Creating Warnscale: Applying Dorothy Wordsworth’s Mode of the Feminine Sublime to a Walking-Performance about In/Fertility and Biological Childlessness

by Louise Ann Wilson

Warnscale: A Land Mark Walk Reflecting On Infertility and Childlessness (Warnscale) (2015-ongoing) is self-guided walking-performance specific to the Warnscale fells, south of Buttermere Lake, in Cumbria, North West England. Warnscale is mediated through a published walking-guide/art-book that leads participants through the landscape, and is aimed at women who are childless-by-circumstance.

Figure i – Warnscale launch-walk participants, 16-17 May 2015. Photographer: Lizzie Coombes.

Society offers no rituals or rites of passage through which women who have ‘missed’ the life-event of biological motherhood can be acknowledged and come to terms with that absence. Warnscale, however, offers imaginative and creative ways through which participants can engage with landscape in order to reflect-upon, re-image and transition (even in the smallest of ways) the liminality that this circumstance can lead to. The book provides multiple-layers of non-prescriptive and metaphorical imagery, texts, and actions through which participants, whether walking alone, with a partner,
a friend or in a group, can assemble or construct meaning and create their own unique version of the performance.

Extracts from Dorothy Wordsworth’s Grasmere Journals frame each section of the book and serve to draw attention to the landscape and feelings it might evoke. The underlying subject matter of the walking-performance is biological childlessness-by-circumstance and the ‘missing’ life-event of biological motherhood. By ‘missing’ life-event I mean the absence of a hoped or planned for life-event and the ‘missing’ social status or role that might otherwise have occurred.

Warnscale involves no artistic interventions in the landscape. Instead, the landscape and its ever-changing seasons and weather is both ‘scene’ and performer AND participants through walking, listening and noticing the landscape – in the framework of the underlying subject matter – are themselves the performer and part of the ‘scene’. The work seeks to engage walking and talking as a creative, therapeutic, conversational and performative tool and the transformative use of: the landscape and activity (walking, actions, visual and sensory immersion); the social effects of communal or solitary walking; the context of the underlying subject matter.

Figure ii – Warnscale, launch-walk participant, 16 May 2015. Photographer: Lizzie Coombes.
In response to the way Warnscale incorporated and worked with the words of Dorothy Wordsworth, Jeff Cowton, Director of The Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere, wrote:

... all the while I was guided by the words of Dorothy Wordsworth and Louise Ann Wilson. Dorothy made me look at the landscape – the shapes, colours, sounds – how often she describes something so perfectly. Louise spoke to me in other ways – inviting me to stop, listen, feel, experience; encouraging me to consider the smallest details of life, from a perspective not simply my own. In these mountains we can find ‘the bliss of solitude’. There were other voices too: those of women ‘childless through circumstance’ (Jeff Cowton, 2015).

Three-tier Methodology

Creating Warnscale involved a three-tier making methodology: ‘Primary/Site’ (landscape/people of place/earth-science) research into the landscape around Warnscale Head Bothy that involved in-depth, ‘situated’ study of the landscape through repeated solo walks and walks with farmers, geologists, botanists, land managers and slate mining experts. This research was supported by a close-reading of the journal writings of Dorothy Wordsworth.

Figure iii – Primary (Landscape/Earth-Science) Research on site; Secondary (Reproductive-Science) Research in fertility clinics; Tertiary (Participant) Research in the form of mapping-walks on site. Photographer: Louise Ann Wilson.
‘Secondary/Subject’ (biological-science/social-science) research which involved: observational work in a fertility clinic that incorporated drawing, sound recording and photographing of the embryologists working processes; studies of human reproduction charts, maps, drawings and graphs; consultations with fertility specialists and sociologists.

‘Tertiary/social’ (participant/life-event) research, which involved a series of mapping-walks with women experiencing biological childlessness-by-circumstance. This reflected my aim that subject matter, landscape, reproductive science, walking and participant were integrated. Each mapping-walk invited participants to notice the landscape, and its changing forces, as metaphors for each of their personal experiences of childlessness.

After the mapping-walk, participants drew a memory-map of their walk that highlighted places or moments of significance and meaning. It is these maps and the words, feelings, images and conversations they provoked, that I then distilled along
with other research materials into the book which layers photographs and drawings of the landscape with: geographical, historical and biological maps; mapping-walk distillations; bio-medical and reflective texts and images about infertility and biological childlessness.

The Feminine Sublime: Six Theoretical and Practical Principles

When making Warnscale I proposed that by emplacing ‘missing’ life-events, for which traditional rites of passage or ceremonies do not exist, into a rural landscape scenographic-led walking-performance can enable participants to emplace, re-image and transform, even in the smallest of ways, their relationship to biological childlessness by circumstance. I argued that this ‘transformation’ is achieved through an applied use of the theoretical concept of the feminine sublime. My interpretation of the feminine sublime as a concept is contained in a series of six principles that I evolved and applied to the creation of Warnscale.

I evolved these principles through a close study of Dorothy Wordsworth’s (1771-1855), approach to and way of engaging with landscape (her ‘mode’), written about in her Grasmere Journals (1800-1803). This ‘mode’ can, I suggest, be understood through the concept of the feminine sublime and offers a counterpoint to the ‘transcendent sublime’, which was dominant in the Early Romantic period in which she, and some of her female contemporaries who also informed the principles, were writing. To be clear: the concept of the feminine sublime is not about the female gender but about a sensibility that manifests as a way of engaging with and walking, or dwelling in and observing the landscape.

Un-framed, un-composed and limitless, the transcendent sublime was considered to be beyond reach and comprehension, and a transcendent sublime landscape represented an un-graspable physical ‘object’ that affected a psychological state of terror or else a metaphysical or spiritual experience of something – an otherness – that lay beyond the physical matter of the everyday.

The feminine sublime, however, is not about losing the self into a ‘higher’ metaphysical dimension or ‘escap[ing] from the confines of the material ‘world’ in order to join, what John G. Pipkin in The Material Sublime Of Women Romantic Poets, describes as a ‘higher spiritual or intellectual level’ (Pipkin, 1998: 599). Instead, the feminine sublime is
about being located and materially present in the physical landscape, the human body and environmental forces, and through them ‘finding’ the self and noticing wonderment in the everyday. With the feminine sublime transformation is achieved through becoming immersed in the immediate, the tangible and the material of the landscape and working with it, not as a place from which to escape or disappear but to ‘reappear’.

Early Romanticism (1785-1815) was the movement through which William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey would forever change Western, and especially British, perceptions of, and relationships to, landscape. Collectively known as The Lakes’ Poets (with the term Romanticism coming retrospectively), I add Dorothy Wordsworth to that group. Her creative influence on William Wordsworth (and Coleridge), particularly around the 1800s, was significant. William Wordsworth acknowledged this in the poem The Sparrows Nest (1801) when he writes that ‘... She gave me eyes, She gave me ears; And humble cares, and delicate fears...’ (Wordsworth, 1851: 183).

For me, however, Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals reveal a deep and profound engagement with landscape and are works of art in their own right. It was her Grasmere Journals, written in 1800-1803 when she was living at Dove Cottage (then Town End) in Grasmere, Cumbria, that became the key writing with which I worked when creating Warnscale. The journals, whilst ‘borrowing’ the continuum of the beautiful, the picturesque and the transcendent sublime, were unique, highly distinctive and radical. This uniqueness resided in how Dorothy Wordsworth walked in, engaged with, and observed landscape and her everyday environment and demonstrates, I suggest, an embodied, multi-sensory and materially specific feminine sublime manner of looking, seeing, noticing and experiencing everyday and familiar objects afresh. In so doing she refigures the familiar.

The contemporaries of Dorothy Wordsworth’s who informed my study and the six principles were: the writer-activists Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Letitia Aikin (later Barbauld) who argued that women were as capable as men of accessing the mind-awakening transcendent sublime (denied them by Burke and Kant); Charlotte Smith who pioneered the use of autobiography, the solitary female figure and subjective ‘I’, and whose landscape poetry provided the blueprint for William, Coleridge, and the unaccredited Dorothy’s Lyrical Ballads; Ann Radcliffe who in her novels used the
landscape as a ‘theatre’ of constantly changing images, scenes and topographies; and Mary Tighe whose poetic female ‘figures’ did not seek to ‘escape’ the destructive effects of landscape but instead faced them. The feminine sublime work of these women subverted dominant landscape discourses and brought different perspectives and viewpoints to those of mainstream culture, art and politics, and their influence weaves into my practice. My focus however is with Dorothy Wordsworth. I will now look at the scenographic principles and how they were applied to the creation of Warnscale.

Principle 1: Being located – A View from Somewhere

Being located in a specific place (and subject matter) is embodied in my three-tiers of research (described above). It reflects how Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals were part creative writing, part diary, part documentation and part field-study. Her writing, observes Suzanne Stewart in The Eye It Cannot Choose But See: Dorothy Wordsworth, John Constable, and the Plein-Air Sketch, was ‘intensely visual’, noting the ‘precision’ with which she ‘records natural phenomena’ and how she ‘consistently blends scientific brevity with artistic sensitivity [which] arises from patient, prolonged experiences in the open air’ and through ‘careful observance’ (Stewart, 2011: 414-415). Through patient, prolonged experiences in the open air she studied and recorded natural phenomenon, the skilled lay knowledge and working lives of local people such as shepherds ‘salving sheep’ or labourers working in the fields.

When creating Warnscale the way I captured ‘raw’ material in sketchbooks, notebooks, photographs, film and sound recordings is, I suggest, comparable to the way that Dorothy Wordsworth used her journals as a tool to ‘provide an account’ of her experiences in landscape. My aim was that participants would, like Dorothy Wordsworth, see the landscape and landscape processes, from the perspective of those who had lay or specialist knowledge.

Principle 2: Autobiography and Giving a Voice to those on the Edges of Mainstream Dialogues

In my early forties, circumstantial factors meant it was likely I would not become a biological parent. I wanted to find a way to properly come to terms with my situation and redefine myself beyond that ‘missing’ identity and the ‘lack’ of being a biological
mother. I also became aware that growing numbers of women were in a comparable situation and I wanted to not only give a voice to my experience but also to create a walk that enabled participants to give a voice to theirs.

Biological childlessness, its reasons and consequences sit outside mainstream dialogues and discourses and often remain under acknowledged. This can, for some people, myself included, lead to the sense of loss and an uncertain identity that manifests in isolation and an on-going state of liminality. Warnscale offers imaginative and creative ways through which participants can begin to move through this liminality.

Dorothy Wordsworth’s writing also witnessed and gave a voice to other women she met when walking the fells: hill-guides, vagrants, beggars, widows – women who were ordinarily overlooked – thus paralleling Warnscale’s ‘giving voice’ to a little discussed and isolating experience. The way in which she noticed the ‘common-place’ enabled her to see afresh ‘everyday’ objects, people and experiences that were ordinarily overlooked, or on the edges of social and cultural discourses.

At ‘Landmark/Station 12 – Solitary Viola (solitary)’ participants are invited to notice the violas growing in the gaps between the stones they are walking in and amongst. Dorothy Wordsworth’s words draw their attention to the solitary nature of these flowers ‘struggling but surviving in cradles in rocks’. But, one solitary viola, and then another, begins to make a ‘family’.

Figure v – Solitary figure drawn into the landscape at ‘Landmark/Station 8 - Summit Tarn (vitrify).
Dorothy Wordsworth’s Grasmere Journal accounts of nature struggling to survive were, I suggest, metaphors for herself. Often she identifies, and perhaps identified with, solitary flowers, such as the columbine she described on Tuesday 1st June 1802:

> growing upon the Rocks [...] a solitary plant [...] a slender creature, a female seeking retirement & growing freest & most graceful where it is most alone (Wordsworth, 1991: 103).

And the strawberry that she found on 31st February 1802:

> in a rock, the little slender flower had more courage than the green leaves, for they were but half expanded & half grown, but the blossom was spread full out. I uprooted it rashly, & felt as if I had been committing an outrage, so I planted it again – it will have but a stormy life of it. But let it live if it can (Wordsworth, 1991: 61).

In Warnscale, at ‘Landmark/Station 12 – Solitary Viola (solitary)’ participants are invited to notice the violas ‘struggling but surviving in cradles in rocks’.

Dorothy Wordworth’s journals show an acute awareness of the fragility of life and the overwhelming forces of ‘nature’ and how these can cause ‘random acts of destruction’. She described trees being uprooted and thrown over in a storm, hungry skeleton-like deer and starving children. She acknowledged the physical and emotional effects on people’s faces and bodies of: time passing, illness, poverty and loss, often in close-up detail, and experienced the effects of ageing first-hand when
for example, aged thirty-nine and close to losing all her teeth, she writes ‘My tooth broke today. They will soon be gone’ (Wordsworth, 1991: 103).

In Warnscale the effects of ageing on fertility are considered at ‘Landmark/Station 2 – Wooden Bridge (transition)’ where images of water running off the fell and out to the lake are layered with reflections on ‘time’ and fertility ‘running out’. At ‘Landmark/Station 10 – Warnscale Beck & Cairns’ participants are invited to ‘acknowledge their powerlessness to control the forces of nature within and around’, and ‘consider the future-life paths they might follow and the alternative stories they might live’.

‘Landmark/Station 13 – Dying Woods (regeneration)’ works with processes of destruction and repair. Factual text tells us that that managed waterlogging of the woods is causing the trees to die in order to return the landscape to the native woodland and flower meadow it once was. Actions invite participants to ‘enter the

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1 Tooth decay was common in the 1800s. By the time she was forty Dorothy Wordsworth had had her remaining teeth pulled out and wore false teeth.
heart of the wood...look for signs of renewal and live the life unimagined...on the other side of nothing...of resurrection’.

One Warnscale participant said: ... the barrenness of the landscape and beauty and timelessness helped me recognise that my grieving and pain would pass in time. I have already begun to flourish (ZB, 2015).

**Principle 4: Walking Beyond Knowledge – Merging with and Dwelling in Landscape**

![Figure viii – Mapping-Walk participants. Photographer: Lizzie Coombes.](image)

In the context of her time Dorothy Wordsworth’s walking challenged social norms. She was an adventurous walker and in order to explore would quite literally ‘beat new tracks’ to find a new route or path, a waterfall, a specific plant, or a viewing place that offered an alternative scene or perspective. Warnscale also uses walking as a performance form through which to reveal and challenge social norms around ‘motherhood’ and invites participants to walk beyond their ‘knowledge’ and imagine different life paths and perspectives.

Walking for Dorothy Wordsworth, and Warnscale participants, becomes a way of seeing, feeling and processing emotions. It becomes a restorative, regenerative, creative and therapeutic act ‘performed’ in a particular landscape and social context. She walked familiar local routes and long-distances that took her miles from home or to home. Alone, or with others, she walked day and night, in all seasons and in challenging and strenuous weather conditions.
In Warnscale the effort and duration of the walk, over uneven, steep and rough terrain, to reach the summit becomes a metaphor for the arduousness of IVF and the uncertainty of biological childlessness. At ‘Landmark /Station 7 – Haystack Summit (geld)’, it reflects on how ‘There are well-trodden routes into IVF’ yet the ‘routes out of treatment are more obscure’. Participants are invited ‘consider the arduous physical and emotional effort it has taken to reach this place (literally and metaphorically), and the cycles we might be trapped in’.

Sometimes Dorothy Wordsworth walked in order to talk with friends. In Recollections of the Lake Poets De Quincey noted that those she walked with felt heard, and he described her as an ‘exceedingly sympathetic, always profound walking’ companion (Levin, 1987: 237, De Quincey, 1961). Warnscale also uses walking and talking as a creative, therapeutic, conversational and performative tool. It allows for companionable, or side-by-side, walking, sharing, talking and being alone in the landscape, with others. For one participant the walking-performance showed her that she is ‘not alone, and it was good to be able to both literally and metaphorically walk the same path’ alongside others.
Dorothy Wordsworth’s close observational study was underpinned by botanical knowledge. A journal entry on 14 May 1800 suggests how her immersive walking enabled her to notice and record a variety of flowers, the way they grow, the habitats they grow in and their smell:

The wood rich in flowers. A beautiful, palish yellow flower, that looked thick round & double, & smelt very sweet – I suppose it was a ranunculus – Crowfoot, the grassy-leaved Rabbit-toothed white flower, strawberries, Geranium – scentless violet, anemone two kinds, orchises, primroses. The hackberry very beautiful as a low shrub. The crab coming out (Wordsworth, 1991: 1).

In order to notice and experience these flowers she must have taken her time and walked slowly and deliberately, perhaps crouching to seek them out or to get a closer look. Her close looking can also be seen when on the summit of Scafell Pike in 1818 her attention shifts from the view to the close up detail of plants and stones are near to hand (De Sélincourt, 1933: 367). She also literally changed her physical viewpoint by lying down to look at or listen to trees, light, birds, water and sheep from an alternative perspective.
Warnscale also invites similar multi-sensory modes of walking and dwelling that give participants a variety of ways in which to physically and imaginatively enter the landscape and literally and metaphorically seek out new ways of looking and viewing that may lead to new ways of thinking about and alternative perspectives in the underlying subject matter.

At ‘Landmark/Station 5 – Black Beck Tarn (wait)’ her words encourage participants to take time to become absorbed in the landscape by listening to it and watching the play of light and wind on the tarn: ‘We amused ourselves for a long time in watching the breezes...brushing the surface...growing more delicate... thinner... paler... until they died away’ (Wordsworth, 1991: 61). Then, to ‘step into the water and feel the sensation of it, listen to the rhythm of its movement, climb the rocky outcrop and change [their] perspective.

**Principle 6: Valuing the Everyday – Wonderment and Defamiliarisation**

![Figure xii – ‘Landmark/Station 4 – Great Round Howe (hope)’.
Book page drawn by Louise Ann Wilson.](image)

The ‘transformative’ capacity of Dorothy Wordsworth’s feminine sublime approach to landscape comes, I suggest, from her aliveness to her environment and the way she could see and find the feminine sublime – a form of ‘wonderment’ – in the human and non-human material of the everyday. The sun glittering on the wool of a sheep, the light moving over water, the movement of the planets or a favorite birch tree ‘yielding
to the gusty wind… like a flying sunshiny shower’ (Wordsworth, 1991: 40). This feminine sublime ‘wonderment’ serves to ‘refigure’ the familiar. It parallels, I suggest, William Wordsworth’s ‘spot in time’ and Virginia Woolf’s ‘moments of being’ and can be understood through the concept of ‘defamiliarisation’.

Figure xii – ‘Landmark/Station 4 – Great Round Howe (hope)’: launch walk photos by Lizzie Coombes and book page drawn by Louise Ann Wilson.

Warnscale finds wonderment in the materiality and material processes of the landscape and the body in order to alter a participant’s perception of those things, in
such a way that becomes revelatory, when viewed in the relation to the underlying subject matter. It does this by revealing ‘interior’ processes that are ordinarily ‘invisible’ or rarely seen in close-up and invites participants to do the same. These ways of looking include: a window framing a view in the manner of the picturesque; the powerful microscopes used by embryologists to grade human oocytes, sperm and embryos and the womb lining (endometrium) ‘thickening’ in preparation for the implantation of an oocyte and by environmental biologists to study the micro fauna of a tarn; the use of a geology lens to study the detail of a volcanic rock and lichen growing on it or the sori on the underside of a fern leaf; the use of binoculars to bring the distant landscape closer. In the book, photographs and images make visible these various life forms and processes that would otherwise remain unseen or invisible to the naked eye. What these ways of looking do not reveal however, is the longing for a child. However when layered with text, action and image they begin to reveal that longing.

I suggest that the six ‘feminine sublime’ principles I have outlined, so inspired by Dorothy Wordsworth, support a mobile, material and embodied ‘mode’ of engaging with landscape. This engagement enables participant to see afresh objects, people and experiences that were ordinarily overlooked. Using the principles articulated, non-mainstream ‘lived’ experiences and discourses on landscape can be mobilised as a creative strategy in contemporary socially engaged performance practice.
References


