

Dorothy Wordsworth's Food-Mediated
"History of the Personal" in *The Grasmere Journal*

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Abstract

Food practices (preparation and consumption) have long been viewed as mere domestic routines, and thus, often dismissed for being too "frivolous [a] realm" to receive the same scholarly attention as "great topics" such as "politics, economics, justice and power" (Shapiro 2). Emerging during the 1970s, food studies owe their theoretical model to research in fields of enquiry such as anthropology, sociology, structuralism, or women's studies, which have highlighted the aesthetic value of food and its transformative implications for the intermediation of social relations with others. Accordingly, food occasions various socio-cognitive activities that help an individual achieve a sense of attachment and belonging to a community.

Based on the premise that food is instrumental in social relations, as well as in expressing a wide range of values, experiences and emotions, the present analysis gives an insight into the epistemic potential of food to attribute new meanings to Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere memoir. Laura Shapiro's non-fictional account, *What She Ate: Six Remarkable Women and the Food that Tells their Stories*¹ serves as a useful starting point for the present reading of Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal* as food narrative that has family relations, daily experiences and emotions constantly mediated through food.² In this sense, I propose a constructivist-relational approach to Dorothy's narrative as

interconnected with food, with the primary aim to explore how her numerous food references in the *Journal* contribute to the construction of her personal narrative and identity. As posited here, *The Grasmere Journal* offers a glimpse of Dorothy and William Wordsworth's dietary, social and writing routines, but also projects an image of Dorothy in a position of power, a woman ahead of her time, with a progressive stance, which goes beyond the societal expectations with regard to women's domestic role during the Romantic period.

Keywords: food narrative, sharedness, emotions, interrelationality, social identification, positioning.

Introduction

“Cooking, eating, feeding others, resisting or ignoring food—it all runs deep, so deep that we may not even notice the way it helps to define us. Food constitutes a natural vantage point on the history of the personal.” (Shapiro 4)

In the early nineteenth century, when Dorothy Wordsworth writes her *Grasmere Journal*, the “Romantic ego is potently male, engaged in figurative battles of conquest and possession” (Mellor 7). It is a time when the feminine writing style and women writers' preoccupations have been widely regarded as rather trivial and domestic, hence “inferior to other contemporary, male-authored literature, and relegated to the margins of academic study” (Ehnnen 75). Often analysed in the context of the Romantic literary canon and her brother, William Wordsworth's masterpieces, Dorothy's works have been overlooked for decades on the grounds that they fail to level with the aesthetic values of her brother's. However, more recent research at the crossroads of women's and socio-cultural studies has provided more in-depth and accurate analyses of Dorothy's writings, as well as fresher views on her detailed

accounts of nature, family life, food practices, and the emotions triggered by each of these aspects.³ With respect to the topic of food, it has been an “old-fashioned custom of keeping a polite distance” from as if “important people [...] never bothered with breakfast, lunch, or dinner” (Shapiro 4). Interestingly, *Grasmere* abounds in references to food, which, among others, render a picture of the Wordsworths’ menu, but also of food as a constantly present element in their domestic life, creative work and social events.

The Romantic era is generally known to have encouraged a return to nature and appreciation of its beauty as a form of resisting the progress and subsequent consumerist culture brought along by the Industrial Revolution. For example, in his discussion of the ethical models and social attitudes towards food, thus encouraging greater concern for animal rights and the natural world, Timothy Morton explains that the Romantics turn to vegetarianism as “a convenient form of social distinction in an increasingly consumer society that had been emerging through the long eighteenth century, and that had reached a reflexive moment of consumerism” (59). The close connection between food and nature and their importance in re-establishing certain principles of life balance within society appear to have been a matter of great interest to the Romantics. In Andrew Hubbell’s view, the Wordsworths are “responsible for creating the modern picnic,” and thus, for having helped “save” the very British culture, since both Dorothy and William are also “the great walkers of the Romantic period” (45).

Reflecting on Dorothy’s authorial work and the unjust dismissal of her artistic talent for decades, Jill Ehnlen regards her as the woman “who facilitates a Masculine Romantic ego,” and manages to “achieve subjecthood through appropriation and transcendence” at the same time (88). Dorothy’s work allows for an internal dialectic due to the constant “negotiation of the interdependence between dominant and subordinate, traditional and revolutionary, masculine and feminine subject positions,” which is a form of resistance to “a masculinist authorial tradition,” as well as “an alternate mode of perceiving and recording experience”

(Ehnnen 88). As Ehnnen's argument continues, Dorothy "orders her world through her writing and [...] connections between things," but also gains "lessons and pleasures of life" from her belonging to a community "in nature, language and writing" in the company of acclaimed male artists (her brother William, S. T. Coleridge, R. Southey, Charles Lamb and other prominent artists) (77).

Although Dorothy's work has not managed to draw as much scholarly attention as her famous brother, *The Grasmere Journal* is worth exploring in more depth as it incorporates within a "wholehearted acceptance of the experience of living" (Woof ix) and an entire "history of the personal," which has made her a "recognizable" figure in the history (Shapiro 2-7). Dorothy's artistic and personal self takes a representational form, that is conveyed via her narrative, "mostly the results of her labor, that are seen and felt, in the tangible products of food, laundry, shoes, and of course, William's poetry" (Ehnnen 77). The journal contains numerous instances when they are described carrying food items on their walks: "Wm & John set off into Yorkshire after dinner at 1/2 past 2 o'clock—cold pork in their pockets" (1).⁴ The following part theorises food narrative as a socio-cognitive and interrelational medium for self and others within the communal space of family and immediate relations.

Food is not just food

"We humans live by symbols; they help us to make sense of the world, to organize and give meaning to our existence [...] we give food meaning far beyond its survival function." (Civitello xiii)

The broad consensus in the fields investigating the complexities of human nature is that man is naturally predisposed for an interrelational engagement with the world, which is mediated and expressed through narratives, but also through food. Similar to narratives, food practices are central to people's sociality, and

represent a way of making meaningful sense of themselves and others, of gaining or consolidating social status and relations, of showing affection, care or duty, as determined by the social context and group of guests, friends or family members with whom food is shared.

In gender studies, for instance, food has often been discussed in terms of gender opposition, namely as “a marker of patriarchal oppression” (Avakian and Haber 2). Therefore, early women’s studies dismiss the topic of food in favour of women’s achievements beyond the kitchen in fields that could reflect women’s power and independence (see Avakian and Haber 2005). However, more recent research on the intersectionality of food, women and social norms, reassesses the traditional understandings of the connection of food with women as a form of oppression and suggests a more open and deep exploration of the topic. As Shapiro remarks, “while extraordinary circumstances produce extraordinary women, food makes them recognizable” and since “[e]very life has a food story, [...] every food story is unique” (7-8). In other words, food generates social knowledge.

For example, a simple food item like bread recurs with high frequency in *Grasmere*. According to anthropologist Carole Counihan, in addition to all the historical and social values bound with bread, its baking may also symbolise families’ sharing lives and burdens together, and hence, bread becomes the “product of their union” whereas “its shared consumption” may suggest their “interdependence” (30). As Counihan contends, women feed others in return for “love, favors, good behavior and the power that comes from being needed” (48). Dorothy’s own references to her bread making activity and cooking, in general, contribute to the construction of her personal narrative in that they reveal aspects of her/ their life and emotions that show how she positions herself in relation to her brother William and the world of Grasmere. She is undoubtedly committed to her leading domestic and secretarial role in William’s household and artistic creation; yet, numerous instances in her journal entries show Dorothy as relishing the freedom to pursue her own creative and intellectual interests, with

not even one mention of her food preparation as being an imposed norm or burden. In turn, food means home and emerges as a locus of sharing time, affection and communication with her brother and friends. As Gill Valentine argues, it is the home that “offers perhaps one of the most intriguing environments to study the relationship between people and goods” (492).

Sociological studies, not exclusively, though,⁵ place the principle of sharing at the core of social interaction. Apart from being a biological necessity, food communicates, too. In his seminal psycho-sociological study on food, Roland Barthes defines food as a “sign,” “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (21). As he continues his argument, “*food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation*” (29). In a similar vein, Eugene Anderson defines food as “social marker” and “a social communication system” that helps individuals to identify themselves within society (124). Based on a study on Japanese character and food, Anderson remarks that food may transmit two types of messages: “solidarity,” which means “sharing” meals together with others, but also “separation,” which may be a cause for social differentiation in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, or religion (125). As far as the sociality of eating is concerned, it unequivocally entails interrelating, which, in turn, activates complex socio-cognitive mechanisms such as, to name the most relevant to the present study, reflection, remembering, perceiving, or expressing attitudes and emotions towards self and others.⁶ Importantly, apart from supporting individuals’ nutritional necessities, food also communicates about “moods and emotion” (Banerjee-Dube 6). In this sense, Ishita Banerjee-Dube, for example, places food and cuisine at the core of “the interplay of intersecting processes and sentiments that go into people’s making” as individuals and as members of a cultural community (7).⁷ Thus, *food is not just food*.

Narrative aptly conveys such symbols, emotions and meanings. Food narrative is a form of communicating and knowing about how one’s culinary habits reflect “who one is,” a representation of one’s world (Counihan 1984). Furthermore, the process of sharing

food with others establishes an interrelational . Jerome Bruner, a prominent psychologist, places sharedness at the core of human social activity when he argues that the human psyche relies on a socio-cultural context of “shared concepts” and “modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meanings” (13). In a family context, but not exclusively, narrative co-exists in symbiosis with the meals that the members eat alone or together on a daily basis, which points to the relational interdependence between individuals’ subjectivity and autonomy for private, personal experience (preparing and consuming food), as well as their interpretation of the world (sharing food with others) (Abarca and Colby 4). Furthermore, when considered as interdependent phenomena, narrative, food and memory enable individuals to “give significance to their personal and collective subjectivities” (Abarca and Colby 4). A food narrative helps unravel an individual’s “embodied experience” that is based on the “sensory, cognitive, habitual and performative” memories associated with it, but also “has the capacity to season the narratives of our lives” (Abarca and Colby 7). In sum, food stories may reflect interrelated socio-cognitive phenomena such as reception, perception, memory, knowledge and the world. The next part of this study explores Dorothy’s food narrative more closely in order to illustrate how her records of culinary routines construct her personal history and world at Grasmere.

The Grasmere Journal: Food as Representation of Dorothy Wordsworth’s World

“MENU [...] DOROTHY WORDSWORTH’S
TARTS *topped with gooseberries from a neighbour’s
garden*” (Shapiro back cover)

The Grasmere Journal gives snippets of Dorothy and William Wordsworth’s daily (domestic and intellectual) routines between 1800 and 1803. Dorothy chooses to live as single woman in her

brother's house and fulfill the household chores as well as the role of a literary assistant. *The Journal* that she admittedly "resolved to write" as she "will not quarrel with myself, & because I shall give Wm pleasure by it when he comes home again" (1) conveys her quest for a sense of belonging. In the edited version of *The Journal*, Pamela Woof explains that the Wordsworth family disintegrated at the death of the mother when Dorothy was only six years old, which led to separation from her brothers for a very long time and her living with other relatives.⁸ As Woof suggests, "the experience" of Grasmere gives Dorothy the opportunity of sharing her "first real home" with a "favourite elder brother" (*GJ* x); therefore, while she carries out domestic and secretarial tasks, she also writes.

With relevance to the topic proposed for analysis here, Dorothy also makes regular notes of her food practices during the three-year recording of her time at Grasmere. In contrast to the poetic language used for the descriptions of nature, definitely in tune with the stylistic features of the Romantic period, the food-related passages are rather plain and brief. Nevertheless, as Shapiro observes, even "[i]f the words themselves tended to be dispassionate, there was a glow about them that belied their brevity" (25). Food transcends its merely domestic utility and serves as space for various social situations in Dorothy's Grasmere life narrative: she goes on long walks with William, clean-copies his work, prepares the meals, shops for ingredients in the village, weeds her vegetable garden, or pays social visits. All these regular enterprises involve or pivot around food, as illustrated in the excerpts below:

Tuesday 10th I made tarts, pies &c—W stuck peas. (9)
 Thursday 14th June We returned to dinner —2 pikes boiled & roasted. (11)

Friday Morning [15th] In the evening we walked to Water End—feasted on gooseberries at Silver hill. (17)

I broiled Coleridge a mutton chop which he ate in bed. (19-20)

After Wm composed a little, I persuaded him to go into the orchard—we walked backwards & forwards, the prospect

most divinely beautiful from the seat—all colours, all melting into each other. I went in to put bread in the oven & we both walked within view of Rydale. Wm again composed at the sheepfold after dinner—I walked with him to Wytheburn, & he went on to Keswick. I drank tea & supped at Mr Simpsons—a very cold frosty air, & a spangled sky in returning. (27)

Food references such as the ones present in the extracts from the first entries recur throughout the journal. The interrelational dimension of food resides in the image projected by these notes, that is of Dorothy's "living *with*, living *for*" her brother, and, occasionally, their guests (Goldstein 51). In addition, Dorothy's food narrative reveals emotions. To put it in Shapiro's words, "[w]henver a pie or a roast or a bag of peas from the garden rose to her consciousness, she simply dropped the image into place among the rest of the day's incidents, as if she were adding a tiny square of marble to a boundless mosaic of her quotidian" (25). Interestingly, as aforementioned, food preparation is represented as neither an oppressive nor a demeaning activity. As a matter of fact, food fulfills the function of a constant that interlinks all the other routines, experiences and emotions of the day.

Freedom and decision not to cook: I was engaged in unpacking out Somersetshire goods & in making pies. The house was a hot oven but yet we could not bake the pies—I was so weary I could not walk so I went & sate with Wm in the orchard—we had a delightful half hour, in the warm still evening. (14)

The reference to her "[f]reedom and decision not to cook," as Dorothy recounts above, reinforces the fact that food preparation is not a household duty, a social norm that she thinks she is expected to perform. On the contrary, it is a deliberate choice that she makes as a way of showing her care and deep affection for her brother. There are many instances in *Grasmere* in which the references to

food highlight her or her brother's health indispositions, but also her concerns about her brother's lack of appetite when absorbed in (and consumed by) his creative work:

We did not walk after dinner—it was a fine wild moonlight night. Wm could not compose much fatigued himself with altering. (29)

[...] but before he rose he had finished the Beggar Boys—& while we were at Breakfast that is (for I had Breakfasted) he, with his Basin of Broth before him untouched & a little plate of Bread & butter he wrote the Poem to a Butterfly! (78)

At dinner-time he came in with the poem of 'Children gathering flowers'—but it was not quite finished & it kept him long off his dinner. It is now done he is working at the Tinker, he promised me he would get his tea & do no more but I have got mine an hour & a quarter & he has scarcely begun his. (92)

I was oppressed & sick at heart for he wearied himself to death. After tea he wrote 2 stanzas in the manner of Thomsons Castle of Indolence—& was tired out. Bad news of Coleridge. (98)

The journal abounds in food notes like these, with some food items such as bread and pies⁹ constantly present in the *Grasmere* menu. Some entries are just about “baking & starching” (35) or just “baking” (35). In general, food acts as an accompaniment to activities such as writing, translating, reading, creating, which reinforces Dorothy's position as an independent intellectual and individual: “A fine grey morning. I was baking bread & pies. After dinner I read german & a little before dinner—Wm also read. We walked on Butterlip How under the wind it rained all the while, but we had a pleasant walk” (73). At times, she describes nature in culinary terms: “[a] succession of delicious views from Skellesh to Brathay” (11); “a sweet lovely afternoon” (22) “[a] delicious morning” (24); “The moonshine like herrings in the water” (30), which undoubtedly points out that her approach to food goes beyond its simple understanding as biological necessity. For Dorothy, food inextricably means being together and

connecting with family (William, friends, and, towards the end of *Grasmere*, also Mary, William's wife-to-be), which gives her a stable and coherent existence. The fact that she finds it important enough to record their meals, content, and preparation quite regularly in the journal about her Grasmere time stands proof for the complex dimension of food in Dorothy's narrative. On the (inter)personal level, considering that Dorothy has lived separated from her brother(s) for a long period of time, food unequivocally functions as an important daily constant of her life. To exemplify this further, a later entry includes food yet again: "I was much better. I made bread & a wee Rhubarb Tart & batter pudding for William. We sate in the orchard after dinner William finished his poem on Going for Mary" (102). Examples like this also show how food represents a situational opportunity for sharing time with family and friends and gives meaning to her day-to-day involvement in cooking. Even the last page of the journal, left unfinished, contains a similar food reference:

Since Tea Mary has been down stairs copying out Italian poems for Stuart—Wm has been working beside me, & here ends this imperfect summary. I will take a nice Calais Book & will for the future write regularly &, if I can legibly, so much for this my resolution on Tuesday night, [...] Now I am going to take Tapioca for my supper, & Mary an Egg, William some cold mutton, his poor Chest is tired. (137)

In addition to these aspects, food, overall, represents a source of knowledge, as well as self-knowledge, since Dorothy does not simply reveal William's and her culinary preferences, but also her (inner and outer) world with its daily experiences, emotions and observations. On the whole, this enterprise constructs *her* self, yet, not in the shadow of her renowned brother but in a relation of reciprocal respect (e.g. William encourages her to start the journal, discusses work and trusts her with his poems). All in all, through a powerful economy of language, Dorothy's food narrative recreates a part of her life at Grasmere and personal memories of self in relation with William.

Conclusion

Overall, an analysis of *Grasmere* as food narrative has given valuable insights into the intimate connection between Dorothy's narrating self and the world: (1) food practices offer a site for mediating (and negotiating) familial relationships; (2) food representations contribute to the construction of a cohesive rather than fragmented narrating self; (3) records of food practices, in addition to the nature ones, season the dynamics of Dorothy's relationship with and emotions around William in the shared living space of Dove Cottage; overall, (4) a sense of interconnectivity emerges from the scenes that show them interrelating with each other through or around food. From a constructive-relational standpoint, solidarity clearly marks Dorothy's food narrative and provides a point of identification through the meals that she prepares and shares with William. The making of bread, tarts and pies, for example, shows an elaborate process of preparation and her devoting "time and effort" to the cooking routine (Bourdieu 34). Dorothy's commitment to the domestic aspect of life, too, highlights not only her unwavering affection for her brother, but also her understanding of the vital importance that good nourishment has in the creative process. Food is thus instrumental in helping William maintain his physical and intellectual energy to create. Furthermore, the food notes are also correlated with a state of mind, and, at times, also with the weather conditions on a specific day. If associated even more closely with "the emotional and psychological baggage [that she] bring[s] to the table" (Shapiro 4), Dorothy's story could be analysed further in order to explore how her exceptional personality and advanced thinking are reflected in her work. Arguably, approached via the perspective of food narrative studies, *The Grasmere Journal* may also be a fertile ground for a more detailed reading into how its menu reflects the culinary aesthetics and practices of the Romantic era.

Notes:

¹ Laura Shapiro's *What She Ate* consists of the biographies of six notable female figures from different centuries and continents and highlights the importance of food in making them "recognizable" throughout history (7). Shapiro's collection of these women's personal stories and struggles gives insight into the more subtle meanings of food and its capacity to restore the balance of power between genders. In each story, food shapes the character's mind and body through evocations of endurance, resilience, internalized oppression, political statement or trendsetting dietary habits.

² In brief, *The Journal* represents an intimate record of Dorothy's life, household activities and personal observations of the (natural and social) world surrounding Dove Cottage, which she shared with her famous sibling, Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, between May 1800 and January 1803.

³ Due to its "passages of extraordinary beauty," *The Grasmere Journal* "at least partly fulfill[s] Romantic definitions of the poetic imagination" (Homans 41). In a similar vein, Nicola Healey argues for "Dorothy's genius for natural description" and for "alternate theories of being," which "are symbolic attempts at mediating, validating and understanding her identity in the shadow of, and through, William" (7-9). For a more extensive discussion of Dorothy's *Journal(s)* (i.e. *Grasmere* and *Alfoxden*) from the standpoint of her masterful use of (descriptive) language and metaphors, and the way in which they contribute to her authorship and recognition of the extremely valuable potential of her writings, see, for example, Homans (1980), Healey (2012), or Meek (2015).

⁴ For an ampler discussion of the aesthetical, ethical and political roles of "picnicking" in shaping the British society of the time and afterwards, see Hubbell (2006).

⁵ In this sense, developmental psychology also agrees that "what develops and is unique to human ontogeny is a sense of self that is co-constructed in relation to others" (Rochat 3).

⁶ David B. Goldstein uses the term "commensality" (> the Latin *commensalis*, i.e. "with the table") to define the relational dimension of eating as "a network or as a principle of connectivity" (41). When discussing literary commensality, Goldstein remarks the importance of language in "forging and articulating relationships," and, as he argues in his analysis of Gertrude Stein's text, the use of the preposition in "roast potatoes for" may bear complex meanings for the socio-relational value of food in that it shows that this kind of food has a social function, a "purpose" since it

is “for something and someone” (44). For further developments and a typology of the concept of commensality, also see Claude Grignon (2001), who discusses the social “morphology” of food and drinks consumption in light of the particular divisions existing in society.

⁷ In addition to the social functions, food has offered the opportunity to discuss and re-assess gender matters. Tracey Deutsch remarks its creative potential for “women of all classes and backgrounds” to forge “power relations” (223). As Deutsch points out, the “compelling presence” of food during quotidian meals occasions “tensions of domestic life, the intersection of racial, class, and sexual privilege” (223). Valentine, for instance, places food at the core of “the situated daily practices of individual and household identity formation and identity crises” (492). Similar perspectives have been extensively discussed in Fischler (1988), Civitello (2008) and Counihan and Kaplan (2005).

⁸ Given the scope of this study, the biographical details have been kept at a minimum and used only as explanatory notes that could add further clarification of some aspects in Dorothy’s personal life as reflected in her writing. For a clear-cut chronology of Dorothy’s life events and historical/cultural background, see Woof (2002).

⁹ Roughly, “bread” occurs forty-four times, “pie,” thirty-six times, and “cake,” ten times, in only one hundred and thirty-seven pages that make up *Grasmere Journal*. The process of making these two food items requires quite some time and effort. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, argues that such a “big investment of time and interest” could be “linked to a traditional conception of woman’s role” (34). Nevertheless, at no point does Dorothy’s journal reveal that she has to play such role.

¹ In the article “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts,” sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut explains that “when referring to the first generation, immigration scholars in the United States commonly have in mind persons born and socialized in another country who immigrate as adults,” adding that “the second generation technically refers to the U.S.-born and U.S.-socialized children of foreign-born parents” (1165).

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