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Dorothy Wordsworth's Return to Tintern Abbey

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Dorothy Wordsworth's Return to Tintern Abbey

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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.

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, **[End Page 309]**
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 [End Page 310] vocation were endless figuration. But what is the force of this activity when the “real” is, presumably...



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