

Is It Or Isn't It?: The Duality of Parodic Detective Fiction

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Writers of detective fiction discovered long ago that every genre begets its parody and that parody can be the vehicle for genre renovation and transformation. Contrary to other genres (like the pastoral novel and the tale of chivalry) for which parody signaled their end as viable means of literary expression, detective fiction has incorporated its parody and, through it, humor into the tradition. The genre, which already involved the reader as an active participant (a "puzzle-solver"), has added a new dimension to reader participation by forcing a decision as to whether the work is to be read as a "straight" novel or as a parody. Parody has been one of the principal strategies used by writers in the renovation of detective fiction—that is, parody has led to the development of the genre; parody has brought humor to what was in its origins a predominantly humorless genre; and parody has been incorporated into the genre in such a way as to be often unrecognizable as parody.

Parody has not always been highly regarded as a form of literary expression. Definitions of it have ranged from that of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines it as a "burlesque poem or song," to Gilbert Highet's definition in *The Anatomy of Satire* as "imitation which, through distortion and exaggeration, evokes amusement, derision, and sometimes scorn."¹ More recent studies on parody downplay its satiric (negative) aspects and emphasize the avenues it opens for the revitalization of genres.

In her book *Parody/Meta Fiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Literature*,² Margaret Rose argues that when the formal possibilities of a specific genre appear to have lost their function—i.e. when techniques and structures have grown stale—the genre can gain new life by parodying the older forms and stretching them beyond their former limits. With this function in mind, Rose defines parody as "in its specific form, the critical quotation of preformed literary language

with comic effect, and, in its general form, the meta-fictional mirror to the process of composing and receiving literary texts" (p. 59).

It follows from this definition that the distinctive literary role of parody is that of offering two texts within one: the parody itself and the parodied or target text: both present within the new text in a dialogical relationship. Parody is, above all else, dialogical; in parody we find two languages crossed with each other, two styles, two linguistic points of view—in short, two speaking subjects. And although only one of these languages (the one being parodied) is present in its own right, it is the other language (the parodic one) which guides the reader to a new way of perceiving the original.³

Because of its "dialogic" nature, parody is "ambivalently critical and sympathetic towards its target" (Rose, p. 34). Parody satirizes its target while being dependent on it for its own materials and structures. The difference between the parody and the target can be used as a weapon against the latter while simultaneously refunctioning the target text for new purposes. Thus parody represents the creation of an alternative form which allows writers to supersede and reorient older traditions. Parody, which is self-reflexive in that it mirrors the process of writing and examines the aims and nature of fiction, is renovating in that it leads to the development of new, if self-conscious, literary forms.

Since parody is self-conscious, it follows that its aims and methods will be different from those of non-parodic works. Non-parodic texts, since their aim is to convince the reader of their truth and reality, strive to blur the reader's awareness of the presence of the literary medium by concealing the literary devices used in the creation of the text. Parody, however, is only effective when the reader's awareness is at its peak. Therefore, since it aims at sharpening the reader's awareness of the presence of the literary medium, parody will focus on the distinctive devices of the original, "laying them bare."⁴ The reception of parody by the reader depends on his ability to recognize this "laying bare of the device."

Because parody focuses on the distinctive features of a genre, the ideal reader reaction occurs when the reader recognizes the discrepancy between the parody and its target, while also enjoying the recognition of the hidden irony involved in the highlighting of certain elements. The recognition of the discrepancy by the reader is vital to the effectiveness of parody because the reader's function is to redecode the parody (a work that has resulted from the decoding of the original by the parodist who encoded it again in a "distorted" form). The reader of parody is challenged to the task of interpretation by the evocation of his expectations for a certain text, genre, style or literary world, before these expectations are disappointed. These expectations, however, can be of use to the parodist; they can either inhibit the reader's understanding of the new work or provide him with a familiar framework that could place the new work within the limits of his experience.

It is undeniable that contemporary detective fiction is to a large degree parodic. From its beginning as a genre, detective fiction contained within it the seed of its own metamorphosis: it was a genre which adhered rigidly to a formula, offering a familiar combination of characters and settings, and prototypical detective figures. The development of the hard-boiled detective story in the United States, although widening the possible variations of crime fiction, basically provided an alternative formula. The formulaic nature of the genre, however, is the basis of its appeal. Tzvetan Todorov, in his essay "The Typology of Detective Fiction" writes about the need to work within—not outside—the formula if one wants to write detective fiction:

As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre except perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book that best fits its genre. Detective fiction has its norms, to develop them is to disappoint them: to "improve upon" detective fiction is to write "literature," not detective fiction.⁵

If we accept Todorov's assertion that to transcend the formula is to abandon the genre, then we must conclude that the one avenue left for developing the genre from within is to parody the elements that constitute the formula in order to stretch them beyond their former limits. Hence the innovative changes in the contemporary detective novel which can only be explained as parodic and which create a new bond between writer and reader as two who are "in the know" and can recognize and enjoy the presence of familiar elements in new and often humorous forms. The appeal of parody is at the basis of the popularity of writers such as Robert Barnard, Colin Watson and Robert Parker. We will concern ourselves with one of them, L.A. Morse.

Larry Morse has published four novels to date: *The Old Dick*, (1981, a 1982 Edgar Award winner), *The Big Enchilada* (published in 1982 but written before *The Old Dick*), *An Old-Fashioned Mystery* (1983), and *Sleaze* (1985).⁶ All four novels are clearly parodic, and their particular interest in our context rests on the fact that as parodies they run the gamut of parodic forms and styles to be found in contemporary detective fiction.

Morse's works are remarkable for having elicited widely divergent responses from critics and readers alike, responses clearly connected to the recognition (or lack of it) of the parodic aspects of the texts. The following are quotations from some of those responses, taken from reviews of *The Big Enchilada*, the first book written by Morse:

There is sex and/or violence on every tenth page, but it's all romp. The coupling is adolescent fantasy, the blood merely catsup, and the wit doesn't detract from the seriousness of the message. *The Big Enchilada* sends up every canon of private eye

from Raymond Chandler to Mickey Spillane. In a genre that is already a parody of machismo, Morse has done the near impossible. He has created a parody of parodies.⁷

I found *The Big Enchilada* a truly vile book, one of the worst I've read in a long time. The main character is a pig and a lout. The violence and sex are gratuitous. The plot is a melange of incredible coincidences. If the book is a parody, it's a complete failure. If it's serious, it's worse.⁸

How tough is Sam Hunter? Remember Dirty Harry?... Next to Sam Hunter, Dirty Harry looks like Mother Theresa. In fact, *The Big Enchilada* requires a body count, rather than a review....

The plot: What plot?

L.A. Morse has written either the best West Coast detective novel or the best West Coast detective novel parody in years. Either way, its great fun.⁹

These reader responses to *The Big Enchilada* reveal four important elements evident in readings of detective fiction: (1) that readers are often unsure as to whether what they are reading is a parody or a "straight" work; (2) that parody has been so readily accepted into detective fiction that it often doesn't matter to the reader whether the work is parodic or not; (3) that if you are a naive reader—one unable to distinguish between parody and its original—you can miss the point entirely; and that (4) if the work is humorous, it probably is a parody.

The Big Enchilada introduces Sam Hunter, a tough, wise-cracking private eye in the Philip Marlowe mold—only more so. What the book offers is precisely more of everything; it is a parody-by-exaggeration which succeeds by humorously heightening the elements commonly found in hard-boiled detective novels. As the critic quoted above suggests, the novel indeed requires a body count. A firm believer that nothing succeeds like excess, Morse presents us with seven corpses, more than sixteen maimed, castrated, mutilated or merely beaten up bodies, and at least twelve offers of sex (not all of them accepted). The excess alone could mark the book as a parody; but what Morse has in mind is a more systematic, tongue-in-cheek send-up of the genre.

The narrative follows the well-established pattern of the hard-boiled genre: first person narration, every chapter opening with Hunter's comments on Los Angeles (that "work of fiction") prior to facing violence, sex and mayhem, and closing with Hunter's wise-cracking, cynical remarks prior to moving on. Chapter One establishes the narrative pattern that will be followed in the following chapters. It opens with Hunter looking out his office window, business being slow, and considering a vacation to Mexico:

It was another stifling summer day. A sulphurous yellow haze hung over most of Los Angeles. From my window I could see the cars backed up about two miles at one of the freeway interchanges. Down below the winos were shuffling around looking for some patch of shade where they could escape the sun. Even the packs of kids that would usually be breaking windshields or ripping antennas off of parked cars were not on the streets today. It was that hot. (7)

This is followed quickly by the abrupt entrance of a hulk who trashes Hunter about, warning him to stay off Domingo, and leaving him to calm his scantily-clad secretary's fear with a brief and rough bout of sex:

When I was through I let her down slowly. She slid down the wall until she was sitting on the floor, skirt above her waist, legs spread apart, totally spent.

I zipped up my pants and left the office.

I wanted to get something to eat.

I also wanted some information. About Domingo. Whoever or whatever that was.

My vacation would have to wait. Until I found Domingo.

At the very least, Domingo owed me a new desk. (11)

The brief chapter accomplishes two goals. On the one hand, it sets the pace for the chapters to follow, which will open with amusingly cynical remarks about Los Angeles, followed by quick bouts of violence and/or sex, and end with Hunter on the move, commenting wryly on the mess left behind. On the other hand, it affectionately recreates for the reader the elements we have come to associate with the hard-boiled genre: the steaming city of Los Angeles, the dusty office in a dilapidated building, the absence of clients (until a case comes looking for him), the sexy secretary (a dark, voluptuous Mexican) with whom the detective has a friendly, no-strings-attached sexual relationship, the provocation of his thirst for vengeance by an act of unjustified and unexplained violence.

The pattern accounts for the quickness of the pace and explains the staggering amount of bodies Hunter leaves scattered around Los Angeles. It also allows for the introduction of almost every conceivable character associated with the genre: the corrupt cop, the teenage porn star, the gruff cop who helps Hunter reluctantly, the all-powerful nymphomaniac gossip columnist, the grotesquely fat former star turned dope-dealer, and the monosyllabic hulk of a bodyguard, to mention just a few.

The accumulation of elements and characters, presented without derision, but with a speed and frequency not found in non-parodic examples of the genre, is the chief source of humor in the book. This "humor by accumulation" is helped along by Hunter's wry and amusingly detached commentary, as shown in the following examples.

Hunter on women:

I stuck my head around the shower curtain and saw that it could have been a lot worse... it was only the daughter of the woman who manages the apartment building. Her name was Candi or Cindi or Bambi or one of those goddam dumb names that were dropped on kids by parents who were terminally warped by the Mickey Mouse Club... She was blonde and pretty in a slutty sort of way that exactly suited her name, Suzi or Sherri or whatever it was. (50-51)

Hunter on sex:

She pulled away the towel. "Oh, Sam!" She fell on me like she was dying of hunger and I was the Christmas turkey.

What the hell. I had a couple of hours before my appointment. (137)

Hunter on food:

I had some time to kill so I went to the Krakatoa Restaurant... Honoring its name, they served a huge cone-shaped pile of noodles that was volcanically hot. The side dish of chile sambal that I poured onto the noodles was nearly strong enough to dissolve the bowl it was in. The delicate, sarong-clad girl who served me couldn't believe what I was doing. She called the rest of the staff out and they stood at a discreet distance away as I worked through the heap. They politely applauded when I finished and returned to their respective jobs. (186)

Morse's humorous style (described by one critic as crackling with "witty toughness"¹⁰ and praised by another for his "superb Chandleresque descriptions of our fair city and its denizens and a gusto so 'macho' it almost creates an acceptable context for his graceless hero"¹¹) has been the only aspect of the book to be universally celebrated. The same two critics, for example, reach widely different conclusions regarding the book. While the first finds it to be full of fun, the second one asks:

Who's more despicable in *The Big Enchilada*... the slimy porn-smack czars whom shamus Sam Hunter tracks down or Hunter himself? He throws his steak on a restaurant floor, pulls a Roscoe on a guy playing his car radio too loud, kicks down a door rather than look for the key and leaves poisonous snakes slithering through Beverly Hills.

Hunter may speak to the anger in us all, but I'd rather cross the street to avoid speaking to him.

The two are characteristic of the responses elicited by *The Big Enchilada*, which range from enjoyment of the book as a parody to complete rejection of its sex and violence by readers not able to recognize which elements of detective fiction it parodied. The responses are interesting because very few of them fell on the middle ground between acceptance and rejection. That was not the case, however, with *The Old Dick*, a book which received almost

unanimous praise from readers and critics, and which was not readily identified by readers as a parody. It is our contention that *The Old Dick* is Morse's best parody (in that it offers the most creative re-elaboration of the formula), as well as being the most representative of the fine line between parody and the "straight" genre that characterizes the contemporary detective novel.

The Old Dick has been described as a "sly send-up of the hard-boiled detective (starring) Jake Spanner, the world's oldest gumshoe, leading a host of geriatric avengers culled from L.A. rest homes."¹² We could add to that apt description that the novel is also a parody nested within the parody of a parody.

The novel opens with a typical scene from a Spillane-type hard-boiled detective novel:

Duke Pachinko lay propped against the wall, a dripping red sponge where his face used to be. He wouldn't bother anyone again... The blonde looked at the body, and then she looked at me. Her eyes narrowed and her lips parted... She slowly raised my hands and placed them on her breasts... Her breath was coming in deep shuddering gasps. I put my hands at the neck of her dress. A quick pull, and the silk tore apart with slithery ripping sound. She stepped out of the remnants of her dress and walked across to me moving like she was hypnotized, her eyes fastened on the bulge in my trousers... (9-10)

But (alas!) a page and a half later we discover that this is not *our* novel but the parody of a hard-boiled detective novel that our septuagenarian hero Jake Spanner is reading: "I closed the book (he tells us) and put it down on the bench outside. I really didn't need to read stuff like that." (10) From the opening pages of *our* novel, Jake establishes himself as a reader of detective fiction; a reader, moreover, who having been one of the original private eyes in his youth, is ready to reject the parodic world of contemporary detective fiction:

And fifty years later he was lying on an unbelievably ugly couch, reading about a guy named Al Tracker who could shatter other guy's jaws without ever hurting his own hand, and who had beautiful women lining up to give him blow jobs.

Tempus fugit.

Forty pages into the book, there had been a garroting, a defenestration, a dismemberment, and a gang rape. Al was out for vengeance (red, I supposed) and a malignant dwarf with a steel hand was out to rip Al's balls off. I dozed off. (33)

Throughout the novel Jake will remain a reader of the adventures of Al Tracker¹³ (his reading of that novel parallels our reading of his own adventure), and he will constantly compare the details of his case to those of Al's tale. If, as a parody of the original private eye (a parody of Jake's original self), Al Tracker is found wanting, Jake (also a parody of his original

self because he is a very old man) will constantly compare the parody that he is against the parody that Al represents.

There are actually three versions of the private eye present in the novel: (1) Spanner's former self, that of the prototypical private eye as exemplified by Sam Spade; (2) Al Tracker, a parody of the original private eye who bores Spanner the reader because his adventures are too far-fetched and unrecognizable; and (3) Jake Spanner as an old man, constantly comparing himself at seventy-eight to the original Jake Spanner of fifty years before. These three versions of Spanner are constantly present in the text, but only the young Spanner is present in his own literary right; Al Tracker and the current Jake Spanner are copies trying desperately to emulate the original.

The first of these copies, Al Tracker, is bound to fail because he is too much of a caricature. And it is Jake himself as a reader who repudiates him throughout the novel:

Since it didn't look like there was anything I could do until the next day, I smoked myself to the point where the adventures of Al Tracker would seem amusing, if not intelligible. Somewhere between Al wiping out a witches coven and being beaten to a bloody pulp by a gang of Oriental men with bamboo sticks, I got a call from Sal. . . . Just as Al was about to sink himself into the lubricious body of his client's wife, I gratefully sank into deep, dark, dreamless sleep. (84)

But Al Tracker is also a figure which must be transcended if Jake is to come close to recreating his former self. Jake's existence as a parody, we must remember, is only validated to the degree that he is a "distorted" version of the original. And surely enough, as the plot of Jake's own case thickens, Jake leaves Al behind:

I got into bed and picked up the adventures of Al Tracker. He was hanging by his fingers from a freeway overpass. How did he get there? I didn't care. After recent events, Al's exploits seemed all too tame and plausible. (177)

What Jake cannot succeed in leaving behind is his present self, subject as he is to the indignities of being a 30-year-old private eye in a 78-year-old body. And this incongruity between what a tough private eye *should* do and what the old Jake Spanner *can* do is the source of most of the humor in what is, after all, a very funny book.

Incongruity has long been offered as an explanation for the creation of humor. Quintilian, in his *Institutio Oratoria*, links humor to the disappointment of expectations, a view echoed by Kant, for whom humor was "an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."¹⁴ This concept of humor is particularly apt to describe humor in *The Old Dick* since it arises, for the most part, from

the disappointment of our expectations as Jake's attempts to act fail miserably *because* he is an old man.

Interestingly enough, however, the novel is not a satire of old age although the work has a fair share of satiric elements.¹⁵ Unlike parody, satire is not necessarily limited to the imitation, distortion or quotation of other literary texts, and the humor in *The Old Dick* is indeed restricted to the incongruity—not between youth and old age—but between two literary figures: the old dick (Jake at 78) and the even older dick which is his former self. (Notice that the title itself, *The Old Dick*, is semantically ambiguous.) The hard-boiled detective is obviously the target of this parody and the elements of the prototype are always present as the sub-text which makes humor possible.

This constant presence of sub-text and text in a dialogical relationship is indeed what makes the work a parody, since parody requires literary self-consciousness, awareness of the need to "lay bare the device." Larry Morse is aware of the need for writers working in the genre to highlight the fact that detective fiction has become a self-conscious genre:

I started writing detective fiction because I knew the genre very well, and enjoyed it. While I never set out to "satirize" it, the genre is by now so formulaic that it's impossible to write about private detectives without some acknowledgment or awareness of what's gone on before. What I do is admit that you can't take this stuff as deadly earnest and serious.¹⁶

And indeed, most parodies of detective fiction, *The Old Dick* included, do more than just establish a dialogue between parody and target, they also subvert from within those elements that characterize the genre. *The Old Dick*, for example, ends with Jake, who at 78 had faced abject poverty, running off with the crook Sal Piccolo and his million dollars to Tunisia, thereby subverting the prototypical moral stand of the hard-boiled detective. In doing so, Jake has broken the professional code that is such an intrinsic part of the model.

Jake's subversion of the rules points to the need to liberate the genre from strict adherence to the original formula. That is, after all, the recurring theme in the book. Jake, at 78, is as old as the hard-boiled genre, and could be seen to stand as its representation. By accepting the 78 year-old Jake as a private eye, we, as readers, have already subverted our own expectations of what detective fiction should be and in the process, we have allowed for the stretching of the formula beyond its former limits.

A different kind of subversion takes place in *An Old-Fashioned Mystery*, where Morse tries his hand at a truly satiric parody. The clear satiric intent—the use of laughter as a weapon against the classic mystery genre—sets this book apart from Morse's other work. In his preface to the book, Morse refers

to *An Old-Fashioned Mystery* as “the mystery to end all mysteries,” as “the eschatology of the mystery,”; and indeed, here the classic mystery becomes the object of satiric ridicule in a way not found in those works in which he parodies the hard-boiled detective novel. To judge by the parodic treatment of the two types of mystery fiction in Morse’s work, it is not hard to see which type he finds to be alive and well (and likely to be renovated through parody), and which type is dead and gone.

The target text in this parody is obviously the classic mystery in general and Agatha Christie’s *Ten Little Indians* (also published as *And Then There Were None*) in particular. The book’s premise will be familiar even to casual readers of murder mysteries: ten people gathered together in an isolated manor on one of the Lawrence River Thousand Islands (no boat, no phone, no way out) where it is soon obvious that a killer is loose.

The characters are just as easily recognizable behind their *Clue* masks: Rosa Sill, the nowhere-to-be-found hostess, brand-new heiress, and perfect murder victim; the apoplectic Col. Nigel Dijon who hides God knows what bizarre secrets from his military service in the Asian colonies; Beatrice (Aunt Budgie) Dijon, seemingly harmless wife for whom Rosa’s millions could bring freedom from the Colonel’s sado-masochistic tendencies; Mr. Eustace Drupe, executor of the will, whose briefcase suspiciously reveals a one-way ticket to South America; Derrick Costain, society beau and Rosa’s fiance; Cerise Redford, Rosa’s secretary-companion, soon to be unmasked as her illegitimate sister; Mrs. Hook, the housekeeper and potential mass poisoner; Mr. Ching, the cook and erstwhile spy, present to disprove the notion that no Chinaman can figure in a detective story; the plainly loony Mrs. Cassandra Argus, possibly the murderess of Rosa’s mother; and eye-shadowed society fop Sebastian Cornichon, smart-alecky twin brother of Society-Girl Detective Violet Cornichon. The latter is set on solving the mystery and ready to entertain bids on the manuscript. The only problem is that as soon as she builds her case and identifies the culprit, her suspect is either poisoned, defenestrated, chopped, drowned, strangled or bludgeoned.

The technique used by Morse in the structuring of *An Old-Fashioned Mystery* is remarkably similar to that used in *The Big Enchilada*: a pattern is established early in the novel and then repeated in a fast-paced narrative that lends itself to the humorous accumulation of familiar elements in parodic excess. Violet’s case against Mrs. Hook is just one of the many examples of the burlesque imitation of the quintessential classic detective story:

So, Sis, you’re saying that this Hacker killed Mrs. Hook and took her identity. But all the time Mrs. Hook was not Mrs. Hook, but was really Helga Milch. And thus it turned out that Hacker, who is a convicted murderer, is posing as a woman who was herself playing a part to hide the fact that she’s an acquitted murderer. What a delicious irony! (154)

But Mrs. Hook is to be found moments later nearly cut in half with a cleaver:

“Wrong again, Violet,” Sebastian said after a moment, flashing his sister a friendly grin.

Cerise began to sob hysterically, her body shaking with each new burst.

Sebastian moved to comfort her. “Take it easy,” he said. “No use crying over split Milch”....

“I say! What’s that?” Derrick pointed to the ground next to the body.

“Golly, you’re right!” Sebastian said. “Look, Sis. It’s the footprints of a giant duck!” (156)

As this and many other examples could show, every cliché found in the classic mystery is employed here, the book being after all a highly elaborate literary joke. The intended audience for this novel is clearly the inveterate reader of classic mysteries, since the deepening layers of humor can only be appreciated by those who are “in the know.” The humor arises primarily from the recognition of the multiple “quotations” from other novels found in the book:

The text is reminiscent of those sequences of fast-flashed photographs that show the events of an era in the space of a minute. Situations, characters, phrases, and dialogue zoom past, evoking elusive images of other books; often the source stays tantalizingly out of reach, just below the surface of memory.... After a few pages the reader will “know” that a Christie classic is the basis for the book, and, as the situation unfolds, will be amused and amazed by its simplicity.¹⁷

The “insider’s joke”¹⁸ is obvious both in Morse’s manifest intention of parodying Christie, and in his commitment to breaking every single one of Father Ronald Knox’s Ten Commandments of Detection (which the reader of *An Old-Fashioned Mystery* will find in a footnote on page 217). This commitment results in a major “transgression” of the rules of detective fiction (or so it has seemed to readers and critics):

This all would be very thrilling and suspenseful except that Ms. Fairleigh chooses to end with a twist that leaves the reader feeling nothing but betrayal. (Indeed I wanted to throw the book across the room.) This gimmick is low-class, unartistic, unnecessary and it violates the very reason for reading any crime fiction—to try and deduce who the criminal is before it is revealed at the end of the novel. This is impossible in *An Old-Fashioned Mystery*. The ultimate result is disappointment.¹⁹

The “gimmick” of course is Morse’s breaking of Knox’s First Commandment, which clearly states that “The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.” By making the author

the guilty party, Morse fails to satisfy the reader's need for a logical explanation, thereby crossing the imaginary line between what some readers are willing and unwilling to accept in parodies of detective fiction. It is worth noting that the majority of critics commenting on *An Old-Fashioned Mystery* professed to like the novel very much "up until the deus ex machina."

The "transgression" brings us back to Todorov's contention that in order to write detective fiction we must work within the formula, since "to develop the norms is to disappoint them." A review of readers' responses to Morse's books reveals the enthusiastic acceptance of the parodying of the elements of detective fiction, as long as the parody does not transcend the essential rules that govern the genre. The parodist, they seem to tell us, can break the Fifth Commandment ("No Chinaman must figure in the story") with impunity; but he must not break commandments that transcend essential rules (i.e., "All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course"). And whereas Chinamen in detective fiction can turn out to be pretty funny, reunions in heaven apparently are not.

The choice of humor as the imaginary line that separates successful from unsuccessful parodies is not inappropriate when applied to detective fiction in general and Morse's works in particular. His most successful parody, *The Old Dick*, is both the book that remains closest to its model and his funniest one by far. This connection between humor and "success" in parody is underscored by the critics' reactions to Larry Morse's work. The further he strays from the conventions of the genre, the greater the diversity in the responses to his work and the greater the number of readers who do not recognize the humor in the text.

The Old Dick and *The Big Enchilada* succeed precisely because they can be wildly funny books, even while poking fun at the conventional formulas of detective fiction. They offer clear evidence (the pun is intended) of the possibilities parody opens for the revitalization of detective fiction. That the genre has been able to incorporate its parody into the tradition assures us of many more detectives stories to come.²⁰

Notes

¹(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 69.

²(London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1979)

³Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 79.

⁴Tuvia Shlonsky, "Literary Parody: Remarks on Its Method and Function," in *Proceedings of the 4th Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, Vol. 2, 1966, p. 800.

⁵*The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 43.

⁶The editions of Morse's works discussed in this essay are listed below, preceded by the original date of publication. All quotations will be cited in the text using, where necessary for clarity, the abbreviation given after the entry:

1981 *The Old Dick* (New York: Avon, 1981). (TOD)

1982 *The Big Enchilada* (New York: Avon, 1982). (TBE)

1983 *An Old-Fashioned Mystery* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1983). (OFM)

We will omit *Sleaze* (New York: Avon, 1985) from the discussion since our analysis of *The Big Enchilada* holds true for the parodic elements to be found in *Sleaze*.

⁷Margaret Cannon, "Gritty Antidotes to Bucolic Boredom," *MacLean's*, 14 June 1982, p. 53.

⁸Bill Crider, quoted by Walter Albert in "The Big Controversy," *The Not So Private Eye*, Issue 11 1/2 (1984), [s.p.]

⁹Michael Neill, "Mystery Roundup," *NY Daily News*, 1 February 1982, [s.p.].

¹⁰Richard Labonte, "The Big Enchilada," *Ottawa Citizen*, 12 March 1982, [s.p.].

¹¹"The Big Enchilada," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 March 1982.

¹²Cannon, p. 53.

¹³There is a parodic link—a very funny private joke—concerning *Red Vengeance*, the book that relates Al Tracker's adventures. It parallels, and parodies, Sam Hunter's first adventure, *The Big Enchilada* (which must be remembered, was written before *The Old Dick*). In an amusing case of intertextuality, this is what Hunter (Tracker?) has to say: "I would extract vengeance, red vengeance... Vengeance! I could taste it in my mouth. A red haze dropped before my eyes, and I saw vengeance, red vengeance. It would be mine. It would be good." (TBE, 139-140)

¹⁴*Institutio Oratoria*, Book 6:3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 17. Kant's remarks are quoted in *The Psychology of Humor*, J. Goldstein and P. McGhee (eds.) (New York: Academic Press, 1972), p. 8.

¹⁵*An Old-Fashioned Mystery*, as we will see later, is Morse's true satiric parody.

¹⁶Morse's correspondence, 3 January 1986. He adds the following: "The writer's job is to engage the reader, to entertain, to keep the reader turning pages; humor is one effective method of achieving this, and because I enjoy it myself, I try to put a lot of humor in my books. Looking at Fowler's Humor Chart, I probably use all of the approaches that are mentioned. If nothing else, humor is a good way of avoiding solemnity, pomposity and arrogance self-importance, three of the deadliest sins that can afflict a writer..."

¹⁷John North, "An Old-Fashioned Mystery," *Quill & Quire*, March 1984, [s.p.].

¹⁸There is, of course, an additional "insider's joke" in the Runa Fairleigh hoax. Fairleigh is the reclusive author whose disappearance—leaving behind the manuscript "found" and "edited" by Morse—is as mysterious as the novel she has written.

¹⁹Kelly Devries, "Low Class Gimmick Ending Spoils The Mystery in Otherwise Good *An Old Fashioned Mystery*," *The Newspaper*, 1 February 1984, [s.p.].

²⁰Our heartfelt thanks to Larry Morse for giving us access to his reviews and correspondence and answering our many questions.