“The Eye it Cannot Choose but See”: Dorothy Wordsworth, John Constable, and the Plein-Air Sketch

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The paper aims to advance the scholarship on Dorothy Wordsworth (1771–1855) with a study that situates her writing in its art historical context. While critics often acknowledge her extraordinary visual perceptiveness, none has examined her descriptive landscape prose in relation to turn-of-the-century developments in landscape painting. Dorothy’s The Alfoxden Journal (1798) and The Grasmere Journals (1800–3) coincide with the intensification of sketching the landscape en plein air (c. 1800) among painters in Britain and Europe. Specifically, I discuss these two journals in relation to sketches by John Constable, the most committed and sustained practitioner of plein-air painting in early nineteenth-century England. Natural effects that Dorothy describes in the Alfoxden and Grasmere journals closely resemble features that Constable was simultaneously depicting in the open air: natural light observed at specific times of day; a broad and vivid range of colours; and fluctuating atmospheric and weather conditions. Similarities between Dorothy’s prose and Constable’s sketches not only reflect their shared engagement in the aesthetic turn towards naturalism during this period, when direct observation of nature’s widely varied and transient features was replacing classically derived principles of ideal form and compositional order characteristic of landscape art in the eighteenth century, but also reveal the deliberateness with which Dorothy sought to replicate in her writing the intensity of observation and particularity of description that she admired in visual art.

The evening is a lovely one, and I have strolled . . ., while my eye is gratified[.]
(Dorothy Wordsworth)¹

I should like to have a keen eye . . ., as a thing I should prize above all the attributes of our profession. (John Constable)²

Dorothy Wordsworth’s contemporaries and subsequent critics of her writing have consistently drawn attention to her ability to observe her surroundings with

¹Wordsworth and Wordsworth, 1:93.
²Constable qtd. in Leslie, 200.
remarkable visual perceptiveness. William Wordsworth, recognizing numerous gifts that he owes to his sister, singles out her “exquisite regard for common things”: “Whatever scene was present to her eyes, / That was the best, to that she was attuned”.\(^3\) Samuel Taylor Coleridge similarly notes with admiration that Dorothy’s “eye” is “watchful in minutest observation of nature”.\(^4\) Thomas de Quincey, too, identifies a “bewitching” quality in Dorothy’s writing, arising from “something . . . that struck her eye, in the clouds, or in colouring, or in accidents of light and shade, of form or combination of form”.\(^5\) Likewise, Virginia Woolf praises Dorothy for her ability to “note . . . what was before her accurately, literally, and with prosaic precision”.\(^6\) More recent criticism differs little from these earlier statements as scholars continue to acknowledge Dorothy’s “intense” and “insistent” desire to “put . . . down what she sees”, to convey “an arresting moment of vision”, to record a “transien[t] . . . impression”, to present “discrete, detailed particulars”, and to “see the world with fresh eyes”.\(^7\) In spite of this sustained attention to Dorothy’s visual perceptiveness, no one has considered the relationship between her descriptive landscape prose and landscape painting contemporaneous with her. Pamela Woof alone remarks briefly that “The Alfoxden Journal is altogether more a sketch book for descriptive exercises than a diary.” “In the world of the visual arts,” she adds, “one would have to go to the sketches of Dorothy’s contemporary, John Constable, to find such precise arrestings of the changing moment”.\(^8\) Prompted by Woof’s suggestive remark, I examine Dorothy’s The Alfoxden Journal (1798) and The Grasmere Journals (1800–3) in relation to the increasingly widespread practice among painters, during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, of sketching the landscape en plein air. These two journals coincide with the intensification of open-air sketching in England, and they exemplify Dorothy’s most intensely visual descriptive prose. Specifically, I discuss these journals in relation to sketches by Constable, the most committed and sustained practitioner of plein-air painting in early nineteenth-century England. Natural effects that Dorothy describes in the Alfoxden and Grasmere journals closely resemble features that Constable was simultaneously depicting in the open air: natural light observed at specific times of day; a broad and vivid range of colours; and fluctuating atmospheric and weather conditions. I argue that Dorothy and Constable exemplify a shift in landscape representation at the turn of the nineteenth century, when a desire for scientific accuracy, arising from direct observation of nature’s widely varied and transient features, was replacing the classically derived principles of ideal form and compositional order that had influenced landscape art during the eighteenth century. While there is no evidence to suggest that Dorothy was influenced by Constable, her letters indicate that she was acutely aware of art in

\(^{5}\)De Quincey, 299.
\(^{6}\)Woolf, 164.
\(^{7}\)Homans, 94; Darlington, 163; Levin, 12; Labbe, 8; Woolf, “Introduction,” xix.
\(^{8}\)Woolf, Writer, 29, 68.
broader terms, and that she desired to be able to articulate herself, particularly in response to the landscape, in paint. The similarities between Dorothy’s prose and Constable’s sketches not only reflect their shared engagement in the shift towards naturalism in early nineteenth-century landscape art but also reveal the deliberateness with which Dorothy sought to replicate in her writing the intensity of observation and the particularity of description that she admired in visual art.

The radical assertion, in the early 1800s, that light, colour, and atmospheric and weather conditions could be the principal subjects of art substantially departed from classically derived notions of form, order, and universality in art. Instead, the individuality of each encounter with nature, in all of its detail, diversity, and transitoriness, became the new standard for aesthetic taste, giving way to a more scientific scrutiny of natural phenomena. New emphasis was placed on the perceptive observer, who endeavoured to “capture reality faithfully, not as it is in itself or in its underlying essence (if it has one) but as it appears”.9 In contrast, Renaissance artists had sought to produce “a universal concept”, representing the principal “idea”, not the individuality, of “human beings, battle scenes, horses, crucifixions, distant mountains, and so on”.10 Michelangelo conceived of extracting from his marble an essential form “already there, hidden under the surface”, a creative process that entailed “unearthing” and “bringing into full view” the essence “underneath empirical appearances”. He made that discovery through his intellectus, in the same way that Aristotelian logic extracts general concepts from ordinary experience.11 In Poetics, Aristotle speaks of art as more philosophical and universal than history, for it delineates not “what did happen” (particularity) “but the sort of thing that would happen” (generality): “Since a tragedy is a mimēsis of people better than are found in the world, one ought to do the same as the good figure-painters; for they too give us the individual form, but though they make people lifelike they represent them as more beautiful than they are.”12 For classicists, then, while art and thought begin with “ordinary experience”, sensory perception of concrete particularities in the world ultimately leads to comprehension of “universal reality”. The mind is engaged in a “movement that begins in observation and ends in universal idea”. A “private experience” is “turned into a public understanding”.13 By the early nineteenth century, however, a new conception of creativity was emerging, in which the first, and most immediate, encounter with the world became aesthetically sufficient. Landscape painters endeavoured to close the gap between the initial experience and the artistic execution—that is, to diminish the “movement” from observation to idea, foregrounding the eye over the mind. By sketching en plein air, they could work with greater spontaneity and immediacy, a clear departure from the classical notion that human intellect and reason are the ultimate foundation of human living and that
this faculty is, above all others, “divine”. Sight, now, acquired a privileged function in the process of artistic creation, and artists asserted the “value of ordinary living”, including the imperative to open oneself fully to nature, for nature speaks most powerfully to those who are immersed in it. The open-air sketch, then, can be seen as a reaction against the perceived disengagement of rational thinking, which sought to move beyond particularities in search of universal truths. Sketching outdoors championed a new process of artistic creation predicated on bodily experience in the world, proximity to concrete forms, and a privileged authenticity of expression.

For painters, sketching out-of-doors was not a new practice in the early nineteenth century. In Europe, beginning in the seventeenth century, open-air oil sketching formed part of a painter’s academic training: artists were taught to sketch in the countryside in order to observe and record natural light, colour, and landscape motifs. In academic practice, the open-air sketch was strictly a private, preliminary stage in the completion of a finished oil painting for public exhibition, a restricted designation that the sketch retained for the next two centuries. By the early 1800s, however, with a developing taste for naturalism in landscape painting, the open-air sketch acquired new and greater significance. It heralded a fresh, modern way of looking: artists exposed the limitations of inherited schema for landscape representation and pursued, instead, direct confrontation with visual facts as they appeared. Sketching out-of-doors became a rigorous, almost scientific form of fieldwork earnestly pursued in order to study first-hand “the diversity of natural phenomena and the ephemeral appearances of landscape”.

Additionally, artists sought a narrower pictorial scope, focused on nature’s humble and most contingent qualities: the trunk of a tree, a single flower, a river bank, a cloud, or accidental effects of light and shade. This “embryonic spirit of realism”, Peter Galassi argues, made possible the development of photography decades later. The oil sketch introduced a “new standard of pictorial logic” devoted to “the singular and contingent rather than the universal and stable”, an authenticity, artists claimed, that arises from the eye, rather than the mind. By the 1820s, the practice of open-air sketching had become widespread in England, France, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, and Norway. While not considered an autonomous, public work of art (a designation it would acquire by the 1870s, most famously in French Impressionism), the open-air sketch gained considerable importance for artists as they sought to integrate the directness and spontaneity of their outdoor work into their finished paintings.

Dorothy’s descriptive prose in her *Alfoxden* and *Grasmere* journals resembles the characteristics of a *plein-air* sketch in several significant ways. Her daily entries are marked by their modesty of scale, the unpretentiousness of her subject matter, the unstudied immediacy of her observations, and the intimacy of her encounters with nature. As Ernest de Selincourt remarks, Dorothy writes with “freshness

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14 Taylor, 60.
15 Ibid., 711, 358–9.
16 Klonk, 101.
and ... spontaneity”. Appreciating nature that is “unspoilt and unadorned”, she “sets down simply and faithfully what she sees”. Similarly, Beth Darlington remarks that Dorothy composes “quickly and spontaneously” rather than “self-consciously” and according to “prescribed rules”. Pamela Woof concurs: Dorothy presents not a complete scene, “but the fragments of one”; “A whole scene, a formal composition, would be too fixed. The life is in the swift impression”. Frances Wilson, too, describes Dorothy as “curiously egoless” in her response to the natural world: a mere “channel through which perceptions pass, like streams”. Her unassuming “pair of eyes”, Wilson adds, enables her to dissolve into what she sees: she finds happiness “slipping into contemplation of an object” with selfless watchfulness. As these remarks suggest, the vitality and immediacy of Dorothy’s responses to nature place her work firmly within the broader artistic development in early nineteenth-century England (and Europe) of sketching the landscape *en plein air*.

Literary critics have not examined Dorothy’s writing within this turn-of-the-century context. Instead, they have considered more narrowly the influence of picturesque theory on her descriptive prose, a critical view, I feel, that overshadows the later, more powerful resemblance between her journals and open-air sketching. To be sure, picturesque theorists, beginning with William Gilpin in the 1770s, advanced the practice of sketching outdoors and the “pleasures of being in the open air”. However, the picturesque aesthetic was a “selective” rather than a “truly impartial approach” to visualizing natural phenomena. It equipped artists to see the landscape with a “mental template” in mind: to look for views that corresponded to the idea of what a classically ordered painting should look like. Gilpin outlined for artists the proper method of sketching the landscape out-of-doors. Only the “characteristic features of a scene,” the “leading ideas,” and approximate “distances” are “fixed on the spot”, he remarks. The purpose of the sketch is to record “General ideas” not “accuracy”. “Exactness” is subsequently incorporated into “the finished picture” indoors with the aid of imagination. Dorothy was undoubtedly quite familiar with picturesque theory. By the late 1780s, William Wordsworth had read several of Gilpin’s treatises, which may have been among the books that he brought with him to Alfoxden House in 1797, and in 1800, Dorothy herself remarks that she was reading “Mr Knight’s Landscape”. As well, the Lake District was a prime destination for picturesque tourists from 1775 to 1800. Women writers, in particular, were attracted to landscape

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18De Selincourt, 78–9.
19Darlington, 168.
21Wilson, 25–6, 115, 103.
22Ballantyne, 118.
23Brown, 61.
24Ballantyne, 117.
25Gilpin, 64–5, 70, 87.
26Wu, 64–5.
28Bicknell, 3.
representation, which assumed a lower status than the “high’ theoretical aesthetics” of academic art, and many of them read Gilpin’s influential publications.29 John R. Nabholz, in 1964, was the first to suggest that Dorothy’s careful rendering of both accident and order in nature reflects adherence to picturesque principles: “a common picturesque vision was shared by Dorothy Wordsworth and William Gilpin—a delight in irregularity, intricacy, and variety of forms and colors . . . and a desire for an harmonious union of these diverse effects in a single visual composition”.30 Robert Con Davis similarly asserts that Dorothy “relies heavily” on picturesque theory: she presents a careful arrangement of landscape scenery that recedes “neatly . . . from foreground to background”. Her approach to nature is highly “rational”, he adds, in that her journals are not “a movement into the world of time, but a frozen series of individual prospects”.31 However, critical interpretations of Dorothy’s descriptive prose primarily in picturesque terms predispose readers to overlook her more abiding adherence to the later, more widespread phenomenon of open-air naturalism.

Other literary critics have conceded, as John Glendening remarks, that Dorothy “stand[s] aloof from” picturesque theory. She offers a “visual mimesis of picturesquely framed scenes” but rejects the “unnaturalness” of its formulaic principles.32 Robert Mellin, too, observes that her writing, while ordered, is also materially specific: “she uses the picturesque . . . to gain a sense of place, which in turn allows her to represent the interconnectedness of humans and the environment”.33 Dorothy incorporates aspects of picturesque theory, Sarah M. Zimmerman agrees, but not strict adherence to its principles. As a “picturesque observer”, she adopts the required spatial and emotional “distance”, but her relationship to her surroundings is “dynamic” rather than “static”: her shifting positions enable her to alter her views and to disrupt the conventional prospect view.34 Elizabeth A. Bohls goes further, noting that Dorothy alters the aesthetic distance of the picturesque—the “over-there-ness’ of landscape separated from the beholder”—by acknowledging actual life: she “brings landscape in close by insistently linking beauty with practical activities and needs, her own and those of the people who inhabit the land”. The texture of her writing, Bohls adds, is marked by this “weaving together” of a privileged aesthetic distance and immersion in the rhythms of daily life.35 I argue more vigorously, however, that a fuller appreciation of Dorothy’s visual perceptiveness must acknowledge the relatedness of her writing not principally to picturesque theory but rather to the open-air naturalism of the 1800s, when artists, with unprecedented deliberateness, sought rather to infuse their landscape painting with a directness and spontaneity acquired only by working out-of-doors.

29Bohls, 5–6.
30Nabholz, 124.
31Davis, 45–6, 48.
33Mellin, 68, 71.
34Zimmerman, 125, 128.
35Bohls, 183, 178.
John Constable, more than any other painter in early nineteenth-century England, aimed (at least initially) to close the traditional gap between the sketch and the finished painting: his serious commitment to working out-of-doors enabled him to convey more convincingly than his predecessors the appearance of nature as he perceived and experienced it. He advocated the importance for landscape painters of spending prolonged periods out-of-doors, an artistic aim he articulated in 1833, in *Various Subjects of Landscape, Characteristic of English Scenery*: “[T]he aim of the Author is to promote the study of . . . the Rural Scenery of England” and to encourage the “Student of Nature” to “daily watch her endless varieties”.36 Making a clear distinction between art that is derived from copying the Old Masters of the past, in an academic and imitative manner, and art that arises from careful study of nature itself, he claims that only the latter produces “a style which is original”.37 In his series of lectures delivered to the Royal Institution in 1836, Constable identified painting as “a science” that “should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature”; the “young painter must become the patient pupil of nature . . . [and] walk in the fields with a humble mind”.38 While Constable most fully articulated these artistic aims late in his life, his intentions as a landscape painter were formulated much earlier in his career, as his now-famous letter from 1802 reveals:

For these two years past I have been running after pictures and seeking the truth at second hand. . . . I shall shortly return to Bergholt where I shall make some laborious studies from nature—and . . . endeavour to get a pure and unaffected representation of the scenes that may employ me with respect to colour particularly and any thing else. . . . [T]here is room enough for a natural painture.39

The desire to work as a “natural” painter, and to infuse landscape art with a freshness arising from direct observation, clearly prompted his practice of sketching *en plein air*, which he commenced in 1802 and continued for most of his career. Working in both watercolour and oil, Constable advanced that practice in distinct phases and regions: during his seven-week tour of the Lake District in 1806; in the fields of East Bergholt from 1810 to 1816; at Hampstead from 1821 to 1822, when he conducted his most intensive studies of skies; and at Brighton, where he produced open-air seascapes from 1824 to 1828. While Constable’s commitment to open-air sketching exceeded that of his contemporaries, he was not the only painter working outdoors in the early nineteenth century. Many of England’s leading landscape painters were either teaching or practising open-air sketching: J. M. W. Turner, John Linnell, John Varley, Cornelius Varley, William Mulready, David Cox, William Turner of Oxford, William Henry Hunt, and Peter de Wint, among others. It is significant, then, that Dorothy composed her first two journals—those in which her prose is most intensely visual—during this heightened interest in open-air sketching.

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37Ibid., 10.
38Ibid., 69, 71.
39Constable, *Correspondence*, 2:32.
As far as we know, Dorothy’s journals were not written on-the-spot and in the open air; nevertheless, her principal experience of nature occurs outdoors, and her writing conveys an immediacy that evokes visual phenomena freshly observed. Woof explains that Dorothy typically composed her journal entries after the fact, from her recollections,40 a practice that Dorothy herself acknowledges: “writing my journal now at 8 o’clock”, she remarks, at the end of a detailed entry that begins with an account of what occurred immediately “after breakfast”.41 However, as Woof conjectures, Dorothy may have carried with her “pocket-books for images jotted down on the spot”, which enabled her to record and subsequently remember what she saw.42 Throughout the Alfoxden and Grasmere journals, Dorothy refers repeatedly to her frequent and prolonged activities outdoors: walking, sauntering, strolling, rambling, lingering, climbing, gathering, gardening, planting, fishing, rowing, sitting, lying, watching, and reading. Dorothy’s open-air experience of the landscape is also evident in her compositional pattern, particularly in The Alfoxden Journal, of beginning her entries with a verb that denotes a precise movement into the outdoors: “Went to the hill-top”, “Walked to the sea-side”, “Set forward after breakfast”.43 Dorothy’s preference, both journals suggest, is to prolong the time she spends outside. “A very fine day. I sate out of doors most of the day”:

I walked to the lake side in the morning, took up plants & sate upon a stone reading Ballads. In the Evening I was watering plants when Mr & Miss Simpson called—I accompanied them home—& went to the waterfall at the head of the valley—it was very interesting in the Twilight. I brought home thyme and several other plants, & planted them by moonlight. I lingered out of doors. . . .44

The journal entry for the subsequent day similarly begins, “I sate out of doors [a] great part of the day & worked in the Garden”, a pattern noted again the following day: “Sate out of doors reading the Whole Afternoon”.45 On one occasion, she remarks with particular enthusiasm: “the day was so delightful that it made my very heart linger to be out of doors, & see & feel the beauty of the Autumn in freedom”.46 Dorothy’s scant leisure time during her busiest years in the Wordsworth household was “given to walking”, Catherine MacDonald Maclean explains, and that open-air setting became, as it did for William, the “workshop” for her writing: she conducted her studies “in the fields”, so to speak, “liv[ing] with the things she describes”.47 Indeed, the intensity of Dorothy’s attraction to the open air—evident in the length

40Woof, “Notes,” 179, 185.
41D. Wordsworth, Grasmere, 20.
42Woof, “Mysteries,” 127.
43D. Wordsworth, Alfoxden, 7, 12, 13; emphasis mine.
44D. Wordsworth, Grasmere, 7–8.
46Ibid., 134.
47Maclean, 24, 62, 26.
and strenuousness of her walks—was deemed by her contemporaries as decidedly “off-beat and eccentric” for a woman. 48

Arising from this open-air experience of nature is Dorothy’s awareness, shared most notably with John Constable, that the appearance of the landscape changes continually. Her journals indicate very specifically the time at which she makes her observation: morning, after tea, before dinner, after dinner, evening, before sunset, 3 o’clock, 7 o’clock, “a little after 9 o’clock”. Aware that any impression of the landscape lasts only momentarily, she uses frequent adverbs and adverbial phrases to indicate the transience of her observations: “a light came out suddenly”; “the moon only now and then to be seen—the Lake purple as we went”; “the mountains forever varying, now hid in the Clouds & now with their tops visible”. 49 Dorothy also records both subtle and striking alterations that occur in natural appearances as the day progresses: “Bright sunshine, went out at 3 o’clock. The sea perfectly calm blue, streaked with deeper colour by the clouds, and tongues or points of sand; on our return of a gloomy red”. 50 Here, she describes what she sees initially: sunshine that is “bright” and sea that is “perfectly calm blue”. During the walk home, the sea’s “calm blue” has become a “gloomy red”. Dorothy’s descriptions of seasonal distinctions, particularly those of Autumn, further register the temporality of all natural appearances:

We walked before tea . . . to observe the many coloured foliage the oaks dark green with yellow leaves—The birches generally still green, some near the water yellowish. The Sycamore crimson & crimson-tufted—the Mountain ash a deep orange—the common ash Lemon colour but many ashes still fresh in their summer green. Those that were discoloured chiefly near the water. 51

Dorothy’s record is remarkably precise: the birches are still “generally” green, but “some”—those “near the water”—are, while not yet completely yellow, visibly “yellowish”; the Sycamores are “crimson” but some are only “crimson tufted”; and while the ash trees are deep orange and yellow, “many” are still green, specifically “those” that are not “near the water”. Each of her descriptive phrases is characterized by carefully chosen qualifying words that identify precise colours, in very specific locations, observed on this particular day in autumn, while walking “before tea”. In contrast, the following day is “A grey day—Mists on the hills. We did not walk in the morning”. 52 With nothing interesting to observe, Dorothy records very little: time—that is, a change in weather—has altered and obscured the appearance that marked the previous, “beautiful” day.

The precision with which Dorothy records natural phenomena at specific times of day and during particular seasons, and her accompanying awareness that nature is

48 Wilson, 197.
49 D. Wordsworth, Grasmere, 114, 98, 37; emphasis mine.
50 D. Wordsworth, Alfoxden, 2.
51 D. Wordsworth, Grasmere, 26.
52 Ibid., 27.
continually in flux, corresponds closely to Constable’s practice, beginning in 1802, of inscribing on the backs of his sketches annotations indicating the time and location of their execution. By 1806, during his tour of the Lake District, Constable added written records of atmospheric and weather conditions that occurred while he sketched. These annotations reflect both his determination to work outdoors in all weather conditions and his developing recognition that the overall character of a landscape is determined as much by weather as by its topographical features: the annotation and the sketch combined constitute a complete and accurate temporal record. Annotating Derwentwater, Lodore from the Road to Borrowdale, Constable writes,

Sepr. Noon 1806 about 2 o clock the clouds had moved off [?to] the left and left / a very beautiful clear effect on all the Distances—very much like that in Sir GB picture of the Lake of Albano— / the heavy clouds remained edged with light.\(^{53}\)

As this inscription indicates, the scene was visually altered by cloud movement and variations in light while Constable observed and sketched it: like Dorothy, he meticulously records a moment in time. The sketch itself conveys contrasting light and dark tones on the clouds to render precisely where the light momentarily hits their “edge[s]”, and their fluid movements “off . . . [to] the left” are suggested by liquid grey and white washes. After his Lake District tour, Constable again inscribed detailed annotations on his sketches only in the early 1820s, during his period of intense studies of skies at Hampstead. From 1821 to 1822, he produced fifty-four oil studies, fifty-one of which are annotated meticulously:

Hampstead, Sepr 11, 1821. 10. to 11. Morning under the sun—Clouds silvery grey, on warm ground Sultry. Light wind to the S.W. fine all day—but rain in the night following.\(^{54}\)

This inscription, accompanying Cloud Study, Hampstead, Tree at Right,\(^{55}\) is a remarkably comprehensive record of the scene as he experienced it (Figure 1): the location; date; duration of the observation; condition of the light; appearance of the clouds; temperature; humidity; strength and direction of the wind; general quality of the day; and weather conditions that followed it. Constable’s detailed annotations, like Dorothy’s prose, consistently blend rigorous scientific brevity with artistic sensitivity to nature’s inherent beauty: “afternoon sun behind a shower”; “all the foliage sparkling and wet”; “while making this sketch observed the Moon rising very beautifully”; “bright light coming through clouds”; “Wind southern with mist”; “looking east 10 in the morning—silvery clouds”; “Clouds. moving very fast. with

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\(^{53}\)Wilcox, 105.
\(^{54}\)Thornes, 60.
\(^{55}\)Royal Academy of Arts, London.
occasional very bright openings to the blue”. Constable’s weather “narratives” or “episodes”, as art historians refer to them, are counterparts to Dorothy’s prose: both portray the distinct appearance of the landscape at discrete moments in time while acknowledging the inevitable transience of their impressions. This shared awareness of nature’s most fleeting appearances, arising from patient, prolonged experience in the open air, underpins the more specific commonalities in their works: their careful observance of natural light, colour, and atmospheric and weather conditions.

Dorothy shared this interest in natural phenomena not only with Constable but also with Coleridge. Coleridge’s Notebooks, which he began composing in 1794, exemplify his most penetrating observations of nature. By 1797–8, when Dorothy commenced The Alfoxden Journal, Coleridge was writing detailed studies of his surroundings. Woof conjectures that a “conversation” occurred between them: we must imagine Dorothy and Coleridge making observations of nature together, or composing accurate written records for the other’s benefit when one was absent. During their walks, Dorothy was “learning to look”, while Coleridge, too, was “training himself to see”. Like Dorothy, Coleridge describes his natural surroundings, both in Somerset and later in the Lake District, with exquisite detail.

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Figure 1 Cloud Study, Hampstead, Tree at Right by John Constable, R.A. (11 September 1821, oil on paper laid on board, red ground, 24.10 × 29.90 cm) (© Royal Academy of Arts, London).

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56Thornes, 60–1.
57Cornelius Varley, too, added detailed annotations to his sketches, particularly during his sketching trips in Wales in 1802, 1803, and 1805. Like John Constable, he developed an intense interest in atmospheric phenomena; however, unlike Constable, he did not elaborate and sustain his practice of annotating sketches into the following decades. Lyles, 143.
59Woof, Writer, 32.
60Lefebvre, 135.
and visual sensitivity: “Aspen—Oct. 25—one a lovely light yellow—the other red, or rather poppy-color’d”; “the lake calm & would have been mirrorlike but that it had been breathed on by the mist”; “a rich orange sky like that of a winter Evening save that the fleecy dark Blue that rippled above showed it to be morning / —soon became a glowing Brass colour”; “slanting pillars of misty light moved along under the Sun hid by clouds”.61 Kathleen Coburn remarks that his “sharp” visual response to the landscape resembles “artist’s notes”, his “half dozen lines” forming a “wet water colour”. Nowhere in English writing during this period can a comparable “language for light and colours” be found, she remarks; he was “seeing the colours of French impressionism a hundred years earlier”.62 Coleridge himself conceived of his descriptive prose in painterly terms.63 Describing his “walks … almost daily on the top of Quantock” in 1797–8, he concedes that he traversed the “sloping coombs” “[w]ith my pencil and memorandum book in my hand, … making studies, as the artists call them, and often moulding my thoughts into verse, with the objects and imagery immediately before my senses”.64 Coleridge was engaged in an “experimental technique of writing” for this era by “jotting in his notebooks a running commentary to the walk” and offering exact records of his impressions of scenery as they greeted his eye.65 His unrelenting pursuit of nature’s characteristic features continued in the Lake District beginning in 1799, where he was “looking with passionate delight, and carefully shaping what he saw into plein-air sketches as in the Quantock days”. His prose notations—“rapid, spontaneous, miraculously responsive to the changing panorama”—constituted a new form of Romantic nature-writing.66 Unlike topographical records by early tourists, who neither walked through nor lived in the region, Coleridge’s notebook prose was wholly new and strikingly “authentic”. He offered a record of his impressions “while a walk … was actually taking place”, invigorated by the sensation of his own body in the open air.67 Among Coleridge’s contemporaries, Richard Holmes remarks, “[o]nly Dorothy … shares his gift for dynamic notation” that is “so precisely visual”. Each had “gifts of observation and response which interested the other”. They “shared, and perhaps helped each other to perfect, a gift for memorably fixing the actual”.68

While important, the shared impressions of nature that underpin Dorothy’s and Coleridge’s writing (a comparison already examined by others) are not the focus of

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61 Coleridge, Notebooks, 1:490, 551, 581, 713.
62 Coburn, 52, 54.
63 Describing Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s immediate receptivity to the Lake District beginning in 1799, Molly Lefebvre distinguishes his ‘way of seeing’ from William’s: “Wordsworth had the eye of a camera, Coleridge the eye of a painter” (132).
64 Coleridge, Biographia, 196. In a brief Notebook entry, Coleridge remarks similarly that Erasmus Darwin (presumably in The Botanic Garden) “seems to have written his poems as Painters who of beautiful objects—take—Studies” (1:132).
65 Lefebvre, 135, 135.
66 Holmes, 275, 281.
67 Ruddick, 92, 93.
68 Holmes, 92, 96.
my study. Instead, I draw attention to the under-acknowledged, and equally substantial, similarities between Dorothy’s prose and Constable’s sketches. Too often, the originality of her artistic sensibility—the ways in which she sets herself apart from William and Coleridge—is overlooked. Illuminating the distinctiveness of her voice requires analysis that looks beyond the context of her immediate biographical and literary surroundings. Darlington remarks perceptively that her artistry “stands aloof” from the work of those around her. Indifferent to “established poetic decorum”, she wrote “to record her impressions”, to “observe . . . with her own eyes”, and to acquire a “steadiness of . . . vision” that arises not primarily from literary conversation but from her own “responsiveness” to her physical surroundings. Richard E. Matlak concurs: her “natural descriptions seem unintended to reinforce her brother’s transcendental inclinations”. Her interest is “the visual supremacy of earthly reality” presented “without . . . speculation”. While Dorothy’s writing is intrinsically part of the literary relationship that she developed with her brother and Coleridge, disentangling her work from that context enables us to explore her uniqueness as a writer whose aesthetic sensibility differs from both poets, and to consider the ways in which she, even more than Coleridge, achieves in prose a “visual supremacy” akin to painting. Her aim to render natural light, colour, and atmospheric and weather conditions without ideas, personality, or metaphysical speculation—to “keep with the visible scene”—aligns her emphatically with her visual art contemporaries, particularly, John Constable.

Light was a central component of picturesque theory, valued for its ability to produce the pleasing “effect” of contrast and variety through a calculated juxtaposition of “light and shade”, as William Gilpin explains. However, it acquired considerably more importance, as a naturalistic feature of landscape painting, by the early nineteenth century. Painters sought brighter, more diffuse effects of broad, unmitigated sunlight, rather than patterned picturesque contrasts of light and dark. The “sky” became “the heart of the plein air sketch”. Rather than adhering to picturesque notions of light as a patterned and pleasing contrast to
darkness, Dorothy, too, describes natural bright light, as well as its variations in intensity. She observes, for instance, how light blends with moisture or water to give the landscape a diffused, sparkling brightness:

Set forward to Stowey at half-past five. A violent storm in the wood; sheltered under the hollies. ... Left the wood when nothing remained of the storm but the driving wind, and a few scattered drops of rain. ... The hawthorn hedges ... glittering with millions of diamond drops; the hollies shining with broader patches of light. The road to the village of Holford glittered like another stream.75

On other occasions, she identifies a sparkling appearance produced not by moisture but by “motion”, evident in her view from the top of the Quantock Hills:

Sat a considerable time upon the heath. Its surface restless and glittering with the motion of the scattered piles of withered grass, and the waving of the spiders’ threads. On our return the mist still hanging over the sea, but the opposite coast clear, and the rocky cliffs distinguishable. In the deep Coombe, as we stood upon the sunless hill, we saw miles of grass, light and glittering, and the insects passing.76

Dorothy’s principal interest, here, is the subtlest movements inherent in nature—the restless grass, the leaves, the spiders’ threads, the mist, and the insects—and the stunning, sparkling effect of light striking all of these moving surfaces and objects. Her journals contain many brief accounts of this fleeting luminosity: the “vivid sparkling streak of light” across Rydal Lake; Grasmere Lake “spotted with sparkles of light” or “dappled: with soft grey”;77 the sheep’s wool “spangled with the dewdrops”; the “sea, spotted with white”; the “distant ... land ... islanded with sunshine”.78 For Dorothy, the diffuse and transitory effects of light are often events in themselves, prompting a more complete description: “It was a sullen coldish Evening, no sunshine, but ... a light came out suddenly. ... It fell only upon one hill, & the island, but it arrayed the grass & trees in gem-like brightness”.79 Dorothy also observes how cloud formations affect the quality and distribution of light: on one occasion, “The clouds of the western sky reflected a saffron light upon the upper end of the lake—all was still”; on another, “There was a curious yellow reflection in the water as of corn fields” but “no light in the clouds from which it appeared to come”.80 Throughout her journals, Dorothy records not only brilliant diffused daylight as it “array[s]” an entire scene but also the more subtle, often fleeting, qualities of that illumination.

For Constable, too, the presence and quality of light in nature is central to his practice of sketching en plein air. In *English Scenery*, he discusses the “Chiar’oscuro of Nature” (its light and shade), describing his illustrations as “an attempt ... to arrest

76Ibid., 6.
77D. Wordsworth, *Grasmere*, 81, 12, 28.
80Ibid., 104, 18.
the more abrupt and transient appearances” and “evanescent Exhibitions” of light that “are ever occurring in the changes of external Nature”. 81 Justifying his work in the 1820s, in the face of opposition from his critics, Constable acknowledges unapologetically “the sacrifices I make for lightness and brightness”, which are “the essence of landscape”. 82 His interest in flooding natural light directed him to study its source—the sky—in the early 1820s. Referring to that intense period of study, Constable asserts that “The sky is the ‘source of light’ in nature—and governs everything”, even “our common observations on the weather of every day”. 83 His first serious study of light occurs during his Lake District tour in 1806. In View in Borrowdale, a “morning” scene, Constable portrays the angular rays of light flooding into the valley. The “sheer density” of that light “has quite obliterated the distant hills, so that all we see is a dazzling haze”. 84 Constable appears to have removed colour with a clean wet brush, which leaves the bottom of the valley and the eastern face of the mountains without form or substance. The pronounced diagonal direction of the light, indicated by the dark western face of the mountains on the left and the brighter sunlit range on the right, resembles Dorothy’s accounts of illuminated mountain scenery: “we . . . sate a long time looking at the mountains which were all black at Grasmere & very bright in Rydale—Grasmere exceedingly dark & Rydale of a light yellow green”. 85 Constable’s sketch (18.1 cm x 48 cm), one of the largest from the tour, is unusual in its dramatic horizontal emphasis. That format suggests that Constable was adapting the size and shape of his painting surfaces to most accurately reflect the scene before him: in this case, to incorporate the horizontal sprawl of the valley and its mountains as well as the distinctively low angle of early morning light, the latter clearly as fundamental as the topographical features themselves to his record of the scene and to his choice of such a wide format for its presentation. Constable’s Lake District sketches reveal his developing interest in the sky as the principal source of light, which becomes an increasingly prominent feature in his later works. In an oil sketch from c. 1812, Autumnal Sunset, 86 Constable renders light more boldly, with thicker paint and more intense colours, but here, too, his intention is to convey variations in luminosity accurately: the intense evening light glows in the sky and across the surface of the fields, but it does not reach into the valley, which remains in shadow (Figure 2). Two years later, Constable refers to a delightfully concentrated period of sketching outdoors in autumn: “This charming season . . . occupies me entirely in the feilds [sic]”. 87 “Autumn only”, he exclaims, “is called the painter’s season, from the . . . peculiar tone and beauty of the skies”. 88 Beginning in 1806, and throughout his career, Constable’s determination to render light

81 Constable, Discourses, 9.
82 Constable, Correspondence, 6:157.
83 Ibid., 6:76–7.
84 Wilcox, 116.
85 D. Wordsworth, Grasmere, 80.
86 Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
87 Constable, Correspondence, 2:131.
88 Constable, Discourses, 15.
naturally—bright daylight, evocative evening light, and distinctive seasonal light—resembles the visual perceptiveness with which Dorothy describes the same phenomenon.

In addition to their careful records of natural light, Dorothy and Constable portray the colours of the landscape with uncommon variety and intensity, their observations arising, again, from a devoted open-air experience of nature. The employment of a colouristic range in landscape representation was a relatively new development in the early nineteenth century. Theorists in the eighteenth century had advised artists to restrict their palettes. Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his Discourses on Art (1769–90), asserts that “a quietness and simplicity must reign over the whole work, to which a breadth of uniform, and simple colour, will very much contribute”. Painters must avoid a “variety of tints” and excessive “detail of colours”.

However, by the early 1800s, painters working outdoors were seeking a “spectral” range of hues: “Empirical observation and recording of natural light effects en plein air were crucial to the lightening and brightening of the painter’s palette”. During the first half of the nineteenth century, developments in chemistry extended the range of pigments available to artists and colour merchants. In England, leading colour chemist George Field, in his treatise Chromatography (1835), espoused a new, modern theory of colour predicated on open-air observation: “study colouring in nature not in art”; use “pure” colours that are “dapple[ed]” rather than “mixed”, for the latter subdue each other chromatically; and observe the “degrees of changeability” within colours.

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89Reynolds, 61–2.
90Callen, 153.
under particular conditions of light, oxygen, air, dampness, and heat. Devoting whole chapters to individual colours—white, yellow, red, blue, orange, green, purple, citrine, russet, olive, brown, marine, gray, and black—Field also names the “classes” into which each one subdivides and acquires further distinctiveness: from red, for example, the artist derives crimson, coral, ruby, rose, scarlet, vermilion, and red ochre. T. H. Fielding, in his manual *On Painting in Oil and Water Colours* (1839), similarly advises landscape painters to “carry sketchbooks” and to make “accurate sketches from nature” in “colour”, for the “most beautiful and impressive combinations of colour” are “seen only once”. Open-air sketches, he adds, must be supplemented with colour “notes” written on-the-spot. To assist painters in the latter task, he offers his own colour notations appropriate to various settings, including this very detailed record of the sky’s chromatic range at sunset:

Top of the sky purple grey—gradating into a very light tea green; nearer the sun, greenish orange tint, very light; sun, brilliant flame-colour; … above and below it of a pale orangey crimson; darker and more purple near the sun. … Clouds along the horizon greenish grey—distant land, leaden grey; edges of clouds near the sun, gold; clouds above the sun, bright copper and gold.

Fielding’s truncated phrases, precise colour words, qualifying adjectives, and spatial precision resemble Dorothy’s descriptions of colour phenomena written three decades earlier. Throughout his manual, Fielding, like Dorothy, also uses multiple compound colour words to designate each hue precisely: tin white, pearl white, lemon yellow, orange vermillion, rose pink, burnt umber, bone brown, chestnut brown, emerald green, prussian blue, purple ochre, and blue black, for example. 

During the nineteenth century, the aesthetic appreciation of, and value attributed to, colour broadened considerably from the restricted palette of the eighteenth century. It is important, therefore, to consider Dorothy’s and Constable’s emphatic use of colour within the context of this artistic development.

Dorothy’s colour words convey an unpatterned and vivid array of hues in nature as they appear to her. She employs a “palette of careful distinctions”, in which her colours are precisely nuanced and strikingly varied. Each colour word is typically attached to a qualifying adjective, and her colour phrases rarely appear twice. In *The Alfoxden Journal*, she describes, for example, the woods as “unvarying brown”; the beech trees as “brown-red, or crimson”; the birch trees as “bright red, through which gleams a shade of purple”; the moss as “sea-green”; the “meadow plots” as “soft and vivid green”; the turnips as “lively rough green”; the sea as “pale greyish blue”; and the night sky as “blue-black”. In both journals, Dorothy also invests her colour

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91 Field, 14, 15, 25.  
92 Fielding, 97, 99.  
93 Ibid., 97–8.  
94 Ibid., 112, 128.  
95 Woof, “Interesting,” 54.  
96 D. Wordsworth, *Alfoxden*, 1, 6, 8, 2.
phrases with an emotive tone to further distinguish the quality of each hue: “heavy blackness”; “soft grey dapple”; “a breathless grey day”; “unutterable darkness”; “delicate purple & yellowish hues”; “alpine fire-like red”; “tender soft green”.97 These carefully chosen adjectives indicate that Dorothy responds to colour with considerable feeling, enriching her prosaic records with a compressed emotive response. The delicacy of her perception of colour phenomena is evident, as well, in her discernment of hues that rarely appear in nature. The persistent presence of purple in her writing illustrates the subtlety of her perceptive powers: the “distant country (which was purple in the clear dull air)”; the “purplish appearance” of a Birch tree; “soft grave purple on the waters”; the “sky soft purple”; “purplish light”; “reddish purple” “mist”; the “red purple colour” of the setting sun; the “lofty purple crag”; the “purple” “Lake”.98 Dorothy also describes rare instances in which colours across a wide spectral range appear simultaneously. The stillness of Rydal Lake on a July afternoon, she writes, “reflected the beautiful yellow & blue & purple & grey colours of the sky”.99 In another extraordinary description, she records a spectacle of mingled colours in the sky on an evening in mid-June, their blended intensity provoking, this time, an impassioned response:

Earth & sky were so lovely that they melted our very hearts. The sky to the north was of a chastened yet rich yellow fading into pale blue & streaked and scattered over with steady islands of purple melting away into shades of pink.100

Additionally, Dorothy carefully observes the ways in which colours are altered by light. “Walked from seven o’clock till half-past eight. Upon the whole an uninteresting evening” she writes—uninteresting, that is, until the light of the moon, momentarily breaking through the clouds, alters the appearance of her surroundings, giving the colours a rare intensity that lasts only until the moon is hidden again by the clouds: “the shadows of the oaks blackened, and their lines became more strongly marked. The withered leaves were coloured with a deeper yellow, a brighter gloss spotted the hollies”.101 On another occasion, she similarly observes how the intensity of colours is transformed by light: “the woods & fields were spread over with the yellow light of Evening, which made their greenness a thousand times more green”.102 Dorothy’s confident, deliberate handling of colour reflects not a passive observance of muted picturesque harmonies but an active, perceptive engagement with her surroundings. She observes an unpatterned array of colours as they appear to her, their inherent vibrancy transforming an otherwise “uninteresting” walk into an aesthetic event worthy of notation in her journals.

97Ibid., 4; Grasmere, 28, 133, 81, 92, 104, 9.
98D. Wordsworth, Alfoxden, 4; Grasmere, 40, 60, 61, 13, 95, 98.
99D. Wordsworth, Grasmere, 14.
100Ibid., 112.
101D. Wordsworth, Alfoxden, 3.
102D. Wordsworth, Grasmere, 130.
Constable, too, employs a richly varied spectrum of colours, a practice that he adopted with increasing deliberateness as his sketching outdoors intensified. Prior to 1802, his colours still adhered to the standard late eighteenth-century palette. However, by 1808, Constable had expanded his range of colours, adding, for instance, orange lake, purple lake, Antwerp blue, chrome yellow, emerald green, scarlet madder, and natural ultramarine. Further stimulating Constable’s colouristic advancements was his friendship, initiated by at least 1825, with colour chemist George Field, which ensured that “new or rare colours were readily available to Constable soon after their introduction”. While Constable’s interest in broadening his palette is most evident in his oil sketches after 1808, the Lake District watercolours show, again, his earliest determination to go beyond the eighteenth-century tradition of tinted drawings and to make colouristic advances in this medium, too.

Although many of these sketches are now badly faded, several examples survive of the rich, full colour that Constable had initially used. In *Helvellyn*, completed in mid-September, the liveliness of the original pigments is evident in the deep blue sky, the cool blue-grey mountain rock, the warm golden hues where the sun hits the side of Helvellyn, and the lively green in the foreground. Constable’s colouristic advances are evident, as well, in two sketches completed in Borrowdale, in early October, that portray the softer colours of early evening. In *Eskhause, Scawfell*, he uses muted orange, pink and purple hues to convey the twilight setting, applying watercolour fluidly to replicate the rapidly changing colours at twilight (Figure 3). The next day, Constable sketched another “Evng” scene, *View in Borrowdale*. Set beside each other, the two images portray the landscape’s constantly varied appearances; in the latter, the evening light has a pervasive golden glow, and nature’s insistent autumnal hues predominate. By 1810, Constable, having resumed his practice of sketching in oil, increased the intensity, variety, and range of his colours. In his *View towards the rectory, East Bergholt*, the warm oranges and yellows, applied in long horizontal strokes across the sky, portray a vibrant sunset, and the cool greens of the dense vegetation have a new depth and variety. The energetic brushwork that Constable is now using, as well as the rapidity of his sketching method, are evident in the visibility of the surface panel, where the paint is only thinly applied in the sky, and in the rough application of colours, which are left unmixed. Two later sketches, *Hampstead Heath, sun setting over Harrow* (1821) and *A View at Hampstead: Evening* (1822), reveal Constable’s continued exploration of a spectral range of hues, as well as the

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103 Cove, 507, 506.

104 In the early nineteenth century, landscape painters—notably, Thomas Girtin, J. M. W. Turner, and John Constable—initiated new watercolour techniques. Formerly, artists began with a preliminary line drawing, filled in the outlines with muted washes, and completed the work by tinting it with subtle colours. However, this later development, in which colour was applied directly to the surface, not only created greater intensity of colour, but also liberated colour from its subservience to line, and thereby facilitated the rendering of movement and atmosphere. Callen, 124.


106 Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
daring brevity of his sketches, in which he reduces his images to spare studies of colour (Figure 4).

A final similarity between Dorothy’s journals and Constable’s sketches is the carefulness with which they record the most ephemeral atmospheric and weather conditions. In England, in the first decade of the nineteenth century, meteorology became a widespread subject of scientific exploration. The most significant studies were published by Luke Howard and John Dalton, who observed and explained, through rigorous collection of empirical data, the complex phenomenon of cloud formation. Their scientific work coincided with, and perhaps stimulated, the parallel meteorological interests among early nineteenth-century landscape painters, not only Constable, but also Cornelius Varley, David Cox, and J. M. W. Turner. However, the practice of sketching out-of-doors itself, which encouraged scientifically rigorous observation and comprehensive “data” collection, likely stimulated painters to take a keen artistic interest in atmospheric phenomena. As artists working in watercolour technically advanced their work by applying colours directly to their paper, rather than adhering thin, tinted washes to a pencil drawing, they were able, more suggestively than their predecessors, to reproduce the rich hues, fluidity, and expansiveness of atmospheric conditions.107 More technically elaborate, this new practice of building up layers of colour, blending washes, and scratching or sponging away portions of applied colour to create highlights created the impression of freshness and spontaneity.

Contemporaneous with these scientific and artistic advancements in meteorological observation and study, Dorothy’s prose renderings of atmospheric and weather

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conditions, at particular times of day and in all seasons, are one of the most pronounced features of her journals. On 10 October 1800, almost exactly the date on which Constable executed *View in Borrowdale* in 1806, Dorothy similarly recorded atmospheric beauty produced by the blended effects of mist, snow, early morning light and autumnal colour. The resemblance between her prose and Constable’s sketch is striking:

> In the morning when I arose the mists were hanging over the opposite hills & the tops of the highest hills were covered with snow. There was a most lovely combination at the head of the vale—of the yellow autumnal hills wrapped in sunshine, & overhung with partial mists, the green & yellow trees & the distant snow-topped mountains. It was a most heavenly morning.108

Dorothy’s careful identification of “mists … over the opposite hills” and “partial mists” at “the head of the vale” indicates that the distinct shape, location, and extension of the mist varies. Her adjectives “hanging”, “wrapped”, and “overhung” indicate not only that solid rock is obscured and made ephemeral in appearance by vapour but also that the mist itself is only delicately and momentarily suspended, or “hung”, in the sky. Dorothy begins this journal entry with the specification that this is what she observed “when I arose”, making clear that this particular appearance of mist, snow, light and colour would dissipate quickly. Underpinning most of her atmospheric and weather narratives is this acknowledgment of nature’s transience: “We walked out before dinner to our favourite field. The mists sailed along the

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mountains & rested upon them enclosing the whole vale”. On another occasion, the movement of the mist, more than the land itself, or even the sheep, is her chief interest: “A thick fog obscured the distant prospect entirely. . . . It cleared away between ten and eleven. The shapes of the mist, slowly moving along, exquisitely beautiful; passing over the sheep they almost seemed to have more of life than those quiet creatures”.

Constable’s abiding and intense fascination with atmospheric and weather phenomena is evident, too, throughout his career. The Lake District watercolours again exemplify his earliest concentrated interest in that subject, the annotations alone encapsulating the single effect he sought to convey: “twilight after much rain”; “Noon Clouds breaking away after rain”; “Stormy Evening”. During this tour, as Constable became familiar with the character of the northern landscape, he sought greater pictorial challenges, including dramatic and extreme weather conditions. In Derwentwater: Stormy Evening, dark clouds appear simultaneously with white, brightly lit clouds, indicating that the weather is extremely unsettled as the storm passes (Figure 5). Constable renders the darkness of the clouds and hills with layers of wet, fluid paint, while he conveys the illuminated side of the mountain and glittering water with a drier brush and delicate scratches, which expose the white paper beneath and create the appearance of sparkling, rain-drenched light. Constable captures not only the “distinctive effects of light and colour, so prominent during his two months in the Lakes”, but also “the moist, all encompassing atmosphere”.

Figure 5 Derwentwater: Stormy Evening by John Constable, R.A. (6 October 1806, pencil and watercolour, 10.5 × 23.8 cm) (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

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109 Ibid., 29–30.
110 D. Wordsworth, Alfoxden, 9.
111 Wilcox, 115, 121, 131.
113 Rhyne, 68.
Atmospheric are the fifty-four oil sketches of clouds that Constable completed at Hampstead from 1821 to 1822. Many are pure cloud studies that lack anchoring references to landforms or features; at times, Constable executed several studies in one day to record the speed with which conditions change (Figure 6). In these works, he, like Dorothy, blends rigorous observation of specific weather conditions and dramatic cloud movement with his artistic sensitivity to their inherently abstract beauty.

Dorothy’s *Alfoxden* and *Grasmere* journals do not offer evidence that she had seen, or was influenced by, Constable or any of the landscape painters working out-of-doors in the early nineteenth century. Like painters’ open-air sketches, however, her descriptive prose consists of pure visual images: “Dorothy cultivated neither personality, nor ideas; she kept with the visible scene.” “The brilliant effects exist for themselves alone”, Woof remarks. Dorothy’s early letters, those composed from 1787 to 1805, contain explicit references to art, often in emotional and exclamatory terms. They suggest that she perhaps conceived of her writing in relation to the practice of drawing and painting. Less guarded in her letters than in her journals, she expresses the desire to articulate her feelings visually, suggesting that paint has the capacity to surpass language as a medium of expression. Regretting the absence of her

![Figure 6](image-url)  
*Figure 6* *Study of Clouds* by John Constable, R.A. (5 September 1822, oil on paper, 29.8 × 48.3 cm) (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

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114 Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
brothers at the end of their summer vacation in Penrith in 1787, for example, Dorothy writes “I cannot paint . . . my Distress at their departure”. Addressing her dear friend Jane Pollard, Dorothy exclaims, “How dearly do I love you! No words can paint my affection and Friendship for you”. In another letter to Jane, Dorothy expresses her present pleasure in life at Fornsett in 1793: “I am sure you will . . . assist me in painting Scenes of Happiness . . . arising from . . . Retirement and rural Quiet”. Later that year, lamenting the absence of both William’s and Jane’s company, Dorothy imagines a rural “retreat” for the three of them, which “Fancy . . . assist[s] us in painting”. In 1797, Dorothy describes to Mary Hutchinson the countryside around Nether Stowey, exclaiming, “There is everything here; sea, woods wild as fancy ever painted”. Again associating natural beauty with visual expression, Dorothy remarks in 1804, “We have had nothing but harsh winter weather till within the last ten days, and now the vale is painted green all at once”. Dorothy’s particular use of the word paint indicates that its expressive possibilities—its potential to convey her deep feelings of solitary “distress”, “happiness” in life, or delight in “wild” and colourful landscape scenery—most attract her. Moreover, the frequency with which she refers to paint suggests that, while she despairs elsewhere at her “fail[ure]” to “compose verses” and, perhaps “never really aspired to be a poet”, she could imagine herself as a painter. These early letters also contain expressions of regret that she lacks the skills of a visual artist to portray the landscape scenes that most impress her. Writing to Lady Beaumont in 1804, Dorothy writes,

here I longed for a small share of the powers of Sir George Beaumont, to have brought away a sketch of some of the scenes we saw. Wasdale is exceedingly wild but in entire simplicity, so that with half a dozen strokes of the pencil a character might be given of the place. . . .

In a subsequent letter to Lady Beaumont, Dorothy again “long[s]” for the “powers” of a visual artist. Enclosing small drawings of Dove Cottage that “will make you smile at my little skill”, Dorothy concludes with a more profound regret: “You may lament with me that I have not been taught to exercise the pencil. It is indeed true that I scarcely ever take a walk without lamenting it”. Dorothy’s exclamatory references to pencils and paint, and her expressed desire to acquire the skills of a landscape painter, offer strong evidence of her interest in visual art. Reading Dorothy’s letters alongside William’s further reveals the strength of her conviction, for William makes no comparable statements. He does not “long” to “paint” his emotions and experiences; moreover, his remarks about art are largely scholarly, in that he desires greater intellectual understanding of the history of art and Old Master painters and

[117]Ibid., 2:24.
[120]Ibid., 622.
regrets the inadequacy of his knowledge. In contrast, Dorothy conceives of painting as an actual practice: as a medium that suits particular subjects, as a discipline that trains the eye, and as a practical skill that she wishes she could acquire.

Future studies of Dorothy Wordsworth, must continue to examine the visual context in which she was working in order to more fully appreciate the complexity and artistry of her descriptive prose. Additional questions probing the dimensions of this relationship need to be asked: In what additional ways do the purely visual portions of her writing resemble painting? In what other respects did Dorothy’s self-proclaimed affinity for visual art shape her extraordinary use of language in a manner that enabled her to replicate in words what she might otherwise have conveyed in paint? As one of her biographers astutely remarks, while “[m]ost journals are introspective”, Dorothy’s “always look . . . outward”. Indeed, Dorothy’s cultivation of a visual mode of composition—her desire to replicate in writing the intensity of observation and particularity of description that she admired in visual art—necessitates a critical orientation that is comparably “outward”—that is, art historical—in its focus.

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121Maclean, 112.


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