

Correspondence

'Michael', Mr Woof and Mr Wordsworth

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INASMUCH as Jonathan Wordsworth in his 'Note on the Ballad Version of "Michael"' (*Ariel*, II, April 1971) cited my text of Wordsworth's poem and my account of it,¹ it may seem fitting for me to speak of some matters raised by Robert Woof in his rebuttal.

The matter of the text, first. Since all of us involved in this debate are busy editing Wordsworth — Jonathan Wordsworth, Mr Woof, Mark Reed (drawn in by Mr Woof as one of the ordinarily 'sensible scholars' he is concerned to set straight), and I — and since it is wretchedly difficult first to read Wordsworth's text, then to get the right readings into print, we all need all the help we can provide each other. Thus I am grateful to Mr Woof for showing that the original first line of the 'Sheepfold fragment' read simply 'Perhaps' and was left incomplete. Contrasts in ink colour persuade me that he is right, and that the original first line I gave was in fact a later addition. At the same time I am not gratified — and I cannot suppose Jonathan Wordsworth is either — by Mr Woof's failure to reveal that Mr Wordsworth's text was, like Mr Woof's own text (*Ariel*, I, April 1970, p. 13), something like a 'readable version' of a draft, showing only revised readings, not the originals. This failure allows Mr Woof to seem to correct that text by supplying original readings in his rebuttal. It will not do to assert, as Mr Woof does (*Ariel*, II, p. 78, note 1) that Mr Wordsworth reads a word 'unequivocally' as thus and so. A 'readable version' does not call for, nor indeed allow, equivocation. Mr Wordsworth gives one reading, 'baking'; Mr Woof is not sure about the 'b' but he proclaims that 'there is an irrefutable "m"' (a letter nobody could desire to refute; both 'b' and 'm' are

¹ 'Michael and the Pastoral Ballad', *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, Ithaca, 1970, pp. 50-75. I provide a full transcript of the poem and facing photographs, pp. 72-5.

shown in my transcript). Similarly, the other word that Mr Woof cites in the same footnote appears to me to have first read 'delay' with the 'l' then overwritten by a 'c'; Mr Woof thinks there may be 'an extra minim', but is sure that 'there is no overwriting of the undeniable "l"' (a letter nobody could desire to deny). Readers are invited to look at the photographs and to consider how one might go about overwriting an 'l' with a lower-case 'c' except by using what I suppose Mr Woof means by 'an extra minim'. A look at the photographs will further show how very hard it is for any of us to straighten out Wordsworth's text. In his 'readable version' (*Ariel*, 1) Mr Woof (or the printer) leaves out a word in line 3 (making the metre unreadable) and misreads a word in line 13 ('larks' for 'taunts'). In his full transcription of one stanza (*Ariel*, 11) he silently restores the omitted word (in the line now numbered 6) and drops in an extra word in line 2 (which does help the metre; the reading of this line is otherwise ingenious, and I think right).

But clerly disputation about the way to read an almost unreadable text is not likely to engross readers of *Ariel*. More serious and more interesting is the matter of 'A Character' and its possible connections to the 'Sheepfold fragment' and to Coleridge. Mr Woof tells us that Jonathan Wordsworth's case for a connection is 'based on a comment by Mark Reed, based in its turn on an article by E. L. Griggs'. But Mark Reed's case is not based on Griggs (whom Mr Reed does scrupulously acknowledge). It is based on Coleridge and on manuscript evidence that Griggs knew nothing about. The MS. evidence — that Wordsworth had written some stanzas of 'A Character' before Robert Jones appeared at Dove Cottage in 1800 — Mr Woof recognizes at the very end, and summarizes it fairly in his last footnote (*Ariel*, 11, p. 78), guessing that it 'probably lurks at the root of Professor Reed's notion that there was originally a poem about Coleridge which Wordsworth turned into a poem about Robert Jones'. There was no need to guess. Mr Reed had laid bare the root of his notion, had indeed delineated the whole growth with botanical exactitude,¹ and it is hard to see how his summary could be more judicious.

¹ *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967, pp. 323-4.

The other evidence that connects Coleridge with 'A Character', Coleridge's own admission in 1802 that in the poem 'certain parts, & superficies' of himself were 'sketched truly', Mr Woof dismisses with a subjective assertion that rings like a cracked bell in this harmonious scholarly chime: 'the introverted man finds reflections of himself everywhere.' It is hard to know how to respond to an assertion of this sort, or to Mr Woof's objection that the 'description in "A Character" does not seem to me a just reflection of Wordsworth's view of Coleridge at any time, and certainly not in 1800'. Not long after the poem was written Coleridge said it *was* a just reflection of him, and this in a letter whose aim was to sketch his own character truly for his friend Godwin. Forty-odd years later Wordsworth said that the 'principal features' were taken from Robert Jones. If we had to believe one or the other, Coleridge might be the better choice. But the remarks are not contradictory. Why not believe them both, as Mr Reed proposed in 1967 and as Jonathan Wordsworth now shows us afresh, MS. evidence encourages us to do?

For the original readings of the first stanza of the 'Sheepfold fragment' carry no reference to an old man, or to long beards; those readings were added in a revision of the stanza. To this plain fact must be added another: the first stanza does not connect smoothly in sense with the stanza that comes below it on the page. (Mr Woof even concedes, *Ariel*, II, p. 78, that the original lines of this stanza are in a 'consistently darker ink' than the other stanzas.) I tried to account for this disjunction by guessing that the first stanza may have been intended to follow the second, perhaps as a piece of the doggerel strain mentioned therein. Jonathan Wordsworth, noticing as Mark Reed had, the similarity of manner and tone between the first stanza and 'A Character' — the stanza form is obviously different, as Mr Woof justly emphasizes — points up another way of accounting for the disjunction: the first stanza in its original state may have described Coleridge and then been made into a part of the 'ballad Michael'. In support of this interpretation Mr Wordsworth advances the notion (obvious — but nobody had thought of it) that 'the two wits of the dale / Renown'd for song satire epistle & tale' may be the partners in *Lyrical Ballads*. The conjecture brings into focus the jocular qualities, the 'clowning' and the wit-play, of some of

Wordsworth's most interesting verse, including 'A Character', and Mr Wordsworth rightly compares 'Peter Bell', where the poet's MSS 'show that he attached what seems to us disproportionate importance to writing and rewriting a humorous introduction'. For the 'Sheepfold fragment', as Mr Wordsworth argues convincingly, looks like an aborted prologue or frame for a version of 'Michael' perhaps cast in the form of a lyrical ballad, then perhaps 'burnt' (as Mr Woof astutely suggests), but in any case abandoned in favour of the blank-verse narrative that tenacious Wordsworthians will have taught themselves to admire.

Eoliths

I give you this necklace (a string of beads),
 A wind-bell made of shell,
 And a rough brooch. With these,
 Not carved by wind or ice, I thank you:

Before, only a few, chipped stones,
 The Permafrost that held
 Whole herds of mammoths by the heels.

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The July issue will contain: 'Yeats and the Professors' by Maurice Elliott; 'Yeats and Dr Gogarty' by D. J. Huxley; 'W. B. Yeats and Gordon Craig' by Alan Tomlinson; 'The Cardinal and the Countess' by Austin Clarke; 'Yeats's "The Cap and Bells": A Probable Indebtedness to Tennyson's *Maud*' by Fred Milne; 'The Early Poetry of W. B. Yeats' by Daphne Fullwood; 'The Secret Rose and Yeats's Dialogue with History' by Augustine Martin; and 'The Queen and the Jester' by Richard Londraville.