

Luigi Gussago. *Picaresque Fiction Today. The Trickster in Contemporary Anglophone and Italian Literature*. Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2016. Pp. 305. ISBN: 9789004311220.

Like the baroque, expressionism, or, better, the fantastic, the picaresque is a twofold category: on the one hand it is strictly linked to a specific historical and geographical context; on the other hand, it can be applied to different periods and authors, becoming a cross-cultural concept: a mode (or type), rather than a literary genre. According to some Iberian scholars (Gustavo Correa, Francisco Rico), the picaresque should be labelled as an exclusively sixteenth-century Spanish phenomenon, whose reverberations to other countries and ages must be considered variations on the same archetype. On the contrary, scholars of comparative literature, such as Alexander Blackburn or Robert Alter, are more inclusive and highlight the dialectic between continuity and transformation throughout the history of this narrative form, which can be found in classical antiquity (Petronius, Apuleius, the Aesop novel) as well as in contemporary postmodern fiction. In particular, since the return of the picaresque has been extremely intensive in the 20th century, one could refer to a New Picaresque, as R. A. Sherrill does in a study devoted especially to American literature of the Eighties.

Gussago's book offers compelling evidence of this contemporary flourishing of the picaresque, as it analyses, through a series of four parallel close readings, eight novels from Anglophone and Italian literatures. The first chapter focuses on history and its rhetoric construction, examining Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* (2000), a semi-picaresque historical novel on Frederick I Barbarossa, and Peter Carey's *Parrot and Olivier in America* (2009), which revolves around the figure of the famous historiographer Alexis de Tocqueville. Exploiting De Certeau's cultural theory and Greimas' semiotics, the analysis deals with some key concepts, such as historical irony, de-familiarisation, and the connection between power and language. The second chapter presents two different kinds of rogue characters: a social outcast who keeps changing jobs and social

relationships, Carlo Marozzi, the protagonist of Cesare De Marchi's *Il talento* (1997); and a doctor who was active in the Auschwitz concentration camp, Odilo Unverdorben, the central character of Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow and the Nature of the Offence* (1990), both read through the lens of Lotman's semiotic of culture, as examples of a picaresque counter-culture. Gender is the dominant perspective in the third chapter: Aldo Busi *Vendita galline km. 2* (1993) and Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1990) deal with female protagonists, "willingly infertile, atypically anti-motherly rebels against the laws of nature" (277), and with other related issues, such as lesbian love, mistaken identities, male sexual exuberance and sexual/political dispossession. Finally, the last chapter is devoted to some crucial stylistic categories, such as irony, humour, satire and the carnivalesque (strangely Bakhtin did not profoundly engage with the picaresque). *Saltatempo* (2001) by Stefano Benni and *A Star Called Henry* (1999) by Roddy Doyle are the two case studies which allow the author to treat a large variety of expressive techniques, often related to some significant cultural turns (for example, the link between irony and the Enlightenment).

Combining rhetorical and formal analysis, semiotic patterns, cultural and gender studies, Gussago's eclecticism offers a rich and profound picture of contemporary picaresque fiction in English and Italian, including the manifold transformations of the trickster, an anthropological figure strictly linked to this literary tradition. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the author does not provide the reader with a satisfactory sense of the picaresque, because the family resemblances between the analysed texts are sometimes too weak and vague. At the end of the book, we still ask ourselves how the picaresque can be defined in today's literary world, is it: a literary mode or a genre? A narrative structure? A myth? A theme? Of course it is probably a mixture of all those components, but a wider and more careful methodological reflection still seems necessary.

The last section of the concluding remarks briefly alludes to the future developments of the studies in the picaresque; the extension to non-European literatures, and "the themes of alienation and otherness, the emergence of sexual 'minorities', the renewed battle for civil rights in many areas of the world, global mobility, migration, the debate on the question of *ius soli* as a first stage toward integration in countries like Italy" (281); themes that the picaresque incisively establishes as the "watchtower of human life" (281). I would add a third point to these suggestions: the intermedial perspective. Picaresque fiction has played a

very important role in the history of the movies. We should only think about the 'on the road' genre, whose Italian masterpiece is Dino Risi's *Il sorpasso* (1962); Gus van Sant's camp masterpiece, *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), a kind of modern *Satyricon*, also comes to mind. Comparative literature nowadays inevitably implies comparing the different realizations of myths, themes and literary modes in different media.

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Work Cited

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