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Dorothy Wordsworth's Return to Tintern Abbey

James Soderholm

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH'S most famous contribution to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), "Tintern Abbey," is directly alluded to in one of Dorothy Wordsworth's poems, written over thirty years later, entitled "Thoughts on my sick bed." Most of the recent debates about Dorothy's place in her brother's poem underestimate the importance of this "sister poem." Among the critics of "Tintern Abbey," there are those who feel that William includes Dorothy in his myth of memory and those who feel that he only pretends to include her. Indeed, this disagreement about Dorothy's place in the poem encapsulates the positions of the major critics of romantic poetry.

After analyzing the last section of "Tintern Abbey," I will discuss "Thoughts on my sick bed." I will argue that it replies directly to the hopes of futurity evoked in the last lines of her brother's poem. Dorothy's poem echoes her brother's earlier works, borrowing from them as liberally as William once borrowed from her journals. The intermingling of poetic images helps us to reexamine the function of address and apostrophe: figural evocations of subjectivity produced by turning, and returning, to another person. I will conclude with a few remarks about the meaning of recent critical views of both Wordsworths.

I

In "Tintern Abbey," William presents his gains and losses in a series of affirmations and abnegations: the poet recompenses himself for his lost youth with spiritual abundance only to pare it away, revealing how little he actually needs to sustain himself at the ripe age of twenty-eight. This argument for the superiority of adulthood appears to reach a solid conclusion two-thirds of the way through the poem.

Therefore I am still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,

And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
 In nature and the language of the sense,
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.¹

The poem might have ended on these graceful woodnotes. But William, as if committed to further self-abnegation, goes on to tell us that his happiness does not depend on the spiritual instruction of nature, so long as his sister Dorothy is there to restore him.

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; 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.

(ll. 112–19)

William seems intent on showing us just how little he needs to keep his spirits from diminishment. Her brother's "former heart," Dorothy becomes his saving grace, or Beatrice, with an important difference: in the shooting lights of her wild eyes the poet sees not a vision of God but the image of what he once was.

Oh! yet a little while
 May I behold in thee what I was once,
 My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer make,
 Knowing that Nature never did betray
 The heart that loved her . . .

(ll. 119–23)

These impassioned lines unite address and apostrophe. In the turn to Dorothy, both the lyric "I" and the addressee vividly materialize. To be more precise, the lyric "I" is reflected in the addressee.² The traditional apostrophe is, M. H. Abrams observes, "a direct and explicit address either to an absent person or to an abstract entity."³ But what is the figural nature of an apostrophe addressed to a present person? How does the address/apostrophe to Dorothy enjamb the "figured" and the "real"? David Simpson argues that Wordsworth's poetry metaphorically encodes the world, transforming trees into tropes, as if the poet's whole

vocation were endless figuration. But what is the force of this activity when the "real" is, presumably, a real person, someone both on the scene and part of the event of the poem? To put it another way, what is the relation between "figuring the real" and an apostrophic address to a *human* figure? Many recent critics are not exercised by this question because they do not take the turn to Dorothy at the end of "Tintern Abbey" seriously. These critics believe that William never gets outside the orbit of his sublime meditations and that he uses Dorothy for his own poetic ends. Indeed, this suspicion about the authenticity of William's turn to Dorothy has given much criticism its high moral tone, as if William must be taken to task for not *actually* turning to Dorothy and inviting her to say something.

The apostrophic address to Dorothy has an important precedent in the poem which occurs when William suddenly doubts whether his memories of the Wye are as spiritually profound, even redemptive, as he had believed.

If this
 Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft—
 In darkness and amid the many shapes
 Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
 Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
 Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
 How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
 O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
 How often has my spirit turned to thee!

(ll. 49–57)

Also a "wanderer thro' the woods," Dorothy is closely associated in her brother's mind with the sylvan Wye he apostrophizes in this passage. Just as conventional apostrophe revitalizes him and shows the soundness of his beliefs, so his later turn to Dorothy profoundly consoles him for the passing of time by taking him out of time. Having momentarily recaptured himself in Dorothy's eyes, William offers a prayer for her to be not merely the curator of his achievement, but, in herself, "a mansion for all lovely forms" (l. 140). William wishes for her to have a perfect memory, to serve "as a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies" (ll. 141–42). It is as if William turns his sister into the Wye itself, whose image she reflects and carries in her eyes, her mind an abbey reverberating with the still sad music of blank verse. This conversion of Dorothy into naturalized abbey completes a movement initiated in the first apostrophe to the river Wye.

At the end of the poem, William orchestrates perceptions, including

Dorothy's, for he is especially concerned for her not to forget this present moment.

Nor, perchance—
 If I should be where I no more can hear
 Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
 Of past existence—wilt thou then forget
 That on the banks of this delightful stream
 We stood together . . .

(ll. 146–51)

He fears in Dorothy what he most fears in himself: loss of youth and memory. So he makes himself, and his lines, an emphatic reminder of what she will stand to lose if she slips into forgetfulness. He finishes his prayer-poem with yet another plea for memory.

Nor wilt thou then forget,
 That after many wanderings, many years
 Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
 And this green pastoral landscape, were to me,
 More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

(ll. 155–59)

Dorothy's presence suggests to William his future absence as well as the collapse of the very possibility of what Robert Langbaum once called "the poetry of experience." The imagination of his own future absence—and the simultaneous creation of a "future" memory in the person (or rather dwelling) of Dorothy—is William's way of overcoming what one later finds in Emily Dickinson's self-canceling, haunting prolepsis: "I could not see to see—." William wants to see to it that Dorothy will see to it that his past experience, richer for her companionship, lasts. His apostrophic evocation of her also sustains him, for in his fantasy he becomes for her what his first apostrophe suggests the sylvan Wye has been for him: a steady stream of inspiration—*Mnemosyne*—from which the ancient poets drank their memories and their epics.

What has the critical tradition made of these last fifty lines, this long and impassioned coda? Langbaum believes that in these final lines William connects "in one concrete vision himself, his sister, their love for each other and for nature, nature's love for them, and past, present, and future, time and timelessness."⁴ Most older critics echo Langbaum's interpretation in seeing the end of the poem as a faithful expression of the poet's need for, and love of, his sister. Geoffrey Hartman calls the turn to Dorothy "a vow, a prayer, an inscription for Dorothy's heart, an intimation of how this moment can survive the speaker's death."⁵ And in

his early work on the romantic poets, Harold Bloom writes that "The most beautiful lines in 'Tintern Abbey' invoke the possibility of perpetual renewal for Dorothy."⁶

These are sympathetic readings in the sense that they see the turn to Dorothy as generously including her in the poet's landscape of memory. But those outside the Wordsworth circle wonder what his address to her actually amounts to. Are these lines more than a self-inscription? Is William's pivot to Dorothy an alibi of sympathy? One of the most important recent critics of romantic poetry, Marjorie Levinson attacks William's transcendentalizing routines and the complicity of his apostolic critics. The tone of Levinson's deconstruction of binary oppositions and historical amnesia in "Tintern Abbey" implies that William might have written a better poem, a poem open both to its historical moment and to the poet's sister. For Levinson, William's poetry seals him in against the encroachments of politics and history. Levinson sees William's turn to Dorothy as "a decidedly feeble gesture towards externality" by which he "cancels the social . . . by allowing no scope for its operation."⁷ In his essay on the figural status of apostrophe, Jonathan Culler invites us to "reflect on the crucial though paradoxical fact that this figure which seems to establish relations between the self and the other can in fact be read as an act of radical interiorization and solipsism."⁸ Many recent critics of the poem see only the solipsistic aspect of apostrophe. They ignore, as Culler does not, the way in which an apostrophe may indeed establish a relation between a lyric speaker and the addressee.

Mistrust of address and apostrophe parallels suspicion of William's ability to evoke women as substantial presences in his poetry. Gayatri Spivak, for example, concludes that "in the texts of the Great Tradition, the most remotely occluded and transparently mediating figure is woman."⁹ Allowing more scope for Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey" would presumably involve letting the poem become more dialogically open to her, so that she is not merely a silent and appreciative auditor but rather a full participant in a more dual-voiced discourse.¹⁰ Criticizing William for his masculinist interiority has become a critical commonplace, practically a *topos*, in the last ten years. In a recent article, Elizabeth Fay writes: "The Wordsworthian solution . . . positions the woman as helpmate only: nonseductive, disenchanting, and disempowered because non-verbal."¹¹ These attacks pervert William's address to Dorothy in order to see it as an expression of his narcissism rather than an appreciation of Dorothy's ecstatic self-sufficiency, an attempt to evoke a former life both from and in that ecstasy, and finally a prayer offered to the redemptive agency of memory.¹² Fay's reluctance to see how William is in fact seduced and enchanted by Dorothy suggests the *critic's* feelings of exile.

If early critics thought of the turn to Dorothy as a kind-hearted gesture and a socializing of the poet's private myth of memory, Levinson and others see only the phantom in Dorothy and, correspondingly, only the reactionary egomaniac in William. They wish "Tintern Abbey" were more dialogic, with Dorothy given a discourse of her own. The desire to see all literature through dialogic glasses results from a zeal for multiple voices. Such enthusiasm either transforms texts into documents of heteroglossia or, failing in that venture, finds them wanting in their monologic resistance. The early critics read the end of "Tintern Abbey" as an honest tribute to a beloved sister. Recent critics, on the other hand, do not wish to favor a poet who turned his back on the French Revolution, despite its rapid descent into despotism. For these critics, William's shift from social to mental reformation is a grand evasion of his early commitment to radical politics.¹³ The poet's turn to his sister repeats his bad faith by representing an inauthentic encounter with otherness or the social world. Because Dorothy is the reader's surrogate in the poem, silently programming our responses, we may take this as a personal affront, and thus see the turn to Dorothy as a subtle coercion of sympathies, a feeble gesture toward *us*. Our response may then take the form of criticizing William for not writing a certain kind of poem, either a poem of social realism or a poem in which the listener enjoys a more visible and vocal "subject position." This restrictive way of reading William's apostrophe shows the *exile* or alienation recent critics feel in relation to "Tintern Abbey," as if the apostrophe to Dorothy fails not only to evoke her but to evoke us as well, because it fails to make us part of the event of the poem, part of its salutary fiction, one of its wanderers.

Exiled critics have little interest in understanding William's relations with Dorothy in 1793, 1798, or 1832. For critics unhappy about William's "reactionary" response to the French Revolution, the poem offers the best evidence of his various betrayals, oclusions, and distances. But there are many ways to measure distance and intimacy. The older critics felt a certain closeness to the poet and his poem, a comradeship encouraged by the intimacy they saw depicted in "Tintern Abbey." Materialist critics treat William and "Tintern Abbey" with more critical distance and see the turn to Dorothy as lacking the social dimension earlier critics were happy to acknowledge. Indeed, many recent critics of "Tintern Abbey" use the poem against William to highlight, and attack, both his resistance to the social and his egotistical appropriations of it.

In "The Uses of Dorothy," for example, John Barrell reads the lines "Oh! yet a little while / May I behold in thee what I was once" as "no more or less than a prayer to nature to arrest Dorothy's development, and for his benefit."¹⁴ But William says "a little while," not from here to eternity. Barrell's lack of sympathy for the turn to Dorothy encourages

the following metaphorical flourish: "Dorothy's growth to autonomous subjectivity will not, as it turns out, simply recapitulate Wordsworth's own; it will precipitate, in him, a less comfortable subject-position than he now claims to occupy, in which he will be unguarded, unguided, un-nursed, where he will be without an audible guarantor of the fiduciary symbols that compose his own language, no longer able to appeal to Dorothy as the Bank of England, underwriting the value and meaning of the coins and banknotes he issues" (162-63). In other words, William, according to Barrell, wishes to retard the growth of his sister so he can enjoy superiority over her. Dorothy's gain is William's loss. Having cashiered William, Barrell confirms his worst suspicions about the poet by investing in commercial metaphors whose darker meanings are left to our coerced imaginations. Why do so many recent critics insist, contrary to all biographical evidence, that William secretly has it in for Dorothy when he writes a poem including and even celebrating her?

David Bromwich argues that William "has not the slightest intention of making Dorothy a gift of her own experience" and that he "was jealous of the strength Dorothy could enjoy without his wisdom. He took his revenge by proving how much she would need his wisdom when at last her childlike powers gave out like his.¹⁵ I do not know what justifies this tone, nor do I see the need for words such as "slightest" and "revenge." In his essay on "Tintern Abbey" and the French Revolution, Bromwich makes a good case for not considering William a mere reactionary, but he nevertheless ends up echoing cynical interpretations of Dorothy's position in the poem, interpretations which have become almost *de rigueur* in recent years, a moralistic reflex. These critics do not want to consider the possibility that Dorothy and William were making each other a gift of their own experience, indeed, a gift of the very poetry of their experience. If these critics paid more attention to Dorothy's life and writings they would see that this was a gift she accepted, just as her brother accepted the gift of her journals to recall certain persons and images for his poetry. I am sympathetic to these transactions because I do not think they reveal the inequities and anxieties recent critics have heaped upon them and because I believe the turn to Dorothy is more complicated and open-ended than these reductions suggest.

"Tintern Abbey" ends with a prolonged address to Dorothy, who is unnamed but hardly absent. Abrams has recently written that "it is hard to imagine how Wordsworth could have made it more patent that, in the poem, Dorothy is both a real and a crucially functional 'other.' He startles us into awareness of the presence, devotes the last fifty lines to her, and gives her the salient role of concluding the poem."¹⁶ William has been attacked for not making more room for Dorothy, for not

making an authentic gesture at the social world she represents. This attack disregards the important liaison between the conventional and personal use of apostrophe and address in the poem. It ignores, moreover, the important fact that Dorothy does remember her brother's exhortations and writes a "sister poem" to "Tintern Abbey." Neither sympathetic nor suspicious critics have treated Dorothy's poem—"Thoughts on my sick bed"—as a companion piece. If one insists on seeing all genres happily novelized into multi-voicedness, then Dorothy's answering poem would seem important to consider, for it shows that lyrics can be intertextually open-ended, reaching both into the future and into the past.

II

In *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, Susan Levin collects Dorothy's poetry in an appendix, which includes "Thoughts on my sick-bed." At the end of this poem, Dorothy directly alludes to "Tintern Abbey" and, more particularly, to William's final prayer to her.

And has the remnant of my life
 Been pilfered of this sunny Spring?
 And have its own prelusive sounds
 Touched in my heart no echoing string?

Ah! say not so—the hidden life
 Couchant within this feeble frame
 Hath been enriched by kindred gifts,
 That, undesired, unsought-for, came

With joyful heart in youthful days
 When fresh each season in its Round
 I welcomed the earliest Celandine
 Glittering upon the mossy ground;

With busy eyes I pierced the lane
 In quest of known and *unknown* things,
 —The primrose a lamp on its fortress rock,
 The silent butterfly spreading its wings,

The violet betrayed by its noiseless breath,
 The daffodil dancing in the breeze,
 The carolling thrush, on his naked perch,
 Towering above the budding trees.

Our cottage-hearth no longer our home,
 Companions of Nature were we,
 The Stirring, the Still, the Loquacious, the Mute—
 To all we gave our sympathy.

Yet never in those careless days
 When spring-time rain in rock, field, or bower
 Was but a fountain of earthly hope
 A promise of fruits & the *splendid* flower.

No! then I never felt a bliss
 That might with *that* compare
 Which, piercing to my couch of rest,
 Came on the vernal air.

When loving Friends an offering brought,
 The first flowers of the year,
 Culled from the precincts of our home,
 From nooks to Memory dear.

With some sad thoughts the work was done,
 Unprompted and unbidden,
 But joy it brought to my *hidden* life,
 To consciousness no longer hidden.

I felt a Power unfelt before,
 Controlling weakness, languor, pain;
 It bore me to the Terrace walk
 I trod the Hills again;—

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.¹⁷

Levin claims that this poem is “an ambiguous dialogue with the poems of William’s great decade, celebrating the old interdependence while shaping the words to fit her own struggle” (*DW* 135). It is Levin’s criticism, I shall argue, which creates an ambiguous dialogue with the poems of William.

In her analysis of the poem's opening stanzas, Levin reshapes words to enact her own hermeneutical struggle: "The word 'pilfered' calls attention to itself, especially as placed in Dorothy's poem with 'prelusive' and 'piercing,' words connected by sound, but also by their possible relationship to the language of William's and Dorothy's poetry. Her observations were taken (pilfered) by other writers years ago. Her sounds, first prelusive to her brother's, now 'pierce' his in the variegated sense of that word: 'see thoroughly into,' 'puncture,' 'penetrate with pain,' 'discern,' 'pass a sharp instrument into' . . . Her being has indeed been 'pilfered'" (*DW* 136–37). Levin's analyses contain several half-formed assertions—more like innuendo than argument—such as "possible relationship," phrases which hint at something unseemly only to treat the unseemly as a fact a sentence later. The charge that Dorothy's observations were "pilfered" by other writers completely misrepresents the actual relationship—not the possible relationship—between her journals and the use both her brother and Coleridge made of them as commonplace books. That Dorothy encouraged use of her journals is suggested most visibly at the beginning of the Grasmere journal, where she writes that she will keep a journal because she "shall give William pleasure by it."¹⁸ The verb "gleaned," not "pilfered," suggests the tenor of his subsequent borrowings. Pamela Woof, editor of the recently published Oxford edition of Dorothy's journals, writes: "When she stopped to recollect details, to write an extended and careful description, to re-read and improve her prose, this must partly be because she was offering for Wordsworth's consideration selected items of their common world. He might have forgotten, had not Dorothy's prose taught him to see again, the leech-gatherer on the shore of daffodils" (xvi). To conclude, as Levin does, that Dorothy's being has been "pilfered" ignores both her stated desires about her journals and the remainder of her poem, especially the second stanza, where Dorothy rekindles her hopes through the redemptive power of memory.

Levin's meditation on the word "pierce" thrusts an etymological dagger into William's alleged plagiarisms from Dorothy's "prelusive" journals, but this reading ignores what I have just suggested about Dorothy's generosity in keeping her journals and the fact that the verb "pierce" is *not* associated with puncturing or pain in the poem, but with acute discernment. Levin cites the entry "discern," but this denotation can hardly match the sensation or insinuation of its violently probing cousins. Indeed, the speaker's *relief* from pain results from both her piercing perceptions of Nature and her ability to be pierced by the kind offices of her flower-bearing friends. The word may seem an odd choice in this second instance, but one must repress the remainder of the poem to find in this word a deep ambiguity toward William's writing or, worse, a subtle condemnation of his poetic obligations to her.

Let me now consider the poem's ending and Levin's interpretation of it. The last two stanzas cite, respectively, "Tintern Abbey," and William's best-known "Lucy poem," "A slumber did my spirit seal." The penultimate stanza unambiguously affirms William's prophecy of hope and continuity at the end of his poem. By alluding to these words, Dorothy evokes their promise and thus completes the circuit of William's hopes for their future. But Levin writes: "It is, however, partly the absence of health and nature that makes this nature of memory possible, that enables the fulfillment of William's prophecy" (*DW* 136). In other words, because Dorothy is sick and out of touch with nature she turns to her brother and his poem. The logic of this turn is not at all surprising. But Levin makes it sound peculiar, as if the price Dorothy must pay for fulfilling William's prophecy is to be stricken with illness.

Dorothy's last stanza is the loveliest and the saddest in the poem. Here she interleaves her poem with her brother's "Lucy poem" entitled "A slumber did my spirit seal."

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

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

Levin admits that in these final lines "Memory serves continuity here, a reinforcement of William's hope in 'Tintern Abbey'" (*DW* 136). But then she immediately qualifies the meaning of this continuity: "In a revision by subtracting from William's seemingly irreducible 'No motion has she now, no force,' the line 'No need of motion, or of strength, / Or even the breathing air' asserts both her independence from and the possible reality of her brother's 'prophetic words'" (*DW* 136). I cannot see how or why Dorothy would wish to assert her independence from lines she clearly enjoyed remembering, just as William enjoyed recalling the images she recorded on their walking tours when he later read her journals. Here, Levin's "possible" backs Dorothy out of the reality her poem generously embraces. Levin, not Dorothy, wants independence from William's poem.

In an otherwise sensible and fairminded treatment of Dorothy's poems, Margaret Homans also makes an argument for what she considers the unfortunate erosion of poetic identity in "Thoughts on my sick bed." Commenting on the final allusion to the "Lucy poem," Homans

claims that the "I of this poem becomes the 'she' of another, and though any quotation denotes a suspension of identity, this one causes the 'I' to abdicate altogether."¹⁹ Like Levin, Homans misses the existential point of Dorothy's translating herself into Lucy, and fastens instead on the fact that Dorothy seems to settle for the inauthenticity of a persona not of her own invention. Thus, Homans argues that: "Writing out of love for nature, she merges with nature and forgets her self; writing out of love for William she takes on the persona he designs for her and adopts a 'hidden life' that is his, not hers, and therefore one that is as mystifying to her as it is to us" (78). Eager to see William as a magisterial presence in the lives of all those around him, Homans will not allow Dorothy's poetic identity to emerge unless she sounds like a trumpet, prophetic and visionary as her brother. Her "hidden life" is not at all mystifying if one pays attention to the way in which she is trying, with a fluted voice, to merge with both nature and death. Because they wish to show how Dorothy must "abdicate" her identity in the presence of her brother (or in the presence of his poems), both Levin and Homans ignore how her allusions simultaneously depict and allay her mortal condition.

Dorothy's allusion to the "Lucy poem" may seem an ambiguous echo of William's poem but, unlike Levin and Homans, I do not hear anything remotely resembling an anxiety of influence here, and it seems wrongheaded to read her final lines as either a declaration of independence from her brother's work or an infirm capitulation to it. In Dorothy's double allusion to "Tintern Abbey" and "A slumber did my spirit seal" she becomes a living memory, momentarily arrested by the memory of poetry past. Her powerful recollections reunite her with her brother and his poem and thus allow her to manipulate presence and absence just as he did throughout "Tintern Abbey."

In both poems the lyric address opens up another dimension of apostrophe which Culler describes as follows: "In lyrics of this kind a temporal problem is posed: something once present has been lost or attenuated; this loss can be narrated but the temporal sequence is irreversible, like time itself. Apostrophes displace this irreversible structure by removing the opposition between presence and absence from empirical time and locating it in a discursive time. The temporal movement from A to B, internalized by apostrophe, becomes a reversible alternation between A' and B': a play of presence and absence governed not by time but by poetic power."²⁰ For Culler, the use of apostrophe works toward the elusive ideal of atemporal immediacy, a way of converting the temporal into an eternal present. Both "Tintern Abbey" and "Thoughts on my sick bed" show the struggle involved in this conversion, for both poems present a play of presence and absence

most intensely imagined in their apostrophic addresses, that moment where one's experience is both eroded and accented, both attenuated and vitalized by the figural prominence of the apostrophe itself, what Culler identifies as its embarrassing visibility and emotionalism. This is a case where figurative language both calls attention to itself and calls something into being.

"Under the aegis of desire," observes David Simpson, "all figurings are a progression to a real which never is but is always about to be."²¹ One might say that the personalized apostrophe is that figure progressing to a real which (or who) actually is: this is its supreme fiction and its most ardent desire. Such apostrophes serve the need for self-preservation by figuring forth subjective presences not trapped in empirical time, but rather endued unto the timeless element sustained only through the power of poetry. Simpson also claims that "[f]or the Romantics, the process of figuring constitutes an alternative to the possibility of passive perception. The essentially creative nature of the mind means that, without it, moreover, there would be mere vacancy" (167). Dorothy's poem is a figural oscillation between speech and silence, activity and passivity, presence and vacancy. Couchant on her sickbed, Dorothy becomes magnificently absent-minded, breathing memories and poetic allusions instead of air. Her figurings are a progression to a past reality which was and ever shall be a source of consolation, her poem both a self-portrait and a still life, her memories a bouquet she lays on her living and breathless soul. Far from creating an ambiguous dialogue with the poems of William, Dorothy's poem responds apostrophically to "Tintern Abbey." By returning in memory to the poem of 1798, Dorothy makes it and its author *her* addressees.

In affirming this bond between brother and sister, some critics attend to the figural magic of poetic language and to the existential predicament of William and Dorothy, both of whom feel their death in every limb. Most recent critics enter these poems and these lives only to confirm their worst suspicions before leaving unceremoniously to ply their trade. If they were to suspend their own hermeneutics of suspicion for a moment, they might gain a deeper understanding of a brother and sister who, with wandering steps and slow, left Tintern Abbey only to return, in memory, to make it one of their main haunts.

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NOTES

- 1 William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston, 1965), p. 108, ll. 102–11; hereafter cited in text by line number.
- 2 The word “dog,” William James soberly observed, “does not bite.” But perhaps an apostrophe, especially an erotically charged one, does create something palpable, does make something present. Why else do lovers so delight in multiplying their pet names for each other, except as a way of conjuring up, in various costumes, the loved one?
- 3 M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. (New York, 1985), p. 182.
- 4 Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (New York, 1957), p. 45.
- 5 Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry* (New Haven, 1964), p. 28.
- 6 Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Ithaca, 1971), p. 138.
- 7 Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 38.
- 8 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca, 1981), p. 146.
- 9 Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1988), p. 76.
- 10 I am obviously thinking of Bakhtin's work here. Wordsworth's lyrics have come under fire, I think, for not being sufficiently dialogic, that is, for being too monologically endorsed by the poet's “authorial ideology” (Levinson's term).
- 11 Elizabeth Fay, “Wordsworth, Women, and Romantic Love: A Question of Nation,” *European Romantic Review*, 3 (Winter 1992), 133–46. Also see Marlon B. Ross's “Naturalizing Gender: Woman's Place in Wordsworth's Ideological Landscape,” *English Literary History*, 53 (1986), 391–410.
- 12 Freud's essay “On Narcissism” (1914) contains some important insights about this form of attraction, where one person finds another compelling precisely for her narcissistic self-engagement.
- 13 Jerome J. McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago, 1983) anticipates much of what I am calling “suspicious” criticism. McGann is more dialectical and even-handed in his treatment of poets and poems than are many deconstructive materialists. My differences with McGann may be distilled as follows. When he writes that “Between 1793 and 1798 Wordsworth lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul” (p. 88), I want to erase the word “merely.”
- 14 John Barrell, *Poetry, Language and Politics* (New York, 1988), p. 162; hereafter cited in text.
- 15 David Bromwich, “The French Revolution and “Tintern Abbey,”” *Raritan*, 10 (Winter 1991), 23.
- 16 M. H. Abrams, “On Political Readings of *Lyrical Ballads*,” in *Romantic Revolutions*, ed. Kenneth R. Johnston et al. (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), p. 342.
- 17 Cited in Appendix One of Susan M. Levin's *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987), pp. 219–20 (emphases Dorothy's); hereafter cited in text as *DW*.
- 18 Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals 1800–1803*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford, 1991), p. 1; hereafter cited in text.
- 19 Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton, 1980), p. 77; hereafter cited in text.
- 20 Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 150.
- 21 David Simpson, *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (London, 1982), p. xxv; hereafter cited in text.