Mr Woof's Reply to Mr Wordsworth

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I AM unpersuaded by Mr Wordsworth's strictures on my article, except on one point, and there I am glad to be able to offer some clarification. His note has properly drawn my attention to one sentence in my essay on 'John Stoddart, "Michael" and *Lyrical Ballads*' (*Ariel*, 1970, p. 13) which imperfectly expresses my meaning. I had wished to suggest a solution to the anomaly that Wordsworth, having, according to Dorothy, burnt the 'Sheepfold' on 7 November, was still working on it on 9 November. That solution, I think, and here explain at greater length, is most likely one of the following: either, that Wordsworth tried to rescue the poem he had burnt and so drafted out more stanzas such as those that survive in the Christabel Notebook (allowing, but not presuming, that those stanzas, which I am calling the 'Sheepfold' fragment, might themselves be the work of 9 November); or, he made a beginning of the blank verse 'Michael', the poem we now have, which, incorporating elements from the earlier poem, Dorothy would still call the 'Sheepfold'. I should add that that same imperfect sentence in my original article was guilty also of giving an incorrect meaning to a word (this error passed unnoticed): 'salving' sheep is not 'washing' them, but greasing or oiling the animals in order to protect them through the winter.

My concern with the 'Sheepfold' in April 1970 was limited to the place the fragment occupied in my narrative of Stoddart and Wordsworth. But Mr Wordsworth moves into a different direction, into speculation about the purpose and nature of the 'Sheepfold' fragment, and here, I feel he is misleading.

His difficulties with the interpretation of John Wordsworth's letter seem unnecessary. First, since the fragment of the rhymed poem about Michael and a sheepfold does exist, it seems perverse to imagine that it may not have been of this composition that Stoddart spoke to John Wordsworth. John could not have known of the poem at first hand since work on the 'Sheepfold', according

to Dorothy's *Journal,* began probably early in October; John had left Grasmere on 29 September. By this date the proposed contents of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) volume were pretty well known and one would expect John to take a particular interest in any new poem Wordsworth was working on. Second, despite a certain cryptic quality in John's writing, I do, unlike Mr Wordsworth, think it possible to discern a pattern of thought in his critical remarks. It was surely lowness of language rather than content that John found primarily disturbing on his initial reading of 'Michael'. This is made clear from a sentence in John's letter to Mary Hutchinson of 24 February 1801, partially and misleadingly quoted by Mr Wordsworth in his footnote 7. The whole of the relevant section is as follows (the letter is torn, but some of the missing words are supplied in brackets; I am following generally Professor Ketcham's text, but excluding John's deletions, and editorial punctuation):

> Your opinion of Michael i[s the same] as my own at the first I thoug[ht] rather vulgar which particular[l]y [ought to be] avoided in a blank verse poem — su[ch]es. that he c[d] look his trouble in the face — th[ese two days, has be]en meat and drink to me — but these objectio[ns I soon go]t the better of — the fathers Speech is [ ] pathectic — & I like the whole of the pa[tha]t man grossly errs — & [in] short [ ] admirable poem —

Clearly what John had at first found rather vulgar was the colloquialism of 'That he could look his trouble in the face' (l. 222) and 'Well, Isabel! this scheme These two days has been meat and drink to me' (ll. 274–5). On the next day he wrote to Mary again, feeling that he had been 'so short' in his last letter, and he reverts to 'Michael': 'I like your criticism of Michael & except the Language which you do not mention it has had the same effect upon me —' By 'criticism' John means opinion, and the 'effect' of course was pleasing. It is thus with 'Language' rather than subject-matter that he has been having difficulty, and, in the context of this, the earlier phrase, 'circumstances too minute & the language too low' of the letter of 29 January, takes on a very different sense from the one Mr Wordsworth gives it. He interprets 'minute circumstances' simply as 'content', and then as 'subject-matter', and this seems unwarranted: it would seem, — and the opinions in the letters help here — that John's original

objection was to the inclusion in 'Michael' of very circumstantial details of every-day life, such as colloquial speech. This element of course he finally found acceptable, especially to those 'who are acquainted & have lived in Cumbd.' — an explanatory part of John's sentence that Mr Wordsworth alas omitted to quote. The over-all subject-matter of 'Michael' for a blank verse poem John was not objecting to; as Mr Wordsworth himself points out, he had raised no similar objections to 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Brothers'.

In 'Michael' in a very marked way an every-day plainness of word is part of the precision with which Wordsworth describes manners and work habits, as well as modes of speech, and John's concern with this area of the poem most probably stems from his reading of John Stoddart's review of *Lyrical Ballads*. This was to appear in the *British Critic* for February 1801, and John, as he tells William in that same 'circumstances too minute' letter of 29 January, had just seen a copy of the review before publication. Although he deprecates the review as 'too flattering' and too obviously 'written by a friend', John's own criticism in the letter is clearly influenced by it — indeed this is the first of John's letters that shows any critical particularity at all. A relevant paragraph in Stoddart's review is as follows:

> Even where the feeling intended to be called forth is of a rich and noble character, such as we may recur to, and feed upon, it may yet be wrought up so gradually, including so many preparatory circumstances of appropriate manners, of local description, of actual events, &c. that the subtle uniting thread will be lost, without a persevering effort toward attention on the part of the reader. Who, that has studied Shakespeare, must not be conscious how often the connection of minute and trifling incidents with the main story has eluded his observation, until after repeated perusals? Something of this kind will probably occur to the readers of the *Brothers,* the *Cumberland Beggar,* and more particularly of the Poem, entitled *Michael*; yet these three are of the highest order of Poems in the volume.

This sort of perception is not a far cry from John Wordsworth's 'circumstances too minute'; and in the same review, perhaps anticipating John's sense of his being 'at first reading disappointed with Michael', and later being 'excessively delighted with it', Stoddart comments on the advantage of the 'subsequent perusal' which leads to an 'improving interest' in the poems.

Again, I feel compelled to disagree with Mr Wordsworth in his finding of a Coleridge 'in-joke' in the stanzaic 'Sheepfold' fragment and his connecting the fragment with the poem, 'A Character'. This connection, though based on a comment by Mark Reed (*Chronology of The Early Years, 1770–1799*, 323–4), based in its turn on an article by E. L. Griggs ('A Note on Wordsworth's *A Character*', *R.E.S.* IV, 1953, 57–63), I find untenable. The substance of the agreement between Griggs, Reed, and Jonathan Wordsworth is that 'A Character' is a poem about Coleridge. It is my first object to demonstrate that that poem was not written with Coleridge in mind, and then to show that that same poem 'A Character' has no necessary manuscript connection with the stanzaic 'Sheepfold' fragment.

When Wordsworth, for the third time (or second? See footnote 2, p. 78), wrote out in his manuscript notebook (Dove Cottage: Verse MS. 18A) the poem, 'A Character', he expanded the title to 'A Character in the Antithetical Manner', and this is a fair description of the modest poem sent off to the printer in the middle of October 1800 (so modest, in fact, did Wordsworth feel it that he omitted it from further editions until 1832). The poem begins:

> I marvel how Nature could ever find space
> For so many strange contrasts in one human face:
> There's thought and no thought, and there's paleness and bloom
> And bustle and sluggishness, pleasure and gloom.
>
> There's weakness, and strength both redundant and vain;
> Such strength as, if ever affliction and pain
> Could pierce through a temper that's soft to disease,
> Would be rational peace — a philosopher's ease.

There are five verses altogether, ending with the affectionate, perhaps slightly patronising,

> And I for five centuries right gladly would be
> Such an odd such a kind happy creature as he.

Wordsworth himself told Miss Fenwick in 1843: 'The principal features [in it *deleted in MS.*] are taken from that [Character] of my friend Robert Jones', a statement dismissed as faulty memory by Griggs. But on three counts, at least, it seems worth taking Wordsworth more seriously here. First, as we know from

Dorothy's *Journal,* Robert Jones, Wordsworth's Cambridge friend, was staying with the Wordsworths in September 1800. Second, Wordsworth's description of a man with an extraordinarily placid temperament seems, *pace* Griggs (though we cannot certainly call it accurate, as we have no other contemporary account of Jones), at least consistent with the character Wordsworth draws of his friend in a letter to his brother Christopher in 1825: commenting on a recent tour in Wales, Wordsworth writes:

> Jones was the best of companions, being master of the language, very extensively known in the Country, a most affectionate Man, and, I verily believe, the best-tempered Creature imaginable; to me, who am apt to be irritable in travelling, an inestimable qualification. (*Wordsworth Letters: Late Years,* ed. de Selincourt, I, 169.)

Third, and again in disagreement with Griggs and Jonathan Wordsworth, 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. Surely Wordsworth did not think of his friend as subservient, or as one who, 'if ever affliction and pain/Could pierce' the utterly gentle temperament, might attain to 'a philosopher's ease'[1] (stanza 2, 'A Character'); rather, he thought of Coleridge as indeed a philosopher, yet at the same time as a much more troubled person than the man behind 'A Character'. Book II of the *Prelude,* written before the middle of 1800, shows Wordsworth in affectionate admiration addressing his great poem to Coleridge, one to whom 'unblinded by these outward shews/ The unity of all has been reveal'd', but one who yet needs Wordsworth's final wish, 'Health and the quiet of a healthful mind/Attend thee!' This Coleridge who at that time was urging and pressing upon Wordsworth the need to write a critical Preface[2] seems to go far beyond the rather patronising limits drawn in Wordsworth's 'Character'.

[1] Nor does the earlier version of this seem any more applicable to Coleridge:

> Such strength as if ever affliction & pain
> Could pierce through his temper as soft as a fleece
> Would surely be fortitude, Sister of peace.

[2] Wordsworth told Barron Field in 1840:

'. . . the Preface was written at the request of Mr Coleridge out of sheer good nature. I recollect the very spot, a deserted Quarry in the Vale of Grasmere where he pressed the thing upon me, & but for that it would never have been written.' (British Museum, Add. MS. 41, 325, page 112).

That Coleridge himself should find in the portrait 'certain *parts,* and *superficies* of me *sketched* truly' should come as no surprise: the introverted man finds reflections of himself everywhere.[1] Coleridge is expressing no more than his recognition of a partial truth about himself that he has discovered in the poem. Yet this letter is taken by Griggs as the starting-point of the whole game of the finding of Coleridge behind 'A Character', and by Mark Reed, oddly enough, even as part confirmation of Griggs' final assertion that Coleridge supplied the 'principal features' of the poem.

It is worth examining the rest of Professor Reed's evidence that 'A Character' should be associated with Coleridge. (It should in fairness be added that Professor Reed does also allow Robert Jones a place in Wordsworth's mind as well as Coleridge.) The confirmation, he says, is 'draft work': he then quotes five lines from the six-line first verse of the stanzaic 'Sheepfold' fragment, omitting all reference to line 1 in its variant forms:

> On himself is so fond of bestowing advice
> And of puzzling through what may befall
> So intent upon making his bread without leaven
> And of giving to earth the perfection of heaven
> That he thinks and does nothing at all.

and says these 'almost certainly speak of STC'. Although he notes that the stanza pattern of 'A Character' and the 'Sheepfold' are not at all identical, he surprisingly finds this no bar to the pursuit of a connection between the two poems. This is because the 'Sheepfold' draft seems to Professor Reed to be originally about a man whose character resembles the portrait in 'A Character' — in his view, Coleridge.

Thus the connection is made, and its basis is little more than subjective assertion, and it is on this groundwork that Jonathan Wordsworth claims to show how the 'Sheepfold' fragment is 'emended' by Wordsworth and turned from being a poem about Coleridge to being one about Michael. All I can do to further counteract this view, is to describe in greater detail that first

[1] Compare A. E. Houseman's marginal note, 'This is me', against T. E. Lawrence's self-portrait in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Laurence Housman, *A.E.H.*, 1937, p. 99). For Coleridge's comment see his letter to Godwin of 22 January 1802 (*Letters*, ed. Griggs, II, 782).

stanza of the 'Sheepfold' fragment as it stands in the Christabel Notebook. It reads:

Perhaps the old man is a provident elf 1
[Perhaps *del.*] Like the [rest *del.*] most of the long beards he 2
[Deep read in experience perhaps he is nice *del.*] 3
[On himself is so fond of bestowing advice *del.*] 4
So fond of bestowin[g] advice on himself 5
And of puzzling [through *del.* at *inserted*] what may befall 6
So intent upon making[1] his bread without leaven 7
And of giving to earth the perfection of heaven 8
That he thinks and does nothing at all 9

It is not hard to see that the lines I have numbered as 1 and 5 are Wordsworth's final thoughts for the first two lines of the verse: they are written in a lighter ink and they are crammed on to the page, but I cannot see that they represent any change in direction; the other lines admittedly are written in a consistently darker ink, darker than both the two final lines (1 and 5) and than the other six-line stanzas about an old man on the rest of the page, but content and stanza form show them to be, and always to have been, one with the whole 'Sheepfold' fragment. Had sensible scholars not put forth the view that the above stanza was originally distinct from the remainder of the fragment and associated with such a poem as 'A Character', it would not have been necessary to demonstrate here that this stanza has been from its beginning a six-line verse: the original first line would begin 'Perhaps *del.*' (line 2) to be later filled in, and go on to lines 4, 6, 7, 8, 9.[2]

[1] Jonathan Wordsworth reads this unequivocally as 'baking'. If there is an initial 'b', it is not one that is characteristic of Wordsworth: the long descender of the 'g' of 'puzzling' in the line above is at first sight confusing, but there is an irrefutable 'm'. I adhere likewise to 'delay' in the last line of stanza 2 in my text of the fragment; although there is an extra minim which might suggest the reading 'decay', there is no overwriting of the undeniable 'l'.

[2] There is an interesting complication which has nothing to do with the 'Sheepfold', but 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. Earlier verses do indeed exist, but there is only speculation to connect them with Coleridge. We know that three verses of 'A Character' had been composed before Jones visited Grasmere at some length in September 1800. We know this from their presence on a stub — the remains of a cut out page where the initial letters of words can be seen. Thus, either Jones had been in Wordsworth's mind from an earlier date, or, after the September visit, Wordsworth took the three verses already composed and wrote two more, with Jones, now, if not before, decidedly his model. Mark Reed has noted this stub and that 'most of W's poem could date earlier than Jones's visit' and need not 'necessarily point to Jones'; but equally of course this need not necessarily point to Coleridge. My reasons for not accepting a Coleridge connection are given above. (continued on p. 79)

The genesis of the poem, 'A Character', merits a more exhaustive study than I can give here, but it is relevant to attempt briefly to describe that stub in the Christabel MS. There is no writing for an inch from the top of the recto page and the first line that appears is slightly indented; this probably indicates space for a title and the opening of a poem. From here to the bottom of the page are the beginnings of six evenly-spaced quatrains. The first three have not been identified; the last three are stanzas 1, 2, and 4 of 'A Character'. (When Wordsworth wrote out 'A Character' in its full version of five stanzas, first, late in the Christabel MS., and, secondly, in MS.18A, he retained this original stanza order, i.e. 1, 2, 4, 3, 5, but in 18A he indicated that stanzas 3 and 4 were to be reversed.) We can have no certainty about what was on the verso of the page, as, except for an 'ing' just over half way down — probably 'doing' at the end of line 18 of 'The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale' — no line endings have clearly remained. The stub of the following page contains quatrains from the last-named poem beginning at line 25. Thus, it is at least possible that three verses from 'A Character' were once a part of a version of 'The Farmer'. It may be no accident that the two poems, beyond their general similarity in form and manner, share an element: when 'The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale' was first published in the *Morning Post* for 21 July 1800, it had as its sub-title, the words, 'A Character' (a point not noted by de Selincourt, see my article, 'Wordsworth's Poetry and Stuart's Newspapers', *Studies in Bibliography*, 15, 1962, p. 173). It all suggests that 'The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale' suffered a kind of fission before 21 July, and that out of this came the origins of 'Poor Susan' (as Professor Reed notes), 'The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale' as we now have it, and 'A Character'.

The Bird in the Brittle Grass

The bird in the brittle grass
Mirrors its dryness.
In a hot season
Dust, it seems, must echo dust
And plumage fade with flowers.

At a sound, though, dull wings beat
And the air vibrates to a shriller blue
As bird flashes to branch,
Hangs there a moment bright
Then dies again to drabness.

Why wonder at it?
Stillness hides self-beauty
That only flares from movement.
Like you, he'd sooner stay safe
Than lovely.

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