

## Postmodern tricksters A comparative approach to contemporary picaresque literature

Review of: Luigi Gussago, *Picaresque Fiction Today - The Trickster in Contemporary Anglophone and Italian Literature*, Leiden/Boston, Brill/Rodopi, 2016, 305 p., ISBN: 9789004311220, € 126,00.

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This book investigates the developments of picaresque literature in contemporary Anglophone and Italian fiction, through a thematic, comparative analysis of eight exemplary novels: Umberto Eco's *Baudolino*, Peter Carey's *Parrot and Oliver in America*, Cesare De Marchi's *Il talento*, Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow or the Nature of the Offence*, Aldo Busi's *Vendita galline km 2*, Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, Stefano Benni's *Saltatempo*, and Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry*.

Within the vast picaresque bibliography, Gussago's exploration, supported by a rather rich theoretical apparatus, is original in both content and methodology, offering a fresh view on rogue literature. If most analyses of this genre have hitherto concentrated on its Spanish origins or on its later British imitations, the author instead shows us postmodern variations of the picaresque in Anglophone and Italian literature. However, while considering the features of the postmodern trickster, Gussago conveniently contextualizes the contemporary picaresque within its history and describes commonalities and differences with previous forms of this genre. Methodologically, the volume departs from the frequent analyses, aimed at characterizing this genre as a whole and defining its (possible) norms, with the author relinquishing normativity in favor of a thematic approach. The selected novels are paired (one Italian and one Anglophone) according to shared themes and examined two by two in each of the four chapters. The choice of Italian and Anglophone texts might appear arbitrary at first but is justified by the convincing way in which the texts are coupled. The aspects the author analyses for each pair of novels are not exclusive to those two stories but are present across the spectrum of contemporary picaresque literature. In each couple, however, certain themes appear more prominently than in other novels, as aptly demonstrated by Gussago. Certainly, the chosen elements implicitly (or at times explicitly) end up creating a set of rules characterizing postmodern picaresque literature but the purpose is not to describe the genre stylistically or to limit its defining criteria. On the contrary, exactly by avoiding the trap of applying strict stylistic criteria, the author tends toward a more inclusive approach in the definition of the picaresque in its historical development and geographical variations. Although common themes in postmodern picaresque literature are the central idea in Gussago's methodology, the author provides precise explorations of the linguistic, rhetorical and even philological strategies characterizing

rogue tales, and punctually relates them to the selected novels. This substantial theoretical framework underlying the whole book and the methodological premise are included in a dense, yet clear and well-written, introduction, which precedes the four comparative chapters.

Chapter 1 utilizes Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* and Peter Carey's *Parrot and Oliver in America* to illustrate 'the significance of history in the picaresque' literature (p. 273). Being an anti-hero that subverts all the rules of society and common sense, the *picaro* narrates history in the first person as an 'unreliable chronicler', offering a highly distorted and subjective account of historical events and characters. If official historical narration can never be truly objective, the trickster reaches extreme levels of subjectivity in their reports. One could argue that Gussago hints at the picaresque as a special, albeit *sui generis*, type of historical novel, one that is not set in a historically accurate background but contains elements of historical narrative from the distorted, unreliable viewpoint of the *picaro*.

The second chapter elaborates on the theme of 'alienation and estrangement from a cultural standpoint' (p. 276), showing how this is represented particularly in Cesare De Marchi's *Il talento* and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow or the Nature of the Offence*. These novels ideally illustrate how the rogue plays an outsider role as far as mainstream culture is concerned and yet still manages to have a special position within predominant culture. The counter-culture proposed by the *picaro* ultimately coincides with the counter-culture represented by picaresque literature as opposed to the 'high' novel. The latter offers a representation of reality, which is more perfect than reality itself, while rogue tales are 'more inclined to simulate the chaos of real life than the tidiness of fiction' (p. 67). Arguably, just like picaresque fiction is a better imitation of reality exactly due to its imperfection, the rogue's historical narration is a better representation of 'real' history, precisely thanks to its distorted subjectivity, which is more in line with actual historical developments than with the orderly narration of 'official' history.

Through Aldo Busi's *Vendita galline km 2* and Angela Carter's *Wise Children* in chapter 3, Gussago examines aspects of gender and sexuality. In both cases, the *picaras*, the female rogue protagonists of these novels, 'contradict the stereotype of women as persecuted virgins, saintly creatures or deadly seducers' (p. 277). Once again opposing mainstream culture and feelings but also resisting the laws of nature, these *picaras* embody the role of willingly infertile women, exactly to reject common views on gender and sexuality, allegedly dictated by nature.

In chapter 4, Stefano Benni's *Saltatempo* and Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* lead the reader through an analysis of the different types of humor in the picaresque novel: the former as a good example of Carnavalesque laughter humor, while the latter is a conveyor of what the author calls Voltairian irony, or an Enlightenment inspired kind of humor. Convincingly, Gussago argues that the Enlightenment was the watershed moment for a new direction in terms of the representation of humor in picaresque literature, a crucial element of the rogue novel at all times. With an accurate description of the role played by irony, parody and satire in rogue tales, the author demonstrates how contemporary picaresque novels have more in common with Enlightenment forms of humor than with the original Spanish picaresque.

In conclusion, the examination of the aforementioned themes is corroborated by a dense weave of philosophical, sociological and literary references. The symbology of the (postmodern) *picaro/a* and his/her actions, in its distinction between meaning and significance, is unraveled in an erudite way, so that the book could be considered a treaty of semiotics in its own right.

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