

**PICARESQUE PROSE TRADITIONS IN THE NOVEL  
THE LUCK OF BARRY LYNDON BY W.M. THACKERAY**

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Prin prisma comparatismului, în acest studiu ne-am propus să determinăm elementele tematice și narative ce țin de tradițiile prozei picaresce, asimilate creator de către scriitorul de origine britanică W.M. Thackeray (1811-1863) în romanul său „Norocul lui Barry Lyndon” (1844). În articol sunt prezentate considerații cu privire la modul în care acest autor a preluat un model literar de succes în romanul său și l-a modificat conform propriei sensibilități și al specificului timpului și societății în care a trăit și activat.

Statuarea modului în care autorul se detașează de acest precursor ne permite să evidențiem individualitatea și originalitatea scriitorului britanic. Nu în ultimul rând, este important să concludem că autorul dat, transformând romanul său în parodie a genului picaresc, deși preia multe elemente specifice, nu continuă mitul acestui gen de proză în spațiul cultural englez din secolul al XIX-lea.

The given study focuses on examining the creative reevaluation of the picaresque prose pattern by W.M. Thackeray (1811-1863) in his novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (1844). One considers a study regarding the creative reception of the picaresque prose traditions in the works of this Victorian writer both a challenge and, to a larger extent, a tremendous endeavor, mainly because in our country little has been written about this author within the body of comparative literature, or few were those literary critics who studied this aspect of his works.

It should be mentioned that starting with the 17th century the elements of *picaresque* are frequently present in the British literature, as it is “*studded with simple tricksters: impostors, vagabonds, beggars, jesters, thieves, pirates, rakes, and fortune hunters*” [1, p.103], but the contemporary comparatists and Hispanists agree on avoiding to call these novels *picaresque*, and they encourage others not only to depict the pattern, but merely to study the ways in which the model was creatively assimilated, stressing the original peculiarities and features of each novel or author that received the influence.

As every author often feels free to detach from a literary predecessor, or tradition in a larger sense, as well as it adapts the pattern to its own sensibility and the specific social conventions of a cultural space, another goal of this work is to study whether W.M. Thackeray, assimilating the picaresque pattern, continued the myth of the *picaresque* or transformed it, which would allow one to admit or deny his contribution to the continuity of the myth on British soil.

W.M. Thackeray is an author who called attention to the life of the upper classes with the utmost frankness, depicting its evils with no uncertain touch. Many critics value W.M. Thackeray as a master of character delineation, an author known for having developed an important new kind of fiction — the ‘novel without a hero’. Referring to W.M. Thackeray’s art F.W. Chandler in his work *The Literature of the Roguery* (1901) pointed out that “*the observer of things as they are may use them in art sympathetically or satirically. He may coin reality to pass current, or else to disgust with life’s counterfeits. In dealing with roguery Thackeray best exemplifies the latter practice*” [p.42].

Speaking about our area of interest one should name some American comparatists who critically treated in various studies and articles the Spanish picaresque prose influence on the novel under discussion, among them: A.Blackburn, F.W. Chandler, and R.Colby, the opinions of whom guided the author of this article as well.

*The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, in which W.M. Thackeray revised the picaresque tradition, is a satirical version (a parody) on this genre of fiction. The opinions of the contemporary literary critics regarding the value of this novel differ. W. M. Thackeray’s *Barry Lyndon* was called by F.W. Chandler “*altogether the most powerful in the range of picaresque fiction, although the author uses picaresque conventions only to transform their meaning*” [2, p.69]. Another American critic, R.Colby, considers *Barry Lyndon* as W.M. Thackeray’s most unsavory story, “*containing as it does both an anti-hero and sordid subjects*” [3, p.129]. More than that, at the time of its initial publication it was much criticized for its harshness. In revising the

serialized version for volume publication as *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq. Of The Kingdom Of Ireland Containing An Account of His Extraordinary Adventures; Misfortunes; His Sufferings In The Service Of His Late Prussian Majesty; His Visits To Many Courts of Europe; His Marriage and Splendid Establishments in England And Ireland; And The Many Cruel Persecutions, Conspiracies And Slanders Of Which He Has Been A Victim* (the grandiose title is the invention of the publisher), the author eliminated Fitz-Boodle and his discursive essays, making the 1856 version shorter and tighter than the original.

It is known that W.M. Thackeray based his story on the real life history of the then widely known and notorious criminal John Bowes. The fact that W.M. Thackeray chose such an infamous criminal for his ostensibly picaresque tale does much to illuminate his intentions with the novel. To truly appreciate the implications of such a choice of models, a modern reader may imagine a Danielle Steele -type family saga modeled on Lizzie Borden's life. Instead of giving us the low-born innocent of *Tom Jones* (1749), we get what was called the Victorian 'bounder', "one who seeks to overleap the settled and venerable bounds of class, and a vicious, brutal (and worst of all, Irish!) one" [5, p.1].

Ch.Meiers claims "*Thackeray's roguish Redmond Barry is patently an imitation of Henry Fielding's picaresque hero Jonathan Wild; although unlike his 18<sup>th</sup> c. progenitor he is not a professional criminal*" [3, p.111]. In this flow of ideas one can list the salient features of tales like H. Fielding's *Tom Jones* intuitively: an innocent hero, typically without parents but always of an apparently low birth, sets out on numerous adventures where through his own bravery and wits he rises in wealth and social rank, finding true love and living happily ever after. According to R. Colby, "*W.M. Thackeray goes H. Fielding one better by making his protagonist condemn himself out of his own mouth with the very words that the anti-hero intends will do him credit. Common' is one of Barry's favorite epithets — to be applied to others*" [5, p.2].

It is easy to recognize in W.M. Thackeray's novel the classical narrative patterns of the picaresque story: the portrayal of the protagonist in a complex mixture of sympathy and aversion, his descent and youth, the traumatic "*second birth*" that sets him up for a life of wandering (the duel with Quin), the first confrontation with a hostile outside world (in the novel the encounter with the Fitzsimmons), the transformation of innocent victim to cunning scoundrel (symbolically represented by the victory on Toole), the trivial life placed against the background of great events (Barry and the Seven Years' War), the steep rise through society (the partnership with Balibari, the marriage with Lady Lyndon), the confrontation with the new generation (the conflict with Bullingdon), the look back followed by death.

In the details of Barry's life story the picaresque elements are also pointedly present: the broad range of characters who let themselves be guided by all possible human weaknesses and vices, Barry's extreme self-interest in his struggle for life, his capacity to adapt to his environment, but also his enormous pretensions and his impulsiveness constantly causing problems, the mocking narrator regularly taking his audience aside with a wink and, last but not least, the crucial role of fate at any moment capable of casting the hero back into a state of utmost poverty.

Some picaresque feature a first-person narrator like W.M. Thackeray's, but a typical one features a partially ironical third-person narrator. "*In employing the first-person narrator in this novel, Thackeray has every intention of deflating the idyllic picaresque paradigm*" [6, p. 197]. The employment of the Swiftian satirical narrator has the effect then of keeping "*the fatuous arrogance of [Barry] always before the reader*" [3, p.130]. According to R. Colby "*after Barry Lyndon Thackeray never again hampered himself with the autobiographic point of view, apparently the author feeling the need for the greater amplitude afforded by the omniscient narrator and detached observer*" [3, p.129].

W.M. Thackeray has Barry tell his own story in the form of a memoir dictated to his mother while in Fleet's prison for debtors in 1811 while slowly dying from alcohol-related maladies. Barry opens his memoirs with the following sentence: "*Since the days of Adam, there has been hardly a mischief done in this world, but a woman has been at the bottom of it*" [7, p.4], in which the reader will perceive the implied irony. However, the subtle, ironical style with which Thackeray lets his protagonist incriminate himself from the very first sentences indicates that Barry presents things in a prettier light than they must have been in reality.

Barry's narrative voice in the novel is one that is full of obvious lies and bragging, with W.M. Thackeray's imaginary editor, George Fitz-Boodle, intervening at several junctures to drive home the point of Barry's dishonesty. Ch.Meiers claims "*the goal here is to confront a reader who would be expecting a garrulous, gallivanting hero with an obnoxious criminal who is, on top of all this, intent on deceiving his readership*"

into thinking that he is the iconic hero to whom they have become accustomed in adventure novels" [3, p.130]. One can witness this technique in the following passage, where Barry describes his treatment of Lady Lyndon during their marriage:

"[Lady Lyndon] was luckily very fond of her youngest son, and through him I had a wholesome and effectual hold of her; for if in any of her tantrums or fits of haughtiness — (this woman was intolerably proud; and repeatedly, at first, in our quarrels, dared to twit me with my own original poverty and low birth)—if, I say, in our disputes she pretended to have the upper hand, to assert her authority against mine, to refuse to sign such papers as I might think necessary for the distribution of our large and complicated property, I would have Master Bryan carried off to Cheswick for a couple of days; and I warrant me this lady-mother could hold out no longer, and would agree to anything I could propose" [7, p.24].

After some digression on Barry's dubious relationships with his lady's female servants, which was here omitted, the editor, Fitz-Boodle, interposes with the following footnote:

"From these curious confessions, it would appear that Mr. Lyndon maltreated his lady in every possible way; that he denied her society, bullied her into signing away her property, spent it in gambling and taverns, was openly unfaithful to her; and, when she complained, threatened to remove her children from her" [7, p.55].

This outspoken pessimism is perhaps the most striking characteristic of the history of Redmond Barry. In comparison with the nihilistic conclusion that in the end only death will settle all human differences, conflicts, and ambitions, Candide's "*il faut cultiver notre jardin*" stands out as downright optimistic. Completely different from Voltaire's naive hero, Redmond Barry is an extremely unscrupulous young man who shamelessly takes advantage of the opportunities life has to offer. Contrary to the crime literature of his day—especially the *Newgate* novels of writers like Ainsworth and Bulwer-Lytton—Thackeray didn't intend by any means to romanticize his half-criminal protagonist. "In the novel Barry's worst character traits, notably his unrestrained aggression and his shameless capacity for lying—precisely, represent his greatest qualities" [8, p.3].

In a sense, W.M. Thackeray's novel, as J. Sanders points out in *Introduction to the Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq.* "can be read as homage to the art of lying" [1]. In the most sobering parts of the novel Barry describes himself straight-out as a rapist and murderer:

"I can recollect a certain day, about three weeks after the battle of Minden, and a farmhouse of which some of us entered; and how the old woman and her daughters served us, trembling, to wine; and how we got drunk over the wine, and the house was in a flame, presently: and woe betide the wretched fellow afterwards who came home to look for his house and his children!" [7, p.146].

Later on, in his marriage with Lady Lyndon, his conduct cannot exactly be called exemplary either:

"(...) if, I say, in our disputes she pretended to have the upper hand, to assert her authority against mine, to refuse to sign such papers as I might think necessary for the distribution of our large and complicated property, I would have Master Bryan carried off to Chiswick for a couple of days; and I warrant me his lady-mother could hold out no longer, and would agree to anything I chose to propose" [7, p.192].

The "trick" here in W.M. Thackeray's novel, allowing the reader to see through the clearly dishonest narration of Barry, is an extremely crude one. It is not difficult at any point, including this one, to see that Barry is not accurately representing the facts of his life, and that his account has a darker truth embedded in it. The editor serves to further point out the obvious. T.A. Nelson, speaking of the novel, points out, "Barry's verbal posturings become as obvious as they are trite, so that one soon learns to measure what he says against what Thackeray means" [8, p.3]. "Thackeray had a very specific intent with this excessively unreliable narrator and, to articulate this intent; we must examine *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* as a genre parody" [1, p.142].

The following passage reveals in style and morality a critique of struggle-for-existence principles that has been met with before in *Lazarillo de Tormes* (); and in a sense the critique maintains itself in the pattern of characterization when Barry's principles effect his reduction to a liar and a simpering fool:

"I say that anything in fair in love, and those men so poor as me can't afford to be squeamish about their means of getting on in life. The great and rich are welcomed, smiling, up the grand staircase of the world; the poor but aspiring must clamber up the wall or push and struggle up the back stair, or, pardi, crawl through any of the conduits of the house, never mind how foul or narrow, that lead to the top (...)" [7].

The fact that, in such passages, Redmond Barry doesn't get completely discredited has a lot to do with W.M. Thackeray's implicit and constantly present question of where his nineteenth-century readers, living in a society that considered naked ambition and opportunistic materialism of increasing importance, should find

the right to condemn Barry's behavior [1, p.143]. W.M. Thackeray refined his belief that personal fortune or situation masters all and that chance is the overriding factor in most men's fortunes, though like *Barry Lyndon* the later novel shows a "doctrine of destiny" that takes into account the culpability of the individual.

This is not to say, however, there are no significant differences with the basic rules of the picaresque genre. Thackeray's early work can partially be read as a parody on existing genres, and *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esquire* is certainly no exception to this. So, for instance, "unlike the traditional scoundrel, Barry has to rely more on strength and courage than on slyness. And contrary to a lot of picaresque novels that suggest, notwithstanding an open end, that the hero's wanderings some day will come to an end, W.M. Thackeray has decided to end his story in a very pessimistic way" [1, p.135].

Another major difference between the traditional picaresque prose and *Barry Lyndon* is in the type of delusions the hero lived by. M. de Cervantes is the great progenitor of the novel in which the hero is deluded. "But whereas Don Quixote mistakes appearances for reality yet really sees in appearances a higher spiritual reality – the soul of the deluded hero dignifies his delusions – Barry Lyndon merely boasts the wrong kind of gentlemanly dash and reveals crude egoism. Barry is a brutalized Quixote" [1, p.144]. But is a brutalized Quixote a *picaró*? At times Barry seems to have the *picaró*'s heritage. Born into a seedily aristocratic Irish family that prides itself on dubious royal descent, Barry does have a *picaró*'s perverted education. Spoiled by grandiose pretensions, he comes to see virtues in his brutish actions that in others he condemns as vices. He is incapable, however, of learning from experience, whereas the *picaró* found in experience a confirmation of the dogmatism in his outlook.

According to A.Blackburn Barry recalls the *picaró* in three of his aspects: he has the sense of illusion about his disreputable past; his will constructs honorable appearances by dishonorable methods, and he rationalizes the failure to achieve membership in approved society as a misfortune caused by the corrupt ways of the world. Nevertheless, in this instance a brutalized Quixote is not a truly *picaró*: the illusions are delusions. Barry does not develop or reveal that kind of honesty with himself that might permit him to escape convention. "Barry's dishonorable actions originate, not in the *picaró*'s frustrated attempt to gain a recognized social standing, but in his own belief that he is, in fact, honorable" [1, p.150].

The same author considers that even if the picaresque formula fits in with the theme of the "lonely hero", but that catalyst of profound cultural dissent – more particularly of religious doubt that seeks to efface itself and cannot – tends to be absent altogether, referring to Barry.

Finally, the lack in *Barry Lyndon* of the double plane of the picaresque novel, whereby both *picaró* and society disintegrate, makes it clear that W.M. Thackeray's brute could be integrated into the good were he not, by nature, evil. The reality of goodness comes out in the novel by means of the Fieldingesque irony that good people may be silly but also be right. Since his seedy family is not impoverished or unkindly, Barry earns no sympathy by pleading necessity. Barry Lyndon, by this analysis, is not a *picaró*.

All these being stated, one should conclude that W.M. Thackeray's novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* assimilated some elements of the picaresque, as well as it transformed some of its conventions, but with the given novel the author did not continue the myth of the *picaró*. Such power, as this novel, would derive from W.M. Thackeray's realism – realism that is non-picaresque because by treating picarism as brutal delusion, it permits truth to exist somewhere in this world of vanity.

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