Parody: Another Revision

Mohammad Reza Sadrian
Assistant professor,
Islamshahr Azad University, Islamshahr Branch Tehran IRAN
mrsadrian@iiau.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

The vast diversity of the proposed definitions of parody, both before and after the twentieth century, can be an emblem of the lack of a thorough agreement amongst the literary critics about the definition of this literary technique (genre?!). While there is not a comprehensive all-accepted definition of parody, modern and postmodern literatures both exhibit a wide application of it. After looking at the definition of parody under Bakhtin's dialogic concepts, Genette's structuralist viewpoints, and Barthes's poststructuralist notions this study endeavours to put forward a more comprehensive and more applicable definition of parody mainly based on Bakhtin's dialogic criticism. Parody then can be defined as a deliberate imitation or transformation of a socio-cultural product (including literary and non-literary texts, and utterance in its very broad Bakhtinian understanding of it) that recreates its original subject having at least a playful stance towards it.

Key Words: Parody, Dialogic Criticism, Bakhtin, Playfulness, Deliberation

One of the major concerns of poststructuralist theories in general and postmodern literary practices in particular is the call for plurality and thereupon criticism. In line with these concerns, parody as a literary device is a significant method in demonstrating and responding to this notion. Imitating a subject, parody enables the writers to depict at least two voices simultaneously. One is the writer's own voice and the other is the voice of the original subject that is parodied. Also, since parody takes a kind of attitude which is most of the time both evaluative and playful towards its subject of imitation, it criticizes that very subject in order to reconstruct a whole new subject.

Parody has been used from the time of the antique Greek plays to the present time. The application of parody is detectable in the ancient time from the works of Hegemon the Thasian, who lived in the fifth century BC and in his *Poetics* Aristotle refers to the parodic nature of his plays, and from the earliest extant example of parody, *Batrachomyomachia*[1], to Euripides' *Cyclops*, which "provides a structural parody of the Cyclops episode in the *Odyssey*" (Dentith, 2000, p. 42), and most of the plays of Aristophanes (448-388 BC), which are "full of parodic allusions, most notably to the plays

of Euripides" (Dentith, 2000, p. 43). Seneca (4 BC-65 AD) and Petronius (?- 66 AD) are two Roman writers who employed parody in their works. Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* shows "a parody of the council of the Gods, and another of the judgment in Hell" (Dentith 48). Petronius's *Satyricon* "is a parody of the platonic Symposium" (Dentith, 2000, p. 47). Parody plays a central role in the writings of the second century Hellenistic writer Lucian, too. Lucian's *The Judging of the Goddesses*, for instance, is a parodic prose version of the story of the judgment of Paris (Dentith, 2000, p. 49). *The Consolation of Philosophy* which is written by Boethius during the sixth century AD is yet another example of parodic forms used by Roman writers (Dentith, 2000, p. 49). *The Consolation of Philosophy* was so widely known during the medieval culture that it was translated into Anglo-Saxon by Alfred the Great and later into English by Geoffrey Chaucer. In turn, one of the earliest applications of parody can be seen in Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales*. Later, one of the earliest definitions of parody in England was put forward by Ben Jonson (1572-1637) in his *Every Man in his Humor*. In the following centuries besides applying parody, some writers tried putting forward a more applicable definition of it. Joseph Addison's definition, asserted in number 249 of his magazine *The Spectator* published during Elizabethan period, and Issac D'Israeli's definition in the Victorian period are the most notable ones.

The long history of the definitions and applications of parody exhibits a wide variety of ways for defining it; a variety which becomes even broader when parody is studied under the light of the concepts of poststructuralism and postmodernism. The diversity of the definitions of parody in the pre-twentieth century English literature is itself a sign of the elusiveness of the term. During the twentieth century, with the advent of a host of new literary theories, the problem of defining parody seems to have become harder to solve; nonetheless, the illuminating concepts of Mikhail M. Bakhtin's dialogic criticism, Gerard Genette's structuralist approach, and Roland Barthes's poststructuralist notion shed light on some of the problematic aspects of the definition of parody and can be used to redefine it.

Bakhtin's contribution to the definition of parody could be generally divided into two categories. The first one is his direct elaboration on the definition of parody and the second is his dialogic concepts under which parody can be scrutinized.

Bakhtin's prime judgments about the definition of parody can be enumerated as parody's being a field for the clash of voices –parody's polyphonic nature– its being double-voiced, its carnivalesque role, and its having different kinds. He believes that the response of parody to its original subject mainly includes a kind of laughter. The laughing attitude of parody towards its original subject is considered to be the symptom of the hostility of parody towards its original subject (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 52). Parody, then, exhibits a battleground wherein the original subject of parody is challenged. To challenge the original subject, parody must necessarily represent it. This means that there must be at least two voices present in parody. One is the voice of parody and the other is the voice of the original subject. These are the reasons that make Bakhtin consider parody as double-voiced (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 185). At the same time, the mere existence of two voices in parody is enough for him to call it polyphonic. The presence of a second voice –or more– in a literary work undermines the power and the force of the first dominant voice. Only some literary works, however, represent the second voice as opposing the first one.

The polyphonic nature of parody and the clash of voices in it are what give parody a carnivalesque role. Carnivalesque, Bakhtin argues, is a feature in some literary works which exists when the dominant voice –or the authorial/sacred voice– is challenged especially by being ridiculed. The very ridiculing of the dominant voice establishes the grounds for its enfeebling and destruction. By undermining its original subject, parody paves the way for the creation of a new subject –a new dominant voice, which is the voice of parody.

By accepting a range of original subjects for parody, Bakhtin classifies it into some different kinds. The original subject of parody for Bakhtin can be another person's style or typical manner of seeing, thinking, or speaking. It can be the verbal forms of another person's work or it can be the deepest principles governing another's discourse (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 194). The salient point insinuated in such a classification is its endeavour to broaden the previously-drawn restricted circle of the original subject of parody to any discourse form; that is, it is not necessarily confined to the written verbal forms of language. It is so because Bakhtin accepts the typical manner of seeing or thinking as a kind of the original subject of parody.

From another point of view, Bakhtin's dialogic concepts clarify the definition of parody, too. Bakhtin's dialogic criticism stresses the dialogic nature of the literary works. In other words, every single work is considered as a single chain in the whole chain of literary works of past, present, and future. A literary work is also looked at as an utterance which presupposes its being a response to another work and necessitates being responded to by its addressee. A literary work thus is itself a response to a previous one and necessarily possesses an author and an addressee. Parody works, like the other literary works, are responses to previous works and they necessitate addressees. This means that the recognition of the original subject of parody by its addressee is a mandatory factor in considering a work to be a parody; otherwise, it would be like the other literary works which are responses to their previously written works and the recognition of this relationship is not a significant matter for their addresses.

The structuralistic view point of Gerard Genette about parody is yet another touchstone in the history of the definitions of parody in the twentieth century. Genette calls the relationship between a text and an earlier one hypertextuality; of course, if this relationship is not in the manner of commentary (Genette, 1997, p. 5). He considers transformation and imitation as two methods used in different kinds of hypertextualities. Parody, based on Genette's point of view, uses only transformation in relation to its original subject; transformation is considered to exist only for individual texts, not for genres and styles. The mood of parody towards its original subject is the other point that Genette emphasizes. Parody illustrates a playful mood in relation to its original subject. The playful mood, however, can merge into the satirical one. Nevertheless, if the mood of transformation of an earlier text is dominantly satirical, Genette prefers to dismiss it from the circle of parody (Genette, 1997, p. 28).

Genette's hard and fast definition of parody has at least the advantage of broadening the scope of parody from the perspective of its mood in relation to its original subject. If the mood of parody towards its original subject is to be considered playful, it can embrace both of the etymological meanings of parody; that is, it can be a text mocking another one and it can be a text beside another one.

Nevertheless, Genette's definition of parody has the disadvantage of confining the scope of parody to short passages and texts. If parody's relation to its original subject is only that of transformation of individual texts and if parody cannot imitate styles and genres, it will be confined to the texts that directly transform their original subject's texts; this is indeed the parody of titles and very short texts. Genette's definition of parody, thus, cannot include texts whose original subjects are longer than short texts or titles.

Furthermore, Roland Barthes's poststructural notions about texts and authors yield some divergent perspectives from which parody can be scrutinized. Barthes considers texts as signs –the signs that do not and cannot rest on single definite signifieds. Texts, then, furnish several signifieds; that is, they are plural. The very plurality of texts is the reason why texts cannot be categorized under a single genre (Barthes, 1989, pp. 1005-1010). Parody texts and their original subjects, from this point of view, cannot be classified under a single genre. In other words, it will be impossible to have genres as the original subject of parody. Barthes, thus, cannot

accede to a definition of parody which in any way embraces genre.

Barthes's idea about author is the other illuminating concept that can shed more light on the definition of parody. Barthes rejects the humanistic understanding of author; that is, he does not accept the concept of author whose purpose, intention, or control affects the form or the meaning of a text. Author is simply a space wherein texts –languages– circulate. He chooses the name scriptor for the previously called author; a scriptor who is devoid of originality, purpose, and intention in creating texts (Barthes, 1988, pp. 167-172). Regarding the definition of parody from Barthes's view point about author will result in declining a particular author's manner, matter, or style as being the original subject of parody. At the same time, the authorial intention in creating parody loses its previously held stance. The very act of defining parody, as a kind, also seems to be quite inadmissible from a Barthesian poststructuralist perspective.

Another Perspective

Based on the extended ideas of M. M. Bakhtin and G. Genette, a definition of parody can be put forward that can embrace a wider variety of its practices in postmodern literature. Parody, then, can be defined as a deliberate imitation or transformation of a socio-cultural product that takes at least a playful stance towards its original subject.

The proposed definition of parody stresses the authorial intention in creating parody. The author's intention is taken into account following the lead of Bakhtin while from a Barthesian perspective the existence of the adjective "deliberate" in the proposed definition of parody cannot be acceptable. The existence of the author's intention in the proposed definition of parody leads to rejecting as parody those texts that unintentionally use another text, discourse, or social product as their hypotext. If an author is not aware of the existence of a hypotext that is parodied in his/her text, the attitude of that text toward its hypotext will be a haphazard unintentional one. In other words, the attitude of that text towards

its hypotext will not be an authorial one since the author of that text has not known the existence of such a hypotext.

Although Genette dismisses 'imitation' in his definition of parody, the proposed definition accepts imitation as one of the ways by which the hypotext of parody can be used in parody. If only transformation is to be accepted for the definition of parody, parody will be confined to titles and very short texts.

Following the lead of Bakhtin, the proposed definition of parody considers a range of subjects as the hypotexts of parody. The hypotext of parody can be a particular text's or a specific writer's manner, matter, tone, style, diction, attitude, or idea. It can be a literary genre or any mode associated with writing whether literary or non-literary. The hypotext of parody can also embrace any kind of socio-cultural product. From Barthes's poststructuralist view point a particular text, a specific writer's style, or a genre cannot be acknowledged as the hypotexts of parody since they are not pure as they seem to be; that is, they do not possess an entity which could be self-sufficient and could exist without the existence of the associated entities. In line with Barthes's poststructural notions, however, this study proposes the cited hypotexts of parody not as entities segregated from the other associated entities –texts, authors, genres, language, etc– but as some useful vocabulary which could be used to examine parody in postmodern literature.

In the proposed definition of parody the attitude of parody towards its hypotext includes a playful one. This idea is taken from Genette's definition of parody; however, the word 'playful' is not applied as Genette employs it. The playful attitude of parody can be taken together with a range of other attitudes, such as the evaluative or non-evaluative, ironical or satirical, and derisive or admiring; nonetheless, the plurality of attitudes of parody towards its hypotext does not exclude the playful one otherwise the hypertextuality of a text can be interpreted as allusion, satire, travesty, pastiche, cento, etc.

Parody can be divided into different kinds based on its various hypotexts. Bakhtin enumerates some

kinds of parody based on its hypotext, such as genre parody, satyr play, parodia sacra, etc. If the kinds of parody are not to be categorized based on some categories of hypotexts, it seems that there will be the possibility of having innumerable kinds of parody because there are innumerable hypotexts for parody. It is more appropriate to assume some categories for the different hypotexts of parody and based on that divide parody into some classifications. Simon Dentith in his *Parody* divides parody into two groups. One is specific and the other one is general parody. The specific parody "consists of a parody of a specific art-work or piece of writing …[while] general parody takes as its hypotext not one specific work but a whole manner, style or discourse" (Dentith, 2000, pp.193-194). Expanding Bakhtin's outlooks and Dentith's views can result in assuming three broad categories for parody. One is specific parody which takes as its hypotext a specific text's or writer's manner, tone, style, diction, attitude, or idea. The next one is genre parody which has a genre or a generic style as its hypotext. The concept of genre is used to include any kind of genre or mode of writing, in general. It can be a literary genre or a non-literary one. The last but not the least important kind of parody is discourse parody. Discourse parody takes as its hypotext any type of human activity from verbal to non-verbal forms. At the same time, this vast group includes all kinds of parodies save the mentioned specific and genre parodies.

Based on the range of parody's attitudes toward its hypotext, the functions of parody can vary. Since the attitude of parody towards its hypotext can be an evaluative one, its function can range from a derisive and destructive stance toward its hypotext to a playful appreciative one. Moreover, since the attitude of parody toward its hypotext can be non-evaluative, the function of parody can be a playful creative one. It seems whether the function of parody is to destroy its hypotext or not, it has a playful creative function, at large. It is possible, then, to accept a range of functions and goals for parody; however, there is a common function in all kinds of parodies which is the playful creation/recreation of

their hypotexts.

Conclusion

Parody as a literary form is highly ambiguous. Its ambiguity is mainly because of different definitions that are put forward by various theorists and writers on the one hand and the variety of its practices by miscellaneous writers on the other. A definition of parody which can embrace wider instances of its postmodern practices with less ambiguity specifically concerning its borderlines with the other closely-related literary devices and forms such as pastiche, travesty, caricature, satire, allusion, cento, etc. can facilitate appreciating postmodern literary works far better. The existence of many definitions put forward by different authors especially in the twentieth century –a few of which can be detected in Genette's *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree*, Rose's *Parody: ancient, modern, and postmodern,* Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms,* Danes's *Parody: Critical Concepts Versus Literary Practices,* Dentith's *Parody*, Jump's *Burlesque*, etc.- is a witness to the efforts directed towards meeting the need for a comprehensive definition of the term.

As yet another attempt to revise and improve the definition of parody, this article proposes a definition which may prove to be more inclusive in terms of the postmodern practices of parody. Parody then can be defined as a deliberate imitation or transformation of a socio-cultural product that takes at least a playful stance towards its original subject. This definition is thus primarily applicable for scrutinizing postmodern literature and is mainly based on an extended Bakhtinian view although it makes use of Genette's structuralist view point as well.

---

[1] Meaning 'War between the Mice and the Frog', it is one of the earliest extant parodies of Homer. In his translation of Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* Holquist in an explanatory footnote to 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse'. asserts that *Batrachomyomachia* is now usually ascribed to Pigers of Halicarnassus, the brother-in-law of Mausoleus, whose tomb was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

References

Bakhtin, M. M. (1990). The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetic (2nd ed.). (C. Emerson, Trans.) Manchester and Minnesota: University of Minnesota.

Barthes, R. (1989). From Work to Text. In D.H. Richter (Ed.), The Critical Tradition, Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends (pp. 1006-1010). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Barthes, R. (1988). The Death of the Author. In D. Lodge (Ed.), Modern Criticism and Theory (pp. 167-172). New York: Longman.

Dentith, S. (2000). Parody. London: Routledge.

Genette, G. (1997). Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree. Lincoln: Nebraska UP.

Mohammad Reza Sadrian
No. 14- Ghareh Pasha Alley- Foad Moosavi Street- Azarbaeejan Street- Tehran

Date of Birth: 1353/6/29
Place of Birth: Tehran

EMPLOYMENT

2001 to present   Faculty Member of Islamic Azad University- Islamshahr Branch.

EDUCATION

2004-2009   PhD in English Literature at Middle East Technical University- Ankara- Turkey.

1997-2000 MA in English Language and Literature at Islamic Azad University-Central Tehran Branch- Tehran.

1993-1997 BA in English Language and Literature at Islamic Azad University-Boroujerd Branch- Borujerd