Notes on Wordsworth’s “Michael”

Typical Wordsworthian hero:

- simple, instinctual creature
- limited education and imagination
- life has a natural dignity

Picturesque opening leads quickly to a “struggling heap of stones.” Speaker of the poem acts as a kind of tour guide who leads his audience through his tale which begins and ends with a heap of stones, although the setting at the beginning gathers immense significance by the time we reach its visual echo at the close of the poem.

The heap of stones marks the site of a covenant which symbolically merges Michael’s love of the land, nature, and his son, Luke. Michael is past 80, but still stout of heart, healthy as a horse, and possessed of a mind that is in tune with nature—the mists, the winds, the hills. Michael’s wife, 20 years younger than he, gave birth to Luke when Michael was already an old man.

The family is a model of industry and thrift—healthy peasant farmers that have not yet been alienated from their labor through the effects of the Industrial Revolution. Their house itself is named “the evening star” by the community and becomes “a public symbol of life / that thrifty Pair had lived.” The light stays lit until late at night so they can continue working at home (mending tools or spinning wool).

Michael is called upon to pay a debt he owes and must decide whether to sell the farm or send Luke to the city to work for a few years to earn money to pay off the debt. After much debate over the dilemma, Isabel and Michael decide to send Luke to the city. The evening before Luke leaves, Michael takes him to the spot where he plans to build the sheepfold and where he has already gathered a large pile of stones. Michael asks Luke to lay the first stone and says, “think of me, my Son, / And of this moment... a covenant / ‘T will be between us” (ll. 406-7, 414-15).

Luke does well at first in the city, but at length he is corrupted by it, falls into trouble, and “seeks a hiding place beyond the seas.” Although Michael suffers greatly, he is not crushed by his grief. Through his love of Luke and consoled by his closeness to nature, Michael lives to see another 7 years.

Poem’s thematic center of gravity is the character of Michael—his emotional strength, his closeness to nature, his attachment to his land and his son, Luke; and his suffering and resilience in tragic circumstances conditioned by nature.

Wordsworth believed that war and industrialization were blunting the spirit of man. In this crisis, Wordsworth placed his hopes in what he called “certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind” and in his belief that “men of greater powers” would systematically oppose these evils. In this respect, Michael is Wordsworth’s shepherd-statesman whose noble character is revealed through his close attachment to nature, the land, and his son.
Significance

1. As a work of social criticism: “Michael” can be read as a work of social criticism which protests what happens to innocent people (like Luke) in the city. Michael can also be read as a commentary on the disappearance of small farm landowners and the alienation of industrial labor. Michael is still very close to his land; he cuts a staff for his son which not only marks Luke’s coming of age, but also a time when men have not yet been alienated from their labor and the products of their labor under the influence of the Industrial Revolution. In much the same way, the sheepfold is no impersonal object, but a symbol of the covenant which binds father, son, and the land together in close human attachment in Michael’s heart.

2. As “pastoral realism”: After all, “Michael” is subtitled “A Pastoral Poem.” “Pastor” is Latin for “shepherd.” Pastoral is a poetic form which originated in Greece in the 3rd century B.C. with Theocritus. Virgil, a Roman poet, later developed the more traditional pastoral: an elaborately conventional poem expressing an urban poet’s nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life shepherds and other rural folk lead in an idealized natural setting (e.g., shepherds meditating under trees, or piping in friendly singing contests).