

THE PICARESQUE AND ITS EARLY ADAPTATION IN ENGLAND: A NOTE ON NASHE'S *JACK WILTON*

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In the wake of the current interest in the picaresque novel, it is worth noting that England was the country where the tradition of the rogue tale was naturalized fairly early, after it had come into being in Spain around the mid-sixteenth century. A consideration of an early English specimen, *Jack Wilton* by Thomas Nashe, entails a brief discussion of the provenance of the genre.

I

The term *picaresque tale* usually denotes a loosely organized story of adventure, told by a rascal who wanders through space and rich social milieux, making his living by his wits. Certain themes, motifs, and, most important, the type of the protagonist can, on the whole, be traced to earlier literature, even as far as antiquity, and to long-existing folklore tales and anecdotes. So we might be tempted to see the progenitors of the European picaresque first in the ancient literature of roguery, e.g. in the Milesian tales, then in the Menippean and Varronian satire, until we reach two famous classics, the *Satyricon* by Petronius and the *Golden ass* by Apuleius. The former may be regarded as the first genuine picaresque story in the sense that it is an episodic tale of a rogue's adventures in contemporary Rome. Moreover, it is autobiographical in form, the convention strictly adhered to by most writers of the picaresque. The *Golden ass* is similar in form and, like the *Satyricon*, employs material from the same source — the Milesian tales (Scholes and Kellogg 1966:73ff.). Scholes and Kellogg even seem to imply that the origin of the picaresque could be traced as far back as Homer's *Odyssey*, since it is a journey narrative, told in the first person. In the ancient history of the genre an important characteristic

is the opposition of such earthy stories as the *Satyricon* to what we would retroactively call Greek romance, e.g. Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. This opposition will be seminal for the rise of the picaresque in Renaissance Spain.

The Middle Ages furthered the development of the tales of roguery in two aspects. First, a broad panorama of representative types was added — in the Dance of Death Poetry. A full scale of conditions was shown there, Death dancing with the Pope, kings, princes, and other people, down to the lowest rung of the social ladder, thus providing one of the first reviews of the whole society. Insight into it was only to be sharpened in the mature picaresque.

Second, the rogue was endowed with one of his most essential characteristics: ability to perform tricks. This type of hero was shaped, among others, by the tradition of the *Roman de Renart*, with the fox, a model of an anti-hero, as a prototype for the astute, picaro. Here, as elsewhere in folk tradition, the central character was seen in terms of pranks and cheats he performed. Accounts of such deeds were dispersed throughout as separate anecdotes and only in time came to be linked to one and the same person. Presumably the whole plot of the picaresque came into existence with the welding of the individual accounts of tricks and attributing them to one person. Such a procedure can be seen in numerous mediaeval collections of French *fabliaux* and Italian *novellas* as well as in various jest books such as *Till Eulenspiegel* (1519), a random choice of comic tricks played by one person upon other people, where the personality of the central character has virtually disintegrated in the process of gathering together the separate anecdotes. The essence of the transition from the early romances of roguery to the picaresque novels of Renaissance Spain consists in the process of integrating the personality of the picaro, who existed and acted under specific conditions in a specific environment (Chandler 1899:ch. I).

Historically and geographically, it was perhaps well justified that the picaresque should have appeared in Spain, of all countries. The discovery of the New World brought an abundance of gold into Spain and the country reached the zenith of its economic development precisely in the mid-sixteenth century. The most immediate result was migration to cities and a greater mobility in society. Yet the new economic possibilities were not matched by the social careers of the kind the English bourgeois were making in the 18th century. The reason was a most rigid social hierarchy and the persistence of the feudal order, which alone accounted for lack of opportunities. The whole picture of Renaissance Spain is that of a country at the turning point of its development, economically, socially, and religiously. Acknowledging the view that new literary genres tend to appear in favourable social conditions, e.g. in England the rise of the new middle-class (Watt 1957), it seems accurate to say that the particular situation in Spain was one of the factors which facilitated the birth of a new convention in prose fiction. (From the literary point of view, an impor-

tant factor was the conscious opposition, often in the form of parody, to the prevalent genre of romance).

It is generally maintained that the birth of the convention took place in 1554, when *Lazarillo de Tormes* was published. It is an anonymous story, told in retrospect, of adventures and vicissitudes of a Spanish ragamuffin. Lazarillo is a poor orphan boy, compelled by harsh conditions of living to fend for himself, often by tricks and thievery. The story is divided into seven chapters-treatises, corresponding to the seven masters whom Lazarillo serves in the course of his fluctuating career. Each master contributes to the boy's peculiar education and stock of experience, the general premise being that life is ruthless in treating a feeble individual. In *Lazarillo* we have a very significant scene where the first master of the boy knocks his head painfully against a stone bull. This bitter experience constitutes the moment of initiation for the hero (later, the successors of the tradition will undergo similar ordeals: Moll Flanders seduced by the elder brother, Gil Blas fooled by an inn-keeper, or Roderick Random maltreated by his school-master). Not only in the motif of initiation is *Lazarillo* archetypal in the history of the picaresque. The whole concept of a lower-class hero (or rather anti-hero) was relatively new in fiction. The concept must include the dual role of the *picaro*, who is both the central character and the narrator of his own adventures. Here Lazarillo recounts his life at the moment when he is no longer a rogue; has married the mistress of an arch-priest who caters for them both, and Lazarillo hypocritically accepts this status. Thus there is a visible split between the attitude of the *picaro*-character and the *picaro*-narrator, they do not share the same system of values. The narrative distance created in this way allows for ample use of irony (Wicks 1974:245ff.), especially in the treatment of the masters of the boy.

The example of Lazarillo was subsequently followed by many writers in Spain. In 1599 Mateo Aleman wrote another picaresque tale, *Guzman de Alfarache*, whose success was immediate. *Guzman* is richer, both in details of the protagonist's life and in the picture of the social background. As opposed to *Lazarillo*, the background is seamier here and the tone much more pessimistic; there is a stress on man's essential depravity. Aleman complicated his narrative by frequently interspersing it with sermons and digressive comments of a moralistic nature (characteristically, Defoe will later make his Moll plunge into exhortations on the wickedness of the life she has led). Of the later Spanish novels in the genre two deserve mention: Espinel's *Marcos de Obregon*, which influenced Lesage, and Quevedo's *El Buscon*, a bitter and sarcastic tale in which realistic descriptions are often carried to caricature (Chandler and Schwartz 1961: 179—187) — an obvious affinity with Smollett. *Lazarillo*, *Guzman* and *Buscon*, as the core of the Spanish tradition, are responsible for establishing the essential picaresque myth (the term is Guillen's 1971: ch. 3):

an unattached individual of low birth, solitary but resilient, sets out on a journey during which he usually undergoes a rude initiation, and after a life of vicissitudes in a dehumanizing society retires in order to record all his past experience (Bjornson 1977, Wicks 1974).

II

England fairly early produced a work that may be said to have been written in the vein of the picaresque, although, it must be remembered, the tradition as such was not established yet. In 1594 (five years before *Guzman* appeared) Thomas Nashe published *The unfortunate traveller or the life of Jack Wilton*, which showed an all-too-clear resemblance to the Spanish *Lazarillo*. For drawing on the Spanish model Nashe had ample opportunity, since there had been several editions of Rowland's popular translation of the tale, the earliest published in 1576 (Chandler 1899: Bibl.; Schlauch 1963: 206). It remains to be examined to what extent Nashe was susceptible to the current interest in criminal biographies (Dekker, Deloney) and anatomies of roguery (like Borde's *Geystes of Skoggon*, 1565), yet the picaresque element seems to dominate in *Jack Wilton*. This will become clear after we have analysed the story in terms of a generic concept of the picaresque (cf. Guillen 1971, Wicks 1974) which is built on the original Spanish tradition.

A casual glance at the plot seems indispensable here.

We first see our hero as a page with the court of Henry VIII at the siege of Tournay where he successfully tricks the purveyor of the camp into distributing his drinks freely, for which Jack is duly punished. He then goes to the continent, where he witnesses the bloody battle of Munster. On meeting the Earl of Surrey, his former master, now love-stricken, Jack accompanies him to Italy. They stop on the way at Wittenberg and at the emperor's court. Soon they change their roles: master becomes servant and Jack travels in the guise of the earl.

While in Venice, they get into the hands of a pander and a courtesan who conspire against their lives and possessions. They fall victim to false accusations of the knaves while trying to outwit them and as a consequence go to prison. Soon they have a companion in the wife of a Venetian magnifico. Jack's master courts the belle in the artificial manner of a knightly romance. Ironically, it is Jack to whom the lady yields and who takes her on a tour of Italy after their release from prison. Jack then witnesses a tournament in Florence in which the earl is master of the field. The earl is soon recalled to England while Jack takes his mistress, widowed now, to Rome. There he occupies himself mostly with sightseeing. At that time Rome is visited by a "hotspurd plague" and Jack evokes the horrors of the calamity in which "one bed was the altar whereon whole families were offered" (Nashe 1594:84). The

house where Jack and his mistress reside is invaded by bandettoes who brutally rape Diamante, Jack's companion, as well as Heraclide, the matron of the house, who has lost her family in the plague. She kills herself and the ruffians take to flight carrying Diamante with them. Jack is inadvertently accused of the crime and "brought to the ladder", which misfortune he makes light of, however, for "he that hath gone through many perils and returned safe from them, makes but a merriment to dilate them" (92). Jack is saved by the intervention of an English earl who upbraids him for "straying so farre out of England" (93) and gives him a lecture on the evils that await an unfortunate traveller in various countries of Europe.

Jack then tries to find his lost courtesan, and so he does when by accident he falls into a cellar of one Zadoch, a Jew, finding Diamante inside. Zadoch sells Jack to his kinsman Zacharie, the Pope's physician, as a live specimen for dissection. Yet while dragged to Zacharie's, Jack is spotted by Iuliana, the Pope's concubine, who resolves to save him. By wicked stratagems she ruins Zacharie, has Jack carried off to her own house and confined there. Zacharie unsuccessfully tries to poison Iuliana and escapes while Zadoch is caught as an accomplice and burned alive. Kept in one house, Jack and Diamante plot against the lecherous Concubine Iuliana, and while she is at a feast rob her thoroughly and escape. They safely reach Bologna, where they hear the last confession of one Cutwolfe: how he pursued, overtook and finally killed Esdras of Granada, the villain whom Jack knows to have committed the atrocious crime at Heraclide's house. The morbid description of Cutwolfe's death on the rack ends the tale. Jack marries Diamante and hastens to join his king at a camp in France.

Having the plot thus summarized, it will be useful to juxtapose *Jack Wilton* against the theoretical construct of the picaresque (Guillen 1971: 75ff.).

1. *The picaro is an orphan, a half-outsider, an unfortunate traveller. He descends from three older types: the wanderer, the jester and the have-not.*

The title itself points to the picaro-Jack's basic situation: it is travel and the adjective suggests his general predicament. As a jester, Jack is best seen at the royal camp where apart from cheating the purveyor he goes in for numerous other jokes (16ff.) Only the third character type does not apply, for the Spanish motif of social oppression is absent here. Jack aspires to nobility (the changing of clothes with the earl) and does not lack education, in which respect he resembles 18th century personages like Gil Blas or Peregrine Pickle rather than Lazarillo or Buscón. Yet the difference is that of degree and emphasis only, for Jack is also a social climber and, like Lazarillo, lives by his wits

and that involves him in a series of predicaments from the start. This feature — of the picaro's entanglement in the environment — places Nashe's novel firmly in the tradition of the picaresque.

2. *The picaresque novel is a pseudoautobiography, narrated by the picaro, whose view is partial and prejudiced.*

Almost all events are related as if Jack witnessed them personally and although credibility of the first person narrator is sometimes strained (Jack could not have known all the dealings of Iuliana, for instance), an attempt is made to justify Jack's position as *witness*: "I through a crannie of my upper chamber unseeled, had beheld all this sad spectacle" (91) — during Heraclide's rape. The subjectivity and partiality of Jack's opinions are often in a tension with the general tendency to appear objective and critical to the reader: proverbial sayings and comments exist side by side with completely subjective statements, as in the fragment where the Earl courts Diamante:

...he would praise her beyond the moone and starres, and that so sweetly and ravishingly, as I perswade my self he was more in love with his own curious forming fancie than her face, and truth it is, many become passionate lovers, onely to winne prayse to theyr wits (62).

A typical subjective opinion ("I perswade my self") is supported here with a seemingly objective generalization ("the truth it is") which is, however, a disguised personal utterance on the nature of artificial love in romance; parody of other genres forms an integral part of the picaresque.

3. *The total view of the picaro is reflective, philosophical, critical on religious and moral grounds. Hence frequent insertion of discourse, essay and sermon.*

Witty puns and wise sayings punctuate the narrative of *Jack Wilton*. There are also numerous descriptions: of Italian villas, of the tournament, of diverse human types, etc.; soliloquies: the highly rhetorical monologue of the ravished Heraclide; occasional sermons: Jack speculating on the nature of religion; or admonitory lectures like the one delivered to Jack by the English earl who saves him from the gallows. These elements make the narrative discontinuous, yet at the same time they impose a certain pattern upon it. Their appearance in the text is justified both by the extent of the travel (all Europe practically) — Jack moves through a rich spectrum of classes, places and situations, which allows him to comment freely, and by the type of the *picaro*-narrator — an educated man (one of Jack's assets is that he knows Latin); this type of *picaro* will be more popular in the 18th century. The historical context of assimilation of the tradition in Nashe is wider and more dynamic than in *Lazarillo*, which concentrates, rather solipsistically, on the experiences of a solitary figure.

4. *The material level of existence is stressed: sordid facts, hunger, money, etc.*

As in the Spanish novels, sordid facts are described in Nashe. The emphasis is different though. Here there are numerous scenes of blood, death and torture. This may be justified by the literary association with the prison tract. Cf. for example the execution of Cutwolfe or Zadoch, in the descriptions of which the author positively seems to relish (pp. 43, 120). Whereas in *Lazarillo* the stress falls on hunger and survival, in *Jack Wilton* it falls on crime and violence.

5. *The picaro moves horizontally through space and vertically through society, which enables him to observe a number of collective conditions: social classes, professions, human types.*

Indeed, Jack is a widely travelled man, in the manner of Guzman rather than Lazarillo, and his scale of experience is fairly broad too, ranging from that of a soldier to that of an enforced lover in the papal court. Jack encounters a variety of human figures: aristocrats, kings, soldiers, scholars, ruffians, prostitutes, inn-keepers, servants and so forth. Such a parade invites satire, and caricature often serves as a means to it (as in the description of scholars on the continent (49)).

6. *The organization of the novel is loosely episodic.*

The story consists of a series of enchaind incidents, more or less fully integrated. Within the framework of the first person narration there may appear stories-within-the-story (Guillen 1971:85) and of this we have an instance in the history of Cutwolfe's revenge.

Even this all-too-brief analysis of the *Unfortunate traveller* may convince us that the novel belongs strictly to the canon of the picaresque genre, though it appeared outside Spain and before the true awareness of the convention existed. Any deviations from the theoretical construct presented here should be examined in the light of other such conceptual models proper for the genres that existed alongside the picaresque in Renaissance England, e.g. criminal biographies and anatomies of roguery. This task, however, lies outside the limits of the present paper, whose modest aim was to place Nashe's work in the context of a newly-born convention: the picaresque.

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