

Links of Love in “Michael”

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I

Wordsworth's poem “Michael” has a subtitle “A Pastoral Poem.” There is no such kind of poem as “pastoral” in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1798. But there are altogether five pastoral poems including “Michael” in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800. So, it is possible to imagine how strongly Wordsworth wanted to write pastoral poems after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 from the simple fact that there is a big difference in the treatment of “pastoral” between the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and the second edition.

The history of pastoral is very old and goes back to the Hellenistic or Alexandrian age of Greek literature and the Greek poet Theocritus, who wrote poems about shepherds in Sicily, is said to be a founder of pastoral. Originally, pastoral takes shepherds or other people in the countryside as its subject and tells that they are free from the vices and sorrows of those who live in more complex societies. Also, it often means poetry in which poets disguised as shepherds talk about their work or other daily matters. Theocritus thought that love, nature and art should be his themes in pastoral, and he was succeeded by the Roman poet Virgil who wrote “eclogues” in which love, nature and art were also his themes. Established by Virgil, this pastoral world with a peaceful country life as

its background, has become a wide stream and developed into a great convention of European literature. It was the priest Alexander Barclay who first wrote formal pastoral eclogues in English. He probably wrote five eclogues in the 1520' s and since then, many great poets have followed this pastoral tradition in England.

The central authors in English pastoral tradition are said to be Sidney, Spenser, Milton, Pope and Wordsworth. For Wordsworth, pastoral was a form of poetry he had to try at any cost before he wrote a long epic which was to guarantee his fame as a real great poet. It was quite natural that Wordsworth, in the same way as many other great poets had done before, should write pastoral a genre which younger poets were supposed to write as a study.

It is obvious from the number of pastorals published in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, as mentioned earlier, that Wordsworth was very interested in pastoral, an underlying tradition of European literature, and also it can be pointed out by a technical analysis that "Michael" is written in accordance with a traditional form of pastoral. That is, "Michael" "takes the life of a real shepherd as its subject and is cast in conventional eclogue form, inasmuch as the narrative is framed by an introduction (1-39) in which the poet declares his purpose in telling so homely and rude a 'domestic' tale."¹

Thus, Wordsworth follows a conventional pastoral form and addresses "youthful poets" who will succeed him as a poet, his strong will to follow the tradition of Theocritus. In other words, as Theocritus in Idyll 7 describes Lycidas giving Simichidas "his wild olive staff as a gift from the Muses," so Wordsworth addresses the young poets who will take over his task as a poet.

Furthermore, the enthusiasm for Theocritus Wordsworth had after *Lyrical Ballads* was published in 1798, is expressed in a letter (27

February 1799)² he wrote to Coleridge who was then in Göttingen. Wordsworth tells Coleridge that idylls of Theocritus and their own lifestyles have something in common and advises him to read Theocritus. And Wordsworth's devotion to Theocritus is strongly expressed at the end of Book 10 of *The Prelude* in the 1805 version. Wordsworth addresses "I lov'd/To dream of Sicily" to Coleridge who was at that time traveling in the Mediterranean, and he goes on to describe the details of Lycidas's song about a goatherd-singer Comatas whom Theocritus introduces in idyll 7. He gently tells Coleridge how bees fed divine Comatas with honey from the fields. Comatas was shut in a chest by his tyrant lord, to be starved to death, and the goatherd-singer had survived many months "Because the Goatherd, blessed Man! had lips/Wet with the Muse's Nectar" (1027-28).

As A. J. Sambrook says, "Reference in *The Prelude* to this famous pastoral allegory of the divine power of poetry is itself a kind of bucolic masquerade,"³ Wordsworth wishes he were a rural poet like Lycidas, and his wishes will lead to his recognition of a similarity between Theocritus and himself. Sambrook interprets this allegory as "a brotherly tribute from Wordsworth – Lycidas, the true rural poet, to Coleridge – Comatas, the divine singer,"⁴ and this myth conveys not only Wordsworth's strong friendship with Coleridge, but his strong admiration for Theocritus. And it is no wonder that Wordsworth feels the same strong feelings that Theocritus felt towards shepherds such as Theocritus had described.

Wordsworth's gentle feelings of love towards shepherds are revealed in Book 8 of *The Prelude*:

My first human love,
As hath been mention'd, did incline to those
Whose occupations and concerns were most

Illustrated by Nature and adorn'd,
 And shepherds were the men who pleas'd me first. (VIII. 178-82)

For Wordsworth, who was brought up watching shepherds nearby, the shepherds would have been very important as one more aspect of nature that had watched him grow up. Therefore, it was quite natural that Wordsworth should compose "Michael," a pastoral poem with a shepherd as its theme, and the reason he chose "Low and rustic life" as his setting lies partly in his love of shepherds.

Wordsworth thinks that "the poet has a special bond with rustic life"⁵ and he says in *the* "Preface" of 1800:

Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language...; and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.⁶

Wordsworth must have thought that such a way of life led by shepherds, who live daily in accordance with nature, was an ideal way of life for men, and their rustic life was probably one of the most appropriate materials of his poems.

II

Wordsworth begins by telling us that "There is a straggling heap of unhewn stones!" (17) beside the brook of Green-head Gill, and he is going

to tell the reader about a story told of that place. Then a protagonist of this poem appears, soon after the introduction, which can be taken as a quiet prologue:

Upon the Forest-side in Grasmere Vale
 There dwelt a Shepherd, Michael was his name,
 An old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb.
 His bodily frame had been from youth to age
 Of an unusual strength; his mind was keen
 Intense and frugal, apt for all affairs,
 And in his shepherd's calling he was prompt
 And watchful more than ordinary men. (40-47)

This is so concise a characterization of Michael that anyone could understand what sort of person this old shepherd Michael is. He is introduced as an old man who has a body "Of unusual strength," and whose "mind was keen/ Intense and frugal, apt for all affairs." Michael is a strong old man such as anyone would like to be when he grows old. It seems unsuitable to call him an old man. He is sound in mind and body, and more skillful in his job than ordinary shepherds. In short, he seems to be free from faults for all his age. This is a story which took place about two hundred and sixteen years ago and Michael is thought to be 80 years old. It is quite admirable that Michael, of such an old age, can actually fulfill a lot of the shepherd's toil more promptly than ordinary shepherds.

Also, "he had learn'd the meaning of all winds,/ Of blasts of every tone" (48-49), and "heard the South/ Make subterraneous music" (50-51) although other people did not notice. In fact, he can swiftly cope with any change of the winds, and he is so experienced and impeccable a shepherd

as to be a model for all other shepherds. Michael is well aware of the severity of nature and never makes light of it, and yet he lives frugally in the vale of Grasmere with more love of nature than anyone else. He never lets us feel any inconveniences of his old age, and there is nothing gloomy or miserable about the hardworking Michael that could remind us of his old age. Furthermore, so praiseworthy is Michael as to be a model shepherd that he is described as an impeccable, good-natured character. His attitude makes him a man of good nature when Michael, who stood surety for his nephew, is ordered to pay the loss for him.

Michael at first decides to sell a part of his hereditary fields when he is forced to pay a severe penalty, which is nearly half his property. He has great disappointment when he makes this decision. Michael talks to his wife Isabel two nights after he heard the unfortunate news, but he never thinks ill of others.

He has been working hard for more than seventy years, and he has lived "in the open sun-shine of God's love" (239), and yet he has done nothing wrong, so he could never accept such bad treatment in return for his diligence. Besides, he is more and more disappointed when he says, "if these fields of ours/ Should pass into a Stranger's hand, I think/ That I could not lie quiet in my grave." (240-2).

He regrets to have stood surety for his nephew out of his kindness and is sorry for his foolishness, but he never blames his nephew, who had started all this tragedy. Michael shows his disappointment by saying, "the Sun itself/ Has scarcely been more diligent than I" (243-4), and when he cries over his misfortune, his disappointment sounds more miserable because of his good-natured character. And lastly, he tries to calm down by not making much of this loss; he decides to forgive his nephew and to take everything on his own. Forced into such a predicament, most people would

strongly blame the man who has put them into the position, but, being a good-natured character, he never asks others to take responsibilities and he simply blames himself for his own foolishness.

The humane character of Michael is described as exemplary along with his soundness in mind and body; therefore, the more generous and faultless his humane character becomes in forgiving and accepting everything, the more pitiful and sympathetic the future incidents happening to Michael's family sound in relation to his character. Thus, the perfect nature of Michael can be observed effectively by comparing it with rashness of Luke, his son.

In one sense, this story tells us that a good-natured person will often experience an injustice, and it is true of us nowadays, it also tells us some cruelty in the social contract in our society. Wordsworth himself never says a word about such an economical system whether it is good or bad, but he seems to suggest that such a wave of modernization as the economical system brought, impacted on simple, innocent and rustic people to undermine their life. His attitude was to defend the weak and the poor of society and it seems to remain unchanged in the same way as he opposed enforcement of the amended poor-law bill.

The relationship between father and son, which is the theme of this poem, is told chiefly by means of the extraordinarily strong love father Michael gives to his son Luke. Luke is a boy who was born when Michael began to feel his old age, and since he is Michael's only son, Luke is dear to him, more precious than anything in the world. Michael loves his son more deeply than he loves nature, and this excessive love of Michael's towards his son is even stronger than his love for his wife Isabel.

Michael's blind love towards his son is described in Wordsworth's considerably calm eye of observation. Michael's feelings as a father are

rather analytically explained in the line, “This Son of his old age was yet more dear – ” (150). The poet Wordsworth speaks for the benefit of Michael his natural feelings of fatherly love by saying, “that instinctive tenderness, the same/ Blind Spirit” (152-53) have made him show his instinctive love towards his son.

Any parents would feel this “instinctive tenderness” or care when they love their children, and they would embrace their children with “the blind spirit.” This blind spirit will often cause a split in a relationship between parents and children, but Michael loves Luke so strongly that he doesn’t recognize the weakness of blind love. Wordsworth calmly says in the eyes of an observer that children bring hope and expectations to their parents, while they cause some anxiety when those hopes or expectations fail. He suggests that there is always a shade of anxiety hanging over joy and makes us anticipate the sad ending of the story.

Children may be a symbol of love which cannot be replaced by anything else and give their parents some hope or strength to live life, but Wordsworth turns his eyes to uneasy situations of man, when future hopes or expectations cannot be fulfilled. We sometimes feel this anxiety drawing near like the dark shade of fate; this anxiety will become a realization of failure and disappointment, sufferings and sadness, and eventually death, the deepest sorrow of human beings. But, on the contrary, children would give their parents such great strength, support and encouragement as to confront those ordeals when they fall into anxiety. In a sense, Luke “was now/ The dearest object that he knew on earth.” (159-60) to Michael, who is encouraged to lead a life through Luke who seems to him as if he were another self.

Michael’s love towards his son is expressed frankly in these lines, “Exceeding was the love he bare to him,/ His Heart and his Heart’s joy!”

(161-62). His love seems as strong as can be and it is to increase more and more as Luke grows up.

When Luke was “full ten years old,” he went to the heights with his father without flinching from the severity of nature nor fearing the shepherd’s toil. This relationship was maintained by such a strong link of trust as you can see between fellow shepherds. In the view of Michael, who wanted his son to succeed him as a shepherd, his son was growing up as he had expected him to. The boy would have been as desirable as could be. We can feel a very spiritual mood in Luke from these lines, “from the Boy there came/ Feelings and emanations, things which were/ Light to the sun and music to the wind;” (210-12) and the boy inspired Michael in the same way as nature did. Luke’s liveliness has rejuvenated old Michael, and he could lead a daily life again in a constructive way. Michael was reminded by his son of the fresh light and the pleasant wind immanent in nature, and he would have felt himself reborn. Luke grew up under the protection of his father, feeling a strong link to Michael, and Luke became “his comfort and his daily hope.” (216) when he was eighteen years old.

In response to his father’s expectations, Luke grew up to be a good strong shepherd, and he appears to be virtuous so far. As for Michael, who has found his daily work harder than before, Luke would be a great help when Luke worked with him. His son could at least ease his hardships and shed the bright light of hope on his remaining life, which was not to last long. In the eyes of the father, nothing is more precious and lovable than his child. And if it was Luke whom Michael now could trust fully as his successor and to whom he could give ancestral estates, Michael would feel more encouraged. Luke, as it were, has become the son who could realize Michael’s long cherished dream, and he is now the one Michael can rely on in his short remaining life.

Of course—considered in connection with “Distrustful tidings” (219) and Luke’s fall at the last scene, which can be called an unexpected twist at the end of the poem—Michael’s expressions of love towards his son would appear very effective if also ironical in the course of the story. Such strong expressions of Michael’s love towards his son are repeated in the latter half of the poem:

I knew that thou could’st never have a wish
 To leave me, Luke, thou hast bound to me
 Only by links of love, when thou art gone
 What will be left to us! (410-13)

This is the scene where, on the day before he sends off his son Luke to his relative, Michael takes Luke to the brook side of Green-head Gill and tells him about his plan to build a sheep-fold. Since how Michael and Isabel feel about their son leaving home is told in these lines, “when thou art gone/ What will be left to us!” by Michael himself, the parting sadness between parents and son appears very pathetic. Luke is probably full of hopes for his future while still concerned about it. Michael knows very well how Luke feels, who doesn’t like to leave his parents for a city, and Michael doesn’t want him to go at heart. And yet there is no other choice but to send him out in order to keep his ancestral land.

Michael expresses and confirms the strength of his love towards his son in terms of the most striking words such as “links of love” and he also tries to mitigate somehow Luke’s anxiety as to his future. Nothing may be more important and encouraging to man than being bound to others by links of love. In a sense, these lines seem to be the most dramatic confession of love towards his son; Michael tells in his last speech to his son the meaning

of building the sheep-fold, as if to strengthen his links of love:

When thou art gone away, should evil men
 Be thy companions, let this Sheep-fold be
 Thy anchor and thy shield; amid all fear
 And all temptation, let it be to thee
 An emblem of the life thy Fathers liv'd,
 Who, being innocent, did for that cause
 Bestir them in good deeds. (416-22)

Originally, Michael had planned to build the sheep-fold with Luke, but now he cannot help building it on his own, since he has decided to send his son to his relative in the city to pay his nephew's debt. Therefore, he asks his son to lay the corner-stone at least. Thinking of the corner-stone Luke is to lay as an encouragement to himself, he is going to build the sheep-fold. It will be a strong foundation of his short remaining life for Michael to complete the new sheep-fold, and also, it will be what strengthens links between father and son.

Michael advises his son to protect himself with the memory of this sheep-fold, his anchor and his shield when he falls into evil temptation in the future. Michael encourages him to bear the sheep-fold in mind as a moral and spiritual prop to his life. As well, when he continues to say, "let it be to thee/ an emblem of the life thy Fathers liv'd," the sheep-fold becomes not a simple sheep-fold but a symbol of Michael's ancestors who had lived a worthy life "in good deeds." When he advises his son to think the sheep-fold as an honorable symbol of Michael's family and to lead a life true to its name, Michael would strongly feel how much responsibility he has for the ancestral land where he has lived.

Lastly, Michael pledges his son to complete the sheep-fold as a promise between them and firmly tells of his unchanging love towards his son:

– but whatever fate
 Befall thee, I shall love thee to the last,
 And bear thy memory with me to the grave.' (425-27)

Michael simply tells such strong feelings of love to his son, and they must be the deepest confession of love. His honest feelings towards his son are of overwhelmingly love. They suggest Michael's unconditional reliance on and strong expectations of his son, and he will accept the last sad fall of his son in this generous love.

It would not be easy to ruminate over how Michael feels about his son Luke when he has fallen in spite of all his generous love. He should probably be angry with his son. Michael has brought up Luke under his gentle care and, and in his own words, “– Even to the utmost I have been to thee/ A kind and a good Father,” (371-72) but his son has run away “To seek a hiding-place” (456) overseas without giving him any word.

It has become meaningless to complete the sheep-fold, which could prove his strong love towards his son; even to lead his own life has become meaningless for Michael. Some say that man's sorrow eases in due course of time, but it's not so easy for Michael, whose remaining days of life are numbered unlike young people who have many years for a sadness to grow light and be forgotten.

But Wordsworth sheds a streak of light on Michael in the depths of disappointment, and tries to bring hope to him who has to face a desperate state of his fatherly love. That is, needless to say, the strength of love generously takes everything, including sadness. Wordsworth gently

addresses Michael; there is no sorrow but has relief:

There is a comfort in the strength of love;
 'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
 Would break the heart:— Old Michael found it so. (457-59)

The poet's affection towards Michael seems to flood into the shepherd in these lines, and it becomes clear that Michael is going to endure his ordeal through the strength and magnificence of love. Helen Darbishire sympathizes with Michael, who silently endures his great despair, described in the same lines:

Those lines from *Michael* crystallize the quiet certainty of thought and feeling that are found in all his studies of simple men and women who are moved by the great emotions— who suffer through love, 'that is not pain to hear of', Wordsworth thinks,

for the glory that redounds
 Therefrom to humankind, and what we are.⁷

Here she seems to believe firmly as Wordsworth does, that there is a comfort or a relief of suffering or sadness in the strength of love.

Michael never shows his disappointment to other people even after he has heard the news of Luke's unbearable fall. He goes among the rocks, looks after his sheep and maintains his small inherited land as before. Such indifferent expressions or attitudes of Michael simply convey how hard he tries to endure the sadness in silence.

Of course, if these somewhat didactic lines about love are literally

interpreted, Michael probably continued to live with unchanged love towards his son and endured the cruel treatment of fate. Even if his son had run away to seek a hiding-place overseas without fulfilling his promise to Michael, he never blamed his son and accepted his betrayal with generous love. Thereafter, he continued his work as a shepherd enduring unbearable sadness in the strength of love.

As Jack Stillinger says, "He uses nearly four hundred lines to establish Michael's love of his land and of his son, to whom the land is to be passed on,"⁸ Wordsworth as a man rather than as a poet seems to have a great sympathy and strong empathy with Michael.

In the meantime, if this poem ends in the scene quoted, where "a comfort in the strength of love" is mentioned, this ending will sound a little didactic, if every suffering of Michael may be resolved by the strength of almighty love. A great deal of emphasis may be placed on sadness supported by the strength of love. Most readers sympathize with the sad figure of Michael who quietly accepts his painful fate.

But Wordsworth still continues to describe Michael's feelings as follows:

'Tis not forgotten yet
The pity which was then in every heart
For the Old Man— and 'tis believed by all
That many and many a day he thither went,
And never lifted up a single stone. (471-75)

After all this, Michael went to the valley in order to build the sheep-fold as if nothing had happened. But the last line, "And never lifted up a single stone" suggests Michael was immensely disappointed in his son. In fact, as Wordsworth explains after the quoted lines, Michael occasionally worked

to build this sheep-fold for the full seven years and left it unfinished when he died.

In normal circumstances, it is highly improbable that anyone could not build a single sheep-fold in seven years, but Michael may have lost the energy to do it. To Michael, all meaning has gone out of building the sheep-fold, and there is something like an indescribable sense of despondency and deep sadness about him. Therefore, the line, “And never lifted up a single stone” conveys how sadly Michael felt about Luke’s fall at that time.

Jonathan Wordsworth finds the situation of Michael rather hopeless as follows:

The Ruined Cottage and *Michael* are both about the refusal to admit despair, but there is the important difference that positive hope is possible in the one and not the other. Michael’s refusal shows itself in an acceptance of the hopelessness of his position, and an unrelenting continuation of the life he has always lived.⁹

Even Matthew Arnold praised Wordsworth for that line, “And never lifted up a single stone,” and Michael’s sense of despair which underlies it may have deprived Michael of his will to live and his small hope for his remaining life. Wordsworth also shows the same feelings of deep sympathy with Michael, and he tells the purpose of his long poem “Michael” in a letter to one of his friends as follows:

I have attempted to give a picture of a man, of strong mind, and lively sensibility, agitated by two of the most powerful affections of the human heart; the paternal affection, and the love of property, *landed* property, including the feelings of inheritance, home, and personal and

family independence.¹⁰

As described by Wordsworth, Michael is at a loss as to what to do with his fallen son Luke, caught between “the paternal affection” and “the love of property, *landed* property.” Michael, who suffers from the two opposite and different kinds of love, stands out in bold relief. As the last scene symbolizes, Michael’s feelings of sadness cannot be quite dispelled by the strength of love. Consequently, as Wordsworth says, wisely and mildly, “Poets do not write for poets alone, but for men.”¹¹ His serious intention to describe the agony of love between father and son is fully conveyed to the public.

Wordsworth himself never mentions for what reason the links of father’s love to his son were tragically broken. Michael thought he had found the best solution to his problem, but he ended up seeing his son no more. However, as far as the last scene is concerned, it successfully describes Wordsworth’s intention in writing the poem, and such a trifling inquiry as to the cause of the tragedy is left to the reader. H. W. Garrod refers to the necessity of poets to face reality in life by stating “They live by the bread of a common humanity, and not by taking in one another’s ‘tricks, quaintnesses, hieroglyphics, and enigmas.’”¹²; the sadness of love between father and son is described by “the poet” who “must descend from his supposed height” of imagination and become more realistic and impressive to the reader.

Notes

This critical essay is rewritten and translated into English from the original essay "The images of father and old man seen in pastoral poems 'Michael' and 'Simon Lee' in *Lyrical Ballads*," in *English and American Literature*, no. 46. Komazawa University, Department of English and American Literature, 2011.

1. James Sambrook, *English Pastoral Poetry* (Twayne, 1983) p. 126.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Picador, 2001) p. 12.
6. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (Routledge, 1991) p. 245.
7. Helen Darbishire, *The Poet Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1966) p. 172.
8. *William Wordsworth Selected Poems and Prefaces* ed. Jack Stillinger (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965) p. 525.
9. Jonathan Wordsworth, "The Ruined Cottage as Tragic Narrative," *Wordsworth A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. M. H. Abrams (Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972) p. 123.
10. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 311.
11. H. W. Garrod, *Wordsworth: Lectures and Essays* (Oxford, 1949) p. 168.
12. *Ibid.*