



2014-03-17

On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life: William Knight's Life of William Wordsworth and the Invention of "Home at Grasmere"

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“On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life”: William Knight’s

Life of William Wordsworth and the Invention of

“Home at Grasmere”

Patria Isabel Wright

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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March 2014

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ABSTRACT

“On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life”: William Knight’s
Life of William Wordsworth and the Invention of
“Home at Grasmere”

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Victorian scholar William Knight remains one of the most prolific Wordsworth scholars of the nineteenth century. His many publications helped establish Wordsworth’s positive Victorian reputation that twentieth and twenty-first century scholars inherited. My particular focus is how Knight’s 1889 inclusion of “Home at Grasmere” in his *Life of William Wordsworth*, rather than in his chronological sequencing of the poems, establishes a way to read the poem as a biographical artifact for his late-Victorian audience. Knight’s detailed account of the poet’s life, often told through letters and journal accounts, provides more contexts—including Dorothy’s journal entries and correspondence of the early 1800s—to understand the poem than MacMillan’s 1888 stand-alone edition of the poem (whose pre-emptive publication caused a small debate in 1888-89). Knight presents “Home at Grasmere” as a document of Wordsworth’s personal experience and development as grounded in the Lake District.

Analyzing the ways Knight’s editorial decisions—both for his biography as a whole and his placement of “Home at Grasmere” within it—shape the initial reception of “Home at Grasmere” allows me to enrich the conversation about Wordsworth and the Victorian Age. Currently scholarship connecting Knight and Wordsworth remains sparser than other areas of Wordsworth commentary. However, several scholars have explored the connections between the two, and I augment their arguments by showing how Knight’s invention of the poem creates an essential part of the “Home at Grasmere” *archive*—a term Jacques Derrida uses to describe a place or idea that houses important artifacts and determines the power of the knowledge it preserves. I argue this by showing that Knight’s editorial decisions embody the characteristics of an archon—keeper or preserver of archival material—as he creates the way to read the poem as a biographical artifact while also responding to Wordsworth’s own beliefs about the poetry and biographical theory. Knight’s archival contribution allows Victorians to view the poem as a product of Wordsworth’s developing poetic genius and helps establish Wordsworth as the great Romantic poet.

Keywords: William Angus Knight, William Wordsworth, “Home at Grasmere,” Victorian Biography, Derridean Archive

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many individuals who helped make this project a success. Thank you to my committee for your valuable feedback, support, and dedication to my work. Thank you to Paul Westover for agreeing to chair my thesis before the argument was formed. Your insights and energy in working through my ideas and refining my arguments over months of idea sessions were invaluable. Your guidance gave me confidence all along the way. To Nick Mason I owe thanks for your deep expertise and belief that my contributions to literary studies can go beyond this essay. My thanks go to Dan Muhlestein for your ability to see my arguments more clearly than I can and to offer succinct and profound criticism throughout the process. I appreciate your kindness and enthusiasm throughout my academic career.

I am also grateful for the opportunity I had to attend and to present at the Wordsworth Conference as well as to rub shoulders with some of the finest scholars in the field. Thanks to my parents and siblings for your endless cheerleading efforts. And thanks to my friends, within and outside of the program, for your understanding, intellect, listening ears, and prayers along the way. Finally, I want to thank my wonderful husband, Matthew, for your constant love, help, and strength. I could not have done this without you.

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“On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life”: William Knight’s

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In describing his unfinished and unpublished *The Recluse*, Wordsworth noted in an 1804 letter to Thomas De Quincey, “To this work I mean to devote the Prime of my life and the chief force of my mind” (De Sélincourt 370). While Wordsworth intended this poem to be his magnum opus, he of course never finished it; still, the completed (or semi-completed) sections of *The Recluse* attest to the care and energy that Wordsworth devoted to it. The lines known as “Home at Grasmere” provide a notable instance. Begun in 1800 and intended as the first section of *The Recluse*, “Home at Grasmere” details Wordsworth’s first encounters with his home and inspiration: the Lake District vale and town of Grasmere.¹ Although pieces of this poem were published in Wordsworth’s lifetime, including in his *Guide to the Lakes*, it was not published in full until after the poet’s death. In fact, the initial printing caused a small publication dispute in the late 1880s.

Professor William Angus Knight received permission to publish “Home at Grasmere” from the Wordsworth family in 1880; the family would control crucial copyrights until 1892, when all Wordsworth’s work would enter the public domain. Knight intended to publish the poem in the first volume of his *Life of William Wordsworth*—the ninth of his eleven-volume edition of Wordsworth’s poetry and biography. It was planned as the first full presentation of the poem. However, Knight was beaten to publication by MacMillan Publishers, who paid one hundred pounds to Gordon Wordsworth for the copyright of “Home at Grasmere” in 1888, while

¹ See Kenneth Johnston’s “Home at Grasmere: Reclusive Song,” Sally Bushnell’s “The Making of Meaning in Wordsworth’s *Home at Grasmere*: (Speech Acts, Micro-Analysis and ‘Freudian Slips’),” Anthony J. Harding’s “Forgetfulness and the Poetic Self in *Home at Grasmere*,” and Peter Larkin’s “The Secondary Wordsworth’s First of Homes: *Home at Grasmere*” for compelling arguments on the text of the poem and its relationship to other texts composed during the early 1800s. Chapters in Stephen Gill’s 1990 life of the poet and Kenneth Johnston’s 1998 *The Hidden Wordsworth* also offer useful historical background on the composition.

Knight had only received permission to publish the poem.² MacMillan published two thousand copies of the poem as *The Recluse* in a stand-alone edition on December 14, 1888 (Wise 175), just weeks before the appearance of Knight's volume in early 1889. The simple reason for this preemption was that Knight's publisher, William Paterson, was going bankrupt, and his lack of funds caused publishing delays. However, Knight's first volume of the life had been printed—but not yet released—by the time of MacMillan's publication. Despite these setbacks, Knight finally released his volume in early 1889 with the *almost* previously unpublished poem included, making his way into the increasingly competitive market for Wordsworthian biography and poetry collections.

Prior to either publication, Knight corresponded with MacMillan about a collection of Wordsworth's poetry maintaining the same sequence Knight pioneered in his 1882-1886 eight-volume edition of Wordsworth's poetry.³ In March 1888, Knight granted MacMillan permission to use his chronology and was paid twenty-five pounds for it. Five months later, Knight responded to an inquiry from MacMillan requesting editorial assistance concerning two passages from "Home at Grasmere" (first published in Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoirs* in 1851). On September 25, 1888, Knight elaborated on the proper place for "Home at Grasmere" in the chronology, advising MacMillan to publish the poem as an appendix to *The Prelude*; no plan for a separate edition was mentioned by either party. Naturally, Knight was disappointed upon the publication of MacMillan's edition, not only because it thwarted his attempt to publish the poem first, but also because it did not acknowledge his editorial assistance. Upon writing to MacMillan on December 20, 1888, Knight expressed his concerns for the sales of his own biography and

² The poem did not appear in other collections until 1904 in Boston (the publisher probably not realizing the poem did not belong to the public domain). MacMillan's copyright remained in effect for thirty years, and in "restricted copyright" until 1938.

³ I am indebted here to Beth Darlington's full account of the relationship between Knight and MacMillan in 1888-9 in her Cornell edition of the poem.

mentioned Gordon Wordsworth's prior ignorance of Knight's payment for permission to publish the poem eight years earlier.

Within the first year following MacMillan's publication of the poem, only a few critics reviewed it. Most of these reviews were brief and argued that the poem simply upheld the poet's genius established in former works. This being said, the volume went through a small second edition of fifty copies in 1891 (Darlington 455). However, MacMillan's publication did not alter the poem's reception or the poet's reputation much. Knight's edition, followed up by a second equally extensive collection of Wordsworth's poems in 1896, established a pattern for editorial and biographical work on Wordsworth utilized by scholars until 1916.⁴ In response to Knight's publication of the poem in 1889, William Minto published a seventeen-page review article in the September 1889 issue of the *Nineteenth Century*. In the article, Minto contests certain assertions Knight makes in his introduction to the poem (namely, that the poem's unevenness and its unfulfilled aspirations as part of the *Recluse* made it inferior to *The Prelude*) by arguing that the poem played a crucial role in Wordsworth's poetic development: "The history of the unfinished *Recluse* is the history of Wordsworth's poetic life" (436). The irony of this claim is Minto's reliance on the letters published in Knight's volume to reach this conclusion. Thus, to an extent, Knight's publication changed how even his critics viewed the poem. They came to see it primarily as a document on Wordsworth's life and poetic development.

Several scholars—including Kenneth Johnston and Beth Darlington—have discussed "Home at Grasmere" in relation to the poet's life at the time of composition, and several others

⁴ Collections of the poetry published after Knight and MacMillan did not include "Home at Grasmere" because MacMillan had bought the exclusive copyright, making Knight's edition uniquely important in understanding "Home at Grasmere" as well as the life of the poet. In 1916, George McLean Harper published a new biography of the poet giving more details about his dealings in France and his relationship with Annette Vallon and criticizing Knight's lack of disclosure. Several biographies were published between Knight's 1888 edition and Harper's 1916 edition with no explanation of these relationships. Knight, unlike many of his contemporaries, had unique access to materials that exposed Wordsworth's relationship with Annette, and his edition set the standard for future biographies of the poet.

have analyzed poetic tropes and themes in the text. Darlington's Cornell edition of the poem is especially valuable for its presentation of multiple manuscripts and facsimiles of the poem.

While much has been said about the poem, its first connection to the life of the poet in Knight's edition remains only briefly mentioned in scholarship. Nonetheless, Knight's presentation of the poem was crucial. "Home at Grasmere" did not gain much traction as a stand-alone poem; instead, it came to Victorian readers as an embedded biographical artifact. Though he published the poem second, Knight's influential placement of the poem helped his readers understand the poem differently and arguably more completely, extending Wordsworth's own links between life, poetry, and place. In contrast with MacMillan's edition, which presented readers with an orphaned curiosity from Wordsworth's poetic remains, Knight's edition produced an image of the poem inseparable from Wordsworth's biographical and literary landscape.

Knight remains somewhat obscure as an academic research subject, despite his unparalleled contributions to Wordsworth studies during the Victorian Age. Knight was the premier Wordsworthian in Britain. Stephen Gill argues that Knight was the first, most devoted, and longest participating Wordsworthian of the era (224), and Knight's wide publications certainly support that evaluation. By the end of his professional academic career, Knight had produced over 10 publications about Wordsworth, ranging from collections of Wordsworth's letters to guide books to the Lake District and several editions of Wordsworth's poetry. Gill offers an insightful study of Knight and his Wordsworthian contemporaries in his *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, but he offers limited analysis of Knight's editorial work. This essay aims to narrow the gap somewhat.

I will argue that Knight's edition invents a crucial reputation for "Home at Grasmere" for his late Victorian audience, helping to solidify Wordsworth's reputation as the great Romantic

poet. The next part of the paper focuses on the nature of the edition and on Knight's incorporation (and departure from) Wordsworth's views on biography. In order to connect the poem to Wordsworth's changing Victorian reputation, the rest of the paper is concerned with contextualizing the poem's reception through Knight's edition and installing the edition within the larger Victorian archive. Exploring connections to the archive as discussed by Jacques Derrida allows me to offer a specific study of how the Victorians created the Wordsworth we celebrate today. While Knight's 1882-1889 edition represents just one part of an illustrious career that included numerous other Wordsworthian, biographical, philosophical, and religious publications, it looms large in the broader history of Wordsworth's posthumous reception. It remains important because of its ambition, its unique comprehensiveness, and its many interwoven parts—thus a discussion of its creation and content is necessary before focusing on “Home at Grasmere.”

William Knight and His Innovative Edition

This edition aimed to transform readers' experience of the poet. The Wordsworth family seems to have understood its potential importance—both as a poetic collection and a biography. Their support was crucial to its publication, which Knight understood as he wrote several times seeking their permission to move forward. In his first letter to the family dated March 26, 1879, Knight details his proposed edition and requests, “I infer from passages in the ‘Memoir’ by the Bishop of Lincoln that there are fragments of ‘the Recluse’ still unpublished. If this be so, will you permit me to publish these fragments?” (To William Wordsworth, Jr.). In his April 1879 response to Knight, Wordsworth Jr. recognizes, “I must appreciate . . . your devotion and admiration of all that relates to my honored and revered Father's memory” (Wordsworth Jr.). As the most outspoken familial supporter of the scheme, William Wordsworth the third wrote to his

uncle, Charles Wordsworth, “I shall be happy to lend all the aid I can in furthering Professor Knight’s scheme, which appears to me an eminently desirable one” (Wordsworth III).⁵ This support allowed Knight access to private family materials, including Dorothy’s journals, the Fenwick Notes, and the “Home at Grasmere” manuscript.

Knight’s edition thus stood out for its wealth of illustrative material; arguably, however, what made Knight’s edition of the poetry unique was his new chronological sequencing of the poems. Knight offered several defenses of his chronological scheme, both within the edition and in his publications leading up to it. In his first published book on Wordsworth, *The English Lake District as Interpreted in the Poems of Wordsworth* (1878), Knight outlined the parameters of the chronological edition he would begin to publish less than a decade later:

A chronological edition of the poems is much needed. Were it accompanied with brief explanatory notes, embodying the whole of the L. F. MSS [the Fenwick Notes], and clearing up every local allusion, with fifty to a hundred illustrations of the places in the district, to which the poems refer, it would be a most valuable memorial of the poet and a real addition to the standard works of English literature. (xxi)

Naturally, Knight himself went on to create this “much needed” edition.⁶ While it does not contain 50-100 pictorial illustrations (just one as a frontispiece to each volume), it does contain extensive poetic explanatory notes, the Fenwick Notes, and connections from the poems to

⁵ While young Wordsworth the third supported the scheme, Wordsworth Junior did not always see the decision to assist Knight as a useful one. In March 1879, he wrote in a letter to Charles Wordsworth in which he lamented that he did not limit Knight’s access to materials such as *The Prelude* and the Fenwick Notes. Despite his and other family members’ concerns, Knight was allowed to move forward. However, Wordsworth Junior did support the idea that a new edition of the poet’s works should be produced around the time Knight began his collection.

⁶ Other scholars called for a chronological edition of Wordsworth’s poetic works. In an 1880 essay published in *Fraser’s Magazine*, Edward Caird, Knight’s fellow Wordsworth Society member, reasoned, “His poems might be re-arranged in chronological order” (205). And after referring to Knight’s 1878 book, Caird mentions that “We hope that . . . Professor Knight or someone equally competent . . . may be induced to undertake the labour of such an edition” (206). One has to wonder whence such a remark originated.

places in the Lake District, not to mention several other features not detailed in this quotation. Together, these various parts of the edition create a composite biography of the poet as well as the first scholarly edition of his works.⁷ The result is a collection not just of poetry but of place and of biography. It is a monument of Victorian literary geography as well as textual scholarship.

The chronological sequencing of the poems aimed to create (or reinforce) a new type of developmental understanding of Wordsworth, important to acknowledge because it affected the reception of “Home at Grasmere” implicitly. Knight sought to show the revisions made in the poems and explain their relationship to Wordsworth’s life as the poet grew older. In the preface to the edition, Knight argues, “The chief advantage of a chronological arrangement of the works of any author—and especially a poet—is that it shows us, as nothing else can do, the growth of his mind, the progressive development of his imaginative power” (1: x). So a chronological order gives us a sense of development of the poet—much like Wordsworth’s own autobiographical masterpiece *The Prelude* does.⁸ In fact, the chronological sequencing becomes a life of Wordsworth because it seeks to show that development of the poet over linear time. However, even in this seemingly objective way of categorizing the poetry, Knight’s chronology is not flawless. He asserts, “The chronological method of arrangement, however, has its limits. It is not possible to always adopt it: nor is it necessary to do so, in order to obtain a new and a true view of the growth of Wordsworth’s mind” (1: xv). Knight includes excerpts of “Home at Grasmere” already published by Wordsworth within the chronology. Interestingly, however, the full text of

⁷ For more details on the construction of the edition, see Stephen Gill’s *Wordsworth and the Victorians* and Tony Reavell’s “William Angus Knight: Eminent Victorian,” the latter of which details Knight’s scholarly career more generally. This edition represented a massive undertaking, and both of these scholars express the magnitude of the project well.

⁸ In his preface to his three-volume biography of the poet, Knight argues, “No poet . . . has given so remarkable a disclosure of his own character and personality—of the very springs of his life, and of the influences that moulded him—as Wordsworth has done. That autobiography stands quite alone amongst the lives of poets” (9: 6).

“Home at Grasmere” appears only within the three-volume life of the poet, rather than in its expected place in the chronological sequencing.

Knight also includes other unpublished poems (deleted fragments of “Michael” and the poem on Nab Well among others) in the biography rather than in the collection, using manuscript materials alongside excerpts from journals and letters. In defense of this editorial decision in his preface to the ninth volume of the collection, Knight argues, “The hitherto unpublished material which the volumes contain far exceeds, in value and importance, what has been added to them from the miscellaneous sources of information” (9: v-vi).⁹ The unpublished poems, enriching the text with impressions of documentary authenticity and immediacy, become the most important primary sources Knight uses in his three-volume life. His aim in his first eight volumes seems to be to present a chronological arrangement of the poems already known to the public, or at least published once during Wordsworth’s lifetime. Meanwhile, the full text of “Home at Grasmere” becomes a relic used in understanding the life of the poet. It has all the more potency for emerging as a “private” rather than public text.

In making this choice, incorporating the poem in prose narrative, Knight followed Wordsworth’s lead in a sense. “Home at Grasmere’s” first publication came in fragments within Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes*, a prose work that insistently linked poetry, biography, and place, published for the first time under Wordsworth’s name in 1820 as an appendix to the *River Duddon* volume. The publication of “Home at Grasmere” passages within the 1820 *Guide* established a way to read the poem as an extension of Wordsworth’s prose, and of his life. While the *Guide* was not properly autobiographical, it offered Wordsworth’s views on his home region, grounding itself in his personal observations and experiences. It helped solidify Wordsworth’s

⁹ Knight’s three-volume *The Life of William Wordsworth* was included as volumes nine through eleven of this edition—following the eight volumes of poetry. Knight also numbers the volumes of the biography separately, with “Home at Grasmere” published in volume one. It is listed as volume one of the biography on my works cited page.

public identity as a “Lake Poet.” Already, then, “Home at Grasmere” was becoming tied to Wordsworth’s development as a bard of place. Thus the meaning of the poem could be understood fully only in connection with the *Guide* and other documents of the Grasmere life of the poet.

One might argue that the *Guide* provided a template for Knight’s inclusion of “Home at Grasmere” in his prose life of the poet, that Knight simply extended the links Wordsworth established. He maintained the link between the excerpts and the *Guide* by inserting them in their correct place within his chronological sequencing of the poems, based on their initial publication in the 1820 *River Duddon* volume.¹⁰ But Knight aimed to do more by including the complete poem in his biography of the poet. In light of Wordsworth’s strong opinions about the relationship between biography and literary works, Knight’s inclusion represents an intriguing intervention. Knight gives readers a way to understand the fragments of the poem that previously (in the *Guide*) served as little more than pasted-in verbal landscape paintings. Now the fragments become part of a poetic whole—and, in the same stroke, part of a poet’s “whole” life. To put it another way, Knight gives us Wordsworth’s life *as* a poem of many parts.

Knight’s *Life of the Poet*: Upholding Wordsworth’s Poetic Genius

Understanding the specific aims of Knight’s *Life*, separate from the context of the edition as a whole, provides readers with a clear awareness of the framework in which “Home at Grasmere” appeared. Knight might be considered a paradoxical Wordsworthian admirer—one who championed Wordsworth’s genius and style as a poet but also defended his own

¹⁰ A four-line excerpt detailing Grasmere cottages appeared in every edition of the *Guide*:

Clustered like stars some few, but single most
And lurking dimly in their shy retreats,
Or glancing, on each other cheerful looks,
Like separated stars with clouds between. MS. (*Guide* 668)

These lines describe both the cottages in Grasmere and the inhabitants of those cottages—people Wordsworth admired and loved. Wordsworth goes on to commend the simple, traditional lives of Grasmere’s residents and celebrates the way the cottages “call to mind the processes of nature” (669).

chronological sequencing (which broke away from the poet's own carefully crafted poetic categories) and his prose biography of the poet in the face of Wordsworth's objections to biographers' extra-textual digging. Indeed, his biography grew from one volume to three over the course of drafting, detailing Wordsworth's connections to his fellow writers during the "second spring-time in the literature of England" (9: vii). Knight aimed to contextualize as thoroughly as possible—his placement of "Home at Grasmere" representing just one example.

While Knight argues for the didactic need for biographies of great men, his ideas also echo, in part, Wordsworth's views found in his *Essays upon Epitaphs*—again showcasing his perception of the poet's opinions. Wordsworth argues, "An epitaph . . . is a record to preserve the memory of the dead, as a tribute due to his individual worth, for a satisfaction to the sorrowing hearts of the survivors, and for the common benefit of the living" (Owen 2:53). For Wordsworth, an epitaph (an "epitomized biography" [2:89]) needs to preserve rather than slander, celebrate rather than critique, and benefit all rather than a few. Wordsworth's use of the word *preserve* here is especially important—epitaphs should uphold, save, and conserve memories of deceased persons. Presumably, a biography (a type of extended epitaph) should complete a similar preservation, but Wordsworth does not think the majority of biographers capable of such a spirit. Wordsworth praises the reverent, idealizing distance that epitaphs maintain with their subjects. If Knight supplies an epitomized Wordsworth, he does it by accumulation, not by epitaphic reduction. Still, Knight's intentions certainly reflect the reverent distance of epitaphs insofar as he seeks to create a positive representation of Wordsworth's life and to allow the poetry to inform the life—both by including the chronological sequencing in the edition and the inclusion of poems like "Home at Grasmere" in the biography.

However, in describing the role of the biographer, Knight explains, “It is absurd at any time, and now-a-days it would be ludicrous, for a biographer to assume the role of eulogist. To be blind to the weaknesses of a great man is itself a weakness. To enlarge upon them is both foolish and useless; but to conceal them is to be unfaithful to posterity” (9: vi). So Knight claims a level of candor in biography that Wordsworth would probably cringe at. In describing the relationship between deceased authors and their posthumous public, Wordsworth famously states, “Our business is with their books,—to understand and to enjoy them. And, of poets more especially, it is true—that, if their works be good, they contain within themselves all that is necessary to their being comprehended and relished” (“A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns” 668). For Wordsworth, the best, and perhaps most legitimate, type of biography is the author’s own works and publications. A poet’s works showcase his poetic identity, which is the only identity the public needs to comprehend. Hence, literary works represent a crucial part of a poet’s biography, and perhaps the only essential part. According to Wordsworth’s theory here, “Home at Grasmere” should either remain unpublished (because never authorized for release by the poet) or stand alone—potentially in a form more like MacMillan’s 1888 publication—because the poem and the contemporary works contain the necessary understanding of the poet’s life in Grasmere. So from the first page of his biography, Knight creates an unsatisfactory account of the poet, moving away from Wordsworth’s poetry and attempting to detail the unmediated life (or to mediate the life himself) rather than simply accept and reproduce the poet’s autobiographical fictions.

Still, ironically, Knight upholds a considerably positive and poem-inflected interpretation of the poet, and he downplays or suppresses sensitive aspects of Wordsworth’s life, such as his extreme closeness with his sister and his affair with Annette Vallon in France (both details he

was aware of through his access to Dorothy's journals and the Fenwick Notes). Although Knight claims to create an authentic understanding of the poet behind the poetry, he also believes his audience wants to read an account that shows discernment: "we desire to find out all that is ascertainable regarding [poets]—to learn *the authentic story of their lives*, fiction and inaccuracy being weeded out, irrelevancy set aside, and all trivial gossip buried in oblivion" (9: 2). And while he claims that his biography seeks to uphold these ideas, Knight values the works of the poet more highly than any "life." Instead of basing his biography on personal anecdotes characteristic of many Boswellian and Johnsonian inspired editions, Knight allows the works like "Home at Grasmere" to guide his account.

Knight uses "Home at Grasmere" to establish an autobiographical sequencing within his biography—that is, to help readers better contextualize the development of the poet seen in the chronology of poems earlier in his edition. By implementing "Home at Grasmere" in this way, Knight extends and makes more explicit the poetic narrative he created in the first eight volumes—showing how Wordsworth's poetic identity reflected and shaped his entire life. As an account of the poet's early life in Grasmere, this poem offers readers a sequence of events read through the lens of Wordsworth's philosophical development in Grasmere. For example, in describing a local widow's lament after her husband's death, Wordsworth explores the possibility of understanding life:

Is there not

An art, a music, and *a stream of words*

That shall be life, the acknowledged voice of life,

Shall speak of what is done among the fields,

Done truly there? (620-624, emphasis added)¹¹

This question echoes, or perhaps precedes, the concerns Wordsworth expresses in his prose arguments on biography during his life. In describing these lines, Peter Larkin argues—quite astutely—that “[Wordsworth’s] dream of a language attachable to human life is a desire for social acknowledgement” (110). But that acknowledgment must come on certain terms, growing out of Wordsworth’s merger of words (poetry), life, and local nature. This dream extends posthumously through Knight’s publication of the poem in full—his framing of the text through a new biographical genre. Is there a way to record a life that is both artistic and an accurate account of what occurred? That is of course the central problem of the *Prelude* and a preoccupation of Wordsworth through much of his career. Perhaps a prose biography cannot embody both ideals (truth and art). One could argue that Wordsworth seeks to establish an accurate picture from his life within “Home at Grasmere,” one that satisfies both art and authenticity. Similarly, one might say that by including the full poem in the life, Knight attempts to create a biography that is also an accurate work of art. Thus, he uses the poetry to create the biography. Together the prose and the poetry build an understanding of the poet, extending Wordsworth’s poetic identity.

Knight’s resolution to connect the poetic works with a life of the poet, while retaining the poet’s supremacy, sets his biography apart to change the initial reception of “Home at Grasmere.” To achieve this compromise, Knight sought to have William and Dorothy speak for themselves within his organization: “My aim . . . has been to make these volumes authentic, full, impartial, adequate; and to let Wordsworth and his sister . . . speak for themselves—he in his poems . . . she in her journals, and both in their letters” (9: 3). This strategy, a fairly conventional

¹¹ All quotations from the “Home at Grasmere” text come from the earliest complete manuscript of the poem, MS B, and the added Prospectus. These manuscripts are used by Stephen Gill in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*.

rhetorical move, somehow feels weighty in light of Wordsworth's known concerns. It puts Wordsworth himself at the forefront of the biography, allowing Knight to present a collaboratively constructed text, valuing the combined teaching possible through both poetical works and traditional biography. The inclusion of "Home at Grasmere" is a primary case of this collaborative construction. While he acts in the role of biographer, Knight self-effacingly argues, "The commentary of the biographer is speedily forgotten; but, while our estimates pass away, the lives of the great remain, and remain to teach posterity" (9: x). This move creates a type of biography where the author does not compete in the construction of his identity, but works alongside the biographer in that construction. By building the biography with the poet, Knight sets out to create a fully "Wordsworthian" version of the poet for the late-Victorian marketplace.

In short, "Home at Grasmere" is thoroughly informed by the biographical artifacts surrounding it, yet it also transcends and subordinates them. Knight claims, "No doubt the poems teach, and will continue to teach mankind, independently of any record of Wordsworth's life; but, on the other hand, many will appreciate his works all the more because of what they come to know of the man who wrote them" (9: 3). Together, poetry and prose biography can give us the greatest appreciation of a poet's life and genius, an enriched and innovative biography of the poet. Knight did not pioneer the publication of Wordsworth poetry in biographical accounts of the poet; Christopher Wordsworth quoted from the poetry, including excerpts from "Home at Grasmere," in his official memoirs of 1851. However, Knight was the first biographer to include previously unpublished full poems—of which the full text of "Home at Grasmere" remains the most significant example.

“Home at Grasmere” in its Proper Place in the *Life*

With this knowledge of both the role of Knight’s edition generally and the context presented in his life of the poet, I turn my focus to the poem and its development within Knight’s edition. Because Knight sought to reach a compromise between his biographic prose and Wordsworth’s poetry, he aligned his biography less with what Annette Cafarelli calls “anecdotal biography” (17) and more, as noted above, with Wordsworth’s own biographical theory. To achieve continuity between the life of the poet and his poems, Knight included the full text of “Home at Grasmere,” comprising the majority of chapter fourteen in the first volume of the life. In describing his placement of the poem, Knight argues, “Future editors may find it desirable to make ‘selections’ from this canto, but in this edition the ‘Home at Grasmere’ will stand untouched, and without comment” (9: 231-2). So far as possible, he wanted the poem to speak for itself. Yet even by saying almost nothing, Knight influenced his audience. Why would he leave the poem “untouched and without comment”? How might his approach change the meaning of the poem for his Victorian audience?

Knight’s claim that he does not intend to comment on the poem requires qualification, though it is true that he does not comment *much* on the poem; still, that commentary offered a way to read the poem within the context of Wordsworth’s other works. What Knight does say is intriguing because it upholds a belief widely accepted by his audience. Knight argues, “As a whole, [“Home at Grasmere”] is not equal to *The Prelude*; certain passages are very inferior, but there are others that posterity will cherish, and cannot willingly let die. It was probably a conviction of its inequality and inferiority that led Wordsworth to give selected extracts from this canto to the world in his own lifetime” (9: 231). This claim is somewhat surprising in light of the small spectacle Knight made of being beat to the first publication of the poem. He seems here

almost to downplay the poem's importance. His opinion about the poem's inferiority to the *Prelude* was potentially influential. The inferiority references the poem's inconsistency at reaching the level of a definite masterpiece (a larger work to which it might have belonged). Even in declaring his indifference, however, Knight showcases the poem in a prominent place. Certainly, Knight published extracts in their proper place in his chronological sequencing. But he seems to reserve a place of more distinction for the full poem, regardless of his measured estimate of the poem's value.

As a Wordsworth admirer, Knight wanted to maintain Wordsworth's reputation established directly after the poet's death. This reputation was established most conspicuously by the 1850 *Prelude* and by the 1851 official memoirs—so carefully constructed, in part, by the poet himself. Knight praises those memoirs specifically in his first chapter as “absolutely indispensable” (9: 7) to the study of Wordsworth. With access to the Wordsworth family letters, Knight probably understood the importance of *The Prelude* in establishing Wordsworth's poetic genius and in the financial stability of the family after his death. Additionally, perhaps Knight simply admired the poem, noting that “no poet . . . has given so remarkable a disclosure of his own character and personality” as Wordsworth did in *The Prelude* (9: 6). His framing of “Home at Grasmere” maintained the prominence of *The Prelude* for his Victorian audience, an audience living only thirty years after Wordsworth's death. The poet's posthumous reputation was still quite malleable. As Knight acknowledges both Wordsworth's choice not to publish the poem and the poem's reflection of Wordsworth's great poetic ability, he allows the beauties within the poem to enhance that reputation, rather than rearrange or rehash it. By leaving this introductory note as a brief frame for the poem, Knight preserves the initial posthumous reputation so carefully crafted by the poet.

However, Knight's preface to the poem also invites future study of the poem. Aware of the growing interest in Wordsworth studies, especially considering his profound investment in the Wordsworth Society, he still allows others to elaborate instead of contributing much of his own criticism. Several reasons can account for this brevity. First, Knight upholds his argument that Wordsworth and his associates should, so far as possible, speak for themselves. Second, he argues that a rich scholarly conversation on the poet already exists. Therefore Knight's short preface simply maintains the established identity of the poet. In the introductory chapter to the life, he claims that the current scholarship "form[s] a mass of literary judgment by competent minds from opposite points of view" (9: 5). Of course, he discusses the state of Wordsworth scholarship generally here, rather than work on a specific poem. Criticisms of "Home at Grasmere" potentially change that already established identity. Third, and I think most probable, Knight—well aware of Wordsworth's biographical theory—allows the work to speak as part of the life. His first line of the volume clearly elucidates his opinion: "Wordsworth's life was given to the world in his Poems" (9: 1). So "Home at Grasmere" *is* placed in its proper sequencing, within the life. Wordsworth would (he implies) be pleased by the representation, despite Knight's influence as the biographer.¹²

Of course, the poem already makes connections between place, life, and poetry, so including the full text within the biography shows the Victorians the moves the poem makes to connect these ideas, in contrast to the surrounding chapters. Well known for his deep-rooted love for Grasmere, Wordsworth describes his local experiences, both sentimental and painful,¹³ within

¹² See Julian North's *The Domestication of Genius*, Annette Cafarelli's *Prose in the Age of the Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey*, and H. J. Jackson's "What's Biography Got to Do with It?" for more explanations of the nuances of writing literary biography, whether Boswellian biography or official memoirs.

¹³ The poem complicates Wordsworth's relationship with his dear Grasmere, as he seeks to juxtapose the unique aspects of Grasmere with his, at times distorting, romantic sentiment towards it. See Kenneth Johnston's "'Home at Grasmere' in 1800" in his *Wordsworth and The Recluse* for a more in depth study of this dichotomy.

“Home at Grasmere,” which also explores the internal philosophical development of the poet in Grasmere. For example, towards the beginning of the poem Wordsworth declares, “Here / Should be my home, this Valley be my World” (41-42). Wordsworth embraces the Grasmere vale as his home, both physically and poetically. He recalls the experiences of his youth and the experiences of others of the valley in the poem. Thus, he both lives and writes in the vale. In his story of the missing swans, Wordsworth relates, “Their state so much resembled ours” (348).¹⁴ Wordsworth not only sees himself in the natural world around him but also learns how to interpret his life through nature. From the departed swans, he interprets his own loss and hope in the future, just one of several examples of his local experiences teaching him how to interpret his life.

Knight allows Wordsworth’s interpretations to shape the placement of the poem—permitting Wordsworth to describe his poetic development through poetry alongside other accounts of that development, not just in contrast to them. In other words, Knight gives Wordsworth power to interpret his own life even in the act of composing a biography of the poet. As Wordsworth interprets his life in Grasmere, he finds his poetic inspiration, also shaping Knight’s thinking in his biography:

A Voice shall speak, and what will be the Theme?
 On Man, on Nature, and on human Life,
 Thinking in Solitude, from time to time
 I feel sweet passions traversing my Soul
 Like Music; unto these, where’er I may,

¹⁴ Bruce Clarke argues that this image of the departed swans occurs when William and Dorothy displace them. Clarke also offers the interpretation that the departed swans represent the absence of explicit sexuality in Wordsworth’s work generally (370). While I understand his claims, I set less weight on this one image from the poetry, allowing it to work with the surrounding images to create Wordsworth’s understanding of his life.

I would give utterance in numerous verse. (958-63)

Thus, Grasmere offers Wordsworth his most promising poetic material, the genius loci—becoming his inspiration. “Home at Grasmere” becomes more unique as it attempts to showcase Wordsworth’s developing understanding of his poetic calling and his relationship to his poetic muse, Grasmere itself.

Kenneth Johnston argues that within “Home at Grasmere” Wordsworth creates a cyclical tension through his reflections and circular images—making it impossible to finish the full *Recluse* because “everything tends toward closure, especially self-enclosure, not toward continuation” (“Reclusive Song” 4). That closure also results, paradoxically, from Wordsworth’s continual growth as a poet. Potentially the difficulties Wordsworth encountered in completing all parts of his *Recluse* stem, in part, from his ongoing development in understanding his poetic character—taking a lifetime to begin to understand. Insofar as it is possible, Knight seems to forward this interpretation of Wordsworth’s life within his biography. As “Home at Grasmere” is, to an extent, already autobiographical, Knight allows his Victorian audience to grapple with the development of Wordsworth’s poetic identity as the poet did during those rather happy years in Grasmere.

Knight also provides his readers with context for the composition of the poem. By placing the poem directly after his chapter entitled “Grasmere” (where he quotes from various correspondences from the time) and directly before his extensive quotations from Dorothy’s Grasmere journal, Knight extends the poem’s links to place. Knight’s placement of the poem next to Dorothy’s famous Grasmere journal extends that initial connection to place. Knight says of the journal that it contains “by far the best record of the life at Dove Cottage, and of how the

Poet and his Sister spent their time at Grasmere” (9: 255).¹⁵ This praise shows the importance of the journal in understanding Wordsworth’s poetic development during his time at the cottage. Putting the poem directly next to the journal excerpts shows the reader the importance of both works in understanding the Grasmere years of the poet and extends the connections the poem maintains between Grasmere and writing poetry.

Arranging these textual artifacts side by side also shows the complimentary perspectives of the brother and sister. In fact, Knight calls the poem “the Poet’s own record of his ‘Home at Grasmere’” (9: 231). While Dorothy details their daily life at home, Wordsworth’s record in the poem is to celebrate his evolving understanding of his home and its role as stimulus to his experiences as a poet:

How exquisitely the individual Mind
 (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
 Of the whole species) to the external world
 Is fitted; how exquisitely too—
 Them this but little heard of among men—
 The external world is fitted to the mind;
 And the creation (by no lower name
 Can be called) which they with blended might
 Accomplish: this is my great argument. (1006-14)

This declaration applies not only to this portion of the *Recluse*, and his numerous unfruitful attempts to write more of it, but also to Wordsworth’s revisionist poetry as a whole. Sally Bushnell claims that Wordsworth’s multiple manuscripts of this poem complicate his

¹⁵ Knight would later edit the first edition of Dorothy’s Grasmere journal published in 1897. While his edition of the journals was not be available yet, Knight’s 1889 audience probably at least knew of the journal because Christopher Wordsworth included excerpts in his 1851 *Memoirs*.

compositional process of “spontaneous overflow” by creating “a method involving optionality and recombination” (400). This method creates new meaning for the poem and its connections to other of Wordsworth’s poems of the early 1800s—not only for twentieth-century scholars but for the Victorians as well. Indeed, Victorian readers would recognize these memorable lines as working versions of language that saw print in the “Prospectus” for *The Recluse*, first published in the 1814 Preface to *The Excursion*. By writing about his individual experience with the Grasmere Vale, Wordsworth moves toward new poetic feats, delving into “the Mind of Man, / [His] haunt, and the main region of [his] Song” (39-40). His insight cannot be properly understood without the knowledge of his experiences with the external world. Knight understands that inseparable relationship between Wordsworth’s home, his poetry, and his life. He includes the whole poem in his life of the poet to illustrate that relationship and raises the question, can “Home at Grasmere” be understood out of biographical context?

After initially understanding the importance of Knight’s placement of the poem, it seems that Knight simply extended the traditional representation of Wordsworth by intensifying the bond between personal place and poetic production, making “Home at Grasmere” a document of the private life rather than a strictly public poetic artifact. Readers might not have known how to interpret or react to “Home at Grasmere” as an independent and public poem. At least, they might have read it quite differently as only a portion of the unfinished *Recluse* or an earlier composition connected to *The Prelude*. By installing it in his *Life of William Wordsworth*, Knight gave readers a way to understand it; he gave them a story to enrich their sense of the poet’s early development and of his fundamental, chosen identity as the poet of the Lakes. However, the implications of the placement of “Home at Grasmere” may extend beyond providing a way to read the poem.

Perhaps the more critical question is not whether “Home at Grasmere” may be understood out of biographical context but rather how the edition changes that biographical context for the poem. Consequently, what new meaning does the edition give to the poem? Knight’s edition is not just unique for his new editorial decisions in connection with “Home at Grasmere,” but it also contributes a vital part to the larger “archive” of the poem. Understanding the archive’s effect on the poem helps readers see the lasting influence of Wordsworth’s and Knight’s editorial decisions in connection with the poem. It is widely accepted that the Victorians built Wordsworth’s identity as the great Romantic poet. Archival work allows us to track that development in this particular case. We can view Knight’s edition as an archive that determines the meaning of its contents.

Towards Understanding the Archive’s Effect on “Home at Grasmere”

Of course, Knight’s contributions to the “Home at Grasmere” archive assist in establishing the poem as an artifact of the poet’s genius. Jacques Derrida’s arguments on archives may help us understand the power of Knight’s intervention. Derrida introduced the term “archive” in 1995 at a conference where he presented his *Archive Fever* analysis for the first time. Derrida used the term in its usual sense—i.e., to describe a place that houses important documents, knowledge, or memories, but he added the insight that this location, whether figurative or physical, determines the power of the memories or knowledge it preserves. For Knight, the “Home at Grasmere” archive begins with anthology of poems, his life of the poet, the poem itself, and the Grasmere para-texts he includes. Knight’s collection houses the important knowledge deemed necessary to understand and interpret the poem. This is a useful starting point, but Derrida’s further analysis sheds more light on Knight’s project.

Because Knight both breaks from and upholds Wordsworth's ideals about his poetry and his biography (as discussed previously), Knight's edition openly molds and wrestles with the "Home at Grasmere" archive as the poet might have imagined it. Derrida famously argues, "[The archive] is at once institutive and conservative. Revolutionary and traditional. An eco-nomic archive in this double sense: it keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves" (12). Knight's archive seems to embody many of these characteristics. He establishes a way to read "Home at Grasmere" while maintaining the reverence for Wordsworth's genius. Literally eco-nomic (home-naming), Knight posits Grasmere as the most potent origin point for Wordsworth's poetry and Dove Cottage itself as a core part of the archive.¹⁶ He breaks away from Wordsworth's traditional poetic categories with his chronological sequencing while also upholding the primacy of the works. He holds "Home at Grasmere" back until the life of the poet in his ninth volume of the collection, saving it for a moment when he can clearly connect it to the life, and keeps back any full analysis of the poem, potentially allowing others to contribute to the archive. Knight's archive seems to fit quite well into the definition from Derrida, embodying the intricacies and power of the archive, even while opening possibilities for its expansion..

For its time, Knight's edition represented the pinnacle of Wordsworthian scholarship—the authority on Wordsworth generally and the authority on "Home at Grasmere" and its archive. Derrida highlights the etymological convergence of the root "arch," connected to both authority and originality. Words such as "archbishop," "patriarch," and "hierarchy" relate to authority while words like "archeology" and "archaic" relate to being original or ancient. However, Derrida insists that these meanings overlap. The archive links power and authority to being

¹⁶ It comes as no surprise that Knight was instrumental in establishing the cottage as a museum, the symbolic heart of Wordsworth Country. Founding the Wordsworth Society in 1880, Knight acted as the society's first secretary and led efforts to publish a collection of Wordsworth Society papers and a selection of Wordsworth's poems. While completing his massive edition in the 1880s, Knight participated as part of the executive committee, directed by Reverend Stopford Brooke, that purchased Dove Cottage and opened it to the public as a Wordsworth museum.

first.¹⁷ As Derrida argues that archives act as places of beginning, Knight's collection can fit this definition as it *nearly* presents the poem first and certainly presents it in a new and compelling context—one different from the one MacMillan chose. The initial two publications of “Home at Grasmere” offer contrasting ways to understand the contextual history of the poem. MacMillan offers the poem unencumbered by any context (except the implicit context of other Wordsworthian publications). Knight's publication offers a new, and richer, starting point for understanding the poem because of its context within his biography of the poet. Additionally, his motives for composing the edition seem to stem from his reverence for the poet rather than merely from the possibility of monetary gain. Knight's edition asserts itself as a more authoritative origin.

But by highlighting the poem's origin in one way, Knight obscures it in another. By excluding it from the chronological sequencing of his first eight volumes, he makes its relationship to other poems less obvious. Knight chooses to build his “Home at Grasmere” archive primarily from the other sections of Knight's life immediately surrounding it. Consequently, Knight leaves work for a later generation of textual scholarship surrounding the poem and its manuscripts. Granted, if the poem was included alongside the other poems of the early Grasmere period, readers' understanding of the poem would still be changed, but the uncertainty about the MSS dates would make precise placement more difficult.

Knight's decision was not insignificant, for it clearly set the agenda for the appreciation of Wordsworth. Derrida emphasizes that the *arche* acts as both the commencement and the commandment—or the origin of meaning and the law for how to classify the material in the

¹⁷ Several scholars have responded to Derrida's claims, further complicating the archive concept. In an analysis of Derrida's lecture, Carolyn Steedman offers a useful imaginary dialogue—between Derrida, Foucault, and others—detailing the critical development of the term archive and its “authority of beginnings and starting points” (1). I appreciate her readings of Derrida and his ability to apply the archive to different texts, like Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*.

future (9). Through these functions, the archive gains authority. Knight establishes modes of reading that only a later generation of textual scholars could begin to unravel.

By publishing “Home at Grasmere” within its historical (that is, biographical, not literary-historical) context, Knight’s edition acts as a place of commencement for understanding how to interpret the poem. Rhetorically, of course, the volume gestures to an earlier point of origin, guiding Victorian readers towards recognizing the poem as a located expression of an individual genius, even as it presents that genius as evolving. Knight changes the origin for the archive because he places the poem within its Grasmere history. Dorothy’s journals and the letters cited in the preceding “Grasmere” chapter become more illuminating to the poem. They become part of the “Home at Grasmere” archive because they supplement Wordsworth’s experience in Grasmere. Thus Knight’s archive for the poem is comprised, most importantly, of the events of the life occurring around the poem (not just the manuscript drafts of the poem). By accurately presenting these biographical details, Knight gains authority in creating the archive for “Home at Grasmere.” He gains this power, one might say, by deflecting attention from his edition, pointing readers toward to the original authority of Wordsworth and those closest to him.

How do Knight’s words also act as commandments, so to speak, for future biographers of Wordsworth and future scholars of “Home at Grasmere”? Knight arguably offers his readers the original critical interpretation of the poem, although his comments are rather limited. With his brief assertion of the poem’s inferiority to *The Prelude*, Knight nonetheless presents it as a comparable text, an example of Wordsworth’s place-bound poetic autobiography. Additionally, his brief synopsis of the previous, fragmentary publications of the poem (first in the *Guide*, then as a separate excerpted poem called “Water Fowl,” and finally in Christopher Wordsworth’s *Memoirs*) asserts his mastery of the archival material. At the same time, his notes take the focus

away from those publications and put it on his current (full and authoritative) publication of the poem. All following interpretations, including this analysis, are changed because of Knight's established "law" of viewing the poem. As previously discussed, Knight extends the connections between the poem and the life of the poet and his Grasmere home. This extension creates a standard for all future readings of the poem—readings that continue to draw upon similar connections. By fulfilling both the commandment and the commencement of the archive, Knight exercises considerable power.

Not only does the edition gain power within the larger "Home at Grasmere" archive, but Knight also gains power as an "archon" for the archive. Derrida uses the term "archon" to describe the ruler or keeper of archived material. The archon is the person in authority with the ability to control what archival material is accessible to the public: "The archons are first of all the documents' guardians"; however, they "do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives" (10). Furthermore, the archons determine what is important in the archive. To control the power of interpretation, they occupy an "uncommon place" (10). For all public purposes, Knight steps into this role the moment he gains permission to publish "Home at Grasmere" along with the rest of his archival materials. He now shapes the interpretation of the archive and thereby holds authority and power over it.

Of course, as I have discussed in relation to biography and the *Guide*, one could argue that Knight's editorial decisions were the natural conclusion of what Wordsworth did to connect his life to his homeland and his interactions with it as a poet—making the archive. Wordsworth begins "Home at Grasmere" with a passage that seems to express archontic power derived from his experiences: "I sat and stirred in Spirit as I looked, / I seemed to feel such liberty was mine, /

Such *power and joy*” (34-36, emphasis added). Knight’s influence came in part from his deriving authority from the poet himself; Knight framed himself as a caretaker, the legitimate agent of the great posthumous archon. Still, it remains a simple fact that Wordsworth kept the poem private. True, he excerpted parts of the manuscript poem in his *Guide to the Lakes* and so tied the poem to prose about Grasmere. In that sense, he decided how to present the poem years before Knight’s collection was even considered. However, he certainly never felt “Home at Grasmere” ready or appropriate for full publication during his lifetime. Consequently, a more complete archive of the poem must account for Wordsworth’s own compositional and editorial decisions. Moreover, Wordsworth’s intense advocacy for the works of a poet acting as the most complete biography of the poet must also be considered. Knight may have felt that principle outweighed Wordsworth’s doctrines of privacy and image control. Certainly, he applies this principle in forming his own theories about biography and poetry.

An understanding of Knight’s “Home at Grasmere” archive helps readers recognize potential ways the Victorians could read and comprehend the poem. Despite the difficulties Wordsworth faced in completing his *Recluse*, that compositional process shaped his poetic career and his life, especially during the happy years in Grasmere. “Home at Grasmere,” with its inseparable connections to Wordsworth’s life, becomes in some ways the core of *The Recluse*’s archive. Ultimately, a poetic archive creates longevity for a poet because it shows the importance of his works for posterity. Knight’s collection shows the importance of “Home at Grasmere” for future generations of Wordsworth scholars and admirers. Therefore, “Home at Grasmere” and Knight’s archive surrounding it form a critical part of the larger Victorian Wordsworthian archive, essential to establishing Wordsworth’s iconic reputation as the great Romantic poet.

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