

William Wordsworth: Poetry, People and Place

Week Three Summing-up Articles

Wordsworth and Class in 'Michael'. (FP)

There has been much debate this week about Wordsworth's depiction of a mountain shepherd and whether or not it is accurate – or whether or not it needs to be or ever can be accurate. To begin with, Wordsworth's contributions to the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* had already set the types of character he aimed to represent. He wrote 'The Female Vagrant', 'The Thorn', 'The Last of the Flock', 'The Mad Mother', 'The Idiot Boy', 'The Old Man Travelling', 'The Forsaken Indian Woman' and 'The Convict'. The character in 'Michael' is part of his poetic purpose, as laid out in the Preface. Many of you mentioned his privileged up-bringing and how that separated him from the farm labouring class and the people represented in these poems. While this is to an extent true, Wordsworth had a 'voice', he was an incredibly talented poet and knew he could communicate to a large audience. The people he represented in his poems didn't have a 'voice' and so perhaps he saw himself as some use. He clearly empathised with their plight and applied his talent to their cause. There were few other writers willing or able to do so then. John Clare's poetry was not published at the time of 'Michael.'

We could also ask whether or not it is necessary for a writer to have experience of the task in question in order to write about it? Wordsworth was championing the imagination, he wasn't an investigative journalist. Many writers today do carry out extensive research into their subjects, actors do the same with their characters. They are pursuing a degree of authenticity that, it is felt, would be missed if they didn't. I read of an exchange between Dustin Hoffman and Laurence Olivier on the set of the film 'Marathon Man', where Hoffman asked what Olivier was doing to prepare for the part (Hoffman had apparently run a marathon). Olivier replied by asking if he had tried 'acting.'

What is interesting about current novels or writing generally is this sense of experience and 'autobiography'. This style of writing is a product of the eighteenth-century origins of the novel. With the impact of empirical philosophy – you could discover the truth through your own senses, through experience and observation – writers explored the individual and their environment. They rejected the grand universals of the previous generations and tried to approach the individual character through a degree of realism. What was perceived as improbable, or supernatural, was rejected in favour of the probable (the literary Gothic took a different turn). It's worth considering the early novels, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, *Jonathan Wild*, *Joseph Andrews*, Richardson's *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and, of course, Boswell's great biography of Samuel Johnson. Into this exploration of the individual and their context, lands the mighty poem, *The Prelude* (though kept from view till 1850) – the growth of a poet's mind. Wordsworth was an early writer who shaped our current understanding of 'authentic' or autobiographical writing. However, we have taken it much further.

As we are looking at the individual and their environment (sense of place), it may be worth giving a thought to Wordsworth's context and class differences. A somewhat abrupt start could be made by the great radical romantic essayist, William Hazlitt who, when writing on Wordsworth's poem *The Excursion*, wrote this about Wordsworth's neighbours:

All country people hate each other. They have so little comfort that they envy their neighbours the smallest pleasure or advantage, and nearly grudge themselves the necessities of life. From not being accustomed to enjoyment, they become hardened and averse to it – stupid, for want of thought – selfish, for want of society. There is nothing good to be had in the country, or, if there is, they will not let you have it. They had rather injure themselves than oblige anyone else. Their common mode of life is a system of wretchedness and self-denial.

Not much sentiment there! These were hard times and the empathy or sentiment Wordsworth showed was not necessarily shared. The slave trade was not abolished in the British Empire until 1807 and even then, slavery continued. Lancaster, just south of the Lake District was one of the country's major ports in the slave trade. During the French Revolutionary period and the Napoleonic Wars the government's reaction to dissent was brutal, it included the death penalty. In 1819 the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester showed how little had changed since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 at Waterloo. Boswell, as a lawyer, in the late eighteenth century writes about his efforts to acquit John Read for sheep stealing – he couldn't and Read was hanged. There were many ways to get the death penalty. Blake's poems give voice to the child labourers and prostitutes of the time as well. Dickens picked up where they left off – his books are full of the abuse of children. In this context, I feel that Wordsworth's position is a sympathetic one and given the political position, one he had to be careful with.

'Michael' and biblical references. (FP)

Also, there has been much discussion about the biblical allusions in 'Michael'. The name, of course, is evident throughout Chronicles as Michael is described in relation to Adam, and 'Michael' is the name of one of the archangels. His story and relationship with his son, Luke, has parallels throughout the book of Genesis with Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (son of his old age – Genesis 21 and 37). The parable of the prodigal son in Luke, 15, is also a major influence.

It would be very hard for any writer brought up in a society that (on the whole) believes in the teachings of a 'great book' – i.e. The Bible, The Koran. Even apart from our own religious up-bringing and beliefs, they are embedded in our education, our social laws, values, morals, ethics – our language and culture! In Wordsworth's time the books that most households kept would be the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and, probably, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Elements of these books would be firmly embedded in the imagination and memory of most people. They were much more likely to learn verses by rote than many people of today. Even the great geologists and scientists of the day still believed in Christianity and the teachings of the Bible after they had discovered the enormity of geological time – in direct contrast to the Book of Genesis. They did not take the Bible literally

and saw it as a wealth of teachings. This is evident in Wordsworth's use of it in 'Michael.' It could be read as an 'up-date'!

It is perhaps also worthy of note that Wordsworth was expected to take up a job in the church after leaving Cambridge – he clearly didn't. However, in the early 1820s he was writing a form of Christian church history in his Ecclesiastical Sonnets. His relationship with the church was a complex one.