Richard Gravil

reads

William and Dorothy Wordsworth, 'All in Each Other'

(Oxford University Press, 2013)

by Lucy Newlyn

'ALL IN EACH OTHER' is in a genre all its own, falling somewhere between a sibling biography, and a monograph on the psychology of gift exchange, nostalgia, homelessness, and the work of mourning. Its intellectual gurus are Marcel Mauss (*The Gift: Forms and Functions of Gifts in Archaic Societies*, 1923) and Lewis Hyde (*The Gift: How the Creative Transforms the World*, 2007). Its joint premises are that Dorothy Wordsworth is not 'an undervalued or exploited member of the Wordsworth household' (the grouse of some widely read studies of the relationship), and that she was 'William's equal in a literary partnership of outstanding importance'.

The story begins with separation: the removal of Dorothy from Penrith to Halifax in 1778 at the age of six, following the death of her mother. She would not be reunited with her brothers, even at Christmas, or even at the time of their father's death in 1783. So the keynote of their partnership-forging reunion in 1787 was sharing their experience of mourning and their histories of fostering—William's by Ann Tyson in Hawkshead, Dorothy's by Elizabeth Threlkeld in Halifax, or less happily with her grandparents in Penrith. Thus, in the scheme of this book, was prepared the leading motifs of their work—of nostalgia, of home, and of belonging.

Numerous of Wordsworth's works are read in this book as instalments in the delayed process of becoming a brother. This began, as *The Prelude* has it, with the experience in 1787 of knowing Dorothy as 'a gift then first bestowed' (6: 216–8) and re-exploring their childhood environs around Penrith with Dorothy and Mary in 1788. Collectively, the Dame School, the River Eamont, Lowther Park, Brougham and Penrith Beacon, not to mention Ann Wordsworth's grave, make Penrith significantly more significant to William, Mary and Dorothy than the famous birthplace.

In a highly suggestive ten or twelve pages, Wordsworth's first three long poems are read in this light of a reunited siblinghood. *The Vale of Esthwaite*, Newlyn suggests, changes its theme from tribal mourning to familial mourning after the reunion with Dorothy; *An Evening Walk* is seen not simply as a work of a young poet expressing his sense of belonging, but as a work initiating Dorothy (its addressee) into a natal landscape from which she has been long estranged; and *Descriptive Sketches* as a work in which Dorothy shared vicariously, through William's letters while on tour with Jones, and then through reliving the tour in conversation (at Forncett) and while critiquing drafts of the poem. All three, then, of Wordsworth's first major efforts are

those of a sibling. More conjecturally, that pivotal wok, *Salisbury Plain*, is read as one in which the depiction of a 'a female vagrant and a male traveller' draw on William and Dorothy's experience of homelessness; as indeed later in the oeuvre, *The Brothers* treats of bereavement, separation and homecoming.

Chapters 2 and 3 treat the first three periods of sibling housekeeping at Windy Brow (where *An Evening Walk* was revised), at Racedown (where *The Borderers* was written, and *The Ruined Cottage* begun), and Alfoxden, in the year of *Lyrical Ballads*. Dorothy's presence at Windy Brow, it is suggested, made the expanded (but unpublished) version of *An Evening Walk* into something resembling one of Coleridge's early conversation poems (29). It is now addressed not to an absent addressee but to a beloved companion, whose shared background in Unitarian ideas allows the introduction into the poem of a new element, Wordsworth's first expression of the idea of an active universe. The idea that this theme owes much to Hartley, or that if it does, this is as much Dorothy's doing as Wordsworth's, may be both overstated and under-argued. Throughout the book, Newlyn reconstitutes Wordsworth as a thorough-going Hartleyan, barely acknowledging other intellectual influences.

Strangely, the two years at Racedown appear to have been free of intellectual inquiry: all we are told of the intellectual resources of Racedown is that 'The Pinney's library was well-stocked, so they read widely, Dorothy's Italian greatly improving over the course of two years' (40). But since a major theme of the book is that Dorothy and William developed each other's ecological awareness it is not easy to see how, when they met Coleridge— already having conceived of an active universe at Windy Brow— his 'intellectual influence deepened their love of the natural world' (44), which statement seems to be offered as self-evident and unproblematic. I suppose it depends what one means by 'deepened': transcendentalised, perhaps?

Inevitably, the book is much concerned with parallels between her prose and his poetry. An obvious instance is that rather problematic poem 'A Night-Piece' (58) adduced in evidence of the shared vision of Alfoxden. That this poem relates closely to Dorothy's journal is clear enough; for some readers that is one reason why it barely begins to be a poem. Whether it follows that the observant sensibility of the Alfoxden Journal dovetails with the philosophy of 'Expostulation and Reply' (59) and the other credal lyrics of 1798 is rather less clear: the Journal entries seem to belong to a different order of thought.

That *The Poem upon the Wye* concludes with an ecstatic affirmation of a brother's love for his sister does need saying, since truly bizarre grounds have been offered for warping this poem's emotional climax, but while it is right to recognise the force of comparing Dorothy to the Holy Ghost (she being the 'thou' in whose company the speaker will 'will fear no evil' even, it is implied, in 'the valley of the shadow of death') it seems more problematic to conclude that Dorothy's role in the poem is as 'the keeper of memories, *guardian* of place, and *nurse* of his creative spirit'. That phrasing equates Dorothy and Nature: it borrows the poem's primary attestation that 'nature and the language of the sense' are 'the nurse, the guide, the guardian and the soul of all my moral

being'. In so doing it seems to me to empty the poem of half its intellectual daring.

Intriguingly, in a joint biography, Hamburg (pp 68-81) looms as large as Goslar (pp. 82-97). The one produces Dorothy's Hamburg journal; the other no journal but the first part of the two-part *Prelude*, the Mathew and Lucy poems and *Nutting*. Curiously, and perhaps because Dorothy kept no journal, the book's only visual reference to Goslar, one of Germany's prettiest towns, is Coleridge's dismissive comment on 'this ugly silent old desert of a city'. Newlyn tends to revive Coleridge's association of 'Lucy' with Dorothy, flirting with the generally unproductive idea that there is one Lucy, whose 'historical identity' cannot be established for certain, but she also makes a very telling suggestion that I do not recall seeing before—that what is mourned in 'A slumber did my spirit seal' is not, *pace* Coleridge, the imagined death of the poet's sister but the actual death that sundered the siblings—that of Ann Wordsworth in 1778. Since the subject of all the 'Lucy poems' is indubitably the work of mourning, and mourning in the Wordsworth family begins with mourning the mother (a young mother at that), the suggestion is a compelling one. Of whom, more than a mother, might one say that 'She seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years'? 'Three years she grew' may or may not gain from association with Dorothy, and I don't know what to make of the conjecture that 'William is not only remembering the lost years of Dorothy's youth … but also prophesying the quiet passage of Caroline Vallon from infancy to womanhood'. Neither of these contrary specificities seems to do much for 'How soon my Lucy's race was run! / She died and left to me / This heath, this calm and quiet scene, / The memory of what has been, and never more will be.'

I confess to feeling that the Wordsworth treated in this book (the Wordsworth who overlaps with Dorothy) is a somewhat diminished one: just such a Wordsworth as we might have had, had he not been to France, or London, or devoted twelve hours of thought to politics for every one he gave to poetry, or had a philosophic power capable of impressing Coleridge. This Wordsworth's major works are the rather prosy inscriptions for various islands in the lake district (on Rydal, Grasmere and Derwentwater) or those on the naming of places—poems of a quiet, pastoral nature, Georgics indeed (as Newlyn righjtly calls them) which do indeed seem to arise from a genius cognate with Dorothy's own. In a way we are back with Matthew Arnold's Wordsworth, who 'laid us as we lay at birth / On the cool flowery lap of earth, / Smiles broke from us and we had ease': not that this Wordsworth is to be scorned, even if it is the yin without the yang. Newlyn shows well how the great lyric achievement of 1800/1802 in Grasmere, in the poems that proved altogether too much for the regency wits (such as his Byronic lordship) who reviewed *Poems in Two Volumes*, begin in present happiness achieved with Dorothy in Grasmere, and are enriched by shared childhood memories. I think Newlyn leaves out the vital sensibility inheritance, but it is profitable to re-read them in this domestic light.

Chapter 8 ('The Grasmere Journal') has many good things on successes and failures in collaborative imagining, as in 'The Beggars', where Dorothy's words constituted a block, and the Butterfly poem ('Stay near me') where William works in part from Dorothy's reminiscences and from talking over their various reminiscences. One of the most gleeful and celebratory pieces of immediate observation, 'The Cock is Crowing', is as Newlyn says, 'as close in spirit to Dorothy's style as William ever got', yet the poem (on p. 156) and DW's journal entry (155) are about as divergent as two simultaneous descriptions of the same scene could be: almost the only words common to the entry and the poem are 'cocks', 'crowing', 'glitter/ing', 'feeding', and 'snow' which vivid elements seem to have impelled both to write. The composition of the poem, in this case, preceded the journal entry: Dorothy's entry starts by returning to a spot where she left Wordsworth writing 'a poem descriptive of the sights and sounds we saw and heard'. The life of those poems is that of the most unbuttoned *poetry* imaginable; Dorothy may well have helped William imagine them; may even have helped him experience them; did indeed, as another poem says, give him eyes and ears with which so to do; but it is hard to point to even a line that is not solely his.

Which brings me to the nation's favourite poem, on which Newlyn writes brilliantly (pp. 157–9) speculating about what mode of private or communal composition might have taken place between William, Dorothy and Mary to result in a poem which at least two of them (William and Mary) wrote, expressive of an experience any of them *might* have had—and which, indeed, all of them *did* have in their communal mode of re-experiencing what two of them (William and Dorothy) severally experienced. No doubt William had been reading in Dorothy's journal of 1802 with its record of what she and her brother experienced (and 'we fancied' as they experienced), but what else arose between them while talking over the experience and the journal entry with Mary (who wasn't there in 1802)? And what sort of communal thinking so wrought upon Mary that she contributed what William (gallantly) called its 'two best lines'? The poem and the diary, Newlyn notes, have little in common beyond the raw data of description and Dorothy's metaphor of the 'dance': and the poem is designed to be shareable by any reader through the medium of the lyric 'I'. Any reader able to make the imaginative leap of identifying with a poet's glee can identify with the poem, and almost everyone but Coleridge and Anna Seward have been able so to do. But whether Dorothy played any part in the oral composition of the final poem we cannot know.

The decision of William, Dorothy and Coleridge to go on a highland tour in August 1803, leaving Mary to care for her new baby with just a sister's help, does not pass without comment; and Newlyn's treatment of the tour in Chapter 10 strikes me as fresh and distinctive. She points provocatively to Coleridge's absorption in landscape aesthetics on this tour (implying that it foreshadows his famous decision to go off in a huff), whereas William and Dorothy were not at all 'all in each other', as he put it, but engaged in observing the peopled world, its speech and ethnography, legend and life.

Dorothy's notes become a joint observational resource, both for her own 'prose masterpiece' and of course for a fresh departure in Wordsworth's art, long after their return. Though for Wordsworth, one might argue, anyone's journal would do just as well—*vide* Thomas Wilkinson and the greatest of the Scottish poems, *The Solitary Reaper*.

In Chapter 11 ('Grasmere and Coleorton') we are reminded of the centrality to the Wordsworths' writings of the Homeric motifs of wandering and return, and the georgic theme of dwelling in a place of work (203), and in Chapter 12 ('The Lake District') William and Dorothy emerge jointly as 'Westmorland writers' (220), in Dorothy's *Narrative of George and Sarah Green*, the first version of Wordsworth's *Guide*, called *Select Views* (1810) and its reappearance in association with *The River Duddon*.

By Chapters 13 and 14 ('The Continent' and 'Wanderlust') home is the gentrified Rydal Mount. These chapters will surprise those who think of the Wordsworths as fixtures, covering the 1820 Tour (and Dorothy's *Continental Journal*), Scotland in 1822, the Isle of Man in 1828, Abbotsford and the Highlands again in 1831, London in 1834, Italy 1837, all with a changing cast of Wordsworths and assorted friends. According to Newlyn, a line in Wordsworth's magnificent sonnet after visiting the field of Waterloo—'And horror breathing from the silent ground'—derives 'directly from Dorothy's journal' (251). Well, yes; but the observation might also be a distant variation on the only worthwhile line in Sir John Beaumont's *Bosworth Field* (1629)—a not unanalogous 'field' with which Wordsworth became familiar while writing on Brougham Castle. As with all such instances, there is no way of knowing which of the tourists first made this connection. The point is made earlier in the volume (p. 54) that with most of Dorothy's journal entries, as with *Daffodils*, 'it is clear who the writing-subject is, but not always whether she is alone when observing and writing': and while certain kinds of vivid notation seem indubitably Dorothy's (a brilliant observation of a birch tree like a water spirit, for instance, treated on pages 144–5) one cannot always know whether the experience being recorded originated with William, with Dorothy, or Mary, or Coleridge, or was a joint perception.

Gathering dementia, and rampant possessiveness (redolent of Dorothy's wedding-day psychosis) is inevitably one theme of the final chapters. In 1835 Dorothy complains waspishly as William and Mary leave for London that 'our friendship is so little prized and they can so easily part from the helpless invalides' (the other 'invalide' being Dora). So, however, is William's staunch fidelity to 'her tenderness of heart', claiming that 'her loving kindness has no bounds' (295). Most intriguing is Newlyn's evidence of the power of poetry, particularly when Dorothy recites hers or her brother's poetry, not merely to recall the past, but to restore her physically and awaken her lucidity.

'All in Each Other' is a sumptuous book, with aptly chosen and beautifully reproduced Bewick miniatures at the start and finish of each chapter, and OUP have priced it remarkably cheaply, on the reasonable assumption that there is a wider audience than a merely academic one for such a book. One is supposed

to find something to grumble at, so here are four cavils. First, the system of referencing is no doubt designed to avoid cluttering the work with apparatus a general reader might not appreciate, but is very frustrating for someone who wants to know what is being cited. Second, anyone planning to walk from the Dorset shore to Racedown Lodge should be warned that it is not 'two hundred yards from the shore' as stated, but five miles as the crow flies, and seven by road. And third, I don't think Wordsworth wrote his prose masterpiece on *The Convention of Cintra* for *The Friend*—it was intended, first, for serial publication in *The Courier*, then for book publication supervised by Daniel Stuart, before finally appearing as book (mediated by De Quincey) from Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme. Fourth, I have looked long, hard and unavailingly, for the 'Christian emphasis' of *The Ruined Cottage* when first revised for *The Excursion*.

This long-pondered and passionate book may not be the ideal prescription for someone wanting to know what made Wordsworth a great poet, but it does much to explain why, if they are all 'Romantic Poets', Wordsworth is so remarkably different a poet from, say, Byron or Shelley, or Keats, or indeed Coleridge—whose sour complaint on the Scottish tour that William and Dorothy were 'all in each other' provides it with its sub-title. What is effectively the epigraph to the whole book, its first quotation from Wordsworth, reads: 'I have at all times a deep sympathy with those who know what fraternal affection is. It has been the building up of my being, the light of my path' (xi). No one has explored that remarkable claim in such depth, and it is amply proven by what Ken Johnston rightly calls Newlyn's 'fine-grained' study.