biography of the Wordsworths' creative collaboration" (xiii). The book could almost serve as an introduction to either writer (not that Newlyn wants us to separate them), and Oxford University Press clearly understands it as a potentially popular volume, pricing it accordingly (£19.99 for a substantial hardback) and illustrating it with many attractive Thomas Bewick woodcuts.

I say "almost," because though Newlyn envisages an audience of both academic and "non-specialist readers" (xiv), the latter group will find her book a tough read, and (if Dorothy is their special interest) would be better off starting with Woof's volume. Newlyn is a very intelligent critic, deeply schooled in academic writing, and though she has aimed at a more popular style than that employed in her earlier books, the reader senses this did not come easily, and *William and Dorothy Wordsworth* frequently lapses (or rises, depending on point of view) into more of a standard academic study. Nevertheless, even if it slightly misses its mark, it makes such a strong case for the value of considering the Wordsworth siblings' work together that it will be essential reading for anyone with a serious interest in either, but especially Dorothy, whose writings have very seldom been read with such fine attention to mode, structure, allusion, and the way she was working alongside her brother. Newlyn's easy familiarity with the entire corpus of the Wordsworths' joint production, as well as related

writings by their contemporaries (pre-eminently Coleridge), allows for an exceptionally well-constructed study in which the bigger picture is never lost sight of among the details. Her writing, even when it waxes difficult, is always fresh and engaging, and at times seems to become that which it speaks of: on the matter of the siblings famously sharing notebooks, for example, Newlyn writes “We might see here a textual analogy for their cohabitation at Town End [Dove Cottage], or even a parallel with the behaviour of swallows. These birds build in pairs, returning after migration to refurbish nests they have built earlier” (139). An endnote supplies further information about swallows and notes that Dorothy wrote about swallows building outside her window: at such moments the book’s distance from conventional academic monographs seems considerable.

The problem with *William and Dorothy Wordsworth* from a strictly scholarly point of view, though, is that while its largely uncontroversial main theses — that the Wordsworths’ writings are intimately connected and that they are closely linked to the events of their lives and sense of home and environment — are entirely persuasive, the book is weakened by the arguments being regularly pushed too far, into myth. Newlyn hears allusions and echoes everywhere, sometimes in the form of a single, commonplace word, and takes it for granted that they nearly always convey the maximum possible meaning; not only will they sometimes be wholly inaudible to skeptical readers, but those readers will find it impossible to believe that such slight echoes mean so much. Moreover, the Wordsworths’ lives together are looked at through a rose-tinted lens that often leads to something like hagiography: the *most attractive* interpretation is placed on everything. The book indeed reads at times a bit like a secular religious text, and it is clearly a very personal work for Newlyn; in the preface she states: “Because I share the Wordsworths’ concern with homesickness — and their belief in the healing power of nature, memory, and shared creativity — my account of their life together has a therapeutic dimension, and is intended to be of some practical use and inspirational value to non-specialist readers” (xiv). Because of her established reputation — Newlyn has spent her whole career in Oxford, and published three previous monographs with OUP — she has been granted a certain amount of editorial indulgence. By this I mean, to put it bluntly, that if a young, unknown scholar had approached Oxford with this manuscript, revisions would have been demanded.

Consider, for example, Newlyn’s reading of the mysterious “Lucy poem,” “Three years she grew.” She hears “unmistakable” echoes of “Tintern Abbey” (93), and give two examples. First, she finds “And let the misty mountain winds be free / To blow against thee . . .” echoed in:

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
A beauty that shall mould her form

By silent sympathy. (qtd. 93)

Really? Second, she finds Dorothy's "wild eyes" in "Tintern Abbey" echoed in "She shall be sportive as the fawn / That wild with glee across the lawn / Or up the mountain springs." Perhaps I am an insensitive reader, but all I take from this is that both poems use the word "wild," just as many other poems do. Beyond these echoes (if that is what they are), Newlyn finds "Dorothy's characteristic actions of watching, listening, and feeling" registered in the poem, and Lucy's "responsiveness" "reminiscent of Dorothy's recurrent preoccupations in the *Alfoxden Journal*" (94). Having set out thus much evidence, which surely would not pass muster in a D. Phil thesis, let alone on the editorial desk at *Notes and Queries*, Newlyn proceeds with staggering confidence to affirm: "There is *much* to suggest, then, that this is a love poem addressed by the poet to his sister" (ibid; my emphasis). Here, as elsewhere, the argument is hijacked by predetermined conclusions: the presumption is that Wordsworth was always thinking of Dorothy at some level, and armed with the presumption Newlyn can always find what she seeks.

The arguments tend to work backwards. That is to say, the example just given is not really about *how* to read "Three years she grew," and Newlyn comes close to owning that the poem is just as mysterious if we say "it is about Dorothy" as it was before. Rather, the discussion is concerned with affirming that as Dorothy is *in* the poem, so she was always present at the springs of Wordsworth's creativity, as he was at hers. Newlyn is very interested in what happened just before the quill was dipped in the ink: what was in Wordsworth's or Dorothy's mind as they decided to write? Where were they? What had they just read, or done, or talked about? These sort of questions fascinate most of us, despite Barthes' attempts to explode them in "The Death of the Author," and I certainly have no issue with Newlyn exploring them and making them meaningful. But this is where her tendency to always choose the most attractive, comforting and wholesome interpretation comes to the fore. This is, perhaps, a reaction to the general air of suspiciousness with which the New Historicists and their kin looked into such things, but it is the sort of reaction that makes me long for the middle ground. A good example, and perhaps the best way to sample the general thrust and style and imaginative investments of *William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, is Newlyn's discussion of "I wandered lonely as a cloud," which lies at the exact center of her book. As is well known, even to non-specialists, Wordsworth and Dorothy strolled by Ullswater on 15 April 1802 and saw a great spread of daffodils in bloom. Dorothy wrote a lively description of them in her journal: they "tossed & reeled & danced & seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind" (qtd. 157). Some two years afterwards, or perhaps even later, Wordsworth wrote his extraordinarily famous poem on the subject. A common perception of what happened here (and in other, comparable, cases) is that the poet plundered his sister's good things without acknowledgement and claimed experiences for himself in which she shared; it is a perception Newlyn is eager to rebut. She opens her discussion with a quotation from Martha Woodmansee: "he [Wordsworth] relied on his sister even when writing such

avowedly personal poems as 'Daffodils'. He was not, in fact, 'wandering lonely as a cloud', but strolling with his sister. The poem deliberately presents a collective experience as a supposedly personal one" (qtd. 156–57). Newlyn finds this a "puzzling" conclusion, given that, in her reading, the "personal" and the "collective" were not clearly distinguished in the Wordsworth household, and she goes on to offer the reader two possible scenarios of how the poem came to be composed:

Let us suppose that in 1804 William picked up Dorothy's journal, admired her carefully crafted description of the 'ever glancing ever changing' daffodils, and wrote 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' while he was alone — upstairs in the sitting-room at Town End, say, or out in the orchard, his favourite spot for composition. Reading the journal entry brought back his memory of their walk by Ullswater, which he then described from his *own* subject-position, supplementing her prose with emotions 'recollected in tranquillity' two years later. That is one scenario, albeit a highly unlikely one. Now let us imagine an alternative scene of writing, in which William, Dorothy, and Mary [Wordsworth] are all present. Let us suppose that something prompted Dorothy to bring out her journal, to read aloud her account of the journey from Eusemere to Grasmere, including the beautiful description of the daffodils, and to help William create his own memory-poem by listening to him, or by suggesting ideas, metaphors, rhymes. In this family scene, the *Grasmere Journal* provides a valued record of an experience jointly remembered by the siblings. It gives pleasure to Mary, who was not with them on their homeward journey in April 1802; and it generates a poem. We can be fairly certain, because William let this be known in print, that Mary contributed 'the two best lines': 'They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude' (ll. 15–16). So, even without the further possibility of Dorothy's part in oral composition, it is established that two writers participated in the writing of 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'. The 'I' of the poem is not *literally* William the lonely wanderer, or William the pensive poet lying on his couch in the upstairs sitting room at Town End, but the 'I' of lyric utterance itself — an 'I' that William, Dorothy, and Mary can all identify with. (158)

With the easy assurance of the preacher who has long since demonstrated how every Biblical text can be made to speak of the need for repentance, Newlyn glides to the now familiar conclusion: "William and Dorothy made an incalculable contribution to each other's writing. . . . Creativity in their household was a form of symbiosis" (159).

The compositional scene Newlyn sketches is an attractive one: David Wilkie could have painted it under some such title as *The Poet Assisted* or *Whose Line Next?* But it is obvious that much more than literary criticism, strictly defined, is involved, and it is difficult to know quite what scholarly criteria are relevant. Why quote Woodmansee at all, unless she is in fact articulating a standard, plausible interpretation of the facts? Why construct

“highly unlikely” scenarios? Why, for that matter, *is* the first scenario “highly unlikely”? The problem with juxtaposing alternative scenarios like this is that we can so easily imagine dozens of them, all as plausible and unprovable as the next. What, for example, if Wordsworth had proposed writing a poem on John Wedgwood’s recent founding of the Royal Horticultural Society (“Wedgwood! Britannia’s soil shall ne’er forget”), Dorothy objected to the subject, Wordsworth huffily declared he had no other ideas for a poem, and then Dorothy murmured, after a long look out the window: “I have often wondered why you never conferred a proper poet’s blessing on those beautiful dancing daffodils we saw by Ullswater the spring ’fore last. Let the Royal Horticultural Society match those if it can!” My point, of course, is that this is a parlor game: we simply don’t know. Newlyn makes an ultimately emotional case that the most warmly companionable, loving, equal, sharing and collaborative “scenes of writing” are the most likely, the ones in which we should place our trust as readers, Wordsworthians, and seekers of therapy and inspiration.

William and Dorothy Wordsworth is, one might say, a conclusion-orientated book and the drive toward the conclusion leads to certain odd errors of fact. In the passage quoted, for example, there is the statement that “We can be fairly certain, because William let this be known in print, that Mary contributed ‘the two best lines.’” The “non-specialist reader,” and perhaps some specialists, too, will assume from this that somewhere in the 1807 *Poems* or a later edition there appeared a charming little note along the lines of: “I must inform the indulgent reader that these two lines, which I consider the best in the poem, were contributed by my wife.” In fact, Wordsworth never published such a note, and only revealed Mary’s involvement in the poem to Isabella Fenwick in 1843: his note dictated to Fenwick first appeared “in print” in Christopher Wordsworth’s *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* of 1851. Was this a simple slip? The error seems to mark a point of stress in Newlyn’s picture: yes, the poem was collaborative, to a limited extent, but Wordsworth kept that quiet, and the Woodmansees of the world might put the emphasis on the fact that he quietly absorbed material from both his sister and his wife into his “avowedly personal” poem and took credit for the result. There is also the nagging question of whether Wordsworth really believed the lines “They flash upon that inward eye, / Which is the bliss of solitude” *were* the best in the poem — they had been sharply criticized by Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*, and generally had a bad press. But the sort of Wordsworth who might indulge his wife by taking her two lines into his poem and then, after they had been condemned, gallantly declare them superior to his own, despite thinking otherwise, plays no part in Newlyn’s narrative. Her Wordsworth is always sincere and admirable, and something very close to the ideal brother and husband — just as Dorothy and Mary appear as the ideal sister and wife.

William and Dorothy Wordsworth has received many very positive reviews, both from professional Romanticists and ordinary readers, and it clearly answers a felt need, one closely connected to the way Dove Cottage has become a shrine for literary pilgrims from all over the world. At a time when the study of literature often seems to be a study of almost

anything *but* literature, biography tends to take a debunking attitude, and modern culture seems hopelessly commercialized, it is an attractive antidote to think of the pleasures of reading and writing, of sharing and loving, as practiced at Dove Cottage and re-enacted in the warp and weave of Newlyn's text. It is a book to savor and to return to, with a genuinely new approach and many fresh insights into familiar material, and it drives home its larger conclusions triumphantly. If many of the local conclusions seem tendentious, it is not because Newlyn is desperate to make her case stick, but because, having secured a strong position, she then advances overconfidently into the realm of the unknown.