



## Physical Corruption Turning to Ecological Purification in William Wordsworth's *Michael*

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Wordsworth (1770-1850) has often been credited for having a vital influence on the English “tradition of environmental consciousness” (Bate 9). While his poems are open to discussion from various critical perspectives, Eco criticism provides the reader with a more comprehensive understanding about the nature of the chosen poem, which focuses on the “three links in Wordsworth’s chain: nature, local community, and mankind” (33). The importance of pastoral elements here is owing to the fact that “its long history and cultural ubiquity mean that the pastoral trope must and will remain a key concept for the ecocritics” (Garrard 33). Many ecocritics tend to concentrate on pastoral elements of *Michael*, when it comes to the examination of the poem more than others. In fact, all the human beings enjoy rural simplicity and pastoral life on the grounds that “pastoralism represents an attempt to compensate for future shock by resort to an ethos of economic and spiritual simplicity that reincarnates the vision of a ‘simpler past’ ” (Buell 330). Likewise, the points dealt with in Wordsworth’s poems are less concerned with “sublime scenery” than are related to “everyday occurrences” of the “people who live in harmony with their natural surroundings” (McKusick 25).

Concerning the main focus of this paper, the writer intends to focus on the miraculous power of love of one’s land as the mediator that appeases Michael’s wounded heart and emotion after all the blights that befall him, as the result of his enormous parental love of his only son, Luke

Put simply, *Michael* is the story of a shepherd, “a typically Wordsworthian Nature figure” (Halpern 22), who lost half of his ancestral land as a surety for a nephew met with financial misfortune. In order to save the land, Michael sends his son, Luke, to his friend who is a merchant, so that he will learn a trade and earn enough money to regain their inherited property. He takes Luke to the heaped stones and asks him to lay “the corner-stone” (Wordsworth 403) as “a covenant / ’Twill be between us;” (415-416) and assures his son that “. . . whatever fate / Befall thee, I shall love thee to the last, / And bear thy memory with me to the grave” (415-417). Despite Michael’s wish, Luke gets caught in “ignominy and shame” (445) and betrays his father’s trust, with the result that Michael washes his hands of his son, gets back to Nature, and takes to leech gathering as a means of maintenance after so many years of toiling and toiling on his inherited land.

Wordsworth wrote to Thomas Poole, on Apr. 9, 1801, that “he had attempted to picture a man ‘agitated by two of the most powerful affections of the human heart; the parental affection, and the love of property, *landed* property, including the feelings of inheritance, home, and personal and family independence’ ” (1368). Read in the light of the Industrial and Enlightenment ideals, the poem is, in effect, a critique of the unjust system of the government, in which Michael can be considered as, “the silent public who suffer the injustice in the unfair society . . . [whose] authorities still violate the civil rights and lives of most people, especially those poor and illiterate people” (Yang 23). However, many

critics tend to analyze the poem in terms of Wordsworth's sense of loss and ecological rebirth in Grasmere. C. H. Tsai asserts Grasmere pictures "both a nostalgia for the paternal home he lost in his childhood and the demand for consolation"; thus, Wordsworth "tires to grasp the spreading joy, overflowing love, and safety provided by the vale to displace and to compensate for the senses of loss" (3)

The emphasis on Wordsworth's search for self-renewal and self-protection within the natural elements has been a concern for literary studies since the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth and Coleridge's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* inaugurated a "Copernican-like shift in poetry" (Palmer 76) that enabled them to substitute "the anthropocentric model of experience" with a "biocentric one" (76). In such a model, Nature is not viewed merely as an object; rather it is a living object that plays such an important role in human beings' lives. Simply said, in the "biocentric" model "'experience' is a general biological category not just a human one" (76). Such a shift in view created misunderstanding about Wordsworth and his ideas about Nature on the grounds that Wordsworth himself was aware of the fact that "his thoughts are somehow beyond his control". His thoughts were not, in fact, as in the "Cartesian tradition", "self-evident" or "knowable". For him "the mind is not fully present to itself but is always only to be understood as an encounter with the living agency of nature" (76-77). Thanks to the nourishing and comforting Nature, Wordsworth can find peace in his mind and do away with the disquietudes of the French and Industrial Revolutions. His encounter with Nature is an effort to remove the veil that has blurred humankind's vision of Nature.

Wordsworth's "devotion to nature was life-long; from first to last, he viewed himself as a follower of nature" (Habib 430) and saw Nature as "embodying a universal spirit" (428). As a result, he viewed the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* as, "a new kind of poetry both in theme and language" (Tilak 231). Nature and man in his relation to Nature became the most admirable poetic themes, since poetry should deal with pleasures and sorrows and show man in his natural ecosystem. Though all poems of Wordsworth, in one way or another, yield themselves to the presentation of love of Nature, *Michael*, more than other poems of him, showcases the symmetry of parental love and the love of Nature that proceed in the same direction. It, in fact, is a good example of Wordsworth's novel poetic contributions with regard to the application of the term "pastoral". More importantly it serves as a good justification for the belief that Wordsworth's *Preface* can be viewed as, "a successful endeavor in correcting the artificiality of Neoclassic poetic diction" (Parker 26).

Wordsworth's theory of poetry and his philosophical views are the keys to understanding his Nature poetry. As a matter of fact, Wordsworth originated a revolution in poetic taste and poetic themes. U. Natarajan claims, "*Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and more especially the 'Preface' that Wordsworth wrote to the 1800 edition, brought him to his contemporaries' notice as an experimenter and a poet with a 'system'" (63). Due to the "initial promise of the Revolution" and "the hopes of reform" that promised "reason, equality, and freedom" in an attempt to uproot "authority, caprice, hierarchy, and inheritance" of "feudalism", many Romantics were, at first, the major advocates of this movement (Habib 430). However, as time passed on, Wordsworth and his contemporaries reached a thorough understanding that opened their eyes to the real consequences of the Revolution. His poem, *Michael*, is a protest against the injustice, dominant in the Enlightenment Age, which created a gap between rural families and Nature. It shows Wordsworth's distancing himself from the primary principles of the Revolution that had promised fraternity, equality, and liberty among the nations (J. Svoboda 6).

Witnessing such and such issues at the time of high social and political turmoil planted the seeds of admiring Nature and finding consolation in her within Wordsworth. To Wordsworth, Nature served as a unifying element that granted liveliness to him and his contemporaries' lives at the dawn of French Revolution. He supported Nature as, "a fundamental unity, and here a human community resting on

equality is held to be an integral part of that unity” (Habib 430). Despite the charges attributed to him, Wordsworth’s interest in Nature was far more different from what Keats called “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” (qtd. in McKusick 25).

Since the emergence of the Yale School criticism in 1970s and the New Historicism in the 1980s, many critics have questioned Wordsworth’s interest in Nature as a source of inspiration and maintained that Nature for Wordsworth has been a key to elevate his imaginary powers. In, *The Visionary Company* (1971), Bloom has cast doubt on the notion that the Romantics were basically Nature poets. In his article, entitled “A Poet’s Progress: Wordsworth and the ‘Via Naturaliter Negativa’ ” (1962), through his analysis of *The Prelude*, Hartman agrees with the critics who have “pointed to the deeply paradoxical or problematic character of Wordsworth’s dealings with Nature and suggested that what he calls Imagination may be *intrinsically* opposed to images culled or developed from Nature” (214).

As a New Historicist critic, McGann sets himself against this conviction and gives priority to history and society. The clash between the New Historicists and Yale School critics gave rise to the new critical standpoints. As a matter of fact, imagination is a pivotal requisite, in addition to Nature, in the Romantic poetry; the Romantics believe that the “primary power” of imagination can give readers “the sense of wonder,” which is a major function of poetry (Kuo 188).

In “The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor” (1957), Abrams delineates that the Romantic lyric follows the structure of description-meditation-description, in which the poet’s meditation is of more significance than the description of the landscape (123-125). It seems that the Romantic tradition was grounded upon imagination, rather than Nature. However, the Romantics, without doubt, occasioned a new angle of vision wherein Nature was regarded as a mirror that reflected the result of the humanity’s conducts and misdeeds. In such a new vision, Nature was the promising element that had granted meaning to Michael’s life from the outset to the end and had inspired and strengthened his exhausted skeleton after witnessing his son’s wrongdoings in the city. In his effort to present a “lived experience” to the reader, in most of his poems, Wordsworth gives voice to a speaker who has a thorough understanding of Nature and as the supreme conciliatory factor reaches mental and physical comfort in Nature. Through the interaction between his mind and Nature Wordsworth finds an “immanent presence” (Kuo 215), which is found in the external Nature. His giving voice to natural elements in his poems is an effort to escape the sorrows and agonies of the human world. As Havens suggests, “At times Wordsworth’s personification of external nature merges with, or is expressed in a way that suggests, belief in Mother Earth . . .” (qtd. in Kuo 215). Nature and natural surroundings are the nourishing prerequisites that provide Wordsworth with food for careful speculation and contemplation. Bate argues that Wordsworth’s poetry gives us pleasure derived from Nature, so it can teach us “how to walk with nature” (8).

Turning to the main subject of this paper Turning to the main subject of this chapter, *Michael* begins with the narrator’s directions to walk “Up the tumultuous brook of Green-head Gyll” to find “a stragglng Heap of unhewn stones” (Wordsworth 2, 17). In the closing lines of the poem, the speaker draws the readers’ attention to the heaped-up stones once more and introduces them as an “unfinished Sheep-fold / Beside the boisterous brook of Green-head Ghyll” (481-482). Considering the opening and closing references to the stones and the stream, leads one to think of the importance of the stream and stones within the poem and shows us how the narrator thinks we should react to the “. . . history / Homely and rude . . .” (34-35). The tragic story of Michael and his family cast light on what is permanent in human nature:

There is a comfort in the strength of love;  
'Twill make a thing enduring, which else

Would overset the brain, or break the heart. (448-450)

Old shepherd found it so. Michael's tending his sheep and his pastoral ecosystem shows that the laborer practices what Levinson has termed as, "alienated labor", which is defined as what "makes nature appear familial; through their domestic and pastoral transformations, many products of which they conserve for their own use, they contemplate themselves in a world continuous with their own being" (qtd. in Tsai 71). The shepherd, Michael, is a man of Nature who is in tune with his ecosystem: the land, sheep, and his family. Pondering about the context of the poem poses the same question in the readers' minds as the one that was raised by J. Williams as, "What is Wordsworth trying to peddle in 'Michael'?" (qtd. in Garrard 40). Garrard answers the question as follows:

The answer to the rhetorical question is: a harmonious vision of rural independence and fortitude that hides a harsh world in which people are bought and sold at hiring fairs, and where customary tenure keeps Cumberland 'statesmen' like Michael in a state of feudal vassalage to local aristocrats who are nevertheless equally adept at capitalist, wage-based forms of exploitation. (40)

Michael's affection for the native fields and hills is characterized as, "a pleasurable feeling of blind love, / The pleasure which there is in life itself" (Wordsworth 76-77). In the phrase, "blind love", Wordsworth has tried to convey "the instinctive harmony that the shepherd has achieved with non-human world he inhabits" (Gifford 8). Thus, the emotional burden for Michael is too much to bear should the land "pass into a stranger's hand, I think", he says, "That I could not lie quiet in my grave" (Wordsworth 231-232). He has an enduring affection for the "the green valleys, and the streams, and rocks" (63). Thus, this interaction with Nature is a consequence of what Bate calls, "an integrated social structure" (47).

Wordsworth believed that the traditional farmers understood the language of the land and treated it as an element of culture that was passed from one generation of the peasants to the other. This issue is expressed in the poem as the loss of the shepherd's ancestral land is "A grievous penalty" that uses up ". . . but little less / Than half his substance . . ." (Wordsworth 216-217). The word substance is significant here; it can be deemed as both economic and bodily. The first meaning that comes to the readers' mind is the economic one in that losing half of the land is an economic loss. Read differently, the bodily connotation of the word comes to the mind. The ancestral grave "the family mould" is the signifier of each generation's incorporation with the soil and Nature. The process of decay converts their bodies into the mould, which then compromises the fertile layer of the soil. The substance of the body and the substance of the soil get unified, which highlights people's connection with Nature and their harmonious relation with their ecosystem (Roberts 40).

In pastoral communities people relied on two sources of income which Wordsworth in his *Guide to the Lakes* (2004) describe as follows: formerly each family "whether estatesman [*sic*] or farmer" had "two fold support, the produce of his land and flocks' and 'the profit drawn from . . . spinning their own wool in their houses" (qtd. in Roberts 45). Isabel's spinning wheels, the Narrator says, were in constant motion: ". . . and if one wheel had rest / It was because the other was at work" (Wordsworth 83-84). The decline of the cottage industry led the peasants and those who had lived on the land for generations to live their cottages to rot. Harrison, in *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* (1994), asserts the rural people were "torn loose" and "struggled to adopt and adapt to new practical demands" (qtd. in Roberts 49). The case is evident in the poem, where the shepherd is interconnected, both physically and emotionally, with his land because it is "life itself" (Wordsworth 77). As a result, the loss of it is "a grievous penalty" (216) on his soul, worth "half his substance" (217). Therefore, the shepherd's decision to send his only son in search of work with the aim of saving their patrimonial land can be regarded as a sacrifice. Luke is, in McWhir's

point of view, “as much a victim as his father of the clash between patriarchal values and social and economic upheaval” (128).

Changes in the lifestyle of the people during the Industrial Age were the main factors for the fading away of strong family ties and human-Nature relations. Gifford believes that in the reading of the poem, the reader can reach the point that “fear is also present in the joy of this man’s [Michael] life, that experiences of hardship qualify the advantages of the beauty of his environment . . . that connects him with the life-force” (7). In fact, Gifford goes on to remark that Wordsworth has taken one step beyond the traditional pastoral assumptions about the shepherd by “making a realistic and broader portrait of an actual person in an actual village” (7).

As a matter of fact, though Gifford asserts that Wordsworth has tried to give birth to a new angle of vision for “evaluating” the life of the shepherd, “the writer’s role is that of privileged observer who resorts from his retreat in the mountains that all is better than well for country workers there” (8). In the opinion of Gifford, in his emphasis on the phrase “blind love” (Wordsworth 76), Wordsworth has tried to focus on the “instinctive harmony” that Michael has achieved with his natural surroundings. Gifford defines harmony as, “the state pursued by contemporary green poets who seek an image that counters human alienation from the earth upon which we depend” (8). Generally, Gifford sees *Michael* as a “refuge and reconstruction” which “rescues rural values of an unexpected kind” (8).

With regard to the changing views about the application of the term pastoral today, Gifford maintains that the pastoral has become a cultural issue nowadays which determines our position in the world; hence, he reads Wordsworth’s pastoral as an attempt to “represent the truth of human interrelatedness with nature” (8). In line with Gifford, Jones in “Double Economics: Ambivalence in Wordsworth’s Pastoral” (1993) proclaims that Wordsworth is “making a turn away from pastoral and toward realism, or at least toward a realist version of pastoral” (1098). Marinelli approves Wordsworth’s shepherds “are real” (qtd. in Jones 1098); likewise, Squires argues that “Michael” is “not about refined shepherds remote from actuality but about real contemporary shepherds . . . [B]y interlacing work and sorrow with pastoral occupations, . . . ‘Michael’ makes pastoral realistic” (1098).

Though many critics share the notion that Wordsworth’s pastoral is different from the conventional ones, since the publication of Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* (1978), New Historicist critics have “found Wordsworthian pastoral is all too pastoral” (1098). In his reading of the poem, Kroeber takes into account Michael’s ironic use of the words “free” and “burthened” and he uses these terms to suggest that the reader can see the notion of symmetry in the poem: “for if Michael’s habit of calling the land “free” when he is “Master” of it provokes one to correct him, one does so only by adopting the land’s point of view” (1100).

In his explanation of plot and symmetry within the poem, Jones describes the plot as the signifier of “an asymmetry of human hope and disappointment,” while the poem “also facilitates an ecological perspective” (Ibid.). There are many elements in the poem that guide the readers to consider the poem as a “realist pastoral” (1101). Levinson believes that the “narrator carefully avoids distinguishing the shepherd as an exception within his own class and culture” (1100). The emphasis on family labour makes them seem normal and exemplary “they were as a proverb” (Wordsworth 94). As a common family, Michael was in a dilemma which is derived from “double economics” (Jones 1107). He is, in a sense, caught between two values; one is “spiritual and familial” and the other is “material and public” (1108). He cared for “. . . the dumb animals, whom he had saved, / Had fed or sheltered,” but he also “link[s] to such acts / The certainty of honourable gain” (Wordsworth 71-73). In response to many critics who hold that Luke is a sacrifice in the poem, Jones claims, “Luke is not sacrifice . . . Luke remains a value in himself, for he is also the end for which Michael’s property is valued” (Jones 1107-1108).

Hartman's reading of *Michael* focuses on the point that "Michael" shows Wordsworth's belief that the Industrial Revolution is "divorcing man from the earth as effectively as a debased supernaturalism"; more importantly Wordsworth "establishes . . . a strange identity between himself and his main character. Both Michael and Wordsworth wish to save the land, the one for Luke, the other for the imagination" (qtd.in Ware 361). That is to say, the death of the land will result in the death of the poet who cannot exist without Nature. Finally, he concludes, "the poet is Michael's true heir" (361).

Hartman's concluding point has originated discussions between many critics: ". . . there are two covenants in the poem: a failed one between Michael and Luke and a successful one created by Wordsworth in the act of writing the poem" (362). Metzger's claims, "Implicitly if not explicitly, [Wordsworth's] finest pastoral poem asserts that only the poet's words can restore the pastoral covenant in an iron age" (362). As discussed below, New Historicists have questioned such standpoints.

One of the keynote critics is McGann whose "ground thesis . . . is that the relationship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (362). Levinson also follows Hartman in regarding the poet as, "Michael's true heir": "The reader is induced to share the narrator's vision of himself as the Son who will perpetuate Michael's line—disseminate the story and finish the sheepfold in finer tone, with language instead of stones" (368). Kroeber rejects such critics' claims by arguing that "there will be no followers for the poet, no second self, as for Michael there was no son, no inheritor" (363). To many critics, Michael has as many flaws as his son, Luke. MacLean claims, "The tragic character of peasant life Wordsworth has best recreated in 'Michael,' where we see a struggle between a man's love of his son, and his love of inherited property, with the less worthy feeling controlling finally his actions" (369). McLean's emphasis draws attention to Michael's flaws and McGann's assertion that "the Romantic Imagination does not save, it offers, . . . , a tragic understanding" (369).

Though such readings uncover the hidden points inherited in the poem, it is with the help of Ecocriticism that the reader can thoroughly grasp the real aim of Wordsworth in applying natural scenes as a source of ecological conscience. Bate argues that such critics as McGann are, "too limited in their view of society... What is done to the land is as important as who owns it" (46). Wordsworth believed that the traditional farmers understood the language of the land and treated it as an element of culture that was passed from one generation of the peasants to the other. The following lines from Michael's speech to his son at the sheep-fold let the reader see that "Michael's life is in a sense part of a covenant with his forefathers and his son" (370):

—Even to the utmost I have been to thee  
A kind and a good Father: and herein  
I but repay a gift which I myself  
Received at other's hand; for, though now old  
Beyond the common life of man, I still  
Remember them who loved me in my youth.  
Both of them sleep together; here they lived,  
As all their Forefathers had done; and when  
At length their time was come, they were not loth  
To give their bodies to the family mould.  
I wished that thou shouldst live the life they lived. . . . (Wordsworth 361-371)

Many critics of Wordsworth hold that the conflict between Michael's love of his son and his property are not expressed explicitly in the poem. Kroeber, for instance, argues, "Wordsworth minimizes that conflict, and finally, in Michael's last address to Luke blurs the two motifs together" (qtd. in Bate

46). Though the birth of the child increased Michael's attachment to the land, Manning claims, "So long as the two means of preservation, the boy and the land, were in harmony, one could deepen the other: the crisis of *Michael* comes when nature and the human are driven apart" (46). Thus, it is Michael who is responsible for breaking of the "covenant between the living and the dead" (Ware 372). The pact between Michael and Luke is an "emotional trust" and of "ongoing values"; the consequences of Luke's failure end in the destruction of "the rejuvenation Michael has found in him" and brings to an end the "patriarchal tradition of the family" (206). Finally, the poem ends and returns the reader to the "tumultuous brook" where it began. Michael endures his fate in silence: "'tis believed by all," Wordsworth says, "That many and many a day he thither went, / And never lifted up a single stone" (Wordsworth 465-466). In Manning's words, Luke remains the "irreducible element which summons the myth into being" (211). The division between man and Nature, echoed in Luke's misdeeds, serves for the poet as the "fateful birth of self-consciousness" (211). The poem should, in a way, "memorialize the pastoral world at the moment of its suppression, for only the dispossessed appreciate what has been lost" (211). It showcases the failure of the younger generations to "meet their obligations" to their "seniors" (207). However, the failure of Luke stems from the failure of his father who chose to "disjoin father and son and to dispatch Luke from the harmonious world of the valley" (208).

Luke's removal from the influence of Nature set his corruption in motion. David Ferry believes, The farm in *Michael* is a place that seems almost out of time, secluded from the world and its affairs. While he lives there, the boy Luke is like a child of nature. But when he leaves the farm and goes far from his relation to eternal nature, he plays the family false. He does so *inevitably* because when he goes to the city he enters a corrupt, corrupting, and wholly human atmosphere. To live in the mortal world is by *definition* to be fickle. (qtd. in Halpern 23)

As Halpern concludes Luke for Michael is a "part of the landscape and a fragment of the single life-commitment of the family to the farm", in that, Michael "cannot recognize divinity in man except insofar as man is a part of divine Nature" (23). The poet, as a result, uses the poem as a "catalyst for humanizing the imaginative vision" (32). Michael's yearning for his son to be his heir on the land is a call for "a union of man and Nature" (32). The "unweeded" garden in *The Ruined Cottage* and the unbuilt sheepfold in *Michael* both represent the "breaking of that promise" (32). According to Halpern:

But to the humanized imagination of the poet, the garden and sheepfold are beautiful because they bear the trace of human work and love. They testify that the grandeur of the mountain and the vastness of the sea are no more worthy of awe than the common human heart which suffers and endures the disasters brought down upon man by a harsh world and his own weakness. (32)

In his attack on McGann who addresses "the problem of ideology in Romantic poems" which means the "prevention" of a discourse which addresses "events in social and economic terms" (qtd. in Pepper 367-368), Halpern writes, "For Wordsworth, the profession of the poet is to heal the rift in the ideological circle made by history by enabling the advance of consciousness through poetry. His ideology is not one of escape from history, but of escape into it" (380). Furthermore, Bate in his *Song of the Earth* (2000), calls into attention Romanticism's accentuating "the moderns' separation of culture from nature;" and the Romantics' listening to the "wisdom of sailors and peasants—of Coleridge's Mariner and Wordsworth's Michael" (102).

As a work of social criticism, *Michael* protests against what happens to the innocent people who have a deep interconnection with Nature, in the city. It shows the corrupting effects of the Industrial Revolution on the lives of the small landowners. Through the poem, Wordsworth lets the reader reach the recognition that “advanced society brings with it not only inequality, but also ‘mental agonies’ ” (Bate 46). Hence at the age of modernity we, much more than before, need to get back to the poets as “the saviour of ecosystems” (231), especially such Nature-writing poets as Wordsworth, to teach us how to renew our broken bond with mother Earth and appease our emotional, mental, and physical loss. Likewise, it is a “true pastoral poem” (Knowlton 433) that casts light on the ecological downfalls of a shepherd, whose chief concern and source of dynamism has been Nature and natural surroundings. Part of its greatness goes back to the notion that “no pastoral quite like it in method and in aim had been written previously” (433). To sum up:

*Michael* was at once true to life and an idealization above it; true in the sense that a shepherd might feel as Michael did toward man and Nature, idealized in that such a shepherd would need a poet’s aid in order to express adequately what he felt. Thus it fulfilled the program of a great poet. The world has just judged its value. (446)

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