

SOME USES AND MUTATIONS OF THE PICARESQUE

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A working definition of *picaresque* is "of or pertaining to rogues; applied to a type of fiction, of Spanish origin, with a rogue or adventurer for hero." The importance of the genre is intimated by Chesterton, in an essay on Smollett: "All novels like *Peregrine Pickle*, all novels up to the time of *Pickwick*, were written frankly on a . . . cynical convention: that the hero should not be heroic. . . . This tendency to follow with delight the tricks and triumphs of somebody little better than a swindler comes from the historical origin of this type of story, which began in what is called the *picaresque* novel."¹ Though Chesterton here overestimates the influence of the picaresque on the early history of the novel, he neglects its influence on the later: many novels since *Pickwick* might be described as specimens of this protean literary type. For the picaresque, rudimentary as it is usually thought to be, has taken on various disguises in the course of the novel's history, and has disappeared from sight only to reappear again. Indeed, it is being used today for purposes closely resembling those for which it was employed four centuries ago.

While the picaresque has its roots far back in the past, it is usually thought of as beginning in sixteenth-century Spain with *Lazarillo de Tormes* (published anonymously in 1554). *Lazarillo* is a rascally servant nimbly dodging the blows of fortune and of his various masters. His first and best preceptor in the art of living by one's wits is a beggar, who is blind but unscrupulous. *Lazarillo* rather admires the beggar's technique of deception, but a blow on the head with a wine jar makes him seek another employer; first, however, he takes a brutal revenge by making the blind man run into a post. Then he serves a succession of masters — an avaricious priest, a penniless grandee, a seller of indulgences, and so on. Eventually he attains a dubious good fortune as town crier of Toledo and complacent husband of an archpriest's concubine. By this time, his adventures have brought him in contact with people on several levels of society and have given his author abundant opportunity for social satire. The strutting grandee, to take one example, lives for honour, but honour will not fill one's belly, and *Lazarillo* has to beg for both of them. Thus the peripatetic servant is employed to give the reader intimate views of various types of people, and to point

out the contrast between the appearance which a person presents to the world and the reality behind it.

This is anti-romance. The romance portrays the superhuman valour and fidelity of those who follow the chivalric ideal; the picaresque portrays unheroic actions. Like the *fabliau*, it is in part a reaction against a particular kind of literature, a cynical travesty of chivalric legend. However, it arises in a particular time and place and apparently reflects particular social conditions. According to Mérimée's *History of Spanish Literature*², the breakdown of the economic system which incessant warfare brought to sixteenth-century Spain produced an army of deserters, cut-purses, down-at-heel *hidalgos*, drifters and adventurers of every description — an army of Lazarillos. It is perhaps tempting then to think of the picaresque as a type of social-protest fiction, fiction intended to shock the reader into an awareness of his country's plight and of the need for change.

But Baker warns us in his history of the novel³ that this type of realism does not mean revealing the truth about things, and the warning is repeated in a different form by S. de Sacy in an article entitled "*Le miroir sur la grande route: Les romans de Stendhal et le roman picaresque.*"⁴ If the writer of picaresque fiction holds up a mirror in a roadway, he rarely takes the trouble to make sure that the mirror is in the right spot to reflect most of those who pass by or to catch the typical rather than the eccentric. In fact, he may even use a distorting mirror: "*Pourquoi se mettre en peine? Quel besoin de se référer toujours la réalité? Un peu d'in vraisemblance ne messied pas, si la recontre est piquante.*"⁵ The picaresque romancer feels no compulsion to reflect the reality of the human situation; his only concern is that his glimpses of it shall be interesting and amusing.

Furthermore, his rebellion against society is often idiosyncratic rather than intellectual, as Sherman Eoff shows in an analysis⁶ of the second notable picaresque romance, Mateo Aleman's *Guzman de Alfarache* (1599). Eoff finds that, far from rebelling against the established social order, the *picaro* aspires to a position of comfort and privilege in it. His rebelliousness is nothing more than that of a youth who seeks unbridled self-gratification and finds his desires opposed; he attacks inequity and hypocrisy primarily because they thwart his personal ambitions. Therefore his thrusts at the corruption of society are really an expression of "sour grapes"; he subscribes without question to a belief in the established order, and his ridicule of it is an excuse for or a rationalization of his failure to succeed in it, a compensation for inferiority.

Eoff says that the virulent social criticism of *Guzman de Alfarache* "reveals the author's own frustrated ambitions"; as we read the biographical accounts of the Spanish picaresque writers, we are struck by the resemblance between their heroes' vicissitudes and their own. Alemán, a treasury official, was jailed twice for malversation or debt, and eventually sought refuge in Mexico. Quevedo, author of *El Buscón* (1626), had to leave Spain because of a duel, was employed by the Duke of Osuna in various intrigues including a conspiracy to overthrow the Republic of Venice, and late in life was imprisoned for a satirical attack on Philip IV's chief minister. Luis Vélez de Guevara, author of *El Diablo Cojuelo* (1641), rose from page to court playwright and Usher of the King's Chamber, but was constantly in debt and died in poverty. Mérimée describes the life of Vicente Espinel, author of *Marcos de Obregón* (1618) as "a real picaresque romance in itself,"⁸ and that of Diego de Torres Villarroel, an eighteenth-century author who left fifteen volumes of works, as "itself a veritable picaresque romance."⁹ The biographical evidence suggests, therefore, that the picaresque tale is often a thinly veiled complaint by an angry young man or a disillusioned old one.

But if the picaresque presents a life of shameless vagabondage, it must frequently do so for the purpose of moral censure. Though we can find little evidence of this in *Lazarillo*, it is certainly present in *Guzman*: Hazlitt praised the latter book for its fine mixture of drollery and grave moralising; Maugham condemns it for its tedious moral disquisitions. In the opinion of most critics, Alemán does not bring his incidents and his homilies into satisfactory union, but Enrique Moreno considers that Alemán exhibits the weaknesses and vices of all ranks of society in order to show how sin corrupts man's nature, and that the plot and even the digressions are subordinated to the inculcation of certain doctrines.¹⁰ In some other picaresque works, the didactic intention is at least as clear. Espinel in his *Marcos de Obregón* reproves the kind of vices which he himself practised in his youth, and concludes with a eulogy of the virtue of patience. In his *Fray Gerundio*, a later picaresque writer, the Jesuit priest Francisco de Isla, goes so far as to take the *pícaro* into the pulpit. It is possible, therefore, to see the picaresque as an exemplary tale exhibiting the kinds of folly and vice men are susceptible to and the kinds of disorder produced by such delinquency.

Lazarillo's successors outdid him in the range of their experiences. Guzmán is page to a cardinal and an ambassador, scullion, gentleman, beggar, and thief. Quevedo takes the hero of his

El Buscón through a sufficient variety of social encounters to enable him to reach the cynical conclusion, "In this world there are none but hypocrites and liars." Veléz de Guevara employs the devil Asmodeus to convey his hero from one part of Spain to another and thereby gives a satirical description of the whole country. The desire for inclusiveness, the desire to present an extensive range of observation, is one of the most notable characteristics of the picaresque writer. In fact, Edwin Muir states that the purpose of the picaresque novel is "to take a central figure through a succession of scenes, introduce a great number of characters, and thus build up a picture of society."¹¹ As we have seen, other purposes were present in the minds of the Spanish founders of the genre, but probably it is this one which has most frequently attracted English novelists to it.

Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) is usually called the first picaresque romance in the tradition of *Lazarillo de Tormes* to appear in England; and certainly Nashe's hero Jack Wilton is as knavish as any *picaro*. But C. S. Lewis terms the book a medley with picaresque elements in it rather than a fully fledged picaresque novel,¹² and Baker flatly asserts that the one thing Nashe did not do was imitate the Spanish rogue story.¹³ (He considers that the first English story to show direct imitation of Spanish picaresque fiction is a little-known work by Henry Chettle, *Piers Plainnes Seaven Yeres Prentiship*, published in 1595.) Jack Wilton has only one master, the Earl of Surrey, instead of several, and the Earl is favourably rather than satirically presented. In fact, Nashe's interest is not in ironic exposure but in the presentation of highly colourful and sensational incidents — the downfall and death of John of Leyden at Munster, Luther's disputation at Wittenberg, the terrible revenge taken on a murderer by the victim's brother, and so on. In the accounts of outlaws and reprobates which were popular in the seventeenth century, the influence but not the spirit of the Spanish picaresque was present; there was a continuing demand for sensationalism of Nashe's type. As in Spain, the introduction of realistic elements did not mean telling the truth about things; it did mean making the incredible sound matter-of-fact. Thus the fictional biographies, of which Head and Kirkman's compendium *The English Rogue* is an example, were a preparation for Defoe and the "strange surprising adventures" which his characters underwent.

Almost automatically we classify *The History of Colonel Jacque*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana* as picaresque works. Defoe's peripatetic hero or heroine is usually engaged in a series of

adventures which take him through high society and low; he describes his exploits with gusto and frequently with some pride in his ability to outwit others; and if deception is succeeded by repentance, the same was true of *Guzmán de Alfarache*. We should, however, pay some attention to Baker's statement that Defoe does not seem to have imitated picaresque fiction¹⁴ and to Ian Watt's assertion that there is a shift of interest in Defoe.¹⁵ The *pícaro* is often merely a literary device enabling an author to cover a great deal of ground, provide some connection between a succession of comic episodes, and unify his satiric observations on the world around him. Defoe, on the other hand, is interested in the behaviour of a person engaged in an economical struggle and a spiritual struggle; he focuses attention on his central character. "The *pícaro*," says Watt, "enjoys that charmed immunity from the deeper stings of pain and death which is accorded to all those fortunate enough to inhabit the world of comedy," but the perils of insecurity, indigence, and imprisonment which a Defoe character faces are very real. That character is a complete individual personality whose actual life experiences are significant in themselves.

The real follower of the picaresque tradition in eighteenth-century England was Smollett, but the Spanish form came to him through a French intermediary: he imitated, and indeed translated, LeSage's *Gil Blas*. In telling the story of a young man who never reaches the University of Salamanca (for which he set out at the beginning), LeSage introduces a great variety of characters, from robbers to ministers of state, and thus presents a whole panorama of society — ostensibly Spanish society, but actually French. The depiction of manners is more vivid than the characterization of the hero; Lanson says that *Gil Blas* has no real personality,¹⁶ Des Granges calls him the incarnation of the neutral temperament.¹⁷ Smollett's heroes are not quite so characterless; when he describes the early career of Roderick Random, for example, he is remembering his own state of mind as a young Scotsman newly arrived in London and as a surgeon's mate in the Navy. The Smollett hero is not a servant, but he is still a rascally adventurer — likely to be rewarded with a bride much too good for him (Peregrine Pickle wins a young lady whom he has previously tried to seduce with the aid of drugs). The adventurous career of the hero, however, is of less importance than the exposure of various types of people which is made possible by the adventures — the London sharpers who impose on young Scotsmen, the naval officers who make the life of the British sailor worse than that of a condemned felon, and so on.

In fact, Smollett's declared intention was to promote "that generous indignation which ought to animate the reader against the sordid and vicious disposition of the world." *Humphry Clinker*, his last novel, showed that there was another side to him besides irascibility, but even there he showed himself as a man reacting violently against the injustices he saw around him.

When Chesterton says that the Smollett hero dominated the novel up to the time of *Pickwick*, he is neglecting one major current of fiction and its English source — Fielding. Fielding employed an honest but gullible hero, not a rogue; he changed the master-servant relationship from that usually found in the picaresque novel; and he took folly as his subject rather than knavery, though the latter entered in despite his desire to exclude it. These were major changes, but his great contribution to the English novel was made through two other and even more important departures from the picaresque tradition. First, he brought to the novel a concept of form which it had not possessed; the strings of adventures which he found in LeSage and his predecessors seem to have satisfied him when he was writing *Joseph Andrews*, but in *Tom Jones* he introduced the plotting devices and the concept of a unified action which he had learned in the theatre. Second, he adopted a major modification of the picaresque made by another writer: *Joseph Andrews* is written "in imitation of the manners of Cervantes." In a study of Samuel Butler, Gilbert Cannon wrote, "Irony is one of the essential ingredients of your true novel, which is a special species distinct from the romance, and begins with the application in 'Don Quixote' of irony to romance. A novel is an epic with its wings clipped, that is, with its action and characters viewed ironically."¹⁸ But the concept of the prose epic set forth by the Canon of Toledo in Chapter xlvii of *Don Quixote* is of a work in which the author can show himself now epic, now lyrical, now tragic, now comic—a work, in other words, in which romance and anti-romance can coexist. The great innovation of Cervantes is to employ irony without cynicism, and to allow room for idealism, as Harry Levin points out in "The Example of Cervantes":

... Robert Greene could live between two worlds and keep them apart: first-hand journalistic accounts of the London underworld and mannered pastoral romances set in some escapist Arcadia, with very little intermixture of styles. The immeasurable contribution of Cervantes was to broaden the province of prose fiction by bringing both realms together, not in a synthesis perhaps, but in the most durable antithesis that literature has known; by opening a colloquy between the romance and the picaresque, so to speak, between *Amadis de Gaul* and *Lazarillo de Tormes*.¹⁹

Hazlitt wrote, "I should be at a loss where to find in any authentic documents of the same period so satisfactory an account of the general state of society, and of the moral, political, and religious feeling in the reign of George II, as we meet with in *The Adventures of Joseph Andrews*. . . ." Yet in the world of Parson Trulliber and Lady Booby and Mrs. Slipslop there was room for the unaffected benevolence of Parson Adams, and in the world of Thwackum and Square and Mr. Blifil there could be found an Allworthy.

When the picaresque proper came back into popularity about 1820, it was closer to Smollett than to Fielding. It meant chiefly strings of adventure tied loosely together by a perfunctory plot, sensational episodes in exotic settings or in unfamiliar regions of the English scene. Byron's *Don Juan*, it has been noted, is a picaresque in verse, presenting the escapades of an unprincipled hero and making good use of the opportunities for social satire which these afford. James Justinian Morier modelled his *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824) on *Gil Blas*, but set his tale of roguery in Persia; a sequel brought the hero to England and thus showed English customs through an unusual perspective. Theodore Hook introduced picaresque elements into the series of *Sayings and Doings* in which he depicted fashionable life in Regency London. Pierce Egan conducted Jerry Hawthorn and his "elegant friend" Corinthian Tom on a series of "Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis" which exposed the behaviour of the sporting and criminal sets in a particularly rowdy period. R. S. Surtees, introducing a Cockney to the hunting field, repeatedly exploited the humorous possibilities of putting a character in situations for which his previous experiences have not fitted him. A much more important writer, Frederick Marryat, piloted a succession of good-hearted but not unduly scrupulous heroes through adventures chiefly nautical to happy ports. Marryat is usually considered a disciple of Smollett, whose writing is similar to his in looseness of plot and in the contrast he shows between the world as it is and the world as it appears to a naive hero, but Walter Allen points out that the tone and temper of Marryat's work is far different from that of Smollett.¹¹

Since the picaresque method of realistic exposure was now back in fashion, it engaged for a time the attention of three young novelists who were to go on to other things — Ainsworth, Bulwer, and, most important, Dickens. Dickens's first novel began with (though it soon departed from) a conception derived from Surtees, that of a Nimrod Club, "the members of which were to go out

shooting, fishing, and so forth, and getting themselves into difficulties through their want of dexterity. . . ." In *Pickwick*, Dickens first secures the reader's sympathy for his central character and then conducts that character into regions of English society which he and the reader have no knowledge of and are shocked to see. In *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit* the design is similar; however, the heroes of these novels are less appealing than *Pickwick* and consequently the interest lies less in them than in their experiences of the London underworld, Yorkshire schools, and "the number and variety of humours and vices that have their root in selfishness." Dickens was undoubtedly instructed in the use of the picaresque for such exposure by his contemporaries, but his chief model was Smollett. In fact, his development as a novelist, as Kathleen Tillotson points out,²² may be seen in terms of his gradual emancipation from the Smollett tradition; he turned from the picaresque to the novel of highly organized plot. Curiously, this development seems to have a connection with technological advancement: the replacement of the stagecoach by the locomotive meant the adoption of a swifter and less flexible means of transportation, which minimized the chances for extraordinary adventures. Humphry House asserts that the railway killed the picaresque world,²³ and the railway entered the Dickens world in *Dombey and Son*, his "earliest example of responsible and successful planning. . . ." However, if the railway meant the destruction of one kind of picaresque novel based on one kind of movement, there were other kinds of movement which the picaresque could exploit.

One such possibility is suggested in some of the early works of Dickens's great rival Thackeray. In *The Yellowplush Papers* Thackeray observed society from the point of view of a Cockney footman; in *The Diary of C. Jeames de la Pluche* he allowed his servant to make a fortune in railway speculation, rise in the world, and look on fashionable life from a different perspective. Similarly in *The Great Hoggarty Diamond* an inheritance removed Sam Titmarsh from obscurity and gave him the opportunity to explore the world of fashion and finance. The Spanish picaresque usually secured inclusiveness by lateral movement in space and vertical movement in society; Thackeray minimized the former and emphasized the latter. "The counterpart of Smollett's travelling hero is Mr. Wells's climbing hero," says Edwin Muir,²⁴ and the climbing hero of Wells and many other writers had a prototype in Thackeray.

Another use of picaresque material by Thackeray was in parody of the picaresque novels of some of his contemporaries. *Catherine* (1840-1) burlesqued the "Newgate novels" of Bulwer and Ainsworth, which presented criminals in sympathetic lights, and tried to teach readers that they ought to "abominate all persons of this kidney." The most interesting of Thackeray's attempts to show that a rogue is a rogue is his first long novel, *Barry Lyndon* (1844). Like Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*, it was the ironic autobiography of a "great man," but it parodied the swashbuckling manner of another picaresque novelist, Charles Lever, author of *Harry Lorrequer*, *Charles O'Malley*, and (later) *Con Cregan, or the Irish Gil Blas*. When Barry Lyndon recounts his early picaresque trickery, he is a sympathetic character; he passes on to the period of his greatness through gambling, when he is still fairly sympathetic — "a not altogether hateful *picare*,"²⁴ as Saintsbury put it; but after his marriage to a wealthy widow he stands revealed as a complete scoundrel. Carl H. Grabo, in his book *The Technique of the Novel*, asserted that "the picaresque novel reaches no greater height as a work of art than in the cold self-portraiture of the rascally hero who tells the story of his life so composedly."²⁵ A number of other critics feel that the irony is not sufficiently well sustained; but one of them, Gerould, believes that the irony should not be there at all: "Thackeray no doubt was trying to use irony as Fielding had done in *Jonathan Wild*, and failed to see that it was incompatible with the picaresque manner."²⁶ As we have seen, irony has been present in the picaresque from its very beginning. The two do not seem incompatible with each other in *Barry Lyndon*, and, as we shall see, they have been brought into very effective harmony in some modern novels.

In *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp, the leading female character, is described by Frank Chandler in his book *The Literature of Roguery* as "the subtlest of anti-heroines." But when Thackeray called *Vanity Fair* "A Novel without a Hero" he surely meant, among other things, that his novel did not have a central character who would serve to link the various scenes. The scenes are presented directly; we follow the author as his vision wanders over the panorama of life and lingers on now one character, now another. Instead of progressing straightforwardly like the picaresque writer, he allows himself to go back and forth in time, and to draw ironic parallels between the experiences of his characters. For his purpose is an ironic one, the exposure of *Vanity Fair*, of people who have "no reverence except for prosperity, and no eye for anything beyond success." The total effect,

therefore, is quite similar to that in some early Spanish picaresque romances, and the method is not very different from that employed by Vélez de Guevara in his *El Diablo Cojuelo*, where the devil Asmodeus guides a Madrid student on a seven-league-boot tour of Spain and raises the roofs off the houses so that they can peer inside. But Thackeray dispenses with devices and pretexts for moving from one part of his world to another and for learning the secrets of the people in it; his imagination roams freely wherever it will. *Vanity Fair*, therefore, is a picaresque novel without a *picaro*.

After Thackeray the use of an intermediary hardly seemed necessary; still the device was revived by H. G. Wells at the turn of the century. His heroes are not rogues but victims; they are examples of how lives are wasted in a society based on muddle instead of a scientific approach to problems. In *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1900) he showed a budding scientist defeated by the world; he also employed a rogue, to make his point another way — by the cynical assertion that a comparatively innocuous brand of cheating has more to recommend it than the self-deception practised by most people. In *Kipps* (1905) the hero is a "little man," who is at first a clerk bound to "the great stupid machine of retail trade," then by means of a legacy is elevated into "society," and finally suffers a defeat which brings him, like Thackeray's Sam Titmarsh, to an awareness of the irrationality of the social structure. In *Tono-Bungay* (1909) Wells said that he intended "to give a view of the contemporary social and political system in Great Britain, an old and degenerating system, tried and strained by new inventions and new ideas and invaded by a growing multitude of mere adventurers."²⁸ His central character is a more mature Lewisham, a potential builder of society who is unable to find any basis on which to build; clinging to the coat-tails of his uncle, who rises meteorically to wealth and influences through the sale of a useless patent medicine, he is given the opportunity to carry on his futile search for positive values at every class level. In his next three novels Wells scrutinizes single aspects of the system. In *Ann Veronica* (1909) he employs a female character to search for a reasonable attitude to women, and to find that this does not exist. In *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910) he takes a "little man" once more, a small shopkeeper who in the economic jungle is only "an ill-adjusted unit in society." In *The New Machiavelli* (1911) he has a politician write an "Odyssey of discontent" and illuminate the decay of the political structure. In this novel the voice of Wells sometimes speaks through the mouth of his hero Remington; in

later novels Wells tends to become much more ventriloquial, so that the central character is often a thinly disguised Wells, very angry at the stupidity and inefficiency he sees around him and anxious to present reasonable alternatives. In the majority of his novels, therefore, he employs a central character to encounter a wide range of experiences and thus build up a picture of the world. But the haphazard movement of the picaresque is replaced by a scientific and experimental approach; the novel as used by Wells is an instrument of examination.

A much subtler use of picaresque method is found in the novels of Evelyn Waugh, especially in his first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928). His central character leaves the sanctuary of Oxford for the larger world, and finds that only rogues can flourish in it. He is therefore a device for exposure: ". . . Paul Pennyfeather would never have made a hero, and the only interest about him arises from the unusual series of events of which his shadow was witness."²² The unusual events in *Decline and Fall* are humorous in themselves, but also they combine to form a satirical picture of a world from which reason, order, and civilised behaviour are disappearing.

The novel reflects a breakdown, such as that which occurred in sixteenth-century Spain, and Paul Pennyfeather encounters a whole gallery of *picares*, strange shady characters possessing the adaptability to flourish in chaos. There is Margot Beste-Chetwynde, who moves in the highest social circles because of her wealth and who is wealthy because of her white-slave business. There is Dr. Fagan, first seen as proprietor of a dubious school in Wales and last seen as proprietor of a dubious sanatorium in Worthing. And there is Grimes, "one of the world's great rogues,"²³ who is constantly getting in the soup but is never there for long. He it is who voices the *picares*'s creed — take advantage of your opportunities:

" . . . I don't believe one can ever be unhappy for long provided one does just exactly what one wants to and when one wants to. The last chap who put me on my feet said I was 'singularly in harmony with the primitive promptings of humanity.' "²⁴

The prevalence of rogues is evidence of social disintegration; as in the most famous use of the term, the decline and fall of a civilisation is Waugh's theme.

In Waugh's next novel, *Vile Bodies* (1930), the interest focusses on a whole class of *picares*, the Bright Young Things. These are members of the uprooted younger generation, going round and round in meaningless circles (symbolized by an automobile race), living only for the day and the day's parties, forgetful

of the past and heedless of the future. They are all penniless adventurers, trusting that luck will bring them what they cannot pay for. Quite casually they bring disaster on themselves and on their whole world.

Waugh's most notable *picaro*, Basil Seal, is a member of this group, but he possesses more energy and initiative than the rest of them. In *Black Mischief* we see Basil awakening after a four-day spree to express his disgust with London and his desire to be off to some place more exciting. He obtains steamer fare by stealing his mother's emerald bracelet and by being obliging to a wealthy nymphomaniac, and then he is off to the African kingdom of Azania. It is the height of irony that this disorderly product of western civilization should be chosen by the Emperor Seth to bring progress to Azania; but it is in keeping with the *picaro's* charmed existence that, when everything else in the new order has been destroyed, he survives to return to London. In *Put Out More Flags* (1942), we see Basil in wartime. His women friends think of him as a white knight going forth to battle, but Basil says, "I know what I want. I want to be one of those people one heard about in 1919; the hard-faced men who did well out of the war."²² Throughout the period of stalemate, he carries on a fabulous career of exploitation; but when the war turns serious in the spring of 1940, Basil, like so many rogues before him, suffers a change of heart and reforms. So end the made-up adventures of the Bright Young Things.

If the picaresque served admirably to describe the pre-war world, it seems to have equally good possibilities for the post-war period. Recently the term has been frequently used to describe the novels written by the "Angry Young Men" who have appeared on the English literary scene. They have all the *picaro's* desire to remain uncommitted and irresponsible; V.S. Pritchett entitled an article on them in the *New York Times* last April "These Writers Couldn't Care Less."²³ One of their leaders, Kingsley Amis, writing in the same paper last July,²⁴ described the present as a transitional period (it was in a transitional period, as we have seen, that the picaresque first developed); stratified democracy is yielding to welfare democracy, old kinds of privilege are on the defensive, new kinds of privilege are in the ascendant. The modern adventurer is therefore on a rambling journey from one conception of society to another. The novel which will reflect this period must have humour, vigour, and breadth; instead of possessing only a restricted cycle of emotional keys, it must be able to combine "the violent and the absurd, the grotesque and the romantic, the farcical

and the horrific. . . ." In other words, Amis is asking for a scope as great as the picaresque can give.

The revolt of these writers, as was the case with the Spanish picaresque romancers, is partly against accepted literary forms. Pritchett says that they "write in a desultory vernacular, using every popular circumlocution or slang phrase or image to avoid the literary expression of feeling, so soaked in the association of bourgeois romance." They are "making war upon the assumptions of middle-class culture, by refusing to wear its masks." Their revolt against the social structure, therefore, is a much more conscious and deliberate one than was that of the sixteenth-century writers. However, as with the latter, there is a suggestion of wounded pride and self-pity; coming from the working class, they are qualified by education to enter the world of the public-school men, but feel themselves shut out. Therefore, as Pritchett says, "they have a chip on their shoulders."¹⁴

Still, though they possess picaresque elements, novels like Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* and *That Uncertain Feeling* and John Braine's *Room at the Top* do not carry their heroes through wide ranges of experiences and occupations. The novel which seems to fit best into the picaresque tradition is John Wain's *Hurry on Down*, published in 1953. When Charles Lumley takes to the road with nowhere to go, no money, and no plans, he is starting off from zero like any *picaro*, and is just as dependent on the whims of fortune. His repeated use of his "Jehovah's Witness" and "I've come for the catgut" formulas to get him out of tight spots shows that he has the *picaro's* ingenuity. He also has the *picaro's* irresponsibility and opportunism; he describes himself as "a louse on the scalp of society" and reflects, "He had thrown his humanity into the gutter, he had betrayed the trust that men place in one another, and with his thirty pieces of silver he had bought. . . what had he bought?" What he is seeking is to avoid commitment. "It's the type who wants neutrality who comes into our racket," he is told. "Doesn't want to take sides in all the silly pettiness that goes on. Doesn't want to spend his time scratching and being scratched. Wants to live his own life." But each apparently safe niche that he discovers turns out to be a trap, from which he must escape. Finally, when he thinks that he has put himself beyond the struggle, safe in a cage, as it were, "a fine new one, air conditioned, clean, commanding a good view," he is called out into the waving jungle again by a girl who has certain resemblances to Moll Flanders (she makes the parallel herself).

Successively Charles Lumley is window washer, driver for an automobile export firm (and dope-peddler on the side), hospital orderly, chauffeur, tramp, night-club bouncer, and member of a syndicate which writes jokes for radio programmes. Therefore he encounters a wide range of social types and gives Wain opportunities to describe them satirically — the social climber, the nymphomaniac, the millionaire, the shambling scarecrow of a headmaster, the vague myopic don, the aesthete and the athlete, the fanatic devoted to the gutter press and the maniac devoted to the radio, a heterogeneous array of vultures and victims. One of the most interesting is an experimental novelist, who is writing a book with no title, just a dark blue binding. The most cruelly treated are the people who are trying to better themselves, like Stan, who is trying to rise out of the world of strictly manual labour into the much slimier circle about it, and who is "immersed in learning the technique of cheap smartness." Perhaps the most sympathetic, on the other hand, is Stan's father, an ordinary working man, undoubtedly a Philistine, but unpretentious, good-humoured, and possessing a genuine dignity. By means of a peripatetic central character, therefore, Wain gives a view of the types of people passing away from the English scene and the types emerging in the new society which Amis discussed.

In the essay from which we have already quoted, Chesterton pointed out a difference between picaresque writers old and new:

It is here that we find the chief difference between old writers like Smollett and many modern writers who set themselves successfully to produce the same convincing smell of dirt, the same unmistakable ugliness in the details of life, the same slippery and sometimes slimy irresponsibility about sex, the same heroic persistency in avoiding heroism. The difference is that Smollett's hero, or villain, does know exactly where he is in the moral world, even if it is where he ought not to be. The modern adventurer of the same type occupies all his adventures in trying to discover where he is. He is not so much breaking laws with bravery and cunning, as trying to learn the laws, with constant bewilderment and despair.²⁶

Though this was written years ago, it is applicable to the novels of the "Angry Young Men," except in one respect. The modern hero is not trying to learn the laws, but insisting that there are no laws to be found. Wain and his group, Pritchett points out, are representatives of "a generation consumed by personal quirks, suspicion and self-interest." They refuse to commit themselves to any kind of idealism; they are "people committed to themselves." They are, in other words, genuine *picares*

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NOTES

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