

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH'S "MICHAEL": AN EXERCISE IN PROXEMICS

William Wordsworth's "Michael"¹ (1800) may be profitably read in terms of its proxemics,² interpreting the poem's narrative of a human tragedy in terms of the changes effected by alteration of Real Spatial Practices (RSPs),³ and the close imbrication of body-place-power relations.

The inaugural image of spatialisation invokes the proxemics of body-place and social relations: "If from the public way you turn your steps" (1.1). The private/public territorialisation calls attention to property rights and ownership, right of way/movement - and therefore of the common *body's* locationability in this place, and the human body's interpellation in(to) a place - through her/his practice, emotional attachment, or memories. A whole proxemics of power relations (ownership and class), subjectivity (emotional investment identity) and meaning (achievement, labour) is initiated. Power is exercised through RSPs, where specific principles of production and consumption (agriculture, sheep rearing) are topographically particularised to suggest a social cohesion (*Grasmere's* agro-economy, landownership). It is also the site of future fractures. Michael's property and its practices are imaged much later, but Wordsworth has proleptically indicated the differentiation and "spatial acting-out"⁴ of the landscape through practices (*walking along public paths*). Wordsworth focalises the *route* to Michael's place, with its adjacent heap of "unhewn stones" (1.17).

Michael's *body* is Wordsworth's first focus (I. 42-44), followed by its spatial orientation. Michael's integration with his surroundings, his kindness and

¹ Wordsworth, William. *The Poetical Works*. Ed. E. DeSelincourt. Oxford: Clarendon, 1952 (1944).

² "Proxemics" is a term used by Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile to study the relationship between body-place-power. For an elaboration see, Nast and Pile (Ed.) *Places through the Body*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, especially pages: 407-410.

³ I owe this framework for reading spatial practices to Steve Pile's work in *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity*. London and New York: Routledge: 1997. See especially pages: 156-158 and 166-7.

⁴ The notion of a "spatial acting-out", which eloquently describes the actualisation of the place through the body's acts is from Michel de Certeau's seminal *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Tr. Steven Rendell. Berkley: U of California P, 1988. See pages 97-100.

guardianship over lesser creatures (l. 48-60, 70-73), is the imaginary representation of spaces. This represents, through various signs and codes, Michael's different RSPs. By constantly referring to his solitary splendour upon topographical heights, Wordsworth conveys Michael's distanciation - literal and metaphoric - from others. Michael's capabilities on his terrain links body and place (he hears/sees/feels/protects with his body-strength) and grants Michael epistemic power⁵ over Nature. The networks of power linking Michael to the land originate in his *knowledge-as-practice* and his *subjectivity-through-emotional attachment* ("those hills/had laid/strong hold on his affections", l. 74-5).

The RSPs of agriculture and sheep rearing aside, Wordsworth also articulates the differentiations of home/away, inside/outside in terms of division of labour (domestic, public) and gender roles that are implicated in power relations. While Michael and Luke toil outside, Isabel is confined to the home ("her heart was in her house", l. 82), among "aged utensil[s]" (l. 115). With the heap of "unhewn stones" Wordsworth undertakes a symbolic representation of these RSPs (the eventual transformation of RSPs will also be embodied herein): Michael's house "stood single", located on a "plot of rising ground" (implying Michael's economic/class separation) and its light "is a public symbol" (l. 130-133). Wordsworth's hint that a story surrounds the heap of "unhewn tones" anticipates changes in the symbolic value (l. 18-20).

Michael's fears of losing his land - and the attendant alteration of power relations/class positions - are expressed in proxemics: "Our Luke shall leave us/the land shall not go from us/ and it shall be free/ we shall possess it" (l. 244 - 245). Before the place-human link can be altered inter-human bonds must loosen, spatially at first, and metaphorically later. Isabel, reconciling herself to Luke's imminent departure, does so through a spatio-geographical image: she recalls Richard Bateman from the same village, who had ventured "beyond the seas". On his return he had "left estates and monies to the poor/and at his birth-place, built chapel floored/with marble, which he sent from foreign lands" (l. 268-270).

Spatial displacement alters networks of power. Luke leaves Grasmere to retain the power relations (embodied in Michael's ownership of *his* lands, and *his* spatial practices: "the land/looks as if it would never endure/another Master" (l. 378-80). The sheep-fold is simultaneously symbolic of familial affection and succession rights. Luke, growing up, had already been inscribed within similar, hereditary class/ownership power relations. The oak tree becomes symbolic of patriarchal and paternal power (l. 165), and the scene of Luke's induction into the system of production. The sheep-fold is a symbol of family ties ("links of

⁵ The term "epistemic power" is from Peter Morris's *Power : A Philosophical Analysis*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987

love", I. 401) *and*, as Michael describes it in juridical terms, a "covenant" (I. 414). This covenant, of ownership and eventual succession, is to be in form of an alteration of the *topography* by the *body*, for Michael suggests that the first stone/alteration be done by Luke's "own hands" (I. 387).

A change in the RSPs - in terms of succession, anticipated in Luke's "watchmanship" (I. 183-87) - has already been effected, since Michael is forced to "begin again/tasks that were resigned to [Luke]" (I. 391-92). Luke now *away*, also alters the relationship between places. Luke writes letters (proxemical practices since they modify conditions of distances, near/far, home/away) of the "wondrous" other world, the city (I. 433). The city is contrasted with Grasmere, with its different spatial practices (urbanised, and involved in trade, (I. 249-250). From such an exoticisation of the "distant", the image shifts to the wickedness of the Other place. Luke's downfall - emplotted within his changing relationship with the city, which is now "dissolute" (I. 444), transports Luke farther (away) to "a hiding-place" beyond the seas (I. 446). The alteration - of spatial arrangements and practices, familial relationships, succession - is almost complete. It only remains for the transformation of real practices and symbolic representations to alter.

The break is again conceptualised in the body-place link: Michael goes to the sheep fold, sits "by the sheep-fold", but never "lifted up a single stone" (I. 466-69). The breaking/altering of the (familial) network, and Michael's refusal to employ his body/hands at that covenant/place anticipates the transfer of ownership. The new ownership is embodied proxemically: "at her death, the estate/was sold, and went into a stranger's hand" (I. 475). The *new* spatial practice of the *new* dispensation, completely erases older relationships: "the cottage/is gone - the ploughshare has been through the ground" (I. 476-77). The transformation of these real practices also effects symbolic representations. The (unchanging) oak tree and the heap of (unchanging) stones are anachronistic spaces in a time of "great changes" (I. 478).

Thus Wordsworth's poem of the English countryside may be read in terms of its proxemics. Proxemics which explores the spatialisation of the body and the corporealisation of space helps generate a reading of "Michael", which, while reasserting its status as a topographic poem, also imbeds a subtext of power-relations.

PRAMOD K. NAYAR