The Perfect Electrometer: Dorothy Wordsworth's Lover's Discourse

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Dorothy Wordsworth presents an ongoing conundrum for literary biography and critical analysis. On the one hand, her relationship with her famous brother William has made her a highly visible figure in literary history. On the other, as an autobiographical writer who wrote very little that is obviously personal, she continues to present intriguing obstacles to interpretation. While her journals have been celebrated for their purported sincerity and simplicity, the extent to which they deliver an accessible authorial 'self' is limited by their strangely impersonal quality: instead of a poetics of self, Dorothy's journals seem to offer a poetics of self-effacement. Similarly, critical analysis of the journals oscillates between reading Dorothy as an active desiring subject on the one hand, and as an object or conduit for desire on the other. In this essay I take as my starting point two crucial insights offered by Frances Wilson's recent critically acclaimed *Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth* (2008): that Dorothy was an active desiring agent and that she was in love with her brother. While these insights are far from novel (rumours to this effect circulated during the siblings' residence at Dove Cottage), Wilson's exploration of this material is nevertheless powerfully suggestive; she mines the journals largely in the service of a newly invigorated, yet still empirical, reading of the life. In contrast, this essay takes up one of Wilson's more provocative but unexplored suggestions—that the journals resemble a love letter—and offers a reading of the journals via Roland Barthes' rhetorical anatomisation of the desiring subject in *A Lover's Discourse*. I read Dorothy Wordsworth's projection in the journals of a fractured, fretful and quarrelsome self through Barthes' protracted dilation on desire, in particular through his analysis of the figures of affirmation, alteration and annulment.

A Lover's Discourse provides a valuable rhetorical framework for understanding Dorothy's elliptical and often puzzlingly random self-projections because Barthes is predominantly concerned with 'horizontal' rather than 'transcendent' patterns of representation (7), ones that are best performed through non-syntagmatic, non-narrative styles of expression. Barthes pays meticulous attention to the lover's 'bundles of sentences' (7), privileging the arbitrary and the paratactic over the syntactic in a way that complicates binary oppositions between an

active desiring subject and passive desired object. My aim in this essay is less to ascertain the 'facts' of Dorothy's relationship with William than it is to explore that relationship's rhetoric in Dorothy's writing and the writing that has been devoted to her. Following the procedure Barthes elaborates in his biography, *Michelet*, my object is not a history of Dorothy's thought or life, but instead the search for a 'thematics', the laying bare of 'an organized network of obsessions' (3). In this sense, what follows is (following Barthes), quite deliberately, 'no more than pre-criticism' (3). At the same time, Barthes' analysis of the figures of affirmation, alteration and annulment in *A Lover's Discourse* provides a useful rubric for understanding Dorothy's desires *as such*, granting us new access to the textual intensity, complexity and drama of Dorothy's desire, irrespective of the physical ends to which this desire was put. While we cannot know how Dorothy's love for William was consummated physically, we *can* analyse how her desire was expressed discursively. Focusing on three of Wilson's most poignant images of Dorothy—as bird, as lover, and as electrometer—I ask how Wilson's negotiation of these familiar metaphors revisits and significantly revises earlier biographical interpretations. Rather than assessing the empirical accuracy of any single portrait of Dorothy, I am interested in exploring the critical and rhetorical frameworks through which her life and work have been, and continue to be, represented.

Wilson relates that Dorothy Wordsworth lost her mother and her father by the age of twelve, 'eloped' with her brother William at the age of 22, lived a life of 'intense, uncharted freedom' with William at Dove Cottage, collapsed on the morning of his marriage to her childhood friend Mary Hutchinson, having spent the previous night with his wedding ring on her finger, and, after helping to raise their many children, spent the last 25 years of her life prone to bouts of mental illness that left her unable to speak except in squawks, save for the uncanny ability to recite her own and her brother's poetry. Hers is indeed a singular story. She wrote the *Grasmere Journals* so that 'I will not quarrel with myself, & because I shall give Wm Pleasure by it when he comes home again' (1). William used this material—sometimes verbatim—in his own poetry, which subsequently became the cornerstone in the literary mythology of the singular, autonomous Romantic author. William described Dorothy as his eyes and ears, Thomas De Quincey (of opium eating fame) described Dorothy as the 'very wildest ... person I have ever known', and Samuel Taylor Coleridge described her as 'the perfect electrometer' (Wilson 8, 5).

Wilson writes that, 'more than any other aspect of her character, it was Dorothy's responsiveness that was valued and praised by all who knew her' (5). As a little girl she apparently burst into tears when she first saw the sea, revealing, according to Wilson, 'the sensibility for which she was celebrated by her family' (5). It is hard to imagine that this asset was celebrated *all the time*,

however. I imagine a little of that kind of sensibility might go a long way. And William does, very occasionally, indulge in irritation at Dorothy's raptures, or what he was once miffed enough to call her 'nervous blubbing'.¹ As an old woman, Wilson recounts, Dorothy wept at the sight of her garden flowers after an illness had kept her indoors: 'In the readiness and accuracy of her responses, her taste was, Coleridge said, 'a perfect electrometer—it bends, it protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties and most recondite faults' (5). An electrometer was a recent invention, consisting of a 'fragile piece of gold, enclosed in glass, which responded to the most minute fluctuations of electrical charge', and Wilson suggests that in using it, Coleridge's metaphor bestowed on Dorothy 'his highest possible praise' (5).

The electrometer has been reproduced in almost every discussion of Dorothy's significance from Coleridge onwards, often verbatim and usually without comment. The very ubiquity of this image, however, warrants further consideration. Ambiguously gendered, the electrometer in Coleridge's description could be seen as a miniscule phallus, or perhaps an alert clitoris, protruding and retracting in response to every sensory stimulus. Romantic appropriations of eighteenth-century science on both sides of the Atlantic equated understanding with femininity. Margaret Fuller, for instance, refers to the 'especial genius of woman' as 'electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency' (Gilmore 473). The electric, Paul Gilmore argues, figured in the work of the Romantic poets either as 'an intense, nearly physical emotion or an ecstatic, shocking sense of sympathy or transcendence' (472). For Coleridge, the operations of electricity revealed an ideal, transcendent truth: 'the idea of *two—opposite—forces*, tending to rest by equilibrium' ('Essays' 478). Like Wilson, most commentators read Coleridge's electrometer as unproblematically positive (*She was enormously receptive*) but Margaret Homans, for one, sees the description as incipiently, if passively, pejorative (*She was 'peculiarly', perhaps dangerously, 'obsessively' receptive* [103]). These undercurrents suggest that the electrometer is a useful image for thinking about Dorothy for a number of different reasons. She is an electrometer to her friends and family, and most particularly to William, who used several images and scenes she describes in her journal in some of his most famous poetry. In the early years of their collaboration, Dorothy's acute apprehension of nature, recorded in her journal entries, was the impetus for many of the poems that found their way into Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. Dorothy also functions as an electrometer for the changing tastes of literary biographers, who register wildly differing readings both about the value of her writing and about the nature of her relationship with her brother, the two of which are usually explored together. And finally,

1 This slur refers to Dorothy's anxieties for Coleridge. On 10 November, 1801, she writes: 'I was melancholy & could not talk, but at last I eased my heart by weeping—nervous blubbing says William. It is not so—O how many, many reasons have I to be anxious for him [Coleridge]' (37).

Dorothy functions as an electrometer for the impulses of literary criticism, offering insights into the fluctuating fads and tremors that inform academic scholarship at different points in time. The journals are electrometer-like in their apparently neutral registering of everyday life—a registration that itself gives life to later (wild, sometimes licentious, sometimes repressive) interpretations. As in Barthes' *Lover's Discourse*, Dorothy's use of fractured, non-syntactic representational regimes arguably provokes more, rather than less, desire to 'uncover' the particulars of her story. And, unsurprisingly, scholars with different critical agendas seek very different sorts of Dorothy.

When Frances Wilson's biography, *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth*, was published to great acclaim in 2008 it introduced, in the words of one reviewer, a 'new and potent Dorothy for the twenty-first century' (Bostridge). The novelty that critics saw in Wilson's approach rests largely on the sensitivity, receptivity and above all potency with which she imbues her principal subject: Wilson presents (ostensibly for the first time) an ardent, even virile, desiring, and desirable Dorothy Wordsworth. Desire is certainly not a new lens through which to look at Dorothy Wordsworth, the familiar scandal of whose life is the spectre of incest that, whether it is explicitly explored or studiously ignored, tends to haunt all discussions of her relationship with her brother William. The promotional materials associated with Wilson's biography raise this spectre explicitly. The dust jacket of the British hardback edition, for instance, offers the following enticement:

From the acclaimed writer Frances Wilson, a new biography of Wordsworth's beloved sister, collaborator and muse ... In her journals, Dorothy kept a record of their idyllic years together. The tale that unfolds through her brief, lyrical writings reveals a strange, intangible love between brother and sister, culminating in Dorothy's dramatic collapse on the very day of William's wedding. In what sense, if any, was theirs an incestuous affair?

Despite the promise of the book's promotional materials, however, Wilson's biography is ultimately surprisingly ambivalent about the exact nature of this relationship. For some reviewers, this is a considerable achievement. Mark Bostridge, writing for *The Independent* (UK) in March 2008, commends Wilson's dismissal of both the 'salacious accusations' of some biographers, and the 'prurient revulsion' of others, as 'equally misleading'. For others, this ambivalence is perceived as evasive. Victoria Glendinning, reviewing for *The Spectator* (UK) in February 2008, finds Wilson's treatment of sibling incest frankly unconvincing: 'It seems to me that there is still a small elephant in the room'.

The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth deliberately toys with the reader's desire to uncover the secrets of Dorothy and William's relationship, to know, definitively, what was going on under the covers, at the breakfast table, on the living room rug at Dove Cottage. 'We all want stories and details and particulars in our life-stories', writes Hermoine Lee, celebrated biographer of Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather and Edith Wharton, among others (2). 'Get as many anecdotes as possible', writes Elizabeth Gaskell, embarking on her biography of Charlotte Bronte: 'If you love your reader and want to be read, get anecdotes!' (Lee 2). In the absence of evidence of a physically incestuous relationship between William and Dorothy (and what would such evidence in fact *look like* at this stage?), this flirtation with the facts is all we have, possibly all we are likely to have. The 'small elephant at Dove Cottage', to borrow Glendinning's phrase, resembles in this sense one of the 'contested objects' of the biographer's craft. In her 2004 Princeton University lecture, 'Shelley's Heart and Pepys' Lobsters', Lee reminds us that biographies 'are full of verifiable facts, but they are also full of things that aren't there: absences, gaps, missing evidence. ... Biographies, like lives, are made up of contested objects—relics, testimonies, versions, correspondences, the unverifiable' (6). The 'elephant at Dove Cottage' presents particular challenges for literary scholarship, challenges that inevitably arise when we attempt to analyze figures whose erotic economies remain opaque to us. As Lee asks, 'What does biography [and one might usefully add literary scholarship] do with facts that can't be fixed, the things that go missing, the body parts that have been turned into legends and myths?' (6).

The *Grasmere Journals* commence on the day that, leaving Dorothy behind, William and his brother John set out from Dove Cottage on a visit to Mary Hutchinson, Dorothy's childhood friend and William's future wife. The first entry, on 14 May 1800, is indicative of the kinds of themes and concerns that occupy their author:

Wm & John set off into Yorkshire after dinner at half 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 knew not why dull and melancholy, the weltering on the shores seemed a heavy sound. ... The wood rich in flowers. ... Sate down very often though it was cold. 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. (1)

This event is decidedly traumatic: it provides the impetus for the journals, which will effectively become a memorial of the time that Dorothy and

William have spent together at Dove Cottage and which Dorothy wishes could continue uninterrupted. And yet what does the journal entry reveal of the situation? There are certainly a variety of details recorded here, but they are not immediately decipherable as responses to the event. This entry is in fact one of the most personal of the journal, relating an anguish acutely felt and acted out, yet Dorothy does not *describe* her feelings, nor does she analyze them. We don't, in fact, know what they are. Wilson wonderfully pinpoints the curious cocooning and consecrating quality of Dorothy's prose: 'Her journal made motionless the world in which she lived, defending it from mutability and change. Daily life, in her hands, becomes elegy' (12). Wilson finds the journals 'curiously egoless': writing that 'when Dorothy refers to herself, it is usually to inscribe her own effacement: *my heart was so full that I could hardly speak*. At her most emotionally full, she is her least expressive' (12). Mark Bostridge reiterates this sentiment, writing that the journals 'possess an overriding simplicity'; the story unfolds, he remarks, 'with the minimum of authorial intrusion'. Caroline Moore, reviewing Wilson's biography for the *Telegraph* (UK) in March 2008, is perplexed by the journals' 'peculiar emotional reticences'. Echoing Wilson, she writes: 'there is no self-exploration—almost no sense of self at all'; the journals represent 'the absolute reverse', she concludes, 'of the egotistical sublime'. Although not novel, the insights that Wilson offers into the subtext of Dorothy's style are important: Dorothy's prose, she writes, 'is defined by modesty and reserve, by the fear of what might happen were she to let herself go' (9).

One of the paradoxes of Dorothy's prose style is that while it is conventionally upheld as intensely personal, it actually reveals very little. As Wilson wryly notes, there exists a mockumentary about the Edinburgh Fringe, called *Festival*, in which an earnest actress performs her one-woman show about Dorothy Wordsworth—to a completely empty theatre. Nothing happens. Dorothy misses William. Dorothy looks at the lake. Dorothy looks at the daffodils. Compared to contemporary examples of creative non-fiction, some of which, contra Dorothy, certainly *let themselves go*, Dorothy's journals might fail to deliver a riveting read. If Dorothy had had access to Facebook (and as a keen cultivator of her personal coterie she may have indeed embraced it) her Status Updates would have been singularly un-scintillating:

Dorothy is waiting.
 Dorothy is looking at the lake.
 Dorothy is cooking a chop.
 Dorothy misses William.
 Dorothy looks at the flowers.
 Dorothy has a headache.

While they are stylistically quite different, structurally, Dorothy's journal entries are not dissimilar to Facebook Status Updates. In their parataxis, immediacy,

and above all, in their ritualistic repetition, Dorothy's journal entries resemble the formulaic signposts of Status Updates. While Dorothy does not use the third person, she creates an analogous distance from her authorial self. And while Dorothy's limited manuscript circulation seems a world away from contemporary social networking media, the purposes of these very different types of text are in several respects similar: they are read exclusively within a restricted, self-selecting community; they are used by their authors to remind that community of small-scale quotidian events, and they are employed by readers within that community as the inspiration for subsequent textual production. William responds to Dorothy's journal description of a leech gatherer with his eponymous poem. Dorothy recalls her critical response to William's compositions in her journal. The Facebook analogy, while anachronistically perverse, allows us to see Dorothy's journals as more public literary productions than we are used to viewing them. As Meaghan Morris argues in her essay for this volume, Facebook Status Updates simultaneously register the disclosure *and* secrecy of information within the 'small town' or village-public of a chosen, restricted social network. Morris' comment that Facebook users suffer from 'living passionately in an environment that the owner can alter at will (a condition a bit like being in love and a lot like being a tenant)' is almost uncannily apropos of Dorothy Wordsworth's position at Dove Cottage—as a passionately engaged and valued member of a close literary coterie, but also as a single, unmarried woman in love with (and tenant of) her soon-to-be-married brother.

In a certain critical tradition, one that follows William's early lead, Dorothy's apparent self-effacement is both naturalized and romanticized. In *Home at Grasmere*, William likens Dorothy's voice to 'a hidden bird that sang' (Wilson 20)² and a slew of scholars have subsequently felt authorized to assimilate Dorothy's voice and writing to the natural world she wrote about. It became traditional, as Wilson notes, to describe Dorothy's writing itself as birdlike:

'The words themselves are as unobtrusive as a sparrow', one critic says of the *Grasmere Journals*; 'the writing is as natural and unforced as the singing of larks', says another. 'We listen to her', says a third, 'as we might listen to a thrush singing'. (20)

This reverse anthropomorphism, this turning of Dorothy into a bird, re-ascribes Dorothy's authorial agency to the natural world. The results of her writing might be delightful, but they are essentially un-willed. Not incidentally, these readings of Dorothy present the strongest possible contrast to the image William self-consciously constructed, with the aid of his sister, of the poet struggling with the feat of composition. Which is not to say that this picture is entirely self-fabricated: Sara Coleridge remarked ruefully that William Wordsworth was

2 Wilson also includes the stanza as the epigraph to her biography (1).

forever ‘hurting himself with a sonnet’ (qtd in Jones 235). William Wordsworth’s elaboration of the Poet’s Herculean labour is nevertheless staged alongside, and in contradistinction to, the idea of Dorothy as electrometer—an image which imbues her with a decidedly passive, almost automated, apprehension of incident and energy. Elizabeth Gunn, in *A Passion for the Particular*, notes that both Wordsworth and Coleridge ‘wanted what she saw because they could not see it, or write of it with her unencumbered pen’ (50). Wilson alerts us to the dreadful irony of the avian analogy in the context of Dorothy’s later life. In the last, unbearably attenuated period of her life, when mental illness kept her confined to her room, the now inarticulate sounds she made were compared to those of ‘a partridge or turkey’ (21). But for Wilson, ‘the bird who most comes to mind’ when she reads Dorothy’s ‘burdened’ journals is the albatross ‘draped around the Ancient Mariner’s neck in Coleridge’s famous “Rime”’. Dorothy Wordsworth emerges from Wilson’s *Ballad* as an image of ‘the great sea bird shot down in its prime as well as a version of the voyager himself, with the “glittering eye”’ (21). While it would be fanciful to imbue them with proleptic power, the celebrated avian metaphors that were used by her contemporaries and subsequent critics to describe Dorothy have had a powerful and disturbingly embodied afterlife.

If one fairly conventional strand of literary scholarship sees Dorothy rather like nature’s amanuensis, as less of an author in her own right and more like a medium for a higher (and nobler) power (be it Nature or Brother), the early feminist scholarship devoted to Dorothy understandably read this as a travesty. The first wave of feminist critics from the 1970s often saw Dorothy’s own voice as all but obliterated by her brother’s enormous ego. In 1973, for instance, Rachel Mayer Brownstein expressed regret that Dorothy could not claim herself ‘more than half a poet’:

The world strikes the writer, who cannot manage to think herself a poet and who furthermore is mostly engrossed in waiting up for her beloved, as more poetical than she, and it defeats her. It was not always so. When she was not thinking of the superiority of verse and William, Dorothy Wordsworth could make moonlight and water beautifully her own with a homely remarkable image: ‘The Moon shone like herrings in the water’. (57)

Feminist Wordsworth scholars in the 1980s also struggled with this legacy. Meena Alexander, for instance, returns to Dorothy’s denial of authorship:

Then there’s the figure of a powerful brother composing in an impossible fluency. What cannot be overcome is repeated. Her uncanny repetition of what is almost his bodily signature forces her to acknowledge her

own secondary nature. Feeling that there was no space left for her to write on, she tries to annul the sexual difference that indelibly marks her. (197)

As Susan Wolfson remarks in her recent reassessment of this critical tradition, the first wave of feminist scholarship on Romantic women poets ‘was attracted to binaries: a “masculine” tradition that was manifold of egotism, sexism, and power politics, defined and exerted against a more diffuse and permeable “feminine” subjectivity, not inclined to self assertion or object appropriation’ (xvi). As Wolfson argues, ‘tuned to broad, categorical descriptions and oppositions’, this tradition sometimes elides ‘not only the instabilities and divisions in male representations, but also the assertive critical force of women’s writing’ (xvii).

Maragret Homans’s influential 1980 analysis offers a more nuanced approach, but nevertheless offers a bleak view of the woman writer’s prospects for poetic identity:

Where the major literary tradition normatively identifies the figure of the poet as masculine, and voice as a masculine property, women writers cannot see themselves as androgynous, or as sexless, but must take part in a self-definition by contraries. (3)

Based on paradigms of feminine psychological development proposed by Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, Susan M. Levin’s 1987 *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* asserts that:

Like many women writers, Dorothy Wordsworth constantly denigrates herself and her talent in a manner that goes far beyond common protestations of modesty. While she does find her own forms in a community of male writing that she proceeds from and revises, the process reflects guilt and torment as she asserts her own passivity in the active world of letters in which she participated. (3)

As Wolfson points out, in these sorts of critiques, ‘theoretical, often value laden principles, practices, and traditions (*masculine; feminine*) tended to be hailed in advance of, sometimes in circumvention of, the complex particulars of texts, and the agency these complexities might have in writing the historical and political text of the age’ (xvii). In contrast, Wolfson wonders whether ‘textual specifics’ might be used to contest such ‘theoretical generalization?’. ‘What of the potential of literary imaginations’, she asks, ‘to re-imagine, to resist the prevailing paradigms, to open a space in which history is not only disclosed, but made?’ (xvii).

While the aims of each of these critical traditions are certainly different, the end results can sometimes be surprisingly similar: in comparing Dorothy’s writing to

currently prevailing authorial models, Dorothy Wordsworth disappears. In the face of her submission to brother, to nature, or to patriarchy, Dorothy's agency is rendered negligible. But what would it mean to return Dorothy Wordsworth to this picture—not as the singular, self evident author promoted by the Romantic revolution she was indelibly a part of, and not as the gynocritical lamb to the sacrificial slaughter, but as something less familiar, and perhaps more interesting; something less than (or different to) autonomous agent and something more than merely victim? By returning to 'textual specifics', Wilson initiates this crucial process when she writes of the journals that:

Their style, at times pellucid, at times opaque, lies somewhere between *the rapture of a love letter* and the portentousness of a thriller; the tight, economical form they adopt is that of the lyric but in the grandness of their emotions they are yearning towards the epic. (4-5, emphasis added)

This is a far cry from the usual position the journals occupy as 'suggested background reading' for undergraduate courses on English Romanticism.³ Wilson's analysis here is astute, and aims to reposition Dorothy in her early biographer Ernest de Selincourt's terms as 'possibly the greatest English prose stylist who never wrote a word for publication' (5). But it is also possible to push this analysis several steps further by taking, more literally than Wilson perhaps intended, the idea of the journals as love letter.

Wilson's association of Dorothy's journals with 'the rapture of a love letter' is for me one of her biography's most important contributions. In his analysis of the strangely de-personalised, non-linear and non-narrative nature of the *Lover's Discourse*, Barthes attempts to trace the impulses of a desiring subject, who is identified as the speaking subject of a discourse, with particular speaking positions and rhetorical gestures, but who lacks (or does not need?) a 'novelistic' biographical or narrative direction. Of the many rhetorical figures he analyses in *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes' analysis of the figures of affirmation, alteration and annulment present the most fruitful framework for testing the strength and reach of Wilson's suggestion—that Dorothy's diaries evoke the 'rapture of a love letter'. In tracing the rhetoric of Dorothy's erotic economy, however, the question of whether or not this relationship was ever consummated becomes, in this reading, beside the point. Rather, the *Grasmere Journals* can be read as a fragmentary record of what Barthes refers to as 'an organized network of obsessions', a collection of perverse, sometimes exultant, often despairing desires. Of the process he terms 'affirmation', Barthes writes:

The world subjects every enterprise to an alternative; that of success or failure, of victory or defeat. I protest by another logic: I am simultaneously

3 See Rachel Mayer Brownstein (48) and Jill Ehhnen.

and contradictorily happy and wretched; 'to succeed' or 'to fail' have for me only contingent, provisional meanings (which doesn't keep my sufferings and my desires from being violent); what inspires me, secretly and stubbornly, is not a tactic: I accept and I affirm, beyond truth and falsehood, beyond success and failure; I have withdrawn from all finality, I live according to chance (as is evidenced by the fact that the figures of my discourse occur to me like so many dice being cast). (22-23)

Resisting conventional categories of victory and defeat, suffering and desiring violently, but affirming secretly and stubbornly, the disparate, discontinuous fragments of the *Grasmere Journals* form a passionate Lover's Discourse, cast randomly like so many dice.

The *Grasmere Journals* contain many strange moments of Barthesian affirmation, moments that resist conventional categories of success (reciprocation or consummation) and failure (renunciation or rejection). On 29 April, 1802, Dorothy recounts: 'William lay, & I lay in the trench under the fence—he with his eyes shut & listening to the waterfalls & the Birds ... William heard me breathing & rustling now & then but we both lay still, & unseen by one another—he thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the *peaceful* sounds of the earth and to know that one's dear friends were near' (92). Breathing plays an important part in Dorothy's desire. On the evening of 23 March, 1802, as they both sit reading before the fire, she writes: 'The fire flutters & the watch ticks I hear nothing else save the Breathings of my Beloved & he now & then pushes his book forward & turns over a leaf' (82). Another entry, on 17 March, 1802, recounts the ingredients for what must have been, for Dorothy, a halcyon day: 'I went & sate with W & we walked backwards & forwards in the Orchard till dinner time—he read me his poem. I broiled Beefsteaks. After dinner we made a pillow of my shoulder, I read to him & my Beloved slept' (79). Earlier still, 'I petted him on the carpet & began a letter to Sara' (61). While William might find peace or even rest in such situations, Dorothy is always wide-awake. Barthes adumbrates of the figure of affirmation:

What my love lays bare in me is *energy*. Everything I do has a meaning (hence I can *live*, without whining), but this meaning is an ineffable finality: it is merely the meaning of my strength. ... Flouted in my enterprise (as it happens) I emerge from it neither victor nor vanquished: I am tragic. (Someone tells me this kind of love is not viable. But how can you *evaluate* viability? Why is the viable a Good Thing? Why is it better to *last* than to *burn*?) (23)

If the *Grasmere Journals* provide moments of intense, intangible, affirmation, they are also extremely concerned with negotiating the process Barthes calls 'alteration'. Written in response to a situation she fears is about to change,

that, in fact, threatens to 'flout' Dorothy in 'her enterprise', this is perhaps unsurprising. Wilson recounts that it was in the last months before William's marriage 'that Dorothy was most alert to the corrosive effects of time; as William's impending marriage threatened to bring to an end the world they shared, she was positioned uneasily between the realization of paradise and the anticipation of its loss' (15). Barthes offers us a poignant insight into the process of alteration:

The lover's discourse is usually a smooth envelope which encases the Image, a very gentle glove around the loved being. It is a devout, orthodox discourse. When the Image alters, the envelope of devotion rips apart; a shock capsizes my own language. ... A *blasphemy* abruptly rises to the subject's lips and disrespectfully explodes the lover's benediction: he is possessed by a demon who speaks through his mouth, out of which emerge, as in fairy tales, no longer flowers, but toads. Horrible ebb of the Image. (The horror of spoiling is even stronger than the anxiety of losing). (28)

Such anxieties give us some insight into Dorothy's encounter with the absent William's discarded apple: 'O the darling! Here is one of his bitten apples. I can hardly find in my heart to throw it into the fire. I must wash myself ... ' (74). It sheds light on the repetitive ritual with the rings that took place the morning of William's wedding: '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' (126). And it illuminates Dorothy's equally emotional recounting of her reaction to that marriage: 'I could stand it no longer & threw myself on the bed where I lay in stillness, neither hearing nor seeing anything' (126). The 'alteration' of Dorothy's lover's discourse is the effect of William's official choice of Mary. The blasphemy involved is the desecration of Dorothy's singular relationship with him. The event forces Dorothy to see their relationship in new terms ('Horrible ebb of the Image'), and ultimately effects her rescinding of the journals (as love letters they have been robbed of preeminence) by his choice of another.

As Wilson's biography demonstrates, the scandal of an incestuous relationship has a certain perennial appeal. In my high school library the Virginia Andrews novel *Flowers in the Attic* was kept, bound in its plastic cover, in routinely heavy rotation, matched only in appeal by two other classic female *Bildungsromane*: *Go Ask Alice* (1971) and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964). It's puzzling, and not a little disturbing, to ponder what models of female development were thus so voraciously consumed (and why they were wrapped in plastic!): Why these three novels? Why these three stories? In fact, Dorothy's story is not so removed from the subject matter of all three. Her life is a veritable *Confessions of a (Female) Opium Eater* meets *Flowers in the Attic* meets *Mad Woman in the Attic*. The subject of Dorothy's relationship with her brother has proved as

consuming to critics as it did to Dorothy and William themselves. Her love for her brother was, Dorothy wrote, ‘the building up of my being, the light of my path’ (17). William likened himself and Dorothy to two swans—who mate for life—and wrote to her in the most ardent terms:

How much do I wish that each emotion of pleasure and pain that visits your heart should excite a similar pleasure or a similar pain within me, by that sympathy that will almost identify us when we have stolen to our little cottage! (Wilson 47-48)

What is the sympathy that will ‘almost identify’ them? Dorothy’s response to the event which flouted her in her enterprise—William’s marriage to Mary—provides us with several clues: she sleeps with his wedding ring on her finger; she returns the ring to him in the morning with her blessing; he returns it to her finger with *his* blessing; she is too distraught to attend the ceremony; she falls into a stupor where she can neither hear nor see; when she learns they are returning she flies down the stairs into the arms of her beloved, he helps her across the threshold; they welcome the new bride, Mary, together. Coda: she accompanies them on their honeymoon.

The whole scenario has proved too much for some critics. This was a literary history that itself required ‘alteration,’ in order to contain the implied ‘blasphemy’ of a ‘beloved object’. Wilson relates that in 1889, 34 years after Dorothy’s death, Mrs. Henry Fawcett described her in the worthy sounding, *Some Eminent Women of Our Times* (1889) as someone who ‘did not know jealousy in love; her love was so perfect that she rejoiced in every addition to her brother’s happiness, and did not, as a meaner woman might have done, wish his heart to be vacant of all affection save what he felt for herself’ (Wilson 10). In their 1985 biography of Dorothy, Robert Gittings and Jo Manton reiterate this myth of Dorothy’s asexuality:

There is no sign that she ever aroused or experienced physical desire, not that she felt this as a loss. ... From girlhood she seemed to be a creature apart, one of that distinctive company of nineteenth-century women, clinging like sterile buds to the family stem, tight-furled until November withered them. (Wilson 10)

About such evasions Wilson is beautifully snarky:

Perhaps they are right and Dorothy Wordsworth did go through her entire lifetime responding sensuously to every leaf and stream, falling to pieces with love for her loved ones, living at the mercy of her impulses and emotions, yet never once experienced or aroused physical desire or felt that this was a loss. But what is their evidence for supposing this? (10-11)

Wilson's biography attempts her own 'alteration' of the image of Dorothy Wordsworth. In an article she wrote for the UK *Telegraph*, 'A demure virgin? Not the Dorothy I Know', Wilson explains her own desire to rescue Dorothy from previous misleading representations: 'Dorothy, whose writing is fired by love and longing, has suffered from "virgin-phobia" more than most. Not only has she been stripped in her posthumous existence of her evident sexuality, but she has also been deprived of the vicissitudes of an emotional and unconscious life'. Wilson challenges this reception of Dorothy partly by describing her 'hot youth': perhaps she was in love with Wilberforce, and perhaps Coleridge; perhaps Coleridge was in love with her, and De Quincey seems to have 'fancied' her. But the more significant alteration Wilson's biography enacts is in its representation of the relationship between Dorothy and William. In her *Telegraph* article Wilson states:

The problem with Dorothy Wordsworth is not that she did not experience jealousy or excite desire, but that we are made so uncomfortable by the idea of her doing so. And this is because the one person who we know excited her jealousy and desire was her brother, which makes Dorothy less a maiden aunt to feel sorry for than a fervent—even feral—figure of whom we should be rather afraid. Even if nothing ever happened between Dorothy and William Wordsworth.

With this final caveat, we are returned to the spectre of the 'small elephant at Dove Cottage', the 'contested object', the tangible absence that, like Shelley's Heart and Pepys' Lobsters, haunts the popular, literary and scholarly response to Dorothy Wordsworth. When it comes down to it, Wilson's biography is on this point unexpectedly equivocal: 'to avoid the conclusion that there was a dynamic between them involving love of some sort is like looking through a telescope with a blind eye'. And yet, Wilson affirms, theirs was a spiritual union, based in poetic vocation; the physical side of this union would have held no meaning for them. But still, she affirms, siblings who have lost their parents early in life often 'experiment' with each other sexually in their adulthood. While this essay is concerned with the rhetorical resonances rather than the empirical facts of Dorothy's relationship with William, it is nevertheless clear that Wilson's equivocations on the subject of sibling incest effect one final 'alteration' in the reception of Dorothy Wordsworth: they participate in what Barthes describes as the 'annulment' of the lover's discourse, an annulment Dorothy Wordsworth also tried to effect herself. Barthes writes of annulment:

By a kindly decision of this subject, a colourless object is paced in the center of the stage and there adored, idolized, taken to task, covered with discourse, with prayers (and perhaps, surreptitiously with invectives); as if she were a huge motionless hen huddled amid her feathers, around which circles a slightly mad cock. ... It is my desire I desire, and the

loved being is no more than its tool. ... And if a day comes when I must bring myself to renounce the other, the violent mourning which then grips me is the mourning of the Image-repertoire itself: it was a beloved structure, and I weep for the loss of love, not of him or her. (31)

The beloved object that emerges from this analysis is not remotely colourless, but she is 'adored, idolized, taken to task' and most certainly 'covered with discourse'. And this is not necessarily an inappropriate or inadequate response: it is a 'pre-critical' response (in Barthes' sense) that usefully resists our literary, historical and scholarly desires for closure and the coherence of a biographical narrative. After all, Dorothy herself made use of the mechanism of annulment in negotiating her renegade desires in the latter part of her life. Eclipsed from her brother's side (and wherever else she may have been) by William's marriage, Dorothy set in place a series of substitutions for her beloved object—like William's unprepossessing and surprisingly blockish son, Will—which repeat the terms of her own lover's discourse ('It is my desire I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool'). Such substitutions, however, did not nearly answer the cause, and for almost a quarter of a century, Dorothy, increasingly addicted to laudanum, was prone to dramatic and prolonged fits of mental illness during which she was confined to the upper regions of the Wordsworth's laureate residence, Rydal Mount. In a grotesque inversion of her celebrated bird-like status, she became obsessed with the chiming of the cuckoo clock, was liable to emit high pitched screeching, rather like a turkey, and had to be hidden from guests. Enduring the grief of an extended annulment, like Barthes' lover rendered bizarrely literal, she became 'a huge motionless hen huddled amid her feathers.' Mourning, sometimes violently, the ongoing pains of the lover's alteration, she was 'possessed by a demon' who spoke through her mouth, 'out of which emerge[d], as in fairy tales, no longer flowers, but toads'.

If Frances Wilson's biography has indeed delivered a 'new and potent Dorothy for the twenty-first century'—and the international media attention it has generated suggests that it has—it is largely because she has produced a radically desiring and desirable Dorothy Wordsworth. It seems important, then, to bring Wilson's revisionist, rapturous Dorothy to bear on our readings of her work. Barthes' anatomy of the lover's discourse provides one useful way to begin this enterprise. Dorothy emerges from the journals as the speaking subject of the lover's figures of affirmation, alteration, and annulment. At the same time, literary biography and the academic industry can be seen to have subjected the journals, and Dorothy with them, to various critical processes of affirmation, alteration and annulment. Annulment, as Barthes conceives it, is 'an explosion of language during which the subject manages to annul the loved object under the volume of love itself'. As the popular, biographical and scholarly responses surveyed here suggest, representations of Dorothy Wordsworth have gone

through several admiring and despairing stages of the lover's discourse, and will no doubt continue to do so. In this sense, it is Dorothy's ongoing critical reception, not the overdetermined biographical subject that is endlessly the subject of biographers' speculation, which provides the ultimate electrometer, capturing the sometimes minute and sometimes violent fluctuations of attraction and repulsion, resistance and intensity that her life and work continue to evoke.

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