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Dwelling with the Dead: Two Wordsworth Texts

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At Christoph's invitation, I presented a draft of what follows as a public lecture at the University of Bamberg in July of 2013. An earlier version formed part of a group of panels on "Genres of Dying" organized by Ian Balfour for the August 2008 conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (NASSR) and intended for publication as a volume, though this plan was unrealized in the event. Christoph himself had an association with NASSR by virtue of his work on eighteenth-century literature and political theory and had in fact prepared for their 2021 meeting a panel on the political reformer and poet John Thelwall, also unrealized in the event due to the pandemic. When Christoph and I team-taught one summer at the International Summer School in Seggau, Austria, we earned, I am told, the joking nickname of "Die Zwillinge," perhaps because of the myriad ways our interests and paths seemed to cross (I certainly couldn't hope to match Christoph in stature!). May my contribution of these pages to this Gedenkschrift count as a small perpetuation of what was for me an inestimable and now sorely missed transatlantic friendship.

My subject is two Wordsworth texts, one by William and one by Dorothy, in which the resting places of the dead and the dwelling places of the living interpenetrate.

I

Perhaps confirming a friend's anxiety that its publication would make the poet "everlastingly ridiculous,"[1] by 1820 "We Are Seven" was circulating in an anonymous chapbook for children entitled "The Little Maid and the Gentleman, or We Are Seven,"[2] and today it remains among William's most widely anthologized poems. What the reception history would have been had he followed through on his own plan to change its title to "We Are Seven, or Death" (Wordsworth 1992,

[1] Wordsworth recounts the story in the Fenwick notes:

> The said Jim [James Tobin] got a sight of Lyrical Ballads as it was going through the press at Bristol, during which time I was residing in that city. One evening he came to me with a grave face and said, "Wordsworth I have seen the volume that Coleridge & you are about to publish, There is one poem in it which I earnestly entreat you will cancel, for, if published, it will make you everlastingly ridiculous." I answered that I felt much obliged by the interest he took in my good name as a writer, and begged to know what was the unfortunate piece he alluded to. He said, "It is called We Are Seven!" "Nay," said I, "that shall take its chance however," and he left me in despair. (Wordsworth 1993, 43)

[2] Although the dating is uncertain, "Kendrew's Edition of We Are Seven" (as it is described on the half-title page) is commonly thought to have first appeared around 1820 (Davis 41).

73) is anyone's guess. But certainly his gloss of the poem in the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" as seeking to illustrate "the perplexity and obscurity which in childhood attend our notion of death, or rather our utter inability to admit that notion" (747) has attached itself to the verse as a paratext and a warrant of due *gravitas*.[3] And with some exceptions, critical response to the poem has been guided by its indications. On this reading, "the little girl who is the Heroine" – again William's formulation (1993, 39) – persists in counting her dead brother and sister among her siblings, despite her interlocutor's equally persistent efforts to have her *discount* them, because she simply does not acknowledge that they are dead.

But is this what the "stand-off," as Frances Ferguson has aptly characterized the dramatic situation (164), is about? After all, the girl *says* quite explicitly, "The first that died was Sister Jane," and then of her brother John that "he was forced to go." We may say that the latter is a euphemism obscuring the truth, but if so, surely no more so than the narrator's insistence that "their spirits are in heaven."

What "The Little Maid and the Gentleman" *are* clearly at odds over is whether the dead and the living are to be numbered together, counted as members of the same set. He tries to enforce a prohibition or rule against doing so: you can't do that. She is impervious – one might say immune – to its imposition. And conditioning that imperviousness or immunity is a defining aspect of her world which I believe tends to get overlooked, though it comes increasingly to dominate the poem, namely the fact that she and her mother *live* in a graveyard.

That they do first surfaces in the two lines with which she wraps up her tidy and compliant response to the speaker's second question – the first having been "Sisters and brothers, little Maid,/ How many may you be?" – about her brothers and sisters: "And *where* are *they*? I pray you tell" (my emphasis). Insofar as those lines

[3] Compare with this, however, Wordsworth's insistence in "Essay Upon Epitaphs" (1810) that "the minds of very young children meditate feelingly upon death and immortality" – this over against those who would ascribe "the sense of immortality, as it exists in the mind of a child" to "blank ignorance in the child":

> Forlorn, and cut off from communication with the best part of his nature, must that man be, who should derive the sense of immortality, as it exists in the mind of a child, from the same unthinking gaiety or liveliness of animal spirits with which the lamb in the meadow, or any other irrational creature is endowed; who should ascribe it, in short, to blank ignorance in the child; to an inability arising from the imperfect state of his faculties to come, in any point of his being, into contact with a notion of death; or to an unreflecting acquiescence in what had been instilled into him! Has such an unfolder of the mysteries of nature, though he may have forgotten his former self, ever noticed the early, obstinate, and unappeasable inquisitiveness of children upon the subject of origination? This single fact proves outwardly the monstrousness of those suppositions: for, if we had no direct external testimony that the minds of very young children meditate feelingly upon death and immortality, these inquiries, which we all know they are perpetually making concerning the *whence*, do necessarily include correspondent habits of interrogation concerning the *whither*. (28-29)

go on to refer to *herself* and not her siblings, however, they also go beyond what she has been asked:

> "... two of us at Conway dwell,
> And two are gone to sea.
>
> Two of us in the church-yard lie,
> My sister and my brother;
> And, in the church-yard cottage, I
> Dwell near them with my mother."

Way too much information. Nor, to judge by the continuation, is it information her gentleman questioner cares to dwell on any more than on the awkward circumstance that two of the siblings into whose whereabouts he has just inquired are dead. Better to strictly reframe the limits of their exchange:

> "You say that two at Conway dwell,
> And two are gone to sea,
> Yet ye are seven! – I pray you tell,
> Sweet Maid, how this may be."

Since she has in fact just *told* him "how this may be," his response, which otherwise mirrors back to the maid her own words, systematically ignores this part of her accounting. The ostensible grounds of this disregard are, as it were, grammatical – counts of the dead are null, have no role in what, following Wittgenstein, we may call the language-game the narrator wants them to be playing. But that *formal* exclusion also clearly serves as the vehicle of a *substantive* suppression: he has heard and understood the implication of what she has told him but wants no dwelling on dwelling with the dead.

And yet what disturbs the narrator's sense of good order, after all, is not so much the *facts* themselves to which the girl refers as the more proximate fact that she has *spoken of them* and spoken of them *to him*. Child mortality was, of course, common in the Wordsworths' day, nor was it simply taboo to *live* in a graveyard. What may strike us as a maudlin gothic touch is actually grounded in sociological fact, as is characteristic of the lyrics of 1798: in this case the fact that parish houses for the poor, like the "churchyard cottage" where the little Maid dwells with her Mother, were not uncommonly associated with graveyards.[4] This would have

[4] "'[C]hurch houses' or 'townhouses' . . . were effectively parish owned, being funded either from endowments made by individual testators or from parish taxation. They were very common in the late medieval period, and were sometimes used as the venue for parish fund-raising events (church ales or wakes) and sometimes used to accommodate the poor. They were effectively administered by the parish officers (especially the churchwardens), and were most commonly situated very close to the church, often in fact abutting against the churchyard wall. In several places, they survived not only beyond the reformation but into the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and by then became absorbed into what had effectively become parish housing stock" (Prof. Steve Hindle, now of Washington University of St. Louis,

been a matter of economy and convenience, since the churchyard of course belonged to and was administered by the parish church, but also a matter of custom and symbolic order.[5] As Mary Douglas has emphasized in *Purity and Danger* in her discussion of caste systems (in arguing against psychoanalytic derivations of pollution taboos), what is unclean for one group may be tolerated of and even enjoined upon another group:

> The whole [caste] system represents a body in which by the division of labour the head does the thinking and the praying and the most despised parts carry away waste matter . . . The sad wit of pollution as it comments on bodily function symbolizes descent in the caste structure by contact with faeces, blood, and corpses . . . It is a symbolic system, based on the image of the body, whose primary concern is the ordering of a social hierarchy. (153-54)

Thus in "We Are Seven" the same symbolic code which prohibits the narrator from dwelling with the dead consigns the impoverished and fatherless household of maid and mother to their neighborhood, reinforcing the separation of the abject (or "impotent poor," in the terminology of the Poor Law) from the social body. The structure of the *verbal* impasse, whereby she gathers together while he separates the markers of the living and the dead, reproduces the divided structure of the encompassing social system. But it also erodes it from within insofar as her articulation of who and what counts, who and what warrants counting, imports into the arena of linguistic exchange a zone of contact and dedifferentiation that is, for the interlocutor, properly consigned to the field of material practices.

With these considerations in mind, let us look more closely at two stanzas which mark a turning point in the poem's development, in that they initiate a shift from the back and forth of dialogue to what one might call the little Maid's six-stanza *solo*. "Least said, soonest mended" having failed as a tactic, the narrator now attempts to stitch closed with reasons and evidence the breach of discourse through which dead siblings and graveyard dwellings have begun to slip out. Only, however, to see his efforts backfire again:

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personal communication, June 2009). See also Hindle's *On the Parish?: The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England C.1550-1750*.

[5] An act promulgated in 1768 "for the better Relief and Employment of the Poor within the Parish of *Saint Leonard, Shoreditch*, in the County of *Middlesex*; and for building a Workhouse, and for purchasing a Piece of Land for a Burial Ground, for the Use of the Said Parish" offers striking evidence of this relationship, though in connection with the newer institution of the workhouse, rather than the medieval tradition of the church-house (see note 5 above). The preamble having identified parallel problems, "Whereas the workhouse of the said Parish is too small for the Reception of the Poor thereof" and "whereas the Burial Ground of the said Parish is filled with dead Bodies, and the Parishioners are at a Loss for a Place to bury their Dead " (687-689), the statute then authorizes the purchase of land for the erection of a workhouse, with a supplementary instruction to "inclose a sufficient Part of the ground to be purchased as aforesaid . . . and to convert the said Grounds . . . for burying the Dead therein" (692-93).

"You run about, my little Maid,
Your limbs they are alive.
If two are in the church-yard laid
Then ye are only five."

"Their graves are green, they may be seen,"
The little Maid replied,
"Twelve steps or more from my mother's door,
And they are side by side."

In his discussion of "We Are Seven" in *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment*, Alan Bewell remarks of this latter stanza, "[the child] boldly points to her brother's and sister's graves – 'Their graves are green, they may be seen' – as proof that death is not radically discontinuous with life" (196). But is she *pointing* to the graves at all? It seems to me rather that she is telling the speaker something *she* knows but that he does not see himself where he is – that her brother's and sister's graves are as visible and distinct as she is to him – and telling him where they *are* to be seen: "Twelve steps or more from my mother's door." In doing so she thus mimics but also displaces her questioner's immediately preceding emphasis on what is visible to *him*: "You run about, my little Maid,/Your limbs they are alive" – which is as much as to say, "You are alive because you can appear *here* before me."

The displacement is important, first of all, because it brings into further focus the poem's symbolic geography: on the one hand, the place of their encounter and verbal exchange, dominated by the adult male narrator's examining presence; on the other hand, and distinctly separate, the mixed place of dwelling and burial, centered on the grave sites and closely associated with the mother.

As important, though slightly more difficult to bring out, is the way in which that disjunction is taken up in a more extended structuring chain of identifications. This is clearest when we move from an intradiegetic perspective focused on the mimetic play of question and answer between adult and child to an extradiegetic perspective that takes into account the poet's relation to his readership. At one end of that chain, the reader stands in the same external, asymmetrical relationship to the scene of encounter which the narrator recalls as the narrator stands in relation to the burial ground on which the little Maid dwells in her words and in fact; while at the other end of the chain is her relation to her buried siblings, as suggested most clearly in the next stanza:

"My stockings there I often knit,
My kerchief there I hem,
And there upon the ground I sit
And sing a song to them."

The figure of the maid "sitting upon the ground" as she sings her song to those lying just below (like a child singing to a doll in imitation of its mother but also

not unlike a reader animating with silent vocalizations the flat surface of the written page[6]) may be seen to absorb or condense into itself that more extended system of relationships. The distances, both temporal and spatial, which otherwise condition the poem's exchanges collapse into a relationship of simple contact or proximity without reciprocation, with the voice lending its *accompaniment* to the scene more than apostrophizing the dead. That the child and her words dwell in continuous proximity to her buried siblings may of course be read as a compensatory response to, and to that extent a denial of, their deaths. But one may also read the scene as disclosing an originary detachment or separation of language from its objects. This may explain in part why the flow of her sing-song speech gradually but inexorably surfaces as the dominant mode of the poem.

II

My second text is an entry from Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal* in which the stationing of a corpse in a house figures centrally (20-21; see figures 1a and 1b for holograph). As it happens, the entry, dated Wednesday, September 3rd, 1800, is also one of those that William drew on in his poetry, specifically for two passages of *The Excursion* (Book II, ll. 373-93 and 550-53) describing a traditional rural funeral "in which the bearers carry the coffin from house to grave" while lamenting the passing of local customs:[7]

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[6] A related image complex appears in the coda to "There was a boy …":

> And there, along that bank, when I have passed
> At evening, I believe that oftentimes
> A full half-hour together I have stood
> Mute, looking at the grave in which he lies.
> *Prelude* 1805 V. ll. 420-23

For discussion of the scene as a figure of reading or self-reading see de Man (82) and Wilner (58).

[7] See Darbishire's note for the former passage (V. 416-17) and the Fenwick notes for the latter (203). In fact, the practice in question was itself soon to die out, leading Wordsworth to specify years later in the Fenwick note that his own body be borne over the corpse road from Rydal Mount to Grasmere "on the shoulders of neighbors" rather than transported by hearse:

> [The hearse] has been the means of introducing a change much to be lamented in the mode of conducting funerals among the mountains. Now, the coffin is lodged in the hearse at the door of the house of the deceased, and the corpse is so conveyed to the churchyard gate: all the solemnity which formerly attended its progress, as described in the poem, is put an end to. So much do I regret this, that I beg to be excused for giving utterance here to a wish that, should it befall me to die at Rydal Mount, my own body may be carried to Grasmere church after the manner in which, till lately, that of every one was borne to that place of sepulture, namely, on the shoulders of neighbours, no house being passed without some words of a funeral psalm being sung at the time by the attendants. When I put into the mouth of the Wanderer, "Many precious rites and customs of our rural ancestry are gone or stealing from us; this I hope will last for ever," and what follows, little did I foresee that the observance and mode of proceeding, which had often affected me so much, would so soon be superseded.

> Many precious rites
> And customs of our rural ancestry
> Are gone, or stealing from us; this, I hope,
> Will last forever.

I mention first this passage because it helps to bring out an ethnographic motive shared by "We Are Seven" and the journal entry alike and that conditions not only how Dorothy writes about the funeral but, at least to some extent, the fact of her presence there at all. She evidently has no relation to the deceased, whom she identifies only as "the dead person 56 years of age buried by the parish" – thus a pauper – "with no near kindred, no children," and otherwise refers to as "the corpse" or, once, "she." Nor, with the exception of her neighbor John Dawson, whose farmhouse, a short distance from Dove Cottage, lay along the corpse road and thus would have served as a way station for the funeral procession,[8] does she indicate any connection to the other mourners, who are identified only as "10 men and 4 women."

If Dorothy's relation to the deceased and more generally to the assembled company seems marked by an added measure of detachment, it is thus all the more striking that she also stands out by virtue of her displays of emotion. That emotionality surfaces twice in her account, first in the statement, "I was affected to tears while we stood in the house, the coffin before me," and then a few sentences later, "I thought she was going to a quiet spot & I could not help weeping very much." By contrast, the unnamed neighbors "talked sensibly & cheerfully about common things," the men "with their hats off sang with decent & solemn countenances" (part of the complex of words and images picked up by William for *The Excursion*), and someone is heard wondering whether the parson will turn up at the churchyard with a hang-over. (He does.)

Of course, one does not have to look far for reasons why Dorothy might identify with the pauper woman whose funeral she is attending. To bring those reasons into focus we need only note her observation "there were no near kindred, no children," and then recall the "flood of tears" that appears on the first page of the *Grasmere Journal*, just after William and John have set off into Yorkshire on what

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See also the Cornell *Excursion* editorial note for II. ll. 406-14 (385).

[8] "A more bizarre type of road was that known as a 'corpse road'. In many parts of England, particularly in the remote areas, the establishment of churches did not keep pace with the growth of population. Thus enormous parishes survived, and although there were usually several subsidiary chapels in these large parishes, only the parish church would have had the right of burial" (B.P. Hindle 10-11). A "coffin-stone" may still be seen on the wayside between Dove Cottage and How Top, the former Dawson farmhouse (see figure 2). "This is a hangover from earlier times when, for want of consecrated burial ground in Ambleside, coffins had to be carried the four miles from Ambleside to Grasmere along the corpse road . . . This coffin stone was used to rest the heavy load while the bearers got their breath back" (Reid 212).

was essentially a courtship visit to Mary Hutchinson. These biographical particulars, while not irrelevant, nonetheless are subsidiary to a more basic relationship that obtains between the corpse itself as an alien impersonal presence in the house and amidst the assembled company and the impersonal character of the "spontaneous overflow of emotion" by which Dorothy is unsettled.

More generally, the journal entry is composed in such a way as to suggest a certain parallelism between the ritual transport of the corpse from its temporary stationing in the farmhouse to its "final home" in the churchyard and the stages in Dorothy's being "affected to tears." On the one hand, her extended account of the funeral – immediately flanked by the sentences, "I ironed till ½ past three – now very hot" and "I had not finished ironing till 7 o'clock" – is both embedded in and suspends a generally symmetrical narrative framework that marks in lapidary fashion the arc of her day, with its routines and cycles (the indentations are mine):

> Wednesday 3rd September. Coleridge Wm & John went from home to go upon Helvellyn with Mr Simpson. They set out after breakfast.
>
> I accompanied them up near the Blacksmith's. A fine coolish morning.
>
> I ironed till 1/2 past three – now very hot.
>
> I then went to a funeral at John Dawsons. About 10 men & 4 women. Bread cheese & ale - they talked sensibly & chearfully about common things. The dead person 56 years of age buried by the parish - the coffin was neatly lettered & painted black & covered with a decent cloth. They set the corpse down at the door & while we stood within the threshold the men with their hats off sang with decent & solemn countenances a verse of a funeral psalm. The corpse was then borne down the hill & they sang till they had got past the Town-end.
>
> I was affected to tears while we stood in the house, the coffin lying before me. There were no near kindred, no children. When we got out of the dark house the sun was shining & the prospect looked so divinely beautiful as I never saw it. It seemed more sacred than I had ever seen it, & yet more allied to human life. The green fields, neighbours of the churchyard, were green as possible & with the brightness of the sunshine looked quite Gay. I thought she was going to a quiet spot & I could not help weeping very much.
>
> When we came to the bridge they began to sing again & stopped during 4 lines before they entered the church-yard. The priest met us – he did not look as a man ought to do on such an occasion. I had seen him half drunk, the day before in a pot-house. Before we came with the corpse one of the company observed he wondered what sort of cue "our Parson would be in." NB. it was the day after the Fair.
>
> I had not finished ironing till 7 o clock.
>
> The wind was now high & I did not walk – writing my journal now at 8 o clock.
>
> Wm & John came home at 10 o clock.[9]

[9] Judging from the manuscript, the last sentence appears to have been inserted the following day.

On the other hand, the measured progression of the account of the funeral is in its turn suspended and to some extent broken up by the sequence of sentences in which Dorothy recalls the strength of feeling by which she was overcome. Thus while that sequence begins, "I was affected to tears while we stood in the house, the coffin lying before me," it ends "I thought she was going to a quiet spot & I could not help weeping very much," establishing an implicit relationship between the anticipated deposition of the corpse in a place where it will cease to disturb or be open to disturbance, and the movement of her own weeping towards quiet and composure – the composure, ultimately, of the journal entry itself.

In between, Dorothy records what she sees and what she feels as she accompanies the funeral procession and the coffin across the threshold to the outdoors:

> When we got out of the dark house the sun was shining & the prospect looked so divinely beautiful as I never saw it. It seemed more sacred than I had ever seen it, & yet more allied to human life. The green fields, neighbours of the churchyard, were green as possible & with the brightness of the sunshine looked quite Gay.

"The prospect" designates most immediately the landscape that greets Dorothy as she passes from the dark house into the open, but in context the word involves an implicit temporal, and ultimately anagogical, dimension of reference. For literally "the prospect" also indicates where the burial party is headed down, while allegorically it comes to encompass the entirety of "human life" apprehended in its being for death. It is not only the sun's transcendent radiance but its relationship to the immanent otherness of mortal remains that makes the ground at once "more sacred" and "more allied to human life."

That relationship is most nearly explicit in the sentence or half-sentence: "The green fields, neighbours of the churchyard, were green as possible" – so close in thought and imagery, be it noted, to the pivotal verse of "We Are Seven": "Their graves are green, they may be seen". While there is some suggestion, particularly in the poem, of an organic cycle linking decomposition and growth, passing away and coming into being, in both texts attention goes more to the juxtaposition, without gradation or mediation, of disparate realms. Indeed, it is the simple fact of juxtaposition that establishes a form of relationship, rather than some prior kinship.

In Dorothy's journal entry, the word which articulates this form of relationship is "neighbours." On the one hand, she uses the word to designate simple physical contiguity: fields and churchyard lie side by side. On the other hand, there is a muted element of personification at work: the word is clearly suggested by the relations among and between the funeral party and the corpse (nameless in Dorothy's account, although she observes that "the coffin was neatly lettered") and now transferred to the relationship between fields and churchyard. If Dorothy's description of the green fields adjoining St. Oswald's graveyard thus involves a measure of personification, it would be a mistake, however, to see that turn of phrase as enlivening her prose. The reverse, I would suggest, is truer: the word "neighbours" is (or contains) the corpse of a personification, the buried residue of a piece of figuration scarcely distinguishable in its occurrence from the ordinary use of the term. Indeed, who is to say it is not an ordinary, an apposite use? Situated within the account of a singular moment of illumination – "When we got out of the dark house the sun was shining & the prospect looked so divinely beautiful as I never saw it" – the appositive, "neighbours of the churchyard," simply discloses what has been there all along – a relation of proximity and disjunction between the living and the dead of which language is the condition.

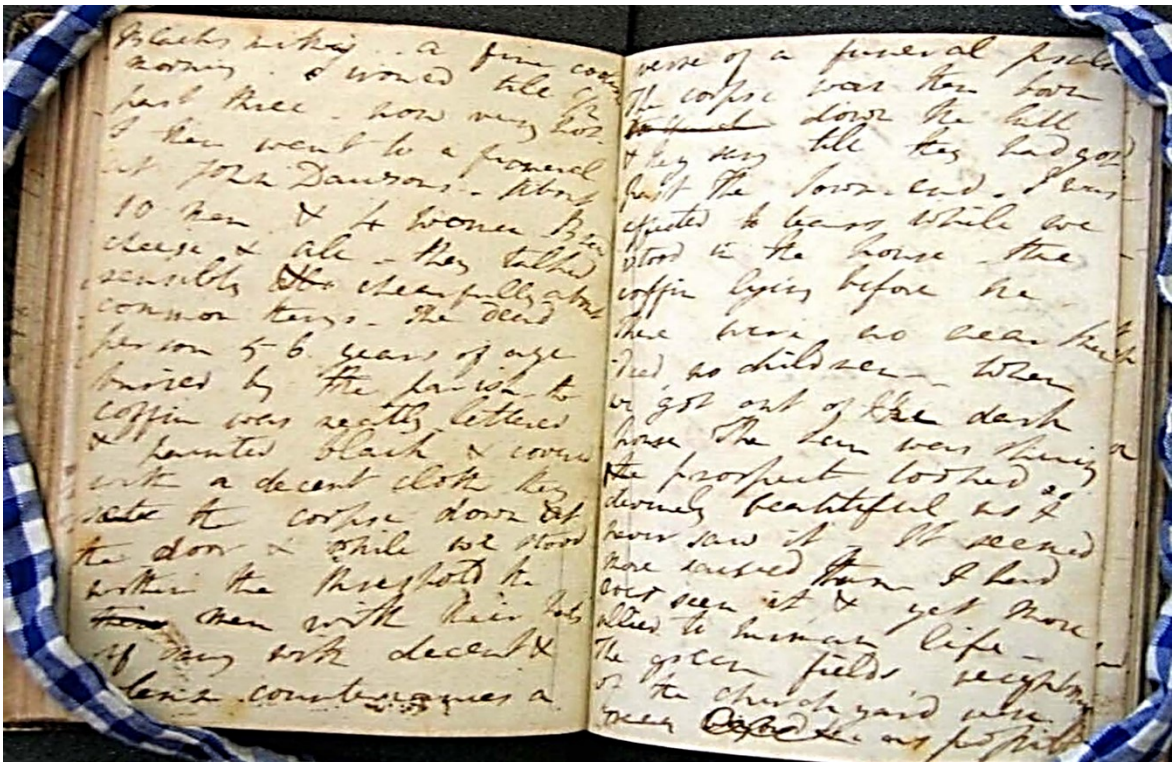

Fig. 1a: Two pages from Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere journal entry for Wednesday, September 3rd, 1800. With kind permission of The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, England. Author photos.

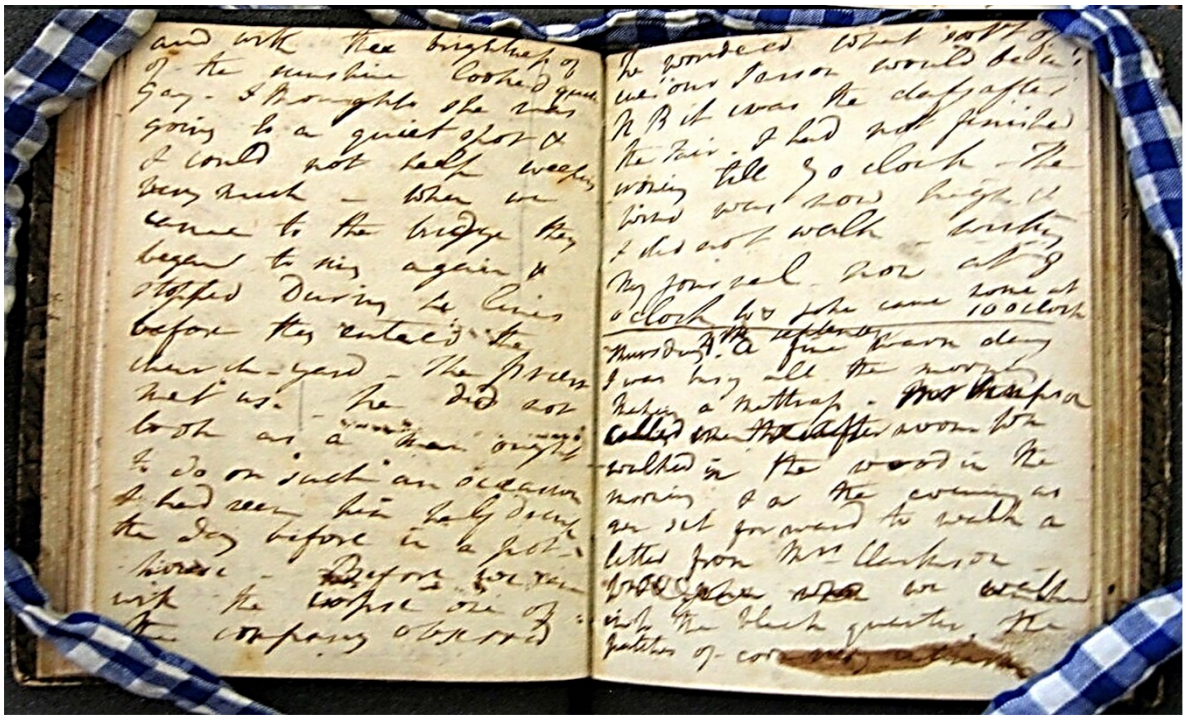

Fig. 1b: Two pages from Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere journal entry for Wednesday, September 3rd, 1800. With kind permission of The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, England. Author photos.

Fig 2: "The Coffin Stone at Grasmere."
https://www.flickr.com/photos/summonedbyfells/21635429406, used without changes as per creative commons license.

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