**Wordsworth, Parody, Print and Posterity, 1814-1822**

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At least 33 parodies of Wordsworth were written between 1814 and 1822, reaching a high point following John Hamilton Reynolds’s pre-emptive parody of *Peter Bell* in 1819. More were published in magazines, newspapers and elsewhere in the years to come (a further 8 between 1823 and 1827), but this is a remarkable peak.[[2]](#endnote-1) The number is striking. A parody depends on recognition–one can only parody what is well known. Yet in these years Wordsworth frequently complained that his age was one in which he could not reach the audience his poetry deserved, so caught up were they, as he put it in the 1815 “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface”, in novelties that “kindle the admiration of the multitude” (83). As Simon Dentith notes, “poetic parody has not been as extensive in the last hundred years as it was in the nineteenth century”, a fact he puts down to the “displacement of poetry from cultural centrality” (117). When Wordsworth and parody came together, the issue was precisely one of poetry’s shaky hold on cultural centrality–the late Romantic period marks the point at which poets began to doubt their cultural position. Wordsworth was not well known, he complained, because the print market was publishing so much, notably in the periodical press, that readers had lost the ability to read with the depth his poetry required. The situation would be reversed, he claimed, but it would take time.

The division Wordsworth indicated has remained a crucial part of Romantic literary criticism. For some time, his critics were happy to endorse his view. More recently, particularly following pioneering studies in book history and print culture by James Raven, William St Clair and others, critics have accepted the division, but turned their attention more appreciatively to those popular works that caught the interest of readers in the Romantic period. The sheer number of Wordsworth parodies suggests, I will propose, that the clarity of this division is questionable. One might expect his parodists, the majority of whom wrote for the periodical press, to take the side of the vigorous popular culture of the late Romantic period. Yet by parodying him they make clear Wordsworth’s prominence in that culture because parodies can only be meaningful if the subject is recognisable. These parodies of the later Wordsworth capture, in a way that earlier parodies of him do not, the crucial role that a Wordsworthian model of reading culture began to play in late-Romantic debates about poetry. Between 1814 and 1822 Wordsworth claimed for his poetry, repeatedly, in several published works, the capacity to achieve the cultural permanence that the novelties of his age could not. Richard Cronin points out that the periodicals, popular poetry and novels which successfully addressed the public, and in doing so earned Wordsworth’s contempt, did not always return Wordsworth’s “antipathy” (237). This is appropriate given that, for Cronin, “rejection was in closer relation to recognition than might have been realised” (17) and antipathy supposes a point of contact. I consider here both the remarkable range of parodies of Wordsworth published in these years, many of them hitherto unnoticed by scholars, alongside Wordsworth’s many published statements that were the subject of parody. By drawing these two elements together, I will suggest that we can reimagine the relationship between the “high” culture associated with Wordsworth and the commercial popular culture to which such high culture was increasingly opposed. Critics have, recently, begun to explore the complexities of Wordsworth’s relationship with his age’s print culture–he did not simply reject it and place his faith in distant posterity. His parodists, I argue, help us rethink the importance Wordsworth held for late Romantic literary culture, a time when poetry’s cultural status was a matter of concern; they also indicate the subtlety and tentativeness of Wordsworth’s attitude to publicity and posterity, and his hidden generosity to his age’s popular culture.

**I**

One might assume, as many critics have, that Wordsworth was simply opposed to his parodists, and they to him. A number of critics have shown, however, as Graham Stones and John Strachan put it, Wordsworth’s “relish of the parodic tradition” and “his dexterity in its techniques,” (1: xxviii) an idea explored more fully by Mark Jones, Nicola Trott, Philip Connell and Brian R. Bates. Critics have been especially interested in parodies of the “simple” Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads* and the 1807 *Poems* who was ridiculed in the *Edinburgh Review*.Prior to 1814 parodists typically mocked Wordsworth, as Nicola Trott argues, for his failure to conform to a Popean model of classical poetics.[[3]](#endnote-2) Richard Mant, for example, in *The Simpliciad* of 1808, characterised his poetry as “babyish simpleness in nonsense dressed” (l. 364) and objected that “Loungers and girls will read as fashion draws” (l. 360). Wordsworth’s novel rejection of “poetic diction” is presented as a *product* of fashionability.

A new strain emerges after the publication of *The Excursion* that I will explore here. Although many of the later parodies continue to mock Wordsworthian simplicity, they are frequently concerned with his public position as one *opposed* to fashionable reading habits. In D. M. Moir’s “The Kail Pot” (1821) in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, Wordsworth walks down the Canongate in Edinburgh, and his eye is caught, as in earlier parodies, by comically quotidian things, in this case a cooking pot “Dangling in negro blackness beautiful” (139). But now his mind moves into abstruser musings: “Hard is the lot of him, whom evil fates / Have destined to a way of life unmeet; / Whose genius and internal strength are clogg’d / By drudgery, and the rubs of common men” (139).[[4]](#endnote-3) Rather than an embarrassing novelty designed to appeal to “loungers and girls”, Wordsworth is characterised by a lofty superiority to a “common” culture that has failed to appreciate him.

*The Excursion*’s publication in 1814 is the turning point. It was a crucial book for Wordsworth, taken by his contemporaries to be his most important poetic statement. It was also a very expensive book–two guineas for 447 pages. William St Clair claims that it was “for its length, perhaps the most expensive work of literature ever published in England” (201). St Clair implies that Wordsworth thus expressed his indifference to the common reader, but we might note that Wordsworth’s publisher, Longman, managed to sell out two editions of Thomas Moore’s *Lalla Rookh* 1817 in a matter of weeks despite it being the same size, length and cost.[[5]](#endnote-4) Certainly, though, it seems partly to be the point of these publishing decisions that *The Excursion* was no common book. He published it in quarto, as he did his *White Doe of Rylstone*. Moore records an anecdote of Wordsworth asking Humphrey Davy at a large dinner “in his most epic tone” if he knew why he published the latter poem in quarto. The reason, he revealed, was “To show the world my opinion of it” (1: 356). Wordsworth does not quite mean that only the rich should buy his book, but that buying it ought to be an expression of one’s devotion to poetry. As Sally Bushell suggests (122), the book’s high price may have encouraged readers to read and reread it the more intensely.[[6]](#endnote-5) Just as telling, though, is the fact that his “most epic tone” announces a calculated interest in “the world”, an entity he often seemed to shun. It is this seeming contradiction that his parodists made their subject.

*The Excursion*’s preface signals that the book is an oppositional move in a cultural game. He has, he says, “retired to his native mountains, with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live” (5). The poem was his first publication since the disappointingly negative (or simply aggressive) reviews of 1807’s *Poems in Two Volumes*. Wordsworth had complained in the 1800 “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* about the inundation of mindless commercial culture, but this period marks, as Moore recognised, a new tone. He followed up *The Excursion* with his *Poems*,accompanied by a new preface and an “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” in 1815; *The White Doe of Rylstone,* also 1815; *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* and the *Thanksgiving Ode* in 1816; and *Peter Bell* and *The Waggoner* in 1819. *Peter Bell* went into a second edition, the first time this had happened to Wordsworth since *Lyrical Ballads*. He had poems published in *The Examiner*, *Blackwood’s Magazine* and elsewhere. In 1820 he published *The River Duddon*, and a much cheaper octavo *Excursion* along with a four-volume collection of his poems; in 1822 he published *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820* and *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (later titled *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*) and *A Description of the Scenery of the Lakes*.

The period was, as Stephen Gill remarks, one of “astonishing activity” (*A Life*, 335), and it was matched by the astonishing activity of his parodists. His parodists, indeed, made that their subject. In *The Dead Asses* we find another of what Hartley Coleridge, himself the author of parodies of Wordsworth, called Wordsworth’s “gasconading prefaces” (*Letters* 92).[[7]](#endnote-6) Here “Wordsworth” (as conceived in *The Dead Asses*)comments on the superiority of poetry over painting. Poetry can outlast the author’s agency: “They [his effusions] may exist either in the memory of his friends, orally delivered from age to age, or in their manuscripts, or in the types of the printer; which last is the most permanent agency, and that which I, who possess confidence in my own impulses, have ever employed” (204). Wordsworth has so often been associated with oral creativity that the comment on his confidence in typography seems an aspect of the parodist’s mockery. Wordsworth’s refusal to engage with the “reading public” is, in this view, one means by which he (arrogantly, perhaps) raised himself above a print-choked age and achieved a higher permanence. Yet in fact this comment might be seen simply to replicate Wordsworth’s fascination with, and frequent published commentary on, the media by which poems might last. Wordsworth was, as Brian R. Bates, Andrew Bennett (*Wordsworth Writing*) and Peter Simonsen have recently explored, deeply interested in typography and the methods of physical inscription–he had indeed “ever employed” the “types of the printer”, and in 1819 he was doing so with remarkable frequency. *Peter Bell*, to which *The Dead Asses* is a direct response, reflects in its dedication on the fact that the poem had lain in manuscript for 21 years, and in its dedication and poetic prologue it considers thoughtfully, and comically, precisely the issues that the author of *The Dead Asses* is, in turn, prompted to think through.

This courting of a reading public he publicly claimed to rise above is not hypocrisy. As Gill puts it, “Despite occasional rodomontade about being hostile to publication, Wordsworth wanted readers” (*Victorians*, 82). Wordsworth wanted readers of a particular kind, though. He dedicated *Peter Bell* (1819) to Southey and told him (and everyone else who read the dedication) that

pains have been taken at different times to make the production less unworthy of a favourable reception; or, rather, to fit it for filling *permanently* a station, however humble, in the Literature of my Country. This has, indeed, been the aim of all my endeavours in Poetry, which, you know, have been sufficiently laborious to prove that I deem the Art not lightly to be approached. (41)

The redundant, uneasily chummy, “you know” suggests that he addresses the reading public rather more than he does his fellow Lake Poet. Wordsworth has often been taken at his word when he suggests his indifference to that public, but, as Brian R. Bates has shown in an insightful recent study, this misses his “dynamic engagements with his contemporary readers” (15). This dedication is a public act dependent on guiding the way he is read, and Bates shows how important these “supplementary writings” were to Wordsworth in these years. Central to that public act is the way he positions his “Art” (like “Poetry” and “Work” marked typographically with a capital letter) as a matter of difficulty, a product of close and careful attention that requires a similar level of attention in readers. That culture might be divided into “high” forms that require a deep attention, and “low” forms produced by a commercial industry that require very little attention at all, is one of the longest-lasting products of these years. A distinction ought to be drawn between their politics, but Wordsworth’s view shares much with Adorno and Horkheimer’s opposition to a “culture industry” that produces uniform products that mean “sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts” (1226). Wordsworth’s position quickly became, as I will discuss later, powerfully influential in these years for readers from a range of backgrounds. But we should not overestimate the clarity of that distinction. Nigel Leask and Philip Connell have explored the complexities of the emergent distinction between “high” and “popular” culture in the Romantic period, and Lucy Newlyn and Andrew Bennett (*Culture of Posterity*) suggest that Wordsworth’s apparent rejection of readers and appeal to posterity, real enough as it was, was never quite as complete as he seemed to present it in his prose. As Tim Fulford remarks, “the late Wordsworth was both a metaphysical and a commercial poet” (266). It is a combination that Wordsworth’s writing often seemed to wish to obscure, but his parodists, I want to argue, draw it into focus.

**II**

One of these parodies begins in a stage coach. A man walks in brusquely, and the narrator cannot quite place him. The man starts to complain about the reading public, and about a recent parody of him and the commentary on it in the newspapers. It is then that the narrator realises it is Wordsworth, and “that I had only frequently *read* of such a man” (*Benjamin* iv).[[8]](#endnote-7) Parodies of Wordsworth take as their subject Wordsworth’s increasing publicity, and the fact that such moments of recognition, a necessary feature of a successful parody, typically begin with Wordsworth’s own self-conscious meditation on the place of his published works in a print market.

Wordsworth’s antithetical reading of culture, divided between novelties that “kindle the admiration of the multitude” and the “Grand thoughts” that will have a “permanent influence” (“Essay”83), often appealed to readers for the surgical clarity of the act of cultural distinction it performed. John Hamilton Reynolds, who later parodied his hero, remarked in a review in *The Champion* (9 December 1815) on the failure of contemporary readers: “‘the million’ saw nothing beyond the surface, – they could not reach where the calm philosophy rested” (*Prose* 26). It is important to him both that a wider audience failed to appreciate the depth of Wordsworth, skimming over the surface, and that another discrete audience had the opposite reaction: “they [the *Lyrical Ballads*] remained alive in the hearts and minds of a few, and have been quietly gaining strength up to the present hour” (27). Wordsworth wrote for all time, unlike *The Champion* which was written for the “present hour”; yet the two kinds of appeal were not necessarily distinct. Comments like those of Reynolds – and one finds in this period similar sentiments by Thomas Noon Talfourd, Maria Jane Jewsbury, and a great many others in the press and in private comments – suggest that Wordsworth’s very oppositional stance might have in fact helped him achieve something like a fashionable status.[[9]](#endnote-8) After all, as William Hazlitt puts it in “On Fashion” (1818), fashion exists poised between “singularity and vulgarity” (17: 52), and it was in being appreciated by a select few that Wordsworth made his appeal. These parodies instead point towards a more nuanced uncertainty about the idea of cultural permanence. It was a nuanced position, I want to suggest, that they found in their source.

The parodies of Wordsworth published between 1814 and 1822 replicate, but unsettle, the act of cultural distinction that reading Wordsworth’s poetry depended on. As theorists of parody have shown, the form is peculiarly well placed to evoke such mobility. Recent discussions of parody have emphasised the form’s instability and its capacity to flit unsteadily between what, for an earlier generation of critics, were firm divisions between forms like satire, burlesque, imitation and criticism.[[10]](#endnote-9) Parody in this period emphasized the question of making cultural distinctions. Matthew Arnold didn’t like parodies because they undermined his sense, inherited from Wordsworth, of poetry’s deep seriousness. Parody is, in his famous phrase, a “vile art” (2: 209).[[11]](#endnote-10) Parodies seem squibs, transgressive thumbings of the nose at authority, and an alignment with a joyously ephemeral popular culture. And yet, as Linda Hutcheon says, “parody presupposes both a law and its transgression …[and] therein lies the key to its double potential: it can be both conservative and transformative” (101). This is the quality that has endeared the form to poststructuralists like J. Hillis Miller and, as Hutcheon explores, postmodern artists, but it has a specific cultural charge in this period. A parody contains a compliment–it shows that the subject is well known. Hence Graham Stones and John Strachan’s claim that “[e]ven in its most radical forms parody is canonical: paradoxically tradition if only a counter-tradition” (1: xxvii). Parodies of Wordsworth, then, were parodies of a poet whose most parodiable characteristic was his anxious concern with canonicity, with cultural memory and the public definition of value.

After 1814 this very opposition, promoted in his prose prefaces and picked up by his readers, became the subject of parody. “The Nose-Drop: A Physiological Ballad” (1821) begins: “The following Poem, which I have endeavoured to fit for filling permanently a station in the Literature of my Country” (249).[[12]](#endnote-11) This is close to a direct quotation from Wordsworth’s dedication of *Peter Bell* to Southey. Shelley quoted the same phrase in *Peter Bell the Third* (89), as did Byron in his “Epilogue” (286); Reynolds’s *Peter Bell* has Wordsworth claim that “the products of my industry will endure” (29), and the author of *The Dead Asses* (1819) has “Wordsworth” claim his writing will “live as long as the Literature of my country shall endure” (204).[[13]](#endnote-12) “Sonnet on the Battle between Mendoza and Tom Owen, at Banstead Downs, July 4th 1820”, published in *Blackwood’s*,places Wordsworth in contact with the popular boxing literature of Pierce Egan.[[14]](#endnote-13) It is part of an article that reflects on the development of new techniques of punching that draws on, and gently undermines, the Wordsworthian idea that “a great poet must create the taste capable of enjoying his works” (Wilson, “Boxiana” 61). Parodying Wordsworth was not principally about saying that his poetry failed to meet an eighteenth-century “standard of taste” (that, as Nicola Trott argues, was the tactic of parodists of the “simple” Wordsworth earlier in the century), but about recognising the way in which he asked for his poetry to be read in dialogue with ephemeral, fashionable, culture.

*Blackwood’s* was a great defender of Wordsworth’s genius, but the magazine seemed incapable of praising him without appending a joke or an insult–it was the location of 11 of the 33 1814-1822 parodies. John Wilson, under different pseudonyms, attacked, defended, and attacked Wordsworth, a poet he idolised and took pride in being one of the first to appreciate, in succeeding monthly issues of the magazine between October and December 1817. In May 1820 *Blackwood’s* printed a celebration of the *River Duddon* sequence (anonymously, but likely by Wilson).[[15]](#endnote-14) Itremarked with pleasure on “the total failure of all the attempts to check the fame of Wordsworth” (Wilson, “River Duddon” 206). Yet it remains important that Wordsworth’s fame has been hard won, that it remains an underground kind of fame. The article notes a paradox that goes some way to explaining the situation: “nothing is more common than to talk about the unpopularity of Wordsworth” (206). Directly preceding this article in the May 1820 issue is perhaps the most inventive parody of the age, a “Luctus on the Death of Sir Daniel Donnelly”, written mainly by William Maginn.[[16]](#endnote-15) It presents an irreverent list of poets, including Byron and Wordsworth alongside lesser luminaries such as Dr Scott (based loosely on a Glasgow dentist) and Odoherty (an Irish military man who was the invention of the *Blackwood’s* staff), who all celebrate the Irish boxing champion.

Central to its humour is a play on the interpenetration of the cultural categories that Wordsworth asks readers to identify and which the *Blackwood’s* review of *River Duddon* echoes. The “Luctus” begins by asking a favour of “Whoever may be the Editor of this Magazine in 2820” (186), an aspiration to longevity that might be judged comically inappropriate in a magazine. The joke is continued in the Wordsworth parodies, which feature the poet grandly intoning on the status of magazines in a critical preface before offering two poems, one “On my own life,” the second a ballad. He is, he tells the editor, reluctant to contribute to a periodical, as such publications are “inimical to the growth and sanity of original genius, and therefore unworthy of him who writes for ‘all time’ except the present” (190). “Wordsworth” reveals his unfitness for the periodical mode (which must seek to please contemporary readers) most particularly in his self-indulgent prolixity. In order to understand a periodical truly, he says, one must

peruse the whole series of the above-mentioned work seriatim, that is, in continuous and uninterrupted succession, inasmuch as that various articles, on literature, philosophy, and the fine arts, being by their respective authors left unfinished in one number, are mayhap brought to a conclusion in a second – nay, peradventure, continued in a second, and even a third, yea, often not finished until a tenth, and after the intervention of divers Numbers free wholly and altogether from any discussion on that specific subject, but composed, it may be, either of nobler or of baser matter. (189)

The parody suggests that the more discontinuous and miscellaneous reading habits prompted by a monthly magazine may produce rather more pleasure than the studied cultural control that Wordsworth embodied, in which the “base” is rigidly denied contact with the “noble”. Yet it is surely not accidental that those readers who did read the May 1820 issue “seriatim” would discover the glowing endorsement of this Wordsworthian system that is contained in the review of the *River Duddon* volume immediately succeeding the “Luctus”. Parody coexists with praise here, as it often does. But it is particularly significant that both what is being parodied and what is being praised is a critical poetics that asks readers to make a separation between the noble and the base that, in both instances, cannot be maintained.

That Wordsworth’s lengthy “discommendation” of magazines and other such appurtenances of the “Reading Public” is punctuated by disavowals of knowledge (“I see the work but rarely”; “I am not, to the best of my recollection, a subscriber to the Kendal Book-Club” (190)) is funny but also sharp parody.[[17]](#endnote-16) Wordsworth, Maginn suggests, insists on the division of poetry from popular reading. Yet he suggests that the act, by virtue of its anxious attempt at separation, tends also to reveal Wordsworth’s proximity to that culture. The “Luctus” moves on to present two poetic parodies, a lyrical ballad and an “Extract From My Great Auto-Biographical Poem”, a parody of the as-yet unpublished *Prelude*. The second directs itself more particularly at the habits of cultural distinction Wordsworth’s poetry addressed. A large part of the fun derives from the combination of a grand style with unsuitable subject matter, boxing:

Yea, even I,

Albeit, who never “ruffian’d” in the ring,

Nor know of “challenge,” save the echoing hills;

Nor “fibbing,” save that poesy doth feign;

Nor heard his fame, but as the mutterings

Of clouds contentious on Helvellyn’s side,

Distant, yet deep, agnize a strange regret,

And mourn Donnelly – Honourable Sir Daniel: -

(Blessings be on them, and eternal praise,

The Knighter and the Knighted.) (pp. 190-1)[[18]](#endnote-17)

The quotation marks that “Wordsworth” places round the slang terms of “The Fancy” act as typographical tweezers. He carefully holds these words apart from poetic language, yet that very wariness suggests also his understanding of them. His poem inhabits two cultural worlds simultaneously. We are encouraged to recognise that a slang word like “fibbing” (signifying both a sound pummelling and a lie) and a poetic archaism like “agnize” hint equally at worlds closed off from common speech, and that, however different those worlds might be deemed to be, that occult status is the source of their power. Mock-heroic combines a high manner with low subject matter, but Maginn’s poem does more than this. Mock-heroic, unlike parody, depends on the reader’s recognition of a difference between high and low, but parodies confuse rather than maintain distinctions. Maginn’s parody recognises that the act of cultural separation that Wordsworth performs is not so much compromised as self-defeating. Wordsworth’s poetry, just like parodies, depends on an act of cultural opposition the magnetism of which draws these opponents together. The idea that Wordsworth, or that poetry *per se*, could float free of his age has been so successful that we have forgotten the inherent impurity that Maginn points towards, and that his source material itself suggests.

Theparodists get a laugh by introducing the popular culture Wordsworth wants to distance himself from, but they also suggest that such material was always inherent to Wordsworth’s poetry. Another *Blackwood’s* parody, “Desultory Stanzas upon Receiving the Last Sheets” (1822), prints some stanzas abusing Whigs by the semi-fictional editor Christopher North alongside Wordsworth’s stanzas that closed *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent* (1822).[[19]](#endnote-18) A parody earlier that year had had Wordsworth praising Christopher North and imagining him sending his copy, “furrow’d o’er with lines / Of sable manuscript”, “To printing-office, where the devils reside, / Compositors, and men with paper caps” (“Tokens”, 115).[[20]](#endnote-19) But Wordsworth’s fascination with the processes of print was not just a joke–the parody of *Memorials* prints the parody in double columns alongside the original, and Wordsworth’s original was titled “Desultory Stanzas Upon Receiving the Preceding Sheets from the Press”. His parodists may have been more self-aware than Wordsworth about the fact that their work was bought and sold in the marketplace, but they were exploiting ideas present in the original.

Among the best examples is by the magazine writer William Frederick Deacon in “The Old Cumberland Peddlar”, included in his 1824 collection of parodies, *Warreniana*. The book imagines the major writers of the age gathered to write puffs for the notoriously brazen advertiser of blacking (boot polish), Robert Warren. The joke at the heart of the collection is that art and commerce ought to be separate yet share more than the artists, at least, can comfortably admit. As John Strachan notes, it is appropriate that advertising should achieve a golden age in the age of Romanticism because in “the widespread focus upon the ‘author’ of the brand, [advertising’s] claims of originality, creativity and genius, its egotism and its warnings about the dangers of imitation” (11) poets mirrored advertisers who often, as Strachan shows, aspired to artistry themselves.

Deacon captures the *Excursion* manner. The poem comes with a solemn prose summary; the blank verse that follows is steady and the grammar in both is knotty. Wordsworth finds, written on a rock, “these magic words, / ‘BUY WARREN’S BLACKING’” (28), which prompts, as the prose introduction says, “Philosophical reflections upon Warren’s Blacking” (27). Warren becomes a kind of Wordsworth, a mysterious figure known by his characteristic writing, whose message is quietly spread throughout the country. Wordsworth reflects on “The fame of Warren, and reflect[s] how wit, / Albeit in commerce, will attain respect / And glory from the nations” (32). Deacon’s parody works well because Wordsworth so often asks his readers to reflect on the unlikely affinities between things, to take some object of seeming insignificance and find in it a hidden depth. Most commonly this is an object in nature, but nature is not empty in Wordsworth, and Deacon simply populates the Lake District a little more fully. These may be “scenes / Where hermit nature, jealous of the world, / Guards from profane approach her solitude” (29), but “the world” is always touching on nature. The story begins as Wordsworth “passed the clefts of Silver-How, and turning to the left, / Fast by the blacksmith’s shop, two doors beyond / Old Stubb’s, the tart-woman’s, approached a glen / Secluded as a coy nun from the world” (28). Wordsworth is both jealous and coy, inviting the glance he seems to ward off. Wordsworth would not, of course, have advertised boot-polish: “getting and spending we lay waste our powers”, and commercial bonds are not, for him, like the sympathetic bonds that hold a community together. Deacon’s joke is still a joke. Yet the success of the parody lies in the way that it follows Wordsworth in teasing out an idea, in testing the boundaries between categories of things. He recognises that Wordsworth’s claims for his own value share much with its opposite, the advertiser’s puff, because they both are in the business of publicly claiming the distinctiveness of their products.

J. H. Reynolds’s anticipatory parody of Wordsworth, *Peter Bell*, suggests a similar position. The story of its publication is well known, but it is also crucial to the way it made its effect.[[21]](#endnote-20) Wordsworth had his *Peter Bell* announced for publication in April 1819. Reynolds, dining with friends, heard the news, and speedily wrote a parody overnight; his publishers, Taylor and Hessey, produced it so quickly that it was out before Wordsworth’s poem. Having two poems published within days of each other, and with the parody first, offered readers and reviewers the opportunity to ponder the question of Wordsworth’s public persona. Many reviewers of the two poems claimed not to be able to tell which was which. A poem Reynolds published in 1820 has an exasperated reader who is “lost between Peter and Peter” exclaim “Two Peters! – two Ballads! – two Bells! / Ah which is the serious Poem?” (86). A review in *The Times* seemed sure which was which, but also wondered whether “they may both be written by the same hand, the poet good-naturedly ridiculing his own manner” (3). A further parody, titled *Benjamin the Waggoner*, was inspired by the debacle, and this has Wordsworth mightily annoyed by *The Times*’s notion, exclaiming “I trust that *they* will be convinced – that both works were *not* written by the same author” (xix). It seems the kind of reaction one might expect from a poet who had hoped his *Peter Bell* would meet with acceptance “*permanently*”among the “Literature of my Country” (41). Yet it is often hard to tell parody from imitation, and at such moments the interpretive uncertainty that parodies provoke seems palpable.

Wordsworth’s parodists drew on the mobility of parody to suggest that reading Wordsworth depends on the recognition of an opposition between ephemeral and permanent types of culture. The first is a product of a highly-productive market for print; the second actively shuns it. A parody, though, is a matter of mirroring, and the instability of that relationship was a frequent, self-conscious, topic of reflection in the parodies. Shelley’s *Peter Bell the Third* plays on it inventively. The first Peter, Reynolds’s, is “Like the shadow in the glass / Of the second, yet unripe, / His substantial antitype” (“Prologue”, ll. 14-16). It was a joke that Reynolds’s parody anticipated, particularly in the prose prefaces that are so important a part of a Wordsworth parody. Reynolds has his Wordsworth protesting that as “these are the days of counterfeits, I am compelled to caution my readers against them” (vi). Advertisers like Robert Warren frequently used the tactic of warning customers against inferior imitations. The current poem is the genuine article: “I here declare this to be the true Peter; this to be the old original Bell” (vi-vii). He is clearly protesting too much, worried that there is so little between him and his parodists that one might confuse the two. Reynolds hints that Wordsworth’s prose apparatuses are so wordy not because he is arrogant enough to be assured of his audience’s interest, but because he anxiously feels the need to direct his readers who might easily mistake him for the wrong kind of culture. Peter the first is both “shadow” and “substan[ce]” because, as Shelley realised, Wordsworth is both shadowed by and constituted by ephemeral poetry, a poetry of surfaces rather than depths, of fashion rather than permanence, by means of which he distinguished his own poetry.

**III**

Shelley, like Reynolds and many more of these parodists, had a complex relationship with Wordsworth that cannot be reduced to a matter of crude opposition. Parodies are one way of recording a debt, and in this case parodies suggest both the powerful reach of Wordsworth’s critical intervention in debates over the separation of high and low culture, and also an appreciation of the teasing uncertainty Wordsworth introduced into that act. A parody called “The Old Tolbooth” from a small Edinburgh periodical in 1818 hints at the creativity in Wordsworthian cultural commentary. We find Wordsworth striding around in a poetic reverie:

Such were my waking dreams – my musing thoughts,

(For I do love to muse) as towards the shop

Of Arch’bald Constable I moved along,

Fully resolv’d to find most grievous fault

With Francis Jeffrey, whose unjust reviews

Deal out damnation, as a grocer deals

His sauded sugar, by the hundred weight. (149)

The musing poet affects a grand indifference to the publishing world. He is a poet who writes for all time, not his vulgar contemporaries. But he is in fact wholly obsessed by the print market and his place in a conversation worryingly dominated, he feels, by periodical critics like Jeffrey.After this period of vacant musing, “Wordsworth” (like Proust’s narrator) has a moment of epiphany when he trips on a paving slab. It’s not exactly a paving slab, he says, but what “mechanics / Call a rybet – explained, as you would see, / In a short note below – Italic-wise” (154). This is laborious, the inversions and blank verse aspiring to a Miltonic key out of proportion to the subject matter, with a bathetic drop into the material reality of the printed page. It’s a common tactic in parodies of poetry, but this gets much closer to Wordsworth in the way the poem takes such elaborate pains to instruct its readers. This depends not on sublime communication, but on the technology of the printer’s shop, the letters set up by the compositor in italics. Reading Wordsworth requires a sensitivity not just to hidden depths, but also what lies on the surface of the printed page, just as critics now combine attention to the poem’s printed format (its book historical features) with attention to its philosophy and its metre.

The parody brings out the sense in which Wordsworthian detachment is always tripping up on the world around it because it so strenuously rejects it, but it also suggests the sense of wonder that moments of confusion like this can offer. Wordsworth’s encounter with the rybet inspires a poem, if a pointedly material one, “Entituled ‘*An Excursion to the Lakes.*’ / In five thick volumes, royal quarto”. It also prompts an insight: “the laws / Of gravitation and attraction, hinge / Reciprocally on one another” (154). In some ways this is simple parody–a mental bombast in which the philosophical reflections are out of proportion to the subject matter. All that has happened is that Wordsworth has fallen over. Perhaps it is something more. Two opposed things are brought together, not as contraries, but as aspects of the same experience. This is the insight Wordsworth offered in the first “Essay on Epitaphs”, published alongside *The Excursion* in 1814: “qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other” (53). This is perhaps the parodies’ most valuable insight–they identify that what lies beneath the surface of Wordsworth’s poetry was a capacity in Wordsworth to raise and to confuse cultural distinctions, a task more commonly afforded to parody itself. Both what is troubling and what is enlivening about Wordsworth’s poetry begins in uncertainty about reading, and the relation between parody and Wordsworth’s poetry draws that idea out with particular sensitivity.

Wordsworth is drawn in his poetry to moments of doubt in which judgment is suspended. That *Peter Bell* (a poem considerably funnier than Reynolds’s parody, and deeply self-conscious about the relation between a poet and his audience) contains a moment in which its hero is confronted by a vision of “an unsubstantial creature, / His very self in form and feature” (ll. 973-4), only for Wordsworth to himself experience the same feeling when the poem came out, is perhaps less an irony than an appropriate addition to a pattern of parodic mirroring in which Wordsworth colludes. At the heart of this pattern is the Wordsworthian method of reading culture. A parody in *Knight’s Quarterly Magazine* is introduced as a sincere imitation; the supposed editor of it laments, repeatedly, “I never could get through the Excursion!” (“What You Will”, 220).[[22]](#endnote-21) *The Excursion*, however, is beginning to lose its reputation as hectoring and unreadable, thanks to critics such as Sally Bushell and Alison Hickey. It is a remarkably tentative poem that considers deeply the difficulty of finding permanence in transitory things, including the printed book the reader holds.

Wordsworth has, he says in the preface, “retired to his native mountains, with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live” (5). But his aspiration to permanence is precisely a “hope” that his poem “might” survive. Across the poem as a whole, the Solitary’s “panic dread of change” (3: 827) leads to a failure to maintain a faith that looks through death that is slowly corrected by the Wanderer and the Pastor who develop ways of reading an abiding permanence beneath transitory things. But the transition from ephemeral to permanent is pointedly tentative. The sound of a bird, for example, “fades upon the ear, / Diminishing by distance till it seemed / To expire; yet from the abyss is caught again, / And yet again recovered!” (4: 1178-81). This is joyous, but clearly far from overbearingly confident. The Wanderer tells the Solitary that “These Dalesmen trust / The lingering gleam of their departed lives / To oral record, and the silent heart; / Depositories faithful and more kind / Than fondest epitaph” (6: 610-14). As Michael O’Neill suggests, the way Wordsworth dallies between speech and materiality produces a layer of unstable irony–both speech and material structures are the source at once of permanence and ephemerality. O’Neill is right to claim that Wordsworth is “alive to the way language involves speakers and listeners in struggle about value” (33), and the doubtful outcome of that struggle is strongly registered. The phrasing here is sincere but playful–security comes in an “oral record, and the silent heart”. This is close to oxymoronic–a record, from cordium, is something got by heart, yet the oral record is held in a silent heart. The continuing maintenance of the “lingering gleam” depends on the heart, the affection of those who knew them. But this is not, the poem keeps acknowledging, permanent–things that “linger” can only do so for a while. This is the “scandal” that Bennett (*Romantic Poets* 95) discovers in the Wordsworthian ideal of posterity–the fact that eventually, and inevitably, there will come a time when, as the Wanderer puts it, “very soon / Even of the good is no memorial left” (1: 505-6). Wordsworth moves tentatively and subtly through a series of methods by which transitory events and emotions might be made to last. His own poem is offered as one such method, but whether it can rise above its age is a question it poses rather than an answer it assumes. Wordsworth’s statements in his prefaces often suggest that some forms of culture, like his poems but unlike the ephemeral trash of the press, might achieve an unchanging permanence, a place in a transhistorical canon. The way that his poem thinks through the necessarily temporal succession of readers who will guard that “lingering gleam” suggests a much less confident, but much more generous, posture.

Wordsworth’s concern with permanence is, above all, religious. But, as the responses of his readers suggest, the poem also invites reflection on the kind of book one is reading, and the nature of reading itself. Marianne Fothergill, a member of a Yorkshire book subscription society that had voted to take *The Excursion* in, then voted it out again, is not missing the point when she notes that it “[possesses] an Imagination of the *first order*”, but that “[t]he Excursion will not meet with praise from the Multitude, but will delight the solitary and reflective” (Woof 824). The poem offers readers a method of reading culture that it is both deeply invested in the possibility of permanence, and fascinatingly uncertain about the method of distinguishing the “first” from the “second” order of cultural products.

The opposition between ephemeral and permanent forms of culture was clearly important to Wordsworth. The two categories resemble, to borrow Shelley’s figure, “The shadow in the glass”, and discovering which was the original and which the reflection proved productively perplexing. Many of these parodies are meta-parodies, concerned with the parallel relation that a parody sets up between itself and its source. One does so in lamenting the death of Wordsworth, who apparently “met with his fate while in the act of leaning forward to lay his hands on the image of a star which was gleaming on the bosom of the water” (*Nose-Drop* 252), a repetition, perhaps unconsciously, of Wordsworth’s *Peter Bell*.[[23]](#endnote-22) James Hogg’s *Poetic Mirror* features a “magic mirror” in which the lake doubles the mountain so that the poet “scarcely could discern” “the shadow from the substance” (133-4). It might seem a hit against a poet who placed such store in being “great and at the same time *original*” (“Essay, Supplementary”80). But in fact such instances are amongst the most imitative parts of these parodies. In “The Stranger” Hogg’s Wordsworth discovers a “subterraneous magazine of bones” (152). One might imagine that Hogg is relishing the opportunity to make the airy Wordsworth more bodily, but the lines are lifted directly from *The Excursion* (5: 345) (and follow close on the heels of a complaint that John Wilson is a “vile copyist” (151)). Hogg has Wordsworth remark on

similitude,

In dissimilitude man’s sole delight,

And all the sexual intercousse [sic] of things. (142)

This may sound odd, but the idea, as Karl Miller (119) points out, is in the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*. The idea also describes with considerable precision the nature of a parody, which is similar to, and yet not quite like, its source. Wordsworth frequently offers moments of confusion between shadow and substance, when opposed things can switch places. A parody by Maginn in *Blackwood’s* that is primarily an attack on *Don Juan* borrows the form of Wordsworth’s “Yarrow Unvisited” and prints original and parody in parallel, including Wordsworth’s exclamation: “The Swan on still St Mary’s Lake / Float double, Swan and Shadow!” (“Don Juan” 194-5). In the ninth book of *The Excursion* the group assembled by the Wanderer and the Pastor see a vision of a “snow-white Ram” (9: 444) reflected in a deep pool of water, and reflect on the way that the ram’s reflection is both part of it and not of it, “his shadowy Counterpart” (9: 449). The image is something like the cultural image Wordsworth presented in these years, in which he was constantly reflected and challenged by a range of doubles whose existence he seemed to have anticipated.

Shelley’s preface to *Peter Bell the Third*, addressed to Thomas Brown, one of Thomas Moore’s pseudonyms, includes, almost as a matter of course, a cultural distinction: “Your works, indeed, dear Tom, Sell better; but mine are far superior; the public is no judge: posterity sets all to rights” (89). There can be little doubt that Wordsworth sincerely hoped that his poetry would act to reform the reading of his culture in a way that would persist. It proved a popular view (not least for Shelley) in a period deeply troubled by poetry’s relationship with the literary market. But as Jonathan Wordsworth suggests in a discussion of *Peter Bell*’s comedy, “Wordsworth works in a realm where distinctions are less clear” (215), a fact that applies to cultural as well as metaphysical distinctions.It is now *The Prelude* and not *The Excursion*, the poem he held back from publication rather than the one he published in quarto for two guineas, that is taken to be Wordsworth’s great statement. Yet the fact that it had not been published did not prevent *Blackwood’s* parodying “My Great Auto-Biographical Poem” (Maginn “Luctus” 190).His parodists help us see more sharply his fascination with, and his tentative exploration of, what he called in that poem the “observation of affinities / In objects where no brotherhood exists / To common minds” (*Prelude* [1805] 2: 403-5).[[24]](#endnote-23)

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1. \*Email: david.stewart@northumbria.ac.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am indebted to the list compiled by N. Stephen Bauer. Bauer lists 48 parodies published between 1801 and 1836 (including one by D. M. Moir in *Blackwood’s* that he is unsure whether to class as an imitation or a parody, which I discuss below). Of these, 10 were published between 1801 and 1813; 26 were published between 1816 and 1822; the highest concentration is between 1819 and 1822 in which 21 were published. In addition to Bauer’s list I can add “A Simple Story; after the Manner of Wordsworth”, *New British Ladies Magazine* (1818); W. F. Deacon, “Immortality in Embryo; or, Genius in its Night-Gown”, Gold’s *London Magazine* (1820); J. G. Lockhart, “Desultory Stanzas upon Receiving the Last Sheets”, *Blackwood’s Magazine* (1822). “Daniel O’Rourke, an Epic Poem” (1820-21) by William Maginn and William Gosnell in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, is a staggeringly varied poem that alludes to much beyond Wordsworth. There are frequent references to him throughout, many references to Wordsworthian ideas of “posterity”, and a parody of the opening flight that begins *Peter Bell*. I include it in this list most particularly on account of the succession of defensive and self-congratultory poems and postscripts that come as a supplement to the final canto. One, capturing the mood, states ‘if one reader rises from its perusal with a heart better adapted for the reception of the sublime and devotional – if one spirit has been refreshed by the inspiration of holy musing while reading it…I shall not look upon the labour to have been in vain’ (“Canto 6” 439), a strange claim for a poem about a man getting drunk on smuggled brandy in west Cork, perhaps, but a pointed reference to *The Excursion*’s preface’s ‘Be not this labour useless’ (l. 99). In addition one should note three notable parodies written but unpublished in this period–Keats’s “Lines Rhymed in a Letter Received (by J. H. Reynolds) From Oxford” (1817); Shelley’s *Peter Bell the Third* (1819); Byron’s “Epilogue” (1820) written on the title page of his copy of *Peter Bell*. My total of 33 comprises Bauer’s 26, the four published parodies, and the three unpublished parodies. I can add three parodies published after 1822, “Discovery of Another Poet” (1825), and two by James Hogg: “A New Poetic Mirror by the Ettrick Shepherd No. 1 – Mr W. W.: Ode to a Highland Bee” (1829) and “Andrew the Packman. After the Manner of Wordsworth” (1830). “Discovery of Another Poet” was published originally in the *Globe and Traveller* in 1825, and reprinted in 1826: for the text and discussion see Mason (*British Satire* 215-8). There were two more by Hartley Coleridge that remained unpublished, “Peter Bell: A satire upon the Poet Laureate’s celebrated production” and “When we are dead and gone to Davy’s Locker” (both ca. 1827). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Trott argues that his parodists assert the “very continuity of culture that Wordsworth had rejected” through allusion to Swift and Pope’s attacks on Ambrose Phillips’s “namby pamby” style (69). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Moir wrote sentimental verse as “Delta” in *Blackwood’s* with a clear debt to Wordsworth. His “Peter Ledyard – A Lyrical Ballad” (1822) is an interesting case of a poem that, as Bauer (569) notes, looks like being a parody, but seems never quite to tip over the edge of imitation. Attributions of authorship are taken from Strout (78, 99). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. The idea that Wordsworth was a loss to publishers until the 1830s overstates the case. Benjamin Colbert puts it more accurately: for Longman’s, Wordsworth was a “sound investment, but no bestseller” (157). For a balanced discussion of Longman’s calculations on both poets informed by a deep knowledge of publishing realities, see Asa Briggs, *A History of Longman’s and Their Books, 1724-1990*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. One should remember that many readers would have borrowed the book from libraries, friends or reading societies. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. Hartley published a parody of Wordsworth in 1827 in *The Inspector, Literary Review and Magazine*, “He lived amidst th’ untrodden ways” (*New Poems* 98). He also composed “Peter Bell: A satire upon the Poet Laureate’s celebrated production” (*New Poems* 99-100), a poem Hartley never wrote down (his friend Joseph Burns made a transcript) and a couplet that mixes reverence and humour: “When we are dead and gone to Davy’s Locker, / Still shall thy name survive, great Goose of Cocker” (*New Poems* 101). Hartley is typical of this period’s parodists in his combination of both impulses; in the same letter in which he comments on the “gasconading prefaces” he remarks “What a mighty genius is the Poet Wordsworth!” (*Letters* 93). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. *Benjamin the Waggoner* has been attributed to both J. H. Reynolds and John Gibson Lockhart, but neither attribution is convincing. See John Strachan, *Parodies of the Romantic Age* (2: 213). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. For a comprehensive collection of these responses that suggests the influence of this view, see Robert Woof’s *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. See, for example, Dentith, *Parody* and Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*. The parodies of Wordsworth are valuable in part because of the interpretive uncertainties they prompt, an issue explored well by Mark Jones who comments on the attempt to police the generic boundaries of parody to “prevent critical embarrassments” (60). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. Arnold used the phrase in a letter to John Morley (6 December 1882) while confessing to enjoying a recently published parody.On Arnold’s indebtedness to Wordsworth, see Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (168-88). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. Published first in the Liverpool periodical *The Academic* 1 (15 Jan 1821). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. “The Dead Asses” has been attributed to Reynolds, but, as his biographer Leonidas M. Jones shows, it is unlikely to have been by him. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
14. The parody is tentatively attributed to William Maginn by Strout (72). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
15. Strout offers either Wilson or Lockhart as possible authors (68). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. See Strout (67) on the tentative attribution of parts of this piece to different authors. Strout lists Lockhart as a possible author of the Wordsworth parodies. See also Mason (*Blackwood’s* 149-52) on attributions. I will refer to Maginn as the author, but, as David E. Latané argues, Maginn (like Lockhart and several of his peers in the press at this time) actively resisted the status of “author” as singular source of textual authority, something these parodies play on. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. Wordsworth often went to elaborate lengths to assure readers he did not read his reviews, perhaps most comically in the *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* (1816) which quotes from the *Edinburgh Review* at length but is only able to do so, he tells us, because “Mr Peterkin’s pamphlet,” which he has seen, quotes from it (126). The “Essay, Supplementary” is Maginn’s primary source: “Casually, and very rarely only, do I see any periodical publication, except a newspaper” (62). *Benjamin the Waggoner* and *The Dead Asses* both find Wordsworth prompted, seemingly against his will, to acknowledge that he reads the daily press and is, in a curious way, inspired to write by his reading of the papers. “The Nose-Drop” claims that Wordsworth has recently died, and speculates on the cause of death. One theory is suicide, because by the body was found the *Edinburgh Review* “containing that cruel critique on his youthful poems, which (though he professed never to have read it) embittered the whole of his after-life” (252). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. David Carey’s anthology contains a parody of “The Waggoner”, “The Sailor’s Story”, which also features a hero possessed of “skill pugilistic” (238). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. Strout (97) offers J. G. Lockhart as the likely author. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
20. Strout (91) assigns this tentatively to D. M. Moir and William Maginn. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
21. Reynolds’s poem came out on the 15 April 1819, Wordsworth’s on 22 April. For a more detailed discussion see Leonidas M. Jones *The Life of John Hamilton Reynolds* (171-5). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
22. This prose discussion, framing “Imitation of The Excursion” (220-1), makes this otherwise sincere-seeming poem tip over into parody. Winthrop Mackworth Praed is the likely author, though the attribution is not certain. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
23. Kent and Ewen (389) note the allusion here to “The Idiot Boy”. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
24. That ‘common’ becomes ‘passive’ in the 1850 *Prelude* suggests Wordsworth’s ongoing concerns with the nature of reading. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)