

Dorothy Wordsworth's Letter and Its Significance

By: Crystal Wu

This post shall spotlight Dorothy Wordsworth's unpublished letter "1820, June 2, Dorothy Wordsworth to Joshua Watson and John James Watson" housed in the Armstrong Browning Library Rare Letters collection. Although Dorothy is not as well-known as her brother William Wordsworth, her letter brings a new insight on the wide connections the Wordsworths have, and how these connections might have possibly influenced William Wordsworth's change of focus in his later poems. In addition, the letter illustrates the care and thought that Dorothy put into writing the letter.

The content of this letter involves Dorothy Wordsworth updating Joshua Watson and John James Watson on the health of Christopher Wordsworth, another brother of Dorothy and William Wordsworth. Interestingly, the letter is divided into parts, with the first part addressed to Joshua, and the second part addressed to John. At the time of the letter, Christopher had been recuperating after a bout of illness. Despite the letter being a personal correspondence, there is an air of formality. This may have been due to Dorothy's relationship with the Watsons as acquaintances, rather than as close friends. In addition, she discusses the well-being of Mrs. Norris. William and his wife are briefly mentioned at the end of the letter, although simply as a passing remark.

At first glance, there seems to be a smaller, cramped handwriting on the first page of the letter, followed by a larger handwriting. Upon further research, it is noted that the handwritings are of two different people, Joshua Watson and Dorothy Wordsworth. Joshua wrote the smaller script at the beginning of the letter. He had read the letter first, and then written a quick introduction for his brother. The script may have been cramped due to Joshua's attempt to not cover up Dorothy's writing.

Here is a description on the relationship between the Wordsworths and the Watsons. Christopher Wordsworth was an English divine. As an English divine, what he wrote were considered standard for the faith. Although his name rarely appeared with William and Dorothy Wordsworth, he was widely famous and influential in his religious circle. Christopher Wordsworth and Joshua Watson founded the National Society in an effort to educate the poor. Prior to the Elementary Education Act of 1870, there had been no formal education in England. As a result, only wealthy families could afford to send their children to private schools. The National Society focused on instilling its students with Christian values and teachings. Mrs. Norris was the wife of Henry Handley Norris, who was a member of the Hackney Phalanx. The Hackney Phalanx was a High Church group whose main leaders consisted of Henry Handley Norris, Joshua Watson, and John James Watson. The High Church was within the Anglican Church and emphasized the authority of the Church, without the Roman Catholicism ties.

In 1807, William Wordsworth published an anthology of poems, titled *Poems, in Two Volumes*. He was considered to be at the peak of his career with this publication, despite scathing reviews from his contemporaries. Prior to 1807, his poems mostly addressed the theme of nature, and the religious aspect was not as strong. He tended to make nature take on the sense of a divine

world, and almost deified nature. To Wordsworth, there was a higher Power, although he did not refer to the Power as God. Yet, a year after Dorothy's letter, he started publishing the Ecclesiastical Sonnets, with emphasis on the Christian faith. So, what could have affected his dramatic shift in thinking? One possibility could have been what was going on in France. William Wordsworth had gone to France in 1791 and had been enthralled with the ideas of Revolutionary France, especially on liberty, equality, and fraternity. However, after the Reign of Terror and the rise of Napoleon, he realized France was deviating from its previous beliefs. As such, he became much more conservative. Another possibility would be the influence of the Hackney Phalanx. Although William Wordsworth was not directly in the group, he was affiliated with the members. Somehow, their ideas would have influenced him to be more conservative.

Through this letter, there is a better understanding of the circle of connections Dorothy Wordsworth and William Wordsworth had. In addition, the letter shows Dorothy's dedication to the welfare of not just her brothers, but her brothers' friends as well. However, through additional research, there can be more insight on the extent of the Watsons' and the Hackney Phalanx's/High Church's influence on William Wordsworth's writing in his later years.