

Parody Without Ridicule: Observations on Modern Literary Parody

Modern experimental novelists - or metafiction writers as they are now called - have many ways of pointing out that their creations are essentially artifices made of words and not stories copying or recording any other form of 'reality.' Perhaps a narrator will explicitly inform the reader of the ontological status of the text he is reading; perhaps an internal mirror or *mise en abyme* will be the sign." Often, however, the 'literariness' of the work is signalled by the presence of parody: in the background of the author's work will stand another text, against which the new creation will be measured. It is not that one text fares better or worse than the other; it is the fact that they differ that the act of parody dramatizes. John Fowles, for instance, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, juxtaposes the conventions of the Victorian and the modern novel. The cultural and theological assumptions of both ages are compared through the medium of formal literary parody. A similar phenomenon of difference is found in such novels as *Grendel*, in which John Gardner reworked the backgrounded *Beowulf*, and *The Black Prince*, Iris Murdoch's modern rehandling of *Hamlet*. Thomas Mann, heir to the 'Romantic irony' of the last century, presents, in *Doktor Faustus*, a kind of parody which informs both the structure and the thematic content of his work as a whole.

What is worth notice in all these examples is that while a text (or perhaps, more generally, a set of conventions) is clearly being drawn upon and parodied, it is in some senses a rather new and even strange form of parody. In these works there is irony but little mockery; there is critical distance but little ridicule of the texts backgrounded. In fact there is considerable respect demonstrated for them. This fact perhaps recalls T.S. Eliot's 'fragments shored against his ruins,' the literary and linguistic comparisons of past and present that imply, as well, moral evaluations in 'The Waste Land.' Yet if this is parody, it is somewhat different from the traditional concept of a ridiculing, belittling literary mode. It does, however, recall very precisely the etymological origins of the word.

The Greek parodia or *παρωδία* means a 'counter-song.' The 'counter' or 'against' suggests a concept of comparison or, better, of contrast inherent

1 See my 'Modes et formes du narcissisme littéraire.' *Poétique*, 29 (février 1977) 90-106

in the meaning. The 'song' provides us with the literary and formal element of the description. Dictionaries, however, include in the meanings listed for the word, beyond this notion of a formal literary contrast, the notion of parody's intent: 'to produce a ridiculous effect' (OED). There is nothing in the root to suggest the need for this comic effect or ridicule, as there is in the *burla* of burlesque, for instance. Yet the OED reduces the distinction between parody and burlesque to a difference of degree; both burlesque and travesty are 'grotesque parody.'

The modern use of parody, though, does not seem to aim at ridicule or destruction. Parody implies a distance between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new work, a distance usually signalled by irony. But the irony is more playful than ridiculing, more critical than destructive. It is the same ironic distance one finds in Picasso's reworking of Velasquez's 'Las Meninas' or in Augustus John's of El Greco in 'Symphonie Espagnol.' In his novella *The Ebony Tower*, John Fowles rhernatizes this parodic play in terms which, although meant for the visual arts, apply to his own literary technique as well:

As with so much of Breasleys work there was an obvious previous inconography - in this case Uccello's *Night Hunt* and its spawn down through the centuries; which was in turn a challenged comparison, a deliberate risk ... just as the Spanish drawings *had defied the great shadow of Goya by accepting its presence, even using and parodying it*, so the memory of the Ashmolean Uccello somehow deepened and buttressed the painting before which David sat. It gave an essential tension, in fact: behind the mysteriousness and the ambiguity ... behind the modernity of so many of the surface elements there stood both a homage and a kind of thumbed nose to a very old tradition."

It is the combination of 'homage' and 'thumbed nose' that characterizes that peculiarly modern kind of parody.

Parody is of necessity a sophisticated literary form. The author - and then the reader - effects a superimposition of texts, an incorporation of old into new. The parody itself then becomes in a sense a bilingual svnthesis.? In this it would differ from pastiche or even adaptation, both essentially monolingual forms which bring about no synthesis and reveal no respect for the borrowed text." In fact modern parody is closest to the Renaissance concept

2 *The Ebony Tower* (Boston: Little, Brown 1974) 18, italics mine

3 See Sanda Colopentia-Eretescu, 'Grammaire de la parodie.' *Cahiers de linguistique theorique et applique*, 6 (1969) 171: "Tout en acquerant la langue du parodie. Le parodisre ne cesse pas de disposer de la sienne."

4 In *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions 1941) 105-7, Harry Levin condemns Joyce's 'Oxen of the Sun' episode in *Ulysses* as pastiche, for there is only one voice - joyce's - interested only in extending its own powers.

of rhetorical imitation. Like Spenser or Jonson, John Barth is willing to use the best of other writers to his own ends. Although we live in a post-Romantic age, made easily nervous by words such as imitation, that particular concept was once considered part of the necessary skill and craft of poetry - before the demands of Genius and the Sublime entered our critical credo.

The neoclassical penchant for the mock-heroic is similarly related to the modern taste for parody. Here again the backgrounded text being parodied is not ridiculed or cheapened. Although 'The Rape of the Lock' amuses, it does so at the expense of its trivial subject, not its lofty manner; the amusement is in fact largely a product of that ironic juxtaposition.^f There is, however, a difference: unlike modern parody, there is no synthesis here, but rather a distinct separation and juxtaposition on the level of form and content. This is not the case, however, in Milton's 'heroic' portrait of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. In this we find a serious critical use of parody that is very modern; the epic hero of tradition merges in an almost dialectical synthesis with the Miltonic vision of evil to produce a deliberately magnificent and deliberately undercut figure.

While such an act of parody is one of incorporation, its function is one of separation, of contrast. Unlike mere isolated allusion, parody requires that critical distance. If the reader does not notice, or cannot identify, an allusion (or even a quotation), he will merely naturalize it, adapting it into the context of the work as a whole. In the more extended form of parody, such naturalization would eliminate the form itself, in that the work would not be read as a parody of a backgrounded text at all.

Modern parody, then, is closest to Renaissance imitation. It is different from but related to burlesque and travesty, especially in its literary and imitative, contrastive nature, but it is a more complex form than pastiche, adaptation, allusion, or quotation. What seems true too is that the most serious problems of definition arise from the confusion of parody and satire. While both are literary forms, the concept of imitation or contrast need not at all be part of a definition of satire. The major difference between the two lies, however, in the aim. Even if we were to accept ridicule as the end of modern parody, it would still be ridicule of a literary phenomenon. Satire, by dictionary and critics' definitions alike, is considerably broader, and in fact usually decidedly moral in its intent. It may use literary techniques - such as parody - but its aim (to attack 'prevailing vices or follies') is more likely to be non-literary. Although Leonard Feinberg⁵ has argued that this ethical desire is a later rationalization of what is really an 'aesthetic desire for self-

5 See J.E. Riewald. 'Parody as Criticism,' *Neophilologus*, 50 (1966) 125

6 *Introduction to Satire* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press 1967) 12

expression,' the 'virtuous purpose' of satiric texts is nevertheless supremely evident.

Satire may thus employ literary parody as a device, but with no specifically literary aim whatsoever. Similarly, parody may choose to be satirical in intent; hence the aim of ridicule claimed in dictionary definitions. Both terms imply, perhaps because of the critical distance suggested, a value judgment, but there is a difference between them. Satire uses that distance to make a negative statement about that which is satirized - 'to distort, to belittle, to wound.'⁷ In modern parody in particular, however, no such negative judgment is suggested in the contrast of texts; parodic art both deviates from a literary norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material. Any attack would be self-destructive. As Northrop Frye implies in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, satire is social in intent, parody formal.⁸ This does not mean that it refrains from comment upon the backgrounded text. Indeed the dramatization of the cultural (and other) differences implied by the parodic formal contrast is what contributes most to parody's impact in modern fiction. But the two contrasted texts are measured against each other; the knife - if it is a knife - would have to be able to cut both ways.

Often, in fact, reverence for the text parodied is more in evidence than any desire to ridicule or even gently mock an outmoded form. John Fowles has himself compared his writing about 1867 in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to Stravinsky's eighteenth-century rehandlings and to Picasso and Francis Bacon's parodic use of Velasquez.⁹ If he admits to studying Thackeray's *Lovel the Widower* for its point of view, its use of the present tense, its teasing of the reader and compensatory self-mockery,¹⁰ he does so to remind the reader that he is not copying, but respectfully synthesizing, reworking in

7 Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1962) 69

8 *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; rpt New York: Atheneum 1970) 233-4, 321-2.

In *The Anatomy of Satire*, 13, 67, 83, Gilbert Highet claims satire and comedy are the ends of parody and makes parody one of the three 'main shapes' of satire. But his further distinction between 'formal' (or literary) and 'material' parody confuses the issue, since the latter, based on content, comes closer to satire itself. This confusion between the two forms is evident in much of the literature on the subject. Although Feinberg (*Introduction to Satire*, 188) admits parody as a literary tool, he claims that no 'aspect of society has been safe from the parodist's mocking attention.' This extraliterary intent is again often attributed to parody (rather than satire) in George Kitchen's *A Survey of Burlesque and Parody in English* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd 1931) x, 122. Murray Morton claims that 'satire must parody man,' in his 'A Paradise of Parodies,' *Satire Newsletter*, 9, 35

9 'Notes on Writing a Novel,' *Harper's Magazine* (July 1968) 90. He also compared his novel to Prokofiev's 'Classical Symphony' in its half-loving, half-ironic treatment of formal material. See Richard Boston, 'John Fowles, Alone But Not Lonely,' *New York Times Book Review* 9 (Nov. 1969) 2.

10 'On Writing a Novel,' *Cornhill Magazine*, 1060 (Summer 1969) 287-8

moyen, avec la forme que j'adopte. de faire indirectement la critique de tout cela?'¹⁴

The imitative impulse might also, then, call up a vitalizing competitive response in the parodist. Doing consciously what time does slowly, he distorts the shapes of art, synthesizing from them and from his own resources, a new form no longer burdened but enriched by the past. In his novel, *Il male oscuro*, Giuseppe Bertolucci presents a narrator who seems at first to be functioning as would a traditional modern character under psychoanalysis. It is only later in the book that he self-consciously admits that all he knows about analysis he has learned from Italo Svevo's novel *La coscienza di Zeno* and from Svevo's own comments. Bertolucci's novel picks up themes and structures from *Zeno*, but the narrator knows that he cannot redo Svevo, even though he shares Zeno's problems. It is significant in thematic terms that he is 'cured' when he burns, among other things, the first chapters of the very traditional novel he had written. At that point the novel about the 'obscure malady' must end. The new parodic form has literally superseded the old; its work too is now over. Parody of this extended sort is not - unlike the pieces in *Punch* or *The New Yorker* - occasional; it does not age faster than other genres. It tries literally to incorporate and then dialectically to transcend the literary past of the parodist.

There is yet another participant in the parodic process, however. Like all literary texts, a parody also requires a reader, a coworker in actualizing or concretizing - bringing to life - the world of words. The task of the reader in completing the meaning of a parodic text is somewhat more complex than usual. In addition to the usual literary codes, the reader must recognize that what he is reading is a parody, and to what degree and of what type. He must also of course know the text being parodied if he is to read it as other than any piece of literature, that is, as any other non-parodic work. In the optimal situation, naturally, the sophisticated reader would know the backgrounded work well and would bring about a superimposition of texts - by the mediation of that parodied work upon the act of reading. This act parallels the parodist's own synthesis.

The result of this use of already familiar traditional material in an unfamiliar backgrounded function is often, as the Russian Formalists have pointed out,¹⁶ that the literary character of the text comes to be stressed. This is certainly so in modern fiction. In leading the reader on, in making him expect

¹⁴ *Journal des faux-monnayeurs* (Paris: Gallimard 1927) 28

¹⁵ This suggests a relation to Julia Kristeva's notion of text as 'une permutation de textes' in *Problèmes de la structuration du texte* (Paris: Seuil 1969) 300

¹⁶ Tomachevski, "Thematique." in Tzvetan Todorov, ed., *Théorie de la littérature* (Paris: Seuil 1965) 284

the familiar, the parodist establishes a rhythm of 'counter-expectation'!" which ends by 'denuding' the structural principles of the work. In *Tristram Shandy* Sterne achieves in the reader a consciousness of form by overt acknowledgment of the rules and conventions of the novel genre. This very acknowledgment acts as a displacement in relation to those preordained conventions. Parody remains a literary mode whose principal intent, for reader and writer alike, is inherently formal rather than extra-literary in any way. Yet, as Robert Alter has pointed out, the effect of Sterne's parody is not reduction but expansion, for it raises the question whether language itself can ever yield an exhaustive account of either a narrated event or the contents of the narrator's mind at any given moment.¹⁵

The parodic denuding of conventions effected by Sterne and others was, for the Russian Formalists, a sign of the most literary of texts. Conventional-ity, or 'literariness.t' was the essence of all literature. This merits some emphasis in a discussion of parody only because of the confusion with extra-literary satire and the stress on the intent to ridicule found in most work on the subject. It is tempting to turn back to Dr Johnson's dictionary for a more satisfying explanation of parody as 'a kind of writing in which the words of an author or his thoughts are taken, and by a slight change adapted to some new purpose.'²⁰ Although one might argue that this defines plagiarism equally well, it does have the merit of not demanding the ridiculing, scorning, or destroying of the parodied text.

Some modern criticism has attempted to go beyond the limitations of later dictionary definitions of parody by including it, along with quotation, imitation, and allusion, in a general descriptive category of 'intertextuality.'²¹ Others have called it a metaliterary form -literature about literature, a form of literary criticism.^V This would open the way to the consideration of modern parody as a literary structure in its own right rather than just a literary device used for satiric ends. The parodist Sir Owen Seaman did in fact

17 My thanks to my colleague W.j.B. Owen for this term and its usage, from his work on Wordsworth, 'A Shock of Mild Surprise,' paper to Wordsworth Summer School, Grasmere, August 1977.

18 *Partial Magic* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1975) 44-5

19 Tzvetan Todorov points out, however, how vaguely and how negatively defined this term in fact is, in 'Some Approaches to Russian Formalism,' in Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt, eds, *Russian Formalism 20th Century Studies* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press 1973) 7-10.

20 *A Dictionary of the English Language*, II (London, 1822) 281

21 See Laurent Jenny, 'La Strategie de la forme,' *Poétique*, 27 (1976) 258.

22 See Sanda Colopentia-Eretescu, 'Grammaire de la parodie,' 169; and also Anton Popovic, 'Aspects of Metatext,' *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (Fall 1976) 225-35

call his work 'a department of pure criticism.'²³ If this is so, the root meaning of parody as 'counter-song' again becomes important. Modern parody, I have suggested, can be seen almost as an autonomous literary form in which a conscious distinction or contrast is brought about by the incorporating or synthesizing of elements from an already existing text (or set of conventions). One of the results of this contrast-function is that parody does become a form of literary criticism. One of the points made in W.H. Auden's 'daydream College for Bards' was that the 'library would contain no books of literary criticism, and the only critical exercise required of students would be the writing of parodies.'²⁴ As a type of literary criticism, parody has the advantage of being intramural, synthetic rather than only analytic. It is a recreation and a creation in one; it is criticism as a kind of active exploration.

The very choice of text to be parodied, of course, implies a critical act of evaluation on the part of the parodist. The judgment is in no way restricted to the negative; Fowles finds much to respect in the Victorian manner and mode he so deftly, if self-consciously, parodies in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Only when parody is linked with a satiric intent is the evaluation implied likely to be a negative one, in a moral even more than literary sense. While theorists have seemed willing to grant parody this critical function, they often seek to reduce its seriousness by the introduction of such terms as 'sportive' or 'deflationary.' If parody possesses, as it often does, irony and wit, these are the signs of that critical distance required as the next step after the parodic synthesis, the result of which has been called by Stephen Leacock 'as legitimate or as exalted as a critical essay by a Sainte-Beuve or a Hippolyte Taine.'²⁵

Modern parody, as literary criticism, is not at all the conservative force controlling literary excess that the Smith brothers believed their *Rejected Addresses* to be in 1812. If anything, the literary nature of modern parody is what makes it an existential, liberating force. As both Barth (in *Lost in the Funhouse* and other books) and Fowles have overtly suggested, for the parodist it is a means to freedom, to the exorcizing of personal ghosts - or more accurately to the enlisting of them in his own cause. In this sense the parodist speeds up literary history. Forms evolve with time; syntheses are always appearing to create new forms. The 'realistic' novel of the nineteenth century merged with the work on and interest in the processes of the mind and human consciousness to bring about the psychological novel of Proust, Woolf, Svevo, and Joyce. Parodists such as Cervantes merely hurry the

23 Quoted by George Kitchin, 'Introduction,' *A Survey of Burlesque and Parody in English*, xix

24 'The Poet and The City,' in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (1956; rpt New York: Vintage 1968) 77

25 *Humour and Humanity* (London: Thornton Butterworth 1937) 64-5

procedure; out of the chivalric romance and a new literary concern for everyday realism came *Don Quijote* and the novel genre.

Parodic works that actually manage to free themselves from the backgrounded parodied text to create new autonomous forms suggest that the dialectic synthesis of parody is a kind of prototype of the pivotal stage in that gradual process of development of literary forms. In one of the most interesting attempts at establishing a theory of parody, G.D. Kirernidjian-" notes that parody is important in general formal evolution in literature and is especially evident at the end of a tradition when established forms are exhausted. While this is perhaps true, the parodist himself (and not just sheer usage and temporal change) seems to play an important and more positive role in that 'exhaustion' process. This indeed was the view of the dynamic character of genre held by the Russian Formalists.²⁷

Tynianov saw parody as a dialectical substitution of formal elements whose functions have become mechanized, automatic. Tomachevski felt that out of this mechanization parody developed as an autonomous genre, a free art of revealed or 'denuded' process. But the new form evolved from and superseded the old without really destroying it, merely altering its function. There is a reorganization, a reconstruction, not necessarily a destruction, of the parodied material, which in the terms of this discussion, moves from the foreground into the background. Since this new context changes this text's function, and therefore its meaning, while still signalling the earlier ones, parody could perhaps be seen as partaking of Shklovsky's 'priern ostraneniija,; the deviation process in which the familiar seems new, as if perceived for the first time.

It is in this sense of parodic continuity, then, that one might say that all art should be viewed against a background of other works within the literary tradition. Shklovsky so argued in 1919: 'Not only a parody, but also in general any work of art is created as a parallel and a contradiction to some kind of model.'²⁸ The same year, 1919, T. S. Eliot wrote that to the writer all past literature has 'a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order'²⁹ and the critic must value the writer in relation to that past. Northrop Frye more recently has claimed that his *Anatomy of Criticism* is but an attempt to annotate Eliot's remark about this ideal order among the 'existing monuments' of literature.

26 'The Aesthetics of Parody,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 28 (1969) 231-42

27 See Tzvetan Todorov, ed., *Theorie de la litterature*, 50, 68, 136 and 301 H, for sources of the discussion following.

28 'The Connection between Devices of *Syuzhet* Construction and General Stylistic Devices,' in *Russian Formalism. zoiji Century Studies*, 53

29 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' *Selected Essays* (1934; rpt London: Faber and Faber 1966) 14

Parody could perhaps be a sign that a form or convention is becoming tedious - or inapplicable to contemporary formal requirements. Jane Austen's *Love and Friendship* reveals her parodic attempt to show that the epistolary novel, so popular at the time, could very easily degenerate into the first-person journal form. It is not really a rejection of the letter style itself, for she returned to it with interesting results in *Lady Susan*, but rather a critical regarding of a near-exhausted convention and a warning. Yet it is not one of her major novels, and the reason perhaps lies in her inability at this early stage of her writing to synthesize, to go beyond, the backgrounded material. Instead, it merely suggests by implication her sense of what the novel form should be and do, a sense aptly displayed in the later novels.

True dialectical parody can lead on the other hand to a synthesis of foreground and background that in time transcends its roots and inaugurates a new autonomous form. As already noted, the parody of the romances of chivalry gave us *Don Quijote*, and with it the novel as we know it today. The parodic allusiveness of 'The Waste Land' almost defined the modernity of poetry at the start of the century. And one views with interest the effect of Tom Stoppard on modern drama. In this way parody participates in the dynamic development of literary forms.

If a new parodic form does not develop when an old one becomes insufficiently motivated, the old form may degenerate into pure convention; witness the popular traditional novel, the bestseller of Victorian times and of our own. Parody is in this sense a positive force. The subject matter, once taken seriously and presented with formal motivation, may become prey to irony, though not necessarily to ridicule. The author, like Fowles's novelist-narrator in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, may seem to destroy the old mimetic illusion of seriousness and authenticity. However, a writer like Fowles goes one step beyond any destructive parody to establish a new seriousness, a new authenticity to replace the strictly mimetic one his parody has unmasked in that novel. A new form which copes with the ambiguity of both modern fiction and modern 'reality' emerges. Out of the incorporation of a temporally, philosophically, and technically superseded literary mode comes the illumination of contrast within a new form which goes one better than the ideal of Conrad and Ford: not only will Fowles make his reader 'see,' but he will show him the mechanisms of vision-creating. Fowles sees life through the spectacles of books, but does so in order to make his reader see more and see differently. Historically he has no choice: he writes after the *nouveau roman*. While retaining all the moral concerns of James and the English novel tradition, Fowles knows that a new form must come out of its perhaps now antiquated conventions. If he self-consciously imitates George Eliot, it is as a way to Roland Barthes. In Fowles's aphoristic book *The Aristos*, a distinction is offered between style-conscious derivative art and

Fowles's own parodic seeking for a voice. He rejects the search for the unique style, for the unmistakable voice. Instead he chooses the parodic use of many voices: 'Polystylism, the use by an artist of many styles to express himself, is inevitable. It is inevitable in the history of art and in the history of social evolution.'³⁰

Parody today is indeed both a 'homage' and a 'thumbed nose' to tradition. This is what Fowles, Barth, Borges, Nabokov, Murdoch, and so many other modern novelists have perceived. In modern music Bartok, Stravinsky, Mahler, Vaughan Williams, and Prokofiev have made similar discoveries. In the visual arts we have already mentioned Picasso and Bacon, and in film there are directors such as Lucas, Godard, Bogdanovich, and many others. Parody, it would seem, flourishes in societies of a certain cultural sophistication.³¹ This is due to its primarily formal, rather than social, intent and to the superimposition of texts - literary, cinematic, musical - required of the perceiver as well as the creator.

Parody is an act of incorporation. As such it seeks, not to debase or ridicule the backgrounded material, but rather to come to terms with it, through irony or criticism (in the broadest sense). The artist cannot ignore what has gone before him. As Harold Bloom writes of the poet suffering from the 'anxiety of influence': 'The poem is *within* him, yet he experiences the shame and splendour of *being found by* poems - great poems - *outside* him.'³² But if the act of parody is one of synthesis, its function is paradoxically one of separation, of contrast. The difference between the backgrounded text and the new rehandling becomes clear as they are measured, one against (and by) another. Parody in modern art is the dramatization of that difference.

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}0 *The Aristos, A Self-Portrait in Ideas* (Boston: Little, Brown 1964) 7:154

}1 This seems to have been true in the past as well. Although we find little or no parodic material in early Hebrew or Christian literature, or in that of Egypt, it makes its presence felt quite powerfully in Greece - the satyr plays which followed the tragedies, the *Batrachomyomachia*, and, most elegantly perhaps, the comedies of Aristophanes.

}2 *The Anxiety of Influence* 26 (original italics)