Mutants of the Picaresque: *Moll Flanders* and *A Sport of Nature*

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Summary

The Postmodernist problem of the relationship between "story" and "history" is approached via the picaresque. Certain characteristics of the Genre are assumed, notably that it concerns the autobiography of a traveller in the margin of conventional society, offering an ambiguous view of contemporary values. Cervantes transformed the picaro from rogue into outsider, internalising the notion of a journey by inserting it into language, and casting doubt on authoriality in autobiography.

Noting the eighteenth century mistrust of "story", the interaction between Moll Flanders and her society is evaluated, largely in terms of the dual narratorial voice, which complicates the notion of identity. This resides largely in language itself, involving not only the protagonist's name, but the invention of a self in interaction with others. Through the identification of language and money, the picara's journey is depicted in terms of a transaction; and it is suggested that Moll's alleged reduction of her world to financial terms, should be seen as a metalanguage to codify emotional experience.

Although *A Sport of Nature* is not offered as autobiography it concerns the invention of a self. The postmodernist author turns even "history" into "story". However, an ideological problem arises since the picara Hillela, as a "sport of nature", subverts her own "validity" and undermines a dialectic with the reader.

Opsomming

Die postmodernistiese probleem van die verhouding "storie"/"historie" word via die pikareske benader. Enkele kenmerke van die genre word veronderstel, byvoorbeeld dat dit die outobiografie is van 'n swerwer op die rand van die samelewing, wat 'n dubbelsinnige instelling ten opsigte van tydgenootlike waardes meebring. Cervantes het die picaro verander van skelm tot outsider, die konsep van 'n reis geïnternaliseer deur dit tot taal te herlei, en outorialiteit in die outobiografie bevraagteken.

In die lig van die agtiende eeu se wantroue in "storie", word Moll Flanders se wisselwerking met haar samelewing beskou, veral met betrekking tot die tweeledige vertellerstem wat die konsep van identiteit verwikkel. Dié bestaan hoofsaaklik in die taal, nie net ten opsigte van die protagonis se naam nie, maar die hele ontwerp van 'n self in wisselwerking met ander. Deur geld met taal te vereenselwig, word die picara se reis aangebied as transaksie; en daar word voorgestel dat Moll se beweerde herleiding van haar wêreld tot finansiële terme as metataal gelees behoort te word vir die enkodering van emosionele ervaring.

Hoewel *A Sport of Nature* nie as outobiografie aangebied word nie, gaan dit steeds om die ontwerp van 'n self. Die postmodernistiese outeur omskep selfs "historie" in "storie". Daar ontstaan egter 'n ideologiese probleem omdat die picara Hillela as "afwyking" haar eie "geldigheid" aantas en 'n dialektiet met die leser ondermyn.

One of the most vexing problems of Postmodernist literature has been the "ambiguous reality" of writing defined by Barthes (1986: 16) in *Writing Degree Zero*: "On the one hand, it unquestionably arises from a confrontation of the writer with the society of his time; on the other hand, from this social finality, it refers the writer back, by a sort of tragic reversal, to the sources, that is to say, the instruments of creation." On the one hand, social

commentary, even commitment; on the other, self-reflexivity and narcissim. "History"; "story".[1]

In this contribution to the debate I should like to take as my point of departure the conviction that in many respects Postmodernist fiction can be illuminated by an exploration of links between what Gordimer might term the "late bourgeois" and the eighteenth-century novel; and my discussion will focus on *Moll Flanders* and *A Sport of Nature* as mutants of a much older literary tradition, the picaresque.

1

The picaresque itself has, of course, been a subject of debate for four centuries; and instead of proposing a detailed examination of what is still very much a territory of dispute, I shall offer a few preliminary assumptions about the genre which may subsequently be used as points of entry into the two narrative texts selected.

On the basis of the archetypal Spanish picaresque novel – Alemán's *Guzman de Alfarache* (1599; Part Two, 1604), in which the brief, earlier *Lazarillo de Tormes* and the widely popular genre of the criminal (auto)biography became fused – one might tentatively summarise some of the characteristics of the genre as follows:

1. It is the life-story of a person living in the margin of conventional society: usually a beggar, a thief, an outlaw of some kind, involved in a battle for survival and, often, in a process of "upward mobility". It is worth noting that, from the outset, the picaresque hero was not necessarily male; as early as 1605 Francisco López de Ubeda created the first *picara* in his *Libro de entretenimiento de la picara Justina*.
2. It is written as an autobiography, from the protagonist's birth to the narrative present.
3. It offers an ambiguous view of contemporary values, by persuading the reader to empathise with the protagonist's own amoral or actively immoral attitudes and actions; even when the protagonist offers (belated) repentance and atonement for a lifetime of aberrant behaviour, this tends to satirise and expose the very structures of that society whose values he/she now appears to embrace.
4. The life – *vida* is the generic term used in Spanish – is narrated as a literal journey through space and time.
5. This journey tends to be demarcated, even determined, by the protagonist's indenture to a series of masters.
6. The form of the narrative is episodic; and – because an autobiography can be narrated only by a narrator still alive – the ending is left open.
7. The reader is invited to enter into an active relationship with the narrator as a sounding-board to the narrative.

These may be termed the hard, "factual" ingredients of the early picaresque novel, that is, the picaresque novel before Cervantes so triumphantly transformed it. Some of the weightiest Cervantes commentators, like Carlos Blanco Aguinaga (1969: 137), argue that "to link . . . the picaresque with the

Cervantine mode is to confuse by vague approximation two kinds of realism which in fact are absolutely opposed". But to exclude Cervantes from the picaresque would be like excising Shakespeare from Elizabethan tragedy. Just as Cervantes demolished the chivalresque tradition in the *Don Quixote* while at the same time writing the greatest novel of chivalry in literature, he enthusiastically subverted the picaresque in the *Novelas exemplares* while simultaneously transforming it into something with an infinitely greater spectrum of possibilities. (Against the testimony of purists, I submit that the *Don Quixote* itself gathers into it the whole of the picaresque tradition: for one thing, no knight – errant or otherwise – in chivalric literature prior to the Don Quixote had ever been an outcast and an outsider; on the contrary, all the hidalgo's predecessors had been the champions of the society in which they lived, rather than its critics, antagonists or saboteurs.)

But even if we were temporarily to exclude the *Don Quixote*, what Cervantes did to the picaresque in *Rinconete and Cortadillo* and *The Deceitful Marriage* (which contains the *Colloquy of the Dogs*), was:

– to transform the begger-thief-vagabond-rogue character of the *picaro*, that is the merely social outcast, into the Other, the earliest manifestation of the Outsider;

– to turn the life-journey of the protagonist into a metaphor for an internal journey through the uncharted territories of the self, towards insight, irony, or wisdom;

– at the same time, to insert the notion of "journey" as such within the concept of "narrative", that is, to approach the prime "movement" of the history as a motion of *language*, of *discourse*;

– to evolve the master/servant relationship into one of interchange, in which each of the two partners in turn serves, helps, dupes, disillusions, and instructs the other;

– to cast doubt on the authority, the authoriality, of autobiography through an intense complication of the narrative situation;

– to implicate – rather than merely to "involve" – the reader in the narrative contract.

I shall dwell very briefly on only one Cervantes text to illustrate some of the points most relevant to the present enquiry. Within the overall framework of the *Novelas exemplares*, twelve narrative texts presented to a real reader by an explicit author, the penultimate story is called *The Deceitful Marriage*, involving an encounter between Ensign Campuzano and the Licentiate Peralta. From the dialogue between these two fictitious characters emerges – as the twelfth *novela* in the collection, but also as a story embedded in *The Deceitful Marriage* a Colloquy between the dogs Cipion and Berganza. It is alleged to be a text written by the Ensign, and now read by the Licentiate. Within the Colloquy, Berganza, a *canine picaro*, tells his story in the first person: but his narration is only made possible through the interventions and challenges of Cipion (who also has a story to tell, only it never gets told: it falls between the interstices of Berganza's; much as, later, in Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste et son Maïtre*, Jacques's "story" will disappear into his Master's interruptions and his own evasions).

There is no single, discernible authorial voice at work here, only a constant referral, a deferment, a *Differance* in the telling; the only valid narrative "space" in the story, as much later in Diderot's, is not topographical but verbal. This is signified at the very end, when the "author" of the story-within-a-story (the Ensign) wakes up and invites his reader (the Licentiate) to accompany him, beyond the boundaries of his own narrative and of language, to stroll along a "real" promenade in the "real" city of Valladolid: "Let us go to the Espolin to refresh the bodily eyes, as I have already refreshed those of the understanding. 'Let us go', said the Ensign, and with this they departed."

It remains to remind oneself that the age in which the "pure" picaresque novel flourished – which was also the age that permitted of its subversion and its radical changings of direction and shape – was a time of turbulence and upheaval for Spain: in the aftermath of the great age of the conquestadores, the physical, geographic conquest of the world, an agonising process of self-searching was beginning; behind the desperate attempts of the Inquisition to gird the whole of Spanish Christian society (newly "rescued" from Islam) within an iron corset of fixed rules and values, a vast process of social disintegration was occurring; and narrative and dramatic texts signalled the urgent efforts of newly unleashed social, judicial, religious, political and economic forces to restructure society and redefine its values. This also characterises, to a large extent, the late seventeenth century and especially the early eighteenth century England in which *Moll Flanders* inserts itself, and the South Africa of the late twentieth century in which *A Sport of Nature* demands to be read.

2

The tensions and interactions between the character Moll Flanders and the society within which she exists as picara, determine to a large extent the narrative shape of Defoe's novel, even if, as Higdon (1977) and Alkon (1979) demonstrate, the details of historical actuality are largely excluded from the text on the page. It is universally accepted today that, if Moll's "world" has little to do with the seventeenth century in which her narrator situates her life, it is placed in a dialectic relationship with the early eighteenth century. Even if specific events or developments are not designated with anything resembling the historical catalogue provided in *A Sport of Nature*, the whole actantial structure is informed by contemporary sociol-politico-economic factors discussed at length by Novak (1962), Richetti (1975), Thompson1975), Earle (1976), Mitchell (1978), Alkon (1979), and others: the development of *laissez-faire* and free trade, poverty and the structure of wages, population and emigration, development of the colonies, a redefinition of the notion of criminality in the wake of the breakdown of feudalism, etc. As Richetti (1975: 17) suggests, in opposition to Watt (1963: 98), "Defoe's novels are not ... naive celebrations of individual possibility. They are most accurately described as what can be called the individualistic dilemma. They communicate by their arrangements and strategies an implicit grasp of the tangled

relationships between the free self and the social and ideological realities which that self seems to require."

This is the direction in which Cervantes had already begun to steer picaresque fiction. But it is interesting to bear in mind that, notwithstanding his familiarity with Cervantes, and purely within the context of English Narrative fiction, Defoe had to fulfil much the same function in revalidating the picaresque. We can deduce, from Salzman's *English Prose Fiction 1558–1700* (1986) and Dale Spencer's *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) – that by the time Defoe turned to the novel, he was not faced with a tabula rasa. Within the context of the picaresque in particular, he had a tradition to draw on (even more so if the "rogue novel" and the "criminal biography" are seen as legitimate continguous traditions – just as they had been to Aleman and Cervantes), notably that of "questioning society" (Salzman 1986: 113), the "mixing of modes" (p. 202), "the ambivalent moral stance of the author" (p. 206), "the breach between reflection and action, morality and pragmatism, as a product of the harsh world in which the picaro must survive" (p. 209), "the expanding world pictured in travel narratives" (p. 218), the exploration of a Hobbesian society characterised by the "warre of every man against every man" (Hobbes 1974: 188), etc.

But "the purpose of a model is to lead one to surpass it", as Weiger (1985: 222) demonstrates in his discussion of Cervantes. And if, among other things, Defoe's characters are more than rogues, it is not, as Novak (1962: 67) would have it, a "departure from the picaresque tradition" but an expansion and transformation of it[2] – bearing in mind Derrida's perception that a "text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (Derrida 1980: 212).

I do not wish to get involved in the interminable discussion, fascinating as it may be, of Moll's character – her actions and reflections, her apartness and her relationships, her dubious morality, her praxis, her strategies for survival and towards independence – as if she were a "real" person; my concern with her lies in the giant leap undertaken by Defoe in transforming the picara and the picaresque, through his peculiar exploitation of narrative voice and narrating language.

Numerous commentators have explored Moll's dual role as character and narrator (cf., inter alia, Robert Alan Donovan, 1973, in "The Two Heroines of *Moll Flanders*); several have pursued this to the perception that "An editor is required to separate Moll from her life, to create a Moll who can speak about her life without being what her life implies" (Richetti 1975: 97). And, within the discourse of the novel, many have examined what they perceived as Defoe's and/or Moll's "casuistry" (Starr 1971), or the codes of disguise and deceit in the text (Blewett 1979). But it seems to me that the true locus of such an enquiry should be the strategy of narrating as such, as this is the nexus between story and discourse, as well as the point where, traditionally, the "world" enters the text, or the text spills into the "world".

We know that almost no eighteenth century English novel was published

without a note disclaiming its fictitious nature and insisting on its being, as Defoe states in *Roxana*, "not a story, but a history", a distinction also honoured by Fielding, Richardson, Sterne and others, and already featuring in Aphra Behn's Introduction to *Oroonoko* (1688): "I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this ROYAL SLAVE, to entertain my Reader with the adventures of a feigned hero."

In an age when the term "novel" still designated primarily a small tale, generally of love" (Day 1987: 1 etc) and when serious authors and readers alike were horrified at being associated with the levities and the extravagance of "romance", writers of narrative were practically unanimous in their paranoia about "fiction", about "meddling with the Unclean Thing", as Hazlitt (1973: 328) termed it, going out of their way to present their texts as histories, letters, journals, diaries, memoirs, in fact, anything *but* "novels". (Cf. also Woolf 1953: 338.) This was the basis on which they constructed their fictions and metafictions; in fact, the history of the novel proper has known no other period, prior to Postmodernism, when metafiction and narcissistic fiction were so much in vogue. This was the formula in which the old Spanish tradition of narrative – "Once upon a time there was and there wasn't", *era y non era* – found its novelistic expression.

For *Moll Flanders* it has peculiar implications.

It is necessary to look very carefully at the terms of the narrative contract proposed in the Preface. It is offered as an autobiography, a "private history" an "original . . . put into new words" (28).[3] The Editor, looking back from the early 1720s on a document dated 1683, cannot vouch for any authenticity, any Auctor, the existence of any signified, behind the written text: he can only offer it as an "account" (whereby the entire economic code of the text is activated). "The author is here *supposed* to be writing her own history," the Editor states, in a "copy which first came to hand . . . written in language more like one still in Newgate than one grown penitent and humble, as she afterwards *pretends* to be" (p. 28; my italics). This preliminary, and already dubious, version is now offered, through the mediation of the Editor, as "put into new words", specifically in "modester words than she told it at first"; it is "put into a dress fit to be seen",[4] and made to "speak language fit to be read".

What is important to note in this explanation-cum-warning is not just the early stage in the text in which the code of dressing or dressing up, of masking and masquerading, of acting and dissembling and pretence, of lies and deceit and charades is introduced, but the fact that it is directly linked to the concept and function of *language*. (And, of course, the fact that through language the reader is drawn into the text; it is "language fit to be read". Within another paragraph or two, in fact, "the gust and palate of the reader" is given primacy over "the real worth of the subject"; and the text is "recommended to those who know how to read it" (p. 29).)

Having activated this web of meaning in the text, the Editor specifies his intervention as twofold: on the one hand ("in a word"), the narrative "is carefully garbled of all the levity and looseness that was in it"; on the other, it is now explicitly "applied, and with the utmost care, to virtuous and

religious uses" (p. 30), a dual activity which has resulted in the excision of "the vicious parts of her life" and the drastic shortening of "several other parts", while inevitably – and implicitly – also necessitating the insertion of passages of (moralising) comment.

One possible critical procedure flowing from this relationship between Preface and narrative text, might be an examination of the distinct contribution of each these two narrating voices. There are, indeed, passages in which one might feel justified in identifying the voice of the Editor; others which suggest Moll's "own" voice, still others in which a transition from one to the other seems to be marked. But this would mean that the reader accepts as "fact" that which is part of the "fiction" of the text as a whole; and it seems to me that it would be more useful in narratological terms to read the *whole* text as spoken/written by two voices/pens: even if one appears to be more emphatic in some passages, and the second in others, *both are present throughout*. Neither can exist without the other; just as, within the narrated text, ultimately there is no difference between the body and the clothes which disguise and falsify it, or between signified and signifier. The narrative situation is not a peach that can be peeled to reveal a kernel inside; it is, instead, Peer Gynt's onion.

This leads straight to the problem of identity: *Moll Flanders cannot* be the "autobiography" (or the biography, for that matter) of Moll Flanders, because – even within the realities of the discourse – no "Moll Flanders" exists. It goes further than the Editor's early warning about "the reason why she thinks fit to conceal her true name" (p. 28), or the intradiegetic narrator's saucy announcement in her opening paragraph that, "My true name is so well known in the records or registers at Newgate, and in the old Bailey, and there are some other things of such consequence still depending there, relating to my particular conduct, that it is not to be expected I should set my name or the account of my family to this work; perhaps, after my death, it may be better known" (p. 33). After all, this narrator must be dead by the time her Editor takes up her memoirs some forty years after she allegedly completed them, by which time she was "almost seventy years of age" (p. 316). For the purposes of a biography, or the annotation of an autobiography, any diligent researcher could have authenticated her existence: however, as a fictitious narrator, and as a picara, she was, *and*, at the same time, was not. She first marked the invention of herself) (her "self") when, during her sojourn as a penniless widow at the Mint, she "called (her)self Mrs Flanders", p. 81); subsequently this "identity" became the fabrication of *others*, notably the inmates of Newgate: "These were they that gave me the name of Moll Flanders" (p. 208) – a name whose significance was demonstrated, inter alia, by Blewett (1979: 56–60).

This marks a shift in the identification of the picaro/picara within his/her autobiography: initiated by the innovations of Cervantes, it was later to result in further inventions, including the Postmodernist strategies in *A Sport of Nature*.

But Moll's name is only one symptom of the narrative processes at work in *Moll Flanders*. I have already referred to the Editor's definition of his

character/narrator's status (which goes beyond a matter of "reliability"). Through his narratorial intervention he changes the notion of "person" into a fabrication of language, a pattern of "traces", which has significant implications for our notion of the picaresque. This involves not only the duality of narrating "voices" speaking throughout, but the reader's perception of the narrative as such.

If there is one grammatical, syntactic device which must strike even the casual reader, it is, in Jakobson's paradigm, the metalingual (rather than "expressive") nature of the communication. Throughout the text there is an emphasis on language, on the processes of verbal comunication – which, we have been warned, are also processes of falsification, of "dressing up". A sentence like the following is the rule rather than the exception: "I *assure* you, if I find a woman so accomplished as you *talk* of, I *say*, I *assure* you, I would not trouble myself about the money" (p. 44; my italics).

In a typical paragraph near the beginning, Moll reports (or is reported to be reporting) that she was "terrified with the *news* that the magistrates (*as I think they called them*) *had ordered* that I should go to service ... for I had a thorough aversion to going to service, *as they called it*, that I *believed* I could get my living without going to service ..." (p. 35; my italics).

From the outset, the course of Moll's life is determined by her resolve to be a "gentlewoman" ("as I understand the word" (p. 39)); while, as everybody knows, much of her conflict with society stems from other definitions of the same word ("for they meant one sort of thing by the word gentlewoman, and I meant quite another" (p. 38)).

To the extent that her "undoing" is caused by her relations with the two sons of the Colchester household, it is significant that the older son *talks* her into submission ("His words, I must confess, fired my blood" (p. 45). (She knows that she is "taken" to be beautiful, "particularly I loved to hear anybody speak of it" (p. 43); and even when she has qualms about eavesdropping and decides to withdraw, she does so, "but not so far but that I heard all their discourse" (p. 44.) And it is the utterance of the *word* "whore" – by Moll, not by her lover – which marks the decisive turn in that relationship, and in the narrative of her life.

Later, in her encounter with the man who turns out to be her half-brother – this is, arguably, the single event which determines the "pattern" of the novel, including its resolution – everything is decided by the *verbal reports* that each of the participants receives of the other. In a scene crucial to their relationship, in which they literally write their messages on a pane of glass, Moll tells the truth about her condition; but the truth of the written word is rendered ironic by its linguistic context (the rumours and roundabout messages).

Towards the end of the scene Moll concludes, "whether I was in jest or in earnest, I had declared myself to be very poor; so that, *in a word*, I had him fast both ways" (p. 95; my italics). Ensnared "in a word" is what it is all about.

This functioning of language continues to Moll's final decision to start again in the colonies, where "we should live as new people in a new world, *nobody having anything to say to us, or we to them*" (p. 284; my italics). And even

beyond the limits of the narrated text, language remains at work in the narrative process, which, in its entirety, constitutes the *verbalisation* of a life: as in the case of earlier picaros – but with far greater complication and subtlety – the "story" of Moll Flanders concerns the stages of her development into a writer, the ultimate manipulator of the word.

What is crucial, as has been established by a whole critical tradition, is that, for Moll Flanders, language is inextricably entangled with finance; with the "reality" of money. This is first evident when her first seducer (or the first victim upon whom, in the Editor's terminology, she unleashes her "depredations"), offers her words and money at the same time: "so he got off from the bed, lifted me up, professing a great deal of love for me, but told me it was all an honest affection, and that he meant no ill to me; and with that he put five guineas into my hand, and went away downstairs" (p. 47).

Not that her attitude towards either language or money is ever simplistic – much of the narrative triumph resides in the increasing complication of their interdependence – but the starting point remains the fact of the relationship between language and money. *This* is why the vicissitudes of a long life debouch into the *telling* of a story, an *account* of experience.

I have room to mention only two implications of this strategy.

The first is that it reinforces the economic nature – supply and demand; offer and reponse – of the narrative contract, the interdependence of "self" and "other"; that is language as a *transaction* (Richetti 1975: 139): "The self can only be aware of itself as such when it sees itself operating upon others". Or, as Jameson suggests (1971: 14): "Substance is replaced by relationship, and the reality of things by a sense of the identity of a given element which derives solely from our awareness of its difference from other elements, and ultimately from 'implicit comparison of it with its own opposite'."

The second is that, perceptive as many of them have been, commentators (for instance Van Ghent 1953: 35) may in the past have simplified the issue by examining how Moll Flanders "reduces everything to the level of economics". It is true that every relationship with another person, male or female, is in due course converted into a code of pounds, shillings and pence, and that Moll's interest seems to reside solely in what she can gain from any given situation, or in what she spent on it. But I suspect that the opposite approach, namely, interpreting Moll's economic calculations as her encoding of emotional values, might lead us more deeply into the text: From the time of her first lover's declaration of love is accompanied by a gift of five pounds, Moll *knows no other language*; her only means of articulation is money. To her money *is* language. (Which also means that to talk about money is to use a metalanguage; this inserts money as metalanguage among several others in the text.) Literally to "sum up" a relationship in terms of financial loss of gain, may well be Moll's way of articulating *love*. This would support Lerenbaum's thesis (1977: 117) that the course of Moll's live embodies, not "freedom from the requirements of the female role", but on the contrary, "a tribute to the very femininity – unglamorous but not inglorious – that modern readers deny her".

3

At first sight *A Sport of Nature* appears to deviate quite drastically from the picaresque tradition in that it is not presented as an autobiography. But one should not be blinded by the mere *surface* of a tradition. The deeper meanings of the autobiographical convention in the picaresque novel reside, not simply in the use of the first person singular, but in *the invention of a self*. If in the *Gusman de Alfarache* this occurs in the naive and straightforward way of a character narrating his own life story, the situation becomes more complicated when the Ensign in *The Deceitful Marriage* bestows the power of speech upon two dogs so that – purely in terms of language – they may invent themselves. And as early as the *Don Quixote* Cervantes dispenses with simple autobiography and allows three narratorial voices – the foreigner and enemy, the Moor Sidi Hamete Benengeli, and his not altogether trustworthy Spanish translator, aided by an Editor – to invent, jointly and severally, the story of a man in the process of almost literally inventing himself. In *Moll Flanders* we have already noted the conspiracy between Editor and character in inventing their protagonist. And from the moment Moll displaces her own name, through all her strategies to remake herself in language, it is this process of the inventing of a self which dominates all others. We have also noted that this "self-invention" can only take place as part of a larger process of interaction and transaction: the "they" who bestow Moll's name on her, contribute to the invention through their construction and deconstruction of other verbal images.

The invention of an "I" – even when it is called "she" – is also predominant in *A Sport of Nature*. The obvious narrating voice in the text is primarily that of an aloof, perhaps even "foreign"[5] biographer in the process of carefully, often speculatively, (re)constructing a "life" from available evidence, conjecture and invention. This process begins, as do those in the *Don Quixote* and *Moll Flanders*, with the matter of the protagonist's name. In the novel's wonderfully ambiguous opening sentence we learn that "Somewhere along the journey the girl shed one name and emerged under the other" (p. 3), which has an immediate signified in the switch from "Kim" to "Hillela" on the holiday trip from Rhodesia to South Africa, as well as deferred signifieds in subsequent transformations to "Mrs Kgomani", or to "Chiemeka", the wife of a man with an "unpronounceable" surname (p. 257).

Behind this shifting surface she is allowed to pursue the career of self-invention, to the point of inventing herself *as picara* (when she turns herself into an illegitimate, abandoned child). The stages of her picaresque journey are marked, true to tradition, by her association with a succession of "masters" – almost literally so, certainly in the apostheosis of her life, when she finds her fullest self-realisation in a wholly unfeminist dedication to the needs, whims, demands and pleasures of her husband.[6] However, unlike Moll who may be said to become "more and more herself" on her journey through the world, the Postmodernist Hillela persists in deconstructing herself by acting the chameleon, surviving through adapting perfectly to constantly changing circumstances. (In this strategy, satisfactory as it may be in

narratological terms, resides an ideological problem, as Glenn (1987) has indicated: given different circumstances, Hillela – like any good Naturalist character – might have ended, not a Crusader or a Freedom Fighter or the Consort of a revolutionary leader, but, say, an empress or a *houri*. She "proves" nothing; which in another novel might have been acceptable, but in *this* novel – a very obvious attempt to go beyond the line from "liberal humanism" to "revolutionary radicalism" which Clingman (1986) has demonstrated in Gordimer's oeuvre – ideological infrastructure is subverted by narrative procedure.)

Hillela's self-invention, mainly effected through a series of "images" or "reflections", of which her confrontation with a photograph of her mother (p. 45–47) and her addiction to mirrors are indicative, is – must be – constantly complemented by her invention through others. In the final analysis the biographer *can* rely only on the testimony of innumerable "sources" unearthed in the course of his/her enquiry.

But the biographer goes beyond the meticulous attempts at reconstructing a "real" story, and in this resides much of the fascination of the text as a Postmodernist construct. On the one hand the reader encounters surmise, conjecture, or the cautious assembly of modern South African and African history, driven occasionally to Michenerian overstatement in involving Hillela and other fictitious characters, together with familiar contemporary figures, in every conceivable historical situation). On the other hand, the same narrator also composes whole scenes, long passages of dialogue, even reports of the unspoken thoughts of characters, which could not possibly have been gleaned from any of his/her "sources". Which means that, *in spite of* the surface impression of historical veracity – that is, of writing "history" not "story", in the sense of the eighteenth century novels – this text is offered increasingly *as* fabrication.[7]

It is in this respect that the novel is most interestingly Postmodernist. For if in many respects there are startling novel and Postmodernist fiction, the essential difference lies in the apparently simple, but profoundly significant, fact that eighteenth century writers eschewed the impression of writing fiction, whereas their twentieth-century counterparts insist, almost extravagantly, on their fictions *as* fictions. And yet their ends, vis à vis their readers, are comparable: Defoe writes a "history" because his readers would not take fiction seriously; the Postmodernist writes "fiction" because – ever since Wittgensten – he/she has come to accept that we live in "a story-shaped world", that history is unreliable, and that only language, only fiction, can hope to make the world graspable. Today, history *is* story.

The principal narrator in *A Sport of Nature* goes further than merely "imagining" some scenes. It is a feature of the novel that the "line" of the narrative from time to time forms a knot: there are nodes of heightened consciousness, expressed visually in a series of italicized passages, interludes, in which the form of autobiography is approached most closely – to the extent of erupting in an "I". However, it is never a simplistic "I", but a modern descendant of the "multiple eye of the fly" we encountered in *Moll Flanders* or *Roxana*). It is an "I" which questions its own validity: both in terms of

itself, and of its involvement with others. This is demonstrated with particular effect in the second of these nodes, which occurs at the critical point when Hillela definitively becomes a picare, that is immediately after she has left the country to disappear from the lives of those who have shaped her, and from the historical context which will determine the rest of her life (p. 124):

> *I, me.*
> Time, now. They had always, they went on fitting that self into their conjugations, leaving out the first person singular...

This is the crucial concern of Hillela, and of the text: valid as it may be in its own right, it directs the narrative towards the private and the individual – the elusive I of the "sport" – in spite of all the attempts to force her into history.[8] (This is all the more ironical in view of the narrator's conviction that "No history of her really can be personal history, then: its ends were all apparently outside herself" (p. 225). "Apparently", indeed.) Which is why, on the level of the ideology of the text, it is disappointing: in spite of being, at times, a tour de force of narrative, at other times the narrative comes dangerously close to wishful thinking and, in the equation of sex and power, to the oversimplification of popular fiction.

This also affects the ultimate test of the picaro/picara: whether he/she triumphs (physically or otherwise) at the end of the quest, or repents and mends his/her ways, the journey traditionally results in liberation: a liberation closely associated with a full assumption of self. Through his conversion Don Quixote makes his peace with the world, through the affluence she "buys" with her motions of anagnorisis – Moll achieves the independence which, to her, means freedom. But, as I have already suggested, Hillela's "liberation" lies in her unconditional subjugation to a "cause" embodied almost wholly in her husband. Unlike her cousin Sasha, the most successful – certainly the most conscious – actor of the novel,[9] Hillela remains a parasite. And even if we know, after Derrida and Hillis Miller, that "parasite' means more than we once suspected, it does affect the status of the picara in that it removes from her the crucial category of *choice*. Her "innocence", which is a curious secondary characteristic of the picaresque, is an innocence of unawareness; sometimes of omission.[10] Cumulatively, this cannot but subvert Hillela's narrative status – however obtrusively the implied author attempts, through mythological references and other devices, to force heroic status on her.

Linked to the fact that as an accident, a freak, a "sport of nature", even as "a creative made of love" (p. 179), Hillela can never "represent" any value system or ideology, this undermines the possibility of a significant dialectic with the reader. This means that the text often comes close to self-indulgence, lacking both the elemental historicity of the early Achebe and the violent historical involvement of the later Ngugi; it lacks, too, the compelling passion which informs a full-blooded modern picara like Arachne in Aritha van Herks' *No Fixed Address* (even though this novel is much less ambitious in scope than Gordimer's).

But ignoring for the moment speculation about "stature" and "quality"

(and *A Sport of Nature* remains a formidable text, partly in spite of, and partly because of the problems it raises), I hope to have demonstrated that the tradition of the picaresque, far from petering out early in the seventeenth century, has continued, throughout the history of the novel and into the age of Postmodernism, to act as an inspirational force to a most disparate assortment of narrators.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this article "history" and "story" are used in their conventional sense, "history" designating a written (narrative) text that purports to refer to a signified with an alleged "independent" existence which may also be evoked through other signifiers in other texts, and "story" designating a written narrative text in which the signifieds, constantly deferred, can in no way be evoked through signifiers beyond the borders of the given text.
2. "To dismiss his characters as rogues is to disregard the seriousness of their lives and problems... Their hunger is not that of the picaro, who invariably acquires money or food through some clever trick. For Defoe's heroes and heroines survival is a genuine, and indeed the most important, problem they must face" (Novak 1962: 67).
3. All references to *Moll Flanders* are to the Penguin, edition, 1978, edited by Julet Mitchell.
4. In the Preface of *Roxana*, again, the Editor refers to the intervention of a ghost writer "dressing up the story in worse clothes than the lady whose words he speaks".
5. "Foreigner", perhaps, because of the detachment obvious in the narratorial distance observed in the visible reconstruction, for disparate evidence, of Hillela's life; the often repeated references to South Africa as "that country"; the use of an American word like "sneakers" (p. 84); the misspelling of a three-letter Afrikaans word, "vr(e)y" (p. 8), etc.
6. This adds yet another paradox to those already enumerated by Glenn (1987).
7. This effectively prepares the final *coup*, when the narrative breaks through historical time into the reader future.
8. Even the acronyms of international organisations and societies are internalised into "the language of love" (p. 250–251).
9. Moreover, as a character, Sasha demonstrates that valid action – on the personal level as well as in politics, in history – is possible for a white, Jewish, English speaking South African, which discredits the entire portrayal of Hillela as an abberation, a sterile mutant.
10. An example: when Hillela is discovered with Sasha in bed, the episode is focalised via her aunt, the "immorality" of the episode, the lovemaking, has never been narrated, and exists solely in Pauline's view, not within the narrated text; this "absolves" Hillela in the mind of the reader. But even if this is a very shrewd narrative strategy, it also amounts, in the final analysis, to *evasion* and *omission*.

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