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PARODY

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Simon Dentith



the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

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1

APPROACHES TO PARODY

PARODY AND THE TO-AND-FRO OF LANGUAGE

In George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* – a novel not generally characterised by parodic playfulness – there is a scene in which Mr Brooke, who is standing for election, has to make a speech to an unruly crowd. As he speaks from the balcony of an inn, an effigy of himself is displayed which, by virtue of a ventriloquist's skill, derisively repeats everything that Brooke says. As George Eliot writes, 'the most innocent echo has an impish mockery in it when it follows a gravely persistent speaker, and this echo was not at all innocent'; the crowd is amused, Brooke humiliated, and his political opponents score a victory (Eliot, 1988: 413). I take this as an exemplary instance of parody, albeit a fictional one. By the mere repetition of another's words, their intonation exaggerated but their substance remaining the same, one utterance, Brooke's, is transformed by another, held up to public gaze, and subjected to ridicule.

George Eliot is doing no more here than illustrating an aspect of discourse which is so widespread as to be universal. The peculiarities of an election, especially the speeches delivered in the course of it, are certainly not typical of all speech situations, but

faced by Little Swills, the comic vocalist, who hopes (according to the bill in the window) that his friends will rally round him, and support first-rate talent. The Sol's Arms does a brisk stroke of business all the morning. Even children so require sustaining, under the general excitement, that a pieman, who has established himself for the occasion at the corner of the court, says his brandy-balls go off like smoke. What time the beadle, hovering between the door of Mr. Krook's establishment and the door of the Sol's Arms, shows the curiosity in his keeping to a few discreet spirits, and accepts the compliment of a glass of ale or so in return.

(Dickens, 1971–3: Chapter 11)

Dickens's parodic references here, marked with varying evaluative charges, are all allusions, not to any specific precursor text, but more to particular phraseologies, even to what can only be described as a tone of voice. The various languages that circulate around the court (that is, some of the dialects of working-class London), reappear here in mildly parodied form. Much of the paragraph is in 'double-voiced discourse', so that we can hear in the writing simultaneous traces both of the characters' speech and the author's attitude towards it. Thus we can hear in the extract the accents of Mrs. Perkins and Mrs. Piper ('that excellent woman'), the jargon of semi-professional entertainment, the slang of the pieman, and the pomposity of the beadle ('accepts the compliment of a glass of ale'). It is helpful to see, in the pervasiveness of parody in a characteristically Dickensian paragraph such as this, an indication of the author's multitudinous recycling of the diverse languages of mid-nineteenth-century English. Writing of this kind marks one limit of what might count as parody, making scarcely hostile allusions to what are little more than the slightly inflected phrases of contemporary speech. The passage nevertheless indicates the potential scope of parody, if it is understood as one form of the more general intertextual constitution of all writing.

I am therefore moving towards a wide and inclusive account of

parody, rather than a narrowly formal one. The definition of parody that I am about to offer is based, not on any specific formal or linguistic features, but on the intertextual stance that writing adopts. Accordingly, I conclude this section with this preliminary definition of parody: 'Parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice'.

In order to capture the evaluative aspect of parody, I include the word 'polemical' in the definition; this word is used to allude to the contentious or 'attacking' mode in which parody can be written, though it is 'relatively' polemical because the ferocity of the attack can vary widely between different forms of parody. And finally, in a distinction whose importance is about to become clearer, the direction of the attack can vary. So far I have been stressing the importance of parody as *rejoinder*, or mocking response to the word of another. But many parodies draw on the authority of precursor texts to attack, satirise, or just playfully to refer to elements of the contemporary world. These parodies also need to be reckoned in to any definition, so the polemical direction of parody can draw on the allusive imitation to attack, not the precursor text, but some new situation to which it can be made to allude. Such parodies; indeed, are the stock in trade of innumerable compilations of light and comic verse and of literary competitions, and their 'polemical' content is often very slight indeed.

DEFINITIONS

Given the often humorous and anti-academic nature of parody, it is ironic that discussions of the topic have been bedevilled by academic disputes about definition. What exactly did the ancient Greeks mean by 'parodia'? How can we distinguish, in a hard and fast way, between parody, travesty, and pastiche? Does parody necessarily have a polemical relationship to the parodied text? It

that parody is one of the many forms of intertextual allusion out of which texts are produced.

In this sense, parody forms part of a range of cultural practices, which allude, with deliberate evaluative intonation, to precursor texts. Just as we cannot speak without adopting an attitude towards those to whom we speak, and towards that about which we speak, so also we must situate ourselves evaluatively towards the language that we use. The relevant range of cultural practices could conveniently be arranged as a spectrum, according to the evaluations that differing forms make of the texts that they cite, with reverential citation at one end of the scale ('My text today is taken from ...'), to hostile parody at the other end, and passing through a multitude of cultural forms on the way. Thus the spectrum would include imitation, pastiche, mock-heroic, burlesque, travesty, spoof, and parody itself. I hesitate to set out this scale in too formal a way, however, for a number of reasons. In the first place, all such classifications of cultural forms tend to invite analyses of texts of a reductively pigeon-holing kind. Second, the discussion of parody is bedevilled by disputes over definition, a fruitless form of argument unless there are matters of substance at stake – of genuine differences of cultural politics, for example. Finally, because of the antiquity of the word parody (it is one of the small but important group of literary-critical terms to have descended from the ancient Greeks), because of the range of different practices to which it alludes, and because of differing national usages, no classification can ever hope to be securely held in place. So for the time being I will affirm that parody in writing, like parody in speech, is part of the everyday processes by which one utterance alludes to or takes its distance from another; and that there are a number of adjacent forms which do the same, while there are equally many other forms which make allusions for quite opposite evaluative purposes. All this is part of the intertextual constitution and competition of writing.

We can use the notion of intertextuality to help us still further

in situating and characterising parody. Developing that distinction between different kinds of intertextuality – between the deliberate and explicit allusion to a precursor text or texts, on the one hand, and a more generalised allusion to the constitutive codes of daily language, on the other – allows us to distinguish between different kinds of parody. One distinction often made is between 'specific' and 'general' parody, the former aimed at a specific precursor text, the latter at a whole body of texts or kind of discourse. Thus Lewis Carroll's poem 'How Doth the Little Crocodile' ('How doth the little crocodile/Improve his shining tail ...') is a *specific* parody of Isaac Watts's poem 'Against Idleness and Mischief' ('How does the little busy bee/Improve each shining hour ...'). By contrast, Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote* is a *general* parody of the chivalric romance as a genre. This distinction neatly correlates with that which I have drawn between intertextual modes. However, we can use the distinction in modes to capture another aspect of parody, between the fully developed formal parody which constitutes the complete text – whose whole *raison d'être* is its relation to its precursor text or parodied mode – and those glancing parodic allusions which are to be found very widely in writing, often aimed at no more than a phrase or fragment of current jargon and sometimes indicated by little more than 'scare quotes' (the written equivalent of a hostile intonation).

Thus in the following paragraph from *Bleak House*, Dickens makes a whole series of parodic allusions, without having any specific precursor text in mind. The death of one of the characters in the novel has caused a stir of activity:

Next day the court is all alive – is like a fair, as Mrs. Perkins, more than reconciled to Mrs. Piper, says, in amiable conversation with that excellent woman. The Coroner is to sit in the first-floor room at the Sol's Arms, where the Harmonic Meetings take place twice a week, and where the chair is filled by a gentleman of professional celebrity,

many discursive interactions are characterised by the imitation and repetition, derisive or otherwise, of another's words. Imitation is the way in which we learn to speak, taking in, as we do so, not merely a grammar and a vocabulary, but a whole repertoire of manners, attitudes, and ways of speaking. Parodic imitation of another's words is merely one possibility among the whole range of rejoinders that make up human discourse, and parodic imitation can itself take many forms. Listening to the language of children and adolescents (and not only them), you will hear a multitude of parodies, as accents are mocked, oral styles from the television are attempted, fashionable phrases are tried on or discarded, so that each of a whole panoply of verbal and cultural styles is in turn derided or assumed. The slang of one generation becomes the target of parody in the next: 'hip' and 'ace' are long since as comic as 'ripping' and 'jolly good', and to use them would be to make yourself subject to mocking laughter.

It is in discourse, understood in this way as a never-ending to-and-fro of rejoinders, that our understanding of the practice of parody should initially be situated. In this context, parody is but one of the ways in which the normal processes of linguistic interaction proceed. For to speak a language is much more than merely to have a command of its grammar and vocabulary. It entails using these resources to adopt an evaluative attitude – both to the person to whom one speaks, and to the topic of discussion. Thus in addressing those to whom we speak, we take-up, willy-nilly, attitudes which, in many different ways, reinforce or contradict our addressees. Equally, we indicate in a thousand verbal ways a particular stance to whatever it is that we are talking about. These attitudes are carried in part by *intonation*, an aspect of language unique to each individual utterance and its occasion. So as we speak we necessarily indicate our attitude to that about which we speak, and towards those to whom we speak: by tone of voice, by the adoption or otherwise of the appropriate politeness conventions, by register and diction, by fitting or unfitting adap-

tation of speech to occasion. These means permit a remarkable array of attitudes to become apparent in our speech – of complaint or reluctant consent, of eager or truculent agreement, of celebration, of irony, of private reservation, or indeed of any of a hundred such attitudes. Parody, be it of the interlocutor's speech, or of the speech of some third party, or even of oneself, is one of the ways in which these inevitable evaluations occur. Its simplest form is perhaps the scoffing repetition illustrated in *Middlemarch*, also a familiar feature of childish argument, by which even the most innocent phrase can be mocked and made to sound ridiculous:

SPEAKER 1: 'I don't like this cold weather.'

SPEAKER 2: (*in exaggeratedly feeble and whining tones*) 'I don't like this cold weather.'

In many more sophisticated ways, and in some less conscious ways also, we respond evaluatively to what is said to us; parody is but one possibility among many.

There is a further, and fundamental, way in which the apparently specialised use of language that we call parody can be related to more general characteristics of language. At some level – later this will be specified more exactly – parody involves the imitation and transformation of another's words. That might also pass as an account of language use more generally, for language is not one's own, but always comes to each speaker from another, to be imitated and transformed as that speaker in turn sends it onwards. All utterances are part of a chain, and as they pass through that chain they acquire particular valuations and intonations on each occasion of their use. In this most general sense, we are all condemned to parody, for we can do no more than parrot another's word as it comes to be our turn to speak it.

Yet this is not a conclusion in which I wish to rest, albeit that it usefully indicates the potential scope of a comprehensive

account of the topic of parody. We can certainly do more than speak parrot-fashion; and the example of Mr Brooke's parodist suggests that when we do, it has a very disturbing effect on the utterance that we repeat. Rather, as we use language – necessarily not our own – to a greater or lesser degree we *make* it our own. So while all language use certainly involves imitation, the particular inflection that we give to that imitation (and parody is one possible inflection) indicates the extent to which we have adapted language to occasion, transformed the value given to the utterance, and thus redirected the evaluative direction in that chain of utterances. Parody is one of the means available to us to achieve all these ends.

The general account of language in which I have just situated the practice of parody is based upon that of the Russian linguist V.N. Vološinov, whose account of language is closely related to that of his fellow-Russian, Mikhail Bakhtin. One of the distinctive features of Vološinov's theory of language is that it stresses the priority of *speech*; certainly for both him and Bakhtin (whose theories of parody will play an important part in this book) the speech situation and a theory of the *utterance* form the essential basis for their understanding of all language uses, including written ones. I will follow their lead in seeking to understand the particularities of *writing* by drawing on an understanding of language derived from the spoken interchanges that constitute it. There are many difficulties in such an attitude, principally to do with the ephemeral nature of speech compared with the permanent nature of writing; and since the parodies that I will be discussing in this book are mostly written ones, I do not wish to underestimate these difficulties. Nevertheless, I propose to leave them to one side for the moment in order to suggest how we might understand written parodies in terms of the chain of utterances and the evaluative attitude necessarily adopted by every interlocutor in that chain.

One designation, for written discourse, of what Vološinov

describes for speech as 'the chain of utterances', is *intertextuality*. This can be characterised initially as the interrelatedness of writing, the fact that all written utterances – texts – situate themselves in relation to texts that precede them, and are in turn alluded to or repudiated by texts that follow. Indeed, there is a tradition of specific 'rejoinder poems', closely related to more formal parodies, in which 'answering back' is especially visible – Sir Walter Raleigh's 'The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd' (1600), which is a response to Christopher Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd to His Love' (ca. 1590), is a famous example of such poems. But there is also a less specific form of answering back, as when the seventeenth-century libertine poet Rochester begins one of his lyrics 'Tell me no more of constancy ...'; in this instance he is making an intertextual allusion to a presumed discourse in praise of constancy which precedes the poem and which he is repudiating. Intertextuality includes more profound aspects of writing than this, however. At the most obvious level it denotes the myriad *conscious* ways in which texts are alluded to or cited in other texts: the dense network of quotation, glancing reference, imitation, polemical refutation and so on in which all texts have their being. At a still more profound level, intertextuality refers to the dense web of allusion out of which individual texts are constituted – their constant and inevitable use of ready-made formulations, catch phrases, slang, jargon, cliché, commonplaces, unconscious echoes, and formulaic phrases. All these linguistic echoes and repetitions are accented in variously evaluative ways, as they are subjected – or not – to overt ridicule, or mild irony, or in the expectation that the repetition of the bureaucratic phrase of the month will gain the writer credit, and so forth. This aspect of intertextuality is more visible in some kinds of writing than in others. Tabloid journalese, for example, or the diction of neoclassical poetry, are both noticeably formulaic, though of course different writers of these genres can put their formulae to very diverse uses. My contention is simply this:

operate critically rather than as merely neutral cancellation of its object. Parodic erasure disfigures its pre-texts in various ways that seek to guide our re-evaluation or refiguration of them. It is dialogical and suggestive as well as negatively deconstructive, for it (at least potentially) can achieve controlled and meta-fictional commentary as well as purely arbitrary problematisation.

(Phiddian, 1995: 13–14)

This is suggestive, and need not be applied rigorously; Phiddian wishes to use the metaphorical implications of the notion of 'writing under erasure' to suggest the multiple ways in which parody can invite the reader to examine, evaluate and re-situate the hypotextual material.

Both these accounts, that of Rose as much as Phiddian's, seem to me persuasive within their own terms; that is, they are persuasive accounts of the texts with which they deal, and draw eloquent attention to some of the perceptual consequences of the parodic acts that those texts perform. However, it is important not to take them as general accounts of parody; not *all* parodies act in metafictional or deconstructive ways, but *some* do. They deal with one moment of the parodic act – the perceptual consequences to the reader – and leave implicit the location of that parodic act within the wider rhetorical situation. But they also point to one important function of parody, which is the act of implicit criticism that it performs. I shall return to this critical function later.

Finally, I turn to Linda Hutcheon's account of parody in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (1985). Hutcheon is averse to offering any trans-historical definition of parody, concentrating instead on the ways that certain twentieth-century art forms offer parodic allusions to the art of the past. Working from this material, she concludes that it is wrong to define parody by its polemical relation to the parodied text (the hypotext, in Genette's terms), since many of the contemporary art

works that she discusses simply do not have that polemical edge to them. Indeed, the neoclassical practice of 'imitation' would be an illuminating parallel for the kind of parody she analyses, since this form characteristically seeks to rewrite an admired classical original in contemporary terms in order to draw upon its authority and to gain purchase upon the modern world. Here, then, is an account of parody which appears to challenge the definition that I have given of the mode, in which the polemical nature of the parodic allusion is central.

However, I believe that Hutcheon's account, strongly based, as it is, on a particular artistic practice, can be assimilated to my preliminary definition because the polemic can work both ways: towards the imitated text or towards the 'world'. Thus it is certainly true, even taking familiar literary examples, that parody does not have to have a polemical relation to the texts that are 'quoted'. For example, in section III of *The Waste Land*, Eliot makes a parodic allusion to Spenser's 'Prothalamion':

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;
Departed, have left no addresses.
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept ...
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.
But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

(Eliot, 1963: 70)

-Shut the FUCK UP, said Jesus. He waved his hand over the basket
 -Hocus ... Pocus ...

(Keizer, 1998: 53)

The humour of this derives from the extreme distance between sacred topic and the violent urban slang, 'in the manner of' Irvine Welsh, in which the story is conducted (though it might be thought to be pretty tame Welsh, with a very low obscenity count per sentence). There is no direct transformation of Welsh's prose, but a satirical imitation of it, justifying its inclusion under the heading of skit rather than parody.

The value of this kind of distinction, however, is ultimately limited. It certainly has the merit of focusing attention on the specific formal operations that the hypertexts perform, and provides some useful vocabulary for describing them. But it suffers from the difficulty of attempting to reform or reconstitute a whole vocabulary by an act of scholarly *force majeure*, as though habitual usage could be single-handedly transformed in the name of greater precision. More seriously, the chief merit of Genette's work – the construction of a classification based on formally distinguished textual operations – is also its principal disadvantage. In the context of a more general account of parody as a possible mode of linguistic or textual interaction, Genette's account is helpful in focusing on the diverse textual operations that can characterise that interaction, but loses sight of the social and historical ground in which that interaction occurs, and the evaluative and ideological work performed by parody.

A very different account of parody is offered by Margaret Rose in *Parody/Metafiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction* (1979) and *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern* (1993). In the former book especially, Rose argues that certain kinds of parodic fiction act as metafiction – i.e., that in parodying one text (or kind of text), the parody text holds up a mirror to its own fictional practices, so that it is at once a fiction

and a fiction *about* fictions. Furthermore, Rose addresses the paradox that, while apparently being destructive, parody texts actually create new fictions out of their own parodic procedures. This is an argument that works especially well for the great classic novels which are in part built out of parody – *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses* – for in all these instances the presence of parody draws attention to the conventions that constitute narrative and novel-writing. Thus Rose's analysis of parody is especially strong in drawing attention to the negotiations that are involved in *reading* a parody text, as the reader's expectations are disrupted and adjustments are required.

This account of parody can thus be compared with that offered by Robert Phiddian, in *Swift's Parody* (1995). The metafictional consequence of parody, detected by Rose, takes on here a more properly deconstructive colouring; in other words, Phiddian extends the argument from one in which the parodic text is a fiction *about* other fictions to an argument which suggests that parody throws some of the very fundamentals of writing into doubt. Following the French theorist Roland Barthes' notion of the 'death of the author', parody emerges as a formal practice in which the densely allusive intertextual nature of all writing is made especially transparent, so that its 'authorship' becomes problematic. At least, that is how Phiddian characterises some aspects of Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (1704). He can then move on from Barthes to the philosopher Jacques Derrida; Phiddian seeks to use his notion of 'writing under erasure' (by which is suggested the impossibility of doing without the very words one recognises as inadequate) as a metaphor for the activity of parody:

The application of this metaphor to the perception of parody is obvious enough: all parody refunctions pre-existing text(s) and/or discourses, so it can be said that these verbal structures are called to the readers' minds and then placed under erasure. A necessary modification of the original idea is that we must allow the act of erasure to

is partly because of these disputes that I have drawn my definition of parody in as wide-ranging a way as possible, and have based it upon linguistic interaction, both verbal and written. On this basis, some of the disputes about definition which we are about to review briefly will seem less significant, though they will point eventually to a large question about the cultural politics of parody, namely whether it is to be thought of as an essentially conservative or essentially subversive mode – indeed, we shall have to ask whether it is possible to talk of parody as ‘essentially’ anything at all.

Aristotle's *Poetics* provides the earliest use of the word *parodia* (παρωδία), where he uses it to refer to the earlier writer Hegemon. A *parodia* is a narrative poem, of moderate length, in the metre and vocabulary of epic poems, but treating a light, satirical, or mock-heroic subject (the epic poems familiar to the Greeks were those of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; mock-heroic, a form related to parody, applies the idiom of epic poetry to everyday or ‘low’ subjects, to comic effect). A *parodia* is a specific literary form for which prizes were awarded at poetic contests; only one of these poems, the *Batrachomyomachia*, or *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, has survived. However, this is not the only meaning of the word in Greek and subsequent Roman writers, who also use the term and its grammatical cognates to refer to a more widespread practice of quotation, not necessarily humorous, in which both writers and speakers introduce allusions to previous texts. Indeed, this is a more frequent use of the term (Householder, 1944: 1–9). Aristophanes's allusions, in his comedies, to the tragedies of Euripides are a special case of such parodic quotations. However, the case of Aristophanes points to one of the difficulties surrounding the definition of *parodia*, namely whether the term had any polemical edge to it in classical Greece, since there is controversy over whether the comic playwright was or was not attacking his tragic contemporary. Certainly, we must recognise that the Greek uses of the term do not simply correspond with mod-

ern English usage, where some sense of parody mocking the parodied text is at least usual. Thus there is apparently no evidence that the *parodia*, meaning the mock-heroic poem, ever mocked Homer rather than imitated him for comic effect. For such mocking or carnivalesque forms, we should turn instead to the satyr plays which accompanied performances of Greek tragic drama. However, we can recognise that Greek usage, in its extension to a more widespread practice of quotation or allusion, does license my more inclusive definition, since the word in its related forms includes not only the specific *parodia* to which Aristotle refers, but also a wider practice of allusion and quotation.

The term ‘parodia’ has subsequently had a long and complicated history, acquiring differing connotations as the artistic practices to which it has been made to refer have themselves altered. These different meanings in part spring, also, from varying national traditions. I shall discuss here four recent accounts of parody which all offer competing definitions. The point is not to adjudicate between them, but to see whether it is possible to assimilate these definitions to the account of parody, based upon linguistic and written interaction, that I have offered.

I start with what is surely the most comprehensive survey of the different modes of intertextuality, namely *Palimpsestes* (1982) by the French literary theorist Gerard Genette, a book which can represent all attempts to offer hard and fast distinctions between the various kinds of parody – travesty, burlesque, and so on. The most striking feature of Genette's account is that it seeks to produce a classification of these cultural forms based on the differing formal relations between texts. The result is to produce a very tight definition of parody, distinguishing it carefully from the related forms of travesty, transposition, pastiche, skit and forgery. Thus parody is to be distinguished from travesty because the textual transformation which it performs is done in a playful rather than a satirical manner. Pastiche, on the other hand, is similarly playful, but works by imitation rather than direct transformation.

Skits (French: *charges*) are doubly unlike parodies in that they work both by imitation and in a satirical regime.

What are the consequences of these careful formal distinctions? Using English examples rather than the French ones used by Genette, we can consider the following cases. Lewis Carroll's 'You are old, Father William' remains a parody, because it is a transformation of Southey's poem performed in a playful way. Here is Southey's poem, 'The old man's comforts':

You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
The few locks which are left you are grey;
You are hale, Father William, a hearty old man,
Now tell me the reason, I pray.

In the days of my youth, Father William replied,
I remember'd that youth would fly fast,
And abused not my health and my vigour at first,
That I never might need them at last.

(Southey, 1909: 385-6)

And now here is Lewis Carroll's parody:

'You are old, Father William,' the young man said,
'And your hair it is growing quite white;
And yet you persistently stand on your head -
Do you think, at your age, it is right?'

'In my youth,' Father William replied to his son,
'I feared it might injure the brain;
But now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again.'

(Jerrol and Leonard, 1913: 309)

In Genette's terms, this is exactly a parody, since the 'hypertext' (Carroll's poem) directly transforms the 'hypotext' (Southey's poem) in a playful way - though we should perhaps note that there is a

mild polemical intention in Carroll's parody, towards the smug didacticism of the parodied text. In passing, we can note the usefulness of these terms 'hypotext' and 'hypertext', the former denoting the preceding or original text upon which the latter, the hypertext, performs its parodic transformation.

Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741), on the other hand, is not to be described as a parody according to Genette, because though it directly transforms its hypotext, Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), it does so in a satirical rather than a playful regime. It is therefore, in this classification, a travesty. Certainly Fielding's satirical purpose is evident enough in *Shamela*, since his aim is to debunk what he takes to be the hypocrisy and prurience of Richardson's text. As an example of pastiche, we can mention Pope's mock-heroic poem *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), which imitates epic verse without direct transformation of it, in a generally playful way. And finally, as a skit or *charge*, we can bring forward those innumerable literary games in which players are asked to produce a piece of writing 'in the manner of' a particular writer, where there is no direct transformation of the writer's work, but a general imitation in a satirical regime. Here is an example; players in a *New Statesman* competition were asked to rewrite an incident from the Bible in the manner of a writer of their choice, so this is the story of the loaves and fishes in the manner of Irvine Welsh, author of *Trainspotting* (1993):

- The crowd wants nosh, man. And so do I. Philip patted his belly. Jesus snorted.-You don't look like you needed any.
- They can fuck off and buy their own, I said.
- There's no shops here, said Andrew.-Soon they'll faint.
- Bugger that said Jesus.-Let's see what we've got.
- Andrew went round with a basket.
- That's pathetic, I said.-Two fishes and five loaves? That's IT?
- SEVEN loaves, DICKHEAD!
- You an IDIOT, or what? You've got five there!

popular culture, is evidenced in the pervasiveness of parody, and is testimony to its effect in dissolving the fixed supports of linguistic and cultural authority.

Evidence of this dissolvent effect can be found in the suspicion with which the culturally conservative have viewed parody. In addition to those who view parody as parasitic, and as essentially a minor form, there are those who, while recognising the pleasure and even the critical edge of the mode, wish to restrict it within very narrow bounds. One such is Arthur Quiller-Couch, who provides the preface to a typical early twentieth-century collection of parodic verse, *Parodies and Imitations Old and New* (1912):

Now, the first thing to be said about Parody is that it plays with the gods: its fun is taken with Poetry, which all good men admit to be a beautiful and adorable thing, and some would have to be a holy thing. It follows then that Parody must be delicate ground, off which the profane and vulgar should be carefully warned. A deeply religious man may indulge a smile at this or that in his religion; as a truly devout lover may rally his mistress on her foibles, since for him they make her the more enchanting ... So, or almost so, should it be with the parodist. He must be friends with the gods, and worthy of their company, before taking these pleasant liberties with them.

(Adam and White, 1912: vi)

This judgement emerges from great confidence and familiarity with the literary tradition to which it considers parody to be addressed. It is interesting, therefore, that it should betray such anxiety about the proper limits of parody, which is in danger, it seems, of becoming a kind of profanity. It must be restricted within very narrow limits, where its desacralising energies will not be allowed out of control. Properly restricted in this way, its pleasures – light and pleasant ones – can be duly enjoyed.

Quiller-Couch, then, acknowledges the potentially subversive action of parody only to deprecate it. This suggests something of

the political (or more widely social) ambivalence of the relativisation of languages propelled by the mode. However, as I have intimated, there is a strong alternative tradition which stresses the culturally conservative character of parody – which claims that parody acts, not to increase the relativisation of language, but to diminish it. It is not difficult to see why this should be so. If nineteenth-century literary parodies, from *Rejected Addresses* onwards, are taken as a model, rather than Rabelais or ‘The Comic Strip’, then the possibilities for cultural conservatism in the form become apparent (*Rejected Addresses* was a series of parodies of contemporary writers published in 1812 by two brothers James and Horace Smith; ‘The Comic Strip’ was a series of television parodies in the 1980s and 1990s, spoofing such forms as the self-important Hollywood drama and Enid Blyton adventure stories). Indeed, from this perspective, the anxieties of a writer like Quiller-Couch seem wholly misplaced. What these literary parodies provide is a series of in-jokes, policing the boundaries of the sayable, and preserving a notion of the decorous or the ‘natural’ by which the absurdities and extremities of writing can be measured. This position is stated (in terms which are perhaps extreme) by George Kitchin in his 1931 *A Survey of Burlesque and Parody in English*:

Parody in modern times, that is since the Seventeenth Century, represents the reaction of custom to attempted change, of complacency to the adventure of the mind or senses, and of the established political or social forces to subversive ideas. Perhaps its character is most compendiously summed up by saying that it has for the last three centuries been inveterately social and anti-romantic. Politically it has tended to become more and more the watchdog of national interests, socially of respectability, and, in the world of letters, of established forms.

(Kitchin, 1931: xiii)

ways in which parodic forms have operated in particular social situations. 'Parody', in this sense, is as much a universal as 'response' or 'intonation'.

Nevertheless, there is a problem with the historicity of parody. If it is a general feature of discursive situations, is it possible to describe it in ways that pay due attention to its historical conditions of possibility? In the chapters that follow, I argue that parody has flourished at particular historical moments, and I shall give more detailed accounts of some of them. It is worth asking whether any particular set of historical circumstances leads parody to flourish, and whether, conversely, in other situations it withers away. For example, given the efflorescence of parody in places like medieval monasteries and Universities, and in modern British public (i.e. private) schools, is parody more likely to be produced in closed social situations such as these? Alternatively, does the prevalence of parody in the relatively democratic social situation of ancient Athens, or the fluid and turbulent societies of Early Modern Europe, suggest that it flourishes better in 'open' social formations?

These questions are important, ultimately, because the answers to them bear upon the cultural politics of parody. We can give more substance to the alternatives sketched in above. The broadly 'subversive' account of parody is most fully expressed in the work of one of the most influential cultural theorists of the twentieth century, Mikhail Bakhtin, whom we have already encountered in relation to his theories of language. Actually, it is incorrect to attribute to him a specific theory of parody, since his account of parody emerges as part of a more general characterisation of 'carnival' and the 'carnavalesque', which he advanced especially in his book on the French sixteenth-century comic novelist, François Rabelais, *Rabelais and His World* (1984b). For Bakhtin, parody is just one of the cultural forms that draw upon the popular energies of the carnival. In late medieval and Early Modern Europe especially, he argues, the popular institution of the carnival, with

its feasting, its celebratory enactments of the overthrowing of authority, and its militantly anti-authoritarian debunking of sacred and official rituals and languages, provides the social ground for the grotesque realism, mimicries, multiple registers, and parodies to be found in Rabelais and his near-contemporaries Cervantes and Shakespeare. Following Bakhtin, parody indeed emerges from a particular set of social and historical circumstances; it is mobilised to debunk official seriousness, and to testify to the relativity of all languages, be they the dialects of authority or the jargons of guilds, castes or priesthoods.

This is an inspiring notion of parody, which has especial force for the Early Modern period, but has relevance also to other eras, where the actual institution of carnival is notably absent, such as ancient Greece or nineteenth-century England. For the notion of the 'carnavalesque' can be extended to include all those cultural situations where the authority of a single language of authority is called into question, notably by the simultaneous co-presence of other languages which can challenge it. One principal method by which such challenges are mounted is parody. In this extended Bakhtinian view, then, parody is both a symptom and a weapon in the battle between popular cultural energies and the forces of authority which seek to control them.

We must ask, despite the geniality of this whole line of argument, how far it can actually be sustained. As we shall see, the answer is: only partially. Many of the particular accounts that Bakhtin gives, especially of medieval sacred parody and some Early Modern forms, do not bear up under careful scholarly scrutiny (see Chapter 2). Despite these reservations, there is an evident force to this general position with respect to parody, to be recognised as much in the parodic practices of the contemporary world as in the conditions of Early Modern Europe which are Bakhtin's home ground. The extreme relativisation of all languages – the refusal to grant final authority to any one way of speaking over another – which is a characteristic of contemporary

one tradition, irony is seen as essentially conservative, destroying the seriousness required to transform society, and reconciling its inhabitants to a world of second bests. 'Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desires? or, having it, is satisfied?', asks Thackeray at the end of *Vanity Fair*, and his question could be taken as a type of the ironic attitude according to this tradition. By contrast, there is an alternative tradition in which irony is seen as essentially subversive, unsettling the certainties which sustain the social order, and placing all final truths under suspension. A comparable set of alternatives have characterised reflection on parody. On the one hand, it has been seen as conservative in the way that it is used to mock literary and social innovation, policing the boundaries of the sayable in the interests of those who wish to continue to say what has always been said. On the other hand, there is another tradition which celebrates the subversive possibilities of parody as its essential characteristic; parody in this view typically attacks the official word, mocks the pretensions of authoritative discourse, and undermines the seriousness with which subordinates should approach the justifications of their betters.

These matters of definition, then, take us into some broader questions. However, there is nothing in them which requires us to abandon our initial characterisation of parody as any cultural practice which makes a polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice, though we have to recognise that this definition points to a range of specific forms which require more careful specification in practice. Since all four accounts start from different examples of parodies, drawn from diverse periods and cultures, it is not surprising that they point towards conflicting definitions of parody. Indeed, this diversity is partly explicable if these definitions are seen as alluding to differing phases or emphases within a related band of parodistic cultural interactions – that is, each definition tends to offer as the *essential* characteristic an aspect which is better thought of as a phase only of parody

when it is understood in the fullness of its discursive situation. It is this emphasis on 'practice' with which I conclude this section, for it directs us towards some of those broader questions of cultural politics, and the historical specificity of parody, which form the topic of the following discussion.

A HISTORY OF PARODY?

One obvious difficulty about any account of parody which is based, like mine, upon a general account of language, is that it is difficult for it to cope with the historically specific forms of parody that have been produced over the ages. Can any such general description accommodate practices as diverse as the Greek Old Comedy of Aristophanes, the ancient literary form known as the *menippea* (a genre of self-parodying serio-comic writing), medieval *parodia sacra* or parody of sacred texts, the tradition within the modern novel from *Don Quixote* to *Vanity Fair* for which parody is an essential component, the genre of literary parody in the nineteenth century which culminates in Beerbohm's *A Christmas Garland* (1912), and so-called postmodernism in which parody plays a crucial role? This range of material certainly seems too wide to be accommodated in any single definition, and any attempt to do so would seem to strip all these various cultural practices of their specific purchase on the differing historical worlds that they emerge from and speak to.

There are in fact several different problems concealed within this general difficulty. The first concerns the very nature of the universalising description of language upon which my account of parody depends. Following Vološinov and Bakhtin, I make the presumption that language is a way both of realising and conducting social relations; since all human societies have been characterised by greater or lesser degrees of social conflict, I take it that the conditions for linguistic evaluations and revaluations have always existed. This is to say nothing about the particular

social and cultural situations, and in various genres, through to the present day, recognising that its polemical direction, and consequences for the reader's experience, vary widely.

PARODY AS CRITICISM

Before turning to these more substantial accounts of parodies, it is worth considering one final function that parody can serve, namely its capacity to act as criticism. One of the typical ways in which parody works is to seize on particular aspects of a manner or a style and exaggerate it to ludicrous effect. There is an evident critical function in this, as the act of parody must first involve identifying a characteristic stylistic habit or mannerism and then making it comically visible. Take the following example from a 1912 parody by the supreme English literary parodist, Max Beerbohm, called 'The Mote in the Middle Distance':

It was with the sense of a, for him, very memorable something that he peered now into the immediate future, and tried, not without compunction, to take that period up where he had, prospectively, left it. But just where the deuce *had* he left it? The consciousness of dubiety was, for our friend, not, this morning, quite yet clean-cut enough to outline the figure on what she had called his 'horizon', between which and himself the twilight was indeed of a quality somewhat intimidating.

(Beerbohm, 1993: 3)

Beerbohm attributes this to H*nry J*m*s, and you may well have recognised some of the characteristics of the latter's late style beautifully parodied here: the complicated syntax, the conclusions to sentences endlessly postponed, the shift between the colloquial and the circumlocutory, the metaphor extended to breaking point. The parody draws attention to extreme features of J*m*s's style here, and it therefore acts, in part, in a critical sense.

This critical function has been seized upon as the basis for

some wider claims made on behalf of parody. These claims reproduce, however, the dispute about the cultural politics of parody that I set out in the previous section. For some writers, parody serves a normative critical function, indeed, it acts to do so when the more modern forms of criticism such as the literary essay are absent, and its function is to make explicit the absurdities of current poetic fashions. On the other hand, it has been claimed, especially by the group of critics known as Russian Formalists, that parody can contribute to the evolution of literary style. Especially in periods of considerable stylistic contention, parody is one of the weapons wielded on behalf of the new against the old. And what period is not marked by such contentions? The battle of the Ancients and the Moderns is being fought at most moments in literary history. However, the Formalist understanding of literary evolution was not a matter of simple generational succession; rather, they understood the literary situation in any period to be a complex system with its elements disposed in particular ways; parody could serve the function of reordering the elements in the system, allowing previously low-status elements to take on high-status positions. This process was memorably described by Viktor Shklovsky as 'the canonisation of the junior branch'.²

English poetic history is certainly marked by skirmishes which lend support to both these ways of understanding the critical function of parody. The battles over style at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century produced, unsurprisingly, a wealth of parodies; Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey must be the most parodied poets in the English literary tradition. We have already observed that behind many of these parodies lurked scarcely concealed political purposes. This is true of the second generation of Romantic poets also, though the politics were directed in the opposite direction. Percy Bysshe Shelley marked his distance from the older poet, Wordsworth, in the parody 'Peter Bell the Third', where the complaint is that

self-confident achievements in the novel and poetry where, with some exceptions, parody is not central. Nevertheless, this is the period characterised by one anthologist and theorist of parody, Dwight Macdonald, as the 'Golden Age' of parody, a description justified by that tradition of literary parody to which I have alluded, which begins with *The Anti-Jacobin* and *Rejected Addresses*, and culminates in Beerbohm's *A Christmas Garland* (1912). However, we have to recognise the particular ways in which the polemical direction of parody operates in this period. In considering the nineteenth-century novel, for example (a consideration conducted at greater length in Chapter 3), we can recognise the importance of parody to certain novelists: Thackeray above all, but also, to a lesser degree, Jane Austen and George Eliot. For these writers, parody of certain stigmatised modes (the Gothic, or Newgate, silver-fork or sensation novels) acts as a kind of guarantee of their own realist credentials. As for that tradition of literary parody, for the most part it surely justifies that suspicion of parody as an essentially parasitic mode – a bearer of 'pleasant liberties', in Quiller-Couch's phrase – whose polemical direction remains to be specified but which does not fundamentally enter into the creative energies of any of the major writers of the period. So, with the possible exception of Thackeray, the nineteenth century, while being the Golden Age of a certain kind of parody, is not a period in which the mode contributes to any of its major cultural achievements.

Open/closed, belated/self-confident – these are ways of describing whole societies, without paying close attention to the social divisions within them. But these internal divisions too are important (perhaps the most important) in assessing whether a particular social situation is likely to produce parody, and have implications for the kind of parody that is produced. Strongly stratified societies, for example, where separate classes live in relative social isolation, are very likely to produce mutual parodic characterisations of the social layers, whose manners of speech and writing are very

strongly marked by class. This is very strikingly the case, for example, in English society, between, roughly, the 1880s and the 1950s. This society was highly socially zoned, and its different groups lived in remarkable ignorance of each other. It was also highly unequal, not only in material terms, but also in terms of access to cultural resources. Unsurprisingly, parody was pervasive, both formally and informally. Mutual mockery of habits of speech indicates one aspect of the pervasiveness of the mode at the informal level; more formally, the institutions of popular culture such as the Music Hall thrived on the parodic recycling of prestigious cultural material, while there was a specific genre of burlesque melodrama within the popular theatre. In an autobiographical account of life in a working-class area at the beginning of the twentieth century, Robert Roberts described how new popular songs were quickly assimilated by the boys of his part of Salford, above all by parody; indeed, parody was one of the principal cultural forms used by working-class people, so much so that people would know the parodic version of sentimental songs or recitations, without knowing the originals. This tradition of working-class parody persisted into Second World War army songs, when ribald versions of classic songs such as 'The Ash Grove' and 'The Minstrel Boy' were widespread; popular entertainment carried forward this genre also, as in such radio and television shows as *ITMA* and *The Goon Show*. When Tommy Cooper or Morecambe and Wise parodied Shakespeare in their acts they were the direct inheritors of this tradition.¹

We can thus say that there *are* social situations or historical moments when parody is likely to flourish, and to become the medium of important cultural statements. The particular forms that parody takes in such periods, however, remain to be specified, and in general terms we can conclude, unsurprisingly, that the predominant uses of the parodic mode will vary according to the kind of social situation in which it is put to use. In the following chapters the uses of parody will be considered in various

Compare Spenser's poem, which gives a highly coloured account of the Thames and the nymphs who are gathering flowers on its banks, and whose stanzas all conclude:

Against the Bridall day, which is not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song.

Eliot's parody of Spenser has as its polemical target not the 'Prothalamion', but the contemporary (1920s') state of the Thames, London, and indeed civilisation. Spenser's poem provides Eliot with a kind of standard by which to measure the ugliness of the modern world, and the benign bridal song of the hypotext measures the sordidness of 1920s' sexual relations, indicated by the detritus that flows down the river, including 'other testimony of summer nights', about which readers do not wish to enquire too closely. This is the predominant direction of the parody in the poem: using Spenser to belittle the contemporary world. It may be, however, that some of Eliot's sexual scepticism about 1920s' London seeps back to Spenser's poem, which does not remain uncontaminated by its association with *The Waste Land*. Despite this possibility, it is clear that, overwhelmingly, the parody is polemically directed towards the world, and it draws on the authority of the parodied text to establish its own evaluative stance.

The question is, therefore, whether we say that this text, and others like it, is best not thought of as a parody (which would be Genette's solution), or whether we stretch the definition of parody to include texts like *The Waste Land* and the artistic examples brought forward by Hutcheon. My inclusive definition certainly inclines me to the latter solution; that is, that the polemical allusive imitation of a preceding text that characterises parody can have its polemic directed to the world rather than the preceding text. However, in saying this we must also recognise that 'parody' now alludes to a spectrum of cultural practices and the specific ways in which individual parodies work will always require careful elucidation.

This sense of a 'spectrum' or continuum of cultural practices is perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn from this brief survey of definitions. 'Parody' should be thought of, not as a single and tightly definable genre or practice, but as a range of cultural practices which are all more or less parodic. Thus in this book I will as often refer to 'parodic cultural forms' as to parody in the singular. The range of available parodic forms (and the names that they go under) varies dramatically from period to period, in a way that challenges any schema of definitions. However, it is possible to recognise a continuum of parodic cultural work or parodic cultural effects, within which different texts (or even different moments within the same text) can be situated. The spectrum of parodic forms, as Genette's book indicates, will include such varying matters as the extent and closeness of the imitation, the degree of hostility, and the play between 'high' and 'low' (of manner and matter) which the parody sets in motion. But these varying practices are used with differing prominence at different periods and go under different names when they are used.

Hutcheon's examples, and the account of parody that they lead to, point us eventually to some of the most contentious aspects of our topic. For they concern the respect or otherwise with which parodied texts are treated, and around this issue gathers the large question of the cultural politics of parody. If one includes under 'parody' texts that make respectful allusions to precursor texts in order to take a polemical attitude to the world, then one is unlikely to see the activity of parody as a predominantly subversive one. Conversely, if one restricts parody to those texts which take a negatively evaluative attitude to the parodied text, one is more likely to see parody in these terms, though there is also the possibility that parody can be used to attack, not the texts of authority, but whatever is new, unusual, or threatening to the status quo. Indeed, another of Hutcheon's books, *Irony's Edge* (1994), suggests an instructive parallel for these latter alternatives. In that book, Hutcheon documents two rival accounts of irony. In

always been said *and* ridicule the new and the formally innovative. We have to recognise, in other words, that parody's direction of attack cannot be decided upon in abstraction from the particular social and historical circumstances in which the parodic act is performed, and therefore that no single social or political meaning can be attached to it. In this respect, the question of the cultural politics of parody is comparable to that of the cultural politics of laughter, which has likewise been claimed both for anti-authoritarian irreverence and as a means of ridiculing and stigmatising the socially marginal and the oppressed.

We can therefore return to the question of the historicity of parody, recognising that if parody is a general feature of discursive situations, the manner in which one can give a particularised historical account of it will have to be recast. It is not that parody, as a discursive mode, has only had one predominant function in the history of cultural forms; rather, we have to describe the ways in which it works at particular historical moments, and to consider the functions it performs in differing social situations. Parody itself is socially and politically multivalent; its particular uses are never neutral, but they cannot be deduced in advance. We can nevertheless recognise that there are particular social and historical situations in which parody is especially likely to flourish, or at least to become the medium of important cultural statements. What are the contours of these situations?

I have already asked whether parody is more likely to flourish in closed social situations (monasteries, etc.) or open ones. Since we have many parodic works which come from both such situations, we must conclude, not that there is no relation between literary modes and social situation, but that the nature of that relationship needs to be specified. In subsequent chapters I will consider some of these parodic forms in more detail: the medieval *parodia sacra*, as well as the parodic practices of ancient Greeks and modern novelists and playwrights. For now we can simply recognise that parody will play very different roles in these differ-

ing situations, perhaps reinforcing community norms in a monastery or private boarding school, and being interpretable as an act of piety in both, while at the same time serving to overturn and discredit the discourses of authority in the Early Modern world of Rabelais and Shakespeare.

If it is possible to draw a broad distinction between 'open' and 'closed' societies or social situations, it is perhaps also possible to distinguish between societies characterised by cultural self-confidence or, alternatively, a sense of cultural belatedness. Is parody likely to flourish, that is, in societies like early Modern Europe, or our contemporary 'postmodern' world, in both of which there is a strong sense of a powerful preceding culture? In the former case, which we also know as the 'Renaissance', European culture was suffused with a sense of the great inheritance of classical writing; in our own case, as the various 'post-' coinages suggest, there is a pervasive consciousness of a past which is still strongly present, though the value of that inheritance is deeply contested. Certainly a related form, 'imitation', is widespread in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing; in this form, a revered classical model is imitated and updated, and thus given a particular contemporary force. If this is one of the principal forms in which a belated-culture manages its relationship to its cultural predecessors, it can be contrasted to the contemporary world, where a more polemical relation to the cultural past often expresses itself in the practice of 'writing back': the canonic texts of the past are scrutinised, challenged, and parodied in the name of the subject positions (of class, race or gender) which they are seen to exclude. In both these periods, then, parody and its related forms are widespread, though the particular polemical direction that these forms adopt differs widely.

A strong contrast can be drawn, here, with the nineteenth century, which, though certainly conscious of its cultural predecessors, was not overwhelmed by this consciousness. In terms of its own cultural production, the nineteenth century saw striking and

sometimes – and this is a consideration which I have certainly not emphasised enough – the laughter is the only point, and the breakdown of discourse into nonsense is a sufficient reward in itself:

The boy stood on the burning deck,
His feet were covered with blisters.
He had no trousers of his own
And so he wore his sister's.

It is not for nothing that parody is a close cousin, perhaps even a progenitor, of the tradition of English nonsense poetry that descends from the seventeenth century and includes Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, who were both accomplished parodists. If the following pages should remain too long in solemn regions, please bring to mind the latter's parody of Southey's smug didacticism, and apply the lesson accordingly:

'You are old,' said the youth, 'and your jaws are too weak
For anything other than suet;
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak –
Pray, how did you manage to do it?'

'In my youth,' said his father, 'I took to the law,
And argued each case with my wife;
And the muscular strength which it gave to my jaw,
Has lasted the rest of my life.'

2

PARODY IN THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL WORLDS

One of the features of parody is that it depends for its effect upon recognition of the parodied original, or at least, upon some knowledge of the style or discourse to which allusion is being made. The greater the historical distance which divides us from parodic literature, the harder it becomes to reconstruct with any confidence the discursive dispositions, or even the specific targets, from which parody emerges and towards which it is aimed. This difficulty is therefore substantial when discussing the parodic practice of ancient Greece, since the very transmission of ancient texts is so haphazard. For example, only one satyr play, Euripides' *Cyclops*, has survived in its entirety; all other such plays are either lost or survive only in fragments. The only complete examples that we possess of the Greek Old Comedy are the plays of Aristophanes. This fragmentary knowledge obviously compounds the difficulties which are anyway considerable in reconstructing the discursive or historical context which allows us even to recognise parody (or more generally irony), let alone be confident in our judgements about its force or direction. Thus the most basic of critical judgements – for example, the nature of Aristophanes' attitude to Euripides, who is frequently parodied in his comedies – remains a matter of controversy.

You should not be misled by the apparently hostile reference to 'complacency' in this quotation – Kitchin is militantly sympathetic to the conservative function of parody, believing that it serves an hygienic function in cleansing the literary world of those unhealthy tendencies, political and cultural, which periodically threaten to engulf it. Kitchin enthusiastically enunciates, then, one version of the politics of parody – that it has a critically conservative function in defending the common-sense values of 'centrally minded' people against the dangerous extremes that enthusiastic poets are ever likely to fall into.

An example of parody that works in this way comes from the practice of *The Anti-Jacobin*, a journal founded at the end of the eighteenth century to combat sympathy for the principles of the French Revolution. Its contributors, who included George Canning, William Gifford, and John Hookham Frere, relied heavily on parody to assault the new poetics of writers such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey. In the 1790s these writers were all sympathetic to revolutionary sentiments, and were writing poetry of a kind construed by the Tories of *The Anti-Jacobin* as supporting those sympathies. Here for example is what Canning and Frere make of Southey in the 1790s, when he was still sympathetic to the Revolution and before his about-face and embrace of Toryism. The poem is called an 'Inscription; for the Door of the Cell in Newgate where Mrs. Brownrigg, the 'Prentice-cide, was confined previous to her Execution':

For one long term, or e'er her trial came,
Here Brownrigg linger'd. Often have these cells
Echoed her blasphemies, as with shrill voice
She scream'd for fresh Geneva. Not to her
Did the blithe fields of Tothill, or thy street,
St. Giles, its fair varieties expand;
Till at the last, in slow-drawn cart she went

To execution. Dost thou ask her crime?
SHE WHIPP'D TWO FEMALE 'PRENTICES TO DEATH,
AND HID THEM IN THE COAL-HOLE. For her mind
Shap'd strictest plans of discipline. Sage schemes!
Such as Lycurgus taught, when at the shrine
Of the Orthyian Goddess he bade flog
The little Spartans; such as erst chastised
Our MILTON, when at college. For this act
Did BROWNRIGG swing. Harsh laws! But time shall come
When France shall reign, and laws be all repealed!

(Jerrold and Leonard, 1913: 93)

This splendidly skewers the pomposities of Southey's verse, with its exclamations, its would-be grand diction, its display of learning, and its invocation of the calendar of republican saints ('Our MILTON'). But these stylistic mannerisms are really beside the point, which for Canning and Frere is overwhelmingly a political one – Southey's supposed sympathy for crime, his admiration for revolutionary France, and his adoption of principles that would lead to anarchy. The practice of *The Anti-Jacobin* represents perhaps the most visible example in English literary history of the conservative function of parody.

Is it possible in any way to reconcile these two generally opposed descriptions of parody? i.e., that it is broadly subversive of authority, acting to relativise all official or sacred languages, or that it is broadly conservative in the way that it constantly monitors and ridicules the formally innovative. The answer to this is surely no, if by reconciliation one means any attempt to give an essentialising definition which grants parody a single social or political direction. Parody can do all of the things that these opposed traditions describe; it can subvert the accents of authority and police the boundaries of the sayable; it can place all writing under erasure and draw a circle around initiated readers to exclude ignorant ones; it can discredit the authority of what has

of Yeats's style; indeed, it is quite likely that no reader would recognise this as a parody if it were not for the title. What Pound is attacking, by means of the parody, is a whole aesthetic, a characteristic way of writing and understanding art and its purposes. He attacks a particular vein of late nineteenth-century Romanticism, which combines lyric beauty, plangent melancholy, and fantasies about rural life. Pound's parody gleefully asserts a quite different aesthetic, in which the rituals of urban life, sharply and brightly realised, are offered instead, and where poetry would not come from the 'deep heart's core', but be a product of the intelligence. Poetry, instead of being about the kind of topic that Yeats adopts, and being written in his style, should rather be about *this* matter, and written in *this* manner.

Pound's parody, written at the beginning of the twentieth century, is part of a battle over the direction that poetry should take; crudely, he is repudiating the generic inheritance of Romanticism in favour of the sharper and harder aesthetic we have come to know as Modernism. Where Gifford and Frere had attacked the early Romantics, and Shelley had attacked Wordsworth, so Pound was now taking on Yeats, in battles that all involved the critical repudiation of a style, seen as symptomatic of wider aesthetic and cultural issues.

A further point needs to be made in this context, that parody has the paradoxical effect of preserving the very text that it seeks to destroy, even if the hypotext remains only 'under erasure' (to revert to the vocabulary of Jacques Derrida alluded to on p.15 above). This can have some odd effects, even running counter to the apparent intentions of the parodist. Thus the classic parody of *Don Quixote* (discussed more fully in the next chapter) preserves the very chivalric romances that it attacks – with the unexpected result that for much of its history the novel has been read as a celebration of misplaced idealism rather than a satire of it. In the following chapters I shall have frequent cause to refer to this 'parodic paradox' – understood as the generation of further writing

out of the assault upon stigmatised forms that the parody is supposed to bring to a halt. Parody can act to preserve the very forms that it attacks.

I have defined parody, in a deliberately widely drawn definition, as any cultural practice which makes a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice. The point of this definition was to situate parody in the to-and-fro of language, and to suggest a similarity between the everyday rejoinders of speech and the competitive relations between texts. This is a definition based upon the function of parody in the continuance of human discourse, not upon the formal means by which parody is achieved. Tight definitions of a formal kind can be attempted, but they have the disadvantage of having to deal with large numbers of incompatible definitions and differing national usages. In my account, parody is to be thought of as a mode, or as a range in the spectrum of possible intertextual relations. The specific means by which the polemical purposes of parody are achieved need to be described locally.

It follows from this that the functions which parody serves can vary widely, so that it is impossible to specify any single social or cultural direction for the mode. In fact, the social and cultural meanings of parody, like all utterances, can only be understood in the density of the interpersonal and intertextual relations in which it intervenes. The following chapters attempt to give accounts of parody which bring out its polemical purposes, in widely varying social and cultural situations.

We should not end on this note of academic solemnity, however; let us remember instead that, among its other characteristics, parody can be irreverent, inconsequential, and even silly. It includes the parodies of schoolchildren ('While shepherds washed their socks by night') as much as the learned fun of their elders (Pope's parody of Chaucer: 'Women ben full of Ragerie,/Yet swinken not sans secresie'). It need not be funny, yet it works better if it is, because laughter, even of derision, helps it secure its point. But

Wordsworth has sold out to political reaction and lost sight of his originating poetic impulse:

Even the Reviewers who were hired
To do the work of his reviewing,
With adamantine nerves, grew tired; –
Gaping and torpid they retired,
To dream of what they should be doing.

And worse and worse the drowsy curse
Yawned in him till it grew a pest –
A wide contagious atmosphere,
Creeping like cold through all things near;
A power to infect and to infest.

His servant-maids and dogs grew dull;
His kitten, late a sportive elf;
The woods and lakes so beautiful,
Of dim stupidity were full.
All grew as dull as Peter's self.

(Jerrold and Leonard, 1913: 206)

The polemical function of parody here is directed to a whole manner or style, that of the late Wordsworth, and looks back to an earlier, more authentic poetry, more genuinely permitting the evolution of a new manner. Parody, in these skirmishes in the culture wars of the beginning of the nineteenth century, is one of the weapons in the struggle over the social and political direction of poetry.

Parody can indeed become the vehicle for a critique of a whole aesthetic, and the substitution of another in its place, as in the following pair of poems. First W.B. Yeats's famous poem from the 1890s, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree':

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,

And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping
slow,
Dropping from the vales of the morning to where the cricket
sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Now compare the following poem by Ezra Pound, from 1917, called 'The Lake Isle':

O God, O Venus, O Mercury, patron of thieves,
Give me in due time, I beseech you, a little tobacco-shop.
With the little bright boxes
piled up neatly upon the shelves
And the loose fragrant cavendish
and the shag,
And the bright Virginia
loose under the bright glass cases,
And a pair of scales not too greasy,
And the whores dropping in for a word or two in passing,
For a flip word, and to tidy their hair a bit.

O God, O Venus, O Mercury, patron of thieves,
Lend me a little tobacco-shop,
or install me in any profession
Save this damn'd profession of writing
where one needs one's brains all the time.

The immediate polemical target here is not really the idiosyncracies