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Paths to Identity: Dorothy and William Wordsworth and the Writing of Self in Nature

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<1> For a while, Dorothy Wordsworth's poems were easy to overlook. First of all, there are just so few of them. In terms of numbers, some say there are less than twenty (Homans 41); others have developed a collection of up to thirty (Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* 177). When compared with her brother's mountains of verse, Dorothy's(1) lines seem diminutive. Also, they are hard to find. Sent in letters, recorded in her nieces' albums and scattered like jotted notes throughout the Commonplace Book among recipes and news items, they seem careless thoughts rather than careful compositions. Only five were published, and these were included in William's collections (Homans 41). Some are very short, bringing their status as poems into question. Should the four-line "To Sarah Foxcroft's Infant" be considered a poem? A fragment? Should it be considered at all? Also, there were pages and pages of Dorothy Wordsworth's journal entries, providing intimate details of William and Dorothy's domestic lives. Compared to these pages, the poems seemed unimportant. Compared to William's poetry, they at first seemed uninspired.

<2> So, for a long time, if Dorothy Wordsworth's writing was studied at all, critics focused on her journals. In her essay "Dorothy Wordsworth, Writer," Pamela Woof discussed Dorothy's journal entries and letters, but excluded any mention of her poems. According to Woof, Dorothy's drive to write arose from an attempt to please others: "Coleridge as well as Wordsworth made use of Dorothy's writing, and this alone must have encouraged her to observe and describe" (99). Woof viewed Dorothy's writing as little more than detailed recordings of "an every-day lived world" (96), and because of this, "Dorothy's fine eye and fine memory simply did not assemble the 'intellectual business.' . . . In her best 'writings' she cannot be a professional author" (110). Rachel Mayer Brownstein similarly focused on Dorothy's journals, concluding that "the journal form, unpretentious and dogged, loose but self-limiting, unfinished, with the smell of the private writing room forever about it, is admirably suited to what Dorothy Wordsworth had to say" (63). For Brownstein, though "there are many lovely descriptions of nature" to be found in Dorothy's journals, and though these descriptions are sometimes evaluated for their poetic language, "more frequently professors praise her as a prose stylist, meaning she wrote good sentences" (48). "In a sense," Brownstein concluded, "this is as it should be" (48). Additionally, Irene Taylor and Gina Luria posited that women in romantic literature were "closed off by personal and social circumstances from the high art of poetic genius" (120), a fact that explained what they viewed as a complete lack of women poets during the era. Dorothy Wordsworth exemplified women's status "as extension of a male counterpart: her place in the

high rank of poetry was secured by the fact that she was a kind of feminized alter-ego of the male poet" (Taylor and Luria 121), but she was not categorized as a poet of her own right.

<3> Even when Dorothy Wordsworth's poems were considered critically, they were often denigrated as demonstrating a lack of talent or poetic ability. In what has become an oft-quoted statement, Susan Levin gave her opinion that "uneven in quality, Dorothy's poetry sometimes has the effect of making us more appreciative of her talents as a prose writer" (*Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* 109). Moreover, Margaret Homans, one of the first critics to study Dorothy's poetry, maintained that she was not truly a poet at all. In introducing the chapter on Dorothy in *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, she explained how "there are implicit risks in studying the poetry of a writer who did not become a poet" (41). She goes on to state that, given her descriptive abilities, "at every point Dorothy causes her readers to wonder why she never became a competent or ready poet" (41).

<4> Homans centered this denial of poetic status to Dorothy on issues of identity. Complicating matters, Dorothy often denied her authority as an author or poet, as the following excerpt from a letter to Lady Beaumont demonstrates:

> And you would persuade *me* that I am capable of writing poems that might give pleasure to others beside my own particular friends!! indeed, indeed you do not know me thoroughly; you think far better of me than I deserve . . . Do not think that I was ever bold enough to hope to compose verses for the pleasure of grown persons . . . I have no command of language, no power of expressing my ideas, and no one was ever more inapt at molding words into regular metre. I have often tried when I have been walking along (muttering to myself as is my brother's custom) to express my feelings in verse; feelings and *ideas* such as they were, I have never wanted at those times; but prose and rhyme and blank verse were jumbled together and nothing ever came of it. (Hill 76-77)

According to Homans, Dorothy was too much under the influence of masculine tradition to achieve the "strong sense of identity necessary to writing Romantic poetry" (71). In a similar vein, Elizabeth Fay notes how Dorothy's sense of self contributed to the ways in which her work has been read by critics: "Dorothy's poetic self-actualization is puzzling because it does not conform to our expectations of the romantic poet, and it has been tempting for critics to speak of her simply in terms of William's creative complement: muse, nurse, critic, amanuensis" (114, see also Taylor and Luria).

<5> However, the categorization of Romanticism began to shift as feminist critics questioned why the study of six male poets should comprise the canon and define the movement in such a manner that excluded the more than 200 women writers of the period (1-2). Other questions followed. Anne Mellor asked, "What if there are other ways of constructing the self than that attempted by William Wordsworth?" (154). Susan Wolfson asked, "Can Dorothy Wordsworth be read fully or exclusively with the premises of the masculine tradition?" ("Individual in Community" 144).

<6> Critics such as Wolfson, Mellor, Elizabeth Fay, Marlon Ross, and Susan Levin began to explore the complex relationship between Dorothy's and William's poetry. Levin noted how "her poems participate in the norms of romantic poetry even while they deviate from them" (*Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* 112). Fay suggested that "depending on how we define romanticism, D. Wordsworth both is and is not a romantic writer and poet; that is, her romanticism is one of her own making" (114). In her seminal book *Romanticism and Gender*, Anne Mellor proposed that Dorothy's romanticism was not so much an isolated construction as it was a contribution to an ideological movement in common with other women writers of the period. The "feminine romanticism" that represents one end of the Romantic continuum is comprised of works that should be read "in a way that acknowledges their cultural power, their creation of a *popular* culture that perhaps more than other literary productions defined British literary Romanticism to itself" (11). By reading "alternative poetic genres" (Mellor 11), we can understand the ways that Romanticism was influenced and shaped by women writers. Furthermore, by reading Dorothy's poetry in conversation with William's poetry, we can explore the ways in which her writing both engaged and challenged the ideals of masculine romanticism.

<7> In this essay, I hope to add to the body of work that reads Dorothy Wordsworth's poetry as a vital contribution to feminine Romanticism. I will demonstrate how Dorothy's poetry can be read in response to her brother's poetry, in dialogue with his ideals and in conversation with him through his poetic development. Specifically, I will compare two depictions of self in nature as represented in Dorothy's "A Winter's Ramble in Grasmere Vale" and William's "Nutting." Both poems can be read as having similar themes: in both, the poet enters nature and emerges transformed by his/her experience. However, the experiences and reactions of the poet in "A Winter's Ramble" run counter in many ways to those of the poet in "Nutting." These poems suggest that, for the Wordsworths, nature elicits a different affective response for the female poet than for the male poet. As such, "A Winter's Ramble" can be read as a reshaping of the poetic narrative of the self in nature that is presented in "Nutting."

<8> The first area of difference involves the poets' views regarding circumstance. The poet figure in "Nutting" set out with a purpose. He "turned [his] steps / Towards the distant woods" (5-6) intent on reaching "one dear nook" (14). In contrast, the poet figure in "A Winter's Ramble" had no destination in mind, as suggested by the title. She is simply rambling, content to "wander" (4) through the vale. In addition, the poet figure in "Nutting" cuts his own course through the woods: "o'er the pathless rocks, I forced my way" (13). His route must be original, taking him to an "[u]nvisited" (15) location. William's poet figure is an adventurer, intent, so to speak, on 'boldly going where no man has gone before.' The poet figure in "A Winter's Ramble," however, is not concerned that her course takes her where "sheep and shepherds [have] trod" (8). Where William's poet "force[s] his way" through nature, Dorothy's is "lured" (5), "tempt[ed]" (7), and "led" (10) by a "little winding path" (5). The passivity of Dorothy's speaker counters the aggressive nature of the speaker in "Nutting." Whereas the poet figure in "Nutting" acts upon nature in the quest for identity, Dorothy's poem suggests an alternative. The passive connection between Dorothy's speaker and nature intimates an existence within nature's landscape; she will follow the path and allow herself to be led wherever it goes. This stands in opposition to the actions of the speaker in "Nutting," who only follows his own will. Susan Wolfson suggests that "William's egocentric poetics depend on asserting self over

circumstance" ("Individual in Community" 162). As demonstrated in "A Winter's Ramble," Dorothy's poetics tend toward the opposite—on being guided by circumstance.

<9> Dorothy's "winding path" (6) and William's "pathless rocks" (13) can also be read as allegories for the poetic process. The speaker in "Nutting" began his quest in search of originality. The "virgin scene" (19) and "[u]nvisited" (15) nook can be read as representations of William's unique poetic vision. In the masculine tradition that defines the "role of the creative writer as political leader or religious savior" (Mellor 2), William envisions his poet as a trailblazer, establishing a path for others to follow. In Dorothy's poem, however, the poet is first figured on a "public road" (6) alongside her "sole companion-friend" (3), whom critics have identified as William.(2) Dorothy's poet begins by following the common path, the path her brother is taking, perhaps the poetic path made public by her male peers. Yet the poetic figure of Dorothy's poem is re-figured (and re-positioned) in the second stanza: "Lured by a little winding path, / Quickly I left the public road, / A smooth and tempting path it was, / By sheep and shepherds trod" (5-8). Dorothy's narrator allows herself to follow a different path, but it is not a new one. In what might be read as an evocation of the pastoral tradition, this trail is worn smooth by the shepherds who have gone before her. This evocation is complicated by the fact that Dorothy's poet leaves her brother on the public road while she follows the winding pastoral path.

<10> Dorothy's departure from her brother opens up the possibility to read the poem as a subtle critique of William. While the dating of "A Winter's Ramble" is not definite, most critics suggest it was written in 1805,(3) a time when William was focusing most of his energy on what Dorothy called "that long [poem] on his own early life and education" (Hill 71). His focus in *The Lyrical Ballads*, as described in the 1802 Preface, had been on depicting the "low and rustic life" (Gill 597), but his work on *The Prelude* had shifted the focus to himself. Dorothy's choice of path in "A Winter's Ramble" could thus be viewed as a reminder to William of how, in his words, "the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity" through the "low and rustic" condition (Gill 597). Through "A Winter's Ramble," Dorothy provides a route to maturation by following the pastoral path.

<11> Moreover, Kurt Heinzelman has read "Nutting" as "one of a cluster of poems . . . in which [William] Wordsworth confronts purposefully for the first time the full cultural idea of a poetic career" (152). As such, Heinzelman reads "Nutting" as a georgic. To support this reading, Heinzelman notes the way in which the poem "constitutes the reality of both economic and sexual division, which is the way of georgic, what pastoral does not share and cannot represent" (153). Thus, Heinzelman situates "Nutting" as William's deliberate departure from the pastoral. In contrast, Susan Wolfson notes that, "Instead of lofty blank-verse declarations," Dorothy "writes a humble ballad, whose oblique, generally unaccented rhymes and rhythmic irregularity yield a jauntily explorative poem, a ramble" ("Individual in Community" 150). Dorothy's "humble" verse form stand in contrast to the "lofty" blank verse in which "Nutting" is written. Additionally, Dorothy's use of the ballad form, with its age-old traditions and simple language, invokes a sense of community and inclusion. William's use of the georgic, with its emphasis on "economic and sexual division" (Heinzelman 153) instead invokes a sense of separation from community. Thus, "A Winter's Ramble" is written in a form that denotes

inclusiveness and an absence of agenda, while "Nutting's" blank verses highlight its deliberate construction and its georgic, anti-pastoral form signify a sense of exclusivity.

<12> In her essay, "Dorothy Wordsworth in Conversation With William," Wolfson notes that Dorothy "evokes certain of [William's] images and circumstances, but does so to discover alternatives–ones to be read in the way she recasts his habitual figures, recontextualizes key words, and substitutes for his speaker's fascinated solitary converse with alien presences her speaker's impulse to read signs promising community" ("Individual in Community" 149).(4) Thus far, I have explored how "A Winter's Ramble," as a whole, is an evocation of the circumstance in "Nutting" (wherein the poet figure enters nature and emerges transformed) with the intent to discover an alternative image of the poetic self in nature. Building upon Wolfson, I extend this argument to suggest that Dorothy also evokes specific images from "Nutting" in "A Winter's Ramble" with the same intent. The image of Wordsworth's "one dear nook / Unvisited" (14) reemerges in Dorothy's poem as "a sheltered chink" (17). The flowery bower described in "Nutting" is recast in "A Winter's Ramble" as winter's "pleasure-gardens" (28). In "Nutting," the speaker describes how the "water-breaks do murmur on / For ever, and [he] saw the sparkling foam" (31-32). In "A Winter's Ramble," there is a "foaming streamlet glancing by" (35), which speaks not in a "murmur" but with a "merry voice" (34). Finally, "Nutting's" "green stones / That, fleeced with moss, beneath the shady trees, / Lay round [him] like a flock of sheep" (33-35) are re-figured in "A Winter's Ramble" into a single "stately rock / With velvet moss o'ergrown" (11-12). It is this "stately rock" (11) that is featured as the focus in the natural landscape of "A Winter's Ramble." In "Nutting," the natural landscape is represented by the "one dear nook" (14), and the poetic figure is situated in the center of the scene, in a position of power. The focus is thus not so much on the nook itself, but on the poet within the nook. The rocks in the nook, likened to sheep, surround the speaker so that the poet figure is placed in a position of authority as shepherd. By contrast, in "A Winter's Ramble," Dorothy situates the poetic figure to a position "beneath" (21) or "beside" (33) the rock, so that the rock truly is the focus of the poem. Dorothy's poetic figure can thus be read in a secondary position to nature. By relocating her speaker so that the focus is *on* nature, Dorothy suggests an alternative positioning of the self *in* nature.

<13> A closer examination of the description of the nook in "Nutting" and the rock in "A Winter's Ramble" gives further evidence of how Dorothy's poem recasts the image of nature as represented in "Nutting." Margaret Homans notes that in "Nutting," the nook "is part of a progressive sequence of feminine figures" (52) that begins with the "frugal dame" (9) and ends with the closing address to the "dearest maiden" (52). Unquestionably, nature is a female presence in "Nutting." Yet the descriptions of the nook vacillate between images of sexuality and maternity. The nook is a "virgin scene" (19); it is a "[v]oluptuous" (22) place filled with "tall and erect" (18) trees upon which "milk-white clusters" (18) hang sensuously. While these "milk-white clusters" (18) can be read as provocative images, they also can be read as maternal images. Likewise, the same nook that provided such sensuality also provides a place of rest and protection. It is a "bower" (28) in which the poet can sit beneath the trees and play with flowers (23-24), secure and "fearless of a rival" (21). The poet figure's relation to nature is simultaneously associated with the roles of lover and of son, a fact to which I will return in the subsequent analysis on the poets' responses. For this discussion, what is important to note is that the descriptions of the nook in "Nutting" specifically establish a female gender for nature.

<14> In “A Winter’s Ramble,” however, Dorothy’s gendering of nature proves more problematic to determine. Margaret Homans has described the rock as a “feminized figure” (51), citing the following lines as evidence:

> . . . I reached a stately rock
> With velvet and moss o’ergrown
> With russet oak, and tufts of fern
> Its top was richly garlanded
> It’s sides adorned with eglantine
> Bedropp’d with hips of glossy red
> . . . . . .
> Beneath that Rock my course I stayed,
> And, looking to its summit high,
> ‘Thou wear’st,” said I, ‘a splendid garb, . . .” (11-16, 21-22)

While Homans does note that “this rock is never ‘she,’ but it is ‘thou,’” (52) her feminine designation is defended by referring to the “consistent metaphor of clothing” (52) and the “positively erotic” (52) image conveyed by the line “Bedropp’d with hips of glossy red” (16). The speaker’s reference to the rock in gender-neutral terms indicates, to Homans, a distancing from William’s feminized nature. Susan Wolfson, however, has contested Homan’s reading of the rock as a female presence. She suggests the possibility that the poem’s “neuters mark an effort to explore a world free from ascriptions of gender and the social politics so implicated” (“Individual in Community” 152). Wolfson also notes that one natural figure, that of winter, is given a specifically masculine gender in the poem through the lines, “Here winter keeps his revelry” (24) and “. . . winter here / Hath pleasure gardens of his own” (27-28). Wolfson reads the figure of winter as “a different character from William’s masculine figures of nature, those stern paternal presences he writes into various psychological agons” (“Individual in Community” 152). Instead, the figure of winter, characterized as playful and lacking a dominating presence, coupled with the figure of the gender-neutral rock demonstrate Dorothy’s rewriting of nature in a manner that “evoke[s] a sense of communal joy” (“Individual in Community” 152). The two critics’ readings of the poem are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Both the description of the “lovely” (32) rock whose “top was richly garlanded” (14), and the reference to the red hips (16) can be read as invoking stereotypically feminine characteristics. Yet the gender-neutral pronouns create a slippage of gender, which opens up the possibility to read the poem as experimenting with the figures of nature that William has developed in his poetry.

<15> An assessment of the psychology of “Nutting” demonstrates how the poem’s direction necessitates a rigid gendering of nature. In “Naturalizing Gender: Woman’s Place in Wordsworth’s Ideological Landscape,” Marlon Ross explores the role that gender plays in the psychology of “Nutting.” He cites “Nutting” as the best display of how William is “unconsciously attempting to assert his humanity/identity, his unique separateness from natural force, even as he consciously attempts to acknowledge his dependence on nature” (393). William develops his subjectivity by balancing his distinction from the natural environment with his affinity for nature as a nurturing presence. The characterization of nature in “Nutting” as

both a maternal presence and an othered lover demonstrates this juxtaposition. Yet the establishment of these characterizations is followed by an assault:

> Then up I rose,
> And dragged to earth both branches and bough, with crash
> And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
> Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,
> Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
> Their quiet being . . . (41-46)

This violent action against the passive feminine landscape has repeatedly been referenced by critics as a rape.(5) However, it is important to remember that it is also an act of destruction. As both rape and destruction, the action of the speaker can be read as motivated by a desire for possession. The poetic figure's actions are precipitated by his determination that the nook has been "[w]asting its kindliness on stocks and stones, / And on the vacant air" (39-40). The nook's pleasures are not reserved only for him. The figurative rape serves to represent the speaker's dominance, while the annihilation of the nook ensures that the nook's pleasures will not be enjoyed by anyone, or anything, else. The speaker's actions can also be read as an enactment of "oedipal rage against a parental ethos" (Fay 64). As such, it is the ultimate symbolic performance for establishing difference and separation. Either way, it is through this act of destroying nature that the speaker achieves self-identity. Furthermore, Ross suggests that "the psychology of the poem demands that nature, in this instance, be feminine, not only that she may be raped in order for the boy to achieve heightened consciousness and self-consciousness, but also that the threat from nature be emasculated" (394). In Ross's reading, the threat lies in the fact that nature is figured as "indifferent" (39). The speaker's actions can thus be seen as an attempt to force nature's acknowledgement of his virility; the emasculation of nature reinforces his own masculine power. Thus, the poet figure's "merciless ravage" (43) of nature, whether viewed as sexual or not, requires a feminine nature against which he can assert his manhood.

<16> In addition to the rape imagery, I also suggest that the poem is filled with battle imagery that serves to heighten the poet figure's sense of masculine power in opposition to an emasculated natural world. Ross suggests that "Like the medieval knight, the Romantic poet arms himself to compete for the collective good . . . like the knight, the Romantic poet proves the strength of his vision, his right to defend and protect, through masculine rivalry" (32). He further explains that "Wordsworth's favorite laudatory term is 'power.' For him poetry is constituted by a quest for poetic self-identity that is mirrored by the quest for manhood" (38). Certainly, "Nutting" can be read as both quest and conquest. The poet "sallied forth" (3) in search of the hidden treasures of the nook, which he discovers only after "long and weary expectation" (25-26). His "motley accoutrements" (10) become a type of armor, investing him with the "power to smile at thorns, and brake, and brambles" (10-11). Moreover, the wallet slung over his shoulder and the nutting crook in his hand are reminiscent of sword and shield. His "proud disguise" (7) is designed to protect him against any adversary and arm him for any adventure. Like any worthy crusader, he finds himself driven to rise up against the injustice the nook represents, destroying his foe with "crash and merciless ravage" (41-42). He turns away,

gloated with the spoils of war, "Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings" (49). Through this conquest, the poet achieves not just self-identity, but *masculine* self-identity. Wordsworth's speaker enters the nook as an immature boy, but is 'made' a man through his interactions with nature.

<17> In contrast, an evaluation of "A Winter's Ramble" suggests that the characteristics of Dorothy's poem provide a flexibility to experiment with gender and nature. Like William's speaker, Dorothy's poet figure is transformed through her interactions with nature. The poem narrates her passage from a "stranger" (1) in Grasmere vale to an "inmate of this vale" (39). Her experience within nature establishes her position as a part of the community, and it also brings her to a higher understanding of herself. As discussed above, the rock serves as the main representative figure of nature, and it is also the presence that inspires Dorothy to action. Susan Wolfson notes that "Dorothy's speaker greets the Rock in terms of expressing interest in and potential for relationship" ("Individual in Community" 153). Dorothy's speech to the rock suggests a communion and sympathy with nature. Moreover, her examination of the rock elicits what Wolfson reads as a confession of grief, followed by a "prospect of recompense" ("Individual in Community" 153): "I grieved when summer days were gone / No more I'll grieve . . . What need of flowers? The splendid moss / Is gayer than an April mead" (26-27, 29-30). The rock serves not just as a companion, but as a teacher. Nature is figured as a moral presence through which Dorothy's poet figure can gain a better understanding of herself. Dorothy is rewarded for her growth via the affirming voice of the streamlet, which "seemed to say, 'Rejoice!'" (36). The affirmation also serves as invitation; it is after she hears the voice of the streamlet that the poet figure recognizes she has matured into a kinship with nature:

> My thoughtful wishes all fulfilled,
> Wishes matured by thoughtful choice,
> I stood an inmate of this vale –
> How *could* I but rejoice? (37-40)

<18> I suggest that this final question reinforces the poet's newfound sense of identity that has been developed through her interaction with nature. I agree with Susan Levin that Dorothy "seeks that which forever exists in nature in order to define that which forever exists within her, in order to find her own consciousness" ("Subtle Fire" 348). Therefore, her echo of the streamlet's voice in the final verse of the poem represents an alignment between herself and nature. Her discovery of nature's truths is also a discovery of the truth within herself–they are one and the same. Consequently, the final line is more a statement than a question; it indicates certainty rather than doubt.

<19> Not surprisingly, this reading stands in direct contrast to many critics' evaluations of the role of nature in Dorothy's poetry. For Elizabeth Fay, nature represents an unwelcoming presence in Dorothy's poetry: "For Dorothy, Nature's voice is intrusive and brings an undesired message" (133). Likewise, Susan Levin suggests that the voice of the streamlet "implies the need for such encouragement, implies feelings that are not joyful, especially given the ambiguity *rejoice* takes on at the end of the poem" (*Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* 153). For

Levin, the structure of the last line "brings up the possibility that the speaker in fact does not rejoice, that the life described is sad and unfulfilled" (*Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* 153). She reads the last line of the poem as indicative of defeated passivity rather than affirmative self-determination. Finally, in Margaret Homans' assessment of the poem, nature is portrayed as a commanding, appropriating force. For Homans, the image of the rock uncovers "the adverse psychic effects of encountering a feminized or maternal nature" (50) that had been developed by William. The rock represents an imposing force that literally blocks the path of the speaker, effectively arresting the narrative (52). Moreover, the "rock does not permit the speaker even to have her own thoughts of anything but itself" (52) and the voice of the streamlet eclipses the voice of the speaker, giving her no choice but to acquiesce (53). In Homans' reading, nature must be a feminine presence because William had previously developed it as a feminine presence, but I argue that when Dorothy's nature is viewed as a re-figuring of William's nature rather than a replica of it, new possibilities are opened up. Rather than an imposing presence that blocks Dorothy's path, the rock can be viewed as the very object to which the path has led her. After all, the speaker indicates "That pathway led me on / *Until* I reached a stately rock" (10-11, emphasis mine). Furthermore, the actions of Dorothy's speaker within the natural landscape can be read as a challenge issued to William's philosophy. Rather than appropriating nature, she stands in communion with nature. Again, the voice of the streamlet reaffirms and celebrates the maturation of Dorothy in "A Winter's Ramble," which can be read as an alternative to the conclusion of the action in "Nutting," where the speaker's "sense of pain" (50) does not invoke a response from the "silent trees" (51). In short, Dorothy's poem can be read as a divergence from what Susan Wolfson has categorized as the "long-standing 'masculinist' tradition of appropriating and subordinating the feminine" ("Gendering the Soul" 34). She suggests a possibility for a self in nature that exists in union with, rather than in dominance over, nature. As such, there is no need for Dorothy to specifically gender nature in "A Winter's Ramble."

<20> Moreover, there is no clear indication of the speaker's gender in Dorothy's poem. "Nutting" is filled with masculine imagery, but the imagery of "A Winter's Ramble" is much more ambiguous concerning gender associations. The poet figure of "A Winter's Ramble" is always referred to in the first-person, gender-neutral pronoun. While it may be argued that the same is true in "Nutting" and that the speaker is never directly identified as a male, the reference to his "Beggar's weeds" (7) and the wallet slung over his shoulder (4) serve to mark the speaker's male gender. In Dorothy's poem, no hints are given concerning the speaker's appearance, and in fact, there is no indication of embodiment at all. Here I depart slightly from Anne Mellor, who stresses the substantive in Dorothy's model of subjectivity: "Above all, this is a self that is *embodied*" (*Romanticism and Gender* 156). For Mellor, Dorothy represents in her writing a self that is at once relational (able to stand in connection with others) and intimately physical. This embodied self departs from masculine tradition: "Such physical bodies have been for the most part absent from the canonical male autobiographies which have attempted to construct a permanent, even transcendental, ego that endures beyond the limits of matter, time and space"(*Romanticism and Gender* 157). Yet, in these two poems, it is William's speaker that is embodied and concerned with physicality, while in Dorothy's poem the speaker is disembodied and there is no physical interaction. I propose that, through this disembodiment, Dorothy is able to represent a radically ungendered poet figure. While William's poem relates a quest for masculine fulfillment, Dorothy is concerned with conveying a relational self that transcends the boundaries of gender. In Dorothy's model, an inscription of the body is less a

determining condition of subjectivity than an inscription of the poet as a part of nature. Rather than creating binaries such as male/female or nature/human, Dorothy's poem is invested in permeating these dichotomies.

<21> Finally, an analysis of "Nutting" would not be complete without mention of the "dearest Maiden" (52) at the end of the poem. Many critics believe that the Maiden represents Dorothy. For example, Margaret Homans attests to the "strong likelihood that [Dorothy] would have understood herself to be the 'dearest Maiden'" (54). Likewise, Elizabeth Fay has grouped "Nutting" with "Tintern Abbey" and "To My Sister" as being written as a direct address to Dorothy (63). Like the poems to which Fay compares it, "Nutting" ends with an injunction:

> Then, dearest Maiden! move along these shades
> In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
> Touch, —for there is a Spirit in the woods. (52-54)

Marlon Ross sees this injunction as a necessary part of William's poet figure's path to identity: "By using the female as a succedaneum, the male is able to move beyond being circumscribed by natural sensation" (395). The maiden is a substitute for the poet figure; she is left to "move along these shades," (52) to remain in nature, so that the speaker can move on. Does this effectively prevent the Maiden from achieving the self-determination that the male poet figure has gained through experience? Margaret Homans suggests that "Dorothy is being asked . . . to bypass the experience that the poem identifies as necessary to becoming a poet" (54). However, if "A Winter's Ramble" is read in communication with "Nutting," Dorothy can be viewed as responding to William's injunction through an expression of her own poetic potential. Again, Dorothy seems to be testing William's philosophies and finding new opportunities for self-discovery. Her brother's instruction for gentleness is heeded by Dorothy's poet figure, who poses no threat to nature. She has learned from her brother, and the lesson is played out in the poem. Whereas William's speaker "turned away" (48) from nature with regret, Dorothy's speaker stands in communion with nature at the poem's end. William's speaker must travel beyond nature to achieve identity, but Dorothy's speaker realizes selfhood by moving within nature. This, far from being a source of regret, is expressed as a cause for celebration: "How *could* I but rejoice?" (40).

<22> The two poems convey William's and Dorothy's epistemological relations of the poetic self to the natural world. Romanticism has long been associated with a love of nature, but the tradition of Masculine Romanticism is invested in a nature that is specifically gendered and associated with the sublime: "the sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment" (Mellor 85). It is grounded in a sense of opposition and desire for superiority. For William, "the experience of the sublime entails isolation, a struggle for domination, exultation, and the absorption of the other into the transcendent self" (Mellor 101). "Nutting" certainly relates the poet figure's experience of the masculine sublime with its lone poet figure that engages in a battle for domination over nature, exults in his victory and then rises beyond natural experience to achieve poetic status. What, however, are the epistemological associations for women Romantic writers, who were also driven to experience the sublime in nature, but lacked the requisite masculine power? I suggest that "A Winter's Ramble" demonstrates a

different ‘way of knowing’ nature. Dorothy’s experience is of a feminine sublime, one that is rooted in connection instead of isolation and communion instead of domination. The feminine sublime “elevates the perceiving self to a sense of her or his own integrity and worth as a unique product of divine creation” (Mellor95). Thus, Dorothy’s knowledge of the sublime, like William’s, results in feelings of exultation. William’s poetics, however, require an association of knowledge and pain, so that the poet figure must move beyond joy to gain self-awareness. Because her type of knowledge celebrates her status as a part of divine creation, Dorothy can extend the period of rejoicing. Thus, Dorothy’s poem of interaction with nature is still self-actualizing, but it conveys how natural experience is a part of the poetic self. By associating knowledge with rejoicing, Dorothy’s poetics subvert the ideals of Romantic epistemology.

<23> Ultimately, “A Winter’s Ramble” and “Nutting” document two poetic paths to identity. William’s poet figure complies with the tradition in Masculine Romanticism of asserting “a self that is unified, unique, enduring, capable of initiating activity, and above all aware of itself as a self” (Mellor 145). “A Winter’s Ramble” demonstrates that there are alternatives to this masculine construction of self. By following circumstance instead of will, by re-figuring natural images, by re-shaping gender politics and by utilizing powers of observance rather than assertion, Dorothy’s poet figure stands as a new image of the self in nature. This self is not transcendent, but rooted in connections. It stands, not in isolation, but in community. Her maturation emerges from “thoughtful choice” (38) rather than from regret over a thoughtless action. Her sense of self is different than William’s but it should not be considered less valid because of this difference. “A Winter’s Ramble” stands as one example of Dorothy’s poetic aptitude. Like the rest of her poems, it should be read as a contribution to the body of discourse that shaped romantic ideals by testing their limitations and challenging their constructions.

<24> It cannot be overlooked.

Endnotes

(1)For ease of reference, I will refer to Dorothy Wordsworth and William Wordsworth by their first names.(^)

(2) See for example Homans 50 and Wolfson, “Individual in Community” 150.(^)

(3)See Wolfson “Individual in Community” note 21.(^)

(4)It should be noted that Susan Wolfson suggests “The Thorn” rather than “Nutting” as a counter-text to “A Winter’s Ramble in Grasmere Vale.”(^)

(5)See Ross 393, Fay 64 and Homans 51.(^)

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