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**The Symmetry of Failure: Desire and Despair in  
Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal***

"The best English diaries have been written by bores."

—Kate O'Brien<sup>1</sup>

"L'intérêt du journal est son insignifiance."

—Maurice Blanchot<sup>2</sup>

Boredom, insignificance, unimportance: characteristics attributed to the journal, at different times, for different reasons. Blanchot traces this "hybrid genre" to "a painful mélange of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Romanticism," which inspired writers in their quest to lay bare the self, enterprise doomed to failure more often than not since he sees in the private diary mostly a means "to escape silence"<sup>3</sup> when other avenues seem blocked.

O'Brien, whose statement is just as condemning and ambiguous as Blanchot's (Is there a boredom at its best? Are the best English diaries the least boring?) gives special consideration to women diarists, among them Dorothy Wordsworth. They are, she states, "not as a genus bores manquées, but diarists faute de mieux."<sup>4</sup>

To have become a diarist "faute de mieux" (for the lack of something better), unable to escape the realm of the insignificant, aptly describes the predicament of women like Dorothy Wordsworth who lived during times when social constraints excluded them from "external speech" and "outward discourse," as is noted by George Steiner in "The Distribution of Discourse."<sup>5</sup> Thus a first look at Dorothy Wordsworth's writings might well lead to the conclusion that her works are indeed insignificant, and that the ensemble of what has been exhumed and published—various journals, poetry, and corres-

pondence—is negligible. Critics who have studied her poetry and examined her private life mostly agree that her importance stems from having been Williams’ “satellite”; even in her poems, the voice she used is said to define her position as being “outside and secondary.”<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, one of her diaries, *The Grasmere Journal*, deserves special attention: its interest lies in the apparent insignificance which camouflages, whether consciously or not, a desperate discourse of desire. There appear, among the many solid notations of nothingness (“Drank tea at Mr. Simpson’s”; “made a shoe”; “did not walk”; “went early to bed”), intermittently, and often in fragmented form, brief passages and lines, sometimes just a single word, which reveal a fragile construct silhouetted against the grid of circumstances and dates. It is this second text, embedded in the primary one, speaking with another voice, revealing another layer of meaning, which affords new insight into a very brief, but decisive period of Dorothy’s life: the years spent in Dove Cottage with William before his marriage.

A recent, comprehensive study of Dorothy Wordsworth shows how helpful contemporary theories of language and psychology by American feminists are in reading her works.<sup>7</sup> Such an interpretative framework can be extended to include other theories, especially those proposed by the French “New Critics” Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan.<sup>8</sup> For example, Lacan’s concepts about language, the unconscious, and the symbolic order show why and how women writers like Dorothy Wordsworth have been marginalized; Barthes’ ideas on the process and the experience of writing illustrate her struggle and fascination with the self as author.

In that short span of her life recorded in *The Grasmere Journal* (May 14, 1800 to January 16, 1803, with almost all of 1801 missing), Wordsworth gained access to language, only to be forced to remain on the threshold of discourse; became the mistress of William’s home, only to be relegated again brutally to the status of unmarried sister by his marriage (and thus to her former position of live-in, tolerated relative). These and other trials might have contributed to her abandoning the format of the intimate journal, and perhaps even gave rise to the first signs of mental disturbance which clouded her final years.

All the dates are given, the chronology is respected; yet the significance of these years, had they not been lifted out of context by the intensity of a journal’s vocabulary, would have been irrevocably lost. Behind the dream-like precision of Dorothy’s daily tasks, stretched out in a horizontal line, rises an invisible graph of anguish and psychological torment, reaching its peak on the wedding day in Gallow Hill.

Then, while accompanying the newlyweds on the journey back to Dove Cottage, the downward slide into despair, regret tapering off into resignation, and, finally, silence.

I resolved to write a journal of the time till W[illiam] and J[ohn] return, and I set about keeping my resolve, because I will not quarrel with myself, and because I shall give Wm pleasure by it when he comes home again.<sup>9</sup>

L'absence dure, il me faut la supporter. Je vais donc la manipuler: transformer la distortion du temps en va-et-vient, produire du rythme, ouvrir la scène du langage (le langage naît de l'absence ... ).<sup>10</sup>

Barthes' idea that language "is born of absence" (stimulated by a lack or void) echoes Lacan's theory of language as request, or demand for something or someone who is missing; deprived of William's company, knowing that she will please him with her writing, Dorothy begins her journal.

At a quick glance, *The Grasmere Journal*—and its prelude, the very brief *Alfoxden Journal*—yield little more than a repertory of menial activities. Dorothy cooks and bakes, sews and mends, gardens, takes walks, and reads; a housewifely existence barely rising above the banal, its economy reflected in the frugality of her language.

This initial impression of a woman almost totally absorbed in homemaking for an adored brother explains one function of the journal: it is the anchor which scrapes the bottom of daily reality. The fixity of time and place, written down, becomes confirmation of a sense of belonging. She remains silent as to what happened before Grasmere; her life as an orphaned child in the households of uncles, aunts, and grandparents, and, later, the hospitality offered by friends, is never evoked. She must have believed that all the temporary arrangements had finally come to an end when William took Dove Cottage. Her brother's decision no longer made her dependent upon the kindness or interest of others, who provided lodging and/or support. Freedom had come in the form of a confining routine which she experienced as incomparable happiness—every day a benediction. She seems riveted to the present, a present which the act of writing merges into the immediate past. The pronominal structure (the use of "I" and "we," whether stated or implied) allows for the speaker's insertion into time and maintains that stasis of the ego produced by discourse, since its *énoncés* provide the illusion of a permanent "now."<sup>11</sup>

There is no past to regret or to haunt her; there is also no future. No plans, no projects, no unfulfilled dreams except one: some day, a house

of their very own. In the meantime, the rented cottage responds to a wish expressed already in letters written to her friend Jane Pollard, when Wordsworth was twenty-one and still living with her uncle William's family. Her "Day of felicity" will be, she confides, "the Day in which I am once more to find a Home under the same Roof with my Brother."<sup>12</sup>

Much thought had been given to the details of that dream; for, as she wrote to Jane, "I have laid the particular scheme of happiness for each Season. When I think of Winter, I hasten to furnish our little Parlour, I close the Shutters, set our Tea-Table, brighten the fire ...."<sup>13</sup> A Freudian scenario at best: desire for a brother filtering through scheming female possessiveness, projecting an exclusive relationship within narrow, hidden confines, around the stifling "our" of idealized domestic intimacy. Jane is included in their fantasy (as a guest at "our Tea-table"); but, and this becomes evident later on, especially at Grasmere, as long as William remained single, his primary interest poetry, close to the stimulating presence of Coleridge, and entertained by a stream of visitors and guests, Dorothy, or so it seems, had nothing to fear. She must have read about those "frank-hearted maids of rocky Cumberland" of his youth, she knew about Annette and Caroline, both safely far away, in France; and, of course, Mary Hutchinson. So why should William, having weathered the sexual storm and stress of his early manhood, not be content to spend the rest of his life calmly and comfortably with the woman idealized in his poetry?

Dorothy's undivided attention to William has always been taken for granted; yet the line of a poem she wrote to celebrate their arrival at Grasmere hints at the possibility that there had been opportunities to make choices:

My youthful wishes are fulfill'd—  
Wishes matured by thoughtful choice,  
I stood an Inmate of this Vale,  
how could I but rejoice?<sup>14</sup>

"Thoughtful choice" implies alternatives; but which ones? A marriage proposal? The offer of a post?

Whatever her prospects might have been, she was poor; beggars can't be choosers. Besides, "She welcom'd what was given and craved no more."<sup>15</sup>

Did Dorothy crave something beyond that which was given? Very few women have found themselves in the privileged situation where an enduring relationship with a loved one has elevated them to compan-

ion/muse; even fewer of them are known to have been writers in their own right. William's role in Dorothy's life had been crucial: he helped her gain access to language, and initiated her into the world of discourse, *his* world already. "Nature" had given him a start; "she" was to remain a major theme of his poetry, i.e. the characterization as feminine/maternal, with its references to "spousal verse"<sup>16</sup> (the marriage between the intellectual and nature), and its vocabulary which often depicts a bridal universe. In his case, the subliminal pattern is clear: "Nature" is mostly the substitution for the lost mother.

Dorothy's situation is far more complex. Her brother's "nature" (the environment's physical phenomena) was the same as hers; but in both the natural world and in its simulacrum, the verbal universe, she must have seen how his desire had colored images of a feminine figure easily recognizable as her own. Poetry thus becomes the ultimate scene of recognition: desire sending back its own reflection—two mirrors separated by a transparent text.

Within the rhetorical register of William's poems,<sup>17</sup> Dorothy's role is one of mediator, active listener, sounding board. Direct references to her in *The Prelude* and in *Tintern Abbey* illustrate how the "beloved Woman," the "dear, dear sister" participated in the poetic process, proving Benveniste's theory that "the linguistic form is not only the condition of transmission, but, first of all, the condition of realisation of thought."<sup>18</sup>

By the spring of 1800, prerequisites for Dorothy's own "condition of realisation of thought" had been met: life with William and its echo in his poetry had built up her confidence, she was ready to progress from the level of speech (*parole*) to that of language (*langue*). The letter to Jane Pollard describing her "Day of felicity" also anticipates her brother's role in this transitional period. Tea, writes Dorothy, is followed by needlework, reading, and conversation:

When our refreshment is ended I produce our Work, and William brings his book to our Table and contributes at once to our Instruction and amusement, and at Intervals we lay aside the Book and each hazard our observation upon what has been read without the fear of Ridicule or Censure.<sup>19</sup>

In "The Distribution of Discourse," Steiner points out how, historically, "the compression of speech-energies in women by virtue of masculine-imposed criteria of decorum" had reduced them to "inward discourse," and comments that it

is therefore more than probable that the sum of utterances in the lives of women, notably of educated women, during the 16th and 17th centuries and almost until the partial collapse of the ancient regime of familial hierarchies in the late 18th century, was unequally divided between the audible speech and various modes of self-address.<sup>20</sup>

William (the enlightened father-figure) had helped Dorothy's development from such "inward speech" to critical utterance; his influence—and perhaps Coleridge's—had prepared and encouraged her to take the next step: writing.

Le langage ne peut être autre chose que demande,  
et demande qui échoue.

—Lacan<sup>21</sup>

If, as posited by Lacan, language is asking for something or someone, but "a wish that fails" (which is never granted), writing, for Dorothy, seems to have been (at least temporarily) a conditional failure only. She admits that she wrote "to give William pleasure" (in the hopes of receiving pleasure in return?). But she must have enjoyed doing so, not only because life at Grasmere was at first delightful enough to be lived twice ("Every day noted down is a day preserved. Doubly advantageous operation. Thus one lives twice."<sup>22</sup>), but because of that special type of pleasure (*jouissance*) associated with *écriture féminine* as defined by Hélène Cixous and other theorists of the French Nouvelle Critique.<sup>23</sup> Keeping a journal was a means of asserting herself, of communicating, and of confirming her membership in that exclusive circle formed by herself, her brother, and Coleridge, who is said to have defined it as being an association of "three persons and one soul."<sup>24</sup>

The journal's relationship to its audience is necessarily one of extension, of complicity; yet, in spite of this (or perhaps because of this) Dorothy's diary sheds little light on the role she played in that exclusive triangle, since the intellectual and passionate elements linking her to her brother and his friend were so closely interwoven. Her attachment to Coleridge cannot be measured in terms of her relationship with William; her contacts with either one and their degree of intimacy are difficult to ascertain because of her style of writing. Her self hides behind the absent "I," or becomes indistinguishable in the ambiguous "we."<sup>25</sup> Compared to the prominent ego radiating from both her brother's and Coleridge's writings, Dorothy stands helpless; they have preempted her desire for autonomy. Was their poetry a form of

hypnosis which conditioned Dorothy, condemning her to produce stiff, lacklustre poems whenever she tried to write verse?

The romantic interlude with Coleridge (which began in Alfoxden) seems to have cooled by November 1801. After seeing him off on one of his trips to London, Dorothy returned to Dove Cottage and proceeded to "put books in order," and at the same time, "Put aside dear C's letters" (86). No doubt this was one of the dreariest, the saddest of housekeeping chores, since it involved the relegation of formerly treasured objects to the zone of indifference. But in the meantime, Coleridge's deteriorating health and his interest in Sara Hutchinson (sister of Mary, the future Mrs. William Wordsworth) had altered the chemistry of the original threesome; nevertheless, when, a few months later, Coleridge read to them "the verses to Sara" (*Dejection: an Ode*), Dorothy found herself "in miserable spirits" (147). *Dejection* not only expressed the suffering caused Coleridge by his ill-fated love, but her own as well, since just eight days prior to the reading, William and Mary had informed her of their decision to marry.

It is possible that Dorothy had cultivated their extraordinary friendship as another means of "giving William pleasure," since she knew how much her brother valued Coleridge's presence; just as her writing had been intended as an offering. Timid and cautious forays onto the blank page at first, then a certain rhythm developing from the recording of performances of daily and seasonal tasks. The joy of bringing home—together with the baskets of mosses and plants she gathered on her walks, and then planted in her garden—the many views and impressions, from panorama or "prospect" to the close-up of a flower, which she set down on paper. More important still was the triumph of knowing that her journal was becoming a storehouse of treasures for William to draw upon, as the following example shows:

[March 13th] Saturday Morning. It was as cold as it ever has been all winter, very hard frost. I baked pies bread and seed cake for Mr. Simpson. William finished Alice Fell, and then he wrote the poem of *The Beggar Woman*, taken from a woman I had seen in May (now nearly 2 years ago) when John and he were at Gallow Hill. I sate with him at intervals all the morning, took down his stanzas, etc. (128)

Critics have pointed out the echoes between her journals and his poetry, and how he "mined" her writings; but this was her gift to him.

Dorothy was of a generous spirit; she was happy to share her recorded impressions and images, she was charitable with the poor and unfortunate. An often recurring image in her journal is the beggar. She seems to have been fascinated by the frequent sight of children and

adults passing through Grasmere, begging. From the very young to the very old, she was eager to hear their stories, at times to the point where she herself would initiate the dialogue:

As we came up the White Moss, we met an old man, who I saw was a beggar by his two bags hanging over his shoulder; but, from half a laziness, half indifference, and a wanting to try him, if he would speak, I let him pass. He said nothing, and my heart smote me. I turned back, and said, "You are begging?" "Ay," says he. I gave him a halfpenny. William, judging from his appearance, joined in, "I suppose you were a sailor?" "Ay," he replied, "I have been 57 years at sea, 12 of them on board of a man-of-war under Sir Hugh Palmer." (100)

Then follows the rest of the story.

Is it simply Dorothy's curiosity that makes her pry into their lives? A search for the picturesque? Or does she see herself in those poor and homeless people, and recognize the plight from which William has saved her?

Fear of poverty, symbolized by the beggar, and the realization that the end will be the pauper's burial. She has noted the cost: "burying very dear—paupers all put in one place—20 shillings paid for as much ground as will bury a man" (25), and described her attendance at such a ceremony:

I ... went to a funeral at John Dawson's. About 10 men and 4 women. Bread, cheese, ale. The dead person, 56 years of age, buried by the parish.... I was affected to tears while we stood in the house, the coffin lying before me. There were no kindred, no children. When we got out of the dark house the sun was shining, and the prospect looked so divinely beautiful as I never saw it.... The green fields, neighbors of the churchyard, were as green as possible; and, with the brightness of the sunshine, looked quite gay. I thought she was going to a quiet spot, and I could not help weeping very much. (48)

"Quiet," as used by Dorothy in her journals and correspondence, signifies the absence of distressing thoughts; thus she exhorts Mary Hutchinson in a letter to "seek quiet or rather amusing thoughts," and tells her "O Mary, my dear Sister! be quiet and happy" (143).

Dorothy's own peace of mind depended on William's decision as to where and how to live. The happiness found when they settled in Dove Cottage had not prevented her from scouting Grasmere for a suitable site to build their own house, as confirmed by a number of entries.<sup>26</sup> After the *Journal's* interruption on December 22, 1800, there are no more references until the anguished notation of March 25, 1802 (after receiving a letter from Mary, which perhaps contained the proposal



that they all should live at G[allow] Hill, the Hutchinson's home, after the wedding): "I made a vow that we would not leave this country for G. Hill" (133). This "we" is a rare occurrence, its duality dominated this time by the otherwise elusive "I," no doubt in response to the threat of yet another, perhaps final, move.

Dorothy's dwelling on the episode of the swallow's nest also draws attention to her growing anxiety. She had watched them for days outside "the sitting-room window as if they wished to build," but they chose her window instead. The description of the discovery of the fallen nest (symbol of the end of a happy union) reveals her own state of mind:

When I rose I went just before tea into the garden. I looked up at my swallow's nest, and it was gone. It had fallen down. Poor little creatures, they could not themselves be more distressed than I was.... I had watched them early in the morning, in the day many a time, and in the evenings when it was almost dark. I had seen them sitting together side by side in their unfinished nest, both morning and night.... I watched them one morning, when William was at Eusemere, for more than an hour. Every now and then, there was a feeling of motion in their wings, a sort of tremulousness and they sang a low song to one another. (181-2)

Although a week later she notes that the swallows have completed their nest (the rebuilding was probably described in a missing manuscript page), the mishap must have reminded her of her own situation, since just two days after that entry she had to leave the swallows—and her own home—for Gallow Hill.

The descriptions of what she has seen (events in themselves often insignificant) help constitute that second text or *sous-code* beneath which unfolds Dorothy's drama.<sup>27</sup> The journal is silent about specific dates to which could be pinned decisions and acts connected with the romance developing between William and Mary; but a change in Dorothy's writing indicates the rising tension like a barometer.

After an extensive round of visits back and forth at year's end in 1801, and early in 1802, it is possible to detect the first manifestations of a curious feeling of release, of letting-go of language. The telling of tender moments, of intimacies heretofore unmentioned (how they read each other to sleep; Dorothy "petting" William; William resting, being read to by Dorothy, his head nestled on her shoulder), the increased use of terms of endearment, the mentioning of their games of musical beds, specific references of where and how they would "lay down" together (on a fur rug spread down in the orchard, under the holly, on a moss-covered rock, amidst the sloping turf)<sup>28</sup> speak of an indulgence,

of a desire to expose (to flaunt?) details of their private lives formerly hidden (or which might not have occurred before that time).

Faced with the unavoidable, she was forced to deal with practical matters (“We resolved to see Annette, and that Wm should go to Mary,” 132); confronted with a deadline, she abandoned her scruples, and wrote, inspired by that lightheadedness which sometimes arises in the face of great danger. Time was closing in on her; writing was a way of making happiness and freedom last. No more attempts at poetry, witness the last try after she had walked home through a moonlit night: “tried to write verses, but alas!” (132); instead a concentrated effort to behold, in words, what would soon no longer be hers alone, to capture cherished moments of togetherness, such as this one:

It is about 10 o'clock, a quiet night. The fire flutters and the watch ticks. I hear nothing else save the breathing of my Beloved, and he now and then pushes his book forward, and turns over a leaf....” (133)

Writing had now become a reprieve, a consolation, a safety rail against despair. She remembered how, upon receipt of that certain letter from William and Mary informing her of their decision to marry, she was forced to endure the company of Mr. Wilkinson on her walk home. He had questioned her “like a catechizer” all the way:

Every question was like the snapping of a little thread about my heart — I was so full of thought of my half-read letter and other things. I was glad when he left me. Then I had time to look at the moon while I was thinking over my thoughts. The moon travelled through the clouds, tinging them yellow as she passed along, with two stars near her, one larger than the other. (136)

The “snapping of the thread” is a hint to how close she was to the breaking point; the moon with the two stars, a symbol of William surrounded by Dorothy and Mary. She had often seen it before, during the many evening- and night-time walks, and recorded (in *The Alfoxden Journal*) how William had once called her into the garden to observe the moon next to “a perfect rainbow, within the bow one star, only of colours more vivid.”<sup>29</sup> Shortly before receiving that letter, she and William had seen the moon “far and distant in the sky; there were two stars beside her, that twinkled in and out, and seemed almost like butterflies in motion and lightness. They looked to be far nearer to us than the moon.”<sup>30</sup>

First there had been only one star, sole companion of the moon, surrounded by the halo of a rainbow: Dorothy and William. Then there were two, though equidistant and of equal size. But on that

fateful evening, she was without William, and the omen in the sky was clear. The two stars had moved closer to the moon (in a move of possession), and one had grown in size and importance. The larger one, no doubt, represented Mary.

The time spent preparing for the journey to France and the wedding, the three-month interval of almost constant travelling, is reflected in the compressed, busy tone of the journal pages. The reader follows easily the itinerary indicated, from Grasmere to Keswick to Eusemere to Scarborough, southwards to London and over to France, and then from Calais all the way back to Gallow Hill; yet time appears to have been at a standstill. The accelerated pace of the physical moments seem to freeze them on the spot, in anticipation of a distant vision fast approaching: the wedding and the return to Grasmere.

In *Fragment d'un discours amoureux*, Barthes states that someone in love is incapable of writing his own love story: "Drame. Le sujet amoureux ne peut écrire lui-même son roman d'amour. Seule une forme très archaïque pourrait recueillir l'événement qu'il déclame sans pouvoir le raconter."<sup>31</sup> Barthes doubts that a journal can adequately relate events which reflect one's love life, because, once written down, the words would only "denounce their own platitude." Since the events are in themselves "infime" (minute, minuscule), only their "retentissement" (reverberation) can indicate, approximately, their meaning or significance. Thus, according to Barthes' definition, Dorothy's diary acquires importance as a *journal de retentissement* (especially the entries of 1802). Its format, which combines household accounts, descriptions of daily tasks, of nature, of village life, as well as a sampler of meditations and feelings expressed, answers closely the description of this "archaic form" as specified by Barthes. Its purpose, though ambiguous, includes the safe-keeping of events around which the amorous subject creates his own love-story; always a solitary project.

Dorothy did not intend to, nor could she have narrated her own drama. In her solitude (the solitude of the lover) she found herself suspended in a vacuum filled with signs of ambiguous character which only spelled out the question: what was she to him? William's presence dominates the journal. Although she stated in her first entry that she was writing *for* him, could this not be interpreted also as writing *to* him? There is no uncertainty on her part; she never ceased to tell him that she loved him, and did so no doubt in the hopes of obtaining signs of reciprocity. We have no clues as to how William "read" her. Only one journal entry records William being attentive to Dorothy (upon his return from a three-day visit to Eusemere):

William came in just when Molly had left me. It was a mild rainy evening—he was cool and fresh and smelt sweetly—his clothes were wet. We sate together talking till the first dawning of day—a happy time. He was pale and not much tired. He thought I looked well too. (181)

Once again, the date mentioned permits reading special meaning into those brief lines: the day of their departure on that journey, from which they would return forever as a threesome, was imminent. The events themselves (William's arrival, a long conversation), are evoked in their reverberation, i.e. the sights and smells remembered. They inform us how parts of a day and night were spent—but they are also "fragments of an amorous discourse,"<sup>32</sup> comparable to fragments/-lines of Emily Dickinson's poetry, since they reach the same registers of sensibility in their attempt to convey feelings of felicity, tenderness, and despair.

During the entire waiting period (Spring to October 1802), the words betrothal, engagement, marriage, wedding, honeymoon, etc. are never mentioned; what looms ahead is a nameless tragedy. The prospect of having to relinquish a privileged position, the thought of many foreseeable changes in her life contributed to an emotional build-up which reached crisis level at the moment of the religious ceremony. It was the final confirmation of months of anguish and suffering, summed up in this entry of October 4, 1802: "... it was over" (197).

"It": *reductio ad absurdum* of a situation, of language; an example of that dilemma Barthes speaks of, when "vouloir écrire l'amour, c'est affronter le gachis du langage."<sup>33</sup> The significance of the act itself (the marriage ceremony) is magnified by what preceded it; the three words expressing its "reverberation"—"it was over"—show the inward ratio of text to event, i.e. the comment's brevity in relation to the immensity of the happenings which are its cause.

The agony of seeing William and Mary leave together (Dorothy had watched them from her window "go down the avenue towards the church") had required all the discipline she could muster: "I kept myself as quiet as I could"; but the pain became unbearable: "I could stand it no longer, and threw myself on the bed, where I lay in stillness, neither hearing nor seeing anything till Sara [Mary's sister] came upstairs to me, and said 'They are coming' " (197).

Although *The Grasmere Journal* does not "fit" into any of our literary categories because of its lack of canonical elements, its only "narrative structure," as a critic has pointed out, is Dorothy's "story"

of William's engagement and marriage to Mary Hutchinson.<sup>34</sup> The fragmentary nature of the journal, the missing pages, the coverings sewn over some sections, the parts blotted out with heavy black ink may constitute yet another sub-text or *sous-code*; they are a repertory of signs drawing attention to the intensity of Dorothy's feelings. For example, was it Dorothy herself who had tried to obliterate the description of the ring ceremony on the morning of the wedding day? It is difficult to imagine a sadder, more heart-breaking moment in her life than the one when she surrendered the ring to William, symbol of union for him, but of separation and exclusion for her:

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.<sup>35</sup>

The voyage back to Grasmere was a last trial, painful enough to make her physically ill (the only time in the journal when she mentions having vomited). It was perhaps her share of “a shilling's worth of negus”<sup>36</sup> they had drunk with supper the day after the wedding night; but already at the earlier (mid-day) meal, which William and Mary “heartily enjoyed,” she had been “not quite well” (200-201).

Besides, so much of the scenery along the way, the inns where they stayed, were cruel reminders of that journey she and William had taken three years earlier, when they had come to settle in Dove Cottage, or of excursions they had made together. The names of the villages they passed through are evoked like a litany of longing (202): In Garsdale “was the publick-house ... where we had baited, and drunk our pint of ale ....” In Sedburgh we “were in the same room where we had spent the evening together in our road to Grasmere ....” In Stavely,

a place I dearly love to think of—the first mountain village that I came to with Wm when we first began our pilgrimage together. Here we drank a bason of milk at a publick house, and here I washed my feet in the brook, and put on a pair of silk stockings by Wm's advice. (202)

The homecoming in Grasmere is the beginning of the end. End of an era, end of language (personal discourse) as well, since she was unable to express her sentiments upon re-entering Dove Cottage; words could no longer describe how she felt. “Molly was overjoyed to see us, for my part I cannot describe what I felt” (203).

It was time now to repeat the vows she had made months ago, after William had left on one of his short trips: “I *will* be busy. I *will* look well....” (115). She knew he needed her; she would have to initiate

Mary into the household routine, continue to “take down his stanzas,” assist him in the endless task of copying and re-copying his verses,<sup>37</sup> and cater to his whims.

It is on this note that the journal ends: William’s fancy for some gingerbread. His capriciousness is part of a curious final image, the portrait of another threesome, Matthew Newton’s household. She had gone there to buy gingerbread, and found the blind man, his wife, and his sister sitting by the fire.

Is the reference to Matthew Newton’s blindness an unconscious reminder of her brother’s lack of awareness? Had William really been blind or just insensitive?

January 16, 1803; the last journal entry. She was now thirty-two years old, in charge of her brother’s household, still the “dear” sister, but mostly household factotum, the needed family relative. Her position is redefined at the end of the last paragraph, in the undistinguishable “we” that records a purchase of “thick” (the thick cream to be served with the gingerbread): “we bought 2 pennyworth” (210). A fade-out into triviality.

The story of Dove Cottage had begun with happiness created by a twosome, brother and sister, which later expanded to include William’s brother, John, and numerous friends, guests and visitors. Then, a process of changes and substitutions had transformed the original nucleus until its evolutionary chemistry culminated in the traditional couple generating life: biographical details reveal that as the journal ends, Mary is already pregnant.

*The Grasmere Journal* covers a period of Dorothy’s life like a patchwork quilt. On the surface, there is the colorful kaleidoscope of the geometrical cutouts, the bits of fabric (of daily life) which, pieced together, fall short of yielding a lasting measure of happiness. The connecting seams permit us to trace the lines/patterns of the underlying *sous-code*. It is a sort of reversible *écriture*, both sides spelling defeat: the failure of her life as a woman, which William’s marriage had changed from unmarried woman companion to live-in spinster sister, a non-entity in patriarchal society; and failure as a writer. She could no longer find words to express her feelings upon re-entering Dove Cottage, the house which was still her home, but whose mistress she was no longer. Although she continues to write in her journal for a short while, Mary’s presence is felt in the narrative structure and tone of the entries. It conferred on Dorothy a ghostlike existence she assumed thereafter for a long time, that of Mary’s shadow, of William’s secre-

tary. Is the abrupt ending of the journal due to the fact that an increase of duties in taking care of the household and the children left her no time to write? Or could it be a sign of how deeply her demotion/change of status had affected her? Was William's marital happiness and attentiveness to his wife too much to bear?

Her writing, as one critic has noted, reveals "both joy and rage at her choice of life"<sup>38</sup>; could part of this "rage" stem from an unfulfilled wish, namely that she had expected William to make the same choice (to remain unmarried and continue living with her) and content himself with the pleasures of the intellect?

*The Grasmere Journal* can be read as a historical document, a chronicle about a period in the life of young Dorothy Wordsworth and the role she played in the beginning of the Romantic movement. But it is also a text of hope and desire, speaking of a woman's vocation, of her aspiration to the symbolic register, and of the circumstances and forces that made this impossible: as such, an admirable exercise in the art of failure.

## NOTES

1. Kate O'Brien, *English Diaries and Journals* (London: Wm. Collins, 1943) 7.
2. Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959) 274.
3. Blanchot, 275-76.
4. O'Brien, 48.
5. George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 61-94.
6. See: Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 81; Rachel Mayer Brownstein, "The Private Life: Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 34 (March 1973) 48-673; and the outstanding study by Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers, The State University Press, 1987).
7. Especially theories of Nancy Chodorow, Jean Baker Miller, Carol Gilligan; essays collected in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1985). See Susan Levin, *op. cit.*, Introduction, 1-10.
8. Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953); *Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1964); *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970); *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973); *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Seuil, 1977); and Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966); *Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).
9. Kingsley Hart, ed., *Dove Cottage: the Wordsworths at Grasmere, 1799-1803, being The Grasmere Journal* by Dorothy Wordsworth together with selections from the correspondence of Dorothy and William Wordsworth (London: The Folio Society, 1966) 25. All further references to this edition of *The Grasmere Journal* appear in the text, except for references to multiple entries, for which notes are provided.
10. Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 22: "Absence lasts; I must endure it. I shall therefore manipulate it: transform the distortion of time into a coming-and-going, produce rhythm, open the scene of language (language is born of absence ...)." [My translation.]
11. Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) tome I, 123.
12. Homans, 45.
13. Homans, 45.
14. Homans, 53.
15. Peter Burra, *Wordsworth* (London: Duckworth, 1950) 79.

16. Prospectus to *The Excursion*, William Wordsworth, l. 57.
17. Barthes, *Essais critiques*; "rétorique" as defined, 30.
18. Benveniste, 230.
19. Homans, 45.
20. Steiner, 72.
21. Catherine Backès-Clément, "La stratégie du langage," *Littérature*, 3 (Oct. 1971), 11-29. Backès-Clément quotes from Lacan's *Seminaire interdit*, of March 18, 1970.
22. Blanchot, 274.
23. See *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Mass. Press, 1980); articles on/by Hélène Cixous, Catherine Backès-Clément, Claudine Hermann, Julia Kristeva; and Hélène Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* (Summer 1976) 875-93.
24. Burra, 79; although this statement has been contested. See Levin, 245.
25. Homans; see discussion of the "self," 70-73.
26. Hart, *Dove Cottage*; see entries of the year 1800: May 18, May 19, May 28, Sept. 2, Oct. 11.
27. Barthes, *S/Z*; the terms "code" and "sous-code" as defined on 27.
28. Hart, *Dove Cottage*; see entries of the year 1802: Jan. 31, Feb. 6, Feb. 14, March 4, March 16, March 17, March 23, April 29, April 30, May 1, May 4, May 27.
29. E. de Selincourt, ed., *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth* (New York: McMillan, 1941), 2 vols., Vol. I, 5 (entry of January 30, 1798).
30. de Selincourt, 130.
31. Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 109: "Drama. The amorous subject cannot himself write his love story. Only a very archaic form could shelter the event it/he speaks of without being able to 'tell' (narrate) it." [My translation.]
32. Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 109.
33. Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 115: "Wanting to write about love means to face the shamble of language." [My translation.]
34. Levin, 21.
35. *The Grasmere Journal*, Dorothy Wordsworth, the revised complete text with an introduction by Jonathan Wordsworth (London: The Albion Press, 1987) 166.
36. Negus: a beverage of wine, hot water, sugar, nutmeg, and lemon juice.
37. A good example is *The Pedlar*; *The Grasmere Journal* reveals how much time both William and Dorothy spent on it, William composing, rewriting it, Dorothy copying it—until she mentions copying it again, all "280 lines" (185).
38. Levin, 1.