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Sarah Weiger reads Dorothy Wordsworth: Wonders of Everyday, by Pamela Woof

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Sarah Weiger

reads

Dorothy Wordsworth: Wonders of the Everyday

(The Wordsworth Trust, 2013)

by Pamela Woof

PAMELA WOOF'S *Dorothy Wordsworth: Wonders of the Everyday* was written to accompany the Wordsworth Trust's 2013-14 exhibition of the same name. Woof's text, though it includes images of many of the pieces that were on display, is more than a catalogue book. With care, patience, and exquisite attention to the vibrant connections between people, objects, and places that make a life (characteristics we encounter in Dorothy's own writing), Woof traces Dorothy Wordsworth: "the woman and the writer, a woman who saw wonder in the everyday."¹ The book is conceptually divided into two primary sections. The first is an extended biographical essay presenting Dorothy's story and her writing. The second is a series of brief essays that zoom in on particular people, places and events in Dorothy's life. These brief essays are accompanied by glimpses of Dorothy's writing: photographic images of her hand from the journals, letters, and Wordsworth's *Commonplace Book*. As Michael McGregor, director of the Wordsworth Trust, notes in his preface to the book, "[t]here has been no more sensitive and assiduous editor and interpreter of Dorothy's works" than Pamela Woof (ix). Readers new to Dorothy's writing, as well as more advanced scholars, will appreciate Woof's simultaneous authority and lightness of hand in presenting this work, as well as her grace in pairing it with illustrations drawn from the Wordsworth Trust's collection of watercolours and drawings.

Threading together some of the most enigmatic passages of the Alfoxden and Grasmere Journals, Woof tells the story of Dorothy's writing life in the opening biographical essay. As readers of Dorothy's Journals will appreciate, this is no small feat; Dorothy's most memorable entries do not refer directly to herself. In a procedure that combines biography and literary criticism, Woof successfully reads Dorothy's journals and letters as a way of telling her life. Woof's reading of Dorothy's description of the "strangeness" of the appearance of sheep on a particular day, for instance, registers twice: first as an observation on the situation of the sheep and the sun (as in Dorothy's journal entry of 29 April 1802), and second, as Woof points out, as the strangeness of Grasmere to Dorothy in that moment, having lived there barely over a year with her brother William, after a long estrangement from him and her other brothers (1). Movingly, Woof stitches together evidence of what Dorothy was like as a young child by tracking the siblings' attempts to become re-acquainted with one another, to tell their shared story. The "Emmeline" of William's poems on childhood is the Dorothy who shares his writing tasks. Similarly, through readings of the Journals and Dorothy's correspondence (primarily to

¹ Inside cover description.

Lady Beaumont and childhood friend Jane Pollard), Woof describes Dorothy's passionate attachments to her friends and family.

That said, Woof's primary attention is on the quality of Dorothy's descriptive writing. As the opening sentence of Woof's book observes, "[t]he most wonderful thing is that Dorothy Wordsworth was there and looked about her" (1). The things she looked at are dependent upon accidents of light and shade, weather and climate, but also, Woof notes, on Dorothy, the person who "noticed, had imagination, remembered and wrote it down" (1). So much life, indeed, depended on Dorothy and the energy of her prose. The reader appreciates Woof's skill in attending to Dorothy's writing, noticing its detail and gathering its observations – written across documents – together. Woof carefully tracks Dorothy's sustained interest, for instance, in the song of a specific Grasmere thrush. The bird and its song appear in a Grasmere Journal entry of the 23rd of February, 1802 as well as in a note, written two days earlier, at the bottom of Wordsworth's unpublished "Peter Bell." Woof's intense familiarity with Dorothy's writings allows her to draw the two mentions together, to tell an unexpectedly fascinating story: not only of the thrush, but of the material pages in which he appears (Woof tells us that the note on the thrush accompanying "Peter Bell" was eventually carried by Coleridge to Malta in 1804, bound with other, shorter, manuscript pages; the thrush and its song now hide within a folded-up page (45)). Woof's reading of Dorothy's writing celebrates her procedure of careful, extended looking and her tendency to catch and celebrate something in nature "more than physical, a glorying in light and life" that transfigures everyday experience (59). As readers, Woof says, we look for "shapes" in Dorothy's writings with the same tenaciousness and – though we find them – they do not, mercifully, stick: "[o]ne beauty of Dorothy's private writing," Woof concludes, "is its resistance to tidying up, to definite shaping, to endings. It makes for an open continuousness, a new day, a new beginning. We stop and start and read again...and again" (70).

Subsequent essays in the book allow Woof to take up memorable moments in Dorothy's writing and to read them again. Her considerable, long-standing familiarity with the documents and objects she presents – letters to Jane Pollard, Jane Marshall, brother Richard Wordsworth, Mary Hutchinson and Coleridge, entries in Wordsworth's *Commonplace Book*, entries from the Grasmere Journal, manuscript pages of *The Prelude*, and even late journal entries and letters – makes accessing the real-time work of Dorothy's writing and the history of its transcription and presentation relatively easy and inviting. Woof neatly and efficiently presents, for example, Dorothy's account of William's marriage to Mary and the range of possible readings its heavily deleted lines have suggested to readers over time. Both an image of the Journal entry and a transcription accompany this discussion.

One of the strengths of the section on "Items and Incidents" is Woof's presentation of the shared experience, images and language of the intimate Wordsworth circle, which she develops through readings of the letters shuttled between them, the notebook Dorothy and William shared, and their frequent

quotation of one another (107). In Woof's account the intercession of memory, through the exchange of descriptions, transcriptions, and revisions, "rings changes upon experience" (104).

Also of special note is Woof's sensitive reading of the writing Dorothy produced late in life, during her extended illness. In a reading of pages from Dorothy's 1833 Journal, for instance, Woof considers the crosshatch appearance of prose and verse on the page. Like Dorothy's writing elsewhere, the prose remains tethered to the present and its weathers (even from within her room, Dorothy was a weather-reporter), while the verse is concerned with the past. The two, Woof observes, "physically as well as emotionally mingle" on the page (142). In this way, Woof suggests, Dorothy was involved in the work of observation even in her later years, ever looking to nature as healer.² Poetry (both her own and remembered verse), Woof suggests, continued to be an avenue for self-examination, as well as an opportunity for expressing gratitude for "the care unstintingly given her, and thankfulness for 'the assurance of immortality growing & / Strengthening as the Body decays'" (141).³

In her article "Dorothy Wordsworth: Story-teller," Woof separated the descriptive language of the Alfoxden Journal from the narrative approach of the Grasmere Journal,⁴ but in this book her primary concern is to show the special excellence of all Dorothy's writing, including the Journal entries, narratives, letters, and verses. As Woof notes in her acknowledgements, this book is "not a biography" (149), but it is, perhaps, something even more needful for Dorothy Wordsworth scholarship: a narrative history of Dorothy's writing. For Woof, "[t]here is only one thing to do with Dorothy Wordsworth's writing, and that is, to read it...we need all the facets of her words" (69). In these pages, Woof provides generous access to those words.

² Frances Wilson's *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), features Dorothy's life during the years described in the Grasmere Journal. Wilson's account of Dorothy's degeneration late in life is, as a reviewer of that book noted, "almost unbearably sad." Virginia Rounding, "More than her brother's keeper..." in *The Observer* (Saturday 1 March 2008).

³ Woof quotes the draft of 'Thoughts on my sick-bed' written "amongst" Journal entries, 27/8 July 1833.

⁴ Pamela Woof, "Dorothy Wordsworth: Story-Teller," *Wordsworth Circle*, 34: 2 (Spring 2003), 103-10.