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# PARODY'S PROTEAN GUISES: THE EVOLUTION OF A CONCEPT FROM ANTIQUITY TO MODERN FRENCH LITERATURE

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Among all of the notions subject to change, that of *parody* has to be principal among them. One could hardly find another word charged with so many different meanings throughout the ages, and which even today theoreticians and other writers on the subject understand so variously. If my subject were comedy or autobiography, there would be relatively little chance of being misunderstood as to the basic sense of these terms. But to put forward the term "parody" is to invite a series of diverging and even contradictory definitions. First of all, is parody a literary genre in itself, like comedy, or is it "simply" a kind of rewriting or imitation? Is parody specific to literature, or does it exist in other cultural forms? What are its intentions and effects? Some would see it simply as a form of amusement, others as of greater consequence, implying the renewal of certain forms and themes; others still might consider its aim to be the devaluation of masterpieces through mockery.

We need to begin by agreeing on a basic definition of parody, in order to evaluate the historical changes it has undergone. Schematically, we can identify three different concepts of parody:

1. The popular concept, where the term has the pejorative meaning of false imitation, of sham, mockery, or pretence. In French we would use the expression *parodie de justice* or (to speak of a recent political event on another continent) *parodie d'élection*. It would be interesting to study the origin of this negative value of the word in daily usage.

2. A wider concept, which considers parody as a broad cultural

practice covering various imitative forms and caricatures of literary and artistic works. This rather loose conception would include techniques of mock heroism, burlesque travesty, and pastiche, as well as other mocking imitations of styles, schools, and authors.

3. A more restrictive notion, in which parody is a selective intervention in a discourse; the transformation of a text, or of part of a text, for what would generally be considered comic purposes. This restricted conception of parody is notably associated with the work of Gérard Genette, with the difference that he does not ascribe a comic intention to parody. We may recall his definition of parody as "the playful transformation of a particular text."<sup>1</sup>

Without rejecting the popular and wider concepts of parody, I prefer to define parody in this last, restrictive sense, while extending it to include comic and satiric intentions. In a little book I published on the subject in 1994, I defined parody as "the playful, comic, or satiric transformation of a particular text."<sup>2</sup> In that study I used the word "text" because my focus was purely literary; but a better word might be "works," so as not to exclude art and music, and forms of popular culture such as comic strips, journalism, and advertising, where parody is very much in evidence.

From what has been said so far we may note that parody is doubly concerned with change. Parody has changing definitions and intentions, while it is itself an art that changes things, playing on the metamorphosis of works and the transformation of literary or more widely cultural landscapes. No doubt this will to effect change is related to the instability of the various concepts of parody: how could a practice whose very essence is transformation ever be fixed?

In what follows I propose to survey various definitions of parody at different historical moments. I shall examine the intentions underlying these definitions along with the practices that implement them, and I shall attempt to explain how these definitions, intentions, and practices of parody are inscribed in a cultural-historical context. I shall therefore indulge in a little exercise in the history of poetics without pretending to exhaust the subject (not having mastery of all the periods concerned, I can in some cases only point out possible directions of research). Special emphasis will be placed on nineteenth- and twentieth-century French literature, this being my area of specialization, but I shall also refer to theories and forms of parody belonging to other cultural contexts. I have opted for a diachronic presentation because there is no canonical definition to serve as an atemporal criterion of selection, because successive definitions either

assimilate or reject preceding ones, and because one can understand the concept of parody prevailing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries only if their historical dimensions are made clear.

Having said this, any endeavour to identify historical changes and transformations must beware of teleological temptation: one runs the risk of arranging the historical review of concepts of parody into an evolution toward the happy ending of its current rehabilitation. In this way, parody would be seen as passing through successive states of valorization and devalorization, but would only emerge from its marginal status to achieve full recognition in the twentieth century. In fact, the valorization and marginalization of parody are difficult parameters to handle: in a single historical period one may find a theoretical devaluation of parody running counter to a valorizing practice. Setting aside certain little-known texts (for example, the eighteenth century Théâtre de la Foire) or the question of the importance of certain undertakings (such as the parodies of Homer collected by Henri Estienne in the sixteenth century), one can easily misjudge the "marginality" of parody.

Similarly, we must beware of projecting modern concepts of parody onto the past. Our own valorization of marginality may lead to a misguided identification of it at certain periods. With an object as vaguely defined as parody, the observer's point of view is more than ever decisive, above all where intentions and reception are concerned. A cautionary example is that of Bakhtin, whose Marxist presuppositions led him to exaggerate the popular substratum in his vision of the carnivalesque in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. One must be careful not to overestimate attractive notions such as counterculture in understanding the phenomenon of parody.

The final difficulty I see for understanding parody concerns the relative importance of theory and practice. A work of pure poetics limits itself to theoretical reflections on parody and leaves aside its realizations in practice (as accidents and chance manifestations opposed to a purely theoretical ideal). But that kind of work lacks the rich perspective to be inferred from the practice of parodists and their own metadiscourse on the practice. With the exception of Michele Hanoosh's *Parody and Decadence*,<sup>3</sup> which strikes a nice balance between theory and close reading (of Laforgue's *Moralités légendaires*), the contemporary studies of parody I have read are invariably abstract essays offering only a few scattered examples, often the same ones from one work to another. My own intention is to combine theoretical reflection with attention to the empirical aspects of the works.

### On The (Hypothetical) Origins Of Parody

If we go back to the origins of the word parody, we find the Greek *parōdia*, from *ōde*, “song,” and *para*, “along” or “beside.”<sup>4</sup> One notices that changes in meaning are already programmed into this ambiguous etymology, which makes it possible to understand parody as either a song developing *parallel* to another, being just slightly out of line, or as a song truly off-line, out of place, false, a “countersong” clashing with the original. Aristotle briefly mentions *parōdia* in Chapter 2 of the *Poetics*, citing two parodists: Hegemon of Thasos, “the first author of parodies,” and Nicochares, author of the *Deiliade*. In Aristotle’s scale of genres parody has the fourth place, with that of narrative works representing the actions of low characters. Parody thus appears as a transformation of the epic, of the kind of the burlesque epic, the *Margites*, that Aristotle attributes to Homer in Chapter 4, and which is also to be found in the fourth place in his system of genres: “the *Margites* is to comedy what the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are to tragedy.”<sup>5</sup>

As Aristotle tells us nothing else about parody, and as the parodies he cites have not come down to us, we can only guess at the definition and forms of early parody. Specialists in the field have gathered from other sources that parody might have been a simple change in the diction or the song of the epic text—“At first, the term meant spoken instead of sung, and thus different from the traditional way of reciting epics”<sup>6</sup>—but that it might also have referred to more important transformations, such as thematic or stylistic reversals, as may be inferred from fragments of the *Deiliade*, an “*Iliad* of cowards,” or from another text then attributed to Homer, the *Batrachomyomachia*, an epic of battle between frogs and rats. In that case parody would have covered the two genres of burlesque and mock-epic poetry.

If the definition of *pârodia* remains mysterious, so do the intentions of the ancient parodists and the effects they were aiming at. Beyond the simple desire to make readers or a live audience laugh, in what context and what situations was parody performed? Octave Delepierre offers the following explanation in his *Essay on Parody* (1868-69):

When the rhapsodes were singing lines of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, and they found that the expectations or the curiosity of the audience were not satisfied, they would add little poems, as a sort of interlude, to entertain the public. These were composed of nearly the same lines that they had been reciting, but they altered the meaning in order to express something

else that would amuse the public. That is what they called *to parody*, from *para* and *ôdé*, counter-song.<sup>7</sup>

According to this suggestion, parodies were meant to entertain the public by offering "diversions" on the epic passages they were hearing; one wonders whether this kind of amusement was meant indirectly to highlight the seriousness of the epic passages, or rather to provide relief from their solemnity.

In investigating the origins of Delepiere's theory, Gérard Genette has gone back through Richelet and the Abbé Sallier to Scaliger's *Poetics*, where one finds indeed the idea of a parody "born of rhapsody," "*rhapsodia inversa*," aiming at "turning the mind back to objects of comedy." Yet we do not know where Scaliger himself found this idea. What is surprising is how universally it came to be echoed in the centuries that followed. To my mind, this is due to the fact that Scaliger's theory corresponds to later ideas of parody; critics from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries have merely discovered in antiquity the intentions of parody as accepted in their own time. In this period every successful tragedy or opera having found favour with the public is automatically parodied: in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in non-official theatres like the Comédie des Italiens and the Théâtre de la Foire, and in the nineteenth century in theatres like the Vaudeville or the Variétés, where one finds the parodic double of every romantic drama, every stage adaptation of a best-selling novel. Of course, these performances do not mix the play proper and its parody as the rhapsodes did, but a certain interlacing of performances would permit a theatregoer to see, for example, *Hernani* one evening and on another evening its parody, *Harnali ou la contrainte par cor*. A remark of the Abbé Sallier's serves as an example of how observers can project their own ideas onto the object observed. In wondering what the dramatic parody of Hegemon of Thasos might have looked like, he writes that it "was perhaps in the same taste of those given in our theatres today."<sup>8</sup>

### **The Good Intentions of Parody in the Classical Age**

There is in antiquity another, more restrictive definition which treated parody as a simple process of comic citation. Fred J. Householder, in an article published in *Classical Philology* in 1944, drew attention to a concept, widespread among Greek rhetoricians and grammarians, which describes parody as "the insertion in comedy of a brief tragic, lyric, or epic passage, (a) either substantially unchanged, (b) with substitution of one or more

words, (c) in paraphrased form, or (d) so changed as to be little more than an imitation of the grammar and rhythm of the original.”<sup>9</sup> It is in Latin rhetoric that we find this definition, which reduces parody to a selective operation on or in a discourse. Thus Quintilian, in the *Institutio Oratoria*, identifies parody as the technique of “making up lines resembling well-known lines” (VI.3.97) to amuse the audience, which tends to show the link between this restrictive concept of parody and comic art.

The fact that Aristotle leaves parody undefined had two important consequences: later theorists did not attempt to make it into a genre which would fill the fourth category of the *Poetics*, and the concept of parody which came gradually to be accepted was the restrictive one of ancient rhetoricians. In the age of French classicism, parody is thus to be found in treatises of rhetoric rather than poetics, as the rhetorical figure of “adapted meaning”: for Dumarsais, this figure consists in “giving a mocking turn to lines composed by another for a different purpose,” in “applying” well-known lines “to a less serious subject.” In Racine’s *Les Plaideurs*, for example, the playwright parodies Corneille’s line from *Le Cid*,

Ses rides sur son front ont gravé ses exploits  
(His exploits were engraved in the lines on his brow)

by turning it to the purpose of ridicule:

Il gagnait en un jour plus qu’un autre en six mois.  
Ses rides sur son front gravaient tous ses exploits  
(He earned in a day more than another in six months,  
The lines on his brow engraved all his exploits)

In Racine, the “exploits” are successful lawsuits, not the deeds of valour in Corneille.

Although the word “parody” found its place in the French language by 1614, and a parodic theatre and opera were developing, theorists of poetics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not seem to realize that parody existed as a genre. While parallel genres such as the burlesque (Scarron’s *Le Virgile travesti*) and the mock-epic (Boileau’s *Le Lutrin*) were defined and codified (as in Boileau’s *L’art poétique*), parody did not seem to be recognized for what it was, even by those practising it. Thus Boileau, Racine, Furetière and others collaborated on a parody of some scenes from *The Cid* called *Chapelain décoiffé*, which comically transforms the quarrel between Don Diègue and Don Gomez into one between

the literary mediocrities Chapelain and La Serre over a royal pension. The slap that provokes a duel is transformed into a wig being pulled off, the Cornelian dilemma becomes the hesitation of one of La Serre's protégés before the prospect of betraying his master, etc. The authors called this parody a "comedy." We might assume that this is due to the marginality of parody, which, as it is not legitimated by Aristotle, would therefore have no official existence. The fact that Boileau dedicated his *Chapelain décoiffé* to the French Academy indicates that this kind of work was officially acceptable (besides, parody was being widely performed as entertainment in the salons of the aristocracy), but the substitution of the generic appellation "comedy" shows that parody itself remained a marginal genre.<sup>10</sup>

What were the intentions of parodists? In *Chapelain décoiffé*, they use Corneille's text to satirize certain customs of literary circles (they mock Chapelain's discretionary power in awarding pensions, bad poets receiving court stipends, and so on). This satiric dimension is also found in other parodies of the age: a *Livre abominable* gives verses of *Polyeucte* to the King's confessor, a *Colbert enragé* uses the lines of Corneille's Rodrigue. The question is whether parody is also a mockery of the text that it transforms. In the case of *Chapelain décoiffé*, are Boileau and his friends also targeting *Le Cid* and its author, Corneille? If the parodists had simply borrowed wholesale the plot and the characters of Corneille to make them ridiculous through a number of comic transformations, there would be no doubt. But they have changed the characters and the action of the parodied scenes, in other words the subject of the play, thus directing our attention elsewhere than at Corneille's tragicomedy. Corneille's text is only a pretext, chosen because everyone knows it. Yet from another point of view, *Le Cid* hardly emerges unscathed from parodic transformation: by ridiculing the dramatic device of the dilemma, for example, aren't the parodists poking fun at the great inner workings of Corneille's theatre?

Marmontel, reading *Chapelain décoiffé*, also questioned its relation to the parodied text, simultaneously affirming its innocence and its derisive effects:

The same things concerning Chapelain's wig and Don Diègue's honor may be laughable in the words of an old rhymester, however noble and touching they are in the words of an aged and respected soldier, who has been mortally offended. ... There is nothing so sacred, so touching or so

tragic, that it cannot be mocked or parodied agreeably, even without there being anything ridiculous in the original. ... The parody which travesties the serious beauties of a text disposes and accustoms the mind to laugh at everything, which is worse than misrepresenting them. It also spoils the pleasure of a serious and noble play; because when the parodied situation arises, we cannot but remember the parody, and this memory spoils both the illusion and pathos.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from the hypothetical questioning of the *Cid* as a whole, we can see that the parodists intended to laugh at certain aspects of Corneille's text. In the pun on the word "ducats" in lines 2 and 3, as well as the presence of this word in line 73, there is mocking criticism of a stylistic fault of Corneille. It can be called *kakemphaton*, a sequence of sounds that inadvertently creates an awkward word, as in lines 152 and 223 of the *Cid*: "Vous élève en un rang qui n'était *dû qu'à moi*" (which raises you to a rank which should have come to me) and "Et par là cet honneur n'était *dû qu'à mon bras*" (and due to that, this honour only came thanks to my arm).<sup>12</sup>

One of the intentions of parody in the French classical age was to criticize the defects of authors. According to the aesthetic which joins the useful to the agreeable, parody must indeed teach lessons, which will be accepted all the better as they are given in a humorous vein. This is one of the two missions given to parody by the Abbé Sallier. Parody

undertakes either to expose what is ridiculous in men's conduct [here parody serves the purpose of satire], or to point out the false beauties of a work, and to open the eyes of an author seduced by his own pride and flattery: parody makes him realize how far he is from the perfection he thought to have achieved. ... By instilling poets with a healthy feeling of shame, parody can encourage them to improve themselves, especially as the severity of its censure is tempered by its inherent sense of humour, which knows neither bitterness nor sharpness, and because it endeavours to please while instructing at the same time.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond attacking individual works, parody may point out the shortcomings of certain genres. Just as *Don Quixote*, through the particular case of *Amadis des Gaules*, attacks the "recipes" of chivalric romance, the parodic French theatre of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attacks the manifestly obvious

conventions of the tragedies and operas of this period. Gustave Lanson, who has made an inventory of two hundred parodies between 1710 and 1789, has shown that, whereas the parodic productions of the Comédie Italienne and the Théâtre de la Foire may have originated in the rivalry between Italian troupes and the official theatre (Italian actors made up their repertory by parodying official productions), as well as in the spirit of the burlesque, they later developed in the direction of satire: "they make fun of unjustified entrances and exits, such as are introduced for the mere sake of ornament or commonplace convention,<sup>14</sup> and of all tricks of the trade ... the extraordinary horror of situations, the heroic or villainous inhumanity of feelings, moral paradoxes."<sup>15</sup> Hans Mattauch, in his study of parodies which make fun of "over-used and a hundred times repeated" situations such as the narration, the prophetic dream, the oracle, the recognition scene, the heroic suicide and so on, speaks of "defensive" parodies which aim at protecting the classical ideal of tragedy against certain distortions of the genre.<sup>16</sup> Contrary to the generally accepted idea that associates parody with a subversive intent, it is here given a conservative aim.

Parodists may have worked for the good of literary genres, but the parodied authors did not like having their works made fun of; many eighteenth-century authors reacted violently against parody. According to Lanson, Voltaire was for half a century a constant target of parodies at the Théâtre de la Foire and the Comédie Italienne ("La parodie" 280);<sup>17</sup> it was due to his efforts that parodies of authors who wrote for the Comédie Française and the Opéra were forbidden in the Comédie Italienne. This symptomatic fact is also noted by Claude Abastado, who quotes an outraged protest: "Parody makes us ridiculous; a Fréron pulls us to pieces; that's our reward for a work that has shortened our lives."<sup>18</sup> Voltaire is not an isolated case: in the eighteenth century, parody was generally associated with plagiarism and had a pejorative sense. It was considered as mere mockery, the refuge of authors incapable of creating their own work and jealous of the success of their betters. Piron, though he himself had written parody, spoke of it as "a laboratory open to small and cunning minds who know nothing other than how to spoil and disfigure works of beauty."<sup>19</sup>

The eighteenth century presents the contradictory situation of theatrical parody, which is very successful with the public and in the salons, but which remains a "bad genre" to men of letters. This contradiction is easy to explain: in a literary field which awards symbolic prestige only to the noble genres, parody cannot be recognized and remains excluded from the literary establishment,

condemned to marginal status, even if approved by a wide public audience.

### **Parody Between Revolution And Decadence**

This situation changed in the nineteenth century, when parody came to be valued more highly. In its challenge to classical aesthetics, Romanticism privileged categories such as the burlesque, the grotesque and the farcical, and parody entered into this loosely defined area. The term parody lost its specificity, and its meaning became extremely broad, covering everything connected to distorting and mocking imitation, and becoming synonymous with "caricature." Champfleury, in his *Histoire de la caricature antique* (1865), goes so far as to use the terms parody and caricature interchangeably.

The development of parody in the nineteenth century was first of all related to a rejection of imitation in the classical sense. If there were to be imitation, it had to be critical and satirical. "I will sow the seed of parody in what they honour the most," exclaims Charles Lassailly in *Les Roueries de Trialpb*, demonstrating the young Romantics' desire to subvert and make a carnival of existing models.<sup>20</sup> Later in the century, this desire led to the iconoclastic inversions of Isidore Ducasse (Lautréamont), to that literary act of "scuttling" that Francis Ponge has called the "Maldoror-Poésies device," and which consists in turning literature inside out like an umbrella.<sup>21</sup> So, for example, Shakespeare's line "Frailty, thy name is woman" becomes "Bonté, ton nom est homme," or "Kindness, your name is man"; and Dante's "Voi que entrate, lasciate ogni speranza," is changed into "Vous qui entrez, laissez tout désespoir," or "You who enter abandon all despair."<sup>22</sup> This takes place according to a double principle. First,

A schoolboy could create for himself a literary baggage by saying the contrary to what the poets of this century have said. He would simply turn affirmations into negations, and vice-versa. (Ducasse 359)

And second,

Plagiarism is necessary. It is implied in progress. It follows closely an author's style, uses his expressions, erases a false idea and replaces it with the right one. (Ducasse 367)

"Plagiarism" here obviously means parody, a practice which Isidore

Ducasse applies to the classics as well as to modern authors, and which consists in a kind of historical adaptation of expressions judged to be wrong: the maxims of La Rochefoucauld or of Pascal having become counter-truths with time, parody applies to them a "writing as contradiction," or *écriture de la contradiction*,<sup>23</sup> which marks Ducasse's opposition to the ideological, cultural, and schoolish values which they represent.

In the nineteenth century, parody was also often used for purposes of political opposition. Under the July Monarchy, and then under the Second Empire, the political clampdown gave rise to forms of resistance inspired by from the humoristic press, the *physiologies*, caricaturists' salons, satirical novels such as *Jérôme Paturot*, and so on. Parody joined forces with satire and caricature, and it is symptomatic that André Gill called the satirical and caricatural weekly he published from 1869 to 1870 *La Parodie*. It was at the same period, when opposition to Napoleon III was growing, that both *Histoires de la caricature* by Champfleury were published, one volume on ancient and one on modern caricature, as well as the first important essay on parody, that of Delepierre cited above. This conjunction of events shows how closely caricature and parody were related, and how both were connected to the same forces of resistance to authority. It also testifies to a profound awareness that history had entered a parodic phase, as is shown in the famous opening lines of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoléon Bonaparte*. "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."

The connection between parody and politics is emphasized by Delepierre:

Parody, the part of popular literature which we have just outlined, finds its nature in the moral and political circumstances of the age and the country in which it develops. It changes accordingly, and finds heightened encouragement amidst the turbulence of political and religious unrest.

(180-81)

Champfleury is also aware of this link, and in his *Histoire de la caricature antique*, he goes as far as to fault Aristotle for ignoring the political implications of caricature, that is to say, parody, for he is commenting on the passages of the *Poetics* which deal with it: "Aristotle, preoccupied with the idea of absolute beauty, underrates

the significance of caricature. This thinker, lost in philosophical abstractions, scorned as futile an art which, nonetheless, allows the common people revenge on their tyrants and which expresses the thoughts of the crowd through the satirist's pencil."<sup>24</sup>

At this time the affinity between parody and caricature was so strong that even Théodore de Banville thinks of his parodic work, the *Odes funambulesques*, in terms of caricature: "In a word, he attempted to do with Poetry, the art which contains all other arts and which has the resources of all arts, what Caricature tries to do when it is something more than scribbling."<sup>25</sup> But in this case, Banville's caricature-parody is aimed both at the literary institutions of his age (practices of the press, etc.) and at Hugo—a literary institution in himself—whose *Les Orientales* are parodied in the *Odes funambulesques*.

One might add that if Banville turned to parody, it was because he saw himself as a funambulist, a verse acrobat, but also as a clown, a saltimbanco, like many writers and artists of his time who demystified the act of artistic creation (I refer to Jean Starobinski's *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque*).<sup>26</sup> This playful, comical intention was essential to the parodic literature of the second half of the nineteenth century. Not that it had ever been lacking in the past: the parodists of antiquity and of the French classical age also meant to amuse, but certainly less gratuitously (a moral lesson usually accompanied the entertainment) than Laforgue, Corbière, the Rimbaud of the *Album zutique* and the humorists of the Chat noir. The parodists belonging to those various movements (Hydropathes, Incohérents, Hirsutes, Jemenfoutistes) have been characterized by Daniel Grojnowski as embodying "l'esprit fumiste." If they were not lacking in aesthetic projects and a spirit of revolt, their activity nevertheless took place mainly in the spirit of "good humor and good songs."<sup>27</sup>

Yet in the second half of the nineteenth century there also existed a less euphoric concept of parody. In what has been termed the "fin-de-siècle mood" or "decadent aesthetics," the dominant feeling is one of cultural saturation and exhaustion. Many artists and writers were convinced that invention was no longer possible, that with the accumulation of works and the overabundance of knowledge they were condemned to the *déjà-vu* (already seen) and the *déjà-lu* (already read). One thinks of Mallarmé's complaint: "The flesh is sad, alas! and I've read every book (La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres)"; or of Maupassant's bitter question: "What is left to do that hasn't been done, what is left to say that hasn't been said?" (Preface to *Pierre et Jean*). The feeling of impotence

implied in such statements leads the fin-de-siècle writer to seek refuge in re-writing and in irony, which appear to him both as his last hope and as his inevitable fate. Though parody is part of this activity of re-writing, it is considered differently from other practices. As it is linked to satire and derision, it is thought to turn creative impotence into destructive mockery, thus degrading the cultural heritage and contributing to the entropy of the fin-de-siècle. As Delepierre writes, parody is “generally the amusement of aging literatures which begin to show disrespect for their own most beautiful works” (37-38).

In the same vein Paul Bourget, known to have greatly contributed to the spread of the notion of decadence, relates this notion to that of parody. Preparing an article on Offenbach, he writes in one of his notebooks on 8 October 1880: “Parody is simply a form of criticism. We are disgusted with everything we know. All that is perfectly earnest is dead. That is why parody only appears in centuries of decadence, which are nothing other than centuries of extreme intelligence, and consequently of impotence.”<sup>28</sup> In the article on Offenbach published two days later he writes:

Parody is the essence of our age, because it is nothing but an exasperated avatar of the critical mind, and this age is above all critical. Is there not a large measure of recklessness and spontaneity in all creations, small or large? This incapacity to create produces two opposing frames of mind, depending on the distinction or the vulgarity of the person's nature: irony and hamming it up. Incapable of pursuing a single idea in their activities, sharp minds delight in detecting in every piece of gold the defect that proves it a fake, and in every exalted form the grain of comedy that belies it.<sup>29</sup>

There is thus in the nineteenth century, beside the general tendency to valorize parody, a parallel current that devalues it for the same reasons as did the eighteenth century: it is the writing of incompetents intent on degrading the great works. The same disapproving reactions are widely to be found, from Rodolphe Töpffer, who says that parody “discredits or turns everything into piquant caricature,”<sup>30</sup> to Jules Janin, who describes the parodist as someone under whose hand “everything withers and spoils; he reshapes the mud you have already shaped; he makes a monkey of a man.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet as in the eighteenth century, the public is more than eager to see the innumerable parodies of romantic drama (*Harnali, les Hures*

*graves, Ruy-Blag, Ruy-Black*) and stage adaptations of naturalistic novels. One even sees authors giving a hand to their parodists, for instance Zola collaborates on the scenario of a parody of *L'Assommoir*, which was to be added to the fifteen parodies already performed onstage in the first eight months of 1879. Parody was a sort of second consecration, treating only successful, well-known and accepted works. Nineteenth century authors understood the system, such that Hugo is reputed to have said, "beside every great work there stands a parody," meaning not only that every masterpiece must submit to parody, but also that parodies take on only masterpieces.

Banville makes the same point in one of the prefaces to his *Odes funambulesques*: "Is it necessary to call to mind once again that parody has always been a tribute paid to popularity and genius?" (Preface 18). Strongly opposing the idea that parody is a symptom of decadence, he states in another preface that parody is on the contrary a sign of health:

Furthermore he remembered that literary genres that had reached their apogee could not express themselves better than through their own parody, and it seemed to him that these attempts at mockery, even if clumsy, might serve as a measure of the vigorous and powerful resources of our lyric poetry.<sup>32</sup>

### From Parody To Pastiche

In the twentieth century, the Russian Formalists considered parody as a contributing factor of what they called "literary evolution." This concept reverses the idea of parody as a contributing factor of decadence, without however evoking the idea of a literary apogee as suggested by Banville. But even if it is difficult to ignore the teleological connotations of this theory, literary evolution as understood by theorists such as Shklovski or Eikhenbaum is not meant in the sense of progress. What is more important to them is the dynamic, the process of evolution rather than its finality. This is seen in the fundamental interaction between works and forms, in the general dialogism according to which every work is created in relation to contemporary and past works. As Tynianov puts it: "Strictly speaking, literary phenomena cannot be considered outside their correlations," correlations that imply not only literary discourse but also language and social discourse.<sup>33</sup> This principle is known to have been imported into France in the 1960s by Julia Kristeva with the notion of "intertextuality."<sup>34</sup>

Parody is only one of the modalities of a work's correlations, but

it is particularly important in the theories of the Russian Formalists. One recalls that Tynianov, in a landmark study, sees in parody an activity of "destruction" and reconstruction of the work parodied. This activity aims at a *stylization* of the work's procedures by means of "over-ostentation," "stripping-bare" and "mechanization," all through effects of discord and discrepancy. When this stylization has "a comic motivation" it becomes parody. However, the comic element does not seem to be a necessary condition, it is "a coloring which generally goes with parody, but is not the color of parody itself."<sup>35</sup> The primary intention of a parodist is not in fact to make people laugh, but to denounce the canonical procedures of a genre, of an age or of a school, as they become perceptible through use.<sup>36</sup> We find here something comparable to the intentions of classical parodists.

With Bakhtin, parody takes on a very broad meaning as well as considerable significance. It concerns not only the transformation of particular works, the pastiche of styles, and the caricature of traditional literary themes, but also, in the perspective of the polyphonic novel, it is one of the means of "plurilingualism" and "plurivocality": the novel absorbs different ways of speaking and literary discourses by "refracting" them in a humorous, ironical or parodic manner. There is "parodical stylization" when the novel "denounces" and "destroys" stylized discourses. But Bakhtin insists that refraction must also take into account the vision of the world implied in the stylized discourses, otherwise parody remains "rhetorical," "elementary" and "superficial."<sup>37</sup> Hence there is in Bakhtin a desire to link parody to the questioning of cultures and ideologies that goes beyond the Formalists' intentions of "renewal." The essay on Rabelais is the great illustration of this all-enveloping concept, for which the "comic universalism" of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance produces a universalizing parody: "For parodists, everything, without exception, is comic; laughter is as universal as seriousness, it is aimed at all the universe, at history and at society as a whole, at the conception of the world. It is a truth about the world, a truth which covers everything and from which nothing escapes."<sup>38</sup>

Bakhtin's concept has greatly influenced recent theories of parody. Thus, Margaret Rose defines parody quite broadly as "the critical refunctioning of preformed literary material with comic effect."<sup>39</sup> This literary material can consist of texts, genres, styles, and so forth, and the comic resides in the effect of "discrepancy" between the original material and its parodic refunctioning. Rose joins Bakhtin in the intentions that she attributes to parody: its

metafictive dimension leads in principle to the unveiling and analysis of the “epistemological, historical and social conditions affecting the composition and reception of texts” (13). In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon also defines parody in a very broad way, as “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text,” and later as a “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.”<sup>40</sup> She also attributes to it a wide variety of intentions and effects, which she calls “pragmatic ethos,” dominated by irony and ranging from “scornful ridicule to reverential homage” (37). In view of this highly “ecumenical” concept, one might wonder where she sees the difference between parody and intertextuality in general.

Margaret Rose and Linda Hutcheon both demonstrate the ambivalence as well as the contradiction in parody. It is, on the one hand, “revolutionary” in that it contests, mocks, and changes artistic models; on the other hand, it is conservative to the extent that, even as it contests these models, it perpetuates them. Yet Hutcheon gives importance to the continuity of parody. In considering its effect on postmodern architecture, she points out how in this case the recuperation of the past is done smoothly in that it has “restored the idea of architecture as dialogue with the past” (11).

The “smoothness” that Hutcheon attributes to parody is absent from the definitions we have given up to now. On the contrary, parody in the past was generally understood as polemical and satirical, upsetting themes and forms, “attacking” the shortcomings of authors and genres, undermining the cultural heritage through laughter. The Russian Formalists even speak of destruction, as well as the “battle” between a parodic text and the one being parodied. Bakhtin speaks of “denunciation” and “destruction.” However, it would seem that recent theories of parody aim at softening these notions of belligerence and aggression. Genette himself considers parody as purely playful.

It is as if our era, in its desire to clear parody of its bad name—one earned both from its popularity in the pejorative sense and from its critical past, where it often appeared as a degrading practice (one being the logical consequence of the other<sup>41</sup>)—had stripped parody of its powers of opposition and transgression, had in a way “softened its corners” to make it more acceptable, in order to conform to a certain cultural consensus which one can see settling in with the twentieth century and with post-modernism.

It is also significant that Rose, in her second study of parody,

*Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern*, cites theorists who show that in this “neoconservative postmodernism” (Hal Foster’s expression), parody tends to give way to the more neutral practice of pastiche. She quotes among others Fredric Jameson:

That is the moment at which pastiche appears and parody has become impossible. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, discourse in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor ...<sup>42</sup>

This judgment can be qualified, because pastiche is neither as neutral and nor as humourless as Jameson would have it—its satirical principle, if less evident, is nonetheless active, and it is never very far from caricature. But it is true, at least as far as French literature is concerned, that pastiche seems to be preferred to parody in the twentieth century: whether one thinks of Jean Pellerin’s pastiches, of the *Chasse spirituelle*, of Reboux and Muller’s *A la manière de ...*, of Raymond Queneau’s *Exercices de style*, of Jacques Laurent’s *Perles de culture*, of the works of Patrick Rambaud (*Roland Barthes sans peine*, Marguerite Duraille), and so on. Is this because pastiche is less offensive than parody? Or is it simply that writers turn more willingly to a genre ennobled by Proust than to a kind of writing that after all remains in ill-repute? In any case I consider it symptomatic that several collections of parodies are entitled *anthologies of pastiche*—as if the trademark of parody were not much of a recommendation.<sup>43</sup>

The twentieth century has largely valorized parody through theoretical works acquitting it of charges of parasitism and entropy, while attributing to it dynamic powers of literary renewal. Nonetheless, parody remains burdened by a history of negative judgments. If these judgments are behind the pejorative sense of parody in its popular conception, they are doubtless also responsible for what one may consider a certain reticence in contemporary writers. Even if they do not hesitate to write parody, they are still reluctant to proclaim themselves its champions.<sup>44</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 164 and *passim*. Reprinted in the collection Points/Seuil.
- 2 *La Parodie* (Paris: Hachette, coll. Contours littéraires, 1994), 7-74.
- 3 Michele Hanoosh, *Parody and Decadence: Laforgue's Moralités légendaires* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989).
- 4 In earlier works on parody, not being a Hellenist I rather carelessly affirmed that *para* in *parôdia* could mean "against." My colleague Paul Schubert has kindly pointed out to me that due to the form of the word, this meaning is impossible. I am grateful to be able to make the correction.
- 5 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Dupont-Roc/Lallot, (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 45.
- 6 Henryk Markiewicz, "On the Definitions of Literary Parody," in *To Honor Roman Jakobson: On the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, 3 vols. (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1967), 2.1265.
- 7 Octave Delepierre, *Essai sur la parodie*, in *Miscellanies of the Philobiblion Society*, vol. 12 (London: Wittingham and Wilkins, 1868-69), 8 n.1.
- 8 Abbé Sallier, "Discours sur l'origine et sur le caractère de la parodie," in *Histoire de l'Académie royale des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, vol. 3 (Paris: 1733), 404.
- 9 Fred J. Householder, "Parôdia," *Classical Philology* 39.1 (1944): 5.
- 10 See also Annick Bouillaguet, *L'Écriture imitative. Pastiche, parodie, collage* (Paris: Editions Nathan, 1996), 96-97.
- 11 Marmontel, *Éléments de littérature* (1825) 3.495-96, qtd in Markiewicz, "Definitions" 1268 (my translation).
- 12 Or involuntary pun. Perhaps not so involuntary for Corneille, who gives us the famous, "Et le désir s'accroît quand l'effet se retire," (*Polyeucte*). Another example: "Je suis Romaine hélas, puisque mon époux l'est" (*Horace*). The fact is that a *kakemphaton* (literally "badly said") shocks the classical ear.
- 13 Abbé Sallier 407-8.
- 14 An example given by Lanson is the convention of declarations to confidants: "I will entrust you with the account of my love, says a goddess to a nymph, just for the sake of information: for I do not intend to take any advantage of you later on."
- 15 Gustave Lanson, "La parodie dramatique au XVIIIe siècle," in *Hommes et livres* (1895) (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1979), 277-78. See also Françoise Rubellin's study of the parodic theatre of Lesage (*Arlequin Thétis, Parodie de l'Opéra de Télémaque, Arlequin Endymion*, plays collected in his *Théâtre de la Foire*): "Lesage parodiste," in *Lesage écrivain (1695-1735)*, ed. J. Wagner (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997). Rubellin points out the following criticism linked to parody in Lesage: length of narratives on stage, emphasis, lack of naturalness,

over-obvious linking, stereotyped and commonplace situations, character weakness.

- 16 Hans Mattauch, "La parodie du genre tragique à ses débuts," in *Burlesque et formes parodiques. Actes du Colloque du Mans*, ed. I. Landy-Houillon and M. Ménard, *Biblio* 17 (1987): 148.
- 17 *Oedipe* was thus parodied by Dominique in *Oedipe travesti, Mérope* transformed into *Marotte*, etc.
- 18 Claude Abastado, "Situation de la parodie," *Cahiers du 20e siècle* 6 (1976): 11.
- 19 *L'Antre de Trophonius*, qtd in Lanson 262, and in Abastado 11.
- 20 These writers do not, as we might suppose, make a *tabula rasa* of imitation. The practice of Gautier proves the contrary, as does this reflection that E. Bergerat attributes to him: "This period is accused of not having its own characters and of drawing its inspiration from all the fashions of the past, but what is always forgotten is that its originality is precisely to be the carnivalesque of other periods. It is the age of parody": *Théophile Gautier. Entretiens, souvenirs et correspondance* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880), 96.
- 21 Francis Ponge, "Le dispositif Maldoror-Poésies," in *Méthodes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 210-12.
- 22 Isidore Ducasse, *Poésies II*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1963), 357.
- 23 This is the expression used by Claude Bouché to give an account of the form of the *Poésies* in *Lautréamont, du lieu commun à la parodie* (Paris: Larousse, 1974), 150.
- 24 Champfleury, *Histoire de la caricature antique* (Paris: Dentu, 1865), 37. This idea can be linked to the concept of certain eighteenth-century theoreticians concerning dramatic parody as an expression of the populace: "Generally speaking, the parodist is nothing but the echo of the pit. It is from the audience of the pit that he borrows whatever he needs to amuse them; he simply gives a theatrical form to the general remarks he has heard," writes L. Fuzelier in an introductory note to *Parodies du Nouveau théâtre italien*, qtd in Rubellin 113, n. 41.
- 25 Th. de Banville, Preface to the 1857 edition of *Odes funambulesques* (Paris: Lemerre, 1892), 13.
- 26 Jean Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1970).
- 27 Daniel Grojnowski, *Aux commencements du rire moderne* (Paris: Corti, 1997), 41.
- 28 Extract from unpublished diaries quoted by D. Grojnowski and H. Scepi in their edition of *Moralités légendaires* of Jules Laforgue (Paris: GF, 2000), 313.
- 29 Paul Bourget, "A propos de Jacques Offenbach," *Le Parlement* (10 Octobre 1880), qtd in *Moralités légendaires* 314.

- 30 Rodolphe Töpffer, *Essai de physiognomonie*, in *Töpffer, l'invention de la bande dessinée*, ed. T. Groensteen and B. Peeters (Paris: Hermann, 1994), 188.
- 31 Jules Janin, "Les parodies," *Critique dramatique*, in *La Comédie* (Paris: Librairie des bibliophiles, 1877), 309.
- 32 Preface to the 2nd edition (1859) of *Odes funambulesques 2*.
- 33 I. Tynianov, "De l'évolution littéraire" (1928), in *Théorie de la littérature*, trans. and ed. T. Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 128.
- 34 For a presentation of this notion, see my article "L'Intertextualité" in *Le Grand Atlas Universalis des Littératures* (Paris: Editions de l'Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1990).
- 35 I. Tynianov, "Destruction, parodie," trans. L. Denis, *Change 2* (1969): 76.
- 36 See B. Tomachevski, "Thématique," in *Théorie de la littérature*. To give an example, a study by Shklovski, "Le roman parodique. *Tristram Shandy* de Sterne," in *Sur la théorie de la prose* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1973), shows how Sterne strips away the traditional procedures of the novel such as causality, chronological succession, linearity of composition, the pretence of the found manuscript, etc.
- 37 I summarize schematically here several chapters of *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, trans. D. Olivier (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).
- 38 M. Bakhtin, *L'Oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance*, trans. A. Robel (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 92-93.
- 39 Margaret A. Rose, *Parody/Meta-fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 35.
- 40 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 6.
- 41 It may be noted that Sartre and Barthes make even more negative judgements on parody: "a powerless genre, to be used only in cabaret" for the former; expression which solely reinforces the statement that it is supposed to question, and a "dishonest" word for the latter.
- 42 Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," qtd in Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 222.
- 43 It is significant that the French translation of Eco's *Diario minimo* has been intitled *Pastiches et postiches*, whereas it contains parodies as well as pastiches. In fact Eco himself does not distinguish between the two notions in his preface.
- 44 This paper was presented as a keynote address at the AULLA XXXI Congress at the University of Adelaide in February 2001. I am grateful to Greg Hainge for his invitation and to Pro Helvetia for its generous grant. I wish also to express special thanks to my colleague

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