WORDSWORTH, PARODY, AND THE AUTHORSHIP OF "THE BARBERRY-TREE"

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In 1964, Romantic studies was struck by the discovery of a suspected new poem of William Wordsworth.[1] The manuscript, unearthed at Christ Church, Oxford, was buried in the papers of the nineteenth-century historian Henry Hallam, in a letter from his wife's brother, Charles Abraham Elton, enclosing "a M: S: of Mr. Wordsworth, never publish'd."[2] Known as "The Barberry-Tree," the poem has come to occupy a controversial place in Wordsworth's corpus. Is the poem a parody or a previously lost Wordsworth lyric, an imitation of the Wordsworthian circle or an elaborate forgery made in jest?[3] The recent acquisition of a second manuscript allows us to deepen and complicate accounts of the poem's textual history and authorship.

In March 2022, I was one of several delegates to attend the donation to Christ Church of the poem's second manuscript. The poem appears within a host of documents from the archive of Philip John Ducarel, ranging from literary works to ephemera that offer a window into nineteenth-century material culture. Eleven lines longer than Christ Church's first manuscript, and altering its form by removing spaces between verse paragraphs, the Ducarel fair copy differs tellingly from the Hallam version.[4] For all its variants, this second manuscript from Ducarel was unknown when the poem was published in the Cornell scholarly edition of Wordsworth (1983), which relied on the first manuscript's authentication by Jonathan Wordsworth.[5] His verdict, on balance, was to support a Wordsworthian attribution, drawing in part on two entries in Dorothy Wordsworth's journal.

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The first, on April 15, 1802, echoes language used both in "The Barberry-Tree" and in Wordsworth's later poem commonly referred to as "The Daffodils," while the second, on April 24, recorded how "William" had "called me out to see a waterfall behind the Barberry tree" (Dorothy Wordsworth 91).[6] So convincing were the allusions to Wordsworth, moreover, that the poem seemed to echo lines that, at the time of writing, existed only in manuscript, unpublished for the general eye. "The Barberry-Tree" may therefore have been an unpublished experiment, a step on the way to "The Daffodils" never intended to be published.[7] Unpublished, but not perhaps unreleased. For a potential complication is that Wordsworth's unpublished poems could still circulate in literary circles and at private readings, and that similarities in diction are not always proof of allusion.

The revelation in 1986 that "The Barberry-Tree" was not in fact unpublished after all reignited debates over the poem's authorship. A printed version had been found in an October 1807 edition of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*. Published anonymously, the poem carried the more doubtful title of "THE BARBERRY-TREE. AN ATTEMPT AT *GENUINE POETRY*, *After the manner of the* NEW SCHOOL" (Mays 362, 366–67; Arno 17). Interpreting this new find through disparate lenses, three articles appeared in the same issue of the *Review of English Studies*, alongside a note from the editor explaining the circumstances of this intervention.[8] The published version's subtitle recalls Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, as Fred Blick has argued, in its use of the term "genuine poetry" and its labeling of poems as "attempts" (248). The "New School" of poetry was a characterization made by Francis Jeffrey to contextualize Robert Southey's poem *Thalaba* (Mays 363). It was not a term for which Wordsworth had much time, declaring in 1804 that "I do not know what is meant by it nor of whom it consists. The only names I ever heard of were Coleridge, Southey, Lamb and myself [. . .] it is scarcely possible that a greater difference should exist between any set of men or Authors" (de Selincourt 433–34). The phrase's derogatory associations make its use by Wordsworth still less likely and underpinned the theory, as put forward by J. C. C. Mays, that "We have lost a new poem by Wordsworth and gained a new parody" (363). There remain several major arguments against the authenticity of "The Barberry-Tree" as a genuine Wordsworth poem—not least the fact that no copy has been found in Wordsworth's hand. Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy, made copious notes in her journals about Wordsworth's compositions, yet scholars have noted no direct mention of this poem.

Only in the last decade did the state of facts surrounding this controversial poem take a further turn. In 2013, the second manuscript (now newly acquired by Christ Church) surfaced in the papers of the Ducarel family, observed by Christie Arno in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Within a week, however, the *TLS* attracted further dissent, in the form of a letter from John Worthen, who had previously judged the poem to be a collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge. The new manuscript, in Worthen's view, suggests Elton's "tinkering" with this poem of his own devising before distributing it in the two surviving manuscripts. Critics had, in his words, been "barking up the wrong barberry tree" (6). Elton was a published poet and parodist himself.[9] "The Barberry-Tree" is conspicuously absent from those volumes, but could Elton have tried to pass off his parody as a work of Wordsworth in jest? Elton did, after all, later publish in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, where the printed version of "The Barberry-Tree" appeared (Mays 366). Like candlelight in a cave, letters give us only flickering glimpses of the expansive unknown, and Wordsworth's authorship may have quickly been dismissed in other correspondence that no longer survives.

What emerges, then, is a series of outstanding questions: chief among them, what clues, if any, might these two versions offer for the existence of a lost set of manuscripts in the hand of Wordsworth? It has been suggested that the new Ducarel manuscript was composed before the first-discovered manuscript: the version sent to Julia Hallam by her brother, Elton (Arno 17). The new, Ducarel manuscript appears without an author attribution, and its hand shares many traits with an undated letter from Elton to Ducarel in the same collection. If "The Barberry-Tree" were a parody by Elton, then it would not be surprising that both surviving manuscripts would be in his hand. If, however, the author was Wordsworth, then we might presume that Elton copied out the original manuscripts before sending the copies for others to read. Yet must Elton not, in that case, have had access to two original Wordsworth manuscripts in order to copy two manuscripts in different textual states? Much of the Elton-Hallam collection was later destroyed by a fire, so these two manuscripts may be the only surviving copies of two now-incinerated manuscripts by Wordsworth—or by a range of other potential authors, including Coleridge, Lamb, or Poole, as others have argued over the years.[10] The two manuscripts of "The Barberry-Tree" might equally comprise a copy of a Wordsworth original followed by a version augmented by another author.

Beyond its textual history, the poem's narrative and tone combine to produce a strangely parodic voice. Its speaker's attentions, for instance, are arrested for hours by, among other things, the dancing of a barberry tree in the wind—"And on this food of thought I fed / Till moments, minutes, hours had fled"—until the church bells peal him back to reality, reminding of a missed engagement:

> And had not sudden the church chimes
> Rung out the well-known peal I love;
> I had forgotten Peter Grimes,
> His nuts and cyder in the apple grove: [. . .]
> (and I to Grimes had pledg'd my word:)
> (Ducarel MS, f. 1v)

Those bells that pull a speaker's thoughts away from wild imaginings and back into the world of action are far from an unusual Romantic trope. Such a scene, in which the speaker finds their thoughts tumble out of "moments, minutes, hours" and into a deeper introspection, is not itself uncharacteristic of the Wordsworth of *The Prelude* with its famous "spots of time," and its "yearn[ing] towards some philosophic Song" (Book XI, lines 258–68, and Book I, line 230 in *William Wordsworth* 491). It could also be a parody of that Wordsworthian tendency, especially in the Ducarel manuscript's lines "Whether it be thus or no / I cannot tell, I do not know; / Nay, whether now I reason well, / I do not know, I cannot tell" (Ducarel MS, f. 1v). The winding syntax of the Ducarel version entwines with the speaker's transfixed state of mind: what the speaker elsewhere calls his "lonely trance" (f. 2r), his thoughts amblingly sifting through the reasons for this arresting encounter. The poem's sudden couplet of "I've measur'd the distance from the door; / Tis fifteen yards and something more" can readily figure as a parody of "The Thorn," with its couplet "I've measured it from side to side: / 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide" (f. 2v; *William Wordsworth* 24). Other echoes of "The Thorn" include the repetition of the line "I cannot tell" and the verbatim use of that poem's phrase "this I know."[11]

Certainly, any serious, sharp-eyed philosophical reading of the barberry tree's arresting sound as it acts on the imagination would need to pause at the following passage:

> But Jacob Jones, if you have at heart
> To hear this sound & see this sight:
> Then this advice I do impart
> That Jacob, you dont go by night:

> For then tis possible the shrub so green
> And yellow may not well be seen.
> Nor Jacob, would I have you go
> When the blithe winds forbear to blow:
> I think it may be safely then averr'd
> The piping sounds will not be heard.
> (Ducarel MS, f. 2v)

While five of the passage's lines are partially ripped from the Elton manuscript, this Ducarel version restores their full oddness, differently punctuated, more prosodically irregular while sharpening the Elton manuscript's "piping leaves" to the more logical phrase of "The piping sounds."[12] Four critical questions emerge immediately from this passage. First, is the speaker aware of the humor in their advice, or is the poet passing judgement on the speaker?[13] Do the lines therefore contain the seeds of a disjunction—between the speaker's hours spent before the barberry tree unable to comprehend the reasons for its allure, and the poet's own more knowing understanding? Are these the lines, perhaps more than any others in the poem, that display a poetic persona at work, a Wordsworthian experiment with dramatic voicing and character? Or, by contrast, are these the lines, more perhaps than any others, that betray this poem as a parody, one that either does not reach Wordsworth's philosophical depth or intentionally undercuts it?

Lineation and metrical patterning offer two clues as to the poem's artistic awareness. For more than the poem's variation between four-, three- and five-beat lines and its plodding regularity in the above examples, passages of metrical variation repeatedly signal its shifts from trance to more alert reality. Of more thematic interest than lines that truncate into hexasyllables or those that tip into decasyllables are the lines that extend still further into alexandrines. Those moments begin when the speaker contemplates their resumed day after the trance that sees them ensnared in tritely symmetrical tetrameters. The syllables that create the poem's first alexandrine occur in the very line in which the narrative trance is broken, enacting a lurch into the speaking present: "Like an immoveable cloud I there had stood *till now*" (f. 1v, emphasis added),[14] a line that had been decasyllabic in the previous, Elton manuscript, though still overextending the prosodic trance ("There like a Statue had I stood, till now" [Hallam MS, f. 105v]). Line length, in the newly acquired manuscript, becomes enwrapped with the tension between historical time and a deeper poetic temporality:

the moments of introspection that become the poem's theme. The lines that immediately follow this alexandrine slip back into trance and tetrameter only then to extend again with the throwing off of this state: "Still, so it was, I know not how, / But pass'd it not away, that piping wind" (Ducarel MS, f. 2r). That final word, "wind," finds no full end rhyme, creating a single blank verse line in a poem of prosodic shifting and at times rhyming circularity.[15] The notion of a trance from which a speaker awakes has been noted in debates over the poem's authorship, since, as John Beer observes of the Elton manuscript, there are "echoes" in this poem of other Wordsworthian pieces that at the time of writing were not yet published. Among them, tellingly, are "the lines 'when the trance was gone pursued his way' and 'And when the trance / Came to us as we stood by Hart-leap Well,' in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' and 'Home at Grasmere' respectively" (Beer 350). Yet a more commonly quoted version of the first line than those that Beer prints is prosodically distinct—"But, when the trance was gone, feebly pursued his way," the additional syllables pulling the line into an alexandrine. The fact this poem both echoes an unpublished manuscript of Wordsworth and uses the same metrical effect of the alexandrine when discussing the breaking of this trance demonstrates a consonance, whether by chance or by circumstance, with Wordsworth's prosody. It produces, at the very least, an effect of versification that recurs in two poems related to experiences of temporally disrupted moments. Indeed, what is striking about the octosyllabic lines of "The Barberry-Tree" "For as I went in sober sooth / It seem'd to go along with me"[16] is how the speaker not only finds that natural image transposed from life and into verse but depicts its transportation from its original time and place.

Put like this, the moving experience of the speaker of "The Barberry-Tree" sounds closer to a depiction of a Coleridgean function of fancy: that faculty closely related to the imagination and to memory, which he describes in the *Biographia Literaria* as "no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space" (chap. XIII, 305). The role of Fancy that Coleridge there describes is one in which past experiences and images are transported by the mind from the circumstances in which they were encountered: a fanciful act of invention, but not of the same imaginative order as the acts of *ex nihilo* creation and "the living Power and the prime Agent of all human Perception" that Coleridge reserves for his descriptions of the *Imagination* (304). The line between a depiction of a poet of fancy rather than imagination, on the one hand, and a parody produced by a poet of fancy, on the other, is again a difficult one to draw. As

difficult, perhaps, as the line between poems *about* a speaker's imprecise handling of the relations of fancy and memory to identity, and poems that themselves offer an imprecise rehearsal of eighteenth-century skeptical philosophy in verse. After all, Coleridge's distinctions between imagination and fancy can at times fall back simply to a qualitative assessment of perceived ability: "Milton had a highly *imaginative*, Cowley a very *fanciful* mind" (chap. IV, 84). The speaker of "The Barberry-Tree" is certainly no Milton, and yet the filtering of skeptical philosophy in verse is rarely itself a crude rehearsal of the idea. For what happens in the transition from prose to verse is more than the disruptive qualities of those alexandrines and hexasyllables that pull against the trance-like qualities of the speaker's metrical norms. The process the poem depicts is a narrative act, one in which tricks of rhyme and prosody can conspire to lend resonance to the narrative's dramatized aesthetic response.

Taken as a work of poetic form, the newly acquired Ducarel manuscript therefore opens up a range of stylistic questions. Certainly, it raises further considerations for the many competing theories of the poem's status as Wordsworth poem, Elton parody, or collaborative coauthorship within the wider Wordsworth-Coleridge circle. The pattern is one in which a poem of clear technical ability—not only familiar with Wordsworth's idiom but also echoing unpublished lines while proving itself prosodically adept—engages with philosophical ideas circulating widely in Wordsworth's circle and the period. Each is done at times with skill and at others with a draining into triviality, a potential marker of a less-practiced poet, a half-hearted parody by a virtuosic poet such as Coleridge, or an off-day genuine experiment of Wordsworth. Regardless of its authorship, what "The Barberry-Tree" therefore suggests is not only the verse culture and imitation surrounding Wordsworthian depictions of the imagination and its encounters with the natural, but also how the intellectual history of the imagination developed within the collaborative enterprises of writers' circles. Often that notion of the imagination's evolution might seem a cooperative one, in the more recounted side of James Engell's account, and clearly for the Lake poets and their circles it at many times was. Yet the sheer confluence of thematic echoes and philosophical resonances in "The Barberry-Tree"—suggestive of several potential, or even multiple, authors—speaks also to the competition in the kinds of poetic project that underlie Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

There remains no decisive evidence for or against a Wordsworth attribution, and the coming of this manuscript to Christ Church unites the only

two known manuscript artefacts of the poem. The bequest was also accompanied by a set of contextual letters and manuscripts from the Ducarel circle that indicate the coterie culture of letters in circulation. Among these, Elton's poem "The Trumpet of Death" will prove useful for comparisons with "The Barberry-Tree." The recent donation of this second manuscript to Christ Church will better enable the close scrutiny of these documents side by side, shedding new light on such questions of authenticity. Reuniting these two manuscripts, then, reminds us of the textual puzzles that present themselves in literary scholarship, of the manuscript cultures that leave their traces in private and public archives, and, above all, of the verse culture out of which Wordsworth's "philosophic Song" emerged.

NOTES

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1. Identified by Peter Clark and published in *The New Statesman* with an analysis by Jonathan Wordsworth.

2. See "The Barberry-Tree" in Letter from Charles Abraham Elton to Julia Hallam, September 22, [1807], f. 105r.

3. For these and other prior questions over the poem's authorship, see Arno 17.

4. See also Arno 17.

5. For Jonathan Wordsworth's extended authentication, see "The New Wordsworth Poem" 455–65; on the poem's inclusion in the Cornell Wordsworth edition, see Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes* xxvii.

6. See also Jonathan Wordsworth, "The New Wordsworth Poem" 459–60.

7. On the origin of the later title "The Daffodils" for "I wandered lonely as a cloud," see Sullivan 441.

8. For the editorial introduction, see Alton; for the issue's articles, see Beer; Mays; Jonathan Wordsworth "'The Barberry-Tree' Revisited."

9. Elton, *Tales of Romance with Other Poems*; see also Elton, *Poems*.

10. See, e.g., Mays 367.

11. On the poem's relations to "The Thorn," see Beer 354.

12. Compare the Ducarel manuscript's nine-syllable line "But Jacob Jones, if you have at heart" with the Hallam manuscript's octosyllabic variant: "If Jacob Jones, you have at heart." Hallam MS, f. 106r; Ducarel MS, f. 2v.

13. As Matthew Bevis observes of "The Barberry-Tree," "There has been much debate about whether the poem was written by Wordsworth, or by Coleridge, or—as John Worthen has argued—by both. Yet the difficulty of knowing for sure is part of the point"; lines 9–14 "might be equally understood as the writer's indulgence of his own creative flights of fancy and as an outsider's scepticism of it" (61).

14. When eliding the word "immoveable" to three syllables, the line scans as a twelve-syllable alexandrine with six stresses.

15. See, however, the eye rhyme of "mind" five lines earlier.

16. Ducarel MS, f. 2r; Elton's undated letter to John Philip Ducarel in the Ducarel Archive at Christ Church includes his views on octosyllabic and blank verse.

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