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Mutual Dependency: The Relationship between William and Dorothy Wordsworth

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Abstract

The argument of this paper highlights the special dependent bond that existed between the poet William Wordsworth and his much younger only sister, Dorothy. As a young orphan girl, Dorothy looked upon her beloved older brother as a caring, protective father-figure. William, symbiotically, found this relationship beneficial and poetically inspiring: Dorothy's instinctive, spontaneous, vivacious response to Nature, and her sharp imagistic descriptions of the natural surroundings of the Lake District evoked lyric lines from the poet's creative spirit. Ironically, however, at a later stage in their relationship, after William becomes a famous public figure, married with a large household, Dorothy is forced by her dire circumstances to become a drudge in her brother's home, toiling in hard physical labour to keep a roof over her head. Tragically, she ends her days in misery and madness.

Keywords: Nature, Grasmere, *The Prelude*, Psychobiographical, Lucy poems.

I

Orphaned at an early age, and separated for many years in their childhood by circumstances beyond their control, William and Dorothy Wordsworth clung to each other in their adult years. Their

strong attachment to each other manifested itself in a yearning for an intimate, nurturing family life together, and in their prose and poetical writing both brother and sister have paid tribute to their mutual love and devotion. More than William, however, it was Dorothy who longed to set up house with her brother. From the age of six she had been shunted back and forth among various distant relatives, and as she grew older, she constantly dreamt of the day when she would be able to live once again with William and her other brothers. In a long letter written to her friend Jane Pollard in 1793, edited and published in 1982 by Alan Hill, Dorothy's "dream of Life" is clothed in warm and homey images of a stable, secure, and mutually fulfilling future. In addition, the letter contains a poignant confession of regret at the enforced separation of the siblings. The letter is an unequivocal affirmation of the ties that united them.

Dorothy writes: "I have laid the particular scheme of happiness for each Season. When I think of Winter I hasten to furnish our little Parlour, I close the Shutters, set out the Tea-table, brighten the Fire, when our refreshment is ended, I produce our work, and William brings his book to our Table and contributes at once to our Instruction and amusement, and at Intervals we lay aside the book and each hazard our observations upon what has been read without the fear of Ridicule or Censure. We talk over past days; we do not sigh for any pleasures beyond our humble Habitation – The central point of all our joys. Oh Jane! with such romantic dreams as these I amuse my fancy during many an hour which would otherwise pass heavily along, for kind as are my Uncle and Aunt, much as I love my sweet little Cousins, I cannot help heaving many a sigh at the Reflection that I have passed one and twenty years of my life, and that the first six years only of this Time was spent in the Enjoyment of the same pleasures that were enjoyed by my brothers, and that I was then too young to be sensible of the Blessing. We have been endeared to each other by early misfortune. We in the same moment lost a father, a home, we have been equally deprived of our patrimony by the cruel Hand of lordly Tyranny. These afflictions have all contributed to unite us closer by the Bonds of affection... Neither absence nor Distance nor Time can ever break the Chain that Links me to my brother."

Of course, as is well-known, it was Raisley Calvert's timely and fortuitous gift of a legacy to the aspiring poet in 1795 which provided the wherewithal that enabled William and Dorothy to set up house together for the first time. The legacy proved to be a godsend both in the wide world of literature and in the smaller private world of the two Wordsworth's. Freedom from the unsettling anxiety of financial insecurity, and the presence of a devoted sister who took over the responsibility of running the routine household affairs, gave William the time and the confidence to become the great poet that he was destined to be.

Dorothy was not only a frugal and adept housekeeper; she was also William's cherished friend and companion. Moreover, in her role as home-maker and nurturer from the first days of living together at Race down till his marriage to Mary Hutchinson in 1802, Dorothy becomes a surrogate mother for the poet and, eventually came to be associated by him with the sublime, spiritual, feminine principle in nature¹. Thus, while she was herself emotionally and economically dependent on William, her presence and her personality were soon beginning to have a profound impact upon her brother's creative imagination. In effect, as Richard Fadem points out in his essay, "Dorothy Wordsworth: A View from 'Tintern Abbey'", "Dorothy played in her dependent capacity an instrumental role in helping to create Wordsworth the poet, certainly the poet he came to be" (Fadem, 17).

William both loved and needed his sister. However, his attitude towards her in his poetry is not always one of unequivocal affection and adulation. Although in his major autobiographical poems – noticeably in *Tintern Abbey* and *The Prelude* – he celebrated her as a restorative and curative force in his creative life, he is more ambivalent in the *Lucy* poems. As Richard Matlak has pointed out in his essay, "Wordsworth's *Lucy* Poems in Psychobiographical Context", the relationship of William and Dorothy was not "exempt from normal strains" (Matlak, 51). Matlak writes: "Wordsworth's relationship with Dorothy was probably stifling and inhibitive at the time of the *Lucy* poem's composition. During this extremely intense and concentrated period (October 1798-February 1799), when Wordsworth was writing so much of importance in addition to the *Lucy* poems – the *Matthew* poems, "*Lucy Gray*", most of part I of

The Prelude, 1798-99, together with its associated passages, "Nutting" and "There was a boy" – the poet's relationship with Dorothy and Coleridge figured prominently in the psychobiographical context of his work, Wordsworth was depressed at Goslar, mainly because he was separated from Coleridge and was growing uneasy about the constancy of Coleridge's friendship and devotion.... Dorothy could hardly be of comfort in this situation because it was the added cost of keeping her that prevented Wordsworth from joining Coleridge, first in Ratzeburg and later in the expensive university town of Gottingen. The consequence of Wordsworth's depression for his work was the fantasy of Dorothy's death in the Lucy poems. (Matlak 46)

Apart from the kind of ambivalence recorded in the Lucy poems, Wordsworth was generally very grateful for Dorothy's constant companionship. He may have felt somewhat "stifled and inhibited" during his trips abroad with his sister, but for the most part he is unequivocal in declaring that he considered his relationship with her to be artistically restorative and generative. For example, in Tintern Abbey – which prefigures The Prelude in both style and subject matter-the poet is especially appreciative of Dorothy's spontaneity and her ability to respond to Nature with the innocence and wonder of a child. Her presence in fact restores within the poet his earlier, lost self, and the reflection of his own "former" self in Dorothy's instinctive, animal response to Nature helps him reaffirm his faith in himself and his art:

".... thou art with me, here, upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou 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."

The double emphasis on the word "dear" underlines the intensity of the emotion felt by Wordsworth, and it serves to accentuate his overwhelming gratitude for Dorothy's beneficent influence at a critical juncture in his journey towards self-discovery.

Of course, Wordsworth's fullest expression of gratitude for his sister's soothing and healing presence is to be found in his autobiographical epic, The Prelude. In Book VI ("Cambridge and the

Alps”) Wordsworth confesses to Coleridge his immense delight at the reunion with his sister in the summer of 1787. In the following passage, the poet is, not only celebrating Dorothy’s active participation in his life, he is also celebrating the opportunity to share his innermost thoughts with a person who loved and appreciated him. In addition, the young poet’s joyous discovery of the beautiful face of Nature is made more wonderful by the knowledge that his sister finds as great a pleasure in Nature as he does:

“In summer among distant nooks I roved, Dovedale, or Yorkshire dales, or through bye-tracts

Of my own native region – and was blest Between those sundry wanderings with a joy Above all joys, that seemed another morn Risen on mid-noon: the presence, friend, I mean of that sole sister, . . . Now after separation desolate Restored to me – such absence that she seemed

A gift then first bestowed...

My sister and myself, when, having climbed in danger through some window’s open space, We looked abroad, or on the turret’s head Lay listening to the wild-flowers and the grass

As they gave out their whispers to the wind.”

(11. 208-32)2

In Book X (“Residence in France – Continued”), Wordsworth acknowledges the fact that it is Dorothy’s love and devotion which helps him to recover from the disillusionment and despair he had felt in the years following the French Revolution. The confused and troubling events of the period between 1792-95 – which included, among other things, the rise of the tyrannical Robespierre, the Reign of Terror, and the war between England and France-had shattered his idealistic vision of a new egalitarian society. Furthermore, Godwinian rationalism had not only failed to provide solace, it had led to the “paralysis of his creative life” (Fadem, 17). It was at this time in September 1795 that Wordsworth and Dorothy moved into Racedown house in Dorset, and it is here that Wordsworth’s recovery and his discovery of renewed poetic vigour are brought about in the company of the dedicated and loyal Dorothy. As in Tintern Abbey, the mere presence of his passionate and vivacious sister enables the

poet to imaginatively recapture his past and thus connect once again with Nature:

“... the beloved woman in whose sight Those days were passed,
Maintained for me a saving intercourse
With my true self (for, though impaired, and changed
Much, as it seemed, I was no further changed
Than as a clouded, not a waning moon);
She, in the midst of all, preserved me still A poet,
made me seek beneath that name
My office upon earth, and nowhere else.”

(11. 908-20)

The conclusion of *The Prelude* contains a long, lyrical eulogy of Dorothy. In this verse tribute Wordsworth tells us to what extent he had been dependent on his sister for his own emotional and imaginative growth. Once again, Wordsworth refers to the fact that Dorothy's natural, vital, and reassuring presence sustains his own faith in his vocation. In moments of crises in his poetic life, she had helped him return to the earlier state of harmonious interaction with Nature, and he eulogizes her as a soul-mate, a friend and guide who illuminates the dark days of despair with her purity and “an unconscious understanding of the laws of things and life of nature.” (Fadem, 17)

“Child of my parents, sister of my soul,
Elsewhere have strains of gratitude been breathed
To thee for all the early tenderness Which I from thee imbibed.
And true it is That later seasons owed to thee no less;
.. I too exclusively esteemed that love, And sought that beauty,
which as Milton sings Hath terror in it.
Thou didst soften down This over-sternness;
but for thee, sweet friend, MY soul, too reckless of mild grace,
had been Far longer what by Nature it was framed –
Longer retained its countenance severe. ..
But thou didst plant its crevices with flowers,
Hang it with shrubs that twinkle in the breeze,
And teach the little birds to build their nests
And warble in its chambers.
At a time when Nature, destined to remain so long
Foremost in my affections, had fallen back Into second place, ..

(XIII, 11. 211-46)

Although we are left in no doubt as to the nature of the bond between brother and sister, Wordsworth's portrait of Dorothy at

times nevertheless seems to relegate the self-effacing, devoted sister to the background while it is the image of the poetic genius which is foregrounded for the benefit of Coleridge and future readers of *The Prelude*. At the narrative centre of *The Prelude* is the articulate, visible, and self-conscious poet who is Wordsworth, and despite the “strains of gratitude” in which Dorothy is apotheosized in the poem, she remains a floating and ephemeral figure on the periphery of our vision. We get a sense of Dorothy’s selfless involvement in areas of experience which were crucial to the poet himself, but it is difficult to see her as a separate and unique individual since Wordsworth fails to probe deeper into her character and personality. As Elizabeth Hardwick points out in her book *Seduction and Betrayal*, Wordsworth ignores what “we imagine [she] must have often felt – undefined, attendant, dangerously emotional, stumbling. All of this side of her life is a hole, a vacancy.” (154).

Indeed, for many years, literary historians and critics had taken their cue from Wordsworth’s verse and persisted in seeing Dorothy only as “William’s satellite” (Brownstein, 48). It is only recently that her place in literary history has been evaluated in terms other than her existence as a famous poet’s sister. Today, on the strength of her own writings, Dorothy is considered a distinctive writer whose diaries and Journals are worthy of critical attention for their innate formal and contextual merits.

One diary in particular—*The Grasmere Journal*—has been the object of concentrated scrutiny not only because of the detailed descriptions of Nature and the daily household activities, but also because it is here that Dorothy reveals more about herself and her relationship with her brother than she does in all of her other works put together. In 1799, Dorothy and William moved to the Lake Country village of Grasmere, and at one of Wordsworth’s frequent trips away from home, Dorothy’s loneliness acts as a catalyst in making her begin to write her prose autobiography: “I resolved to write a journal of the time till W. and J. return, and I set about keeping my resolve because I will not quarrel with myself, and because I shall give Wm Pleasure by it when he comes home again.” (*The Grasmere Journals*, 15-16)

The Grasmere Journals is not really a true autobiography. Unlike Wordsworth's poetic autobiography *The Prelude*, which takes us on a journey from infancy to maturity and in which there is a great deal of introspective self-analysis as the poet struggles to achieve a stable poetic identity, *The Grasmere Journals* contain detailed accounts of only the period 1800-1803 and much of the work is repetitive and concerned with external activities: walking all over the beautiful countryside – alone or in William's company; gardening-toiling with her brother to grow flowers and vegetables; and doing the backbreaking household chores that had to be done by women alone, such as laundering, ironing, cleaning and cooking. Dorothy is meticulous in her descriptions of people, and her observation of Nature is at times so accurate and poetic that both Wordsworth and Coleridge transposed some of those graphic natural images into their own poems. However, Dorothy avoids introspection in her writing, and just as the brother had provided little of Dorothy's real self in *The Prelude*, the sister herself in turn desists from looking inward and revealing her innermost desires and fears. Dorothy observes the world around her, and records her feelings at particular moments in time, but she does not analyse or examine either her own motives and passions or those of others.

II

There is a good, tenable psychological reason for Dorothy's refusal to be more critical and analytic: the traumatic childhood experiences of loss and homelessness most likely led to the fear of being too bold and independent – even in her writings. Although Dorothy's inner life is absent in the Journals, there are many passages which betray the intensity of her feelings for her brother William. His presence kept her alive and vital, and his absence made her suffer. A whole series of entries at the beginning of *The Grasmere Journals*, written during William's absence from home from the period between May 14, 1800 to June 6, 1800-shows us an anxious, lonely, insecure Dorothy, whose tense expectancy of her brother's return is manifested in the physical symptom of a constant headache. Even Nature does not soothe her at these times:

"I sate a long time upon a stone at the margin of the lake, and after a flood of tears my heart was easier. The lake looked to me I knew not why dull and melancholy, and the weltering on the shores seemed a heavy sound." (15)

"No letters! no papers. ... I was sadly tired, ate a hasty dinner and had a bad head-ache. "' (20)

"... wrote to William after dinner, nailed up the beds, worked in the garden, sate in the evening under the trees. I went to bed soon with a bad head-ache. "(20)

"I expected a letter from Wm. ... I had a bad head-ache-went to bed after dinner, and lay till after 5 – not well after tea. "(21)

"No letter-No William. ... I lingered out of doors in the hope of hearing my brothers tread." (23-4)

"No William! I slackened my pace as I came near home fearing to hear that he was not come. "(24)

The need for William's physical nearness is so pronounced that it leads us to speculate that Dorothy must have had an unconscious terror of losing him as she had lost her mother and father at the early age of six. His presence is constantly desired because his presence alone gives her a sense of security and permanence. In his absence, all her thoughts focus on him with an urgency akin to hysteria, and she is constantly concerned with his safety when he is travelling:

"I will be busy; I will look well and be well when he comes back to me. O the Darling! Here is one of his bitten apples! I can hardly find in my heart to throw it into the fire. ... Sate down where we always sit. I was full of thoughts about my darling. Blessings on him."(97)

Even a momentary separation is enough to send her into a panic about his return: "William and I walked together after tea first to the top of white Moss, then to Mr. Olliffs. I left Wm and while he was absent wrote out poems. I grew alarmed and went to seek him – I met him at Mr. Olliff's." (106)

In contrast, when William is with her, she glows with a sense of contentment, and she and William seem like two souls in harmony with each other:

"We made up a good fire after dinner, and William brought his Mattress out, and lay on the floor. I read to him the life of Ben Jonson..." (88)

“... we sat a long time with the windows unclosed. I almost finished writing the *Pedlar*, but poor William wore himself and me out with labour. We had an affecting conversation.” (89-90).

I “ I went and sate with W. and walked backwards and forwards in the orchard till dinner time – he read me his poem.. . . After dinner we made a pillow of my shoulder, I read to hm and my Beloved slept.” (102-3).

William marries Mary Hutchinson on October 4, 1802, and soon after this event, Dorothy stops writing in her Journals. Although Dorothy accompanies the newly-weds on their honeymoon, she does not attend the wedding ceremony. Her description of her own emotional state during the hour William was wedded to Mary reveals a great deal about her inner conflicts. She appears almost numb with grief at the thought of losing William to another woman:

“.. . I saw them go down the avenue towards the Church. William had parted from me upstairs. I gave him the; wedding ring – with how deep a blessing! I took it from my forefinger where I had worn it the whole of the night before-he slipped it again onto my finger and blessed me fervently. ... I kept myself as quiet as I could, but when I saw the two men naming up the walk, coming to tell us it was over, I could stand it no longer and threw myself on the bed where I lay in stillness, neither hearing or seeing anything, till Sara came upstairs to me and said ‘They are coming’. This forced me from the bed where I lay and I moved I knew not how straight forward, faster than my strength could carry me till I met my beloved William and fell upon his bosom.” (154)

After reading the above passage, we cannot help but identify with Dorothy’s grief. We can empathise with this unfortunate woman in her dire circumstances. We realise that Dorothy has resolutely steeled herself to accept the situation with grace and courage: after all, unless she is able to subsume her own wishes to the wishes of her brother, her very survival is put at risk. And, as Norman Furman points out in his famous essay “The Sister’s Sacrifice”, from this time onward “until her mind and body broke down in her early sixties, [Dorothy] was a tireless servant of William’s needs and those of his household” (Fruman, 711).

Feminist critics of the twentieth-century celebrate Dorothy Wordsworth’s writings, but continue to read her life story as a “cautionary tale”: the unique trajectory of her unique journey is

suffused with tragic irony. Without a fortune of her own, or any economic and material means of sustaining herself, plain-looking and poor Dorothy never found a lover or husband. While her beloved brother and his large household flourished, Dorothy's slaved away her days as a drudge. Her mind began to disintegrate as she entered mid-life. Routine chores and constant hard work were her lot in Wordsworth's household, and the natural rewards of motherhood were denied her. In such circumstances even Nature gradually failed to sustain her or give her any solace.

References:

1. See Thomas A. Vogler's "A Spirit, Yet a Woman Too!". In *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners*. Edited by Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley. Holmes and Meier: London and New York, 1984: 238-258.
2. All quotations from *The Prelude* are from the 1805 version of the poem.

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