



A Note on the Ballad Version of 'Michael'

JONATHAN WORDSWORTH

THE stanzas of a ballad 'Michael' that survive in Wordsworth's *Christabel Notebook*¹ bear very much the same relation to the blank verse poem as the similarly unpublished and recently discovered 'Barberry-Tree'² does to the 'Immortality Ode'. That is to say, they show him presenting incongruously and in a comic vein material about which he is extremely serious. When Stephen Parrish, who first transcribed the stanzas, showed them to Helen Darbishire she was understandably shocked.³ Here was Wordsworth writing doggerel about a subject that should by rights have been sacred:

Two shepherds we have, the two wits of the dale,
Renown'd for song, satire, epistle & tale,
Rhymes pleasant to sing or to say;
To this sheepfold they went & a doggerel strain
They carved on a stone in the wall to explain
The cause of old Michael's decay.

But all their suggestions & taunts to repeat
And all that sly malice so bitter & sweet
My pen it would sadly distress;
When I say that our maidens are larks in their glee
And fair as the moon hanging over the sea
The drift of those rhymes you will guess.

Now from this day forward to tie up your [tongues],
To teach you to make better use of your lungs,
An hour will I spend to relate

¹ MS. *Verse 18* in the Wordsworth Library, Grasmere. The ballad 'Michael' is the subject of R. S. Woof's 'John Stoddart, *Michael* and Lyrical Ballads', *Ariel*, April 1970, pp. 7-22.

² For a text and account of 'The Barberry-Tree', cf. Jonathan Wordsworth, 'The New Wordsworth Poem', *College English*, vol. 27, no. 6 (March 1966), pp. 455-65.

³ The incident is recalled by Professor Parrish in '*Michael* and the Pastoral Ballad', *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, Ithaca, 1970, p. 53 n.

What old Michael once told me while on a loose [stone]
 One sweet summer's morning depress'd [and] alone
 By the edge of his sheepfold he sate.¹

Dr Woof in his recent essay has some very interesting suggestions to make about Wordsworth's composition of the two 'Michaels'. Like Professor Parrish, of whose M.L.A. paper on the ballad version (delivered at the Convention of Christmas 1963) he seems not to be aware, he assumes that the ballad precedes, and is in some sense a source of, the blank verse poem. The enigmatic references to 'the sheepfold' in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal* of October and early November 1800 are taken to indicate her brother's work on the ballad, while the composition of 'Michael' proper belongs to c. 15 November–9 December. The major new piece of evidence adduced by Dr Woof is that John Stoddart, who was at Grasmere 30 October–4 November, led the poet's brother, Captain John Wordsworth (in London between voyages), to expect that 'Michael' would be 'a poem in rhyme'. 'I was at the first reading,' John writes to William at the end of January 1801,

disappointed with Michael. At the second reading I was not a little pleased — but latterly I have been excessively delighted with it. When I first read it I though[t] the circumstances too minute & the language too low for a blank verse poems [sic] — from what Stoddart had told me I thought it would have been a poem in rhyme — but I now think it most interesting . . .²

Stoddart did not apparently say that Wordsworth was writing 'Michael' in rhyme; he said something that led John to infer it. We don't know what. In John's central sentence, though the original is unpunctuated, it is clear that the words 'from what Stoddart . . . a poem in rhyme' are in parenthesis. It is not however, clear whether John is reinforcing his previous statement ('When I first read the poem I thought the content and language too low for blank verse — in fact from what Stoddart told me of these things I'd inferred the poem would be in rhyme . . .'), or saying that as well as feeling as he read that the

¹ The text is that presented by Professor Parrish in the article previously cited, pp. 74–5, but with additional punctuation.

² *The Letters of John Wordsworth*, ed. Carl H. Ketcham, Ithaca, 1969, p. 83. Punctuation is mine, and on two small points I agree with Dr Woof's reading of the manuscript against Professor Ketcham's. John's deletions have been omitted.

matter was too low for blank verse, he had had information of a *different kind* that led him to expect a rhymed poem. Dr Woof takes the second interpretation for granted. I tend to think it the more probable, but the looseness of John's sentence structures, and the abruptness of his transitions, leave one no confidence in guessing the patterns of his thought. And though it is odd that he should have done so after, presumably, reading 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Brothers', John seems to have felt strongly that blank verse was to be reserved for elevated subjects.¹

If we assume with Dr Woof that John Wordsworth had grounds other than subject-matter and decorum for expecting a poem in rhyme, his words have two important implications: that a ballad 'Michael' preceded the blank verse, and that it was a poem of considerable length — Wordsworth seems to have been at work on it for three weeks when Stoddart left Grasmere. One striking anomaly remains: the fact that Wordsworth was working at 'the sheepfold' (the ballad, we must assume) on 11 November, although according to his sister he had burned it on the 9th.² It may well be that without new evidence the problem cannot be solved, but it has to be said that Dr Woof's suggestions are not very plausible. 'The solution,' he writes:

probably is that a fragment that survives in [the Christabel Notebook] is either Wordsworth's final attempt to rescue the poem he had burnt, or a beginning of 'Michael', incorporating elements from the earlier poem, and still entitled 'The Sheepfold'.³

This is certainly a convenient way of explaining the final 'sheepfold' reference; but what the stanzas actually look like is not a rescue operation, or work towards anything that we can conceive

¹ The view that John's statement is inconclusive was put to me very ably by Karen Trosser of University College, London. For further evidence that John initially thought the subject-matter of 'Michael' too low for blank verse see his letter to Mary Hutchinson of 24 February 1801 — 'At the first I thoug[ht] [it] rather vulgar, which particular[l]y [ought to be] avoided in a blank verse poem . . .' (*The Letters of John Wordsworth*, p. 94). Charles James Fox, of course, reacted in much the same way to 'The Brothers' and 'Michael': 'I am no great friend to blank verse for subjects which are to be treated of with simplicity' (*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. A. B. Grosart, 3 vols, 1876, ii, p. 205).

² 'burned' is a conjectural reading, but no convincing alternative has been suggested.

³ Op. cit., p. 13.

of as 'Michael', but an attempt to create an introduction or framework for a poem otherwise complete — and by implication still in existence.

Dr Woof at this stage is in a hurry, and does not pause to tell us what may be inferred from the placing of the Christabel stanzas on the page. Wordsworth's ballad drafts occupy the recto and verso of the second extant leaf of the notebook (counting from the back; Wordsworth worked from both ends of the manuscript), and spread onto the recto of the third. At the top of the page when he began to write was a stanza which, as Mark Reed has pointed out (in *Wordsworth, The Chronology of the Early years 1770-1779*, 1967, p. 323) is closely connected with 'A Character', the outspoken but affectionate satire on Coleridge that also belongs to the autumn of 1800:

Deep read in experience perhaps he is nice,
On himself is so fond of bestowing advice
And of puzzling at what may befall,
So intent upon baking his bread without leaven
And of giving to earth the perfection of heaven,
That he thinks and does nothing at all.

Below this on the recto Wordsworth has composed the three stanzas of the ballad 'Michael' quoted above, the third being rewritten at the top of the verso. It is impossible to be sure of the precise stages of composition, but at some point he also, (a) incorporated the draft from 'A Character', by twisting the first two lines into a facetious reference to Michael —

Perhaps the old man is a provident elf,
So fond of bestow[ing] advice on himself . . .

— and, (b) scrawled half-way down the verso some disconnected lines clearly intended to be spoken by Michael to Luke at the sheepfold:

We've loved & we've cherished the fear of our [God]
Should [thou] stir from the path which thy fath[ers] trod]
Then think of this sheepfold, my Son, let it be
Thy Anchor and watch tower, a bond between thee
And all that is good in thy heart . . .

These last exceptionally rough drafts are quite distinct from the earlier stanzas, and must surely be explained as reworking of

lines from a complete, or largely complete, poem, broadly corresponding to 'Michael' as we know it.

Dr Woof would like to see the ballad 'Michael' as comparable to 'The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale', and is not unnaturally worried by the degree of facetiousness shown in the surviving stanzas:

The insistent rhythm here recalls such poems as 'The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale', even 'The Convict'; the stanzaic form is one which, as in many other poems, Wordsworth invented; but, despite the professionalism, the stanza has an awkward potential for sounding facile and trite. Yet the fragment does contain some elements that are carried over to 'Michael' . . .¹

The claim of professionalism would not be easy to support. Dr Woof is forced to make it because he cannot accept that Wordsworth's triteness and clowning are deliberate. Here the poem's connection with 'A Character' might well have helped. Wordsworth had at the top of his page, and at some point took into the ballad, six jocular lines about Coleridge. In this context it is not difficult to identify 'the two wits of the dale, / Renown'd for song, satire, epistle & tale', though for some reason Dr Woof does not do so. Clearly what we have is a kind of in-joke: having laughed at Coleridge, Wordsworth is now poking fun at himself as well. And yet on the verso is the draft connected with the central episode of the blank verse poem — the laying of the cornerstone. Here too Wordsworth's idiom is incongruous, but a great deal of the story of 'Michael' is implied, and it is hard to see how his intention can have been other than serious. Without this draft one would have taken the earlier stanzas to be a form of self-parody, a joke against himself written by Wordsworth as reparation after finishing 'A Character'. As it is, one must look for a different explanation. The only one that seems to fit is that Wordsworth is writing a prologue for a completed poem, and incidentally including a private joke. Both 'The Ruined Cottage' and *The Prelude* show his tendency to start straight in and then go back to write an opening section; but the close parallel here is with 'Peter Bell', where the manuscripts show that he attached what seems to us disproportionate importance to writing and rewriting a humorous introduction:

¹ 'John Stoddart, *Michael* and Lyrical Ballads', *Ariel*, April 1970, pp. 13-14.

'My dearest Sir,' cried Mistress Swan
 'You've got at once into the middle,'
 And little Bess in accents sweeter
 Cried 'O deal Sir, but who is Peter?'
 Said Harry 'Tis a downright riddle.'
 The Squire said 'Sure as Paradise
 Was lost to us by Adam's sinning
 We are all wandering in a wood,
 And therefore, Sir, I wish you would
 Begin at the beginning.'¹

It is almost as if Wordsworth were involved in the dramatic situation for its own sake; but in strategic terms he presumably wished to attract the reader with his clowning before the narrative proper begins. Was something of the kind perhaps true of the facetious ballad stanzas that survive in the *Christabel* Notebook?

¹ *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 5 vols, Oxford, 1940-9, ii, p. 339, *apparatus criticus*.

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The third-year boy, baffled by questions about God,
 Held a tiny plastic skull for luck,
 Starting young, hoping he was right;
 Later, thinking what on earth to say,
 He cuddled it. So they kept each other warm.

Once, in days further off from wishing,
 It might have been St Christopher, whose back
 Bore him to his master's good report,
 Or a vernicle sewn upon his cap
 To pardon all his errors with her charm.
 But now it was his age's latest joke,
 Sick as he was in his schoolroom flight
 From knowledge. So he took possession
 Of the favour to which he too must come;
 And as I watched him struggling with the word,
 And though I knew that time was on his side,
 I saw the plaything blacken in his grip,
 And death winking in his bright and early eye.

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