PARODIES

An Anthology from Chaucer to Beerbohm—and After

EDITED BY

Dwight Macdonald

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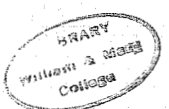

To my dear sons
MICHAEL AND NICHOLAS
without whose school bills
this anthology would not have been made

T. S. ELIOT

THIS FAMOUS PARODY was originally an entry in a *New Statesman* contest. "Most parodies of one's own work strike one as very poor," Mr. Eliot writes. "In fact one is apt to think one could parody oneself much better. (As a matter of fact some critics have said that I have done so.) But there is one which deserves the success it has had, Henry Reed's *Chard Whitlow*." Broadness is the sin of most Eliot parodies; Mr. Reed's alone seems to me to escape it. The one following, by "Myra Buttle," who is a Cambridge don, does not. I have included it because it is funny and because I thought some sample of *The Sweeniad* should be given.

Chard Whitlow

(MR. ELIOT'S SUNDAY EVENING POSTSCRIPT)

AS WE GET OLDER we do not get any younger.
Seasons return, and today I am fifty-five,
And this time last year I was fifty-four,
And this time next year I shall be sixty-two.
And I cannot say I should like (to speak for myself)
To see my time over again—if you can call it time:
Fidgeting uneasily under a draughty stair,
Or counting sleepless nights in the crowded tube.

There are certain precautions—though none of them very reliable—
Against the blast from bombs and the flying splinter,
But not against the blast from heaven, *vento dei venti*,
The wind within a wind unable to speak for wind;
And the frigid burnings of purgatory will not be touched
By any emollient.
I think you will find this put,
Better than I could ever hope to express it,
In the words of Kharma: "It is, we believe,
Idle to hope that the simple stirrup-pump
Will extinguish hell."
Oh, listeners,
And you especially who have turned off the wireless,
And sit in Stoke or Basingstoke listening appreciatively to the silence,
(Which is also the silence of hell) pray, not for your skins, but your souls.

And pray for me also under the draughty stair.
As we get older we do not get any younger.

And pray for Kharma under the holy mountain.

HENRY REED

Sweeney in Articulo

THE VOICE OF SWEENEY

Sunday is the dullest day, treating
Laughter as a profane sound, mixing
Worship and despair, killing
New thought with dead forms.
Weekdays give us hope, tempering
Work with reviving play, promising
A future life within this one.
Thirst overtook us, conjured up by Budweisserbrau
On a neon sign: we counted our dollar bills.
Then out into the night air, into Maloney's Bar,
And drank whiskey, and yarned by the hour.
Das Herz ist gestorben,[1] swell dame, echt Bronx.
And when we were out on bail, staying with the Dalai Lama,
My uncle, he gave me a ride on a yak,
And I was speechless. He said, Mamie,

century, or of Racine's own parody of Corneille's "rolling Alexandrines" in *Les Plaideurs*. But that was in another country and age.

The Shakespearean travesties were for lowbrows. They were succeeded by the more sophisticated burlesques of Gilbert and Sullivan, which were for the middlebrows, as were the parodies endlessly printed in *Punch* and such magazines. One gets a notion of their stupefying quantity from the six-volume collection that Walter Hamilton published between 1884 and 1889. Unreadable now, these tall, small-print, double-column volumes are interesting because they show that poetry was then common currency and not a peculiar diversion of the intelligentsia. Not very good poetry (though Volume V has 86 versions of Gray's *Elegy*). Some poems seem to have been written only to be burlesqued, as *The Raven* (60 versions), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (21) and *Horatius at the Bridge* (36).* They have one thing in common: emphasis; both of rhythm and of emotion. These qualities are prominent in Ann Taylor's *My Mother*, which begins:

> Who fed me from her gentle breast,
> And hushed me in her arms to rest,
> And on my cheeks sweet kisses prest?
> My mother.

And so on for eleven stanzas. Miss Taylor published her poem in 1803 and at once the burlesques began; Hamilton prints over a hundred of them. The rhythm and the sentiment were irresistible. In fact, Miss Taylor herself was imitating Cowper's *To Mary*, doing a serious parody so to speak. Cowper was gloomier:

> The twentieth year is well-nigh past
> Since first our sky was overcast;
> Ah, would that this might be our last!
> My Mary!

* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow falls repeatedly into this category, with his *Hiawatha, Village Blacksmith, Wreck of the Hesperus, Psalm of Life* ("Tell me not in mournful numbers / Life is but an empty dream") and above all his *Excelsior:* "The shades of night were falling fast / When through an Alpine village passed / A youth who bore mid snow and ice / A banner with this strange device: / Excelsior!" The situation is irretrievably comic, as is Longfellow's development of it, and folk burlesques sprouted immediately. I remember two from my childhood: one that wrecked the poem simply by introducing at the end of each line some variant of "Upidee-Upidah" and another that substituted for the all-too-dramatic "Excelsior" the name of a then much-advertised brand of soap, Sapolio.

The English still have a living parodic tradition; one might call it an upper-class folk art. It expresses itself in competitions in *The New Statesman* and, until lately, *The Spectator*, in which readers undertake such tasks as composing a Miltonic sonnet on photography with special reference to Princess Margaret's marriage, or a paragraph on Rock 'n Roll in the manner of (a) Dr. Johnson, (b) Carlyle, (c) St. Paul, or (d) Gertrude Stein. The best parody of Eliot, Henry Reed's *Chard Whitlow*, originated in a *New Statesman* competition; and Graham Greene is said to have won a prize (second) for his entry in one calling for parodies of Graham Greene. But what is impressive is the large number of entries, often in the hundreds, and the skill of those that are printed.

In the present century, with the important exception of Beerbohm's *A Christmas Garland*, the best parodies have come from writers associated with *The New Yorker*—Robert Benchley, Peter DeVries, Wolcott Gibbs, S. J. Perelman, Frank Sullivan, James Thurber, and E. B. White. A peculiar combination of sophistication and provinciality is needed for good parody, the former for obvious reasons, the latter because the audience must be homogeneous enough to get the point. The Oxford-Cambridge milieu of the last century was perfect—a compact cultural group that felt itself, with some reason, at the center of things and thus able to judge what was eccentric. A similar situation has obtained in New York City since the First World War. Before then the provinces made fun of the big city, from Artemus Ward and Mark Twain to the early Ring Lardner. But with *Main Street, Babbitt,* and the founding by Mencken and Nathan of *The American Mercury* in the early twenties, the balance of power shifted in favor of New York; the provinces were now the object of ridicule. The appearance of *The New Yorker,* with its defiant "Not Edited for the Old Lady from Dubuque"—a slogan long forgotten, since the magazine's readership has for two decades been as much outside New York as inside the city, a change that does not signify a victory of the provinces but just the reverse—crystallized this dominance of the urban wits. Furthermore, they had something on which to exercise their parodic conservatism —the rise of a literary avantgarde. Parody still appears in *The New Yorker* but not with the old vigor. Perhaps because the sense of fun has atrophied since the thirties. Or perhaps because the present avantgarde is too hermetic to be parodied. The real world has become so fantastic that satire, of which parody is a subdivision, is discouraged because reality outdistances it. What can a satirist add to the Ug-Sum-