The “high” and “low” of the picaresque or adventure novel genre

It is a well-known proposition that the novel is a genre of European modernity.¹ The Ancients did not know a prose epic genre. Their narratives were legends in verse, like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey,*² or pressed into the highly structured “dramatic poem” in five acts, known to us as the Greek tragedy. The extent prose fragments of *Satyricon,* “Trimalchio’s Feast” and one other, attributed to Petronius, bear witness to a Roman literary celebration of “low life” and artistic pornography. Dating from A.D. 65, this novel represents the *carnivalesque* style, identified by Mikhail Bakhtin³ as the subversive stream in the culture of the Roman Empire. Prose writing of the “modern” kind appeared with Boccaccio’s collection of novellas, *The Decameron,* in the mid-fourteenth century, followed by Rabelais’ *Pantagruel* (1532) and the epic romances of Cervantes, the 12 *Novelas Ejemplares* and *Don Quixote,* at the very beginning of the seventeenth century. The Thirty Years War on the territories of what is now

---

¹ See Jaques Souvage, *An Introduction to the Study of the Novel.* With a Foreword by W. Schrickx. (Gent: E. Story – Scientia P.V.B.A., 1965), p. 66, where Souvage contends that “The novel as we know it is a product of modern consciousness. Its appearance at the turn of the seventeenth century must be seen in connection with the transition from a feudal order to a world order based on the social relationships between individual persons.” Souvage quotes Ian Watt, who says that the transition from feudal to modern “involves secularisation as well as individualism.” Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), p. 84. Souvage also quotes the following passage from Ian Watt, who refers to the ideas of Georg Lukácz on the theory of the novel: “The novel, Georg Lukácz has written [*Die Theorie des Romans* (Berlin, 1920), p. 84], is the epic of a world forsaken by God; it presents, in de Sade’s phrase, ‘le tableau des moeurs séculaires.’”

² Milivoj Solar, in his monograph on the novel, written in Serbo-Croat, contends however that *The Odyssey,* as distinct from *The Iliad,* “deals with the destiny of a singular hero in a manner reminiscent of later ‘stories about individual destiny’ that constitute the *sujets* of most European novels.” See Milivoj Solar, *Ideja i priča: aspekti teorije proze* (Zagreb: Liber, 1974), p. 183. [My translation].

Germany furnished the subject matter for Grimmelhausen's adventure novel *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1669), written under the influence of the Spanish *picaresque novel*. The eighteenth century saw the adventure novel genre spread to English literature, where Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) raised the genre to a new level of sophistication and self-reflexivity.

The distinctive feature of the adventure-picaresque novels, novellas and romances is parody. M. M. Bakhtin, in his classic study on *Rabelais and His World*, proclaimed parody to be the founding structure of the modern worldview, modelling a "dialogic" relationship between the text and the reader. As such, parody becomes a kind of *arche trace* of representation as a mode of thought or discourse.

The subject matter of the adventure novel is furnished by observation of the life of the times that determines the linear plot of the adventure hero. This linear plot is such that it represents the life of the hero as a series of alternating "highs" and "lows" – peripeteias of Fortune that now raise the hero into the highest social circles of wealth, now plunge him into the depths of poverty and social misery. Throughout the vicissitudes of his adventures, the picaresque or adventure novel hero never loses his libidinal vitality. He is capable of undergoing numerous transformations in appearance and is all things to all people. He has no set morality or ideology. He is polymorphous and adaptable to the heterogeneous reality reflected through him.

Although considered a genre of "high" literature, the adventure novel always drew on "low life" for its plot structure and characterization. Thus the dichotomy of "high" and "low" always appeared interchangeable, if not borderless, in the genre. This mix of the plebeian and the aristocratic "taste" prepared the ground for the further development of the genre in the nineteenth century. For it is in the age of bourgeois capitalism, particularly in English and French society, that the adventure novel bifurcates as a genre. On the one hand, it "degenerates" into the "low" genre of the boulevard novel and its close relative, the detective novel, which are read by the "downstairs" staff in the houses of the upper middle classes in London and Paris. On the other, it becomes the vehicle of high bourgeois culture and its historical and aesthetic self-examination. While Dostoevsky reads Eugene Sue and adapts this "low" genre to his needs as a Realist portraying the modernizing Russian society of the mid-nineteenth century, he is not read by the St. Petersburg maids and cooks, who are reading Sue in Russian translation, along with "low" Russian writers of the boulevard