Elements of the Picaresque in Contemporary British Fiction

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By

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To my dear husband, Dorel, for all his love and support

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

I. The Picaresque Story: Literary and Aesthetic Coordinates...................... 7
  1. Genres and the place of genre study in contemporary literary theory
  2. The canon of the picaresque

II. The Rogue Tale in the History of English Literature before the 20th Century 33
  1. Beginnings of the British rogue story: “La inclinacion picaresca” of the British writers
  2. Smollet, Fielding and Defoe: picaresque stories and experimentation with the narrative
  3. The nineteenth century English picaresque: Byron and Dickens

III. Revisitations of the Picaresque in the English Literature of the 50s and 60s.. 57
  1. The twentieth century: in search of new means of expression after WWI, and the re-discovery of adventure after WWII
  2. Adventure, fantasy, anger, and erudition in the Post-War Novel
  3. The picaroons of the Angry Generation
    a. The Angry Young Men and their times
    b. Joe Lampton and Jim Dixon: two “angry” picaroons
    c. Picaresque elements in the ‘non-angry’ novels of the 50s

IV. The Study of Genres in Contemporary British Literature: Postmodernist and New Age Criteria... 79
  1. Matters of the ‘self’ and of ‘identity’ in Postmodern and Post-post-modern times
    a. Postmodernism and the new approach to history
    b. Postmodern subjectivity, and the new conception of the ‘self’
    c. New conceptions of time and space
    d. Tendencies towards a reconstruction of the self and the spirit of New Age theories
  2. Towards a generic classification of contemporary British literature
  3. In search of the protocols of the picaresque in contemporary British literature: postmodern revaluations of the Genre

V. Picaresque as Displacement 125
  1. Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*
  2. Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*

VI. The Rogue’s Progress in the Remains of the Empire 153
  1. University rogues and European postmodern picaroons in novels by Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge
    a. David Lodge, *Therapy*: the rogue in search of his immortal soul
    b. The postmodern European rogue in Malcolm Bradbury’s *Doctor Criminale*
  2. Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* and *When We Were Orphans*: the displaced picaresque narrative and the fading of Englishness
  3. Tom Sharpe, *The Midden*: the comic and the grotesque gathering of rogues, struggling to find a long-lost Empire
  4. Timothy Mo, *The Monkey King* and *Sour Sweet*: the rogue among ‘pieces’ and ‘left-overs’ of colonial times
  5. David Dabydeen, *A Harlot’s Progress*: the tragic story of involuntary rogues

VII. The Rogue and the New Ethics of Science 199
  1. Simon Mawer’s *Mendel's Dwarf*: the ‘science’ rogue and the two-fold ‘otherness’
  2. The clone-rogues of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*: the humanity of the non-human

Conclusions 223

References 229

INTRODUCTION

This study started off from a workshop discussion in the early 90s at the British Council headquarters in Bucharest, when an officer of the British Council expressed his belief that there had to be something genetic about Englishmen and travelling. In fact, he did not refer only to simple travelling, but to a tendency of the Englishmen towards the picaresque. He said that the English nation was made up of "a queen, Parliament, inn-keepers and a bunch of picaroons". The participants in the discussion tried to identify the sources of such a 'genetic disposition', and the conclusion was that there were at least two sources for such an inclination: a *historical one* – coming form the tradition of the Empire of having all sorts of categories of people travel to colonies on a regular basis and for very long periods of time; and a *psycho-anthropological* one, which could be translated into some kind of specific disposition of the English to be on the road, to get involved in all kinds of adventures, to comment on the social, moral and cultural realities they encounter, using a more or less satirical tone.

After reading more on the theory related to the rogue-tale, the trickster, the wanderer and the traveller, I was surprised to notice that these categories existed in English literature much earlier than in the European cultures (in some cases), and I especially got interested in the picaresque, which 'officially' started as a baroque tale in Spain, but which seemed to have been 'instinctively' used by Chaucer almost two centuries before that moment. Following this 'lead', I have travelled with the picaresque in time, throughout centuries, and discovered that this genre might have undergone various changes and developments, might have been used fully intentional or just as a cultural and artistic reflex, but still, it has never completely disappeared from the English (then British) literary scene.

My main objective with the present study is to demonstrate that the picaresque is a cultural and literary invariant of the British fiction (like the grotesque, the adventure, and the satirical story). In order to do that, I had to start with the beginning, that is, with a diachronic study of theoretical approaches to genres, and to determine the place of genres in today's literary thinking. The next step was to define the picaresque. From among several definitions of the genre, I selected Ulrich Wicks' theory as being the most complete and functional. The project continues with a historical view on the tradition of the picaresque tale in Europe, as well as in Britain. The canonical Spanish texts were the source for the European archetype of the rogue tale. Nevertheless, the British novelists that have used the picaresque form have internalized this genre and transformed it into a very 'British' one: Nashe, Defoe, Smollett, Fielding, are names of the 'creators' of the British novel, who, at the same time, employed the picaresque genre (we may say that the British novel was *born picaresque*); in the nineteenth century, Byron and Dickens (like Thackeray and Goldsmith) are also representatives of the British picaresque. They used the genre, but, at the same time, made it their own, brought their own vision and interpretation to it. The conclusion is, nonetheless, that the British novel had picaresque elements from its very beginning, and has never entirely 'lost' them.

Coming into the twentieth century, after a short period in which it seemed to fade away, new texts were written in the first decades after WWII that show not only a revival of the rogue-tale, but also a programmatic employment of the genre as a reaction against the mannerisms of the Modernist novel. Elements of the picaresque were used by authors belonging to the "Angry Generation" or the Movement, but also by "non-angry" authors. In the same period, the *campus novels* began to be more and more present, displaying obvious picaresque elements.

When approaching contemporary literature, I could detect many such elements, but, in order to define, interpret, and illustrate them correctly, and to be able to support my vision on them, I had to take into consideration other factors, as well. Thus, among the 'sources of the picaresque tale', I did not only look at the historical argument (European and British canonical texts and their development till contemporary times), but also at the specific moments when the rogue-tale seems to be more 'vital'. Consequently, I came to agree with such critics as Herrera and Munteanu in maintaining that the picaresque appears mainly in the baroque and especially the mannerist stages of established trends; the history of the genre supplied enough proof in this respect (Byron and Romanticism, Dickens and Realism, Braine and Modernism, etc.).

Another important factor in contemporary British literature is the presence of many authors coming form the former colonies, and I needed to account for their use of the picaresque. Are they just 'influenced' by the British rogue-tale as they 'learned it'? Obviously, their coming form India and Pakistan, from the far East or Africa, where the specific conditions for the picaresque are obvious (with a society very strict with casts and social status), pre-disposed them towards this genre. Moreover, they bring with them a picaresque cultural pattern of their own (from their own traditional texts). A third argument would be their own situation as authors belonging to two cultures, two literary traditions, but also their personal status as immigrants (a position that very well resembles the position of the rogue).

There are other elements in contemporary British fiction that come from a new vision of the self, of the status of the individual in today's world. The changes brought about in the treatment of time and space during Modernism and Postmodernism are completed in this Post-post-modernist period by new tendencies, belonging to sciences, to psychology, to New Age concepts that maintain that man needs to sort out many issues concerning his position in today's world, especially his position towards scientific developments, towards beliefs in metaphysical conceptions, as well as a new conception about the non-constructed nature of the self. These debates 'deviate' very much from the traditional postmodern approaches.

To contextualize my study, I have also given attention to the concepts of 'British' and 'contemporary', and listed a few key approaches of the past decade that used such concepts ('English', 'British', 'Modern', and 'Contemporary' with their various meanings). In my approach, I adopted the vision according to which 'British' means literature coming form the United Kingdom and former colonies, and 'contemporary' means belonging to the past three decades.

The above-mentioned approaches also provided me with evidence that literature is still classified according to generic principles. I have a few examples of classifications in which such generic principles are used, among which there are some studies that even used the term *picaresque* in approaching certain novels, or categories of novels.

Consequently, the selection of the novels that I interpreted in terms of their 'display' of picaresque elements tried to illustrate this list of *sources* of the picaresque in contemporary fiction:

a. the canonical sources and the important moments of re-visitation of the genre before the twentieth century, illustrated with Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*; then with novels written by Nashe, Defoe, Smollett, and Fielding in the eighteenth century; further on, I exemplified my theory with Byron's epic poems, and with Dickens's novels and gallery of characters;
b. the revival of the picaresque after WW II, in novels written by representatives of the Angry Generation (Braine's *Room At the Top*, and M. Amis's *Lucky Jim*), and of 'non-angry' writers in the period – Murdoch's *Under the Net*, and Wain's *Hurry On Down*, and a re-interpretation of M. Amis's *Lucky Jim*;

c. the Asian tradition and re-interpretation of the rogue-tale in a Postcolonial context in Rushdie's *Shame*, and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, and Kureishi's *The Buddha of the Suburbia*. I selected Rushdie as a representative author that writes in English, but is pendulant between his old country and the new one, and, therefore, has to imagine them both; Kureishi writes about the second-generation immigrant and his/her special status on British settings;
d. the campus-novels, with the special situations created by their rogue-academics, who travel to and from conferences and symposia, in a permanent pursue of academic positions, represented by David Lodge's, Malcolm Bradbury's and Tom Sharpe's novels, with a special attention focused on Bradbury's *Doctor Criminale*;
e. the postmodern psychological and philosophical novel, in which metaphysical themes are re-visited (David Lodge, *Therapy*);
f. Postcolonialism seen from various settings: England in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, in Tom Sharpe's *The Midden*; in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*; the former colonies in Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans,* in Mo's *The Monkey King*. An "in-between loci" is represented by David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*;
g. New Age theories on science and the ethics of science in Mawer's *Mendel's Dwarf*, and in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*.

I am aware of the fact that these authors have been classified and categorized within other frameworks, and against other backgrounds before. Those classifications, though, do not come to contradict my vision as to the presence of elements of the picaresque in those novels. The fact that *Shame* has generally been referred to as an expression of Rushdie's magic realism, or the acid satire that is at the core of Sharpe's *The Midden* are not contradicted by the detection of picaresque tales within these novels. This is not an attempt towards new classifications; it is an attempt to demonstrate that the picaresque is an invariant, a constant element from an aesthetic, historical, narrative and thematic point of view in British fiction.

Naturally, there are many other novels that could have been analysed here (written by Angela Carter, by Julian Barnes, by Graham Swift, etc. – as the picaresque is an invariant in British literature), but the economy of this study imposed its own restrictions and I had to illustrate all of the *sources of the picaresque* with those novels that I considered to 'respond' best to the zoom provided by Wicks' *protocols of the picaresque*. Analysing such an eclectic list of novels, it was very important to work with clearly defined concepts. The *protocols of the picaresque* that were followed and highlighted in these novels were: *plot, rhythm, fortune, accident, character, internal instability, point of view, style* and *ending*, each with their particularities as defined by Ulrich Wicks. It is obvious that not all the novels display all the protocols – genres are always transgressed, there is no pure genre. This is why I preferred to look not for the rogue-tale genre as such, but for elements of the picaresque that can substantiate my vision on the picaresque as an invariant of British literature.

The titles that I gave to the last three chapters are not meant, thus, to become names of categories or to offer a classification principle; they are metaphorical titles to indicate the source of the picaresque in the novels analysed.

This angle – offered by the highlighting of the protocols of the picaresque in the novels selected on this purpose – can be considered both very generous (if the reader comes to agree with the idea of the picaresque as an aesthetic invariant of the British literature), or it may be seen as a very limited one, from the perspective of postmodern theory with its preference for more ‘technical’ approaches to literature, which favour especially narratology, or from the perspective of Postcolonialism, with its demanding classifications and concepts. My position is a direct reflection of my personal view on the limitations of such technical approaches; I favour those thinkers who consider that Postmodernism is downhill, and that even ‘during’ Postmodern times, this term was used as an umbrella for too many texts. As professor Berube shows, in today’s context, teaching Postmodernism, and illustrating it with texts written in the 70s and 80s is not very convincing for our contemporary students and their texts. Therefore, a generic approach, by which novels are seen from the perspective of aesthetic invariants, could open new horizons.

Even if my approach is less technical, it is, nevertheless, rigorous, in terms of the concepts applied and in terms of the type of close reading I favoured. Together with an open generic approach, close reading could also be useful in discussing such a variety of texts as the British literary scene has to offer nowadays. Still, I would not call my approach an example of close reading, as much as an example of taking down reading notes, which are presented in an essayistic form and style, with generous illustrations offered by the texts themselves. This attempt does not intend to minimalize or discard technical approaches; it tries to propose an ‘inter-disciplinary’ study (coming from the areas of the theory of genres, of aesthetics, of the history of literature, of anthropology, of psychology, of imagology, of traditional literary criticism, etc), under the form of a more or less impressionistic and subjective essay, which, idiosyncratic as it might be, advances a rigorously pursued cultural and literary perspective on British Fiction today, offered by the study of its generic invariants.

I.

THE PICARESQUE STORY: LITERARY AND AESTHETIC COORDINATES

1. Genres and the place of genre study in contemporary literary theory

Ever since Aristotle came against Plato's doctrines and included in his norms of definition the word *genus*, the discussion about genres reached incredible ramifications. In fact, except for the classical Greek and Roman period, genres have never been agreed upon any longer; they have been time and time again dealt with or dropped altogether, depending on the idiosyncratic angles theoreticians had in viewing them.

In this context, it comes as no surprise that the Romantic writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries dismissed categories such as genres as being static, thus questioning classical labels. Especially under the influence of Darwin's theories, the German Romantics relegated the character of genres to history, and consequently maintained that such categories were not applicable, as every literary text was unique and "'*a genre unto itself (eine Gatung für sich)*'", according to Friedrich Schlegel (quoted in Duff).

The Russian Formalist School re-phrased the Romantic belief in the autonomy of texts. Moreover, its specialist in aesthetics, Yury Tynyanov considered that genres appear and die, that the moment an artistic phenomenon reaches the level when its structuring is automatic, it provokes a counter-reaction, and within this dynamic process evolution of art is made possible. As a critical comment and as a reaction against early Formalism, Bakhtin came with his theory of *speech genres*, and he maintained that these extra-literary genres influence literature as well. Thus, when he wrote his first theories on the moulding quality of the two speech genres – the first speech genres, which are responsible for everyday life communication, and the second speech genres, which are used in writing novels, or literature in general (Bakhtin) –, it was the middle of the 20th century, and, by then, psychological studies had already revealed the fact that human mind functions by conceptualizing the world according to certain patterns. These patterns allow the human mind to understand and rationalize the world around it.

Although most of the critics tended to focus mainly on Bakhtin's speech genre theory, Bart Keunen showed twenty years later how another thesis formulated by the Russian theorist could be applied to genre, namely his concept of "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". The theory of chronotopes was intended by Bakhtin to reveal literature as a

> […] dialogue between mutually interacting texts, on the one hand, and the prior knowledge of readers and writers, on the other. This interaction between texts and mental procedures can be conceptualized in terms of invariant structures within literary communication – chronotopes – which are cognitive invariants used by writers and readers in order to structure historically and textually divergent semantic elements. (Keunen).

Although Bakhtin did not clarify very well his understanding of the concept of chronotope – as he associated it both with genre, and with motif – it was a turning point for other scholars, especially for those involved with the structures of memory schemata, towards the end of the century. Chronotope is not an image that can be associated with literary texts, as some may think; it is a complex concept, which incorporates the particularities of time and space within literary strategies:

> […] in the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (Bakhtin, 84).

Consequently, for Bakhtin, the theme of a text, its very meaning, is determined by the author's choice of genre, since genre is nothing but the cultural expression of a Weltanschauung. It is this Weltanschauung, or mindset that is called by him chronotope:

> Literary communication – or at least the communication found in 'realistic' novels – is taken to be determined by historical stereotypes like the "adventure chronotope", the "idyllic chronotope", the "folkloric chronotope", or the "chronotope of the *Bildungsroman*". The specific features of these structures are evidently those of time and space. A chronotopic schema can be determined by analysing the ways in which the plots and time markers of texts are interwoven with a series of settings and

> spatial markers. Time and space, however, are not only textual features; they also function as a mental unit that constitutes the backbone of the writing and reading processes. (Keunen).

Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope and the new psychological theory of mental schemata gave a new dimensioning of genre, that is, genological chronotopes, which could be associated with Keunen’s *super-structural memory schemata* (Keunen).

After World War II, the American school of literary theory revived the discussion on genres yet again, particularly under the influence of the New Rhetoric, of the theory of speech acts formulated by Burke, Searle, and Austin, which, in a way, diverted attention from what was considered important in a text up to that moment, namely content and structure, towards contextual social issues. Carolyn Miller's innovative article “Genre as Social Action” rejected the concept of genre in its more traditional meaning of recurrent patterns, serving to classify literary texts; instead, Miller, as it is widely known, viewed genres as community responses and rhetorical actions that are more or less typified and that come as a reaction to contextual social frameworks. (Miller).

In the Preface to the Romanian translation of Marthe Robert’s *Roman des origines and origines du roman*, Angela Ion synthesised the discussion on genres, their origin, evolution and aesthetic statute by referring mostly to the French school of thought. She maintained that this discussion did not lose any of its interest, in spite of such theories as Maurice Blanchot’s, who in *Le livre à venir* and *L’Espace littéraire* argued that there are no more forms and that genres have lost their signification (Ion, 6). Nevertheless, as Ion pointed out, other critics kept the discussion on genres alive, starting with Tzvetan Todorov in *Les genres du discours*, who re-stated the importance of genres, and (particularly) with Genette in *Introduction á l’architéxte,* in which he revaluated Aristotelian theories:

> Defining genres implies, thus, establishing a relationship between a-temporal universal archetypes and historical thematics; without denying that literary genres have a ‘natural foundation’, as well as a trans-historical one, an existentialist attitude and an “anthropological structure” [Gilbert Durand], a “mental disposition” [André Jolles] or “an imaginative scheme” [Charles Mauron], Gérard Genette considers that no matter what level of generality we might consider, “the generic fact always combines, inextricably, the fact of nature and the fact of culture” [Gérard Genette, Introduction…]; there are no archetypes that can totally escape historicity and still keep their generic definition; there are modes, for example, the story (le récit), there are genres, for instance, the novel.” (Ion, 73, my translation).

The discussion on genres has almost always been a discussion on typologies, classifications, taxonomies, where critics have drawn both lists of more or less normative features of a certain genre, and interdisciplinary parallels with philosophy, mathematics and biology in more classical studies, and with the media in contemporary ones.

In *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye, representing the Second wave of the Formalist school of literary theory, considered that all literary texts are organized according to a range of universal genres, as well as universal modes. A few decades later, Robert Allen noticed that, even since ancient times, genre study had been mostly targeted towards a dividing of literary works in terms of types that can be determined in a more or less scientific way (Allen). This vision was criticised by Daniel Chandler, in his very comprehensive study *An Introduction to Genre Theory* (1997), considering that genre is

> […] an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world (Feuer, 144).

Therefore, Feuer and Chandler contradict Frye and his belief in *universal genres and modes.*

Other critics started their process of defining genres by trying, first, to look at texts and find common features. Such attempts led to yet another limit, as they started using various terms to describe the same reality – there appeared, besides genres, sub-genres,

> […] or even super-genres (and indeed what is technique, style, mode, formula or thematic grouping to one may be treated as genre by another (Daniel Chandler, 1997). Critics, themselves write "to and from specific interpretive communities" (Foster quoted in Henke, 371).

This is why sometimes critics contradict each other, as they look at texts starting from very different angles. Commenting on such disagreements, Robert Henke wrote in his review of Verna Foster's essay on tragicomedy:

> […] often a disagreement between two critics may be largely traceable to the fact that they come from two different sets of texts. Academic theatregoers (who certainly don't make up the majority of those academics who write about drama), will likely see, within a relatively short time span, plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen, Synge, and Beckett, and they will therefore be interested in commonalities of dramaturgy and audience response between historically disparate works. Historically based critics who publish on drama, such as those associated with new historicism, have 'habits of mind' that are more likely to perceive family resemblances

> between Shakespeare and Columbus than between Shakespeare and Beckett, and they will likely be suspicious of concepts, assertions, and generic categories that span historical periods. (Henke, 371).

Some other critics clearly demonstrate that to start from the themes of the texts might not be such a good solution, either; this is particularly true to contemporary critics who linked literary genres with cinema ones, like David Bordwell, who claimed that

> […] any theme may appear in any genre. (Bordwell, 147).

Bordwell is also quoted in Chandler, along with his list of categories that film critics have used in grouping various films:

> Grouping by period or country (American films of the 1930s), by director or star or producer or writer or studio, by technical process (Cinema Scope films), by cycle (the 'fallen women' films), by structure (narrative), by ideology (Reaganite cinema), by tenure ('drive-in-movies'), by purpose (home movies), by audience ('teenpix'), by subject or theme (family film, paranoid-politics movies). (Bordwell quoted in Daniel Chandler, 1997).

If we remain in the same realm of film genres, we may also exemplify other approaches like that of Robert Stam, who showed that movies fall into categories according to several criteria, and, thus, genre could be referred to from various angles:

> While some genres are based on story content (the war film), others are borrowed from literature (comedy, melodrama) or from other media (the musical). Some are performer-based (the Astaire-Rogers films) or budget-based (blockbusters), while others are based on artistic status (the art film), racial identity (Black cinema), location (the western) or sexual orientation (Queer cinema). (Stam, 14).

As to literary texts, what we may use from Stam's theory is that there are types of definitions of genres, or types of problems when defining genres, which, although Stam uses to give definitions of film genres, may prove to be useful for literary texts, as well. These types of problems are summarized by Stam under four headings: (1) *extension* problems, when labels are used in either too broad a sense, or, on the contrary, in a too narrow sense; (2) *normativist* problems, when the critic tries to impose, or prescribe certain features to a text before even working with it; (3) *monolithic* definition problems, which ascribe certain texts to one and only one genre, excluding any features belonging to another genre; (4) *biologist* problems, a type of defining genres in which the critic considers genres as Darwinian cycles of evolution in time (Stam, 128-129).

Much as these later developments in film critique may help defining genres, they remain at the level of criteria, as there is no such instance as a ‘pure’ genre to start with. Although Tzvetan Todorov argued that

> […] any instance of a genre will be *necessarily* different (quoted in Gledhill, 60),

when working with texts, it is impossible to find such clear-cut differences. Consequently, some contemporary critics have started using other terms when referring to texts and stopped trying to give such definitions.

Thus, since Fowler demonstrated that texts very rarely display all features of a certain genre and only those features (Fowler, 215), other critics refer to texts that have ‘family resemblances’ (Swales, 49). Yet, the issue of defining genre is still there, as when particular texts are looked at, critics will select those texts that best suit their purposes. Therefore, such a selection of texts is biased to start with. If the attempt to start from definitions is very complicated and starting with family characteristic resemblances is difficult to apply, too, there are other approaches that try to find those texts that belong to certain genres to a greater extent: they exhibit the most features that can be labelled as characteristic for that particular genre. This new approach is called by Swales *prototypical*, an approach that will look at texts by comparing them to others in the attempt to

> “[…] identify the extent to which an exemplar is *prototypical* for a particular genre” (Swales quoted in Daniel Chandler, 1997).

Such difficulty in reaching a definition of genre has led to a new attempt, that of ignoring the concept altogether. But, as Chandler pointed out in his study “Children's understanding of what is ‘real’ on television: a review of the literature”, the public will keep on using genres, even if critics tell them not to, whereas some critics will always try to come with new definitions. What he suggests is that more attention be given to the readers and the way they relate to texts and classify them:

> How we define a genre depends on our purposes; the adequacy of our definition in terms of social science at least must surely be related to the light that the exploration sheds on the phenomenon. For instance (and this is a key concern of mine), if we are studying the way in which genre frames the reader’s interpretation of a text then we would do well to focus

> on how readers identify genres rather than on theoretical distinctions. Defining genres may be problematic, but even if theorists were to abandon the concept, in everyday life people would continue to categorize texts. (Daniel Chandler).

With such a vision on genres, other issues appear, that is, how could we lead such an empirical investigation that might reveal the reader's preferences and references when it comes to generic definitions of texts? If a reader buys a book that he believes to be a romance, for instance, is there a set of characteristics that he expects to find in that text? Are these expectations the same with all readers'? How can we systematize difference, then? Asking these questions will bring us closer to Steve Neale, and his opinion that

> […] genres are not systems; they are processes of systematisation (Neale, 51).

This comment is rather suitable when it comes to discussing real texts, as they will necessarily transgress any clear-cut genre delimitations, they will divert from genre characteristics, and they will move freely from one genre to another; they will mime genre membership, sometimes, they will change rules, or adapt others. Nevertheless, in this process of evaluation and revaluation of genres, texts will influence each other, and, eventually, will allow a certain type of labelling, even though such labelling will only be possible when texts are seen in interaction.

Another important factor that should be taken into consideration is the fact that genres have come to be regarded as historical categories. The way in which they are defined depends on the period when that particular type of definition was formulated, and even if some texts are evaluated retrospectively, attributing to them certain genre characteristics in hindsight, this is still a historical undertaking. Some genres seem to have disappeared, some are considered to have 'evolved' and gained new dimensions, some are "*dormant*" (Daniel Chandler,n1997) and will 'wake up' in certain periods of time.

Modern criticism, especially of Marxist or feminist orientation, argues that genres are nothing but yet another means for social control, imposed by a propagandistic type of ideology. Seen from this point of view, genres are ideological constructs, with subliminal messages, by which certain values are transmitted to the readers. Changes in the social message of certain genres, especially if evaluated thematically, may be considered from such an angle. Defining genres will be, consequently, defining the social content of various types of texts and their sub-texts. Still, we may argue that any text can be seen as a carrier of social values, that the reader might or might not read into, and this is not necessarily a genre discussion. Nevertheless, it is obvious that genres cannot be neutral from an ideological point of view, in that they

> […] are concerned to establish different world views. (Livingstone , 155).

We may further note, then, that if texts belong to a certain genre intentionally, purposefully, the rhetoric dimension of genres is highlighted. Thus, texts are considered to be written in such a way as to convince the reader of a certain set of values, which means that texts should be analysed from the point of view of the action they are intended to carry out. Or, as John Swales puts it,

> The principal criterial feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes. (Swales, 46).

A tripartite relationship is established, between the text, its writer and its reader, by which some characteristic features of genres are negotiated upon, so that

> […] genres first and foremost provide frameworks within which texts are produced and interpreted. (Daniel Chandler, 1997).

Considered from a semiotic point of view, genres represent codes, as Alistair Fowler notes (1982), which are absolutely necessary in human communication (216), since the writer and the reader play various roles within the process of communication specific to each literary text. Thus, sometimes the reader, the writer, the story-teller, the instructor and the instructee are positions that are taken by both writers and readers, and these positions depend on such communicative codes. This perspective brings to light both social and communicative implications of genres, and their negotiated character. Even though some critics considered that texts are more valuable if they transcend generic conditions, and reveal their unique character (like Croce and Romantic ideologists), it is obvious that the discussion about genres is abiding, and not without reason. Analogies have been made between genres and the schemata theory in psychology, following Bakhtin's school. Such arguments are brought by John Fiske, who speaks of such 'scripts' that we have mentally and that help us interpret the world around us:

> A representation of a car chase only makes sense in relation to all the others we have seen – after all, we are unlikely to have experienced one in reality, and if we did, we would, according to this model, make sense of it by turning it into another text, which we would also understand intertextually, in terms of what we have seen so often on our screens. There is then a cultural knowledge of the concept 'car chase' that any one text is a prospectus for, and that is used by the viewer to decode it, and by the producer to encode it. (Fiske, 115).

Thus, we may draw the conclusion that both writer and reader are conditioned by such mental scripts, which enable them to refer to pre-existent realities. Genres function in this way as organising principles. Readers have an experience with genres, even if they cannot articulate such frameworks theoretically. They learn genres ,

> […] gradually, usually through unconscious familiarization. (Fowler, 215).

From this perspective, genres both help to render content, and to make this rendering of content more efficient, since it is based on commonly agreed-upon frameworks of rhetorical procedures and social understanding.

Whether we look at genres from a typological point of view, or we side with the social approach, whether we consider the rhetorical characteristics or the psychological and semiotic ones, Jacques Derrida's conclusion is transparent and uncompromising, even if it represents in itself a compromise:

> […] a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without […] a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text. (Derrida 1981, quoted in Chandler, 1997).

So far, we have concentrated on genre from the point of view of its implications in literature, film, and the media, as some of the critics cited are specialists of media and film and not of literature necessarily, although they have paid much attention to literature and traditional genre study, as well. In the past few years, the concept of genre has been taken into consideration and applied to other types of communication, too, especially in the domain of hypertext, where the concept of Cybergenres was launched. Consequently, critics like Berkenkotter and Huckin have devised a framework that is seen as a summarizing and synthetic view of genre, and that is relevant for all theories of genre, be they linguistic, literary, social, rhetorical, or belonging to any other type of socio-cognitive perspective. This framework gives five criteria in defining genre, which are met with in all of the above-mentioned perspectives: *dynamism,* *situatedness, form and content, duality of structure, and community ownership* (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 4).

Dynamism refers to rhetorical forms, that is, to types of interaction between members of the communicative situation, which enables them to give meaning and coherence to texts. This feature gives credit to genre as being alive, an ever-changing means of socio-cognitive negotiations.

Situatedness refers to genre as being derived from previous, embedded knowledge, according to which we participate in various cultural situations in our lives.

As to *form and content*, the authors show that in genre analysis none of the two has prevalence over the other, both form, and content being of interest, as a certain form is appropriate for a certain content, both historically, and rhetorically.

The *duality of structure* refers to the fact that during human activities, we both participate in the constituting of certain structures whether professional or cultural, and are in charge of reproducing them.

The last theoretical category according to which genre is 'disciplined' by the two authors is *community ownership*, which mainly refers to the norms, ideology, epistemology that genre is a signal of.

One of the latest and most comprehensive studies on genre belongs to Amy Devitt, who brings a very thorough and useful contribution to the theories of genre. She is able to combine the way writers and their readers have shaped genres in time, as well as the way genres have been shaped by other contexts they operate within and which we have mentioned (historical, rhetorical, and generic). Devitt grounded her theories in several prevailing theoretical models in the domain, in order to give a definition of genre with a degree of complexity that may allow an interwoven type of approach. She takes each theory and extends it to the limits, gives highly acceptable interpretations to it, and reveals most of its limitations. At the same time, she puts in a great effort in finding a common view that is shared by such theorists as Bakhtin, Beebee, Derrida, Fishelove, Todorov (who come from literature); Freedman, Halliday, and Swales (who come from linguistics), and Bazerman, Berkenkotter, Hucking, Jameson, and Miller (who come from rhetoric and genre study). She discovered that most of these scholars have as common defining ground the fact that

> […] genre is action, that genre is typified action, that typification comes from recurring conditions, and that those conditions involve a social context. (13).

To put it differently, she noticed that, apparently, all these scholars agree on the rhetorical character of genre, as, obviously, genre is meant to give specific responses to specific situations, and these situations can be (and historically are proven to be) recurrent.

Such a definition, though, leaves two ‘loose’ ends, in that it does not give a proper definition to what ‘situations’ may be and what context entails, that is what is considered to be included when we refer to context. In other words, it is not clear how individual perceptions, individual experiences with texts and contexts more or less influence or even determine this recurrence of situations and genres. The author solves this problem by showing that

> […] individual perception, which must be the source of recurrence for discourse, exists only through the actions of individuals. (20).

She suggests that genres are not only means of reaction to situations, but they also determine situations.

Devitt brings into discussion two more aspects of genre: the great significance of culture, and the importance of pre-existing genres. If genres are responses to contextual situations and, at the same time, determiners of these, it is obvious that in the course of history genres have had the task to transmit cultural values. Such values can be brand new and require for new genres or new mixtures of transgressed genres, but they can also be recurrent and, for these, pre-existing genres will be recognized and used by the individual. Thus, genres have an important role in both constructing, and reproducing culture (27). Through recurrent, pre-existing genres, people

> […] interpret situations, select genres, and function culturally with a context of existing genres that brings the past perpetually into the present. (28-29).

By summarising pre-existing definitions and arguments, by introducing a more focused attention to cultural context and pre-existing genres, Devitt goes on to give her own definition of genre, one of the most complex definitions that have been proposed in the domain:

> […] that genre be seen not as a response to recurring situations but as a nexus between an individual’s actions and a socially defined context. Genre is a reciprocal dynamic within which individuals’ actions construct and are constructed by recurring contexts of situation, contexts of culture, and contexts of genres. Genre is visible in classification and form, relationships and patterns that develop when language users identify different tasks as being similar. But genre exists through people’s

> individual rhetorical actions at the nexus of the contexts of situation, culture, and genres. (31).

This definition allows for historical interpretation, as well as for a cultural one, for a rhetorical approach, as well as a social one, and, at the same time, remains in the domain of classifications of patterns, forms and typologies. This definition is, in itself, at the nexus of traditional genre theory and a modern genre theory, giving more reason to adapt such an old concept to contemporary artistic production. It is also the theory that constitutes the basis for my own vision of genres in contemporary literature, generally, and, more specifically, my vision on why the picaresque is still used in British contemporary novels.

2. The canon of the picaresque

The Picaresque genre seems to be a concept that most critics have agreed upon; especially the 'picaresque novel' seems to be distinct, easy to recognise, due to its form and its specific modality of presenting the story. One other thing that also seems clear and settled is that the picaresque novel is a genre that belongs to the history of literature, to the past. My undertaking here is to prove that there are several possibilities to analyse picaresque stories, and that a larger and more permissive definition of literary genres, generally, leads to a subsequent larger and more permissive definition of the picaresque, without inflating the realm of the picaresque artificially, though.

The picaresque novel appeared in Europe around the year 1554, although some studies speak about Petronius and his ancient presentation of a rogue story in *Satyricon*. The first Spanish picaresque novel was published in Bugos and almost at the same time in Alcala and Burgos, and was entitled *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades*. It is attributed to Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, but its author is still not known. This novel is not important only because it is the first in a series of Spanish and, later on, other European rogue stories, but also because it confers the rogue *"an archetypal character*" (Munteanu, 135).

From the point of view of critical approaches, the picaresque was first dealt with in a serious and academic manner by F. W. Chandler, in a book entitled *Romances of Roguery*, which appeared in 1889 and which gave the first pertinent classification of the picaresque novel. In 1907 he published another study, in two volumes, *The Literature of Roguery*. Since then, many studies have been devoted to this issue, and many came to contradict each other.

For instance, some critics maintain that rogue stories appear when societies are in full development, even flourish (Hague, 217), while others, on the contrary, think that such stories are part of a social and historical downfall, they appear when societies are on a descending economic road (Herrera Garcia quoted in Munteanu, 133).

From a historical point of view, though, it is certain that the Spanish picaroons actually existed in the sixteenth century Spain, in a society that gave very little freedom to individuals, as it was a powerful, concentrated monarchical system, in which each individual had his/her well-defined place. Thus, from a social point of view, the picaroon was a trouble-maker, one who wanted to transgress his social position and find another, a more satisfactory one in terms of living conditions, especially. In order to find such a better social standing, the picaroon had to be very attentive to what was happening around him, so, even unwillingly, he became a social commentator.

Some critics show that the first “picaros” were called “conversos”, as they were Jews who had to hide their real identity (Bjornson, 4), without making of their stories a dogmatic or doctrinarian comment. As Guillén notes, the picaroon has to deal with the

> […] economic and social predicament of the most immediate and pressing nature (77),

and has very little time for drawing philosophical conclusions. Other critics consider that there are two clear stages of the Spanish picaresque, a realistic one, in which the stories of an existing, real category of people were told, and the baroque stage, in which the picaresque story starts having a more aesthetic function (Munteanu, 134).

In the older stories, the picaroon is an isolated individual, ‘thrown’ in a state of crisis, very often an orphan who is forced to face a hostile society. After a series of events, he will soon discover that he has to find a social role, that he cannot just be an outsider, that society cannot be ignored. Thus, he will try to find a role to play, even though this means cheating, lying, deceiving etc. He is not only urged by the need to belong to a certain social group, but also by the even more urgent material needs, which make him be even more vigilant and a keener observer of social realities. Thus, he reaches the conclusion that evil has to be accepted as a natural phenomenon: the picaroon in his social ascent becomes, consequently, an icon of amorality.

Although the figure of the picaroon seems to be so easy to define, the very concept of the picaresque as a literary genre has never been easy to define, especially because there are many novels that have been labelled as picaresque. After the other Spanish rogue stories appeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *Guzmán de Alfarache*, *La picara Justina, La hija de Celestina, Marcos de Obregón, Alonso, moxo de muchos amos, El buscón,* and *Estebanillo Gonzáles*, followed by Cervantes's rogue stories *La ilustre fregona*, *Coloquio de los perros*, and *Riconete y Cortadillo*, they were immediately followed by such stories all over Europe. Thus, in Germany there appeared a German picaroon, called Simplizissimus, adapted to a German outlook by Grimmelshausen. As Borges underlined in a conference he gave in Germany and one of his commentators recently re-discovered,

> A feature that differentiates this literature from its Spanish models is the fact that the Spanish picaresque novel was written with a moral, satirical purpose; on the contrary Grimmelshausen's *Simplizissimus* – especially in his first books – seems to have another purpose than that to reflect, as in a big mirror, the whole terrible life of Germany during the 30 Years War. Then, as the book became successful, Grimmelshausen added new chapters. Towards the end of the 'narration' something typical for the German mind happens: the work moves away from concrete stories, and is transformed in an allegory. (Borges, a text translated in *Letras Libres*, by Eugenia Bojoga).

In France, *Gil Blas* became the iconic rogue, and in England, *Tom Jones* and *Moll Flanders.* From now on, for many scholars the Spanish models started to be less interesting, they gave more attention to the French and English stories, to Le Sage, Defoe, and Fielding, as well as to Smollett, who with his *Roderick Random* set a new type of discussion about the picaresque, which led to the conclusion that the picaresque narratives are in a way

> […] disjointed, episodic, high-spirited and adventure stories […] (Alter, 26).

Consequently, we may speak of a sixteenth to eighteenth centuries' range of picaresque stories, especially due to the fact that many stories presenting the ascension of a hero on the social 'ladder' told in a more or less adventurous way started being considered picaresque ones. These were narratives in which the so-called picaroon presented an example of social and financial success, whereas many 'true' rogues ended up in gaol or in total misfortune. This is why there were critics who pointed out a certain 'diffusion' of the term picaresque (Lewis, 27). In the last decades of the twentieth century, the picaroon was identified with the European and American man after World War II, and such critics as Ulrich Wicks showed that the features of the modern rogue are anguish and despair; moreover, Wicks does not make a theoretical point from the picaroon's social or financial situation, but rather associates him with the spirit of the times (74).

To summarise, we may say that the picaresque is the story of a picaroon, or a rogue, who is in a way at the margins of society, either by birth, or by social-economic-political accident, and who undergoes a number of adventures and situations that help him understand society, sometimes bringing him to a high social ranking (where he knows he has worked his way to by deceit and cunning), or to total despair and misfortune, when society discovers his amoral activities. Well, if these are the coordinates of the picaresque, then there is very little left of literature that is *not* a picaresque story. In trying to find a solution to this apparent dead-end, there were a number of critics – Guillen, Frohock, and especially Wicks – who suggested that, in order to establish the essence and the main features of the picaresque, they needed to go back to the initial Spanish rogue stories, that is, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, Aleman's *Guzman de Alfarache*, and Quevedo's *Buscon.*

By studying these classical texts, they were trying to find a framework, which would be basic in analysing later texts, even if the genre developed in time and was subject to changes in other countries, under the pressure of other social, cultural, and aesthetic values. In 1966, Robert Scholes discusses narrative forms theoretically, from a general point of view, and suggests that there is

> […] a system which divides all fiction into modes that are available to writers as possible forms of literary expression (27),

Starting from this affirmation, Wicks arrives to a definition of the picaresque, not only as a genre, but as a "myth" (243). But, in order to prove that, he went back to the initial Lazarillo.

Lazarillo de Tormes tells his story in seven chapters, by using an epistolary form, which is suitable for this sincere story, both from the point of view of the narrator, who can prove his reliability since he uses a natural, un-adorned type of language, even a colloquial one (which makes him very convincing), and from the point of view of the reader, who has the illusion that he is reading somebody's correspondence, in which the author did not try to lie, or to pretend, and, therefore, he can believe in the truth of the writings. These features set one of the main characteristics of the genre: the first person narrative, the un-mediated and objective by its extreme subjectivity type of story. At the same time, as compared to other first person narratives, in which the story might be told by several narrators or by a narrator whose role in the story is not major (by an observer), the picaresque is characterised by a single view-point. Everything that happens to the rogue involves him, is integrated in his story, in his perspective on life. His cynical point of view and his straightforwardness, together with his feeling of insecurity and doubt, make this narrator very effective in telling his story. Whether he is laughing at the social hypocrisy and shallowness or, on the contrary, deplores his inability to conform to what society considers good conduct, this limited point of view is, in fact, the only possible means for such a hero to present his story and make the reader take part in this unforgettable reading experience.

Generally, the picaroon is not the critic of just one aspect of society, as he travels from one city to another, or as Lazarillo does, from one master to another, and, therefore, he is able to present a social panorama of his age – in Lazarillo's case, the main three Spanish social classes of the 16th century, the nobility, the church people, and the world of the outskirts, of the markets and squares, of inns and roads: the underworld. Lazarillo feels lonely in this world; he is alone before he climbs to higher social positions, while he does that, and when he arrives there. His loneliness is due to the fact that there is nothing he can count on in his life, he has no family to begin with, and he has no friends, either; he needs to be self-reliant and trust nobody. He cannot afford being really attached to other people, and he finds no people worthy of getting attached to, either; his only response to this hostile world is to travel, to wander from one place to another, alone, unattached, isolated, and, very often, confused. He avoids public attention, and, by adopting this policy, he does not give in to criminal impulses or heroic ones, for that matter; the only realities for him are food, security, shelter, money, heating, immediate comfort.

In this confused, cruel world, the picaroon has no other means of resistance but his good humour, and his capacity to adapt to any circumstance. Most of the times, Lazarillo improvises: he laughs at social honour, he considers that everybody is deceitful and untrustworthy, and he is not willing to be caught in the middle of any serious battle.

The structure of the picaresque story is an episodic one, whose sequences are linked only by the fact that the picaroon is the main character in all of them (Stuart Miller, 12). Most of the other characters are episodic; the plot of the story does not allow the reintroduction of any of them in further episodes (Guillen, 84). The episodes of the rogue's progress are presented in a more or less chronological way and appear along the picaroon's travel.