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Opening Extract from...

What You Didn't Miss

A Book of Literary Parodies

As featured in Private Eye

Written by D. J. Taylor

Published by Constable

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What You Didn't Miss: A Book of Literary Parodies

As featured in *Private Eye*

Edited and introduced by D. J. Taylor

With illustrations by Ken Pyne

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INTRODUCTION

All these pieces were first published in *Private Eye* between 1998 and 2012. As well as offering a series of comments on the work of the individual writers involved, they are also a modest contribution to an ongoing debate about what might be called the satirist's tragedy. The satirist's tragedy used to be simply that he (or occasionally she) grew old. Had the *Eye* been founded in 1928 one could assume that the young Evelyn Waugh would have nodded affably over its cradle. Come 1963, alas, when invited by the *Observer* to review *Private Eye on London* – this contained a caricature of the potential reviewer marooned in 'The Old Bores' Club' beneath the caption 'Now that even the Pope is a bloody liberal the time has come for me to die' – Waugh could only acknowledge that 'it exposes me as a hopeless old fogy' and suggest that the book be sent to his son Auberon. Waugh junior, unlike his benighted parent, was 'in touch with modern London'.

Half a century later the satirist's difficulties run a whole lot deeper than this, and never more so than

in the specialised satirical redoubt of parody. It is not just that, in an age where wealth, talent and celebrity are seldom backed by self-awareness, certain things – they range from the public utterances of Lord Prescott to Max Clifford's *apologiae pro vita sua* – are, as Craig Brown once put it, 'beyond parody'. At the same time, in an era of cultural fragmentation, a worryingly large number of people wouldn't know a parody if they saw one, or, worse, would fail to see the need for its existence if told that it were there. After all, there must be several million television viewers who imagine that Reality TV is a fascinating sociological experiment, or that Radio One's Chris Moyles is a very interesting young man of whom a great deal more should be heard.

On the other hand, parody – literary parody especially – has always appealed to, and mostly been aimed at, a fairly specialist audience, those capable of seeing the joke or, less pacifically, keen to assert their cultural superiority by carrying the war into the enemy's camp. There is, for example, a memorable scene in Malcolm Bradbury's early novel *Stepping Westward* (1966) in which James Walker, an English novelist with a visiting post at a mid-western American university, decides to walk his class of under-educated students through Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' in which Swift suggests that an obvious solution to famine is for the starving to eat babies.

Nine-tenths of the group are disgusted. It is left to the class anarchist, lemur-eyed in the back row, to wonder whether we shouldn't be 're-evaluating our attitude to cannibalism'. Walker despairs, as one or two creative writing teachers, and quite a few parodists, have despaired before him.

To the problem of cracking parody's cipher, and establishing that a 'joke' is being made – not always as simple as it sounds – can be added a third drawback. This is the difficulty of maintaining a sense of detachment, of not being caught up in the maelstrom one would ideally like to be observing from a safe distance. As Clive James has pointed out, however sharp a scourge of celebrity culture the parodist may be, he is quite likely to become a celebrity himself, with all the dangers to his integrity that this transformation implies. And indeed Mr James once appeared on the *Michael Parkinson Show* reciting one of his amusing poems to David and Victoria Beckham. Even *Vile Bodies*' dissection of the late 1920s Mayfair charivari is occasionally rather compromised by Waugh's dual perspective, in which the author can be found satirising a social scene of which he is himself a part, and sometimes forgetting on which side of the fence he is supposed to sit. Craig Brown, to take one of our great modern practitioners, star reviewer and *Private Eye*'s resident diarist, probably earns more money than many

of the people he is sending up: not necessarily a handicap, but something that should always be set against the crucible of starveling resentment in which certain kinds of parody are always assumed to be forged.

None of this answers the fundamental question of what parody 'is' or the function that, even in an age of alleged cultural debasement, it might be expected to fulfil. In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Parodies* (2010), the late John Gross, while noting that 'it would be a mistake for anyone writing about parodies to become entangled in a search for exact definitions', offers some useful observations on the various forms that parody takes: the thing itself (defined as a gradual heightening of the original's stylistic quirks to the point where it collapses into absurdity), variations such as pastiche (quasi-sympathetic imitation drawing attention to its own facility) and burlesque – again, rarely malign – in which everything is so deviously mocked that the *ur*-text can sometimes be left far behind in the burlesquer's slipstream. A good example might be Thackeray's *Punch's Prize Novelists* from the 1840s, most of which have worn a good deal better than the authors (Disraeli, Mrs Gore, Charles Lever) they were sending up.

All this makes taxonomic sense while not quite managing to explain why Craig Brown, in the guise

of Shirley MacLaine, minting one of his nonsense proverbs ('He who wishes to go back must first go away') or, from an earlier epoch, Julian Maclaren-Ross colliding (and colluding) with Nancy Mitford ('His grace doesn't half sound in a wax this morning, ducks') is so horribly funny. The most interesting thing about Brown's last collection, *The Lost Diaries* (2010), is the variety of treatments on offer. There are no procedural givens: different subjects, Brown implies, require different approaches. Some of the choicest extracts are simply near-phonetic representations of pop stars doing their stuff: Rod Stewart performing 'Maggie May' ('*Way kup Maggie ar thing Ar gos umfin ter say chew'*), or Madonna in full, uninhibited flight ('*Ah trahda stayur head, trahda stayon tarp/Trahda playapart, but somehow ahfugart*'.) Here, as elsewhere, there is a faint hint that Stewart, Madonna and their kind are only collateral, semi-innocent victims caught in the wider cultural crossfire. Brown's real target, you infer, is not only the self-absorption of people fatally engrossed in the small but delicious spectacle of themselves, but the lazy, self-celebrating media mulch that nurtures them. Significantly, Madonna's performance is compered by Jonathan Ross ('Like, if I were you, I'd fondaw my bweasts all day, thas what I'd do!') whom Brown pretty clearly regards as a fawning, sex-obsessed buffoon.

In his Oxford introduction Gross considers the claim, occasionally advanced by students of the genre, that most parody is at heart affectionate. There have certainly been parodists who bore no malice – see, for example, Malcolm Bradbury's emollient collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1976) – or at least no malice towards a work's creator: Max Beerbohm once produced a devastating send-up of A. C. Benson's sedative prose style in the form of a triolet ('Nevertheless, it is my bounden duty to drone on. And, even were it not, on I should drone', etc.) while remaining on friendly terms with Benson himself. Brown, alternatively, seems positively to detest many of his subjects. This is particularly evident in some of the literary parodies, in which the writer's style is gently, or not so gently, subverted to the point where it becomes a kind of offensive weapon capable of bringing down the imagination that created it in mid-flight. Brown on Martin Amis ('I is a serious') is actually a piece of disguised literary criticism, in which a very slight exaggeration of Amis's procedural tics – the repetitions, the stylisation, the sense that all we are really being asked to admire is the spectacle of the writer writing – realises a final judgement which insists that, whatever the merits of Amis's work, everything in it leads inexorably back to Amis himself. The same note was struck nearly a century

ago in 'Song: In Wartime', an anonymous parody of the first wave of Great War poets sometimes attributed to J. C. Squire or Richard Aldington:

At the sound of the drum,
Out of their dens they come, they come,
The little poets we hoped were dumb,
The little poets we thought were dead,
The poets who certainly haven't been read
Since heaven knows when, they come, they come,
At the sound of the drum, of the drum, drum, drum

Here a poem doubles up as an essay on 'What is Wrong with Great War Poetry' and is all the more effective for using mimicry rather than critique.

What you didn't miss – none of whose selections, incidentally, is the work of Craig Brown – may also be read as literary criticism by another name. If there is a theme to its versions of contemporary verse, it is the idea that most of what gets marked down as 'poetry' these days is simply prose chopped up into irregular lines. It is also a reliable guide to some of the contemporary book world's enduring fixations, its fondness for biographies of long-dead Oxford dons or dispatches from 'Planet Amis'. One of its main findings, ominously enough, is that practically anything can be parodied if you set your mind to it. Most writers of any distinction end up exaggerating

the qualities that make them distinctive. In the same way, so self-consciously stylised a medium as literature could hardly fail to encourage stylisation. Another of its conclusions, perhaps, is that there is a way in which parody becomes an integral part of the cultural process it sets out to lampoon, the salt that gives the Big Mac its savour. In one of P. G. Wodehouse's Mulliner stories, for example, the fiancée of Egbert Mulliner writes a romantic novel entitled *Parted Ways*, whose success is such that, as Wodehouse puts it, 'Clergymen preached about it, parodists parodied it, stockbrokers stayed away from Cochran's Revue to sit at home and cry over it.'

Parody was a bad idea, F. R. Leavis once declared, as it demeaned the artist. To this one might retort that an excessive respect towards books and the people who write them is nearly always a very bad idea, and also that the parodist is not only there to laugh at the overwrought and the self-obsessed: he is also there to authenticate, and, by implication, to set up a series of spiritual preservation orders on the victims who crawl under his lens. The only thing that keeps certain of the subjects of Squire's *Tricks of the Trade* (1917) precariously alive is the fact that Squire thought they were worth sending up. If, as is regularly suggested, we live in an increasingly relativist age, where people prefer to keep their opinions of other people's behaviour

to themselves for fear of causing offence, then the parodist's role grows ever more crucial. It could be argued that Craig Brown is quite as much a moral force as the Archbishop of Canterbury, even if, like the Archbishop, he preaches to an ever-dwindling congregation. He and his fellow-workers are not simply there to express their likes and dislikes. They are also a vital part of an aesthetic process that the modern world seems to have lost sight of: the cultivation of that rare but intoxicating cultural condiment, *taste*.

D. J. TAYLOR