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LITERARY PARODY IN THE FIRST DECADE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Abstract

The first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by a “revival” of the genre of the parody novel, which manifested itself in the publication of a series of books poking fun at the most famous bestsellers of the recent years. This paper examines the specific features of contemporary parody novels, considers the functions they perform in the social context of popular fiction and tries to account for the proliferation of the parody novel genre in the present historical moment described as the age of globalization.

Key words: parody novel, popular fiction, the age of globalization

The first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by the emergence of an interesting literary phenomenon – a “revival” of the genre of the parody novel, which manifested itself in the publication of a series of books poking fun at the most famous bestsellers of the recent years. The book that set the trend was Michael Gerber’s witty parody of the first four Harry Potter novels by J.K. Rowling. Gerber’s parody first appeared online as a self-published “print-on-demand” book in December 2001 and became an instant success, drawing thousands of visitors to <www.barrytrotter.com>. In 2002 Gerber’s parody entitled *Barry Trotter and the Unauthorized Parody* was published by the American publishing company Simon and Schuster; the same year the book was printed in Great Britain by Gollancz under the title *Barry Trotter and the Shameless Parody*. The wide popularity of Gerber’s parody led to his writing a parody-sequel, *Barry Trotter and the*

Unnecessary Sequel (2003), and a parody-prequel, *Barry Trotter and the Dead Horse* (2004).

The publication of Gerber's first Harry Potter parody coincided with the reprint of Henry N. Beard and Douglas C. Kenney's *Bored of the Rings* by Gollancz in 2001 (the book was first published in 1969 by Signet for the Harvard Lampoon, an undergraduate humour publication and social organization at Harvard University). "Tolkienmania" brought to life Adam Roberts's *The Soddit, or Cashing in Again* (2003) and *The Sellamillion* (2004). Shortly after the release of the film *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) Gerber produced *The Chronicles of Blarnia: The Lying Bitch in the Wardrobe* (2005). The incredible success of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) was followed by a number of parodies, with Henry Beard's *The Dick Cheney Code* (2004), Adam Roberts's *The Va Dinci Cod* (2005), Toby Clements's *The Asti Spumante Code* (2005) and Robert Rankin's *The Da-da-de-da-da Code* (2007) among them.

It is the purpose of this essay to examine the specific features of contemporary parody novels, to consider the functions they perform in the social context of popular fiction and to try to account for the proliferation of the parody novel genre in the present historical moment described as the age of globalization.

Parody (from Greek *parodeia*, 'a song sung alongside another') is usually defined as "a mocking imitation of the style of a literary work or works, ridiculing the stylistic habits of an author or school by exaggerated mimicry (Baldick 1996: 161)". Parodies are commonly classified into ludic and satirical ones. While the former are aimed at merely amusing and entertaining the reader, the latter have an evaluative or normative function providing criticism of marked stylistic features of a writer, deriding overused conventions of a school/genre, or ridiculing the ideas and contents of a source text. Moreover, literary parodies may also be used for political purposes, as a weapon in the cultural wars of a given historical period. Another distinction is made between specific and general parody, i.e.

between the fully developed formal parody which constitutes the complete text – whose whole *raison d'être* is its relation to its precursor text or parodied mode – and those glancing parodic allusions which are to be found very widely in writing, often aimed at no more than a phrase or fragment of current jargon and sometimes indicated by little more than "scare quotes" (the written equivalent of a hostile intonation) (Dentith 2000: 7).

At the end of the twentieth century there appeared some important publications in which attempts were made to rethink the traditional understanding of parody as a mocking imitation. Margaret Rose (1979) called attention to the fact that certain kinds of parodic fiction act as metafiction, i.e. in parodying one text (or a kind of text), the parody text holds up a mirror to its own fictional practices. In her later work Rose reconnected parody with the fully comic practice to be found in Rabelais's or Sterne's writing (Rose 1993). On the other hand, Linda Hutcheon (1985) made an effort to return the term parody to a more neutral usage in which the element of mockery would be absent – in which case parody would be more like the practice of imitation (Dentith 2000: 193). Simon Dentith proposed a broad and comprehensive definition of parody as “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice (Dentith 2000: 9)”.

The tradition of literary parody is very rich in English language literature, suffice to mention Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741), Jane Austen's *Love and Friendship* (1789) and *Northanger Abbey* (1818), T.L. Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), W.M. Thackeray's *Rebecca and Rowena* (1849) and other parodic works, or Bret Harte's *Sensation Novels Condensed* (1875). As Mikhail Bakhtin remarks, “there never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of literary discourse [...] that did not have its own parodying and travesty double, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie*” (Bakhtin 1981: 53). Parody thus is as old as literary art itself and can be found at every stage of the historical development of literature. However, some historical periods seem to be especially conducive to parody, while at others parody withers away.

There has been considerable debate about the role and place of parody in the postmodern age. On the one hand, Fredric Jameson in his well-known essay “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1984) argues that under late capitalism there seems no longer to be a cultural norm to resist, therefore parody of dominant norms is impossible and gives way to pastiche which takes no critical distance from the material it recycles, in fact, it is “blank parody” (Jameson 1991 [1984]: 17–18). Pastiche is then seen as characteristic of postmodernism and thus expresses the cultural logic of late capitalism, since the absolute extension of the commodity system prevents the recourse to any discourse of nature or tradition (as in earlier Modernism) which could be used to measure or ironize the forms that are pastiched (Allen 2000: 183–184).

On the other hand, Linda Hutcheon, polemicizing with Jameson, calls parody “a perfect postmodernist form” because “it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions (Hutcheon 1988: 11)”. Hutcheon defines parody as repetition with difference (emphasizing the latter): “A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony (Hutcheon 1988: 32)”. However, Hutcheon’s understanding of parody has been criticized on the grounds that in her works it acquires too broad a meaning replacing at times the notion of intertextuality; as a result, she has to continue to reshape and redirect her definition of parody (Allen 2000; Dentith 2000).

With respect to this debate, a question arises: how to account for the flourishing of parody novels today, in the historical circumstances of late capitalism with its global market system and commodification of knowledge and intellectual work? Are parody novels, being a small part of contemporary popular culture, which is the product of a huge entertainment industry, just commodities created with a view to meeting the demands of a mass consumer? I will deal with this question in the last section of the essay, after discussing the specificity of today’s parody novels and their function in contemporary cultural discourse.

The parody novels published at the start of the new century share some important common features. They represent the “specific” kind of parody, i.e. they are mainly engaged with one precursor text and are long enough to be published as a single book. One of the main stylistic devices used in these parodies to travesty the original is a kind of pun known in classical rhetoric as *antisthecon* – transformation of a word by replacing a sound, a letter or a syllable in such a way that the newly created word should rhyme with the original one (this device can be observed already in the parody titles where, for example, Harry Potter becomes Barry Trotter, the Hobbit is the Soddit, Narnia turns Blarnia, etc.). As a result, the effect of semantic degradation is achieved, when words (especially proper names) acquire negative, ironic and derogatory connotations.

The majority of contemporary parody novels are based on the greatest international bestsellers – books by J.K. Rowling, J.R.R. Tolkien and Dan Brown, which represent the key genres of popular literature – fantasy fiction and detective fiction and which have redefined and enriched

these traditional genres giving rise to new forms. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien, creating a vast and coherent **alternative world, with its own** mythology, chronology, and cartography, whose complexity far outruns the immediate needs of plot, has produced a work that is considered to be a definitive version of the fantasy genre. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, combining gothic elements, fantasy and mystery, has become the archetypal postmodern tale for children and young adults. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, drawing on the myth of international conspiracy, which has always fascinated the popular imagination, and **setting the murder mystery plot** in the present with the solution of the mystery lying in the past and revealing esoteric knowledge to the reader, has reshaped the classic conspiracy thriller and introduced a distinctive formula of a subgenre which came to be known as "esoteric whodunit". Thus the sources of the parodies, despite much controversy and the negative criticism they evoked, are influential texts of popular culture which inspired many followers and imitators. The parodies, providing a critique of the tradition to which their sources belong, at the same time, paradoxically, authorize this tradition and confirm the status of their precursor texts within it.

All of the parody novels discussed here combine ludic and satirical functions. They are fun to read, part of the enjoyment depending on the sense of play and – for the fans of the original texts – on the extension of pleasure connected with the initial encounter with **the source** (John Ellis 1982) argues that this kind of pleasure is evoked by all types of literary appropriation). But these parodies also hold up to ridicule the absurdities of fantasy novels and conspiracy thrillers – those "falsifying genres which offer wonder and wish-fulfillment (Dentith 2000: 74)". **The inconsistencies** of Tolkien's plot, his "linguistic and mythic structures, [...] his use of Norse tales and wicked phoneme fricatives" (Beard and Kenney 2001: 2) are parodied in *Bored of the Rings*, together with the source's paratext which is imitated by the inclusion of the preface, the prologue, poetry, songs and a double page map which has almost nothing to do with the events in the text. Gerber's *The Chronicles of Blarnia: The Lying Bitch in the Wardrobe* (2005), which features the Perversie siblings, apart from criticizing the idiosyncrasies of C.S. Lewis's style, has a broader scope, being a spoof on contemporary fiction's preoccupation with dark themes and perverse material – deviant sexuality and dysfunctional families (as, for example, in Ian McEwan's early fiction, associations with which Gerber's text evokes). Gerber's Harry Potter parodies make jibes at the "political correctness"

of Rowling's books, at what the parodist takes to be their tokenism – superficial reference to difference and multiculturalism: “Barry got a letter from the headmaster. He showed it to the group. ‘Maybe it’s good news [...],’ said Manuel Rodriguez, a third-year who will not reappear, but was shoehorned in so that not *everybody* in this story was white, middle-class, and British (Gerber 2001: 8, original emphasis)”. Interestingly, the authors of the parodies often emphasize their admiration for the writers whose works they ironically and playfully mimic. Gerber, who calls himself “a great big Potter fan”, dedicates his first Harry Potter parody to J.K. Rowling “with impudent admiration”, while Beard and Kenney in their “Foreword” to *Bored of the Rings* write: “All fooling aside, we consider ourselves honored to be able to make fun of such an impressive, truly masterful work of genius and imagination (Bear and Kenney 2001: 3)”. In consequence, contemporary parodies are simultaneously irreverent and honorific, mocking their sources and paying tribute to them.

Twenty-first-century parody novels, typically, include elements of political satire serving as a comment on the social and political concerns of our world. For example, in *The Dick Cheney Code* Henry Beard scorns the Bush/Cheney administration for conservative policy and arrogant leadership, while *Bored of the Rings* makes allusions to the plight of native Americans and illegal immigration in the USA.

More significantly, however, parody novels function as one of the specific ways in which globalization has been registered by contemporary literature. As is well known, globalization has emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century as a defining paradigm in nearly every area of human activity. The term globalization is used to denote a process by which regional economies, societies, and cultures have become integrated through a globe-spanning network of communication and trade. David Held, one of the leading British theorists of globalization, underlines its manifold nature and describes it as “a process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in their spatial organization of social relations and transactions – assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact – generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power (Held *et al.* 1999: 16)”.

Globalization has also generated international opposition – usually referred to as the anti-globalization movement, though many scholars point out that the term “anti-globalization” has been misused because in fact this movement represents “a wide range of interests and issues and many of

the people involved in the anti-globalization movement do support closer ties between the various peoples and cultures of the world through, for example, aid, assistance for refugees, and global environmental issues” (Stiglitz and Charlton 2005: 54 n. 23). Noam Chomsky notes that the term globalization

has been appropriated by the powerful to refer to a specific form of international economic integration, one based on investor rights, with the interests of people incidental. [...] Accordingly, advocates of other forms of globalization are described as “anti-globalization”; and some, unfortunately, even accept this term, though it is a term of propaganda that should be dismissed with ridicule. No sane person is opposed to globalization, that is, international integration. [...] globalization [...] attends to the rights of people, not private power systems (Chomsky 2002).

Contemporary parody novels are products of economic and cultural globalization. Their effective reception (including translation into foreign languages) is ensured by the status of their source texts as global blockbusters. Together with film adaptations, parody novels have become part of an industry of spin-offs spawned by their sources. They capitalize on the success of the great bestsellers and at the same time act as a marketing tool to boost their sales.

Globalization is explicitly thematized in many of the parodies, which become a medium through which some of the contradictions of today’s global society are played out. Contemporary parody novels often examine material conditions of literary practice in the age of globalization and discuss the impact of globalization processes on the production, circulation and reception of literary texts. The damaging effects the publishing industry has on contemporary literature by treating it as a commodity are discussed, for example, in Toby Clements’s *The Asti Spumante Code*. The parody satirizes the “book business” which, by adopting a very narrow definition of genre as literary forms that satisfy certain expectations in a delimited readership (such as chick lit, detective fiction, science fiction, romance, etc.) promotes the formulaic and the conventional and compartmentalizes the reading public (in particular by gender stereotyping) so as to facilitate “niche marketing”. In the book, Professor James Crack explains to Emily that there was once an age “when writers wrote books that both men and women read. Some of the earlier writers are a bit obscure, but think Charles

Dickens. Think Jane Austen. Think Henry James.” But then publishers realized they could “double their profits if they forced writers to write books only for men, say, or women, or even children (Clements 2005: 57)”.

Since the parody novels frequently take as their subject matter the publishing industry of which they are a product and comment on their own status as a commodity within the global economy, they have a self-reflexive dimension, which, according to Dana Polan, is a recurrent aspect of popular culture in general (Polan 1986: 175). Moreover, an opposition to the perceived negative aspects of globalization, especially to the unregulated power at large and multinational corporations, has figured prominently in some of the parodies. As a representative example I will discuss Gerber's *Barry Trotter and the Shameless Parody* at some length.

Gerber's parody describes the adventures of twenty-two-year old Barry Trotter during the eleventh year of his stay at the Hogwash School for Wizards. After the publication of J.G. Rollins's book based on his life, *Barry Trotter and the Philosopher's Scone* (released in the USA as *Barry Trotter and the Magic Biscuit*), he became so famous and so indispensable for the reputation and finances of the school that he has been allowed to stay at Hogwash as long as he wishes. Life is very good for Barry. However, the production of a film version, *Barry Trotter and the Inevitable Attempt to Cash-In*, has been started by Barry's mortal enemy, the evil Lord Valumart and his minions, the Marketors. Afraid that the release of the film will attract so many unruly fans to Hogwash that the school will not be able to function and will have to be closed down, its headmaster, the great wizard Bumblemore gives Barry a task: to stop the production of the film. In this ordeal Barry is helped by his loyal friends, Lon Measly and Ermine Cringer.

Informed by his anti-globalist perspective, Gerber's parody is a biting social satire directed against what he sees as the corrupt agency of multinational corporations represented in the text by Fantastic Books, Wagner Bros and McDaniel's. The grotesque portrayal of these corporations serves the author as a means to expose the mechanisms of their influence on the consumer, especially on the most defenseless and susceptible one – the child reader and viewer.

Gerber shows how the success of a book triggers off a gigantic marketing mechanism, all the operations of which are aimed at getting the maximum profits out of the bestseller. The book alludes to the aggressive

advertising campaign organized by Warner Bros which turned a likable book character – Harry Potter – into an international brand, a commodity which brings enormous profits. Similarly to their real-life counterparts, the multinationals of Gerber's book join their efforts to spin off the Trotterian industry and incite Trottermania. As Lord Valumart cynically confesses:

There will be Barry Trotter wands, robes, brooms, figures, board games, stationary, pens, candy, T-shirts, coffee cups, calendars, audio books, stones, trading cards, comics (manga, alternative and regular), theme restaurants, an amusement park, a video game – and maybe a hockey team, if I can find enough Russians. The kids will have stickers and party favors and shampoo that cleans your hair “magically” but is really the same old crap in new bottles. Mom gets Earwig earrings, Dad gets the Trotter edition SUV. [...] Their minds will turn to glop, so full of my dreck that they won't even be able to *imagine* life being different (Gerber 2002: 244, original emphasis).

One of the important aspects of the book is its critique of commercialization of a writer's creative work under the conditions of the global economy. According to Gerber, a successful writer loses her creative and personal freedom being forced to serve the capital which turns her into a money-making machine. The situation of J.G. Rollins becomes a symbol of a writer's exploitation. J.G. Rollins, who has written eight books about Barry, has increasingly greater difficulties in producing the next bestseller about him. Tired of her hero, she is thinking about giving up writing books about Barry. However, Fantastic, for whom Rollins is their “golden Mother Goose” (Gerber 2002: 171), cannot allow it and kidnap the writer. One of the most memorable scenes in the book is the description of Rollins' confinement in the Torture Chamber of Fantastic Books where the floor is electrified; whenever the writer drops below a certain number of words per minute, she gets an electric shock. The metaphor “bestselling writer = prisoner” / “publishing corporation = prison” symbolizes the rigid system of control and coercion which is imposed by publishing corporations on the best-selling authors through contracts and huge royalties and which makes the writers their hostages.

Gerber satirizes the inevitable practice of sequelling bestsellers. In this he continues the satirical tradition of W.M. Thackeray who ridiculed the spurious continuations of popular novels in his short story “Proposals

for a Continuation of *Ivanhoe* in a Letter to Monsieur Alexander Dumas by Monsieur Michael Angelo Titmarsh” (1846) which later served as a basis for his parody novel *Rebecca and Rowena*. According to Jack Zipes, in Western popular culture “one story is never enough, especially if it sells well and sits well with audiences. Repeat it, tweak it, and milk it until the ratings diminish (Zipes 2002: 177–8)”. Gerber demonstrates how today this tendency is stretched *ad absurdum* with the creative process becoming mechanized and resembling a mass production when books, just like automobiles and other commodities, roll from the production line. It is worth pointing out that Gerber’s critique of sequelling as a device used “to leech off” a massive pop culture phenomenon does not prevent him from producing a sequel and a prequel to his first Harry Potter parody, which can be seen as a parodic imitation of the detrimental practice but also as a way to use this practice (playfully and “shamelessly”) for material benefits.

Gerber’s book fictionalizes another distinctive feature of global culture – the thorough entanglement of the publishing industry with the other major culture industries, especially the film industry, and the promotion of text as an image through postmodern marketing strategies. Gerber maintains that Hollywood film adaptations deprive the child of an individual, personal and unique experience of communicating with the book; the reader’s perception becomes vulgarized and standardized being mediated by the images imposed by the corporations:

When you’re reading the books, you provide the pictures. So not only do you tell yourself the story in a way that is meaningful – Bumblemore looks like your favorite Uncle – you also exercise your imagination while doing it. [...] So say I’m a kid who sees the movie, then picks up the books. Who’s making the pictures then? The movie people! And since movies are a business – and a pretty cynical one at that – the pictures that they give you will be the blandest, most mainstream ones they can come up with. They’ll put some market-researched, audience-tested, focus-grouped crap into your head – and call it Barry Trotter (Gerber 2002: 263–264)!

Gerber’s novel also reveals his deep concern with what Andrew Brown calls “the rapacity of copyright holders” (Brown 2006: w.p.). According to Gerber, the immediate cause for his writing the first Harry Potter parody was “some fan-unfriendly behaviour of Warner Bros, their excessively

zealous control of the Harry Potter brand (qtd. in Yates 2001)”. Gerber’s novels contain numerous jibes at rigid copyright law, which calls attention to the paradox of contemporary culture: “the collision of two contradictory tendencies [...]. On the one hand, more and more ideas are owned, sold, and protected; but at the same time, more and more of what is on sale has been copied with very small variations from other things also on sale” (Brown 2006: w.p.).

I would like to conclude my discussion of contemporary parody novels by considering the question about their role in the postmodern age posed at the beginning of this essay. As mentioned above, parody novels should be considered in the social context of contemporary popular fiction, which is a quintessential product of globalization. Critical opinion concerning popular literature (and popular culture at large) is divided. At one extreme there are those who consider popular culture to be a negative phenomenon in modern life; at the other end we find those who detail both its positive and negative aspects. In Scott McCracken’s words:

The former see mass culture as an irresistible force, creating standard products for a standard consumer. They argue that it eliminates any spark of creativity in its audience. The latter are more cautious, understanding mass culture as a contradictory phenomenon, open to intervention and affording the opportunity for critical engagement by its audience (McCracken 1998: 19).

For example, Jack Zipes (following Jameson’s ideas) sees popular literature as being dependent on the market conditions of the culture industry. He argues that in conditions when corporate conglomerates control the mass media and market demands, when the production, distribution and reception of books are driven by commodity consumption that at the same time sets the parameters of reading and aesthetic taste, for a book to be a success it is necessary to conform to the ideology of standardization and consumerism typical of the contemporary Western culture industry. Zipes maintains that all works of popular culture express dominant ideology, impose sameness and suppress difference:

In American and British culture, the quality of what rises to the top is always appropriated, and if the phenomenon does somehow contain some qualities that are truly different, they are bound to be corroded and degraded, turning the phenomenon against itself and into a homogenized commodity that will reap

huge profits until the next phenomenon appears on the horizon. Difference and otherness are obliterated in the process. What appears unique conceals the planned production of commonality and undermines the autonomy of judgment (Zipes 2002: 175–6).

According to this view, parody novels have been published and become successful because they themselves are conventional and have been calculated to conform to the popular taste.

However, every work of literature is ideologically heterogeneous and is made up of conflicting discourses. As Anthony Easthope argues, the view that “high” literature is authentic and “beyond” or in an inherently critical relation with ideology while popular culture remains inauthentic, merely a passive and “transparent” bearer of ideology is untenable as ideological content differs little in contemporary examples of high literature and pop genres (Easthope 1996). A similar idea is expressed by H. Porter Abbott who writes that “it is far from true that the more expensive public forms of narrative invariably eliminate the subversive and counter-cultural” (Porter Abbott 2003: 120) because “[m]ost narratives of any complexity can be read as efforts to negotiate opposing psychological and cultural claims (Porter Abbott 2003: 175)”.

As the discussion of parody novels in this essay has shown, the cultural work performed by literary parodies at the beginning of the new millennium is highly ambivalent. They are both ludic and satirical, undermining and upholding the conventions of popular literature; they are both original and parasitic, feeding off their precursor texts. Being aware of the dangers of commodification of writing, they are trying to free themselves from the restrictive influence of the global market system but are deeply implicated in it. They are both disruptive and conformist, combining a radical critique of globalization and shamelessly using the strategies they mock. No single political meaning can be attached to contemporary parody novels and it is impossible to say whether they are unequivocally conservative or radical. Globalization has proved to be a fruitful ground for parody, which can provide important insights into the world’s changing culture. Parody novels demonstrate the complicated relations between standardization and difference and the fact that, as Mark Currie observes, there exists the co-dependence of diversification and globalization, or sameness and difference – postmodern difference can be discernible only against the background of standardization (Currie 1998: 13–14). Contemporary parody novels are as

contradictory as the world from which they have emerged and upon which they reflect.

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КЊИЖЕВНА ПАРОДИЈА У ПРВОЈ ДЕЦЕНИЈИ ДВАДЕСЕТПРВОГ ВЕКА

Сажетак

Прва деценија двадесетпрвог века обележена је „обнављањем“ пародијског романа које се манифестује кроз објављивање низа књига које се на овај начин односе према бестселерима. Есеј описује специфичности савременог пародијског романа, као и његово место унутар ширег контекста популарне књижевности, и настоји да објасни нарастајућу продукцију пародијског жанра у доба глобализоване културе.

Кључне речи: пародијски роман, популарна књижевност, доба глобализоване културе

