"THE CASE OF THE MISSING PLUMS"

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Abstract: From William Carlos Williams' 1934 "This Is Just to Say" to Florence Williams' "Reply"—this is the "investigative" journey here, where travelling between high modernist poetry and the parodies that followed over the decades seems to have marked a certain evolution in American poetry. If parody may have appeared as a result of an exhaustion in the potentialities of the genre, then modernism and post-modernism may have also witnessed the exhaustion of parody itself; the now long announced end or death of literature cannot mean its alternative existence only as parody (though a form of literature itself).

Keywords: Williams, Mudie, investigation, modernism, parody

"One hot late August morning in 1934, a man creeps into his home's kitchen /like a burglar/ just as dawn breaks. Tenderly, he opens the icebox, cringing as it squeaks like an asthmatic mouse /nice touch/. A rooster crows at the farm down the road, and the man cocks his head to listen for the sound of his wife shuffling out of bed upstairs, but hears nothing. From the icebox, he removes a small burlap sack with half a dozen plums inside it, places the bag on the counter next to the sink, and closes the icebox. After once again making sure that his wife still sleeps, he methodically takes each plum out of the bag, one by one, swallows them whole. Pits and all.

Upon finishing the plums, the man walks to the coat rack next to the door that leads outside and rummages in the pockets of one coat. He pulls out a stub of pencil and a prescription pad /he was a medical doctor/. Tearing off a sheet, he jots a quick note on the back. I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox, he begins. He scribbles another few lines /eight, in fact/ before placing the note on the counter next to the empty sack,. For the final time, he listens for his wife's footsteps as he stands at the door. For the final time, all he hears is the chirping of sparrows outside and the distant cough of a motorcar. He opens the door and takes a step out before stopping. He returns to the counter, stares at the note. The words Forgive me /line 9/ stare back. The man snatches the note, crumples it into his pocket, and exits the house, gingerly shutting the door behind him so as not to wake his wife as he leaves. The sky, for now, is clear, and he anticipates no problems."

No problems!? How about the hundreds—probably thousands—of responses, in various forms (imitations, parodies, critical interpretations…) Williams' 1934 "note" was to provoke in the following eighty years or so. The two paragraphs we chose for the opening of our paper are from a 2014 short story by Timothy Mudie, which reads quite well as long as it is a parody of a detective piece of fiction; it conveniently introduces two of our concerns here: that of parody itself, and that of the "poet as burglar" (including the watch-dog as the simple/minded reader, and whom we can easily identify with). As it is so early in the morning and the wife, Flossie, sees no evidence of her husband anywhere around, she looks through the Yellow Pages, finds Private Eye Josiah "Smokey" Gunn (the critic?—but we would rather not pursue this path or track) in a deserted, dilapidated wooden building on the outskirts of the town (in New Jersey, most likely), drinking whiskey, feet on his desk, chain smoking and rudely talking. According to Josiah's keen detective ratiocination, the poet must be at "The Hen and Barrow Tavern," whose sign above the door shows "a white chicken pecking at the ground as it stands next to an overturned red wheelbarrow"; and one has to recall that—

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"so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens"

But then the story turns SF, and Mudie ruins the whole (promising) project as Williams is shown as a furry alien who goes into space by a flying saucer, never to be seen again, while Josiah finds the sack of plums (the remaining six) and Flossie "removes a plum from the bag…, with great deliberation she lifts it to her mouth and takes a bite; it is so sweet, but so cold."

Mudie's story does not only contextualize Williams' poem, but the poet as a burglar—in his own (and Flossie's) kitchen—also invites T. S. Eliot's remark in one of his essays (which we quite from memory) that a poem is made of an argument and metaphors; the argument (the origin of this story) is like the biscuit that the burglar (poet) takes along for the dog (poor reader), who thus cannot see what the former performs in the dark (capturing valuables—or plums for that matter--, i.e. metaphors).

It now becomes almost useless to say that the argument of "This Is Just to Say"—

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold (1934)

functions (in Charles Altieri's view) "as a speech act to affirm community and communication"; there is an "I" and a "you," and a message in a slice-of-life poem (Williams' frequent signature), where the speaker (see Ann Fisher-Wirth) "revels in the stealing and loves the confessing of stealing." And Altieri elaborates: "The justness of the speaker's poem is its recognition of his weakness and its lovely combination of self-understanding with an implicit faith in his wife's capacity to understand and accept his deed and, beyond that, to comprehend his human existence as a balance of weakness, self-knowledge, and concern." (in Why Men Fall…). The argument then also includes the plums, with all sorts of associations (not only delicious, cold, and sweet), the icebox (the Freon-based refrigerator market expanded in the late twenties, when the icebox was still very much in use, with icemen coming /O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh, 1939/ on their rounds to replace the ice blocks at the top), breakfast (so the doctor was an early riser as Mudie also shows us), and the question of

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trespassing and forgiveness (Altieri's "strong sense of humanity ultimately prevailing"); one cannot help appreciating this unpretentious internet commentary on this "argument": "maybe a dude ate some plums and feels guilty about it."

And this is American literary modernism at its best—or its highest, with William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) playing a key role in it, primarily as an imagist and objectivist poet. The Latino-American medical doctor (pediatrician and general practitioner), whose mother was a Puerto-Rican of French Basque (he himself went to school in Geneva and Paris) and Dutch Jewish descent, was also the prolific writer who published not only poetry (twenty-six collections between 1909 and 1962, a couple of them hybrids of prose and verse), but also short stories, five novels (one a trilogy), prose on historical figures and events (In the American Grain of 1925, for instance), travelogues, essays, plays (Many Loves and Other Plays, 1962), letters, autobiographical writings, philosophical and critical notes, translations. In 1912 he married Florence/Flossie Herman (1891-1976), and they had two sons.

All of these many volumes have not succeeded in making him as famous as the two poems we quoted above, both of them emblematic for his specific kind of modernism: poems drawn primarily from the actual observations and events of a poet that was "magically observant and mimetic," reproducing "the details of what he sees with surprising freshness, clarity, and economy" (Randall Jarrell); his notations of everyday circumstances and the lives of common people are rendered in triadic-line poems (three free-verse segments) with "variable foot"; "no ideas but in things" is his frequently repeated statement (mostly in his modern epic poem in five books—1946-1958--, Paterson).

In a simplified presentation, (American) literary modernism seems to have come with a sense (often emphasized and illustrated by Williams) that literature, at least in its traditional forms and genres, may have exhausted many (most?) of its resources, so innovation and experiment became more than a choice; degeneration, therefore, must be followed by regeneration in new forms of art (like the cubism of Matisse, Picasso, and Braque) and in parody. Making sense (especially after World War I) is no longer important, the rationality of mankind is deeply questioned, fragmentation, confusion and the multiplicity of perspectives/points of view, interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness appear as productive solutions; and hence alienation, the wasteland, loss, and despair as the predominant themes; cubism in the arts is accompanied in literature—and poetry, most of all—by imagism, symbolism, futurism, vorticism, surrealism, expressionism, Dada and others.

Like his other American contemporaries (Pound, Eliot, Moore, H.D., Zukofsky…), Williams adheres to the new "tradition" of free verse (in Whitman's wake), brevity, and precision of imagery; Williams' poetics is rooted in the belief that there is no inherent or even recoverable correspondence between words and facts (things), that all language can do is reflect on and play with the emptiness or fictiveness of its signifiers, as words do not copy, but produce meanings (like the ones produced by Mudie in his story, or like the substance and meanings "given" to the wheelbarrow by the "wandering eye" of the doctor-poet looking from a window down into the hospital's inner court).

As far as "This Is Just to Say" is concerned, its plain speech, stripped down language, brevity of "message" (a hurried e-mail several decades later), innovative line breaks, lack of punctuation, and unique, natural rhythm have all turned it into a triumph of Williams' modernist ideology and one of the most famous "poems" in American literature; the inverted commas are required by a question most or all readers will have asked, together with John W. Gerber, who in a 1950 interview wanted to know what it is that makes it a poem; Williams' reply is naturally puzzling: "In the first place, it's metrically absolutely regular." And Marjorie Perloff tries to understand while showing that the three little quatrains look alike, meaning that they have roughly the same physical shape, i.e. typographical structure (more

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intensely and successfully experimented with by Cummings)—i.e. "stanzas to see." They are, in fact, three verses of twelve syllables each (Alexandrines), adding up to thirty-six syllables in all.

Otherwise, it received the most diverse commentaries and responses along the years, ranging from its being the "perfect love poem" to an "idiotic poem" (Laura Jayne Martin in 2014, who also writes a parody beginning "this is just to say/I am sorry/I used/your toothpaste…"); it has also been taken to be a poem "about" temptation, a re-enactment of the fall, the triumph of the physical over the spiritual, the uselessness or self-estrangement of sexual desire, the memories of a thwarted boy (though Williams was famous for his philandering), "the beauty that lies hidden behind the simple, everyday things that happen," a "dry, boring, even superficial" text (Laura Maria Perez), etc., etc…--i.e. numberless Eliotian "metaphors."

Hence the hundreds and hundreds of parodies in late modernism and post-modernism, the latter especially relying fundamentally on this special "genre," and thus inviting a brief survey (or investigation, considering our beginning paragraphs). The original Greek paroidia, meaning "a song sung alongside another" (though para- also implies "counter" or "against," and thus a "counter-song"), comes closest to its po-mo meaning. Historically, it is as old as Aristophanes, who parodied Aeschylus and Euripides in The Frogs; Aristotle himself thought that parody, in its comic mockery and the transformation of the sublime into the ridiculous, also involves a through appreciation of the work that it ridicules. Among most famous examples are Don Quixote (which became much better known than the romances it parodied), Shakespeare's "Sonnet XIII" (vs. the traditional love poems of his day), Swift's Gulliver's Travels and "A Modest Proposal," Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, Austen's Northanger Abbey, Lewis Carroll's Alice books, and so on.

For the twentieth-century, parody may have become a central and highly representative artistic choice (a form of intertextuality, in fact, but also a way of liberation from the background text); the ultimate parody was proposed by Borges in his 1939 "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" (itself a parody, see supra). Boris Eichenbaum has an explanation (quoted by Malcolm Bradbury): "In the evolution of each genre, there are times when its use for entirely serious or elevated objectives degenerates /our emphases/ and produces a comic or parodic form… And thus is produced a regeneration of the genre: it finds new possibilities and new forms." So, when a formula grows tired, it retains value only as parody; in other words, (post-modern) parody represents a natural development in the life cycle of a genre. And it has also become a dialogue between cultures and subcultures, with—see Mary Louise Pratt—the marginalized or oppressed groups selectively appropriating or imitating and taking over aspects of more empowered cultures (the husband-wife dialogue in our case?—see infra). Joyce's Ulysses (his Irish Odyssey), Eliot's The Waste Land (parodying numberless older texts), Alice Randall's The Wind Done Gone (Gone with the Wind told from the point of view of Scarlett O'Hara's slaves, who were glad to be rid of her), Henry James' self-parodies in later novels and stories, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard, then (movie) parodies of westerns, scary movies, vampire movies…, Andy Warhol…, "Monty Python"…

So parody is basically commentary, but also satire (Nabokov: "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game"), irony, humor, imitation (polemically allusive), apery, pastiche (no satirical intent), burlesque (fooling around with serious material of high literature and adapting it to low ends), trivialization, spoof (or hoax), charade (the problem of guess work, especially when the parodied original is not very well known), lampoon (or skit or pasquinade), mimicry, mockery, travesty (disguise), put-on (deception), take-off/caricature (overstressing noticeable features), farce (exaggerated effects), camp (bad taste)… It may include "textual intervention" (a book of this title by Rob Pope), but also plagiarism problems

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(see "fair use doctrine" in 17 U.S.C…), the revelation of incongruities, clichés, etc.; but, in so far as we are concerned here, the main components are criticism, commentary, interpretation/translation, obliqueness and reprising a known text to give it new meaning/s.

One term we have not used in this long series of synonyms/components is that of "variation," which is how Kenneth Koch (1925-2002) describes his 1962 four parodies of "This Is Just to Say" piece of "found poetry." These "variations on a theme by William Carlos Williams" aim to preserve the same logic as the poet's "argument"—which describes a minor domestic infraction—and also exaggerate it into such major destructions as chopping down her summer house, spraying with lye her hollyhocks, giving away her money for the following ten years, and badly injuring her, as in (4):

Las evening we went dancing
and I broke your leg.
Forgive me. I was clumsy and
I wanted you here in the
wards, where I am a doctor.

As one would expect, there are other "variations on a theme by William Carlos Williams," only in this case (Pam Thompson) they are also "after Kenneth Koch," and her fourth one reads:

Last evening we went motor-cross racing
and I ran you over.
Forgive me, I was distracted, and
I wanted you on the ward where I am the orthopedic surgeon!

And this can go on like this forever, as in allpoetry.com/poem/8501185--… there are over 400,000 "comments" and analyses by amateur and expert poets, plus dozens and dozens of blogs named after Williams' poem, while on "Twitter," hundreds of other people have endlessly broken the poem down and repurposed it for their own jokes and commentary (one of them is "I laughed as hard I scared my dog"). A little more consistent are the 141 "responses" (another term we have not used in the list above) to "This Is Just to Say" on http://somewhereinthesuburbs... Many of them are love (and hate) poems, some are porn, some obscene, others are sinister or gay, domestic or religious or travel poems, several on/about the internet itself and a few that are parodies of other parodies. All we can do now is select a few that we found more rfelevant; here are two awful ones:

This is Just to Say
I burnt your wedding dress
that you wore
on the best day of your life

I wanted something to burn
for I am a pyro-maniac
and I got a new lighter

Forgive me, it was
just so white
so flammable…, signed by "Nick P." and John Breslin's
This Is Just to Say

I have murdered
your mum
and placed her
in the icebox

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by the sandwich
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
she was annoying
so bitter
and so cold…

"Mark Sells" also works in the register of sinister, terrifying, outrageous parody:

This Is Just to Say
I have hidden
the insulin
you kept in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
counting on
to keep you alive

Forgive me
revenge is delicious
so sweet and so cold…

And one that looks like a linguistic template, meant probably to give a clear idea of endlessness:

This is just to say
I have [verb, past tense]
the [noun]
that were [prepositional phrase]

and which
you were probably
[verb]
for [noun]

Forgive me
they were [adj.]
so [adj.]
and so [adj.]… (a "Mad Lib." site)

Finally, one by "The Lame Cook" that seems to explain many others:

I have left
my mind
at the office
next to my computer

but you want me
to decide
what I will cook
for dinner

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I have
three words for you
dial and dine…

And, to top it all, Joyce Sidman (a published poet herself, with at least three books of poetry to her credit) put together a book of poetry for kids, this is just to say: poems of apology and forgiveness, written by fourth to sixth graders (ages 9 to 12): pleas to their parents, expressions of remorse over ball games, "I'm sorry" letters about various "misdemeanors" and apologizing to someone and righting a wrong in the first part and, in the seconds, replies from the recipients, plus the childlike illustrations in both. Thus, from a mature poem of experience to parodies of innocence, though any exercise in parody would involve much more that that (i.e. innocence).

Anyway, high time now to go back (to) home(-page): having failed to retrieve her plums—or her husband, for that matter--, in spite of expert help, Flossie (very much like ourselves) kept herself busy, enjoyed her early breakfast eating the biscuit left behind by the doctor; and, as the Eliot-made wrapping paper was quite clean, she also wrote on it her reply, just to make sure that the communication process (begun with the poet's message) is complete; Williams himself once recalled (http://everything2.com/title/This+Is+Just+to+Say) that his poem was an actual note he had written to his wife—"and she replied very beautifully"(kept as a manuscript at the SUNY Buffalo, first appearing in The Atlantic Monthly, Nov. 1982, p.145 and The Collected Poems…, vol.I, ed. by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan):

Reply
(crumpled on her desk)
Dear Bill: I've made a
couple of sandwiches for you.
In the ice-box you'll find
blue-berries—a cup of grapefruit
a glass of cold coffee.

On the stove is the tea-pot
with enough tea-leaves
for you to make tea if you
prefer—Just light the gas—
boil the water and put it in the tea

Plenty of bread in the bread-box
and butter and eggs—
I didn't know just what to
make for you. Several people
called up about office hours—
See you later. Love. Floss.
Please switch off the telephone.

This unbelievable (and, certainly, unanticipated) abundance of responses to a rather simple and puzzling or intriguing poem may justify the common-sense reactions of certain critics; commenting on its self-referentiality, Stephen Matterson (in Trawick…) concludes that "it is the poem itself that 'means nothing'"; also at a loss as to the poem's meaning, Laura Maria Perez sounds helpless: "maybe poetry is about creating theories and wild guesses" (including those of children).

As a non-parodying reader, one can first conclude that the simpler and, thus, by its simplicity, more intriguing a text, the more parodiable it becomes. Next, parody may be a

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response to a genre's exhausted literary potentialities, but, as it becomes available to almost anyone, anywhere and at any time, parody itself seems to be used up; and, thirdly, parodying (in such cases) takes the form of a snowballing phenomenon (or geometric progression), as each parody gives birth to several other parodies, which, in their turn…, and so on, to the imminent end of parody itself. When Alvin Kernan (in the nineteen-nineties) was announcing the "death of literature," he could not have meant that literature was to exist only in the form of parody; an imitation has always got to have something to imitate (rather than just itself). As for "the missing plums," they do not show any signs so far of becoming a "case closed" for any "private eyes" of a literary turn of mind.

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