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

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A complete outsider¹ on the literary stage for years, Cesare De Marchi can be described, not unjustly, as an unfashionable writer, “un autore di romanzi completamente fuori tendenza”², deliberately excluded from the limelight of postmodernism, or the experiments in hyper-realistic fiction of the “Cannibali” movement. While belonging, age-wise, to the early generation of postmodernist writers, whose first works appeared between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the ’80s, De Marchi started publishing his fiction only ten years later. Born in Genoa in 1949, he moved to Milan, where he completed his philosophy studies with a dissertation on Hegel. There, he self-published his first short story collection, *L'ora di memoria* [Memory Time] in 1981, and co-founded the literary periodical *Nuova Prosa* [New Prose, 1987]. In 1995 De Marchi moved to Stuttgart, Germany, where he was the director of the Società Dante Alighieri from 2003 to 2012. He seemed destined to literary obscurity when suddenly *Il talento* [The Talent, 1997]³, his fourth published book, was surprisingly awarded the Premio Campiello in 1998, soon followed by the Premio Comisso, receiving warm critical acclaim.

¹ Giovanni Pacchiano calls him a “signor Nessuno” in the newspaper article “**Il talento** di Cesare De Marchi: romanzo tutto da leggere, fuori dalle mode letterarie. Un anti cannibale per gente qualunque” [**Il talento** by Cesare De Marchi: a page-turner, beyond literary vogues. An anti-cannibal for ordinary people], **Corriere della sera**, 20 January 1998, p. 31.

² See Paolo Di Stefano, “‘Da rileggere’: la nuova categoria della letteratura” [Re-reads: the new category in literature], **Corriere della sera**, 31 October 2007, p. 45.

³ De Marchi, **Il talento**, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997.

This, however, still did not accord him well-deserved visibility amongst his reading public⁴. The reasons for this limited popularity, despite the major literary prizes, may be found in De Marchi's complex style, complemented by a plain, terse turn of phrase inspired by nowadays "arduous" Italian classics such as Boccaccio, Sacchetti, Leopardi, Gadda, Brancati. Likewise, a psychological insight that recalls Svevo or Moravia, and a preference for the purely verbal representation of a setting over sensationalism and complex plot manipulation have not endeared his books to the Italian readership⁵. More precisely, De Marchi repeals the careless interplay of high and low literature, or argot and elevated language, typical of newest, yet fickle literary tendencies such as pulp, splatter or "pop" literature, as much as he avoids the bland verbal refinements of authors like Alessandro Baricco, in favour of a more genuine, identifiable idiom, "qualcosa di simile alla prosa francese tra Sette e Ottocento, o alla nostra tra l'Unità e la prima guerra mondiale" [“something close to eighteenth or nineteenth-century French prose, or that between Italian Unification and World War I”]⁶; in other words, a modernized revisit of the principles informing neoclassical, or avant-garde poetics. In *Romanzi, leggerli, scriverli*⁷, an essay on the art of story-telling, De Marchi also censures the practice of imitating foreign writers whose original language has often been spoiled by simplified, reader-friendly translations, criticizing the tendency to transpose the language of cinematic fragmentation of characters and events into literature. Discouraging any form of empathy between the reader and the characters, De Marchi insists on the genuine literary experience of a text, the discovery of what he defines as "emozione letteraria" [“literary emotion”], a purely language-inspired journey through narrative, an aesthetic

⁴ Gabriella d'Ina, editor at Feltrinelli publishers, reports that only 5,000 copies of **Il talento** had been sold in the six-month period (January-May 1998) before the Campiello award giving. See Mirella Appiotti, "Scrittori d'Italia. Dov'è il bestseller?" [Italy's writers: where is the bestseller?], **La Stampa**, sez. Tuttolibri, 7 May 1998, p. 1.

⁵ De Marchi was also harshly criticized by Angelo Guglielmi for a presumed excess of sentimentalism in a review from the weekly magazine **L'Espresso**, as Franco Cordelli reports in "Fulmini e carezze: gli opposti estremismi della critica" [Lightning and caresses: the criticism's opposing extremes], **Corriere della sera**, 22 September 1998, p. 33.

⁶ De Marchi, "Scuole di lingua;" [language schools], **L'Indice**, May 2008, p. 32.

⁷ De Marchi, **Romanzi, leggerli, scriverli** [Novel Reading and Writing], Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007. See also his complementary essay **L'arte di raccontare** [The art of story-telling], Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2013.

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choice that eschews both cheap sentimentalism and a too often celebrated suspension of disbelief in literary representation.

In his postscript to *Il nome della rosa* [The Name of the Rose], Umberto Eco distinguishes modern from postmodern literature: “with the modern, anyone who does not understand the [metalinguistic] game can only reject it, but with the postmodern, it is possible not to understand the game and yet to take it seriously”⁸. De Marchi’s view of literature seems to harmonize better with the modern than with the postmodern: though his narrative indulges in metalinguistic tricks – in the first tale of *Fuga a Sorrento*⁹ [Escape to Sorrento], for instance, he reconstructs fourteenth-century Florentine prose by imitating Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio – the novelist never uses his skills exclusively as an occasional game for knowledgeable readers, but with a broad view of the text as a whole, of the literary emotion it has to instil, and focusing on the subjective stance of its protagonists, as if unaware of the variety of its potential readers¹⁰. As such, he does not make any concession to literary fashions, perhaps assigning himself an outsider’s position.

This sense of detachment and distancing from the written page also informs the axiology of most of his characters, who act as reluctant underdogs, outcasts from society or the family circle, a condition which does not usually depend on free choice. External circumstances force them to distance themselves from normality: for instance, the awareness either of a physical or

⁸ Umberto Eco, **Reflections on The Name of The Rose**, trans. William Weaver, London: Minerva, 1994, p. 68. Two closely related notions, “double coding” and “intertextual irony”, are discussed in Eco, **Sulla letteratura** [On Literature], Milan: Bompiani, 2003, pp. 227-52.

⁹ Cesare De Marchi, **Fuga a Sorrento** [Escape to Sorrento], Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003. A similar penchant for language historical diversity pervades his recent story collection centred on Genoa: **Nove storie storiche** [Nine Historical Stories] Genoa: Il Saggiatore, 2013.

¹⁰ A case in point is **L’uomo con il sole in tasca** [the Man with the Sun in His Pocket] Milan: Feltrinelli, 2012, a novel in which De Marchi combines typical elements of a detective story with a touch of political fiction, reconstructing the imaginary episode of the Red Brigades’ abduction of an unidentified contemporary Italian Prime Minister (Silvio Berlusconi). Although the politician’s features and idiosyncrasies are easily discernible, the narrator does not urge the reader to take a definite moral stand.

moral disease¹¹, misunderstood genius¹², or even insanity ensuing from a series of personal mishaps¹³. This is also the case in *Il talento*, whose protagonist, Carlo Marozzi, has a dismal life story to tell: the first misadventures happen within the family circle, with outbreaks of anger towards his elder, intolerant brother Pietro, a strained relationship with his mother and a purely opportunistic alliance with his sister. The only family member who shows some real affection to Carlo is his mentally disabled brother Sandro, who dies when the young rebel has already left home. The encounter with the outside world is no less hostile: Carlo bravely enrolls in a *liceo*, has a rather lackluster school career and failed love stories. His constant struggle to earn money compels him to work as a janitor in a reputable school, while stealing complimentary textbook copies from the teachers. At the same time, he attempts snail farming with a literally crushing outcome; eventually, he finds a job as a proof-reader and, later, as a copy-editor compiling captions for pornographic booklets. He attends highbrow gatherings with the sole intent of pilfering food. His only companion is Michele, a school colleague, who introduces him to gambling and charming women, distracting him from his wife Alice and his little daughter. Carlo divorces and when Michele is arrested for counterfeiting the school registers, the *pícaro* cannot keep up with his carefree life any longer: besieged by creditors and banks, he ends up in jail. Like many of De Marchi's other heroes, he acquires a strong sense of being unfit for life, a condition he imputes to external causes. Such a condemning attitude tragically becomes an individual's second nature, bringing despair, confusion or, at times, a self-consolatory peace of mind. From this point of view, Marozzi, once in isolation, seems to follow a similar pattern by blaming his environment for his lot, as confirmed by the first sentences of the novel:

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

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

¹¹ For instance, De Marchi, **La malattia del commissario** [The Disease of the Inspector], Palermo: Sellerio, 1994, and **Il bacio della maestra** [The Teacher's Kiss], Palermo: Sellerio, 1992.

¹² De Marchi, **La furia del mondo** [The Fury of the World], Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006.

¹³ De Marchi, **La vocazione** [The Calling], Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Intended as a parody of the memoir, the confession, or the classical Latin *exemplum*, dedicated to virtuous personalities, picaresque narrative unfolds from a petty rogue’s farcical attempt to take control of his/her life: from Lévinas’ philosophical standpoint this tendency to dominate one’s existence is

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

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

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

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the principle of solitude¹⁸. At the beginning of *Il talento* Carlo does not qualify himself immediately with the pronoun “Io” [“I”], but with the expression “[la] mia persona” [“my own person”]. This choice of singling out the “person” from the “I” entails a sense of appropriation that emerges from an experience of solitude, as well as a decision to expose and divulge one’s private life. *Lazarillo de Tormes*, a Spanish picaresque classic, shows a very similar attitude when the narrator explains that he decided to tell his story “porque se tenga entera noticia de mi persona”¹⁹ [so that a full account of my own person is given], and, when recalling the circumstances of his marriage, he uses the term *persona* to qualify both himself and his patron, the archpriest of San Salvador, asserting, at least on the page, a kind of moral equality between the two, regardless of their apparent social disparities²⁰. Loneliness is, for Lévinas, not a prelude to self-denial, but quite the opposite, since it introduces the individual to authentic insight, and marks the “mastery of the existent over existing”²¹. Claudio Guillén associates the picaresque with two complementary aspects of alienation: first, in terms of story-telling, the *pícaro* is divided between the narrating (“Io”) and the narrated self (“[la] mia persona”), where the former’s supposed sense of guilt collides with a none too subtle complacency over his past mischiefs²². Next, the *pícaro* is an “insular,

¹⁸ “everyday life, far from constituting a fall, and far from appearing as a betrayal with regard to our metaphysical destiny, emanates from our solitude and forms the very accomplishment of solitude and the infinitely serious attempt to respond to its profound unhappiness [*malheur*]”. See Emmanuel Lévinas, **Time and the Other**, trans. R. A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1987, p. 58.

¹⁹ Anonymous, **Lazarillo de Tormes**, edición de Francisco Rico, Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1988, Prólogo, p. 11.

²⁰ **Lazarillo de Tormes**, *cit.*, Tractado Séptimo, pp. 130-31. Juan Carlos Rodríguez argues that the Spanish Renaissance bourgeoisie discovered its class identity only when it revealed its private life, acknowledging the ‘person’ behind a nameless, literary ‘I’. See: Juan Carlos Rodriguez, **La literatura del pobre** [the literature of the poor], Granada: Comares, 1994, quoted in Francisco J. Sánchez, **An Early Bourgeois Literature in Golden Age Spain**, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, pp. 73-74.

²¹ Lévinas, *cit.*, p. 54. Lévinas also argues that “Solitude is thus not only a despair and an abandonment, but also a virility, a pride and a sovereignty” (p. 55).

²² Interestingly, at the Campiello award ceremony De Marchi has taken a moral distance from his creation: “Non è il mio alter ego questo Carlo

isolated being”²³, rejected by the family circle and society at large (a “half-outsider” according to Guillén)²⁴.

Similarly, the phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels explains that the individual acquires self-awareness only when s/he is deprived of his/her certainties. Since the experience of this deprivation arises from the encounter with the stranger²⁵, individuals have to experience solitude in order to fully understand themselves and the presence of a stranger within themselves. In sum, the stranger carves a place within one’s conscience even before being recognized as an external entity: “The ‘I’ is an Other because alienness begins in one’s own house” (Waldenfels, *Phenomenology*, p. 16). This idea of a “resident” stranger does not wholly overlap with Guillén’s conflicting narrative personas because the division of identities is not simply a question of separating the teller from the character²⁶; it involves an existential strain, within the character in the story, between an appointed role in the world and the choice of a different path in life. The basic argument is then that the *pícaros* are not always victims of their isolation: they enjoy, and even make a show of the barriers that society built around them.

Marozzi, al centro di tumultuose avventure. Il suo talento di vivere ha tutta la mia riprovazione. Se uso l’io narrante è proprio per allontanarmi da questo personaggio” [Carlo Marozzi, the culprit of these hectic adventures, is everything but my alter ego. His talent for life has all my aversion. If I use the narrating I it is exactly because I want to take a distance from this character]. See: Donata Righetti, “Il Campiello a Cesare De Marchi”, *Corriere della sera*, 20 September 1998, p. 31.

²³ Claudio Guillén, “Toward a Definition of the Picaresque”, **Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History**, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 77.

²⁴ A sociological view of this process of alienation is also expressed, in moral-theological terms, by Alexander Parker, who defines the typical Spanish *pícaro* as “an offender against the moral laws” and a “dishonourable and anti-social” person, whose extant conversion takes the choice of a self-estrangement from society to the extreme. See: A. Parker, **Literature and the Delinquent: The Picaresque Novel in Spain and Europe, 1599-1753**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967, p. 4.

²⁵ Bernhard Waldenfels, **Phenomenology of the Alien**, trans. A. Kozin and T. Stähler, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011, p. 11.

²⁶ The confessional nature of the picaresque is well explained with reference to a typical *pícaro*, Lazarillo de Tormes, and his personal case of conjugal infidelity, by Francisco Rico in **The Spanish Picaresque Novel and the Point of View**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 7 and following.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This then brings us to the second crucial element in the building of a sense of outsider-ness: the use of questions. Waldenfels assumes that every time an external agent – the “alien” – asks questions relating to our own status in life or society, s/he necessarily raises issues about our part in the conversation³². This is what happens in everyday conversations; however, narrative is a recreated, time-transcending form of communication where the narrator predetermines questions and answers. What is more, in everyday discourse, the position of a stranger should imply reciprocity with the other entity: I am a stranger to them, they are strangers to me. On the contrary, the picaresque anti-epic depicts a situation of extreme non-reciprocity, in which the mainstream culture rejects any recognition of the stranger, and brandishes the weapon of rhetorical questions as a subtle instrument of segregation. In *Il talento* there are more than 150 rhetorical queries scattered over a total of 283 pages, an average of about one question every two pages, but their number would increase if we considered indirect questions inserted in the narrator’s reported speech. As an indicator of alienation, a rhetorical question attests to a refusal to engage in any dialogue whatsoever with the stranger, seen as a threat to the certainties of the main culture. It has the formal appearance of a common question, but it is mainly centered on the speaker rather than on the listener. The speaker is persuaded that no answer will add new information to what s/he already knows: a rhetorical question guarantees a sort of entropy³³ in the dominating cultural milieu, keeping any disruption at bay. Thus, the assimilating culture leaves little or no space for “creative” replies: for instance, when Carlo wonders what the students are doing in the streets of Milan (the 1968 student riots), a bartender briskly answers: “(‘ma lei in che mondo vive? non li legge i giornali? Qui un giorno sì e uno no fanno a botte con la polizia!’)” [‘but what planet are you living on? Don’t you read the

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

³³ Lotman employs the term “entropy” to define a standstill in the exchange of information within a culture and a transitory lack of information inside the semiotic sphere. See Lotman, Uspenskij, **Tipologia**, *cit.*, pp. 52-53.

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papers? Every other day they're brawling with the police!', p. 221]. The answer sounds more like a reproach than an attempt at constructive communication. Another example of this is the sarcastic question Carlo's daughter asks her mother: “‘Ma perché papà viene sempre a mangiare a casa?’” [‘How come dad always eats at home?’, p. 213], where the answer is already implied in the question: the accepted rule of conduct is not her father being home for dinner regularly, but the opposite. The stigma placed on Carlo of being a failed father figure is made undisputable by the premise that irregular behaviour has become, in the eyes of a child, an acceptable custom.

A further conflict escalates between these external, unresolved interrogations and Carlo's own genuine questions, which sound as *bona fide* efforts to come to terms with the iniquities surrounding him. For example, he cannot help asking his cell-mate Angelo about his decision to become a *pentito*: “‘Come ti penti? Ti penti di che cosa?’” [‘How do you repent? What do you repent of?’, p. 274], which is nowhere near a rhetorical question. Carlo seems to be unaware that Angelo's choice has no moral implications; instead, for the prisoner, it is just a ruse to enjoy better treatment in jail. In short, rhetorical questions consolidate barriers that already existed between culture and counter-culture and, not surprisingly, one of the most bluntly meaningful, non-rhetorical questions in *Il talento* comes from another genuine stranger in the story, the disabled brother Sandro, who draws attention to Carlo's state of exclusion: “‘Perché non torni a casa?’”[‘Why don't you come back home?’, p. 80]

Another essential linguistic device hinging on the theme of isolation as a philosophical issue of language is the break with the idea of language as a system for labelling the world, a “language of proper names”, according to the semioticians Juri Lotman and Boris Uspensky³⁴. The “language of proper names” is a vision of language where sensory experience is assumed as real only insofar as it has been named. The emblem for this concept of signifying the world is homonymy: the same object, regardless of its context, bears the same name; a solution that tends to standardize experience. Discarding a language that gives names to reality, the *pícaro* defends a more ambiguous idiom, where the description of experience is obtained through synonymy. The use of a synonym does not simply respond to the need of more variety in language, it also refutes the main idea that words are infallible substitutes for objects. A naming process underlies what logicians call “reification”, where

³⁴ Juri M. Lotman, Boris A. Uspensky, “Myth-Name-Culture”, in **Soviet Semiotics. An Anthology**, edited, translated, with an introduction by D. Lucid, Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, p. 244.

“è la cosa a definire l'uomo, che cosí risulta oggettivato e istituito dal genere della propria attività” [it is the object that defines the person, who then becomes objectified and established by this kind of activity]³⁵, a process of reversal of means into ends. It turns out, then, that language as a human activity becomes a dangerous substitute for the actual object. Conversely, the more substitute words one uses for an object, the less clearly identifiable that object will become, blurred in its own “nicknames” that distract from a clear-cut meaning. Although this anarchy in language choices could lead to serious misunderstandings among speakers, it is nevertheless a safeguard against any imposition of a standardized language meant as a filter of experience. Given that, only the outcasts, those that have been excluded from the circle of reification, have the privilege to breach this self-referential circle.

Synonymy enfolds a paradox since, as David Crystal emphasizes, semantic equivalence between terms belonging to similar fields is unattainable. Synonyms are never exactly identical in meaning: language registers, context, and the social circumstances of communication inevitably affect the choice of one lexeme in place of another³⁶. Synonyms, then, lack a precise definition or a suitable paraphrase for a term. From the rogue's perspective on language within a marginalized culture, the abundance of synonyms is not simply a play on words, but it is basically a way of detracting from the certainties of codified terminology. By extending the number of synonyms for a common noun, the picaresque narrator does not explain the original noun any better; on the contrary, s/he enriches and destabilizes the illusion of naming experience in order to control it.

A synonym is not only a term meaning almost the same as another term, it can be an expression encapsulating a similar meaning, such as a euphemism, or a circumlocution. Most significantly, this latter type of synonymy, quite familiar to the convention of the picaresque, constitutes the aesthetic basis of *Il talento*, as can be seen in a couple of examples, taken from an argument between Carlo and his wife Alice:

In risposta [Alice] farfugliò qualcosa che non fui del tutto sicuro di percepire esattamente, ma che assomigliava alla locuzione, a me ben nota, *Non rompere le palle*. (p. 160)

[Alice muttered an answer, something I was not entirely sure I understood correctly, but it sounded like the well known locution, *Don't piss me off*]

³⁵ Umberto Galimberti, **Psiche e techne, L'uomo nell'età della tecnica** [Psyche and techne, man in the age of technology], Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999, p. 325.

³⁶ David Crystal, **How Language Works**, Camberwell: Penguin Books, 2006, pp. 195-96.

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[...] mi sentii apostrofare con una indignazione e una libertà lessicale che fino a quel punto della mia vita mi erano state risparmiate:
'Di' un po', ma tu sei stronzo o lo fai?' (p. 163)

[I was addressed with such indignation and lexical freedom that I had, until that time in my life, been spared from: / 'Tell me what, are you a turd or are you acting like one?']

Apparently, Carlo is a champion of formal language, hiding the humiliation of abuse behind the constructs of rhetoric. In cultural terms, he states his position as odd man out compared with that of his soon-to-be wife Alice, a mouthpiece for the dominant money-conscious culture. Circumlocution aptly conveys diverging views of the world, along with a strong ironic purpose on the part of the narrator. But most of all, circumlocutions in picaresque texts show how a verbal skirmish loses its reference points with the set demeanor of an arguing couple: in fact, the mocking tone in Carlo's elaborate turn of phrase not only conceals the character's supposed innocence, but also indeed allows the reader to doubt his feigned astonishment at the swear word. As a consequence, the reader cannot clearly assess the seriousness of the characters' involvement in this episode. Secondly, Alice's allusion to the contrast between acting and being nasty betrays the principle of ritual denomination, an aspect that has already been explored with regard to behaviour. Insults from Alice are not synonyms but labels, second names unequivocally hurled at Carlo because they do not admit any variation. She defines Carlo as a "meno abbiente cerebrale" [cerebral "have-less", p. 163], which might sound like a funny jumbling of words, a "nickname", but it is simply an echo of the speech of Carlo's snobbish schoolmates, who defined pinball as a game for mentally handicapped people: unconnected moments in the story thus become correlated to show the lack of originality in the main culture's ways of expression (once again, the logic of homonymy). Note that two different episodes are identified by the same linguistic devices: here, the sense of possession that the stranger violated is carelessly blended with the feeling of abnormality implied by this violation, and the logic of money ("meno abbiente") as social branding in the dominant culture overlaps with a completely unrelated aspect defining a human being, mental faculties³⁷.

³⁷ A similar juxtaposition can be found in the expression "paralitico morale" [moral paralytic], used by Angelo, Carlo's fellow prisoner, to describe his mate's unawareness of what happens around him (p. 272).

Carlo seems to enjoy the company of his school mates, who appear to rebel against any kind of imposition: “la disciplina brulicava d’insopportanza” [discipline swarmed with impatience, p. 41]. He later realizes, though, that their bitterness towards authority is a sham: the fact that they aspire to unfeasible rules of behaviour has turned them into victims of a conventional form of rebellion: “La nobiltà di forma, o per meglio dire la nobiltà di sostanza, dei miei compagni di classe si serbava intatta anche nella più aperta volgarità” [The nobility of form or, better said, the nobility of substance, of my schoolmates remained intact even at the most explicit rudeness, p. 41]. This again assigns Carlo to the realm of the picaresque. Insults in *Il talento* are always embedded in the same prejudice involving money as a discriminator of social status, another hallmark of the picaresque³⁸. As Dunn aptly explains with reference to Spanish picaresque fiction, poverty is neither an issue among many others, nor one that can be relegated to the margins of society; it actually jumps into the foreground as a “condition of the world”³⁹. In De Marchi’s modern version of the traditional rogue’s stories, poverty is not an element of discrimination between survival and death but a more subtle contrivance to separate the socially worthy from the lowly proletarians.

Euphemism is another form of the synonymy that rules the *pícaro*’s world. It is a periphrasis cloaking unpleasant, sexually allusive or offensive phrases under more decent, respectful language. Nonetheless, this verbal camouflage is anything but neutral or impersonal: the more covert the actual meaning appears, the more outrageous and provoking the outcome. Readers of the picaresque are accustomed to freewheeling derogatory terms and prurient situations, but in line with the unexpected role of the narrator as a filter of information, euphemism is a much more common and effective tool. For instance, in this passage from *Il talento*, disability is described in an unmediated way:

(Maria:) ‘L’ho visto spesso, seduto sulla panchina... in compagnia di un uomo, non so come dire...un po’ strano. Lei non guardava mai dove ero io...’

(Carlo:) ‘Quell’uomo è mio fratello.’ E dopo un attimo d’indecisione aggiunsi: ‘Non è strano: è mongoloide’. (p. 85)

[(Maria:) ‘I’ve seen you often, sitting on the bench...beside, how can I say...a rather strange man. You never looked where I was...’]

³⁸ Alice scorns Carlo’s former partner because she is cross-eyed and, what is more, she has no money to buy sunglasses to cover her physical flaw (p. 164).

³⁹ Peter N. Dunn, **Spanish Picaresque Fiction, A New Literary History**, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 294.

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(Carlo:) ‘That man is my brother.’ And after a moment of hesitation, I added: ‘He is not strange. He is mongoloid’.]

While Maria uses an all-inclusive word as a euphemism for Sandro’s unusual appearance (“strano”), Carlo corrects her with the more appropriate, technical term (“mongoloide”). What is really striking about this contrast between politeness and truth is that the picaresque outsider sees strangeness as the unpleasant word, while “mongoloide” becomes its euphemism and, at the same time, a way of separating his own deranged condition from that of his brother:

chi era Sandro? Che cosa significava la sua morte? Un deficiente di meno al mondo: e il mondo continuava, anzi si perfezionava, si liberava di una macchia. Io invece al mondo ci restavo...: non ero superfluo, io, no! la vegetazione del mio lustro sacco di carne rallegrava la creazione [...] (p. 102)

[who was Sandro? What did his death mean? An idiot left this world: and the world went on, actually it improved, it got rid of a stain. I, instead, was still in the world...: I wasn’t superfluous, not me! Creation rejoiced at the vegetation of my lurid bag of flesh (...)]

Instead of being an unpleasant noun that the reader is supposed to condemn as disrespectful, the term “deficiente” or, earlier in the text, “persona ibrida”, ultimately denotes a euphemistic choice since, by comparison, it conceals an even more desperate, unresolved condition, that of Carlo, an omitted monad, without any further distinguishing features. It can be argued that the sheer fact of admitting the multiple description of an object does cast doubt not only on the word that identifies it but also on the actual essence of the object. The main dilemma does not concern which synonym is more suitable for an object, but rather – and this is the basis of the picaresque reversal strategy – it revolves around another issue: Which object is (more) suitable to the chosen synonym? In the example mentioned, the readers are invited to ask themselves: Which person – Carlo? Sandro? Their family? – conforms to the title of strange? Does a person one can classify as strange really exist? Such a dilemma calls for a highly moral and philosophical confutation of our certainties. Furthermore, strangeness as an attribute of the outsider becomes irrelevant to the sympathetic roguish antihero but not to the hegemonic culture which segregates Sandro to the fringe of humanity. In terms of style, this shift of focus between defining and defined terms for the stranger results in a muddle of euphemistic overtones and straightforward language disclosing the

protean nature of social conventions and hinting at a disquieting role of the alienated *pícaro*.

On closer inspection, the “language of proper names”, which mainstream culture elevates to an emblem of authority over experience⁴⁰, is dramatically downsized by the disruption of the picaresque “language of nicknames”, whereby experience can only be described but never exactly named. In addition, proper names do not establish a direct reference to a real person because they do not identify a person’s characteristics, while nicknames, or “chosen names”⁴¹, bear meanings that expressly qualify the individual. For example, Carlo likes to describe his friend and colleague Michele with a variety of nicknames/periphrases that blur the picture of the character that readers create in their minds: he calls him “saltimbano della parola” [word acrobat], “ladro benefico” [charitable thief], “ciarlatano cervellotico” [brainy charlatan, p. 170], “il mio pulcinellesco amico” [my Pulcinella-like friend, p. 177], “ciarliero architetto di truffe” [chatty trick planner, p. 209], etc. Even when Michele is arrested for counterfeiting the school’s registers to make money out of “nameless” back-up teachers, his individuality is cloaked under a “bianca maschera mortuaria” [white mortuary mask, p. 210]. Both Michele and Carlo are rogues, but Carlo is the real *pícaro* since, unlike Michele, he takes advantage of the social order of things, he knows the duplicity of his marginalized role and has the strength not to be enthralled by the comforts of a normal life. Later on, as Carlo ironically compares his cell mate’s name, Angelo, with the moral attributes the name is supposed to bear on its owner, he is clearly making fun of the reliability of proper names:

⁴⁰ The most oppressive forms of cultural hegemony, dictatorships, strive to repress the potential of descriptive language in order to rename the private spheres of human life (e.g. Hitler’s slogans, Stalin’s liking for coinage, etc.).

⁴¹ Uspensky describes the custom of civil names in Russian onomatology: “intendiamo parlare del fatto che la stessa persona potesse avere due nomi, il nome ‘di battesimo’ e il nome ‘civile’. In teoria tale opposizione poteva essere intesa come la contrapposizione tra il nome ricevuto (da Dio), e quello coscientemente scelto, in conformità con qualche tratto caratteristico della persona” [we want to argue that the same person could have two names, the ‘given’ name and the ‘civilian’ name. In theory, this opposition could be meant as a contraposition between the (God)-given name and the one that has been consciously chosen, in harmony with some characteristic personal features]. See Uspenskij, **Linguistica, semiotica, storia della cultura** [Linguistics, semiotics, history of culture], Bologna: il Mulino, 1996, p. 77 (my translation from the Italian version).

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In fondo Angelo è un brav'uomo e rende onore al suo nome: quando glielo dico, ci scherza sopra anche lui: ‘Eh sí, hai ragione, *nomina sunt consequentia rerum!*’

[All in all Angelo is a good man, he honours his own name: when I tell him about that, he jokes about it too: ‘Yes, you’re right, *nomina sunt consequentia rerum!*’, p. 273].

Even though Angelo is a prisoner, an individual that has been confined to the margins of society, he knows how to play on the ambivalence of this role, and is therefore ready to wear the mask of the “pentito”, as already observed, giving up his integrity as a genuine outsider.

It is crucial to recall how the typical coming-of-age narrative also hinges on the conflict between two tendencies: one to name experience, and the other to describe it. This tension of extremes stands out in a later novel by De Marchi, *La furia del mondo* (2006), arguably a more conventional *Bildungsroman*, somewhat representing the other side of the coin with respect to *Il talento*. In *La furia del mondo* the two tendencies coexist in Abel, the protagonist, but are confined to different stages in his life: at first, the child claims to dominate the world by means of language: “ogni cosa aveva un nome, e finché non l’aveva non era davvero sé stessa” [anything had a name, and until it did not have one, it was not really itself, p. 22]. To Abel’s naïve reckoning naming is, to paraphrase Lotman and Uspenskij, the only instrument of cognition (“Myth-Name-Culture,” *cit.*, p. 242). Anything beyond the reach of language is inscrutable. At a later stage, the adolescent Abel is surprised to be confronted with a deeper layer of meaning when reading Dante’s poetry:

mai avuto questo sgomento di non toccare il fondo delle parole che leggeva, come se ognuna di queste avesse una sostanza più ampia e sconosciuta, della quale lui vedeva solo affiorare la cima senza il grande corpo sommerso (p. 318).

[he never had such dismay of being unable to reach the bottom of the words he was reading, as if each of them was made of a wider and uncannier stuff, where only the summit was emerging, while the great body was still submersed]

Abel’s *Bildung* is also a progression from the appropriation of the world through words to the discovery of the elusiveness of this appropriation, and this process of discovery necessarily entails alienation and rejection from the rest of society. What differentiates this book from *Il talento* is the fact that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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