Robin Schofield
reads
Dorothy Wordsworth and Hartley Coleridge: The Poetics of Relationship
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)
by Nicola Healey

HARTLEY COLERIDGE was 'hailed as the most promising poet of his day' (1); and Dorothy Wordsworth, in her 'descriptions of natural life', has been 'acknowledged as unequalled by any other prose writer of the period, and perhaps by any [other] early nineteenth- century writer' (2). Yet, both Hartley and Dorothy have been persistently misunderstood, misrepresented and undervalued in literary history, largely through the influence of 'biographical and 'familial' myths (10). Nicola Healey redresses the balance decisively, by focusing attention on their work itself. As Edmund Blunden observed of Hartley in 1929: 'Incomplete, eccentric, confused, interrupted as the story of Hartley Coleridge must be, to adventure into his poems is to pass into a sphere of completeness, method, and continuity' (3); Hartley's poems and essays yield impressions wholly opposite to those of the biographical myth of immaturity, 'fragmentation and waste' (44). Similarly, Dorothy's journals and poems show unique literary 'abilities'; and, when read with acute reference to her brother's work, reveal 'the extent of her contribution to William's poetics' (2). Healey subjects Dorothy's continuing 'dialectic between self-subordination and self-expression' to rigorous analysis; and counters the view, influentially promoted by De Quincey, that Dorothy was a 'permanently obstructed writer' (7). Hartley, meanwhile, should be associated with 'relationship, community, sociability and philanthropy', rather than 'introversion' (12). Healey's introductory chapter, therefore, makes a strong case for revaluation of both authors, and offers a succinct prospectus of her study's revisionary scope; particularly, her challenge to core articles of faith enshrined in the masculine Romantic canon, and its concept of individual genius. Healey refers to Dorothy's brother as 'William', therefore, just as she uses the first names, 'Dorothy' and 'Hartley', throughout the book. Healey's range of reference over past critics, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, is authoritative and illuminating: she pays tribute to scholars such as Susan Wolfson (on Dorothy) and, particularly, Andrew Keanie (on Hartley), who have begun the process of revaluation, and whose insights she develops.

Healey's focus on family, and particularly sibling, relationships suggests that 'authorial identity is not fundamentally determined by, and dependent on, gender, but is governed by the infinitely complex pressures of domestic environment, immediate kinship and familial readership' (233). Authorial anxiety for Dorothy and Hartley, moreover, is shown to derive from 'sibling' rather than 'patriarchal' influence (6). One of the book's most significant suggestions is that Hartley's essential struggle for creative identity is not so much with his literary 'fathers', but with his brother, Derwent, who would

produce the posthumous editions of his poems and prose, and influence their future reception (90). Hartley contended, also, against 'a textualized version of himself as child, created by STC and Wordsworth'; and 'with his readership, and their relationship with STC', who would have him 'play […] into his irritatingly persistent alter-ego: "a living spectre of my father dead"' (83). Similarly, Healey's approach to Dorothy involves revisions of Wordsworthian critical preconceptions. Dorothy's descriptions of William's 'pains of composition' in her journals, for example, 'show poetry-making […] to be anything but "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", or "emotion recollected in tranquillity"' (178). Dorothy's construction of William has received little attention, Healey contends: Dorothy portrays 'a William' who depends on her 'vital support'; who 'would literally be unable to survive without [her] ministry of care' (182). Dorothy 'thrives on intertextuality'; and, aware that William would read her account of his weaknesses, asserts her own personal and creative strength (180).

At first glance, the organization of the book, with three chapters on Hartley, followed by three on Dorothy, framed by short introductory and concluding chapters, might suggest it to contain two essentially discrete studies, linked by a common theme. This proves to be far from the case. The book is admirably cohesive: each author is presented in a way that complements and inflects discussion of the other. Healey illuminates, for example, the comparable ways in which Hartley and Dorothy describe the natural world. Dorothy's whole manner of seeing and writing reflects her acute sensitivity to changing, ephemeral phenomena; just as Hartley, Dorothy applies a minutely attentive 'vision', reflected in the vibrancy and detail of her descriptive language: 'Sat a considerable time upon the heath. Its surface restless and glistening with the motion of the scattered piles of withered grass, and the waving of spiders' threads […] In the deep Coombe, as we stood upon the sunless hill, we saw the hills of grass, light and glittering, and the insects passing'. (159) Dorothy's images of movement and light are characteristic of her style; as when, elsewhere, she notes 'locks of wool […] spangled with dew-drops', and 'withered leaves dancing with hailstones' (159). Hartley's almost microscopic observations show similar sensitivity to 'the elusive surfaces of nature'; as he perceives, for example, a moment's interaction between insect, flower and sunlight:

> The very shadow of an insect's wing,
> For which the violet cared not while it stay'd,
> Yet felt the lighter for its vanishing,
> Proved that the sun was shining by its shade. (33)

In describing subtle movements of the natural world, Dorothy and Hartley meet Ruskin's criterion of 'what we want art to do for us' (162): 'to stay what is fleeting, and to enlighten what is incomprehensible, to incorporate the things that have no measure' (162). Hartley would have concurred: a poet's 'humble

[…] spirit', he declares, 'Hears […] a low sweet melody, inaudible / To […] gross sense'.[1]

In contrast with William, who seeks 'to transcend the object and see into the life of things', both Hartley and Dorothy avoid the masculine sublime: they record, simply and directly, 'the life of things' in 'their material existence' (160). Hartley, for example, describes the ever-changing appearance of goldfish, which, in perpetual movement, 'constantly elude a perceptible form':

> Restless forms of living light
> Quivering on your lucid wings,
> Cheating still the curious sight
> With a thousand shadowings. (24)

As Hartley writes in his essay, *Pins*: 'forms are all fleeting, changeable creatures of time and circumstance', which reflects an outlook that is Lockean rather than Wordsworthian (25). Dorothy, suggests Healey, expresses a similar 'mode of perception' (150): 'We […] watch[ed] the Breezes some as if they came from the bottom of the lake spread in a circle, brushing along the surface of the water, & growing more delicate, as it were thinner & of a paler colour till they died away – others spread out like a peacock's tail, & some went right forward this way & that in all directions' (160). Dorothy's journals, in such delicate vitality of style, and her poems written later in life, suggest her intrinsic objection 'to the elevation of self over nature' (229). As Hartley, who distanced 'external nature' from the human 'mind', Dorothy reveres nature as 'separate from herself', in contrast with William's vision of 'an interdependent relationship' of nature and man. Dorothy 'never confused her own soul with the sky', in Virginia Woolf's incisive phrase (229). Dorothy and Hartley, interested in 'the thing itself, in itself, and for itself', rather than its transcendent purpose, offer what ecocriticism would term, in Jonathan Bate's words, an 'experiencing of nature' (229). An ecocritical approach, Healey argues, would 'value' Dorothy's 'work on an equal standing with that of her brother' (229).

Healey shows that Hartley retained a determined, steely faith in his poetic abilities: I am not angry with my critics', he wrote in 1848, and compares himself with a 'soldier' who 'can stand fire', contrasting his own resilience with Keats's vulnerability: 'I will never be snuffed out with an article, I assure you' (128). Dorothy, meanwhile, finds personal, intellectual and creative strength in William's presence. The writings of both, Healey argues, reveal a symbiotic and generative relationship, mutually fulfilling, not one of passive female dependence. Dorothy responds to the 'deep and continual' tensions of entering William's authorial domain by 'imaginatively setting herself up as co-author' of his work (166). As William himself, and subsequent critics have acknowledged, Dorothy influenced his ability to see and hear, 'unlocking' for him the 'vision of nature' (162). What has not been fully recognized, Healey reminds us, is that

[1] *Task Ad Libitum*, *The Complete Poems of Hartley Coleridge*, edited by Ramsey Colles (London: Routledge, 1908), p. 23.

Dorothy 'subtly influenced the whole movement of Romanticism, and later generations of poets who are influenced by William' (102). However, Dorothy recoiled from 'the idea of setting [her]self up as an author', as her reluctance to publish her *Narrative Concerning George and Sarah Green of the Parish of Grasmere*, indicates. Such self-deprecating anxiety stems from a reluctance to encroach on 'William's territory' and compete with him (168). Healey's meticulous and sensitive readings indicate convincingly that Dorothy's 'anxiety over the fruition of her independent self becomes progressively more apparent in her journals and poems' (136). Dorothy's conflict between authorial desire and refusal is experienced by other female writers of the period, such as Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Sara Coleridge.

Although Dorothy's collaboration in William's work involved 'an emptying out of self' (230), Healey counters the construction of Dorothy 'as a figurehead for women's repression' (173): fine critical attention to the writings of both siblings illuminates ways in which Dorothy contributed to William's work. Dorothy emerges, therefore, as rigorous critic, editor of work-in-progress, and source of poetic material, particularly as catalyst for William's memory; Dorothy's 'version of events then being generated into his verse' (208). Healey reads the journals, therefore, as a record of Dorothy's collaborative support; and the 'Lucy' poems as William's realization that he would be 'sensorily and creatively weakened without Dorothy's presence, a discovery that both destabilizes and reassures him' (196). This view of Dorothy, as 'integral to [William's] entire poetic imaginative vocation,' is confirmed in Book XIII of *The Prelude*: William acknowledges Dorothy and STC as 'the two Beings to whom my intellect is most indebted' (196). In her discussion of *Tintern Abbey*, a poem 'primarily intended for Dorothy', Healey adjusts Clifford Marks's reading: she argues that it is 'the triadic interdependent relationship of nature, William and Dorothy that inspires' William's 'imaginative response' (192). In 1832, Dorothy engaged in dialogue with the William of *Tintern Abbey* in her poem *Thoughts on my Sick-Bed*: while validating his belief in 'the regenerating and creative powers of nature and poetry', Dorothy asserts the primacy of the 'power of companionship'; at the same time, she 'offers William the relief that she can exist independently':

> No prisoner in this lonely room,
> I saw the green Banks of Wye,
> Recalling thy prophetic words,
> Bard, Brother, Friend from infancy! (224)

Written during the Rydal years, when William's creativity was declining, Dorothy's poems show her working towards a resolution between dedication to collaborative endeavour, and realization of 'poetic selfhood' (230). Of her 'investment in William', she writes:

> But joy it brought to my hidden life

My hidden life
To my inner life no longer hidden
To my consciousness no longer hidden (229).

This 'hidden life', represented in 'her reviving memories of the Banks of Wye', and the shared creative experience, is the 'site of Dorothy's poetic identity' (230). Sara Coleridge's authorial self-realization through dedicated devotion to editing STC might be a literary parallel; though Healey's study suggests that the 'double singleness' of the sibling bond is unique in emotional and imaginative potency (202). If siblingship fulfilled Dorothy's 'hidden life', Hartley found the influence of Derwent, career cleric and educationalist, severely inhibiting: 'Many are the [poems] that I have either strangled at birth, and murdered as soon as born, for fear of you', Hartley confessed to him (91).

Dorothy and Hartley share a similar concept of their poetic identity. In her poem, *Floating Island at Hawkshead,* Dorothy, as Hartley, rejects egocentric values, and conceives of poetic regeneration and continuity perpetuated through 'community' (228). Hartley shifts the criterion of poetic value from author to readership: 'what the poet leaves behind' is not the 'empty fame' of an 'echoed name', but its influence on human perception and emotion:

It is a happy feeling
Begot by bird or flower or vernal bee.
'Tis aught that acts, unconsciously revealing
To mortal man his immortality. (86)

Hartley believes that 'poets all work towards the same end and contribute to one collective immortal identity' (88). Using the symbol of different rivers or streams, Hartley suggests that all voices have their distinctive tone and identity: all 'myriad-voiced rills' rightly strive 'to tell their story':

Yet every little brook is known
By a voice that is its own. (89)

Hartley's concept of poetic identity differentiates him from his literary 'fathers', and aligns him with Locke's understanding of the individual's partaking in 'one Common Life' (16). This 'is an earlier more embodied principle' than the 'one Life' concept generally associated with the Coleridge circle of the 1790s; it confronts 'the problems of time and change, and how identity can be sustained' (16). Such a concept has implications for poetic continuity: 'An awareness of literary history (as opposed to a consciousness of great poetic "models") involves understanding one's own creativity within a continuing inheritance' (89).[2] It is within this 'continuing inheritance' that Hartley finds his own voice. He believes in the importance of poetry as a living principle in human culture, as opposed to a monument to individual genius. Literary value,

[2] David Fairer, *Organizing Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790 – 1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 4.

for Hartley, resides in, and is transmitted through, 'the myriad multitude of human lives', the actions and relationships of everyday life: 'it must be delight to every lover of mankind to see how the influence of Wordsworth's poetry is diverging, spreading over society, benefiting the heart and soul of the species, and directly operating on thousands, who haply, never read, nor ever will read, a single page of his fine volumes' (87). The purpose of literature, as Sara Coleridge puts it, is 'the furtherance of man's well being, here and hereafter';[3] Hartley, as 'lover of mankind' elevates this cultural and spiritual purpose above individual claims of recognition. It is in this 'larger scheme' of reception that the authorial identities of Hartley Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth are realized (232).

Nicola Healey's book is a major contribution to our understanding of Hartley Coleridge: Healey enables us to hear more clearly, and place more securely in context, Hartley's distinctive voice. Healey's meticulous study of the writing relationship of Dorothy and William lends important insight into the nature of Romantic authorship, and the unique creative potential in that period of the sibling bond. The study indicates fresh approaches to William's work, and fundamentally revalues the decisive nature of Dorothy's contribution in what was, essentially, a collaborative endeavour. Moreover, Dorothy's individual creativity is restored: 'Dorothy's poetic identity', asserts Healey, 'and its difference from William's, should be celebrated more for what it achieves rather than lacks in comparison' (229). The excellently detailed and informative notes at the end of the text, and exhaustive bibliography, offer ample opportunity for those who will wish to pursue its compelling themes further. The book repositions Hartley and Dorothy in literary history, and contributes significantly to our developing understanding of Romanticism: it deserves to be widely read.

[3] Sara Coleridge, 'Introduction', S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and opinions. Prepared for publication in part by the late Henry Nelson Coleridge; completed and published by his widow*. 2 Vols, edited by Sara Coleridge (London: Pickering, 1847), Vol 1, p. clvi