

---

## DOROTHY WORDSWORTH

1771–1855

---

Dorothy Wordsworth has an enduring place in English literature even though she wrote almost nothing for publication. Not until long after her death did scholars gradually retrieve and print her letters, a few poems, and a series of journals that she kept sporadically between 1798 and 1828 because, she wrote, “I shall give William pleasure by it.” It has always been known, from tributes to her by her brother and Coleridge, that she exerted an important influence on the lives and writings of both these men. It is now apparent that she also possessed a power surpassing that of the two poets for precise observation of people and the natural world, together with a genius for terse, luminous, and delicately nuanced description in prose.

Dorothy was born on Christmas Day 1771, twenty-one months after William; she was the only girl of five Wordsworth children. From her seventh year, when her mother died, she lived with various relatives—some of them tolerant and affectionate, others rigid and tyrannical—and saw William and her other brothers only occasionally, during the boys’ summer vacations from school. In 1795, when she was twenty-four, an inheritance that William received enabled her to carry out a long-held plan to join her brother in a house at Racedown, and the two spent the rest of their long lives together, first in Dorsetshire and Somersetshire, in the southwest of England, then in their beloved Lake District. She uncomplainingly subordinated her own talents to looking after her brother and his household. She also became William’s secretary, tirelessly copying and recopying the manuscripts of his poems to ready them for publication. Despite the scolding of a great-aunt, who deemed “rambling about . . . on foot” unlady-like, she accompanied her brother, too, in vigorous cross-country walks in which they sometimes covered as much as thirty-three miles in a day.

All her adult life she was overworked; after a severe illness in 1835, she suffered a physical and mental collapse. She spent the rest of her existence as an invalid. Hardest for her family to endure was the drastic change in her temperament: from a high-spirited and compassionate woman she became (save for brief intervals of lucidity) bad-tempered, demanding, and at times violent. In this half-life she lingered for twenty years, attended devotedly by William until his death five years before her own in 1855.

Our principal selections are from the journal Dorothy kept in 1798 at Alfoxden, Somersetshire, where the Wordsworths had moved from Racedown to be near

Coleridge at Nether Stowey, as well as from her journals while at Grasmere (1800–1803), with Coleridge residing some thirteen miles away at Greta Hall, Keswick. Her records cover the period when both men emerged as major poets, and in their achievements Dorothy played an indispensable role. In book 10 of the 1805 *Prelude*, William says that in the time of his spiritual crisis, Dorothy “maintained for me a saving intercourse / With my true self” and “preserved me still / A Poet”; in a letter of 1797, Coleridge stressed the delicacy and tact in the responses of William’s “exquisite sister” to the world of sense: “Her manners are simple, ardent, impressive. . . . Her information 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.”

The verbal sketches of natural scenes given in the journal passages reprinted here are often echoed in Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s poems. Of at least equal importance for Wordsworth was her chronicling of the busy wayfaring life of rural England. These were exceedingly hard times for country people, when the suffering caused by the displacement of small farms and of household crafts by large-scale farms and industries was aggravated by the economic distress caused by protracted Continental wars (see Wordsworth’s comment in *The Ruined Cottage*, lines 133ff., p. 323). Peddlers, maimed war veterans, leech gatherers, adult and infant beggars, ousted farm families, fugitives, and women abandoned by husbands or lovers streamed along the rural roads and into William’s brooding poetic imagination—often by way of Dorothy’s prose records.

The journals also show the intensity of Dorothy’s love for her brother. Inevitably in our era, the mutual devotion of the orphaned brother and sister has evoked psychoanalytic speculation. It is important to note that Mary Hutchinson, a gentle and openhearted young woman, had been Dorothy’s closest friend since childhood, and that Dorothy encouraged William’s courtship and marriage, even though she realized that it entailed her own displacement as a focus of her brother’s life. All the evidence indicates that their lives in a single household never strained the affectionate relationship between the two women; indeed Dorothy, until she became an invalid, added to her former functions as William’s chief support, housekeeper, and scribe a loving ministration to her brother’s children.

In 1897 William Wordsworth’s biographer William Knight published the first transcripts of Dorothy Wordsworth’s Alfoxden and Grasmere journals, and those transcripts are the basis for the excerpts printed here. The exception is the entry from autumn 1802, in which Dorothy describes her distress on her brother’s wedding day: because Knight excluded it from his edition, we rely there on Pamela Woof’s edition of the Grasmere journals (Oxford University Press, 1991). Dorothy Wordsworth’s poems, many of them originally written for the children in her brother’s household, survived through the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries mainly as manuscripts in various family commonplace books. (William Wordsworth did, however, include three in his *Poems* of 1815, ascribing them to a “Female Friend.”) Her poems were not collected until 1987, when Susan M. Levin edited thirty of them in an appendix (“The Collected Poems of Dorothy Wordsworth”) to her *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*. The two poems included here are reprinted from that source.

## Thoughts on My Sick-Bed<sup>1</sup>

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?

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

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

15 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,

20 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.

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

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

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

lying

With some sad thoughts the work was done,  
Unprompted and unbidden,  
But joy it brought to my *hidden* life,  
40 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;—

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

50 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.

May 1832

1978

1. In a letter of May 25, 1832, William Wordsworth's daughter Dora mentions this as "an affecting poem which she [her aunt Dorothy] has written on the pleasure she received from the first spring flowers that were carried up to her when

confined to her sick room." The lines refer to half a dozen or more poems by William, including "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (in line 18) and "Tintern Abbey" (lines 45–52).