Lucy Newlyn

*William and Dorothy Wordsworth: All in Each Other*


Teiko Hatsui

In this joint literary biography, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: All in Each Other*, Lucy Newlyn, Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford University and a published poet, affectionately details the collaborative activity between William and Dorothy. It spans nearly fifty years—from their temporary reunion in 1787, nine and a half years after their mother’s death, until Dorothy’s premature decline in 1835. In the preface, Newlyn clearly declares her three principal objectives: first, ‘to establish the equality and intrinsic value of their partnership in writing’; second, ‘to explore the therapeutic benefits of their shared regional attachment’; third, ‘to investigate their distinctively symbiotic contribution to Romantic environmentalism’. With reasonable pride she says she has brought ‘the full range of Dorothy’s prose into the foreground alongside William’s poetry’. Her extensive background knowledge of psychology, anthropology, medicine and other fields sustains her argument throughout. Newlyn’s sensitivity to subtle meanings, to rhythm and rhyme, which is presumably her gift as a poet, contributes to unfolding deeper and sometimes unexpected layers of meaning in William and Dorothy’s writings.

Newlyn’s first and crucial argument in this book is to assert the reciprocal equality in William and Dorothy’s literary collaboration. It reveals her intention to correct ‘some serious misconceptions’ concerning Dorothy, who is still often regarded as a typical Victorian virgin, undervalued, exploited in the household and sacrificing herself for William’s vocational desires with self-effacement. Throwing light equally on Dorothy’s journal entries as well as on William’s poems, Newlyn provides a detailed investigation of the origin and evolution of their writings in their intermingling creative collaboration. She frequently notes the difficulty of identifying the ‘base author’ of their writings. They are rather joint efforts, if we take the situations of composition into consideration; Newlyn shows how writing was stimulated
by conversation, by a poem or prose text being recited, or by the ‘physical proximity’ of pieces of writing in a shared notebook. Newlyn thus emphasizes the reciprocal equality of the joint creation, which perhaps she gestures at in her subtitle, ‘All in Each Other’, though the expression is from Coleridge’s letter addressed to the Wordsworths, ‘You have all in each other’, confessing his loneliness in Germany.

De Selincourt once expressed his high appreciation of Dorothy as ‘probably the most remarkable and distinguished of English prose writers’. Newlyn feels that Dorothy’s prose ‘hovers on the edge of verse’, and considers it through rhythm, above all else. Newlyn’s sensitivity as a poet may have induced her to arrange some sentences from the *Grasmere Journal* into something like free verse, breaking the sentences ‘at points where they appear to fall naturally’: ‘Helm Crag rose very bold & craggy, | a being by itself’, to give an example. Newlyn is, in fact, not the first to treat Dorothy’s prose like this. A book entitled *The Poetry of Dorothy Wordsworth* sits on my bookshelf: a collection of free verse rearranged from lines of Dorothy, published in 1940. Newlyn gives a high appraisal of Dorothy’s prose, ‘as powerful as an imagist poem’ for ‘its plainness of diction, its sensual clarity, and its eye-on-the object naturalism’.

Newlyn draws attention to Dorothy’s sharp ear for the idiolects of neighbours, beggars and a crazy man passing through Grasmere village. Dorothy’s record of the rhythms of their speaking voices gives a more realistic image of the poor people, Newlyn says, than William’s poems. On the tour in Scotland of 1803, Dorothy was impressed by the Highlanders’ power of speech and the English spoken in a Scottish accent, sounding so sweetly to her ears. Her vivid recollections of the incidents inspired William’s poems. Newlyn considers that the *Alfoxden* and *Grasmere Journals* possibly inspired William to develop his concept of the equality of poetry and prose, which he professed in the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). William’s awareness of the equality of the two media, Newlyn suggests, implies his respect for Dorothy’s creative talent, ‘acknowledging the equality of their partnership in writing’.

Like most critics, Newlyn attributes the siblings’ intense relationship to their unique experience of a childhood involving homelessness, unfair dispossession and their orphaned circumstances following their father’s death. They saw very little of each other between 1778, the year of their mother’s death, when Dorothy was only six, and 1795 when they started living together at Racedown. Dorothy seemed ‘A gift’ for William at their brief reunion in 1787 after long separation, as he recounted in *The Prelude* (1805, vi. 218). Newlyn notes William’s frequent use of the word ‘gift’ in the
context of gratitude for Dorothy’s existence and considers William’s poems as his return gift to Dorothy. Newlyn understands the siblings’ relationship in a gift-exchange system, developed in Marcel Mauss’s gift theory, where spiritual bonds are created through soul-exchange by gifts.

Homesickness, yearning for a surrogate home to the one they had lost, became their lifelong preoccupation and closely united them. Newlyn hears elegiac echoes of Cockermouth as an undertone in many of their writings, even in ‘Tintern Abbey’. Following their lifelong journey from Windy Brow to Alfoxden, Grasmere and Rydal, including their tours in Scotland and on the Continent or their pilgrimages along the Wye Valley, Newlyn recounts how they retrieved their home, a surrogate home, and family and regional identity through developing a shared regional attachment to places, exchanging memories associated with those places, and immortalizing their shared experiences in their writings. Newlyn’s analysis of the ‘Inscription poems’, ‘Poems on the Naming of Places’ and A Narrative Concerning George and Sarah Green, elucidates how they developed affinities to local places to become ‘inmates’ of the Vale of Grasmere.

Newlyn vividly evokes William and Dorothy, sometimes with Coleridge and John Wordsworth, ‘walking, talking, remembering and grieving’, responsive to the spirit of places. Their collaborative creativity involved a spiritual assimilation. Newlyn asserts that it was part of their intuitive remedy for nostalgia, a typical pathology of European Romanticism, which was beginning to gain attention at the turn of the nineteenth century. Every moment William and Dorothy spent together responsive to the ‘spirit of the place’ could be a ‘spot of time’ with a vivifying power and a bondage to link them closer. Even their characteristic rhythmic actions of pacing ‘to and fro’ or ‘backward and forward’ in composition, Newlyn considers, enabled them to ‘deepen their shared connection with the place’.

The siblings’ extraordinarily intense attachment has long puzzled many people and critics, including De Quincey, Percy B. Shelley or F. W. Bateson. In our time, though without a literal implication of incest, Kenneth Johnston traced behind their affinity a ‘strong erotic attraction to each other’, while Stephen Gill called it ‘unquestionably, profoundly sexual’ and most recently Frances Wilson labelled it ‘Romantic incest’. Newlyn downplays the ‘erotic’ element and uses associationist theory to discuss William’s attachment to Dorothy as an intense yearning to ‘merge his identity with his sister’s, becoming almost her twin’, seemingly another connotation of ‘All in Each Other’. She asserts that it arose from their intense ‘emotional and spiritual need’ for a healing process caused by their childhood circumstances.
Newlyn takes pains to provide readers with sporadic information concerning the affectionate relationship between William and Mary from their childhood until she was integrated in the Wordsworths’ household, thus showing that their marriage was not an abrupt idea, though no one nowadays would consider him to have married for the sake of convenience, now that his passionate love letters have been published. On the other hand, Newlyn excellently describes the spiritual and emotional background of the change in the triangular relationship among William, Dorothy and Mary in the Town End household, triggered by William’s marriage to Mary: with Dorothy finally leaving the centre of the stage. Newlyn, making use of Gaston Bachelard’s nest principle and Biblical allusions in *Paradise Lost*, follows their subtle emotional movements in their writings: in the epithalamion, a valediction or elegy and a nuptial poem of William and in the narrative of the incidents taking place in the orchard-garden in the *Grasmere Journal*. Newlyn suggests that writing served a therapeutic function during the months approaching the marriage, calming anxiety, especially Dorothy’s fears that she might be displaced.

Newlyn offers a unique interpretation of the astonishing ring ritual involving Dorothy, resorting to gift economy theory. It was a significant rite of passage, exchanging their vows of ‘continuity of pre-existing family bonds’ with undiminished reciprocal devotion in a new household. She emphasizes that the siblings’ ritual is easily understandable if we consider that their living together after one of them had married was far from uncommon in the nineteenth century, when the old system of consanguinity was still strong. A new triangular relation began among the three with Mary rather than Dorothy now the ‘mistress’ of Town End as the *Grasmere Journal* was finished. I question why Newlyn gives Helen Darbishire’s reading of the manuscript, ‘and blessed me fervently’, in preference to that of Pamela Woof, which is now widely accepted: ‘as I blessed the ring softly’. Woof’s reading should have been introduced in a note at least.

Newlyn observes the siblings’ relationship entering another stage as William became famous and they came to spend less time together. Away from him, Dorothy became productive, independent and confident in her writing, sometimes with ‘a novelistic awareness of suspense’ even conscious of publication. It is significant, however, that shared memories, especially of their past tours and pilgrimages, imaginative ‘revisits’, became their subjects. Newlyn considers it a confirmation of each other’s love.

As William’s poetic reputation began to consolidate, a dramatic deterioration began in Dorothy’s health. Newlyn’s account of Dorothy’s declining
years is, as it were, a record of a therapeutic case study of dementia. William and Mary looked after her with what Newlyn calls a ‘treatment deeply enlightened and humane’. They may have had an intuitive awareness of the remarkable therapeutic power of poems, Newlyn assumes, which modern medicine has proved true, with their rhythm, their associated memories and emotions. Newlyn notes that reading poems aloud, particularly ‘Tintern Abbey’, had a significant effect in their palliative care.

Newlyn deserves credit for having brought less well-known writings of Dorothy to our attention. I would like to close this review with a few lines of one of Dorothy’s poems, written at the beginning of her deterioration. Here emerges Dorothy returning to her prime of life spent in active, symbiotic creativity, recalling William’s entrustment to her as the guardian spirit of the place: the ‘Muse of memory’:

No prisoner in this lonely room,
I saw the green banks of the Wye,
Recalling thy prophetic words—
Bard, brother, friend from infancy!

(‘Thoughts on my sick-bed’, 45–48, 1832)

Newlyn’s book is deeply researched and beautifully written with an affection linked to her feelings of sharing the Wordsworths’ homesickness, according to the preface. It is both enlightening for scholars and informative for students. The Thomas Bewick woodcuts at the beginning and end of each chapter are a joy for the eyes as well as useful illustrations, often reminding us of William’s poems.

(Former Professor, Teikyo University, Fukuoka)