
STYLE AND VERBAL HUMOUR

This reading is taken from Walter Nash's book *The Language of Humour* and it explores some of the stylistic techniques that are used in the development of comic styles of writing. Nash is particularly interested in *allusion* and in the role it plays in the compositional make-up of humorous discourses like parody. The topics broached in this reading make numerous implicit intersections with material in other units of the book; this includes intertextuality (see A5), the comic function of allusion and intertextuality (C1 and C2), grammar and style (B3 and C12) and sound symbolism (strand four). In all, Nash's reading is an excellent illustration of 'applied stylistics' in that it shows how the stylistic method can serve to identify and explicate various techniques of creative writing.

Allusion and parody

Walter Nash (reprinted from chapter five of Nash, W. (1985) *The Language of Humour* Harlow: Longman, pp.74–102.

Walter
Nash

Allusion in the very broadest sense is never absent from our discourse; always there is some fact of shared experience, some circumstance implicit in the common culture, to which participants in a conversation may confidently allude. For families, friends, neighbours, colleagues, there is a generic knowledge of the affairs of the day – of politics, of social questions, of sports and entertainments, of current notions and phraseology. Such knowledge informs a good deal of what we say to each other, making its point even when its presence is veiled.

What we commonly understand by 'allusion', however, is something more explicit and overt, something for which the word 'citation' might be a more accurate name. These citations often have a function that goes beyond the mere decoration of a conversational exchange. They are a kind of test, proving the credentials of the initiated, baffling the outsider. In effect, they are a device of power, enabling the speaker to control a situation and authoritatively turn it to his own advantage. [. . .]

In an allusion, however, the cited text need not be from a poem: or any other recognised piece of literature. Virtually any well known form of words – from the language of politics, of advertising, or journalism, of law and social administration – will serve the requirements of wit. A music critic, reviewing a performance of Bruch's violin concerto, notes the unusually slow tempi adopted by the soloist, Shlomo Mintz; and jocosely adds his supposition that this violinist is 'one of the too-good-to-hurry Mintz'. British readers can laugh at this, because they will almost certainly recognise the allusion to an advertising jingle no longer in use but popular in its day:

Murraymints, Murraymints,
Too-good-to-hurry mints.

The allusion is impudently funny, and at the same time makes a criticism that might have been more woundingly phrased; the reviewer does not use expressions like 'cloying', or 'self-indulgent', but something of the kind may be implied in his quip. Once again, we can regard the allusion as a controlling element in discourse; here, its effect is both to direct and to deflect the severity of criticism.

[. . .] allusion can be an important, indeed cardinal, device in the structure of comic texts. Furthermore, wherever allusions occur some excursion into parody is possible; the parodic line often begins with the allusive point [. . .]

Robert Graves sees an image of parody in the folk myth of the witch who invisibly stalks her victim, following close on his heels and imitating his gait so aptly that she at last possesses it, and can make him stumble at will. This striking comparison suggests that parody appraises – learns the way of walking – in order to ridicule and discomfit. But not all parody is hostile; many acts of literary caricature and burlesque show affectionate familiarity with the things they imitate, and are a form of positive criticism, of stylistic analysis, and ultimately of tribute. If there are malign witches, there are also benevolent warlocks, who learn the steps in order to show just how well the ‘victim’ dances. Parody of a personal style often aims to do just that. It is the shortest and most concrete way of commenting on typical features of syntax, lexicon, phonology, prosody, and all the apparatus of learned dissertation.

The point is illustrated by the following attempt, on my part, to parody the distinctive poetic idiom of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

G. M. Hopkins takes lunch in the restaurant car

Ah, waiter, are there any any, where are, tell me, come,
Napkins, lovely all-of-a-starch-staring
Linen, preferably, or pauper-seeming paper, waiter? Wearing
My gaygear goodsuit, ah, my dear, dim was it? dumb?
Well, this train’s tripping and track-truckling as I sipped
Soup, did, ah God, the hot of it! – yes, slipped, flipped
Into my lap, slapping, of this clear consomme, some
Spoonflung flashes, splashes for bosom’s bearing.

Bring me a – coo – lummy – here dab, here dry with a kerch-
ief, tea-towel, toilet-roll, oh-dear-then-a-doyly, but merely
A move (with a mercy, man) make! Oh what a slanting that
sheerly,
What with the canting curve of the, what with the lilt of the
lurch,
Hurled leaping lapward, all in a skirl, the dear drenching.
There was a splash to abash one quaintly, ah, there was a
quenching!
Since when, on seat’s edge sodden I pensive perch,
Picking at lunch unlovely, unappetising nearly.

The intention of this light-hearted exercise is certainly not to stage a satirical attack on a sage and serious poet. The parody aims affectionately at the comprehension of certain stylistic mannerisms, and it is the parodist who is at risk here, should the purport of his mimetic tricks go unrecognised. To say what these ‘tricks’ are, and how they reflect the devices habitually used by the poet, is to embark on a primary course in Hopkinsian poetics. Here are the familiar prosodic and phonetic idiosyncrasies, the ‘sprung rhythm’ with its jostling clusters of strong accents, the linking alliterations and assonances, the internal rhyming, the ‘rove over’ rhyme (*with a kerch/ief, tea towel* etc). Here also are the characteristic syntactic patterns: the interrupted constructions, the parentheses, the ellipses, the bold departures from normal word order, the phrasal modifiers, the liking for certain phrase types (eg the ‘of-genitive’, *the X of Y*, and the ‘s-genitive’ with participial noun, *the Y’s Xing*). The vocabulary, too, clearly purports to represent Hopkins’

lexical preoccupations – the abundant compounds and phrasal adjectives, the deviant semantics (as in ‘the *lilt* of the lurch’, ‘all in a *skirl*’), the liking for words suggesting rapid and violent action or motion (*hurl* is a favourite).

The validity of these brief analytical notes can be tested against the poet’s work. Anyone interested enough to make the test might possibly mark in passing some apparently direct verbal borrowings from Hopkins’ poems, or perhaps some general resemblances of phraseology between the parody and the original corpus. Although these correspondences were not consciously sought when the parody was made, memory has indeed been at its sneaking craft, as a few examples may show:

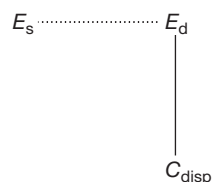
- Hopkins:* ‘How to keep – is there any any, is there none
such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch . . .’
(‘The Leaden Echo and The Golden Echo’)
- Parody:* ‘Ah, waiter, are there any, any, where are, tell
me, come, Napkins . . .’
- Hopkins:* ‘. . . to-fro tender trambeams truckle at the eye’ (‘The Candle
Indoors’)
- Parody:* ‘This train’s tripping and track-truckling . . .’
- Hopkins:* ‘But how shall I . . . make me a room there:
Reach me a . . . Fancy, come faster-’ (‘The Wreck of the
Deutschland’)
- Parody:* ‘Bring me a – coo – lummy – here dab, here dry . . .’
- Hopkins:* ‘The girth of it and the wharf of it . . .’ (‘The Wreck of the
Deutschland’)
- Parody:* ‘. . . the hot of it’
- Hopkins:* ‘. . . and blue-beak embers, ah my dear, Fall . . .’ (‘The Windhover’)
- Parody:* ‘My gaygear goodsuit, ah, my dear, dim was it . . .?’

Such echoes, however, are ultimately of minor interest and are perhaps irrelevant to the question of whether or not the parody is effective. A test of good parody is not how closely it imitates or reproduces certain turns of phrase, but how well it *generates* a style convincingly like that of the parodied author, producing the sort of phrases and sentences he might have produced. Borrowing the terminology of language acquisition, we might say that the parodist displays a competence, learns to ‘speak Hopkins’ and to produce Hopkinsian utterances which he has never heard before.

Something, therefore, is *added* to an effective and interesting parody; it is not solely or even primarily an exercise in specific allusion to certain textual loci, but an attempt at a *creative allusiveness* that generates the designated style. To this, add one further element: the intrusion of the parodist’s own idiom, or at all events of a patently alien accent (*dim was it? dumb?; coo – lummy –*) confessing to the irreverent act, reminding the reader, should he need reminding, that this is not the style itself, not a blatant forgery, not an attempt to pass off as genuine a gobbet of pastiche, but something that remains from first to last a piece of jocose mimicry. The apparent ineptitudes of the clown are at one and the same time the setting for his burlesque act and his admission that it *is* a burlesque and nothing more. [. . .]

There arises the question of how we recognise a parody or a parodic intention; for here, as in other forms of humour, laughter depends on some framework of expectancy. Most commonly, as in our Hopkins parody, a title makes the directive signal, even suggesting the

structure of the parodic joke. The reader is given some form of stylistic proposition; a poet's name is mentioned, and a content (eg: *lunch in the restaurant car*) is indicated. Thus he is led to presuppose a model of this type:



This represents two 'planes', of *expression* and *content*. E_s is the source-expression (eg Hopkins' style as observed in his poems), from which the parodic expression E_d is *derived*. The content of the parody is totally unHopkinsian; his usual subject-matter has been *displaced*, so to speak, by an untypical theme. Hence, E_d = 'derived expression', and C_{disp} = 'displacing content'.

The presuppositions encouraged by the title are confirmed, or at any rate tested, by the ensuing text; as we have seen, the E_d may pick up identifiable scraps from the E_s or, more broadly, may generate a phraseology suggestive of the E_s . If the parody is successful, the model-proposing title is strictly speaking unnecessary; nevertheless, it has a part to play, in orientating the reader. Were there no title, or were the title less explicit (eg: *Eminent Victorian in Hot Water*), he would have to make his own guess at the intended style. There would be an implied query – 'Guess who?' – which would turn the exercise from a humorous demonstration into a riddle or charade. The title, then, is part of a conditioning process that lets the reader in on the joke.

Yet in the absence of a title, even when the reader is not sure just what is being parodied, it may still be possible to recognise parodic intention. The parodist takes care as a rule to create notable discrepancies: discrepancies of 'fit' between expression and content, and discrepancies of style on the plane of expression itself. In the Hopkins parody, the mismatch of expression and content is boldly obvious, and must be so even to a reader with no knowledge of Hopkins. 'Cry like this over spilt soup?' he asks himself. 'This has to be a joke.' Similarly, he must have his doubts about the seriousness of a rhetoric that veers abruptly from the pseudo-poetic (eg: *bosom's bearing*) to the banally colloquial (*coo – lummy –*). Perception of stylistic discrepancy confirms his assumptions about the wayward content; what he has before him is either a piece of absurdly ill-judged writing, or an essay in buffoonery, *probably* of a parodic nature. [...]

The domain of parody is, to be sure, a large and varied one – so much so, that we inevitably come across texts that are not centrally parodic, in terms of a clearly definable model, but which wear a parodic *aura*, and are full of echoes of half-remembered writings. They might be called *pseudoparodies*. Here is an example of pseudoparody, produced during a tutorial on composition and creative writing, as an illustration of some rhetorical techniques:

Milkmen everywhere. Milkmen up the Avenue; milkmen down the Grove. Milkmen on the High St, where it winds between banks of shops stacked with plastic footwear and cutprice washing machines; milkmen in the alleys that meander past the dirty backyards of dormant pubs. Milkmen rattling their bottles in areas and basements; milkmen wheedling incorrect sums from harassed housewives; milkmen with dejected horses; milkmen with electric floats, stuck at the traffic lights where the main road forks left past the grim grey majesty of the multi-storey car park.

The composition of this was haunted by the troubled sense of writing to a hidden model. Readers of the passage may have the impression of having met something like it elsewhere, and in their mental rummaging for a source may possibly remember the first page of Dickens' *Bleak House* [see unit B3 – P.S.]. [. . .]

Clearly, the 'milkman' exercise is an example of parodic recollection. It is not closely or pointedly imitative of the Dickens passage. If it were a deliberate and conscious parody, it would imitate the original's subtle variations of clause and sentence length, and its picture of a suburban High Street would offer some sort of iconographic parallel to the programme of the Dickensian Thames, which is followed from the meadows above London, through the city, and out to the estuary marshes. There is no conscious modelling of one passage on the other; but there is a hazy recollection of rhetorical procedures. We see, for instance, how the pseudoparody has picked up some linguistic features of its Dickensian original, eg the rarity of finite verbs, and the frequency of participle clauses and adverbial constructions. [. . .] These echoes suggest that a powerfully or idiosyncratically written passage, like the splendid opening of *Bleak House*, can lodge in a reader's mind a stylistic record for later reference. [. . .]

Elements of parody are so important in the style of comedy that the creation of a parodic texture may sometimes appear to be the exclusive principle of any comic work [. . .] One might certainly argue that one of the *axes* of comic writing – the 'style-axis', if we like to call it that – is a progression of allusions, parodic hints, pseudoparodies.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

It is interesting to observe how prominent is the principle of ironic echo (see the accompanying web unit) in Nash's parodies – indeed, Nash himself elaborates in some detail the stylistic impetus for his pastiches of both Hopkins and Dickens. Worth mentioning in passing is that both of these pastiches embody a particular kind of parodic humour known as *high burlesque*. This technique works by presenting trivial subject matter in an ornate or high-flown style of presentation, while *low burlesque* (a technique much favoured incidentally by the Monty Python team) works by presenting serious subject matter in a trivial or informal way. In general, Nash's reading emphasises the interdependence of creative writing and stylistic analysis: in a sense, you cannot write a parody without first of all undertaking some kind of stylistic analysis, no matter how intuitive or informal that analysis may be.

Some suggestions follow:

- ❑ David Lodge's novel *Thinks* (2002) makes for an interesting study in style, not least because of the multiplicity of styles its author employs. Many of these styles are direct parodies of other writers' work. Worth following up in view of the material covered both in C2 and D5 of the book, is a parody which involves a treatise on the subject of bats written in the style of Irvine Welsh.
- ❑ Many years ago, Woody Allen published a collection of comic essays called *Getting Even* (1975). The collection included a parody entitled 'A Twenties Memory' which was set in Europe of the 1920s. In this tale, a fictional persona imagines a series of encounters with the distinguished literati of that period and, interestingly, this comic short story became the inspiration for Allen's 2011 film *Midnight in Paris*. Both film and short story make for an excellent stylistic analysis of parody and style, because each of the literary figures encountered tends to speak using the key (and familiar) stylistic indices of their own published work.

Activity ★