

21 Thursday Apr
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Poems by John Syng Dorsey

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POSTED BY SAMANTHADESTEFANO IN STUDENT WORK

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When I first saw MS Coll. 251 during our [November 2014 meeting](#), I was struck by the elegant hand, both looping and precise, that filled the pages with neat lines of poetry. As we deciphered the pencil markings at the bottom of the first page, we discussed the poet's life: born in Philadelphia on December 23, 1783, John Syng Dorsey graduated from the University of Pennsylvania medical school at 19, spent two years in London and Paris studying medicine, and returned home to teach and practice surgery at Penn and continue assisting his uncle Philip Syng Physick, a renowned physician who mentored Dorsey in his teens. In 1818 he became a full Professor of Anatomy but died of typhus after giving his introductory lecture. In addition to this illustrious career, between 1805 and 1818 he produced the 40-page manuscript of *Poems*, which I had the pleasure of transcribing from photographs during the summer of 2015. The large notebook he used contains dozens of blank pages after his poems, which his son Robert Dorsey edited in the 1850s, in a poignant reminder of what he could have accomplished in the sciences and the arts had he lived longer.





Although Dorsey is mainly remembered today as the author of *Elements of Surgery* (1813), the first American surgery textbook, and does not appear to have published the poems I transcribed, his contemporaries may have known him as a poet as well as a doctor. John Agg's 1819 [collection](#) *The Ocean Harp: a Poem, in two Cantos, with some smaller pieces; and a Monody on the Death of John Syng Dorsey, M. D.* contains an elegy about Dorsey (an interesting tribute given that Dorsey writes several elegies in MS Coll. 251). Either the publisher or Agg, an English immigrant to Philadelphia who was best known as the author of two Byron apocrypha, thought this poem significant enough to include on the title page. The poem imagines Dorsey's urn joining those of the other eminent Philadelphia physicians Benjamin Rush, William Shippen, and Caspar Wistar and describes Dorsey's inclinations toward philosophy, poesy, music, morality, and piety. The elegy's heroic couplets and imagery about death, darkness, and the heavens recall Dorsey's own poems such as "Reflections on the Incomprehensibility of God etc.": like his subject, Agg celebrates poetry, which he portrays as just one of Dorsey's many gifts, "whose magic wakes the thunder, and unbinds / The forked lightnings, and the warring winds!" In the May 1819 issue of the *Analectic Magazine*, which Moses Thomas published in Philadelphia in addition to *The Ocean Harp*, a reviewer wrote that "the 'Monody' is not in good taste; a part of it is much the reverse, and is worthy of neither its subject nor its author," hinting at Dorsey's fame and skill as well as Agg's.

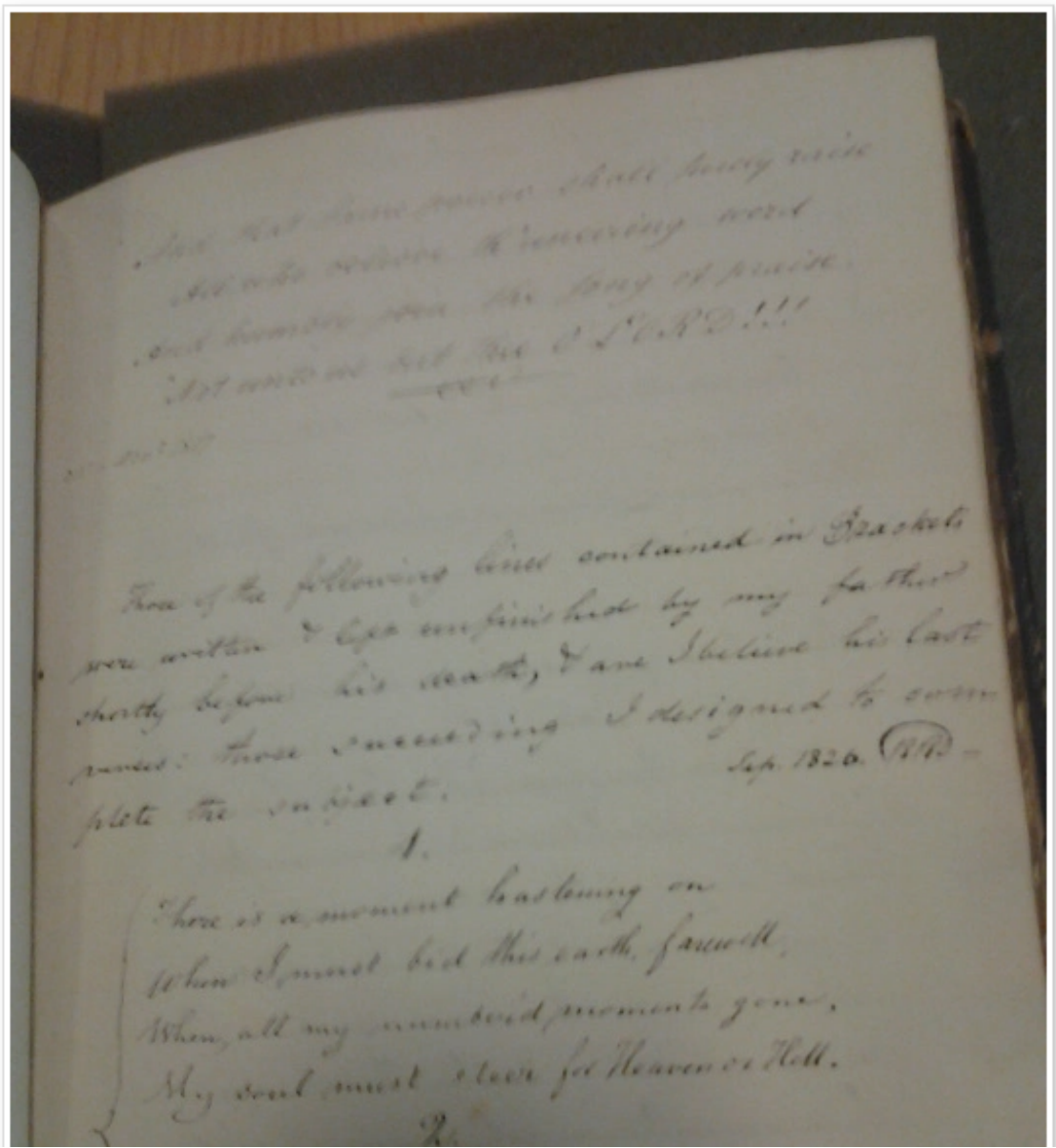
"Dorsey was not a poet but he wrote good verse and what is more on deep subjects, for his mind was never frivolous" -Bulletin of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, Volume 19 (1908)

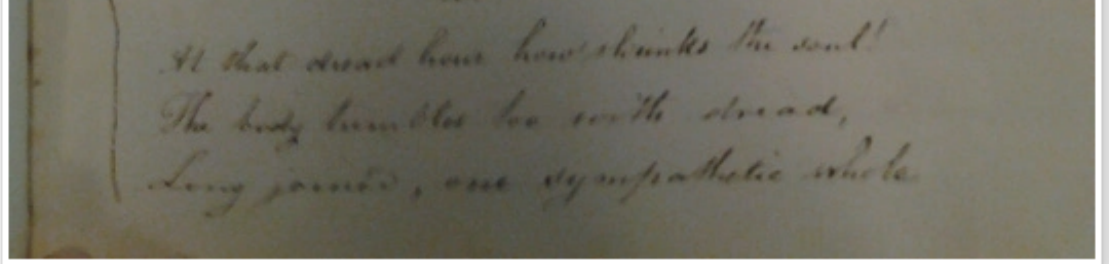
"his whole soul was wrapped in his chosen calling and no claims, even those of music and poetry, were superior to those of his profession"-he expresses a conflict of interest perhaps contradicting this in "Valedictory Address to my Muse" but then he stops writing for years

Robert (1808-1869) also had a medical degree from Penn the year of his death but never seriously practiced as a physician, never married, was paralyzed for last 10-15 years of his life (during which time he edited father's poems)

catchword at bottom of page-feature of early printing

I have italicized the notes in graphite which Robert Dorsey added after his father's death.





[Page 31]

In Memory

of Alexander James Dallas^[1] writ in his diary & ?

[memoriam ?] on hand

fill'd with [poetry]

Mid the gay flowrs that here display their bloom

Aloft the solemn cypress [seans] his head

And casts a melancholy withering gloom

O'er the cold precincts of the silent tomb

Where Dallas now reposes with the dead.

Beneath this shade the muse inscribes a page

With the brief record of departed worth

For oft her smiles had beam'd upon the sage

Whose worth redeeming a degen'rate age

Evinc'd it gave one honest statesman birth*^[2]

Genius did all her energies impart

To store with Science his capacious mind
And honour stamp'd her image on his heart
So deep, that not its latest throb could part
The lov'd impression she had left behind

[Page 32]

That heart replete with love for human kind
Polish'd his manners with resistless grace
Each social virtue in his bosom shrin'd
Shed the mild lustre of a soul refin'd
O'er the bright beamings of his manly face

Persuasive eloquence in deep debate
And wit that sparkled never to offend
And wisdom's maxims that sustain'd the state,
When war had urg'd the crisis of her fate[.]
These stamp'd the patriot his country's friend.

What Dallas was the muse could still rehearse
And bid our unavailing sorrows flow[:]
But vain—the dirge of dull funereal verse.
The death bell sounds;—rolls heavily the hearse,
And leaves our aching bosoms lasting woe.

Aug 1817[3]

[Page 33]

1. Christian Honour addressed to ? ?

Whilst others sing the hero's fame

Whose blood-stain'd banner floats afar,

And crown with loud applause a name

Splendent[4] in victory and war!

Be mine the task in humbler verse

The Christian's monument to raise

The good man's virtues to rehearse

Whose modest merit shrinks from praise[:]

Yet I will praise thee man of GOD

Above the illustrious proud and great[;]

Thy soul now prisoned in its clod[5]

Is heir to more than regal state.

A crown of glory brighter far

Than ever grac'd a monarch's brow

Thine honour'd tempter soon shall wear

Tho' bleach'd by cares and sorrows now.

Who can discern this man of GOD?

describe the livery[6] he wears?

'Tis he who dreads his master's nod

And trembles at temptation's snares.

[1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_J._Dallas_\(statesman\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_J._Dallas_(statesman)) ; interesting that Dorsey writes this in memory poem then John Agg does it for him when he dies (assume all these people didn't know each other personally?)

[2] This asterisk, probably written in graphite, does not correspond to a revision or note at the bottom of the page

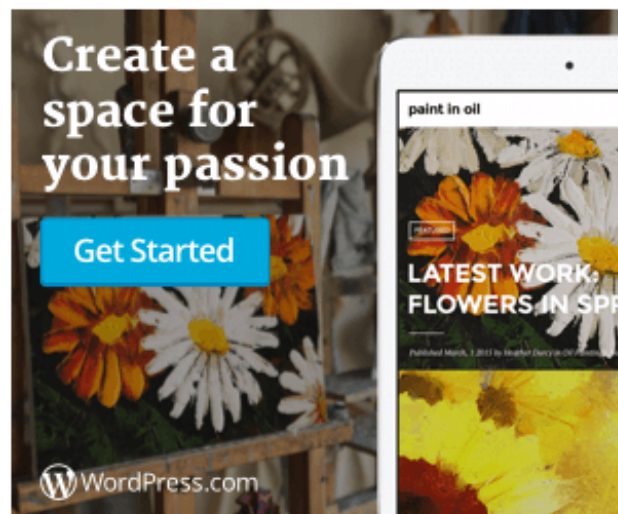
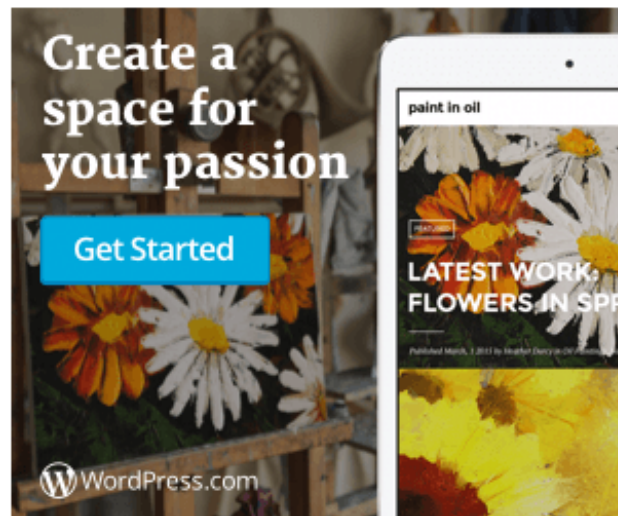
[3] Inside the curlicue he uses the mark the end of poems-no other poem dated this way (usually year after title or no date-why was this given specifically and ornamentally?)

[4] Archaic word-"shining brightly"

[5] Look up this word

[6] So men of God are servants; also unusual that "describe" is lowercase starting the line b/c continuing previous ln's question

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