

SELF-INDULGENT ISOLATION:
A CONTEMPORARY *PÍCARO* IN *IL TALENTO* BY
CESARE DE MARCHI

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This is also the case in *Il talento*, whose protagonist, Carlo Marozzi, has a dismal life story to tell: the first misadventures happen within the family circle, with outbreaks of anger towards his elder, intolerant brother Pietro, a strained relationship with his mother and a purely opportunistic alliance with his sister. The only family member who shows some real affection to Carlo is his mentally disabled brother Sandro, who dies when the young rebel has already left home. The encounter with the outside world is no less hostile: Carlo bravely enrolls in a *liceo*, has a rather lackluster school career and failed love stories. His constant struggle to earn money compels him to work as a janitor in a reputable school, while stealing complimentary textbook copies from the teachers. At the same time, he attempts snail farming with a literally crushing outcome; eventually, he finds a job as a proof-reader and, later, as a copy-editor compiling captions for pornographic booklets. He attends highbrow gatherings with the sole intent of pilfering food. His only companion is Michele, a school colleague, who introduces him to gambling and charming women, distracting him from his wife Alice and his little daughter. Carlo divorces and when Michele is arrested for counterfeiting the school registers, the *pícaro* cannot keep up with his carefree life any longer: besieged by creditors and banks, he ends up in jail. Like many of De Marchi's other heroes, he acquires a strong sense of being unfit for life, a condition he imputes to external causes. Such a condemning attitude tragically becomes an individual's second nature, bringing despair, confusion or, at times, a self-consolatory peace of mind. From this point of view, Marozzi, once in isolation, seems to follow a similar pattern by blaming his environment for his lot, as confirmed by the first sentences of the novel:

Sono nato quarto di tre figli in una famiglia decorosamente malestante. Fin dove risale la mia memoria, l'omissione della mia persona fu concorde e completa. (p. 9)

[I was the fourth born of three children in a decently bad-off family. As far as my memories can reach, my person's omission has been concordant and complete.]

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Ever since the age of reason, the protagonist has been confronting, or enduring, isolation at its worst. He is not simply excluded from the household; he is utterly omitted, a position far less comfortable than mere exclusion.

In spite of the sense of defeat or resignation that a first reading of this opening could suggest, the narrator already hints at a different issue which pervades and becomes central in the whole novel: how can the experience of non-belonging be reversed into a weapon against the tyranny of the majority, and how is the narrator to convey this rebellion towards established culture? The present study will centre on the reasons and the literary devices underlying various forms of this “reversal” strategy in *Il talento*, which, as will be shown, achieves at least a partial empowerment of the omitted/outsider by means of language itself. With reference to the ideas inspiring the novel, the writer explains:

era un mio obiettivo scrivere un moderno romanzo picaresco, e mi ero preparato diligentemente rileggendo o leggendo per la prima volta i romanzi picareschi spagnoli.

[I intended to write a modern picaresque novel, and I prepared myself diligently, re-reading or reading for the first time the Spanish picaresque novels]¹⁴.

Arguably, De Marchi tackles the question of alienation by reinstating the figure of the literary archetype of the loner, the *pícaro*. If that is the case, it is essential to determine whether this declaration of intent can be considered a viable instrument in the interpretation of the novel. First of all, what is the picaresque, and how does this mode intersect with the issue of alienation? The picaresque is a mock-autobiographical narrative based on the tragi-comic adventures of an outsider forced to roam around searching for fame or, in the worst case scenario, just enough food to survive. The central character is usually a servant who keeps changing masters out of self-interest, learning from necessity to steal and deceive, even though he is not immune to punishment and revenge. Many scholars have explored the issue of isolation in the picaresque: for example, Ulrich Wicks highlights the “ejection motif” as a common narrative device of this literary mode, implying a sort of “second

¹⁴ De Marchi, e-mail communication, 08 July 2011. An affinity with the picaresque has been mentioned by Bruno Quaranta in his review “La scommessa, che talento quel pícaro”, [The bet, what a talented pícaro], *La Stampa*, sez. Tuttolibri, 25 September 1997, p. 3.

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birth” of the protagonist, a quest for a place in the world through an unavoidable “initiation shock”¹⁵. More importantly, this initiation reinforces a lack of moral direction and a cynical view of society that establish the picaresque as a humorous surrogate for the *Bildungsroman*.

Pointing in this direction, the very title of De Marchi’s novel already entails an educational contradiction, as the author explains:

il talento cui si richiama il protagonista è la capacità (abilità?) di vivere e ricercare la felicità, ma il talento che egli in realtà mette in pratica non è altro che il talento nel vecchio senso della parola (che si trova anche in francese fino a Stendhal e, credo, anche nell’inglese medievale) di voglia soggettiva, capriccio, desiderio disordinato, arbitrio. Insomma il vero talento di Marozzi è solo di agire a suo talento [...].

[the talent which the protagonist refers to is the capacity (ability?) to live and search for happiness, but the talent he actually puts into practice is nothing but the talent in the old meaning of the word (a meaning that can be found in the French language up to Stendhal and, I believe, in medieval English) of subjective urge, whim, unruly desire, arbitrariness. In short, Marozzi’s real talent is to act according to his own talent (...)]¹⁶.

In the picaresque deceit and reality, acting and being, coexist; apparently, the word *talento* ought to express a positive quality but, in the *pícaro*’s consciousness, it acquires further devious connotations. One of the novel’s two epigraphs, a famous line from Dante’s *Divina commedia* “... la ragion sommettono al talento”, *Inferno* V, 39 (p. 7) [“... subject their reason to their lust”]¹⁷ highlights the word’s ambivalence. In cultural respects, too, the *pícaro* is a walking contradiction: coming from the margins of mainstream culture, he tells his story as a protagonist, flaunting himself as hero, well aware that his self-indulgent carryings-on and rambling thoughts do not represent an entire culture.

¹⁵ Ulrich Wicks, “The Nature of Picaresque Narrative: A Modal Approach”, *PMLA*, Vol. 89, No. 2, Mar. 1974, p. 247.

¹⁶ E-mail communication with the author, 20 July 2011.

¹⁷ Dante Alighieri, **The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Volume I: Inferno**, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling, New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 89.

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This contiguity of solitude and extraneousness pervades picaresque narratives; the question now is whether or not this aspect is reflected in *Il talento*. Carlo's pilgrimage from one zone of marginality to another seems to recall the journey of Lazarillo de Tormes, who "moves from one unstable familial and social situation to another", crossing an "ambiguous state combining baseness and the sacred", as Anne J. Cruz observes, with reference to Spanish picaresque²⁷. A similar fate awaits Carlo Marozzi after the inauspicious career twists previously outlined: he starts narrating his frenzied "compendio di una vita non ancora strozzata [...] giusto per passare il tempo" [compendium of a not yet strangled life (...) just to kill the time, p. 269], seized by a sudden intellectual whim, where the act of writing becomes a "ripiego per non impazzire" [expedient against insanity, p. 269]. It is only near the end of *Il talento* that the reader realizes Carlo is writing his story from prison, a place of solitude and exclusion, where he ends up after being unjustly (*sic*) accused and almost lynched for picking up a lost wallet that he tellingly describes as "gonfio fino alla deformità" [swollen to deformity, p.270]. After fifty-one days in jail, a place of confinement for the 'irregulars' of society, as much as a site of isolation and a typical confronting *locus* for one's "outsider-ness", Carlo's story of dejection reaches its climax with a grotesque suicide attempt, a sudden outbreak of repentance and a desperate emergency call to a first-aid operator who cynically cheers him up by saying "non si fa tanto presto a morire" [no one dies so quickly, p. 282]. These endless migrations of the rogue through the vicissitudes of family and social life become an obligatory path to a threefold destination: the personal omission of the protagonist from the home, his social segregation in jail and his drastic attempted self-omission through suicide, followed by the satisfied final acceptance of his state of alienation. The circular course of this pilgrimage clearly recalls the last words of another notorious *pícaro*, Francisco de Quevedo's Pablos, alias el Buscón: "nunca mejora su estado quien muda solamente de lugar, y no de vida y costumbres" [they never mend their condition who only change places without mending their life and manners]²⁸. This comment by Pablos may suggest that the *pícaro* will

²⁷ Anne J. Cruz, **Discourses of Poverty, Social Reform and the Picaresque Novel in Early Modern Spain**, Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1999, p 10.

²⁸ Francisco de Quevedo, **El Buscón**, Edición de Domingo Ynduráin, Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1980, p. 284. English version: AA.VV., **The Spanish Novelists: A Series of Tales from the Earliest Period to the Close of the Seventeenth Century. In Three Volumes. The History of the Life and**

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persevere in his dubious lifestyle and will keep making the same mistakes. Such circularity is essential and consistent with the picaresque quest whose purpose is *not* to draw a lesson from experience, but rather to give priority to knowledge over conformity. And knowledge is closely knitted with the awareness of the stranger, as Lotman maintains: “we have no other knowledge mechanism than transformation of ‘our’ (own) (*svoj*) into the ‘other’ (alien) (*chuzhoi*) and the subject of knowledge – into its object”²⁹.

The core of this sense of alienation does not only emerge from the story, but it also explains two more crucial elements distinctive of this narrative mode: the outcast’s conduct and his/her instrumental use of language. Regarding the first element, the *pícaro*’s assumed isolation from mainstream culture is often revealed through the rejection of ritual behaviour³⁰. Frequently, for example, Carlo perceives many around him as executors of rites imposed by society or by supposedly natural regulations: “rito della carne” [rite of the flesh, p. 16], referring to his parents’ sexual acts; a “minuzioso cerimoniale di dolore e dissoluzione” [meticulous ceremonial of pain and dissolution, p. 98], recalling the mourning over Sandro’s death. Even animals respond to a ritualized code of behaviour:

il cagnolino, espletata con rapidità sommaria la cerimonia inconfondibile dell’annusamento, alzò la zampa destra gratificando il risvolto dei miei pantaloni e la sottostante scarpa d’un nervoso e fortunatamente breve getto d’urina. (p. 84)

[the puppy, rapidly accomplishing the unmistakable ceremony of smelling, lifted the right leg, rewarding the turn-up of my trousers and the shoe below with a nervous and fortunately quick jet of urine.]

With regard to the rejection of ritual behaviour, there are two kinds of staging gestures in *Il talento*. Behaviour is a means by which we express a variety of hidden meanings, e.g. when a host shows too much courtesy to a

Actions of Paul, the Spanish Sharper, trans. Thomas Roscoe, London: Richard Bentley, 1832, Vol.II, p. 158.

²⁹ Juri M. Lotman, **Culture and Explosion**, ed. Marina Grishakova, trans. Wilma Clark, Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009, p.136. Original italics. Lotman’s first name has been transliterated either as Juri, Jurij, Iurii or Yuri. I maintained the original spelling of the referenced editions.

³⁰ “A gesture is an action which is not so much practical as meaning-bearing. It is always a sign and a symbol”. See Iurii M. Lotman, “The Decembrist in Daily Life (Everyday Behavior as a Historical-Psychological Category)”, in **The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History**, trans. from the Russian by A. Beeing, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985, p.105.

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guest, this attitude which can be read primarily as a display of politeness, may ultimately conceal a feeling of uneasiness, inferiority or, at times, derision, if the guest is particularly unwelcome. In the picaresque, rather, mainstream culture limits behaviour to its immediate purpose: gestures are means to an immediate end, they are self-contained acts. Further, behaviour does not only result in a stimulus/response chain, but even different actions lead to the same meaning, they are repetitions of themselves, rehearsals of the same *pièce*. Carlo emphasizes his gregarious role inside the family circle through theatrical metaphors: “In sala parto non ero stato che una comparsa, introdotta e subito rispedita fuori: e comparsa incominciai a sentirmi anche a casa [...]” [in the labour room I had been nothing but a walk-on, pushed onto the stage and quickly sent away: even at home I started feeling like a walk-on, p. 195]. The hegemonic culture has assigned him the part of a *comparsa*, but Carlo has the ability to turn his acting routine into a feast of improvisation. Describing his friend Michele as an “attore senz'altra natura” [actor with no other nature], Carlo grants that his role of “simulatore incessante” [incessant simulator], faithful to his mission of acting for acting's sake, has made him predictable to the point of looking “veritiero in tutte le sue manifestazioni” [truthful in all his demonstrations, p. 170]. On the other hand, Carlo acts as an improviser, creating urgency and simultaneity: he is unable to foresee where his role-playing will take him, his words and actions happen at the same time, so that it is difficult to judge which come first. His bouts of acting, his “estro momentaneo” [momentary inspiration], often reflect an interchange between the content and the expression of his actions, as in this passage where gestures even anticipate words: “Lo stupore incredulo con cui spalncai la bocca [...] stupì anche me per la facilità con cui riuscii a riprodurlo” [The disbelieving amazement that made my mouth gape (...) even astonished me for how easy I was able to enact it, p. 84]; or, later, when Michele enquires about his sexual exploits with Alice, Carlo easily simulates embarrassment: “dopo aver finto di fingere un momento di sconcerto lo ringraziai [...]” [after pretending to pretend a moment of disconcert, I thanked him (...), p. 162]. Thus, the roguish improviser seems to enact what Erving Goffman describes as “role distance”: individuals, embracing an appointed role in society – the “self-as-performer” (e.g. Michele) – occasionally detach themselves from this position and revert to their variable, “all-too-human” selves, which is yet another more subtle social construct³¹. While this is common practice for Carlo, the improviser,

³¹ See Erving Goffman, “Role Distance”, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*, Indianapolis-New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961, pp. 83-152.

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Michele is always at pains to detach himself from his appointed role. In short, although improvising is one way of acting, of belonging to the social stage, improvisation also reveals layers of genuineness and “personal style” (Goffman, *cit.*, p. 152) in the actors’ performances. Nevertheless, Marozzi’s behaviour achieves fulfillment only after the recollection of the past through narrative, because only storytelling can provide a justification for this “role distance”.

This then brings us to the second crucial element in the building of a sense of outsider-ness: the use of questions. Waldenfels assumes that every time an external agent – the “alien” – asks questions relating to our own status in life or society, s/he necessarily raises issues about our part in the conversation³². This is what happens in everyday conversations; however, narrative is a recreated, time-transcending form of communication where the narrator predetermines questions and answers. What is more, in everyday discourse, the position of a stranger should imply reciprocity with the other entity: I am a stranger to them, they are strangers to me. On the contrary, the picaresque anti-epic depicts a situation of extreme non-reciprocity, in which the mainstream culture rejects any recognition of the stranger, and brandishes the weapon of rhetorical questions as a subtle instrument of segregation. In *// talento* there are more than 150 rhetorical queries scattered over a total of 283 pages, an average of about one question every two pages, but their number would increase if we considered indirect questions inserted in the narrator’s reported speech. As an indicator of alienation, a rhetorical question attests to a refusal to engage in any dialogue whatsoever with the stranger, seen as a threat to the certainties of the main culture. It has the formal appearance of a common question, but it is mainly centered on the speaker rather than on the listener.

³² Waldenfels describes the request from a stranger as a mechanism which triggers a process of self-discovery that the act of replying sets in motion, whatever the effectiveness of the answer. “In the call of the Other which breaks the purposive circle of intentionality as much as the regulative circle of communication, the alien emerges *in actu*”. (Waldenfels, *cit.*, p. 36)

Abel discovers within himself this conflict of attitudes to life, and is led to succumb to it, whereas Carlo Marozzi has the ability to transfer this contradiction from himself to the society surrounding him, exposing its insignificance.

In summary, the *pícaro*, a stranger inside the *status quo*, challenges mainstream culture to confront his alienated nature. In the first place, the *pícaro* displays his skills as an improviser, opposing the execution of a ritual, a pattern that characterizes the hegemonic cultural practice of “role taking”; secondly, he resorts to linguistic devices that allow him to make sense of his isolation. All around, a profusion of rhetorical questions reveal the reluctance on the part of hegemonic culture to engage in true dialogue, pointing out, by contrast, the stranger’s talent for innovation. Furthermore, the picaresque outcast rejects the potential of proper names to embrace the paradox of synonymy, which privileges the language devices of circumlocution and euphemism. In accordance with a long narrative legacy, then, the protagonist of De Marchi’s novel acts as a self-satisfied outsider in a society undermined by lame mythologies, where the conflict between tagging reality and describing it is shifted from the individual (as occurring in the *Bildungsroman*) to the whole of society. Carlo leaves the reader with the resolution to trade happiness, seen as coercion, for the thrill of adventure: “[l]’avventura che verrà, non importa come o quando, a rompere i sigilli arbitrari della felicità” [(the) adventure that will come, no matter how or when, to break the arbitrary seals of happiness, p. 283]. Interestingly, De Marchi interprets this ambivalent sentence in an objective-genitive sense – used for the object of an emotion – (the adventure that breaks the seals imposed on happiness) rather than in a subjective way (the adventure that breaks the seals that happiness imposes)⁴². Without wishing to misjudge the writer’s

⁴² E-mail communication with the author, 29 January 2012. “Un punto delicato è invece la frase conclusiva del romanzo (il cui titolo provvisorio fu a lungo *L’avventura*), che io ho abbreviato rispetto a una prima versione che mi pareva un po’ pedante (“i sigilli arbitrari *imposti* alla felicità”) con una frase che inevitabilmente può riuscire ambigua, dato che “della felicità” può essere sia genitivo oggettivo (com’era nelle mie intenzioni) sia soggettivo [...]. Il senso che volevo dare era che solo la vita intesa come avventura incessante (“talento”) può rompere i sigilli della dura realtà che [...] precludono il conseguimento della felicità” (italics by the author). [A crucial point is instead the final sentence of the novel (whose provisional title had long been *The Adventure*). I shortened it in comparison with the first version because it sounded a little pretentious (“the arbitrary seals *imposed* on happiness”), and replaced it with a sentence which inevitably proves ambiguous, since “happiness” can be either genitive objective (as I meant it to be) or subjective (...). The meaning I wanted to convey was that only life, meant as an

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intentions, as expressed by himself, both interpretations could nonetheless be viable, considering the fact that the idea of happiness as anarchy that Carlo pursues clashes with the idea of happiness society tries to impose on him since school, where a teacher's motto of an "obligation to joy" (p. 47) sounded like a moralizing, well contrived justification to intrude on someone's freedom. To this, Carlo can only oppose his instinctive opinion that happiness is a right (p. 48), although his actions in pursuit of this right prove unsustainable and misplaced. The frailty of a utilitarian idea of happiness offers a sceptical corollary to *Il talento's* initial epigraph, a passage from John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*, V: "I never wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life" (p.7).

Finally, the significance of this *Missbildungsroman*⁴³ lies in the fact that, although Carlo Marozzi does not appear to have learnt any life-changing lesson from his failures, his condition as outsider is still, paradoxically, much preferable, in existential terms, to the fossilized fate of the mainstream culture. The latter is completely devoid of the courage to change (from proper names to common names), and remains entrenched in its unwillingness to accept the impact of the stranger as a disruption to its well-established state of entropy (acting against improvisation). The only responses that the main culture is able to oppose to this provocation are dispersed in rhetorical questions and ritualized codes. On the whole, extending the metaphor of the self-indulgent outcast to the literary product, De Marchi's novel represents an unpretentious yet insinuating voice that ventures to cast doubt on the certainties of postmodern narrative, shaking the foundations of its internal logic. A *picaro* this author is certainly not; but his deliberate choice of swimming against the tide of literary fashion places him undoubtedly in the position of a contented outsider.

incessant adventure ("talent"), can breach the seals of a harsh reality which (...) averts from the achievement of happiness].

⁴³ A definition that De Marchi reserves for his novel (e-mail communication, 21 January 2012).