

Parodies of the romantic age.

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4

# CONTENTS

## Volume 1

Acknowledgements	page xii
General Introduction	xiii
Introduction to <i>The Anti-Jacobin</i>	xlvi
Table of Attributions	lxi
Abbreviations	lxix
Introductory note to <i>Prospectus to The Anti-Jacobin</i>	1
<i>Prospectus to The Anti-Jacobin</i>	3
Introductory note to Issue I	11
Issue I Introduction	12
Inscription for the Apartment in Chesnow Castle, where Henry Martineau the Regicide was imprisoned thirty years	15
Inscription for the Door of the Cell in Newgate, where Mrs. Browning, the Prentice-cide, was confined previous to her execution	15
Introductory note to Issue II	17
Issue II The Friend of Humanity and the Knife-Grinder	19
Introductory note to Issue III	23
Issue III The Invasion; or the British War Song	25
Introductory note to Issue IV	28
Issue IV La Sainte Guillotine: a New Song, attempted from the French	30
Meeting of the Friends of Freedom	32

PARODIES OF THE ROMANTIC AGE: VOLUME I

Introductory note to Issue V	47
<i>Issue V</i> The Soldier's Friend	48
Sonnet to Liberty	49
Introductory note to Issue VI	51
<i>Issue VI</i> Quintessence of all the Dactyls that ever were, or ever will be published	52
Latin Verses, written immediately after the Revolution of the Fourth of September	53
Letter from a Lady	55
Introductory note to Issue VII	59
<i>Issue VII</i> Translation of the Latin Verses in Issue VI	60
Introductory note to Issue VIII	63
<i>Issue VIII</i> The Choice; imitated from "the Battle of Sabla", in Carlyle's Specimens of Arabian Poetry	66
The Duke and the Taxing Man	68
Epigram on the Paris Loan, called the Loan upon England	70
Introductory note to Issue IX	71
<i>Issue IX</i> Ode to Anarchy	72
Song, recommended to be sung at all convivial Meetings, convened for the purpose of opposing the Assessed Tax Bill	74
Introductory note to Issue X	76
<i>Issue X</i> Lines written at the close of the year 1797	78
Translation of the New Song of the "Army of England"	80
Introductory note to Issue XI	83
<i>Issue XI</i> To the Author of the "Epistle to the Editors of The Anti-Jacobin"	85
Ode to Lord Moira	92

CONTENTS

Introductory note to Issue XII	94
<i>Issue XII</i> A Bit of an Ode to Mr. Fox	97
Mr. Fox's Birth-Day	100
Introductory note to Issue XIII	109
<i>Issue XIII</i> Acme and Septimius; or the Happy Union	110
Introductory note to Issue XIV	112
<i>Issue XIV</i> To the Author of The Anti-Jacobin Lines, written under the Bust of Charles Fox at the Crown and Anchor	114
Lines written by a Traveller at Czarco-zelo, under the Bust of a certain Orator, once placed between those of Demosthenes and Cicero	117
Introductory note to Issue XV	119
<i>Issue XV</i> The Progress of Man. A Didactic Poem	121
Introductory note to Issue XVI	125
<i>Issue XVI</i> The Progress of Man, continued	127
Introductory note to Issue XVII	130
<i>Issue XVII</i> Imitation of Bion. Written at St. Ann's Hill The New Coalition	131
Introductory note to Issue XVIII	135
<i>Issue XVIII</i> Imitation of Horace, Lib. 3. Carm. 25	136
Introductory note to Issue XIX	138
<i>Issue XIX</i> Chevy Chase	140
Introductory note to Issue XX	143
<i>Issue XX</i> Ode to Jacobinism	144
Introductory note to Issue XXI	146
<i>Issue XXI</i> The Progress of Man, continued	150
Introductory note to Issue XXII	155
<i>Issue XXII</i> The Jacobin To the Editor of The Anti-Jacobin	156
	158



PARODIES OF THE ROMANTIC AGE: VOLUME I

Introductory note to Issue XXIII	161
<i>Issue XXIII</i> The Loves of the Triangles. A Mathematical and Philosophical Poem	164
Introductory note to Issue XXIV	174
<i>Issue XXIV</i> The Loves of the Triangles, <i>continued</i>	175
Introductory note to Issue XXV	181
<i>Issue XXV</i> Brissot's Ghost	184
Introductory note to Issue XXVI	187
<i>Issue XXVI</i> The Loves of the Triangles, <i>continued</i>	188
Introductory note to Issue XXVII	194
<i>Issue XXVII</i> A Consolatory Address to his Gun-Boats. By Citizen Muskein	196
Elegy on the Death of Jean Bon St. André	198
Introductory note to Issue XXVIII	202
<i>Issue XXVIII</i> Ode to my Country MDCXCXVIII	204
Introductory note to Issue XXIX	211
<i>Issue XXIX</i> Ode to the Director Merlin	212
Introductory note to Issue XXX	214
<i>Issue XXX</i> The Rovers; or the Double Arrangement	216
Introductory note to Issue XXXI	229
<i>Issue XXXI</i> The Rovers; or the Double Arrangement, <i>continued</i>	230
Introductory note to Issue XXXII	243
<i>Issue XXXII</i> An affectionate Effusion of Citizen Muskein, to Havre-de-Grace	244
Introductory note to Issue XXXIII	246
<i>Issue XXXIII</i> Translation of a Letter from Bawba-dara- adul-phoola, to Neek-awl-arechid-kooez	247

CONTENTS

Introductory note to Issue XXXIV	252
<i>Issue XXXIV</i> Ode to a Jacobin	253
To the Editor of The Anti-Jacobin [Translation]	255 257
Introductory note to Issue XXXV	259
<i>Issue XXXV</i> Ballynahinch; a New Song	261
De Navali Laude Britanniae [Translation]	262 265
Introductory note to Issue XXXVI	268
<i>Issue XXXVI</i> New Morality	269
Notes	287

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Parody is enticing. There is no knowing what may be around the corner, over the page. There is no easy way to summarize it, to package a form which delights in unwrapping and unravelling. The joys of parody can be formal or riotously slapdash. It may be intemperate or languid, cynical, idealistic, urbane, rough, sharp or recherché. Politically it traverses the spectrum from blood-red anarchy to black-booted oppression. It can be visual, verbal, musical, plastic or literary. It is a voice of the people and an instrument of elites. It mimics and parrots and wheedles and needles and postures and poses and postulates. It is gone in a moment or never forgotten. It is camp, scathing, blunt, flirtatious, scholarly, insouciant, allusive, cathartic, prurient, conniving, priggish, outspoken, demotic, costive and timid.

One ambition of this five-volume edition is to give a hearing to as many of these improbable voices as possible. The edition opens with a dramatic surge in the voltage of parody in 1797, in the form of *The Anti-Jacobin*. This political periodical was an arm of government at a time of national crisis, and its parodies are urgent, clear-sighted and unscrupulous, though little else is predictable about them. Volume Two gathers together a wide variety of verse parodies written by the famous, the infamous and the unknown. Volume Three is a motley collection of parody in prose. Two new editions follow: Deacon's *Warreniana*, a collection so full of life it is hard to fathom how it ever disappeared from sight; and Patmore's long-neglected *Rejected Articles*.

In any age parody is an exasperating, provocative art, but never more so than in the Romantic period, when Divine creativity was finally supplanted by the human Imagination. An autonomous artistic ideal demands that all forms of imitation be scorned. One

result was peculiar but long-lasting – an artificial division between ‘artist’ and ‘parodist’, blindly adhered to by artists themselves self-evidently highly accomplished and indulgent parodists. Add Victorian moral sobriety to this and Matthew Arnold’s opinion of parody as a ‘vile art’ spreads quickly. Appreciation of the parodic gifts of major Romantic writers has been slow. Byron was eventually rescued from disrepute, but Wordsworth – at least as influenced by the parodic tradition as ever Byron was – has never really recovered from Victorian approval.

Scholars of every other period of literature have learnt to value and take an interest in parody. But critics working on Romanticism have been much slower to take to the form. Parody is not of necessity anti-romantic, and another ambition of this edition is to collapse that assumption, and along with it the idea that parodic creativity and Romantic creativity are foreign to each other. Romanticism grew up inseparable from the emulative arts, looking askance with irritation and pride at duplicate, duplicitous forms which undermine its own creed. Macpherson’s ersatz folk-poetry, Chatterton’s spoof medievalism, Blake’s inversions, Coleridge’s bulk-importations, the chameleon Keats, Byron’s self-deflating postures, Wordsworth’s oxymoronic gambols: these are only the more vivid reminders that parody and Romanticism are not simply antithetical.

Each volume in this edition possesses its own introduction and is intended to stand on its own feet. Readers well-versed in parody are recommended to skip the following three sections of the general introduction, which discuss the status, definition and slipperiness of parody without coming to firm conclusions.

### 1. *The Status of Parody*

‘It is a common mistake,’ wrote Hazlitt, ‘... to suppose that parodies degrade, or imply a stigma on the subject.’<sup>1</sup> This is no longer generally true. The use of parody by modernist and postmodernist writers as a primary form, and the reinvestments made by twentieth-century critics in older parodic texts such as *Don Quixote* have rescued parody

from disrepute so successfully that it is now almost synonymous with postmodernism:

The affinity of parody and postmodernism lies on their common strategy of revision, a rereading of the authorized texts which turns all texts into pretexts.<sup>2</sup>

This revisionism, with its self-conscious mirrorings, declarative strategies, and meditations on the workings of art, has come to be seen by some as the clearest available demonstration of creativity itself – analysis and example in one:

a parody forces us to be aware of form as an artifice or as an artificial discipline which is brought into relation with a radically different phenomenon, that of natural experience itself.<sup>3</sup>

Art on the Aristotelian path of imitating life must cover its tracks. Parody, creatively imitating creativity, uncovers them. As a text itself, while busy prying open conclusions and disallowing the finalities of previous texts it must also be implicitly provisional in its own discoveries – embodying the fragilities of language itself.

Despite these recent valuations, Hazlitt’s warning remains current for romantic parodies, where the distaste once felt by F. R. Leavis lingers on:

There is only one thing that could be learnt by attempting to parody a writer whose distinction makes him worth close study; that is, how inaccessible to any but the most superficial, and falsifying, imitation the truly characteristic effects of such writers are.<sup>4</sup>

Leavis turned immediately to parody of Wordsworth for illustration. Parody, the product of ‘obtuse and smug complacency’ and ‘the worst enemy of creative genius and vital originality’ was at its most offensive to him in the new dawn of originality of the late eighteenth century.

This distaste persists partly through the vehement expression of it by romantic writers themselves. Coleridge was particularly dismissive:

Parodies on new poems are read as satires; on old ones ... as compliments. A man of genius may securely laugh at a mode of attack, by which his reviler ... becomes his encomiast.<sup>5</sup>

In fact Coleridge's laughter sounds rather insecure. He preferred to be his own encomiast, determined to manipulate the critical response to his writing – full as it was of unacknowledged borrowings. The parodist's disregard for literary property was dangerous, since Coleridge's standing as a man of genius depended, to him, on concealing thefts of his own. His dilemma embraces much that is essential and has been inherited by critics. Insisting on originality as the prerequisite of genius, he created works of genius that were often 'unoriginal'. Despising parody, he was himself among the most accomplished of parodists – although the form, an addiction stronger than opium, repelled him throughout the peaks and troughs of his dependence. 'Originality' is not the sovereign concept that Coleridge pretends.

If parody is 'anti-romantic' in its disregard for originality, this is counter-balanced by its disrespect for authority, including that of authors themselves, whose controlling urges are equally anti-romantic. Parody's most essential quality is momentum – whatever it does, it also undoes, because any parody implies the deconstruction of its own standpoint by further parody. This has drawbacks. To be so constantly in passage is fatiguing. But it guarantees that parody cannot be subdued, and more, that it is liveliest responding to force. Nor can it be controlled from the inside. Parody is anarchic in the true sense of the word: leaderless, not destructive.

As a form of literary criticism it has the abiding advantage that it never becomes a school. Like helium, parody is finally uncontainable. For example, Leavis's attempt to bottle it only led to parody of his dogmatism. In 'Another Book to Cross Off Your Your List', Simon Lacerous ('perhaps the most feared and respected critic in England') declares D. H. Lawrence 'the only English novelist worth reading' and defends his singular canon:

... we are now in greater need than ever before of critics – or shall I say, of a critic – who will stand up as a moral and aesthetic guide, leading the culture-hungry masses to the finest and purest literature and keeping the rest in outer darkness ... if I were addressing the loyal old *Thumbscrew* group, I would end my critique here. Unfortunately, there are enemies as well as friends among my readers, and they need to be reminded what the

absolute canons of taste consist of. Literature must reflect, conform to, and serve the interests of Life; that is the point in a nutshell.<sup>6</sup>

Crammed into this nutshell are the characteristics, qualities, and covert ideology with which critics disputing Leavis's tradition also engage. Terry Eagleton's attention, for example, is uncannily close:

... 'Life', a word which Scrutiny made a virtue out of not being able to define. If you asked for some reasoned theoretical statement of their case you had thereby demonstrated that you were in outer darkness: either you felt Life or you did not.<sup>7</sup>

Lively as always, Eagleton is still out-performed by Simon Lacerous, who:

*Though he is a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, ... despises the entire English University System. Of his fellow Fellows he has said: "They can all go to hell. Of course, some should go before others. One has a responsibility to make discriminations."*<sup>8</sup>

Frederick Crews's parody sets Lacerous to work on *Winnie the Pooh*. Although Leavis is the victim, his academic opponents do not escape unscathed:

Not one character is from the Midlands; not one is of working-class origin; and there is not even a coal-mine on the ideal landscape where they jump and play. Do not mistake me for one of those vipers, the Marxists, who turn literature upside down to shake the social doctrine out of it. My interest is in the art of the novel; simply, there is no art without Life, and no Life without Midland coal mines.<sup>9</sup>

For a critic visibly wistful for social doctrine, Eagleton again:

since both Lawrence and Leavis refused a political analysis of the system they opposed, they were left with nothing but talk about spontaneous-creative life which grew more stridently abstract the more it insisted on the concrete.<sup>10</sup>

Crews's collection of parodic essays in *The Pooh Perplex* happily upsets one school of the academy after another, depriving lazy intellects of any critical ideology safe enough to hide behind.

The traditional view of parody as parasitic could not long survive the Russian Formalists and subsequent interest, particularly by

Mikhail Bakhtin, in parody's role in transitions between forms, in escaping genres, and in the convergence of the nature of literature with the nature of parody. Bakhtin's interest in dialogism – valuing textual pluralism, conversations between radical and established forms, and momentum in literature – upends the notion of parody as dependent. His concept of the novel embraces the impulse behind its finished form, an impulse indistinguishable from that of parody:

“novel” is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system.<sup>11</sup>

✓ For Bakhtin, before the ascendancy of the novel itself, this impulse manifests itself through ‘dialogic’ discourse characterized by parodic duality: exchanges between texts. Bakhtin's novel in its evolved state, suffused with border violations not just between literary genres but between extra-literary arts as well, transcends its own form. At this level it becomes the later theorists' ‘meta-fiction’, literature reflecting on literature, language on language, and so in symbiotic relationship with parody.

Bakhtin's celebration of the carnival impulse also helps to place the comic effects of parody, founding them in Socratic irony, and a new kind parodic hero who claims ‘I am wiser than everyone, because I know nothing’. Parodic comedy becomes courageous rather than disreputable:

Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically.<sup>12</sup>

Bakhtin rephrases Nietzsche's ‘nothing succeeds in which high spirits play no part’, for similar ends. In his hands irony, and the ironies achieved through parody evolve into an existential necessity.

Whatever the frustrations of Bakhtin's looseness and voracious generalizing he is energetic enough to overturn mistaken assumptions about parody, although more rigorous critics – Shlovsky, Jacobson, Foucault – have taken much of the credit. Bakhtin's emphases are revitalizing: on *jouissance*, intertextuality, the work of demotic art in qualifying its elders and betters, the creativity of renegade impulses,

the wealth and extent of the parodic tradition, and on levelling the author with the reader ‘making them contemporaries, possible acquaintances, friends, familiarizing their relations’. These can be misused, as Donald Davie notes:

the sportiveness eagerly embraced by admirers of Bakhtin recognizes no responsibility towards the educational or other structure of any actually existent society.<sup>13</sup>

A jester finds his place within a court's oppressions, and Bakhtin's carnival subversion needs to be seen in the context of his reacting to censorship. But much of his work overrides that context, particularly the strong belief in the historical pervasiveness of parody:

It is our conviction that there never was a single straightforward genre, no single type of literary discourse – artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday – that did not have its own parodying and travestying double, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie*. What is more, these parodic doubles and laughing reflections of the direct word were, in some cases, just as sanctioned by tradition and just as canonized as their elevated models.<sup>14</sup>

This conviction of omnipresence has become postmodernism's, though critics tend to drop Bakhtin's emphasis on ‘never was’, in favour of a ‘never is’ for their own period. There has been so much interest in the ‘self-reflexive’ reflex, on *immediate* parodic doubling and laughing reflection, that parody's profoundly historical instincts are often forgotten.

For Bakhtin parody, despite its appetites, performs in the end a mediating function in literary continuity. Other critics have explored the pivotal part played by specific parodic texts in initiating literary discontinuity, and change. For Shlovsky *Tristram Shandy*, *Don Quixote* and *Don Juan* were more interruptive and interrogative than for Bakhtin,

prized because their parodic form coincided with his own theory of the essential conventionality of literary form and the role of parody in its denuding or laying bare.<sup>15</sup>

For Foucault *Don Quixote* was the watershed between Renaissance and modern ‘episteme’, between unselfconscious and self-regarding art,



the first modern work of literature, because in it we see the cruel reason of identities and differences make endless sport of signs and similitudes; because in it language breaks off its old kinship with things and enters into that lonely sovereignty from which it will reappear in its separated state, only as literature . . . <sup>16</sup>

A number of other trends in criticism have helped overturn the distaste for parody expressed so pungently by Leavis in 1962. Harold Bloom's work on influence is one, his 'anxiety-principle' prompting imaginative misrepresentations by poets of previous poets in a manner shared by parodists. Bloom's six 'revisionary ratios' through which poets achieve successful misprision of their predecessors almost translate into stages by which parody evolves from attempted correction to its finest achievement: a sympathy-in-difference in which two texts co-exist. Parodists act on Bloom's argument that:

We need to stop thinking of any poet as an autonomous ego, however solipsistic the strongest of poets may be. Every poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets.<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere, the increase of interest in irony and Romantic irony has lifted parody from its former status as a poor relation to that of fitting vehicle. Not all irony is parodic, obviously, but all parody serves the purposes of irony. 'The business of irony is to see clearly and ask questions', wrote D. C. Muecke, before pinning down the opposition: '... its enemies are those who do not wish to be pressed for answers.'<sup>18</sup> Sophisticated interest in irony has had a corresponding effect on parody. Wayne Booth, always sensitive to the delicacy of ironic manoeuvres, also pays tribute to parody:

The contrasts between an original and a really skillful parody can be so slight that efforts to explain them can seem even less adequate to the true subtleties than explanations of other ironies.<sup>19</sup>

Both Muecke's concept of General Irony and Booth's of unstable 'infinite' ironies support renewals of interest in Romantic irony. This ought at the same time to have generated more interest in Romantic parody. Friedrich Schlegel's formula of 'permanent parabasis' – of

oscillation seen as 'simultaneous commitment to exalted visions and to a renegade impulse which mockingly dissolves them'<sup>20</sup> – derives from the same prefix of 'par-ody'. Schlegel's respect for Socratic irony parallels Bakhtin's, and plays a similar part in making parody an essential partner rather than a minor relative of irony. And like Bakhtin, he sees irony as the precondition of an authentic existence:

Socrates's constant self-parody, his perennial awareness of his own weaknesses and failures as well as his strengths . . . enabled him to be simultaneously playful and serious, exultant and anxious, free and yet bound to what is necessary. Only such self-parody can enable one to transcend all unnecessary human limitations and to approach as near as human beings can to a valid perception of the infinite chaos that is reality.<sup>21</sup>

The upsurge of attention to Romantic irony has done much for the period's major poets, particularly Byron and Coleridge. It seems odd then that it has done but little for the parodists of the actual period. There has not even been much work on self-parody in the major writers, still less on the parodic critique of them. Given the prominence given to irony and the acknowledgement parody deserves for an intimate partnership with it, there is certainly an imbalance.

In the late twentieth century, interest has continued to grow. Whether decadent or caustic, parody provides a stylish way to stay ahead in a period Malcolm Bradbury identifies as

a time when the theatrical display of multiple styles is an essential term or condition of our modern and increasingly self-doubting existence.<sup>22</sup>

Although the contemporary status of parody is widely accepted, divisions remain over its ethics, just as they do with irony. Parody is a focus for tussles between tradition and what Bradbury called a 'positive post-humanism which constitutes what Foucault would call the new "episteme"':

In the French new novel, in American post-modern writing, in the critical preoccupation with radical fictionality, art is not simply recording a situation but breaking the mould of an entire falsifying structure of discourse, challenging, in Foucault's words, the western tradition's capacity to offer its own form as the obscure content of reality, and hence creating a new order of things.<sup>23</sup>

It was mistrust of this critical preoccupation which was visible in Donald Davie's comments on Bakhtinian irresponsibility, which ended:

However often philosophers and linguists may have declared it an impossibility, poetry's business is with telling the truth; and the truth in question is not restricted to the truth about its own workings and its own production. It seems incredible that this should need to be said; and that professors of literature should earn their salaries by denying it.<sup>24</sup>

Critical relativism is a danger in which parody is implicated, participating as it does in the ethical impotence of self-reflexive art – what Bradbury called the 'dance of styles' of postmodernism – and reflecting

a loss of the central self, a breakdown in moral reference, and a circling uncertainty about its own substance.<sup>25</sup>

So another antithesis in valuations of parody emerges, though a more sophisticated one than in Leavis's day. Again it lies between those who distrust parody's deconstructive activity, and those who admire it. But it is misrepresented by both. Parody's deconstructive faculties are only half the story, a prelude to change, part of its forward momentum. Parody's business is also with telling the truth, and that it begins by countering previous truths is no more than the process in which all literature is engaged, compressed into a more visible spectrum. As Bradbury writes, 'literature is our name for a monument that is both solid and evanescent':

Parody, by accepting the truth of the monument, but also by probing and questioning the artifice used in its construction, both perpetuates and destroys, becomes a form of mysterious translation, often but not always in the same language as the original, which explores the mystery of institutionalization and the paradox of the classic art-object or text. It exaggerates a process basic to literature and art, which oscillate between extremes of mimesis and artifice, insisting on both the force and the emptiness of a prior object.<sup>26</sup>

For Bradbury, out of the the modern parodists – Joyce, Beckett, Picasso, Duchamp, Magritte – with their 'deep, dark indication that there is no

assertable style, no ultimate authenticity', arrives stylistic permissiveness and so 'the renewed possibility of story itself'.<sup>27</sup> G. D. Kiremidjian reaches the same conclusion:

In a culture where the usurpation of function and confusion of polarities are the rule, the very instability of parody becomes the means of stabilising subject matter which is itself unstable and fluid, and parody becomes a major mode of expression for a civilisation in a state of transition and flux.<sup>28</sup>

Parody is not a cause of narrative fatigue, only a symptom, and at the same time a cure. Even the most radically parodic of texts respect the cardinal virtues of the genres they mimic – or if they do not, they perish. Bakhtinian irresponsibility is dangerous in critics, but not in fictions. Rabelais pokes fun at dull writing, and reading, but loses only those readers who fail to see the joke is on them. Sterne tells a story which fails to tell a story and parodies attempts to tell stories while it tells one. No-one reaches the end of *Ulysses* without deep interest in Leopold's homecoming. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, for all its chaos, still moves in a narrative direction. Even Calvino never quite removes the mystique so surgically exposed.

For an example of parody's capacity to create stories out of apparently terminal writing, I turn to Beckett's *Endgame*. As Wayne Booth wrote drily, 'Beckett, the prophet of the Meaningless, is seen as a good writer because he knows what real values and real virtues are. There's irony for you'.<sup>29</sup> Not a closed one either. Beckett's work, pared so close to the bone, ought to defeat parodists. A writer of few words – but not the last, for parody always has the latest of those:

*The den of Slamm, the critic. Very late yesterday. Large desk with throne behind it. Two waste-paper baskets, one black, one white, filled with crumpled pieces of paper, on either side of the stage. Shambling between them – i.e., from one to the other and back again – an old man SLAMM. Bent gait. Thin, barking voice. Motionless, watching SLAMM, is SECK. Bright grey face, holding pad and pencil. One crutch. SLAMM goes to black basket, takes out piece of white paper, uncrumples it, reads. Short laugh.*

Kenneth Tynan's play on Beckett is perfect, not a word or a crutch too many. From one basket, in *Slamm's Last Knock*, comes one verdict on Slamm: '... the validity of an authentic tragic vision, at once personal and by implication cosmic'. From the other its opposite: 'Just another

dose of nightmare gibberish from the so-called author of *Waiting for Godot*. Caught between black and white, Slamm would be in anguished pursuit of a mediating grey, if he could stir himself:

SLAMM: (*Glazed stare*) Nothing is always starting to happen.

SECK: It's better than something. You're well out of that.

SLAMM: I'm badly into this. (*He tries to yawn but fails.*) It would be better if I could yawn. Or if you could yawn.

SECK: I don't feel excited enough. (*Pause.*) Anything coming?

SLAMM: Nothing, in spades. (*Pause.*) Perhaps I haven't been kissed enough. Or perhaps they put the wrong ash in my gruel. One or the other.

Seck, who is Slamm's conduit to words he cannot find himself, eventually breaks down and like Lucky of *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame's* Hamm, collapses into language with a parodic review of Slamm's work as Beckett might have written it:

SECK: (*Raconteur's voice*) Tuesday night, eight-twenty by the Fahrenheit anonometer. *Endgame*, translated from the French with loss by excision of the vernacular word for urination and of certain doubts blasphemously cast on the legitimacy of the Deity. Themes, Madam? Nay, it is, I know not themes. Foreground figure a blind and lordly cripple with superficial mannerisms of Churchill, W., Connolly, C., and Devine, G., director and in this case impersonator. Sawn-off parents in bins, stage right, and shuffling servant, all over the stage, played by Jack MacGowran, binster of this parish. Purpose: to analyse or rather to dissect or rather to define the nature or rather the quality or rather the intensity of the boredom inherent or rather embedded in the twentieth or rather every other century. I am bored, therefore I am. Comment, as above, except that it would have the same effect if a quarter of the words were other words and another quarter omitted. Critique ended. Thesaurus and out.<sup>30</sup>

Like Hamm, Seck escapes from silent futility but only into voluble futility, with the added twist that Beckett's parodies of the rhetoric of meaning become a parody of the rhetoric of criticism. To plays which gracefully suggest there is nothing to say except there is nothing to say, parody adds that criticism has nothing to add. *Slamm's Last Knock* is as provoking as its originals, poring over aporia and enjoying beginnings in Beckett's endgames. 'And if I speak of principles, when there are none,' said Beckett's own Molloy, using the language of creative parody, 'I can't help it, there must be some somewhere'.<sup>31</sup>

Two comparatively recent studies have contributed much to the current status of parody. Margaret Rose's *Parody // Meta-fiction* (1979), now updated in her *Parody: ancient, modern, and postmodern* (1993), and Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody; The Teachings of Twentieth-century Art Forms* (1985). Rose's 1979 reading is close to Foucault, taking parody as the character of the modern episteme with its contemplations and challenge of assumptive orthodoxies. In effect, parody reclaims the sources of power. It appropriates by quotation, infiltrating closed fictional worlds and providing a common, self-regarding, 'meta-fictional' language. Rose's purpose was

to outline the possible forms and functions taken by meta-fictional parody, and to point to its role both in transforming literary history, and in attacking the epistemological presuppositions and expectations of the readers of certain ages for specific texts, for specific theories of the text, and for a specific relationship between author, reader, and the institutions controlling both.<sup>32</sup>

Rose is thorough about the historical status of parody, and in stressing its bivalent nature, though her 1979 study is weighted towards discontinuity and the theoretical implications of parody's 'self-critical meta-criticism'. In 1993, reacting to Hutcheon's work amongst others, Rose is at pains to distance herself from 'the reduction of [parody] to but yet another metafictional or intertextual form',<sup>33</sup> and extends her emphasis on the 'comic' nature of parody to separate it from such forms.

Hutcheon's reading is wider, concerned with parody's ubiquity in all modern arts, and is more attentive to parody's mediating function:

Parody in much twentieth-century art is a major mode of thematic and formal structuring, involving . . . integrated modeling processes. As such, it is one of the most frequent forms taken by textual self-reflexivity in our century. It marks the intersection of creation and re-creation, of invention and critique.<sup>34</sup>

Like Rose she emphasizes parody's dual nature, although her history more readily accepts its role in continuity:

Parody certainly can be disruptive and destabilizing; it is as such that the Russian formalists gave it its major role in the evolution of literary forms . . . Yet parody, while often subversive, can also be conservative; in fact, parody is by nature, paradoxically, an authorized transgression. It cannot be

accounted for only in terms of *différance*, deferral, even if it is true today that for many artists and theorists, a stress on undecidability has replaced previous concerns for aesthetic unity, even in diversity . . . Parody is both tectual doubling (which unifies and reconciles) and differentiation (which foregrounds irreconcilable opposition between texts and between text and "world").<sup>35</sup>

With these two comprehensive theories of parody available, the status of parody seems secured. An understanding of parody's radical and imaginative qualities has been rescued, and the variety of its roles explored. It has become possible to argue that at its best parody is a uniquely creative form of literary criticism, capable of probing weaknesses in a way which can complement its original and return the reader to the source, enlightened and enlivened. It may query overstatement, dispose of sentimentality, restore historical process, re-introduce social influences, banish outworn forms, revive discarded forms thought to have long since been exhausted, and rescue art from narcissism. It can discriminate between the shock and the schlock of the new. It can qualify idealism by returning to the real, and modify realism by uncovering its fictions – highlighting the fictionality of all discourse but never discouraged by it. It is a consummate vehicle, carrying irony into areas from which it has been excluded. Finally, it invites participation: its multiple voices and exaggerations-for-effect encourage active intelligent reading.

Its greatest failing is not, as Leavis would have it, simple philistinism. But parody does share the weakness of irony in acting from a 'womb with a view'.<sup>36</sup> Parodists criticize from relative safety. Or, can enclose with safety:

I think there is a sense in which Calvino would like to contain all sorts of novelists within himself, without in the end deigning to be any of them.<sup>37</sup>

But the momentum of parody undoes this – any such pose can itself be parodied.

Parody has come a long way since Matthew Arnold's opinion of it as a 'vile art'. But Romantic parody has yet to be properly revalued as a result. In 1979 Judith Priestman's PhD thesis, virtually complete when Margaret Rose's first study was published, was still inclined to read

nineteenth-century parody as a form of light verse.<sup>38</sup> Some ground has been gained in the meantime. Linda Hutcheon's foreword to David Kent and D. R. Ewen's recent collection (1992) at last pays tribute to parody's teeth:

The desire to "de-fang" parody may well testify to the fear of its power, a power it shares with humor in general: what is at stake here – in addition to the specific individual issues raised by each parody – is the equation of seriousness with significance that is at the core of much of the ideology of nineteenth century art.<sup>39</sup>

The power of Romantic parodies has had too little attention. Also needed is a stronger sense of parody's historical variety and pervasiveness. One disadvantage of postmodern enthusiasm has been to over-privilege its current status in comparison with other periods. Definitions and functions of parody change, over the centuries, but its ubiquity varies much less than one might think. Every age turns out to be, on closer examination, 'the Age of Parody', as Bakhtin knew better than most. The current emphasis on immediate 'self-reflectivity' has also obscured parody's historical sensibility. Even in its most radical forms parody is canonical: paradoxically tradition if only in a counter-tradition. This can be comically literal. On trial in 1817 for seditious parody, William Hone successfully invoked centuries of religious and political burlesque in his own defence. Parodic texts refer to and play with previous texts, often reaching far back into the counter-canon. Parodic forms, strategies, habits, mannerisms, tropes and games recur over and again. The current ubiquity of parody is a matter of artistic and cultural inpenetration at all levels – not one of status. Parody mirrors the art of the age, and is as important to that age as its art is.

An awareness of the intimacy, variety and historical all-pervasiveness of parody helps break down the division between 'parody and art', a partition which does not exist for irony. The notion of a division obscures the creativeness of fine parody, and blinds critics to parodic undercurrents in artists not attempting overt parody. Since this partition appears to derive from the Romantic aesthetic, parodies of that period need more thought. Kent and Ewen, for example, perpetuate the myth of po-faced Wordsworth: 'apparently the only

[Romantic poet] who never wrote parodies himself'.<sup>40</sup> They also perpetuate the idea that Wordsworth disapproved of parody and called it a "mode of false criticism" in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. He did nothing of the kind.<sup>41</sup> A glance at Wordsworth's reading habits shows his relish of the parodic tradition, and considered readings of his poetry uncover his dexterity in its techniques. Even in the first generation of Romaniticism, and in its most high prophet, there is no black and white division between artist and parodist.

## 2. Defining Parody

Traditional parodies are easily identifiable:

### *Lucasta Replies to Lovelace*

Tell me not, friend, you are unkind,  
If ink and books laid by,  
You turn up in a uniform  
Looking all smart and spry.

This poem by G. K. Chesterton holds close to the form of the original, playing with the content to uncover its affectation. Chesterton neatly gives Lucasta, mute subject of condescension in Lovelace's poem, a voice to retort with:

I thought your ink one horrid smudge,  
Your books one pile of trash,  
And with less fear of smear embrace  
A sword, a belt, a sash.

She briskly overturns Lovelace's 'apology' for turning soldier. This is straightforward work, though with happy flourishes:

Yet this inconstancy forgive,  
Though gold lace I adore,  
I could not love the lace so much  
Loved I not Lovelace more.<sup>42</sup>

Lucasta's closing burble nicely undermines Lovelace's nonsense: 'I could not love thee, Dear, so much, / Lov'd I not Honour more'.

The first difficulty of defining parody, however, is that the relationship of form and content is highly variable. Effects can succeed with the briefest of alterations to form: 'Here shall the spring her earliest coughs bestow, / Here the first noses of the year shall blow'.<sup>43</sup> Or by attending largely to content, as in the Crews parody of Leavis quoted above. Parody does not even need to have a specific author in sight:

### *On Epigrams.*

This neat, egregious house-style  
Parades its insights pat, on time:  
It smiles a very knowing smile . . .  
Here comes another fucking rhyme.

Dick Davis parodies smugness from within the form: things are never as simple as epigrams would have them. Though not as simple as readers take them for either:

(Its *double entendres* are subtle, supple –  
'To fuck' here means, of course, 'to couple').<sup>44</sup>

What these parodies have in common is imitative repetition, with enough distortion to carry irony. Though crucial, these are loose qualities – like irony, parody suffers from conceptual vagueness. Unlike irony, this had led to misrepresentation, and confusion with other terms.

Until formal literary criticism began, the looseness of parody was unimportant. For Dr Johnson it was simply

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.<sup>45</sup>

This cannot separate parody from imitation, plagiarism, pastiche, burlesque, travesty and others – and gives no clue to intent or method.

Confusion followed, including a widespread misapprehension which is still visible two centuries later in the *OED*'s definition of parody:

A composition in prose or verse in which the characteristic turns of thought and phrase in an author or class of authors are imitated in such a way as to make them appear ridiculous, especially by applying them to ludicrously inappropriate subjects; an imitation of a work more or less closely modelled on the original, but so turned to produce a ridiculous effect. Also applied to a burlesque of a musical work.



This defines the purpose and effect of parody as ridicule, and is almost indistinguishable from their definition of burlesque. The *OED* prolongs a misuse detrimental to parody. The term 'burlesque' derives, via France, from the Italian *burlesco*, its root *burla* meaning mockery. First used by Francesco Bruni early in the sixteenth century, the term is much more recent than 'parody'. English burlesque arrived via Paul Scarron and the court of Louis XIV, to be widely imitated by the likes of John Philips, Charles Cotton and Samuel Butler. Misconceptions begin here; the idea of parody as a clever, polished piece of philistinism derives from Scarron. His travesties of Virgil were copied by poets lacking his expertise, and these too were brought to England. George Kitchin calls one example of these

a coarse and brawling work, degrading the epic characters into town bullies and slatterns, and utterly unworthy of its lively, but still witty and elegant French original.<sup>46</sup>

The coarseness was timely, mingling well with stage traditions of low farce and theatrical satire, and burlesque flourished. But the conflation of burlesque with parody is unfortunate (made worse by the American associations of 'burlesque' with vulgar variety performances). Ridicule is an essential element in burlesque, etymologically built in. This is not the case with parody, whose root is older, subtler and more ambivalent.

Burlesque is conventionally defined as 'the use or imitation of serious manner or matter, made amusing by the creation of an incongruity between style and subject'. It is traditionally divided onto two techniques: an important subject brought Low, or a trifling subject raised High (a division popularized by Addison in the *Spectator* in 1711). And parody was typically read as some kind of subset within these subdivisions:

Parody, the high burlesque of a particular work (or author) achieved by applying the style of that work (or author) to a less worthy subject: e.g., Fielding's *Shamela*.<sup>47</sup>

But parody is not a minor form of burlesque. Not only is it older by far in etymology and practice, but it cannot be a subdivision of a term

which demands ridicule. On the contrary, burlesque is a loose form of parody, easily satisfied with generalizations and laughter.

'One of the most ancient and widespread forms for representing the direct word of another is *parody*', wrote Bakhtin, for whom source and parody co-existed to give classical discourse its 'binary tone'. 'Ancient parody was free of any nihilistic denial', he added emphatically, introducing an ambitious survey.<sup>48</sup> The prefix 'para' has a double meaning in Greek: 'against', and/or 'beside'. Until recently, the first of these has been stressed at the expense of the second: the 'doubleness of the root suggests the need for more neutral terms of discussion', writes Linda Hutcheon.<sup>49</sup>

Disputes over the origin of the term 'parody' have been less than neutral, resolving nothing but demonstrating by default the ambiguity of parody from the outset. Evidence is fragmentary and inconclusive. The term is generally derived from the noun *παρῳδία* (*parodia*). Etymologically, F. W. Householder posits the sense to have been 'singing in imitation, singing with a slight change'.<sup>50</sup> F. J. Lelievre expands:

*παρά* may be said to develop two trends of meaning, being used to express such ideas as nearness, consonance, and derivation as well as transgression, opposition, or difference.<sup>51</sup>

*Parodia* was first used by Aristotle (*Poetics* 2.3, 1448a, 12–13), with reference to Hegemon.<sup>52</sup> The *Batrachomyomachia* is the only surviving example of the type of work described. A rival claim on slender grounds can be made from Athenaeus, who cites Polemo writing that the first parodist was the earlier Hipponax.<sup>53</sup>

*Parodia* in turn is thought to have evolved from the older *parode*, a choric echo. Parodes are commonly located as a response to Homeric rhapsody in the 5th century BC, but to what extent these were complementary, or just light relief, is unclear and probably beyond recovery. Priestman reports further uses of parody as a 'beside' form (instead of 'against'): from Aristotle's use of it in Greek theatre as 'the first entry of the chorus . . . the whole of the first utterance of the chorus', to Quintillian's 'singing a new song to a familiar tune'.<sup>54</sup> Householder also lists *paradoi*, meaning 'singing in imitation', or its singular *parados*, an 'imitating singer', as precedents.<sup>55</sup>

Later Greek use of *parodia* emphasized the countering valency of the term, linking it with the *silloi*, which undermine didactic and philosophical verse, and the *cento*, a pastiche technique of setting quotations in satirical contexts. The related term *paratragoedia* – referring to dramatic inversions of tragedy – is also more oppositional than choric:

Other critics have looked to the Athenian satyr plays and to the 'paratragoedia' rather than the mock Homeric epics to describe the meaning of 'parodia' for the Greeks. They have described 'parodia' as a song sung next to that sung by the chorus of the drama, and the word 'paratragoedia' has been applied by some critics to Aristophanes' comedies, in which examples of parodic choruses can be found.<sup>56</sup>

It is impossible to be precise, but the history appears to show a drift towards the 'countering' valency of the term 'parody'. In this drift, parody loses ambiguity and subtlety – the closer it comes to antagonism, the nearer its relationship to satire, and the weaker its partnership with irony.

Margaret Rose sought to redress this by founding her definition on Quintillian and the scholiasts' position of parody as quotation, arriving in 1979 at parody as the 'critical quotation of pre-formed literary language with comic effect'<sup>57</sup> [my italics]. She accepted S. L. Gilman's warning that 'parody can not be defined by the ends which it is thought to achieve, be these ends comical or critical'<sup>58</sup> but held that *effect* 'need not be excluded from a description of the work as a whole'.<sup>59</sup> In order to separate parody from other forms of literary criticism, Rose nevertheless stapled effect onto her formal definition. And while it may be true that 'the comic element is clearly described as an effect in classical criticism', and need not be mistaken for a structural element,<sup>60</sup> the result is too close to burlesque for comfort. The difference between comic effects and mocking effects is too slight, as is that between comic effect and comic intent. Rose's updating of her definition in 1993, where she is now pre-occupied with separating parody out from 'meta-fiction', is more insistent: 'the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material'.<sup>61</sup> The 'comic' now is a structural element, rather than an effect:

it is the structural use of comic incongruity which distinguishes the parody from other forms of quotation and literary imitation, and shows its function to be more than imitation alone.<sup>62</sup>

Rose's campaign for comic function relies on an adjective which does not do justice to the subtlety and range of parodic effects. The traditional belle-lettrist definitions relied all-too-fondly on comedy:

In the sphere of Letters parody is the quizzical art, the art of the man with the eye-glass, quick to seize the mannerisms of his betters and to raise a laugh by a piece of outrageous fooling, or by a whiff of gentle malice.<sup>63</sup>

The idea that Robert Burton, Rabelais, or William Hone should sport a monocle and ape their 'betters' is irritating and trivializing. Margaret Rose's 1993 study works hard to restore the value of 'comedy' in all literature, but the term continues to seem inappropriate and this effort on parody's behalf misplaced. The Marquis de Sade's parody is not 'comic', nor is that of Otto Dix, or Thomas Mann. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is repeatedly and tiresomely reduced to the level of slapstick by directors convinced that otherwise the audience will miss its 'comedy'. To make humour prescriptive is to kill its spirit; it should never be built into a definition of parody, but left to float in and out unbidden, at the whim of audience and context as well as author. No-one sensibly defines irony in terms of comic intent or effect, although its relationship with humour is equally intimate, and parody is closer to irony than any other literary form. There are as Linda Hutcheon comments, 'probably no transhistorical definitions of parody possible', but hers at least restores this closeness:

Parody, then . . . is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance signaled by irony.<sup>64</sup>

Avoiding all-embracing formulas, then, in the context of the Romantic period perhaps it is sufficient to think of parody as ironic imitation: the necessary suspiration of disbelief.

With burlesque outlined as unfocused and mocking parody, other terms separate out as follows. If parody focuses minutely it becomes travesty: parody grown microscopic and scathing, taking small failings

and magnifying them out of proportion. Arthur Hugh Clough's parody of modern Anglicanism, 'The Latest Decalogue', for example:

Thou shalt have one God only; who  
Would be at the expense of two?  
No graven images may be  
Worshipped, except the currency:  
Swear not at all; for, for thy curse  
Thine enemy is none the worse:  
At church on Sunday to attend  
Will serve to keep the world thy friend:  
Honour thy parents; that is, all  
From whom advancement may befall;  
Thou shalt not kill; but need'st not strive  
Officiously to keep alive:  
Do not adultery commit;  
Advantage rarely comes of it:  
Thou shalt not steal; an empty feat,  
When it's so lucrative to cheat:  
Bear not false witness; let the lie  
Have time on its own wings to fly:  
Thou shalt not covet, but tradition  
Approves all forms of competition.<sup>65</sup>

Travesty has its uses, but levelled against real art is self-defeating – gross exaggerations only push a reader's sympathies back towards the original.

Lampoon is travesty less bitter and particular, not so tied to form, and more immediate. The more goodnatured, the closer it is to persiflage; the less, the closer to caricature. Either way it is a fine political tool, as Dryden on the second Duke of Buckingham:

A man so various, that he seem'd to be  
Not one, but all Mankind's Epitome.  
Stiff in Opinions, always in the wrong;  
Was every thing by starts, and nothing long.<sup>66</sup>

Pastiche is a magpie habit; when parodic, it is parody grown too lazy to exert itself, expecting easy laughs. William Beckford's parody of the incoherence of sentimental novels, for example, by simply collecting together likely phrases:

The sudden appearance of the Bear produced great anxiety in the minds of the three women in the cart, but the Curate was by no means to blame, for he had not been a fishing before for six months, and was totally ignorant of the matter. Lord Giblet had indeed promised him a pointer if the parliament should be dissolved before the frost set in, but the light dragoons who were quartered in the next village, had absolutely sold their library by public auction.<sup>67</sup>

The difficulty all definitions of parody wrestle with is its inherent instability, its slippages and intimacies with closely related terms. These are an inevitable outcome of its duality. Containing two immiscible impulses, of countering and repetition, parody slithers between them and only when one impulse drops away completely is the result undoubtedly not parodic. Parody which forgets its own song altogether falls away into imitation and genuflection; parody which listens too much to itself changes into satire. Parody must both reflect and reflect upon the source.

### 3. Grey Areas

Like ironists, parodists are usually delighted to be taken at their word: 'certain jokes are pointless if they are not taken seriously' said Felix Krull.<sup>68</sup> *Gulliver's Travels* perplexed some readers: 'I lent the book to an old gentleman, who went immediately to his map to search for Lilly putt'.<sup>69</sup> Leigh Hunt boasted his parody of Wordsworth was taken for the real thing.<sup>70</sup> Virginia Woolf disguised herself with gold-braided hauteur in a hoax inspection of His Majesty's battleships.<sup>71</sup> But jokes may well work the other way around, for readers may see parody where authors meant none. As a textual con parody is deeply involved in context, delicately reliant on the observer and the conditions in which it is observed. Intertwined with context is the matter of intent.

An example of parody's contingency is discussed in an article by David Bennett, who quotes from a 'dismissive description of Imagist poetry' which interleaved its prose with a parody 'which mocks the implicit claim to significance which Imagism makes for the self-consciously spare or "insignificant" images it so fastidiously "evokes"':

So much depends  
upon  
  
a red wheel  
barrow  
  
glazed with rain  
water  
  
beside the white  
chickens.

The parody is an exact repetition of a poem

by a canonical American poet once described as the one member of the Imagist school who, having mastered the precepts of Imagism, never really progressed beyond them.

A poem has become a parody through quotation, independent of the author. For Bennett this upsets formal definitions:

Quotation as parody puts into question traditional, so-called 'intrinsic' definitions of parody as a function of rhetorical inflation or of manifest fault-lines, incongruities, *within* a text.

He develops this hypothesis until 'the parodic can be seen as contextually, not intrinsically, defined'.<sup>72</sup>

The idea carries some weight. William Gifford, for example, demolishing the Della Cruscans, quoted sections and even whole poems of that school in the *Baviad* and *Maeviad*. Set in a satirical context, the poems are so visibly foolish that they parody themselves. Rudolph Friedman published a serious 'analytical-literary' article on Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter*:

He is a castrated child, grown fat as a result of glandular disturbance caused by the castration. His hair is a luminous halo of uncombed black and yellow out of which a frightened feminine face tries to gaze with schizoid severity and direction to compensate for the lost and holy genital eye which alone can see in the vagina of life and the coffin of death . . . To make up for the genital loss his outstretched hands possess five fingernails uncut and grown into five long sadistic claws sharp like erect tails. And yet the claws are no longer really cruel, there is only a facade of cruelty. The whole growing pyknic obesity of the figure gives the nails a self-crucifying

and drooping look . . . There are no life-lines or heart-lines in these outstretched hands, only the stigmata forming little folds of death. The whole figure, dating from 1845, as one is moved by its mute message to unveil it, is a tragic commentary on the impending fate of the German nation.

Bemused and bewitched by this, Dwight Macdonald requested and received permission from Friedman to include it in his anthology of parodies; among bedfellows it becomes parody willy-nilly.<sup>73</sup>

Pastiche relies entirely on this effect, parodying by quotation (though pastiche need not be parodic at all). The issue elaborates a point made in the previous section, that there can be no transhistorical definition of parody. The context of any one moment shapes evaluations. For many eighteenth-century readers Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* held real pathos. In the late twentieth century *Werther* seems melodramatic to the point of parody. For Goethe himself the intent apparently lay somewhere in between, *Werther* partly a tragic hero, partly a cathartic self-parody of his own youthful romanticism.

This contingency does not justify abandoning intrinsic definitions. Unless some common ground is assumed, whole galaxies of context will have to be called up before any line of text becomes available. But the issue does, as Bennett wished, foreground the 'constitutive role' of the audience. It enlivens ideas about intent, and alerts readers to parodic possibilities. D. B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee's anthology takes its title from a little-known sonnet of Wordsworth's:

*The Stuffed Owl.*

[*This is taken from the account given by Miss Jewsbury of the pleasure she derived, when long confined to her bed by sickness, from the inanimate object on which this Sonnet turns. — W.W.*]

While Anna's peers and early playmates tread,  
In freedom, mountain-turf and river's marge;  
Or float with music in the festal barge;  
Rein the proud steed, or through the dance are led;  
Her doom it is to press a weary bed —  
Till oft her guardian Angel, to some charge  
More urgent called, will stretch his wings at large,  
And friends too rarely prop the languid head.