

## “These my Exhortations”: Reading “Tintern Abbey” as a Lesson to Dorothy

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**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In her essay on William Wordsworth’s famous poem “Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” Julia Walton enters the **scholarly conversation** with an **against-the-grain reading** of the function of William’s sister, Dorothy, in the poem. After establishing a clear **motive** for her reconsideration of this text, Julia combines meticulous **close reading** with **evidence** drawn from period **sources** to support her original **thesis**. Julia’s essay has been selected as our feature piece; it is published in its entirety to show how Julia’s many pedagogically successful moves work together to create a full, well-written essay.*

### *Excerpt*

Few poems are more deeply embedded within the Romantic canon—and therefore more deeply dissected—than Wordsworth’s “Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” first published as the final poem of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. Yet, the poem’s spiraling rhythms and passionate poetics have inspired generations of readers to bring new insights to “Tintern.” Many critics focus on such issues as Wordsworth’s relationship to place (Stafford), the autobiographical nature of the poem and Wordsworth’s relationship with history (Wolfson), his preoccupation with “things” (Castell), the ego and the sublime (Gill), memory and the sublime (Bloom, “The Scene of Instruction”), and so on, to name just a few issues and relevant critics. These critics assume that Wordsworth crafts this poem primarily for himself, and undoubtedly matters of the self are always on Wordsworth’s mind. However, even critics who are interested in Wordsworth’s ultimate turn to his “dearest Friend” (116), his “dear, dear Sister” (122) as something other than a projection—even as they respond to a strand of criticism that sees this final segment of the poem as narcissistic and demeaning to Dorothy (such as Marjorie Levinson, John Barrell, and David Bromwich, qtd. in Soderholm 313-315; Marks 47-48) and point out William’s clear love for her—see mainly William portraying Dorothy’s power to teach (Bloom, “The Scene of Instruction”), inspire (Marks), and provide mutual support (Thomson), again casting this section of the poem as mainly self-serving for William. David Bromwich argues that William “has not the slightest intention of making Dorothy a gift of her own experience” (qtd. in Soderholm 316); yet, I find that William is not just speaking about her, but speaking *toward* her. I argue that, whatever other interests the poem has—like Coleridge’s “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison,” which is predicated on Coleridge’s address to Charles Lamb, and which William is likely

to have seen during their collaboration—it is important to recognize the ways in which “Tintern Abbey” is in fact a poem written *for* Dorothy. Far from merely a “prayer” for or “prophecy” about Dorothy (Bloom, *The Visionary Company*), the fact of Dorothy’s poetic exchange with her brother, and the language of the poem itself, suggests a lesson William wants to impart to her, a road-map for the path they share, which is meant to guide the rest of her life. It is a gift Dorothy herself is known to have accepted, and a lesson she saw herself as having achieved, by way of her 1831 poem “Thoughts on my sick-bed,” which is a direct response to “Tintern.”

In this context, it is important to understand the extent to which William and Dorothy shared a close relationship, not only interpersonally, but also creatively. The two were separated after the early death of their mother in 1778—Dorothy went to a “succession of relatives” (Roe 36), while William went to school and university, afterward embarking on a series of travels through revolutionary France and then England, “living as a penniless vagrant, . . . mingling with social outcasts—beggars, wounded soldiers, war widows—whose plight resembled his own” (41). When they were reunited in 1795 to live at a friend’s country house (arguably the start of a period of extraordinary productivity for William [44]), it was surely due in part to their shared experiences of alienation and estrangement that made them such fast companions from then on, and so ready to share their poetic impulses with each other—for Dorothy, too, was a creative person, primarily in the form of diaries. In this way, she and William seemed to quickly develop a similar philosophical outlook: “[a]n elated awareness of landscape, space, and creative excitement suffuses Wordsworth’s poetry from this time,” writes Roe, “as it does Dorothy Wordsworth’s ‘Alfoxden Journal’” (46), which she kept during the famous summer, in 1797, that she and William were joined by Coleridge, Sara Coleridge, and John Thelwall at their new country residence, which would ultimately result in the production of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*; this detail suggests frequent discussion and reflection between the two, allowing this creative attunement. William is further known to have used the details and reflections Dorothy recorded in her journals as reference for his poems, a practice Dorothy encouraged. In her later Grasmere journal, she writes that she keeps her diary not merely for herself, but because she “shall give William pleasure by it” (qtd. in Soderholm 319). Their relationship, then, was not just one of familial affection, but more importantly, one of mutual, creative exchange, in which both discussed ideas and supported each other in their literary endeavors. It is tempting to focus merely on William’s mining of his sister’s writings—but “Tintern Abbey,” I argue, is evidence of William returning the favor.

Although I do not fully follow Clifford Marks’s backward approach, I do follow his thinking that, far from turning to Dorothy merely as an addition in its last section, “Tintern” actually anticipates Dorothy’s arrival (55). The opening section of “Tintern,” so occupied by the landscape,

is populated by an atmosphere of “quiet” (8), “repose” (9), and “seclusion” (7), which (along with the emotionally positive opening lines, “Five years have passed; five summers, and their length / Of five long winters! and again I hear / these waters . . .” [1-3]) offers “sweet” and gentle noises (5) and freedom from disturbances (“Nor [do they] . . . disturb / The wild green landscape” [14-15]). William’s eye then travels farther across the landscape, and far from noticing an untouched nature, what he discovers is evidence of humanity: “hedge-rows” (16) indicate a human hand in the structure of the scene, and he zooms in from “farms” (17) to their “very door[s]” (18). However, when William refers to “. . . vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods / Or . . . some hermit’s cave, where by his fire / The hermit sits alone” (21-23), what is introduced is, not quietude or a comforting society, but a sense of alienation and loneliness, of “houseless”-ness and estrangement from company, especially in the movement toward the final “alone” (22). William—and Dorothy too—deeply understand alienation, and William pays tribute to this “low and rustic life” (“Preface” 97) by making it the “principal object” (96) of his poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. But what these lines prefigure here is William’s revelation that he is, in fact, not alone; it provides the groundwork for the turn: “For thou art with me, here, upon the banks / of this fair river . . .” (115-116). Further, the lonely figures William refers to are not seen, but only imagined—“wreaths of smoke” “seem” to give “notice” that vagrants and hermits are out there, but this is “uncertain” (18-20). This anxiety of estrangement, therefore, is conjured, but then averted, allayed by what we will later discover is the presence of his sister. Perhaps what William is thinking of is his aloneness the first time he visited this scene, when he was “[f]eeling angry and alienated” in response to news from revolutionary France (Roe 41).

Just as William’s references to solitude provide a basis for Dorothy’s introduction, so do William’s references to his childhood. For when William writes about

. . . what I was when first  
 I came among these hills; when like a roe  
 I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides  
 Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,  
 Wherever nature led . . . (67-71),

and how

[t]he sounding cataract

Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
 An appetite; a feeling and a love . . . (77-81),

what he does is provide a point of reference between his own youthful “aching joys” (85) and “dizzy raptures” (86) and “the language of [his] former heart” that he sees in Dorothy, which is shown by the “shooting lights / Of [her] wild eyes” (119-120). What serves to illustrate William’s wild youth, then, also serves to prime us with an understanding of Dorothy’s current state. It, too, provides Dorothy with an understanding of herself, a “thought supplied” (83) to her during a relatively un-self-aware period of life, one “that ha[s] no need of . . . / . . . any interest / Unborrowed from the eye” (82-84). Some critics, such as Robert Essick (qtd. in Marks 51) and Marjorie Levinson (qtd. in Soderholm 314), would read the subsequent lack of dialogue given to Dorothy as evidence of her erasure in the face of William’s own subjectivity. However, I argue the opposite. First of all, William does include, in a way, Dorothy’s voice: it is in her “voice” that he “catch[es] the language of [his] former heart” (117-118). And second, it is precisely Dorothy’s wordlessness that communicates William and Dorothy’s similarity: it reflects both his current pleasure in silent repose *and* his former days, in which he was “like a roe” (68)—for animals do not need to speak to communicate their radical, essential communion with their environment. Her quiet, then, makes clear her connection with William and his strands of thought in earlier sections of the poem; it makes clear their shared transcendent connection with nature. It is a quiet that makes William’s elucidation of his younger days highly relevant for her.

From here we can begin to fully address the ways in which William sees himself as becoming instructive in his address to Dorothy, for it is at this point in the poem that the language makes this explicit. When William writes,

. . . and this prayer I make,  
 Knowing that Nature never did betray  
 The heart that loved her;  
 'tis her [Nature's] privilege,  
 Through all the years of this our life, to lead  
 From joy to joy: for she can so inform

The mind that is within us, so impress  
 With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
 With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,  
 Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
 Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
 The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
 Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb  
 Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold  
 Is full of blessings (122-135)[,]

what we feel, with these highly indicative sentences, is William's interest in making these points come across: nature "never *did*" betray those who are open to her (123-124); she *does* have a "privilege" (125) to bring joy, quietness, and beauty; she "*can* so inform" (127) their minds. And it is clear that these are points that are directed both to himself *and*, even more, to Dorothy, because William uses highly inclusive plural pronouns, as in "the mind . . . within *us*" (for William and Dorothy are of the same mind) (127), "prevail against *us*" (134), "*our* cheerful faith" (135), "all which *we* behold" (135). It is also this inclusiveness that seems to make this lesson so imperative. Their philosophical connectedness to nature and thus each other seems to provide them, together, with a shield from "evil tongues" (129) "rash judgements" (130), "selfish men" (130), unkindness (131), and "dreary intercourse" (132)—the last of these being an intercourse that is unlike the one they share together. This is a lesson that William knows to be true ("Knowing that Nature . . ." [123]), but it is a "prayer" (122) insofar as it has a future uncertainty for the rest of "the years of this our life" (126)—it needs Dorothy's commitment to be enacted indefinitely.

William anticipates a time in which he and Dorothy will be apart, however. This is where William speaks much more clearly in the form of "exhortations" (147), and much more clearly for Dorothy's sake. In this way does William say, "Therefore *let* the moon / Shine on thee in thy solitary walk; / And *let* the misty mountain winds be free / To blow against thee" (135-138), with his very particular choice of verb entreating her to be open to the influence of nature, for nature "can" (126) inform, impress, and feed her, but only if Dorothy lets it. It is with the acceptance of "these [William's] exhortations" that Dorothy can be, in the future, granted "healing thoughts" (145) and "tender joy" (146) in the face of "solitude," "fear," "pain," and "grief" (144), something

William wants very much for his beloved sister and companion. When William writes in conclusion, then, that Dorothy will not forget that he,

. . . so long  
 A worshipper of Nature, hither came  
 Unwearied in that service: rather say  
 With warmer love—oh! with far deeper zeal  
 Of holier love (152-156)[,]

it is partly, again, in exhortation that she, too, never become “unwearied in that service” of nature. By this point, though, William has switched to a different mode, that of certainty; his writing “wilt thou” several times over (146, 150, 156) professes to his confidence that Dorothy will dutifully follow the path he sets out. It is, undoubtedly, his penning of this poem, his self-conscious offering of “these my exhortations” (147) to Dorothy directly, to her and for her, that allows William to have this confidence. By the end of the poem, in writing it, there is the sense that he feels that he has accomplished his mission.

With this, the poem’s ultimate trajectory toward “exhortations” (147) of Dorothy, in view, the reader is equipped to re-interpret the earlier sections of the poem, which at first seemed the reflections of the solitary poet. When William writes that the “sweet” sensations (28) the memory of “these forms of beauty” (24) have brought to him in “hours of weariness” (28) have had “no slight or trivial influence / On that best portion of a good man’s life, / His little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love” (33-36), it seems that this, too, is an “exhortation” in service of these “acts of kindness and of love,” “best” though “nameless” and “unremembered.” When he writes about his recollections’ power to help him “see into the life of things” (50), it is his introduction of the plural pronouns “us” and “we” (“. . . the affections gently lead *us* on,— / Until . . . *we* are laid asleep . . . and . . . *we* see into the life of things” [43-50]) that again suggests William’s intent to include his interlocutor in his vision of transcendence—his desire to entreat her to share the vision. When he writes that when “the fever of the world, / [Has] hung upon the beatings of my heart— / How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee, / O sylvan Wye!” (56-58), and then that he expects “That in this moment there is life and food / For future years” (65-66), it is in precursor to his later message to Dorothy:

If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,

Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts

Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,

And these my exhortations! (144-147)

For William must prove that his lessons are effective and true even in times of struggle—as they relate to *himself*—before he can turn and make his instruction, his gift, to Dorothy. Making clear his message is a lesson, he has “*learned*,” he writes, “To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes / The still sad music of humanity” (89-92), reminding her that nature is not a pristine object divorced from humanity, but essentially tied up with it, as with the farms, vagrants, hermit of the beginning of the poem (for the “life of things is fundamentally social for Wordsworth,” writes Castell, referring to Wordsworth’s famous line 50 [745])—and also as with himself in this moment, encountering the Wye simultaneously through Dorothy’s eyes and his own. He has “learned” this, and it is again as a lesson that he turns outward to his interlocutor. He has been “thus taught,” and if he “were not thus taught,” he should not “the more / suffer [his] genial spirits to decay,” for, he realizes, she is with him (113-115)—and so, too, does he give to her the lesson that she gives to him, that their mutual encounter has made it all the more meaningful, and that this knowledge will fulfill her even when it becomes a memory:

. . . Nor wilt thou then forget

That . . .

. . . these step woods and lofty cliffs,

And this green pastoral landscape, were to me

More dear, both for themselves, and for thy sake. (156-160)

William’s first “therefore” (“Therefore am I still / A lover of the meadows and the woods / And mountains . . .” [103-105]), thus serves as the basis for his second, ultimate, conclusive “therefore” (“Therefore let the moon / Shine on thee . . .” [135-136]), which brings him to reiterate that he is unwearied in his worship of nature, and that she should be, too, even when suffering and alone, in part because they have shared a moment of transcendence. We find, at the end of the poem, that all William’s meditations and conclusions have direction toward and completion in the service of Dorothy.

This address to Dorothy is not a mere poetic device for William’s own purposes. This is a gift, indeed, that Dorothy herself acknowledges, accepts, and sees herself as having fulfilled in her

1831 poem “Thoughts on my sick-bed,” a clear response to “Tintern” more than thirty years after William pens “Tintern” in address to her (this is to follow Soderholm’s logic; Dorothy’s poem is quoted in full in Soderholm 316-317). The poem refers to what is clearly a sad and stagnant time for her: she opens by wondering if the “remnant of her life” (1) has been “pilfered” (2), what’s happy about living stolen from her. But she quickly denies this, referring to “kindred gifts” (7), evoking connotations of familial companionship and of gifts both received from and shared with the “kindred.” She then makes an allusion to what William recognized in her—when she writes that with “busy eyes [she] pierced the lane” (13), we are reminded of William’s phrase, “the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes” (“Tintern” 119-120), and her reference to “careless days” (25) is reminiscent of William’s “hour / Of thoughtless youth” (“Tintern” 90-91)—but she also indicates that she shares in his love of the quiet and repose he enjoys at the start of “Tintern”: she refers to a “silent butterfly” [16] and “noiseless breath” [17]. She even makes reference to what is surely William specifically (“Companions of Nature were we, / . . . / To all we gave our sympathy” [22-24]), reiterating William’s message of humanity’s essential tie with nature. Here, though, Dorothy turns again. She writes,

No! then I never felt a bliss  
 That might with *that* compare  
 Which, piercing to my couch of rest,  
 Came on the vernal air. (29-32)

She focuses, now, on her current plight, which, paradoxically, brings *more* “bliss” (29) than her former, youthful days (“that”). I follow Soderholm when I argue—contrary to Marjorie Levinson’s reading of the poem—that the word “pierce” is not associated with puncturing or pain in the poem, but with “acute discernment” (318) that comes with “the vernal air” (32), associated with the sobriety of her autumnal “after years” (“Tintern” 138). Indeed, it is “Memory dear” (36) that brings her “a Power unfelt before” (41),

Controlling weakness, languor, pain;  
 It bore me to the Terrace walk  
 I trod the Hills again;  
  
 No prisoner in this lonely room,

I saw the green Banks of the Wye,  
 Recalling thy prophetic words,  
 Bard, Brother, Friend from infancy!

No need of motion, or of strength,  
 Or even the breathing air:  
 I thought of Nature's loveliest scenes;  
 And with Memory I was there. (42-52)

Here, Dorothy, both sadly and triumphantly, fulfills William's hopes for her, referring to the Wye and William's poem outright; Dorothy recognizes this fulfillment, calling William's words "prophetic" (47). Just as William foresaw, suffering was her "portion" ("Tintern" 145)—but Dorothy recalls his "exhortations," and, through the power of "Memory" (52), she is transported to, undoubtedly, that scene and many others, which free her from the prison of her "lonely room" (45) and offer her comfort. She also, most importantly, turns to address William specifically ("Bard, Brother, Friend from infancy!" [48]), just as William had addressed her (to echo a point in Soderholm 319), again returning her poem to him in exchange, in a relationship that was so essentially defined by creative exchange. Without a doubt, Dorothy recognized William's poem as one instructive for her, and here, claims her instruction as complete.

It is my hope that scholars of Romanticism, adding to much exciting and important work done in recent years, continue to explore the influence of women in the "canonical" Romantic writers' lives and writings, as well as the work penned and philosophy imagined by often-overlooked Romantic women writers themselves. We do, though, have to recognize the element of surprise William's turn to Dorothy introduces in the poem, as well as what the poem's inclusion in the *Lyrical Ballads* means for William's intentions. I argue, as a final thought, that though Dorothy is the direct recipient of the poem, which is a gift that she claims for herself, the "surprise factor" encourages all readers of "Tintern" to participate in William's inclusive vision, indicated by his use of "we." As the final poem of the 1789 *Lyrical Ballads*, it serves as William's departing, ultimate words, and they are ones that elucidate and define his message (however indefinite aspects of this message are): to be open to the power of nature, to share in that force with others, and to use the memory of that experience as a bulwark in sadder, more tumultuous days. It is also a message that serves to provide hope in the face of the other poems in the collection, which

articulate “abandonment and loss of those whom nature puts close to us originally,” such as “The Foster-Mother’s Tale,” “Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree,” “The Female Vagrant,” and “Simon Lee” (Thomson 534). Like Dorothy, we can claim this vision, as William, in his writing, has offered us the chance to share it with him—which, in fact, we do share with him, by reading the words that describe the scene. In our sadder, more tumultuous days, perhaps the scene of “Tintern,” with its quiet repose and passionate transcendence, will come to us, offering comfort, as it once did for Dorothy.

*Author Commentary*

Julia Walton

This paper was, for me, an exercise in writing on a work that has been written about many times before. As I suggest in my introduction, even “canonical” works carry within them the potential for new insights—every age brings a new context in which we can notice new images, angles, lessons, and motives. I was particularly inspired by a lecture given by Dr. Juliette Atkinson (UCL) on “Romantic Women,” during which I was first encouraged to think about the relationship between William and Dorothy Wordsworth and their respective works. At first I was nervous to write about “Tintern Abbey”—what work has been written about more, and by some of the smartest thinkers in the world? But her lecture motivated me to contribute to a recent effort to recognize the influence of women on the work of “canonical” Romantic writers and illuminate the work of under-studied Romantic women writers themselves. In short, she gave me my approach—my “way in.”

To effectively enter a conversation that has been going on for decades, however, it’s important to do a good deal of reading. The process of articulating my thesis was a dynamic one, involving combing through critics’ insights, taking notes, doing some preliminary analyses, returning to the criticism, and increasingly refining my “reading” until I arrived at one I thought was both adequate to the poem and sufficiently unique enough to merit being written. I read a lot, but, of course, it’s impossible to read everything that has been said about “Tintern.” For that reason, I also relied on reviews of the criticism I found in several critics’ readings, which was helpful for understanding some of the main strands of thought surrounding the poem. Situating my argument among all this criticism also allowed me to effectively motivate my own reading of the poem.

Of course, though, looking at the words of the poem itself, and responding to what other people have said about those words, is just one way to engage with a poem. Following the advice of my UCL tutor, Dr. Benjamin Dawson, I also made sure to read up on the biographical details and historical contexts of William and Dorothy’s lives—these, too, were essential for situating my understanding of the poem. Given the writers’ close relationship, looking at connections between “Tintern” and Dorothy’s poetry also helped me answer “so what?” in relation to my argument that “Tintern” is a poem meant primarily *for* Dorothy. That argument is still possible without the analysis I do of Dorothy’s “Thoughts on my sick-bed,” but her poem is powerful evidence for how “Tintern” had a life outside itself and touched her own. Finally, situating “Tintern” among the

poems it was published with (in the *Lyrical Ballads*) served as the perfect way to offer a twist on my argument and final word.

This essay was the last one I wrote that semester, and so I tried to pull out all the stops, as it were. I stayed as close to the text as I could, letting the descriptors, pronouns, tenses, cinematics, and flows of the poem speak for themselves—and I would say I am particularly proud of my reading in this respect—but I also drew on all the strategies I mention above to guide that reading. I often got stuck, but at those times I returned to the poem or the critics again to help me think through my way forward.

*Editor Commentary*

Paige Allen

In the first paragraph of her essay, Julia establishes the motive and stakes for her argument by situating herself within the scholarly conversation. After acknowledging the long line of scholars who have written about “Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” before her, Julia clearly identifies the gap in the societal conversation she hopes to fill—namely, that most scholars interpret William’s address to Dorothy at the end of the poem as merely self-serving—and positions her original thesis as reading against the grain of those previous interpretations. Julia’s thesis—that William imparts a lesson to Dorothy as a gift which she accepts and achieves—carries scholarly weight because of the clear scholarly motive Julia has established.

Julia continues to position herself in relation to existing scholars by acknowledging when she is reading with them, pushing against them, and extending out from them. For example, Julia begins her discussion of the use of the word “pierce” with, “I follow Soderholm when I argue—contrary to Marjorie Levinson’s reading of the poem—that....” When Julia reaches her conclusion, she returns explicitly to her motive as she provides new ways of considering “Tintern Abbey” as scholars and recipients of the poem’s message.

Through her essay, Julia builds a methodology consisting of skillful close reading of the primary text (such as her reading of lines 122-135) and biographical evidence from the lives and writings of William and Dorothy (such as the details from Dorothy’s diaries and journals). The combination of these forms of evidence are necessary for Julia to make her argument, as her thesis rests on both the poem and the relationship evoked through it. The interplay of both of these forms of evidence culminates in Julia’s use of Dorothy’s poem “Thoughts on my sick-bed” as a response to “Tintern Abbey” and an indication of Dorothy’s own understanding of her brother’s lesson. It is the combination of this specific methodology with the motivation behind her argument which makes Julia’s essay so pedagogically compelling.

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