The genius of parody:
imitation and originality in seventeenth— and
eighteenth—century English lite

Robert L. Mack



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1 Introduction

Born Originals, how comes it to pass that we die Copies?

- Edward Young (1759)¹

In a sense, we write nothing original and everything we compose is a re-ordering of events, scenes and ideas that other storytellers put together long before we were born. If someone composed an entirely new story, perhaps we wouldn't recognise it as a story at all.

- Phillip Pullman (2005)²

Ours, it appears, is destined – for better or for worse – to be an age of parody. Or is it? In the past few decades, prominent critics such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Gérard Genette, Fredric Jameson, Julia Kristeva, Michael Riffaterre, and Edward Said (to name only a few) who are otherwise irreconcilable in their wider interpretive strategies could all be counted on, at the very least, to have agreed that the creation of any truly original work of art was not only a theoretical but also a practical impossibility. As recently as 1979, Malcolm Bowie, investigating Jacques Lacan's indebtedness to Freud, had yet felt it necessary to preface his account by reminding readers that a 'lingering Romantic conception of genius leads us to expect of an original thinker that his ideas will spring in fully formed splendour from within himself, or from nature, or from nowhere'.3 As Bowie justly observed at the time, most of his readers would only naturally have assumed that 'where lesser minds-may find proper employment in reading and elaborating texts from the past, the true innovator is expected to do everything for himself'.4

All such assumptions with regard to this 'Romantic conception of genius', however, seem to have disappeared - if not exactly overnight, then at least with a remarkable suddenness. To whatever extent today's authors might still aspire to position their works as in some way unique or 'monumental', it would be no less axiomatic now to assert that quite the opposite is true; rather, all individual utterances or 'speech acts' simply imply the momentary coalescence of an infinite number of possible textual relations.⁵ Within a matter of just a few years, long-standing but increasingly old-fashioned notions of meaning were completely overturned. Modern debates on interpretation focused instead on the technological processes of reproduction whereby alreadyexisting cultural codes and practices (codes and practices that manifestly bore increasingly less relation to the supposed 'realities' of any external world than to the very media through which they were expressed) were reduced to such a degree that writers themselves seemed compelled to recognize - often in the face of their own lingering, cherished pretensions to originality - that their products were in actual fact mere fragmented 're-presentations' that had been opportunistically harvested from a vast field of 'already-existing language'. The work of criticism, certainly, no longer entailed any precisely detailed attempt to recover authorial intentions or explicitly literary contexts. 'The deconstructionists', as David Boucher observed in a summary of the era, 'further undermined contextualism by announcing the death of the author, the vanishing text, the disappearing knowing subject, the illusion of the historical agent...and finally the dissolution of the interconnected network of intellectual discourse'.6 Those poems, novels, and dramas that might in the past have been regarded only common-sensically as the ideologically neutral insights of a single author's unique consciousness or (dare one even venture to suggest it) genius were now conceded to be merely the hitherto-unarticulated manifestations of texts that had fortuitously been snatched from far wider, culturally encoded contexts of signification. If thinkers such as Roland Barthes and Michael Foucault had indeed together publicly announced the death of the author in the heady days of the late 1960s, then many of the theorists who followed them were content to spend the better part of their own time hammering a tremendous number of critical nails not merely into the coffin, but - in their often angry crusade against the long-standing deceptions perpetrated by the phantom agency of such fantastic scriptors - into the very 'tissue' of the corpse itself. If, that is, they could ever manage actually to locate one in the first place.

That having been said, one of the more positive results of the latetwentieth-century's fascination with the interdependence of all forms of literary creation was to pave the way for a thorough revaluation of a literary mode, the defining essence of which was precisely its orientation of formal reference: parody. Parodies, after all, are the textual products of a myriad of sophisticated literary processes that seek not to obscure but rather to highlight - and, not infrequently, ostentatiously to flaunt - their status as in some way marked or derivative. The originality of any given parody (if one could even suggest that a parody can be said to possess any originality in the first place) would appear paradoxically to lie precisely in the simple fact of its unoriginality. The mode's boastful acknowledgement of formal dependency - the same characteristic that had for so long served only to render it a disreputable referential practice, and to banish it beyond the bounds of respectability - was spectacularly rehabilitated in a self-consciously post-modern era. Parody was guilty of nothing more than parading its own refreshingly roguish charm. In fact, it possessed a rare and disarming honesty in its gestures towards multiplicity and plurality - a 'celebration' (one encounters the word again and again) of all that resisted stabilization or confinement. Other genres might, in their pretence to a seamless mimesis, seek anxiously to bury their pasts; they might look to draw their readers' attention away from the determining precedents of generic boundaries and source-texts, or to perpetuate a deceptively naïve game of pseudo-Aristotelian realism. Parody alone, or so the theoretical intervention of the past several decades would have us concede, fearlessly embraced its task of disruption with an often giddy abandon - with an affirmation of textual indebtedness that was both playful and inviting. The rehabilitation in contemporary cultural theory of all that was fashionably imitative, trans-textual, and poly-semic arguably allowed parody for the first time to stake a credible claim to being a legitimate and even a defining feature of the most consequential products of English literature and culture. Recent modern and post-modern parodies, in particular (it was often specifically argued), were said to be distinguished by a positive 'ethos' that widened their possibilities to embrace not only the mocking and ridicule so often associated with the kind, but extended the pragmatic range of its facilities for combinatorial play to include highly self-aware, meta-ironic acts and gestures of reference and 'homage'.8

It comes as something of a shock therefore – particularly given its writer's close to uncontested status as the primary champion of parody as a nearly unavoidable literary practice – to discover Mikhail Bakhtin, of all

people, asserting (in his tremendously if belatedly influential collection of essays translated in 1981 as *The Dialogic Imagination*) that 'in modern times the functions of parody [have become] narrow and unproductive'. 'Parody', Bakhtin contended of its contemporary manifestations, '[had] grown sickly, its place in modern literature [was] insignificant'. Almost equally unsettling – although certainly less unexpected, considering his own underlying conjectures with regard to the post-modern dislocation of the governing, oppositional structures of Western thought – was Fredric Jameson's suggestion that the radical eclecticism of contemporary culture had led to a situation in which parody had been left 'without a vocation'. In the absence of any strictly 'normal' or dominant culture against which to define itself, Jameson claimed, parody would be compelled to yield to a different *kind* of inter-textual practice, one that he distinguished as mere pastiche. 'Pastiche', as Jameson qualified,

is, like parody, the imitation of peculiar masks, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter, and of any conviction that, alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.¹¹

'Pastiche', the Marxist Jameson concluded, 'is thus blank parody'. Jameson's assumption that 'ulterior motives' prompt all attempts to speak in the 'abnormal tongue' of parody (to say nothing of his implicit and wrong-headed equation of the functions of parody with those of satire) is open to serious question. However, his more comprehensive point that the dialogic kinetics of parody *per se* could not even be set in motion when those very same stylistic, generic, and cultural norms that those parodies would logically have been intent on disrupting no longer even existed is considerably more problematic. With no dominant cultural ideology or targeted logonomic system to dislodge, in other words, parody was left without any real purpose.

Jameson's bleak view for the prospects of any 'healthy' literary activity in an era in which parody is perceived to function less as an 'alternative practice' than as a standardized process of empty signification in a cultural state of 'ironic supersaturation' has, to some extent, been addressed by subsequent commentators when discussing the role of the parodic in modern discourse. ¹² Even more significantly, and in

the face of what emerges as Jameson's pessimism, we appear for some considerable time now - both as readers and as critics - to have begun acknowledging that we are gradually passing through what might be described as a distinctly 'post-theoretical' moment. This particular moment could well turn out to be one of considerably extended weight and duration. Without question, a great many academic (to say nothing of non-academic) readers have begun to confess to a deeply felt need a need that amounts for many to a form of aesthetic imperative or even existential obligation - for a return to some sort of consensus or standard, collective habit (the vocabulary here is still vague and volatile) of cultural meaning and value. There has been an increased demand for criteria and standards of interpretation and merit. Many of my own recent students, and not a few of my professional colleagues, certainly, express a desire for a reformulation of philosophical or discriminatory aesthetics - if not an acceptance of any single, coherent metaphysical 'system' - that is still in some way reconcilable with the most recent advances and depredations of so-called cultural theory. As Colin Falck presciently insisted some time ago,

The anti-spiritual language of much post-Saussurian theory has gone to incoherent lengths to avoid acknowledging the necessary role of insight – of insight into a reality which is revealed or disclosed, by someone in a cultural and historical situation – in the literary-critical process. The arguments of post-structuralists against the systematic theory of, for example, [Ferdinand de] Saussure himself – inter alia (in effect) its classifications presuppose an Olympian classifier – are in fact valid against the entire apparatus of rhetorical theory in general; but the post-structuralist can go no further than this, because his conceptual framework prevents him from giving any account at all of what it is for us to recognize literary (or any other artistic) success or failure.\frac{13}{2}

This insistence that we return to a tacit acceptance of the relationships that connect literature and the arts to our own experiences as embodied human subjects who exist *materially* outside the structures of human language and sign systems is increasingly incontrovertible. Falck's own patiently argued analysis exposing the embarrassingly sophomoric, decontextualized misreadings of so many of Saussure's structuralist and post-structuralist followers, and his insistence on the essentially physical or *gestural* aspect of language, is itself masterful. The demand that we somehow manage to incorporate in a redefined notion of artistic achievement and expression both the few advantages and the many

and often catastrophic fallacies of the culture of theory that so casually jettisoned the truly material and anthropocentric nature of all practices of reading and interpretation is too strong to be ignored. 'It will continue to be the case that the essential function of the literary text', as Falck defiantly asserted 'is one of revelation or disclosure [and] the essential requirement of a piece of writing if it is to have any significance to us as a piece of literature is that there should be a sufficient degree of reality or truth in it to be revealed or disclosed'.¹⁴

So what, specifically, do such assertions regarding the need for revitalized forms of cultural discrimination have to do with parody? The answer seems to me to be a simple but a mighty one. Most significantly, a deeper understanding of our yet-prevalent and now firmly institutionalized culture of repudiation - particularly with reference to the demand for a comprehensive redirection in our understanding of aesthetics will only necessarily advance the fact that parodies (and, indeed, most other forms of literary reference, imitation, echo, and response) can and should be looked upon as activities that have long constituted an inherent and positive facet of almost all artistic (and specifically literary) endeavour. A proper reorientation of our theoretical conceptualizations of creative contiguity, that is to say, entails an acceptance of the fact that parody, so often trumpeted as a literary mode that is anti-canonical, critical, destructive, and even anarchic, has played a far more complex role in - and has contributed in a far more creative manner to - the greatest achievements of our literary traditions. 15 We will be compelled to admit that parody is not - as critics such as Jameson, Baudrillard, John Barth, and others would have had us concede - a quasi-mechanical routine of 'pointless resurrections of past styles and past voices', but, rather, plays an astoundingly dynamic role in the dialectical processes of creation. Moreover, unlike those who have for so long insisted on 'celebrating' the supposedly disruptive and subversive power of parodic 'ambiguity' and 'play', we will need to focus our concerted attention just a little bit more closely on the intrinsic role of formal parodic imitation and echo in traditional acts and gestures of meaning and significance.

To be sure, this meaningful aspect of parodic reference has always been acknowledged by many aestheticians of the first class. Following in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Schiller, Benedetto Croce, F. H. Bradley, and George Steiner, for example, R. G. Collingwood observed in his mid-twentieth-century study *The Principles of Art* that

All artists have modelled their style upon that of others, used subjects that others have used, and treated them as others have treated them already. A work of art so constructed is a work of collaboration. It is partly by the man whose name it bears, partly by those from whom he has borrowed.... [I]f we look candidly at the history of art, or even at the little of it we happen to know, we shall see that collaboration between artists has always been the rule.¹⁶

Assertions such as Collingwood's remind us that the imitative gestures of parody can be restored to their proper status within the various taxonomies of creative endeavour and exemplary expression without being undervalued as mere forms of whimsical literary playfulness. For all the apparent progress that has been made in recent years, the critical resistance to a real understanding of parody may yet be more deeply rooted than we would ever care openly to acknowledge. To whatever extent post-modern parodies have been allowed more explicitly to enact their role in the referential dialectics of creation - to whatever extent parodic reference has been redeemed and celebrated by the advocates of post-modernism itself - there still hovers about the mode and its practices a toxic cloud of textual disrepute. It seems as if post-modern parody - like some wayward juvenile delinquent - has finally been let out to play, but has never seriously been permitted to work. To return once again to the insights of Colin Falck, an accepted valuation of the 'play' of parody, like the imaginative play inherent in the mythical dimensions of religion and poetry itself, 'will not be a merely fanciful or truth-free sporting with images, but a play of the imagination which never wholly loses awareness of its dimension in which the play of our imagination makes possible the disclosure of reality or truth (άλήφεια)'. 17 Perhaps it is about time that we began to take parody just a little bit more seriously.

The range of works examined in the pages that follow inevitably entails being highly selective – on occasion perhaps even arbitrarily so. My own primary aim is merely to begin the task suggested above – to lay some of the more practical and often admittedly anecdotal groundwork for its possibilities, perhaps by drawing attention to the sheer versatility of the possibilities with regard to parody available to writers throughout the extended period examined here. Consequently, I shift my attention variously and in turn from drama, to poetry, and even to modes of prose fiction and narrative autobiography. Indeed, I have deliberately taken the risk of looking to demonstrate the omnipresent and unavoidable pleasure (and, no less frequently, the perceived threat) of parody

in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries precisely by seeking out the pervasiveness of techniques of parodic provocation and response where we might *least* expect to find them. Although the chapters that follow might be read as a series of separate 'case studies', so to speak, they are united in their more ambitious aim of resituating the strategies of literary parody within a new ethical and conceptual philosophy of art.

The traditional animus against parody, again, has been unusually deep-rooted and long-standing. Chapter 2 looks simply and broadly to survey the critical history of the idea of parody in English. Parody, far from being a maliciously derivative critical activity, is in actual fact a literary mode essential to the work of some of the most widely read and influential English writers. We must aim to restructure the historiography of parody by examining the figurative language typically used to describe parodic poetic activity in English; we need to achieve some understanding of the manner in which the critical trends of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries have necessarily tended towards a reassessment of the long-standing, anti-parodic critical vocabulary that had dominated the traditions of interpretation and literary value for hundreds of years. One of the first times the word 'parody' is mentioned in English, as we will see, it is used to designate the products of a dangerous literary disease. The 'parody' that is recognized in the drama of Ben Jonson is thought of as a literary plague that manifests its potential to infect and to destroy all forms of legitimate literature - a literature that somehow partakes of the 'right language' of stable linguistic authority typically sanctioned by Jonson at the end of his satiric plays. Jonson himself is in some respects the harbinger of an entire literary-critical tradition that comes in time consistently to posit 'parody' as little more than 'para-literature'.

The early appearance of the word parody in one of Jonson's comedies leads me, in Chapter 3, to trace more thoroughly the sources of such a designation of parody-as-plague in Jonson's own work, and further links the parodic mode to the new cluster of authorial anxieties that began to emerge among writers in the early seventeenth century. A close reading of the final scene of the dramatist's *Every Man in His Humour* (1601; 1616) reveals Jonson drawing an elaborately coded connection between parody, on the one hand, and threats of treason, sedition, and the visitation of a deadly plague, on the other. Jonson is highly suspicious of those tactics of textual appropriation and abuse that – to his mind – seem so suddenly to have insinuated themselves as dominating features of the literary ethic of the period. Chapter 3 traces

throughout some of the playwright's work, generally, and examines within the resonant language of his early tragedy Sejanus (1603), in particular, the fears that I describe as having constituted Jonson's nascent 'anxiety of parody'. The idea that his own words might be used against him - the possibility that his own language could be transformed, manipulated, and somehow reshaped by another author in a manner hostile to his own intentions and inimical to his own, avowedly classical, literary standards - was a particularly unsettling prospect for the playwright to contemplate. (Jonson had himself, as some readers will recall, gone so far in his later years as to wrangle with the printer he seems to have deemed incompetent - John Beale - in his various attempts to maintain authorial control over his writings even as they went to press.)18 For a writer of Jonson's temperament, the usurpations of parody constituted a form of surrender - a surrender of material that was ostensibly more often perceived to be subject to the poet's own inalienable prerogative of interpretation and meaning - into the hands of an indiscriminate mass of readers and (even worse) a growing body of self-appointed, professional critics. Parody was not merely a disease: it was a disease that robbed the hard-working, literary craftsman of the inherent value of his labour.

The chapter also emphasizes the fact that the rapid-fire, text-specific dialogues that flair up in Jonson's era (encounters that included the so-called Poetomachia or 'War of the Theatres' from 1599 to 1602) were perceived as phenomena that constituted something decidedly new to English authors. 19 The inter-textual relationships that from time to time connected earlier literary documents, by contrast, might more accurately be described as typically respectful or ancestral. Such relationships constituted not so much a challenge, but a form of inheritance - a bond that was less a burden than a positive bequest. These earlier textual relationships tended to involve both temporal and geographical distance (extending often to the practical necessities of translation and patient cross-cultural assimilation). The comparatively primitive mechanics of textual reproduction and dissemination prior to the early modern era likewise entailed, at the very least, the necessity of a patient and considered response. Textual 'dialogues' prior to the seventeenth century, that is to say, were by sheer force of circumstance much less frequently matters of precise stylistic or formal indebtedness and specific, rhetorically targeted parodic reference than they were a general and often quite genial inter-textual debate structured on a leisurely pattern of formal, thematic, and stylistic exchange. The parodic redactions that began appearing in the early seventeenth century, by

contrast – those heralded by Jonson's precise articulation of the word 'parody' – were soon to establish a very different kind of textual dynamic indeed.

In Chapter 4, I pause very briefly to consider the manner in which even those works that were not explicitly responding to the fierce and competitive standards of the new poetic age – even, that is, those literary and dramatic efforts that were not engaged in an explicitly text-specific dialogue involving recognizable hallmarks of parodic manipulation and appropriation - can arguably be elucidated by a hermeneutic practice that acknowledges the pervasiveness of parodic activity and reference as the final years of the sixteenth century gave way to the dawn of a new political and literary era. Given the probable date of its composition and earliest production (1599), Shakespeare's Henry V suggests itself as an ideal piece to examine in this light. Indeed, one might argue that Shakespeare's popular historical drama provides a model well worth exploring, if only because the Chorus in Shakespeare's play has continued to develop into a very specific kind of overtly parodic figure in many recent productions of *Henry V*. I merely suggest in this chapter that the figure of Shakespeare's Chorus is likely to have originally conjured an unusually specific kind of parodic resonance and meaning. Shakespeare's stage figure is himself the descendant of a long line of choral commentators who had only recently, in the final decades of the sixteenth century, begun to lose the theological authority and the homiletic voice that had characterized their immediate predecessors in the indigenous traditions of the sacred drama. One of the more obvious effects of the gradual secularization of theatrical material in England throughout the sixteenth century was the tendency of the newer dramas to shatter the authoritative and sometimes even apodictic monotone of such choral commentaries – commentaries that lent a legitimacy to the speeches of (for example) the Vexillators in The Castle of Perseverance (c.1405–25), or of the messenger who serves as the Chorus-Prologue to the anonymous Everyman (c.1495). It is entirely fitting, therefore, that a work such as Henry V – a play that points at every possible moment to the elements of role-playing and of exploitable, manipulative dramatic ritual inherent in the activity of kingship itself - should itself in turn be guided and, in effect, masterminded by a cipher recently emptied of significance, and opened in a similar manner to the possibilities of parodic play. The parodic fate of the Chorus-as-Dramatic-Ritual, that is to say, re-enacts within the analogy of the play's dramatic, onstage action the destiny of the king himself. Just as Shakespeare's cynical young monarch appears already to have recognized that positive value adhere to the activity of kingship only insofar as that same activity is situated and defined (and constantly redefined) by its relationship to the several other, warring elements that constitute the social and political structures of his authority, so too the Chorus in Shakespeare's play stands, as the language of one once-fashionable school of criticism would have put it, as a signifier effectively cut off from its signified. Not at first recognizable as a parodic construction, the *Henry V* Chorus reveals only within the meaning-constitutive contexts of its original theatrical situation its inherent potential for genuine parodic resonance – a resonance that would nevertheless still appear to exert its native or latent influence even within the most vigorously contemporary productions of Shakespeare's history play.

Chapter 5, on John Dryden, explores at greater length the manner in which the post-Restoration author confronted the vehement threat of parody. I argue that Dryden chose eventually to adopt preventative, defensive, and self-parodic techniques - techniques the vigorous aggression of which was rooted in the perceived efficacy, in the instance of any literary dispute, of a textually debilitating 'first strike', as it were, against one's literary or ideological enemies. The language of plague, disease, and contagion that had by the early-eighteenth century come to characterize almost all references to parody (Dryden's near-contemporary Andrew Marvell refers with undisguised contempt to the appropriative poets of the era as 'paper rats' and 'book scorpions') suggests, in the first instance, a possible designation of Dryden's self-parodic activity as purposefully preventative or 'homeopathic'. Dryden was among the first authors to recognize that the parodic mode, when employed aggressively in the textually dangerous morass that some twentiethcentury critics accurately dubbed the 'early Augustan battleground', could not only deflect, but even, on occasion, destroy his critical antagonists.

Chapter 6, on Alexander Pope, turns much more specifically to examine an early parody of that poet's 1717 heroic epistle, *Eloisa to Abelard*. Pope himself, of course, employed obvious techniques of parody and burlesque in almost all his poetry and translations. *The Rape of the Lock* (1712; 1714; 1717) and the *Dunciad* (1728; 1742; 1743) are only the best known of his many works that reveal the vast referential potential of Pope's parodic technique at work. My own discussion of Pope, however, turns to focus our attention on the most significant of his popular works that is *not* generally considered as having anything much to do with parody; I consequently explore a fascinating example of the complex way in which the parodic mode could influence an author in

the eighteenth century, in the shape of Eloisa. The character of Eloisa, as she is presented within the lines of Pope's fictional epistle and in her arguments with reference to her difficult position in the paraclete, echoes and effectively parodies the actual language of the historical Peter Abelard. Although such conscious echoes of the earlier, published versions of the couple's original medieval correspondence have rarely received the attention they deserve, there is, admittedly, nothing startlingly new in merely pointing them out to readers. The Eloisa of Pope's poem is herself a parodist, and the individual whose language she chooses to parody is no one other than her own correspondent and former lover, Abelard. What I find to be particularly intriguing about Pope's Eloisa to Abelard, however, is the opportunity the poem seems to have offered at least one other mid-eighteenth-century parodist to advance an apologia for his own appropriative poetic practice. This 'secondary' parody of Eloisa to which I subsequently turn my attention in the chapter - Richard Owen Cambridge's Elegy Written in an Empty Assembly Room (1756) – picks up on this very dialectic between past and present potential, and explicitly calls attention to the fact that Pope's is a poem that asks its readers to bring the specifics of its target text to bring the language and intention of Pope's own Eloisa - along in their memories, in such a manner that the 'original' work pointedly forms the basis for the imaginative vagaries of the subsequent redaction. I would even venture to suggest that Cambridge's parody itself 'understands' the greater resonance of the personal crisis that Pope sought to depict in his poem, but chooses finally (on at least one level) to diminish that crisis. While acknowledging in the parodic form of his own work the dialectic between memory and imagination that creates meaning in Pope's poem in the first place, arguably all that remains in Cambridge's lines of the actual substantial drama of Pope's work is an obsessive, myopic egomania and materialism. Lady Townshend, who replaces the original's Eloisa as the speaker of the piece in Cambridge's satiric parody, laments the fact that she has not been invited to a large evening assembly at the home of the Duchess of Norfolk. In his own poem, Pope himself had presented to his readers a sympathetic female figure; he then explored that same figure's possible ostracism from society, and delineated the existential crisis contingent upon such exclusion as a subject worthy of serious poetry. For Cambridge, however, the subject of female subjectivity and identity provides the basis for a mere jeu d'esprit. The chapter concerns itself finally with the various ways in which a parodist can transform his or her target text - it explores the manner in which the truly perceptive parodist can respond not only

to the formal and linguistic cues of his or her original, but can no less certainly tap into the deepest meanings that rest beneath and behind those cues.

Chapter 7, my final chapter, deliberately takes us in an altogether different direction, and rather more ambitiously makes use of the opportunity offered here to widen our notions of parodic reference by reacquainting the reader with the work and personality of the celebrated eighteenth-century actress and writer, Charlotte Charke, Charke is of course best known to most modern readers of eighteenth-century literature for her autobiography, A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Charke (1755). I turn our attention instead to an examination of the rather less celebrated achievement of her 1756 novel, The History of Henry Dumont, Esq., and Miss Charlotte Evelyn, and the referential relationship that the novel establishes with the author's earlier Narrative. Charke's novel implicitly rejects and refutes her earlier work, which had itself been an extended justification and portrait of the failed artist as an outcast. Although a few critics, subsequent to the early feminist reassessment of Charke's significance in the 1980s and 1990s, drew attention to the seemingly out-of-character, penitential reinforcement of patriarchal values in the later fiction of the otherwise chronically transgressive Charke, the frequently subtle self-parodic reference of that same novel's narrative has been left largely unexplored. Charke's early and deliberately parodic experimentations with the yet-emerging tropes of genres such as the romantic novel and the personal, confessional autobiography reflect her own particular obsessions, but they also significantly anticipate the treatment of sexuality and its representation in subsequent eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century fictions. In so doing, the work offers a vision of some of those ways in which the potential of the genre of the novel itself related to the era's definitions of power and representation. Charke's self-parodic History arguably establishes a particularly formative and hitherto unacknowledged (though possibly quite influential) inter-textual, parodic dialogue of its own with later novelists, including - most significantly - not only Frances Sheridan, but also Elizabeth Inchbald, 'Fanny' Burney, and Emily Brontë. What we finally see in the affected persiflage of Charke's novel is an innovative attempt at a novel form of parodic autobiography. Having already presented her own story in a more straightforward manner to her (original) intended audience, and having seen her textual experiences rejected by that same audience, Charke turned instead to the yet-emerging forms of romantic, narrative fiction, and put those forms to work as a means of distancing her experiences in the guise

of parody. Having experienced brutal rejection when she presented the 'truths' of her life to her father (and to a larger, only slightly less patriarchal readership that did not wish to listen to them – much less to understand them), Charke looked to articulate her meaning and so give voice to her own sense of self by means of an acutely self-conscious parody.

2

'We Cannot Think of What Hath Not Been Thought': Or, How Critics Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Literary Parody

Let's not theorize about humour;...it's utterly fruitless and makes the very dullest kind of conversation.

- Robertson Davies, World of Wonders¹

The stigmatization of literary parody as an essentially parasitic activity, and the concomitant denigration of parodic reference as an authorial technique manifestly unworthy of serious critical scrutiny, exerted the force of profoundly influential stereotypes within our literary culture for an extraordinarily long time. An indignant F. R. Leavis, endeavouring in the last century to express his personal contempt for the mode in the kind of language that even he reserved only for his most vitriolic criticism, not only insisted that parody 'demeaned the integrity of [its] subject', but went so far as to characterize parody as nothing less than 'the worst enemy of creative genius and vital originality'. 2 Parody was an act of lacerating discursive rebellion – an enemy to literature worse (or so Leavis would have had his readers concede) than the frustrating impotence consequent upon the arbitrary stasis of writer's block; worse than the casual or (for that matter) intentional misconstructions of one's audience; worse than the rhetorical arrows drawn from the quiver of a hostile rival; worse than the ill-intentioned carpings of unsympathetic critics; and worse, Leavis would have compelled his readers finally to admit, than those constraints that are typically brought to bear upon an author forced to produce his or her work within the ever-vigilant shadows of an inflexible ideology. To whatever extent the demands of a compulsory political orthodoxy might well prove intolerable to any writer intent on maintaining the integrity of his or her own voice, the passive submission of the perversely wilful parodist would yet appear to entail a treacherous resignation of creative authority far more disrespectful (and ultimately, in its promiscuous complicity, far more damaging) to the very activity of writing itself. Voluntary participation in the parodic mode constituted an unseemly form of betrayal - an act of aesthetic treason - far too slavish ever to be countenanced by any readers (and certainly by any critics) chary of their own carefully cultivated reputations. Whilst most readers would already have sympathized with William Hazlitt's observation that aesthetic 'rules and models' work generally not to foster but rather to destroy 'genius and art', more destructive still was the literally con-forming ethic of composition at work within those traitorous collaborations that would so forget themselves - and so forsake the dignity of their vocation – as to submit to the restrictive dictates of those same 'rules and models' of their own volition.3 What could be more contemptible than the work of those authors who - even when left to pursue their craft precisely as they saw fit, and when guided only by the their own creative impulses - would nevertheless persist in submitting to such formal 'rules' and perversely remain within such structural 'models' as necessarily determine the gestures of extrinsic reference inherent in any act of parodic imitation? Having surrendered any prior claims to those qualities of inspiration traditionally recognized as the hallmarks of the truly independent 'genius', parodists consciously (and, by implication, suicidally) divorced themselves from whatever modicum of real talent they, too, might once have possessed.

The derision held in store for the destructive practitioners of parody by commentators such as Leavis, however, constituted only the uppermost tip of a deceptively extensive critical iceberg. The implications of such a stance (insofar as 'parody' was itself at the time conceptualized as constituting not so much a distinct type or genre as embodying, rather, a more nebulous though still recognizable approach or mode) rested on a number of contemporary critical assumptions regarding notions of authorship, genre, imitation, tradition, and authority in English criticism. The implications of such a devaluation of parody, in fact, proved on closer examination to be extraordinarily far-reaching and aesthetically consequential. (And it must be emphasized that the Cambridge critic appears on this occasion to have been speaking not merely for himself, but rather succinctly to have been voicing the cumulative, inflexible contempt of a long-standing tradition of dismissal.) The corrosive potential of parody, Leavis's judgement looked waspishly to remind those wayward readers who might otherwise be seduced into extending the mode some small degree of tolerance or (far worse) appreciation, was in esse to be positioned as existing exclusively in adversarial relation to the constructive powers of 'creative' literature. According to the necessary

terms of such a definition, parody was inimical to the very potential of literature per se. (The latter designation in Leavis's writings referred, the reader was left to suppose, to some exalted body of writing that managed somehow - and in the face of such an insidious enemy - always to retain its privileged status as real, aware, or, should we choose to retain the organically charged subtlety of Leavis's own suggestive terms, 'creative' and 'vital'.) The critic's very recognition of parody as a literary mode proved a double-edged sword. To be sure, in acknowledging parody even to exist, Leavis and the many critics who in this instance followed in his angry footsteps may admittedly (if only in a strategically qualified manner) have conceded the terminological necessity of acknowledging parody as having long constituted a distinct method of textual reference. Yet the wider, inflexible paradigms of literary creation within which those same critics at once situated the parodic mode (paradigms themselves structured, by no means incidentally, upon the priorities embedded within a post-Romantic cult of awareness and originality) consigned the inter-textual activities of parody to the seediest underworlds of modern print culture.

Any practising parodists, it should once again be stressed, would themselves be assumed to maintain the posture of demonstrably inferior subalterns within the posited hierarchies of 'genuine' literary endeavour. The simple articulation of such a predetermined, formal subservience on the part of parody within the culturally transcendent taxonomies of literary creation, entailing as it did a harshly judgemental subsumption of the mode to almost every other genre and method of composition, seemed, nevertheless, often to strike readers as having constituted only a necessarily formal statement - an emphatically public acknowledgement - of the existence of a particular kind of textual indiscretion that was extended considerably less mercy (and treated with considerably less toleration) when actually encountered in print. The hectoring resonance of Leavis's own pronouncement, it must be admitted, possessed a raw, rhetorical power that is capable even today of bullying its more intuitively tolerant readers into a position approaching that of abject submission. Previous observations on the general sustainability of his judgement regarding literary appreciation notwithstanding, Leavis's attitude towards parody appeared at the very least successfully to have filtered the sheer force of his deeply rooted and strangely personal contempt for the mode through the screen of a critical vocabulary that recollects, in its tone of dogmatic inflexibility, the familiar voice of paternal and punitive authority. He thus appeared capable of prompting within many readers what to his mind must have seemed a cowed and

suitably flaccid response of tractable acquiescence. The only perceptibly lively impulse generated by such a docile passivity (with regard to critical matters) was to pursue the implications of such a dismissal even further in the direction of its possible sources. If nothing else, readers were compelled by the straightforward urgency of Leavis's judgement to trace his desire for a containment of parodic literary activity - a confinement that amounted, in its assertions of total restraint if not absolute annihilation - to what can only be interpreted as a form of literary quarantine.

(I)

The discredited, pseudo-Arnoldian notions of the older generation of liberal humanist critics of which Leavis stood representative might appear at first to be of very little relevance to today's readers. Yet it is nearly impossible to overstate the extent to which such a simultaneously impassioned and contemptuous vilification of the parodic mode and (more particularly) such a perception of a non-negotiable dichotomy inherent within the terms of the sort of judgement that posited parody as a conceivable textual entity only to the extent that it cringed in futile opposition to the 'vital originality' of true 'creative genius' seem for a remarkably long period of time not only to have been recognized but also to have been enthusiastically seconded by a great many literary critics on both sides of the Atlantic. 'A true parodist', as J. B. Price could reiterate in the mid-twentieth century, 'does not really create anything'.4 And therein – when taken together with parody's already enervated participation within the extended history of what was not so very long ago designated as genre theory in English - lies at once the significance, the continued relevance, and the sustained power and consequent influence of its judgement.

It should be stressed that until the advent of the analytic criticism of the late 1960s, little if any serious attention had been paid to the status of parody as an identifiable mode or genre at work (or even at play) within the valued traditions of English literature. Little toleration was ever willingly extended to the transformative operations of parodic technique within the work of our so-called 'original' or truly 'creative' authors. 'Real' authors got on with their business and wrote. Parodists, on the other hand, having perhaps first failed in their own attempts to dethrone the present idols of the literary marketplace, devoted their energies to belittling the culturally significant achievements of those geniuses whose works they were assumed, more often than not, incapable of ever truly appreciating, much less emulating.

The role of parody in the work of English authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seems to have been particularly neglected. The editor of one of the most popular anthologies of English parody to remain in print throughout the later decades of the twentieth century, for example, included only a handful of eighteenth-century parodies in an otherwise admirably representative volume, noting that although the era 'should have been a great age of parody', there was 'surprisingly little' definite or identifiable parody in the period; 'the century', he apologized, 'seems to have been too self-confident to feel the need for parody'. Such an attitude was unfortunately not limited to cursory surveys of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries alone, but found its way into the most ambitiously comprehensive anthologies of parody available to the modern student; it managed also to creep into some of the most influential histories of English literature in general.⁶ A generously inclusive and well-informed history of parody as a distinctive technique in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries has yet to be attempted. The dismissive attitude towards parody as a literary mode more generally, of course, long remained unchallenged. Guides to literary terminology and self-designated handbooks to literature and poetics invariably ignored the actual range of parodic activity in English so as to focus their definitions exclusively on the perceived destructive capacity of the mode. 'Parody, in verse as in prose', ran one such representative definition, 'is a comic or satirical imitation of another piece of writing that exaggerates its style and subject matter in a sort of reductio ad absurdum, playing especially upon any weakness in structure or content of the original'. Moreover, the definition went on to add, 'parody is best understood when the original is known, and some of the most hilarious effects can only be fully grasped by one conversant with the solemnities of the work being parodied'.7

This condescending stance regarding parody – a stance that comprehends the view that parody itself is typically 'low' or useless, as well as the received perception that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced few, if any, parodies worthy of our attention, anyway became for a long time an entrenched part of the English literary tradition. George Kitchin's influential 1931 survey Parody and Burlesque in English, which remained for many years the only full-length critical study of the parodic tradition in English, was content to define parody as a mode the essential aims of which were inevitably critical and conservative.8 Parody was a 'polite art' - the 'watchdog of national interests', social respectability, and 'established' literary forms. 'Parody', Kitchin's volume observed, 'since the Seventeenth Century represents the reaction of custom to attempted change, of complacency to adventure of the mind and senses, and of established political and social forces to subversive ideas'.9 By imposing this brand of Whig historiography on the parodic legacy in English, Kitchin unapologetically privileged those parodies that acted as acts of literary criticism (the works of 'our great age of parody' - the often fastidious productions of mid-Victorians such as C. S. Calvary, Algernon Swinburne, and J. K. Stephen), and backed away from the fact that parody is far more often a very messy (and a very adventurous and iconoclastic) business indeed. Kitchin's narrow definition of parody, and his broad exclusion from the mode of any formally imitative productions that did not serve the purposes of stylistic critique, worked only to limit the scope of literary parody. Any parodies that did not measure up to the standard of the new order were stigmatized as somehow 'rude' or 'childish'. The entire parodic tradition prior to the newly conceived Golden Age of English parody was soon dismissed altogether as an undesirable if necessary step in the development of the mature genre, as it was to manifest itself in the work of the late-nineteenth-century parodists such as Beerbohm and Calvary. Those twentieth-century critics and anthologists who followed Kitchin's lead (Gilbert Highet, for example, and, to some extent, Richmond P. Bond) continued to transform the remarkable variety and resourcefulness of parody to its own disadvantage. Such attempts to revitalize the popular perception of the mode have unfortunately felt it continually necessary to sacrifice large portions of parody's legitimate heritage in the quest for aesthetic respectability. 10

As already noted in my Introduction (Chapter 1), one of the primary purposes throughout these pages is once again to question and hopefully to contribute to what began to emerge only in the late 1980s and 1990s and in the earliest decade of the new century as a clearly discernible effort on the part of an increasingly diverse group of scholars and critics to overturn this still widely accepted characterization of parody as an authorial strategy that is necessarily parasitic in its methods, base in its intentions, and vulgar in its effects. Far from being a literary mode that exists only on the scarred and tattered margins of our literary culture and far from being one that can ever confidently or for very long be confined to those margins - parody ought clearly to be included within the legitimate taxonomies of culturally valued literary endeavour. The practical analyses entailed by such a study further insist that we are today in a position not only to confront the long-standing demand on the part

of parody to be recognized as a respectable literary activity, but that we ourselves - in our various capacities as scholars, critics, educators, and informed readers - finally begin to redress that same demand; parody has played a significant and very often determining role in a wide range of works by both canonical and non-canonical English authors.

The participation of parody in the work of such authors, it should once again be stressed, remains a facet of literary creation that traditional critics have rarely shown themselves eager to champion or even, for that matter, openly to acknowledge. Although the element of parody has always, to some extent, played a necessary role in the history of aesthetics, one of the several notions that I hope to advance is that a particular dynamic of text-specific parodic dialogue and (consequently) correspondingly particular and specific techniques of practical parodic redaction and response arguably made their first appearance in English from the earliest decades of the seventeenth century. Within the span of a single author's lifetime (a period that I posit as extending roughly from the succession of James I to the English throne in 1603, and continuing through the era of the Civil Wars and into the reign of the restored Charles II), the simple possibility of being parodied in print was to establish itself as one of the unavoidable conditions of the writing life in England. The manifest possibilities of parodic replication very soon, in those early and increasingly turbulent decades of the seventeenth century, developed into an inescapable reality. The troubling, recombinative force of parodic imitation necessarily confronted any writer bold or foolish enough even to contemplate setting pen to paper.

Different authors, of course, would only naturally develop different strategies in response to the reflective and transgressive potential of literary parody. The parodic mode constituted an activity that was instantly perceived to pose a new threat to (or, depending on one's point of view, a serviceable weapon against) the privileged status and the seemingly autonomous authority of the printed word. Many such responsive or reactionary strategies, as one might expect, were themselves pre-emptively and often defensively self-parodic in nature. Those professional authors who necessarily participated in the aggressively appropriative ethic of the new literary era, not surprisingly, more often than not desired themselves to make use of parody and selfparody as a means of diverting potential detractors away from their own 'original' writings - writings that those same authors typically, though long before the days of copyright law, regarded only-naturally and with a common sense typical of the era as constituting a portion of their own private literary 'property'. An authorial technique that

looked strategically to incorporate a carefully measured element of selfparody in its design might conceivably lead adverse imitators astray in their own reading, and might thus practically render the work of such malicious enemies the contemptuous products of (in the language of the period) mere 'Mouths' and 'Shake-bags'. Parody, as any perceptive student of the period begins very soon to realize, exercised a determining if often unacknowledged influence within that same cluster of modern, authorial anxieties that - as critics such as Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom argued quite some time ago - began to make themselves felt with increasing force in England in the years immediately following the Restoration.¹¹ Through an examination of the precise historical circumstances surrounding the initial moment of socialization - that is, the first, public appearance of a text and its relinquishment, on the part of its author, to public scrutiny and (mis)interpretation of the works of several of the most influential authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries - we can see the extent to which the calculated disruptions of parodic play constituted an inextricable part of (and exercised an inescapable pressure on) the very development of the professedly and on occasion ostentatiously 'original' texts of the era's most popular and influential writers.

(II)

Parody, as all writers on the subject have been compelled to admit, has never been an easy term to define. On the contrary, the permeable, formal parameters of parodic literary imitation as well as the modus operandi that might conceivably constitute the techniques of any representative parodic methodology are by their very nature notoriously elusive concepts. The author of one eponymous book on the subject typically if tautologically declared very early in his volume that 'when he [spoke] of parody', he meant precisely 'that which we conventionally mean when we speak of parody'. 12 Other modern critics have appeared eager to mask their own (apparently unresolved) anxieties regarding the imprecision that has historically haunted the term by - rather than referring with any regularity to parody or to parodists by any such traditional designations - self-consciously directing their readers' attention instead to the supposedly more identifiable dynamics of techniques such as 'inter-textual dialogism', 'bitextual synthesis', 'paratextuality', or 'diachronic duplication'. 13 Such baldly apologetic euphemisms can unfortunately very soon assume the status of seemingly invaluable (if yet verbally Jesuitical) tools in the analysis of parody itself. One professional

colleague cautioned me early on in my own interest in the subject that most attempts to expand the meaning of the term 'parody' to include any form of imitative literary activity beyond a genially inconsequential brand of humorous and derogatory textual imitation - the implied intention of which was to criticize or playfully to poke fun at the formal and stylistic peculiarities of a specific work or a specific author - risked creating, in its grander aspirations, a term similar in its idiosyncratic and arguable inutility to the 'translation' of George Steiner's otherwise brilliant 1975 study, After Babel.14 In attempting to expand or even legitimately to retrieve the etymological, diachronic range of meaning implied by the designation 'parody', one might very easily push the resonance of the term so far beyond the bounds of its more conventional meanings so as to render it nearly unrecognizable and, consequently - at least as a helpful, functional signifier of literary form and/or intention very close to useless.

Be that as it may, the specific kinds of parody that we begin to see emerging in the work of the poets, the dramatists, and finally the writers of prose fiction throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries - the forms of parody that I recognize and write about in these pages - do seem insistently to constitute a mode that is very often far more integral to the processes of literary creation, as most professional scholars would today define those processes, than the simple-minded echo - the lightly humorous recollection - that so often announces the fleeting presence of the purposefully ephemeral stylistic critique more typically conjured by the designation 'parody'. All pretence to definition, as the novelist Samuel Butler conceded in the nineteenth century, may ultimately amount to nothing more than a vain attempt to enclose 'a wilderness of ideas within a wall of words'. 15 Even so - or at least as long as the inherent profusion and indigenous diversity of any such artificially enclosed 'wilderness' remain acknowledged and plainly in evidence – the prudent circumscription of a useful definition will generally construct only those walls that are capable of withstanding both the pressures of its internal contradictions and the ever-expanding volume of its intramural growth. The artificial constraints imposed by any definition, however repugnant they may be to our sense of scrupulous and thoroughgoing rigour, remain, in the face of all such protestations, constraints that are nevertheless indispensable to the progress of all practical analyses. And, as such, despite the awkwardly pseudo-scientific formulations proposed by some critics, the parameters of their restraints must be tolerated. Such a practical definition must also, from time to time and even from generation to generation, be reformulated even as

it is handed down within the inextricable legacies of human experience and tradition.

Strictly speaking then, and at its most basic level, literary parody insofar as such parody can ever be said to constitute a specific 'mode' or method of deliberate literary recollection or allusion - typically involves the formal and/or substantive invocation or alteration of an already existing text within the creation of a novel and yet in some way purposefully derivative work. Such parody generally depends for its meaning (and some readers might find it useful here to conceptualize this essential element of dependence or textual reliance as quite literally and precisely 'dependent', in the sense of 'suspended from', or 'resting' and 'hanging upon') on the explicit invocation of a pattern of pre-formed literary language (i.e., on poems, plays, novels, newspapers, magazines, and 'texts' and media of all varieties already 'written' and generally known or available to a wide audience). The element of paratactic contingency, in the most basic sense of 'close connexion or affinity of nature' or 'close relationship' is essential to the parodic method. The extrinsic or extramural verbal, linguistic, and stylistic references of parody - the patterns by means of which parody structures and positions itself, in other words - are quite often readily, necessarily, and purposefully identifiable. The very playfulness and innovation of much (if not all) parodic imitation is frequently the intentional product of the experience and complicity of an active (or, more accurately, an interactive) reader. All parodies are to some extent, by their very nature, what critics such as Roland Barthes would once have designated scriptible or 'writable' texts (although, of course, according to some readings of Barthes's criticism, all texts are necessarily the exotic and erotically charged products of a complicitous engagement between the écrivain and the reader). 16 Parodies are texts that are conjunctive; they are quite literally 'articulated' - connected by nature - and their coherence relies on the vitally connective participation of their readers. However, in the absence of any such reference to precise and identifiable textual models or authors, parody can just as easily ground either its form or its meaning (or, indeed, both) in a similar recollection of, for example, preexisting and familiar literary conventions, traditional literary themes, subjects, characters, and tropes, or even, on occasion, the very sorts of imagery and textual situations that any reasonably experienced reader might in almost any another context justifiably dismiss as clichéd, hackneyed, stereotyped, or openly recognizable. Literary parody differs from almost all other methods of explicit textual imitation in that the fundamental emphasis of the purposefully inclusive and kinetic textual

dynamic of the parodic mode invariably relies for much of its force at least as much on the substantive distance that separates any derivative (or alternately 'secondary', dependent', or 'subsidiary') work from its formal progenitor, as it does on the simultaneous structural or linguistic proximity that nevertheless and inevitably immediately links and will forever connect those same two works as conceptually inseparable and generically dependent literary cousins. The determining textual orientation of parodic imitation, to put it rather more simply, situates itself as a simultaneous (if at the same time paradoxical) affirmation of both distance and proximity.

Parodies characteristically underscore their indebtedness to the past. Indeed, they often 'celebrate' that debt and, not infrequently, highlight the precise historical, literary, and situational moment to which they owe their own textual nascence or genesis, while at the same time brashly trumpeting the incontrovertible self-assertion of their own independence. However deeply rooted in precise circumstances of cultural and literary history, parodies nevertheless routinely insist on signalling their inherent potential for - and arguably their inalienable 'right' to - still further innovations of meaning. The possibilities of parodic resonance - as so many of those texts that participate in the mode intimate with an excitement that is often effervescent, yet no less characteristically subdued and wary in the realization of its dangerous power are theoretically endless. Like the poetic form of the rhymed heroic couplet (a metrical form so often used by eighteenth-century parodists and satirists), parodies are themselves theoretically endless. Parody can in fact lay some substantial claims to recognition as the mode of the infinite; it is the literary gesture closest both in theory and in actual practice to the eternal, cosmic principles of change, flux, and metamorphosis. Parody is the literary method closest in its impulses and in its transmutations of existing reality even to the ancient and primordial chaos that informs the patterns of the universe itself – it is the logical literary heir to the hustling and dynamic metaphysics of Heraclitus and other pre-Socratic philosophers. Far from delimiting or debasing the potentials of real 'literature' or creative genius and originality, in other words, parody is just as easily conceived rather as constituting the formal and liberating mis-en-abîme that would appear candidly to reflect, in the dizzying, eternal mirror of its transformations, the inherent instability and the inescapable mutability of any and all textual activity.

While the terms of the wide-ranging definition I have just been rehearsing are, of course, by no means intended to stand as in any way definitive, the calculated depth and flexibility of such a conceptualization of parody can at the very least allow the word itself to be of some functionally playful use to the practising critic and reader. Included within the parameters of such a notion of parody, we might at once observe, are those works that structure themselves just beyond the parameters of a precise and formal mimeticism, yet nevertheless recognizably remain, for most if not all readers, in the literally reactionary or complimentary positions of 'beside songs' – of etymologically precise para odoi, from the Greek $\pi\alpha\rho\alpha$, meaning 'by the side of' or 'along side of', and ἀείδω, signifying the transitive verb 'to sing'. 17 (Strikingly, the first recorded usage of the actual Greek word παρωδία or 'parody' occurs, as one might expect, in Aristotle's Poetics, wherein Hegemon of Thasos [fifth century BC], author of the Gigantomachia, is referred to as 'the inventor of parodies', a metrical verse form that Aristotle describes as a variation on the general project of μιμησιs or imitation, insofar as it represented people as 'worse than they are'; the related word $\pi\alpha\rhoo\delta os$ – of a different derivation - was a technical term employed in the theatre to designate 'the first entrance of a chorus into the orchestra, which was made from the side'.)18 The latitude inherent in any such etymologically precise definition at the very least allows us quite reasonably, for example, to recognize a work such as Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1726) as constituting, on at least one, admittedly primary level, a loose and extended parody of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719). Such an expansive understanding of parodic redaction permits us likewise to acknowledge within the framework of a suitable and comprehensive terminology the position of Henry Fielding's Joseph Andrews (1742) as it stands in relation to one of that same novel's ultimate source-texts, Samuel Richardson's Pamela (1740). We can similarly acknowledge Richardson's epistolary romance as obviously participating, seminally, in the wider traditions of English parody as they have just been defined, despite the fact that Fielding's picaresque derivation of Richardson's material (markedly unlike his earlier and more obviously dependent Shamela [1741], or related works such as Eliza Haywood's Anti-Pamela [1741]) only infrequently positions itself as a formally explicit or linguistically precise imitation of its original or so-called target text.

(III)

In rueful retrospect, one of the few incontestable virtues of the often calculatedly transient structuralist and post-structuralist criticism of the latter decades of the twentieth century was the simple fact that it persistently drew its readers' attention to literature's seemingly limitless

capacity for self-reference. Edward Said once commented with unwonted accuracy that the modern obsession with 'textuality' had effected a corresponding transformation in what critics actually meant when they took it upon themselves to speak of 'originality' in literature. The latter term seemed suddenly, incontestably, no longer to refer to that which was fresh, underivative, spontaneous, or independent of existing styles and forms.¹⁹ In light of the view that literary creation was merely the redeployment and 'refunctioning' of already existing writing, originality had less to do with the uniqueness of individual expression than with a particular ability in the reflection and trans-contextualization of previous 'texts'. 20 The modern and post-modern imagination revelled not in the Romantic ideal of the poet who created (as Coleridge had put it) something 'perfectly unborrowed and his own', but rather privileged a literary impulse that was comprehensive and (one could only hope) constructively dependent.²¹ The vital originality of the truly representative twentieth-century artist (at least) was, as Said noted, best described as a 'facility for combinatorial play' - a penchant for pastiche. 22 Art itself was primarily to be thought of as a 'field of play' for alternative possibilities. If sprezzatura - that quality which Northrop Frye once so precisely described as that near ecstatic 'sense of buoyancy or release that accompanies perfect discipline' - had once stood as the much sought-after and audacious characteristic of that 'art which hides its own art', then analytic theory insisted to some extent on advancing the very antithesis of such a classically based (one thinks, for example, of the life-like achievements of a Pheidias or an Apelles) ideal. Baldesar Castiglione, of course, had in his Book of the Courtier (1528) memorably been compelled 'to speake [the] new word' sprezzatura to describe the nonchalance peculiar to that grace that nevertheless effected 'a certaine disgracing to cover arte withal', and allowed an individual 'whatsoever he doth and saith, to do without paine, and (as it were) not minding it'.23 (Continental writers had long boasted of their participation in a Horatian tradition that valued the qualities of self-conscious poetic craftsmanship and artifice over originality and vatic inspiration; as Pierre de Ronsard conceded in the sixteenth century: 'Ils ont un art caché qui ne semble pas art'.)24 The creation of any corresponding neologism to designate the antonym of such creative nonchalance, it need hardly be said, would have worked almost comically to negate the very principles it sought to define. True art, in any case, was now paradoxically the very antithesis of all that was once embodied in such a liberating and exuberant aesthetic. The best way for the critic to appreciate the (non)innovative creativity of the truly 'original' artist was to look not for

first instances, Said had argued in 1984, 'but rather to seek parallelism, symmetry, repetition...[and] parody'.25 Acts and gestures of authorial power, control, and initiation - whether creative or interpretive - were ultimately illusory, invariably despotic, and destined to be frustrated. The originality of the individual artist or author was itself exposed as a tyrannical myth. Originality, in the post-structuralist era, was typically recognized to be the skulking obsession – the shameful bourgeois fetish even - of the petulant or ill-informed novitiate.

Of course, as a few of the examples noted even in the very brief discussion above intimate, this was not the first time that the related issues of imagination, originality, imitation, allusion, parody, and even plagiarism had been the subject of debate among literary artists and their critics in the Western tradition.²⁶ The writers of the seventeenth century had similarly, themselves, only naturally engaged in what were typically far more lively and informed discussions regarding the amount of imitation necessary or proper for what Sir Philip Sidney, in his Defence of Poetry (1585), described as the 'right poet' – not neglecting to note that however much English writers such as Gower and Chaucer may have been 'encouraged and delighted with [the] excellent foregoing' of their continental counterparts such as Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, the 'priority' of those same writers did not per se guarantee their superiority.²⁷ Edmund Spenser, who in his posthumously published fragment on 'Mutabilitie' (1609) reminded his readers of the manner in which that same descendant of the Titans had

> the face of earthly things so changed, That all which Nature had established first In good estate and in meet order ranged, She did pervert, and all their statutes burst ... ²⁸

throughout his poetry betrayed an unparalleled awareness of the protean instability of the post-lapsarian world that seemed to inform all his work, and would probably have intimidated even the Pythagoras of Ovid's Metamorphoses. Spenser's most transparent layering of secondary narratives in his Faerie Queene (1590; 1596) alone - the fabric of which work would only on the most obvious levels be woven from the skein of textual reference that included the Book of Revelation, the legends of St. George, the Aeneid, Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato (c.1480), Ariosto's Orlando Furioso (1532), and Gerusalemme Liberata (1581) - demonstrates that he would have had nothing to learn from post-modern theory's musings on the discourses of authority and exclusion, or from supposedly radical

perceptions of phenomenon such as différance, sillage, and the supplément.

In much the same manner as their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century predecessors, the writers and critics of the eighteenth century – Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Richard Hurd, Edward Young, and Thomas Warton most prominently among them - throughout that period all vigorously debated the necessary status of the poet's relationship to a body of past tradition (both classical and foreign, as well as indigenous). The question of the complex dynamics that always exist as a form of creative tension between 'tradition and the individual talent', to use T. S. Eliot's phrase, as such writers were well aware, had in any event been with us at least as far back as classical antiquity.²⁹ The Alexander Pope who so thoroughly disassembled and undermined notions of authorship and authority in works such as the Dunciad Variorum of 1729, or the Jonathan Swift who initiated the often bizarre inter-textual crises precipitated by the Bickerstaff Papers of 1708-9 are unlikely to have benefited in any significant respect from the work of their twentiethcentury descendants.

The work of Swift, in particular, provides perhaps the best example of the manner in which parody and the often unpredictable give-and-take of inter-textual parodic exchange were features that played important and intractable roles in nearly every essay, poem, and polemic that could be written in the period. Although Swift's own authentic or, strictly speaking, 'proper' voice could be extraordinarily persuasive in its own right (an ability he ably demonstrated in works like his early Conduct of the Allies and Some Remarks on the Barrier Treaty [1711], as well as in such earlier productions as the more formally and rhetorical conservative odes of 1694), the satirist seemed always to thrive most when writing in or through the voice of a fictional persona; he thrived most, that is, when given the opportunity to display his incomparable genius for literary ventriloquism. On the simplest of levels, Swift possessed an unerring ability to mimic the diction, the cadences, and the idiolects of his designated political and ideological targets or 'enemies'. Whether this talent was being exercised with an eye towards a particular and overtly comic purpose (as it is, for example, in comparatively lighthearted pieces such as the 'Humble Petition of Frances Harris' [1701]), or being employed to more serious ends (as in works such as his Examiner essays of 1710, or 1711's An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity), Swift's was a transformative skill that appeared to come to him almost effortlessly.