

TAPPING PARODY FOR THE SAKE OF SATIRE¹

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Abstract: *After having taken a bird's-eye view of parody as defined over the years by theorists thereof, and discussing the pros and cons of the "parody vs satire" stance, the present essay argues with Van Ghent (1953) and Chambers (2010) that parody can best be viewed as a technique. While Section 3 features "stiob" (Yurchak 2006) as the prototype of 'politically-correct' parody, Section 4 takes theory out into the field by anatomizing several specimens of 'politically-germane' parody.*

Keywords: *parody, satire, stiob(like), politically-correct/germane/incorrect, transcontextualization.*

1. Parody Revisited

With definitions running the whole wide gamut from the rather simplistic "narrative poem of moderate length using epic metre and language but with a trivial subject" [Householder, 1944, *apud* [9, p. 32], "an imitation of a work more or less closely modeled on the original, but so turned as to produce a ridiculous effect" (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, *apud* [9, p. 32]), "a burlesque or satirical imitation" (*Chambers English Dictionary*, p. 1051), "the imitative use of words, style, attitude, tone and ideas of an author in such a way as to make them ridiculous" (*Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, p. 640), through the more sophisticated "a work which reflects a fundamental aspect of art that is at the same time a symptom of historical processes which invalidate the normal authenticity of primary forms" [Kiremidjian, 1969, p. 241, *apud* [9, p. 36], "bitextual synthesis" [8, p. 171], "imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways [9, p. 37], or "the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material" [13, p. 52], to the more trenchant "Technique of presentation [which] offers a field for the joyful exercise of perception and not a platform for derision" [15, p. 24], or even highly unorthodox "über-technique" or "the art that plays with art" [3], parody looms larger than ever in both modern and contemporary research pursued by scholars in a vast array of academic disciplines.

Whether viewed as related to the burlesque, irony, metaphor, pastiche, plagiarism, quotation, satire or travesty, as a genre *per se* [9], [13] or merely as a device [14], [1] or technique [15], [3], parody never ceased to attract the interest of both professionals and laymen with a penchant for "transcontextualization" (cf [9]).

Finally, though taken by some theorists to be repetition that includes difference (cf [5]) or mark "difference rather than similarity" [9, p. 6], parody, on account of its imitating core features, tends to be defined more in terms of "what it is like" rather than "what it is unlike". The idea that brings

us to the crux of the matter and our major focus in the next section can be summarized in the following sentence: defining parody is not a question of what it is, but mainly of what it is not.

2. Parody vs Satire

While fully aware that facing us is a highly complex question which merits a full-fledged essay to itself, we shall attempt to confine the discussion in this section to the parody-vs-satire distinction, veering off the meandering course which parodic theorists usually steer, as the scope of the present research requires.

For openers, we deem appropriate to firmly state in which particular area our loyalties lie theory-wise. Thus, rather than claiming with Rose (1993) or Hutcheon (1985)² that parody, like satire, is a genre, we are more inclined to adhere to the stance adopted by Van Ghent (1953) and Chambers (2010), who convincingly argue that parody should best be viewed as a technique, or better still, as a device located halfway between technique and art proper, which professional parlance chose to label “*über*technique” (cf also Shklovsky’s (1990) “*über*-mechanism” label).

A further issue which needs to be addressed here is the relationship obtained between parody and satire. The vast majority of theorists who still consider parody to be a genre gravely compound the difficulty of telling apart by speaking both of satiric uses of parodic forms and of parodic employment of satiric texts.

It is Hutcheon – the reader will kindly remember – who best accounts for this confusion (see Note 2 *infra*). And it is she again who, we must give credit where it is due, even though equally adamant that parody should most conveniently be regarded as a genre *per se* – and with good reason too, we might add, for she further argues that “it has its own structural identity and its own hermeneutic function” [9, p. 9] – , makes the by far most crystal-clear distinction between the two³.

Now then, by correlating Hutcheon’s intra-vs-extramural-target theory above with Chambers’ “Untidy View of Parody in Modern Genre Land” [3, p. 230], which shows parody graphically located between non-parodic satire and the Imitations/Adaptations/Free Translations slot, we can now safely move a step nearer the focus of Section 3 below.

Along the same line of reasoning, with parody actively interacting with satire – hence no longer confined to an aesthetic context⁴ (see also Chambers’ classification of parodies into “specific” and “general”, presented in [3, p. 230] – and, in addition, with irony playing a key role in this “intricate textual interaction” (cf [9, p. 49], it follows from the above (see also Section 1 *supra*) that in parodic satire⁵ a shift in target is being effected, as transcontextualization proceeds, from the intramural to the extramural, more precisely from author or text to the socio-political milieu. Consequently, the “parodied background” [9, p. 31] is being accordingly converted from actual target of irony into a mere vehicle thereof⁶.

At this particular juncture, the question which most naturally springs to one's mind when following this particular train of thought is: what exactly acts as a catalyst for this shift of target effected in the mind of the parodist?

3. 'Politically-Correct' Parody

A multitude of factors can be brought to bear on the author of the parody in this respect. Topmost among them within a hypothetical hierarchy are psychological factors such as dissatisfaction with a whole range of issues. And, since, as Frye aptly infers, "In the sinister human world one individual pole is the tyrant-leader... The other pole is represented by the *pharmakos* or sacrificed victim" [6, p. 148], the critical distancing which parody implies turns out to be a real blessing in disguise for writers oppressed by a totalitarian regime, as well as their only mental escape from it. Add to that an equally critical distancing from its ironic purpose, and there we have the safest parodic strategy of putting political censorship to sleep, the 'politically-correct' parody⁷.

Socialist⁸ authoritative discourse, therefore, can be converted into the ideal target of politically-correct parody, with "stio**b**", a highly idiosyncratic parodic type thriving in late-Soviet socialism, acting as a perfect case in point. Yurchak, one of the finest analysts of this particular ironic aesthetics, argues that what sets stio**b** apart from cynicism, derision, sarcasm or other types of absurd humour is that it "required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two" ([16, p. 250], also [17, p. 84], *apud* [2, p. 181]).

The covert irony of this most deceptive parodic strategy came to assume an even subtler form in what Yurchak calls "inverted stio**b**" [17, p. 90-92], "directed not at Soviet communist ideological symbols *per se*, but at the now-dominant questioning of these symbols"⁹ [2, p. 189].

Since - without in the least defeating it - stio**b** would not signal its own ironic purpose, this idiosyncratic parodic type tended to overestimate the interpretive abilities of its audience, with the inverted version of stio**b** sometimes putting even highly educated people on their mettle. Nevertheless, the fact that, in the last analysis, it is considered to have "contributed significantly to the disenchantment of the dominant discourse and thus to socialism's sudden and spectacular end" [2, p. 213] speaks volumes for stio**b**'s huge impact, as an alternative to overt political critique, on the collective sensibility of a mainly well educated audience, as well as for its quasisatirical¹⁰ task of *castigando mores*, hence of reforming society, a feat which the oppositional, 'politically-incorrect', type of discourse is most frequently credited with¹¹.

4. Tapping Parody as Transcontextualizing Device: A Modest Proposal

While an in-depth anatomy of stio**b** and stio**b**like parody requires more extensive research, i.e. a study or a full-fledged book *per se* (see Note 1

supra), the last section of the present contribution submits to the reader's attention an equally subversive parodic species which defies classification with both irony-hiding politically-correct stioeb and irony-flaunting politically-incorrec parod as employed by mordant satire and which we accordingly labeled 'politically-germane' parody, whose intricate pattern of intertextuality, pregnant with more or less subtle sociocultural allusions which only a very well-educated target readership can hope to grasp, makes the sophisticated humour tapping it the most difficult to savour.

The three specimens below, together with their respective translations from German originate with the author of the present contribution and date back to her student days in Iași, when they would lift the spirits of many a room- or classmate. In addition, they have been singled out – from a larger series – as most apt to substantiate our claim that, though metaphorically based, intertextual humour does not subvert the mainly metonymic axis of narrative discourse, since it draws heavily on association¹² (for a detailed discussion of metaphor, metonymy and their relation to similarity- and continuity disorders, respectively, see [11]).

4.1. In Bucharest did Niculai
A stately pleasure-dome decree;
Where Dâmbovița swiftly ran
Past blocks-of-flats with desperate men
To drown in sunless sea.

(Parodied original: *In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree;/Where Alph, the sacred river ran/Through caverns measureless to man/Down to a sunless sea* - Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*; in [12, p. 256].

Endocentric socio-cultural gloss on target text: the derogatorily employed *Niculai* is a Moldavian spelling of *Nicolae* [Ceașescu]. The “stately pleasure-dome” stands for the by now notorious *Casa Poporului* (“House of the People”), which came to be regarded as the very epitome of grandiose futility. Yet the real infamy was that while the communist dictator was pumping tons of money into this architectural monstrosity, the common “desperate men” living in drab four-storeyed blocks-of-flats were being reduced to silence and driven to dismay.

A meticulous analysis of further subversive associations, derived from cross-cultural discrepancies and opposing sets of metaphorical connotations on which irony is grounded¹³, yielded the following:

- (a) Ambivalent metaphors
- (1) the “pleasure-dome”

Coleridge's “sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice”(30, 7) is the central exotic image conjuring an atmosphere both bright and sinister, and mainly taken to connote warmth and pleasure of art which cold forces constantly

threaten (cf [4, p. 110]. Even if intended by both Kubla Khan and Ceaușescu as a “miracle of rare device” (30, 6), in the original poem the pleasure-dome is presented as located in an earthly paradise, whereas nowadays’ Romanian reader of the transcontextualized version knows better than to take it at face value. To the latter, Casa Poporului has proved to be a genuinely Dickensian Bleak House, of which most of the decrees issued are not exactly pleasing, to say the least.

(2) the “sunless sea”, contrasted in the original poem to the “sunny dome”, is, in all probability, indicative of the dark, evil forces lurking underground, as well as in the human mind. Partly aided in taking effect by the very name of the Romanian sea (“The Black Sea”¹⁴), parodic transcontextualization semantically equates the sunless sea with the grim reality of a totalitarian regime with little prospect of any improvement.

(b) the Alph → Dâmbovița recontextualization

Whereas in Coleridge’s poem “mid these dancing rocks at once and ever/It [Alph] flung up momentarily the sacred river./Five miles meandering with a mazy motion/Through wood and dale [...]” (20, 4-7), all of which magnificently captures a dreamlike Xanadu, the all but sacred river Dâmbovița runs “past blocks-of-flats”, i.e. past the epitome of socialist Bucharest’s drab reality.

Compounding the irony of such blatant contrasts is the no less ironically-loaded similarity between the “caverns measureless to man” and the cavern-like blocks-of-flats which the late-socialist systematic shutting down of the power stations would plunge into darkness on a “nightly” basis.

(c) the Kubla Khan → Ceaușescu recontextualization

Though literally and figuratively worlds apart, the two political leaders seem to share a streak of megalomania most likely to spell disaster for their people.

In addition to the previously discussed symbols (“pleasure dome” and “sunless sea”) acting as cross-cultural bridges between parodic foreground and parodied background, macro contextual interpretation showcases still a third element connecting the two contexts, namely the dreamlike auctorial experience¹⁵, of which the effect on the author of the original was quite the reverse of that generated by what the author of the parody goes through. In plain English, the former’s was a reverie, while the latter’s looked more like a nightmare scenario.

Continuing in this macro contextual vein, a key element of Coleridge’s vision is the song of the Abyssinian maid called up by a magician¹⁶, viewed by many analysts as alluding to the Muses’ attempt to revive the poet’s inspiration. The Abyssinian maid singing enticingly in Coleridge’s vision can be appropriately recontextualized as the late socialist oligarchs constantly singing Ceaușescu’s praises and trying to “narcotise” him into believing that everything was well with Romania and its people were

perfectly happy with their lot. Like Coleridge, therefore, Ceaușescu lived in a dream, from which he unfortunately awoke “to his death”¹⁷.

4.2. (a) *Wer schreitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?* (=Who walks so late into the night?)

Es ist Genosse Ioan mit seinem Rind (=It's comrade Ioan holding his beef tight);

Er hat das Fleischstück wohl in dem Arm (=He has the meat joint tucked under his arm),

Er faßt es sicher, er hält es warm (=He holds it tight, he keeps it warm).

(Parodied original: *Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?/Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;/Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,/Er faßt es sicher, er halt ihn warm* - Goethe, *Erlkönig*, in [7, p. 98]).

Endocentric socio-cultural gloss on target text: comrade Ioan is the archetypal pre-Decembrist Romanian citizen (i.e. the one who had to cope with living conditions before December 1989) after the daily eight-hour work plus another five or six hours he spent standing in a long queue to buy his monthly meat, which he was fortunate enough to do – unlike the other hundred or so comrades who got wind of the happy event too late. In those days meat was considered a luxury item to be sold only once or twice a month.

Though *prima facie* a canonical case of politically-correct parody, when the whole background of Goethe's “Erlkönig” is kept in view, or better even, in perspective, facing us is a kind of “demonic” parody (cf [6, p. 148]), for, just as the last line of the ballad zooms in on the child lying dead in his father's arms¹⁸, killed by the elf-king, i.e. by a figment of his own imagination, so will comrade Ioan, the prototypical champion of utopian Communism, fall victim to his own beliefs.

(b) *Kommunistennachtlied* (=A Communist's Lullaby)

Über allen Betrieben (=There's a blank silence)

Ist Ruh (=Hovering over all companies),

In allen Fabriken (=In all the factories)

Spürest du den Aufstandshauch (=You can feel the wind of revolt);

Die Kommunisten arbeiten ohne Halt (=The communists keep working without a halt).

Warte nur, bald (=Just wait, pretty soon you)

Ruhest du auch (=Will be dead-silent too).

(Parodied original: *Über allen Gipfeln/Ist Ruh,/In allen Wipfeln/Spürest du/Kaum einen Hauch;/Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde./Warte nur, balde/Ruhest du auch* (Goethe, *Wandrer's Nachtlied*, in [7, p. 85]).

The subversive overt irony of the last four lines of this parodic specimen veers halfway towards politically-incorrect parody, as do “[...] with desperate men/To drown in sunless sea” in 4.1. *supra*. The key element connecting parodied background to parodic foreground is here the very last

line, “Ruhest du auch”, which they share and share alike, with the verb “ruhen” employed in both texts in its figurative meaning [=rest in peace, lie buried]. Nevertheless, while in Goethe’s poem the traveller is invited to put an end to his lifelong wanderings and finally rest in peace, i.e. die a natural death, in the quasi-demonic parody¹⁹ thereof, the communist’s lullaby is meant to set the political leaders’ fears at rest, with the ominous silence muffling the wind of revolt and foreshadowing the tragic end of the cruel dictators.

5. Concluding Remarks

In order to keep things in perspective, let us recap briefly on what we *discussed* so far.

With a sequel in prospect on stiobliche parody as idiosyncratically deployed in late-socialist East European countries, we charted in the first section of the present research the changes proposed by various analysts to the definition of parody over the years.

After going with a fine-tooth comb in Section 2 over the stances adopted by parody theorists on a by now notorious bone of contention, ‘parody vs satire’, we have come to claim with Van Ghent (1953) and Chambers (2010) that parody, unlike satire, should be best viewed as a technique, and not as a genre in itself.

Section 3 submitted to the reader a highly idiosyncratic parodic type called “stiob” [16], to which we additionally attached the label ‘politically-correct’ parody, so as to markedly contrast it to the ‘politically-incorrect’ type employing overt irony.

Finally, in Section 4, we investigated three specimens of ‘politically-germane’ parody, all of them originating with the author of the contribution, in that we painstakingly analyzed cross-cultural associations connecting parodied background to parodic foreground, with a minor focus on several details responsible for steering germane- towards politically-incorrect parody.

Notes

¹The present research is the first in a, hopefully, longer series exploring the protean power of stiobliche parody deployed as one of the most efficient strategies for ridiculing late-socialist authoritative political ideology and discourse in Eastern Europe.

²Cf “Yet the obvious reason for the confusion of parody and satire, despite this major difference between them, is the fact that the two genres are often used together” [9, p. 43].

³Cf “The ethos of that act of repetition can vary, but its [=of the parody] “target” is always intramural in this sense. How, then, does parody come to be confused with satire, which is extramural (social, moral) in its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind, with an eye to their correction?” [9, p. 43].

⁴Cf “Both satire and parody imply critical distancing and therefore value judgments, but satire generally uses that distance to make a negative statement about that which is satirized [...] In modern parody, however, we have found that no such negative judgment is necessarily suggested in the ironic contrasting of texts. Parodic art both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material. Any real attack would be self-destructive” [9, p. 43-44], as well as Van Ghent’s contention that parody is not inherently satiric (cf [15, p. 24]).

⁵Since we already adhered to Chambers’ view of parody as technique, it seems only natural to utilize his terminology as well (cf, by way of contrast, Hutcheon’s “satiric parody” [9, p. 45]).

⁶Cf also [9, p. 43]: “Satire frequently uses parodic art forms for either expository or aggressive purposes [...], when it desires textual differentiation as its vehicle”.

⁷We are willing to take both the blame and the credit – if any – for this label we took the liberty to coin.

⁸Cf “Like fascism before it, socialism is normally described as a perverse remnant of modern authoritarianism” [2, p. 180].

⁹“Inverted stioab” was mainly generated by a shift effected in the party-led authoritative discourse of the final perestroika stage around 1990 towards disputing the very foundations of the Soviet system (cf [2, p. 188]).

¹⁰Cf also Boyer and Yurchak’s claim that “The stioab aesthetics and sentiments of political withdrawal of late socialism are likewise uncannily similar in certain respects to the positionless and even “necrorealist” satirical sensibility of the American so-called “*South Park* generation”” [2, p. 184].

¹¹In late-socialist Romania “Divertis” came closest to this at first blush politically-correct parodic type originating from overidentification with the dominant form of discourse – both in their pre- and post-Decembrist performing years.

¹²The topic will be explored in fuller detail in a sequel to the present contribution.

¹³A most valuable insight into the similarity of metaphor to parody as well as in the compatibility of the latter with irony is provided by Hutcheon in [9, p. 33-34]: «Both [parody and metaphor] require that the decoder construct a second meaning through inferences about surface statements and supplement the foreground with acknowledgement and knowledge of a backgrounded context. Rather than argue, as does Wayne Booth, 1974, p. 177, *apud* [9]), that, although similar in structure to metaphor and therefore to parody, irony is “subtractive” in terms of strategy in its directing of the decoder away from the surface meaning, I would say that both levels of meaning must coexist structurally in irony, and that this similarity to parody on the formal level is what makes them so compatible».

¹⁴See derived figurative meaning: *black* [=having the darkest colour, like the sky at night when there is no light] → *black* [=making people feel unhappy or lose hope] (cf [18, p. 129]).

¹⁵Cf [12, Note 3, p. 255]: “In a manuscript note Coleridge confessed that his supposed sleep was actually an opium-induced reverie”. As for the *ad hoc* parodist, the series of parodies under examination, as previously intimated, date back to her student days, when Casa Poporului was merely a bleak prospect.

¹⁶Cf *A damsel with her dulcimer/In a vision once I saw/It was an Abyssinian maid,/And on a dulcimer she played;/Singing of Mount Abora* (30 [8]-40 [2]).

¹⁷Cf also *And ‘mid this tumult Kubla heard from far/Ancestral voices prophesying war* (20 [10]-30 [1]), recontextualizable in retrospect as the December 1989 revolution.

¹⁸Cf *In seinen Armen das Kind war tot* [7, p. 98].

¹⁹Cf also Frye's contention: "In the most concentrated form of the demonic parody the two [tyrant-leader and sacrificed victim] become the same" [6, p. 148].

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