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Narratives of Resistance and Resistance to Narrative: The Tragic Picaro as an Alternative Model for Life Stories

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Abstract

A specific narrative form implies a specific ethics. While the plot of the Bildungsroman values personal growth and fruitful dialogue with the outside world leading to a meaningful whole, the plot of the picaresque – its direct opposite – values episodic fragmentation and a nonchalant or even hostile relationship with our surroundings. Picaresques often deploy unnatural narrative, a form that constructs a reality that blatantly reveals itself to be fictional and constructed. In this paper, I analyse novels by Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie and Abdelkader Benali (*The Tin Drum*, *Midnight's Children* and *The Long Awaited*) in which this picaresque tradition is modified to become a narrative of transition. There is strong, deliberate intertextuality between these texts, with each novel building on its predecessor to create a narrative form that can solve the trauma of transition (from the life of the German minority in Poland to post war West Germany, from colonial rule to independence and from village life in Morocco to city life in the Netherlands, respectively). Oscillating between the nonchalance of the picaro and the need for belonging that drives the plot of the Bildungsroman, and between the ethics and values each of these imply, the novels establish a tradition of 'tragic picaro' that show both the necessity and futility of resisting nationalism and history through narrative. Narrative works towards an end point that is always oppressive as it subordinates all earlier events, so any resistance to oppression through narrative becomes oppressive itself. The unnatural narrative deployed in these novels foregrounds this and facilitates a continuing resistance, not only to the narratives of nationalism and history but, ultimately, to all narrative. As such, the narrative tradition established in these three novels has a use-value as an alternative to dominant stories in the neoliberal realm.

Introduction

A specific narrative form implies a specific ethics. Like all mimesis, narrative 'involves a certain degree of semiotic transformation that either confirms, subverts or elaborates upon' (Pieters, 2001, p. 44) the elements that constitute the world it presents to the reader. A narrative does not simply

recount events, but evaluates them too, imbedding them with values, some of which have a moral nature. To say, as one does when creating a plot, that one event leads to another, is to enable (but not necessarily dictate) a moral assessment of those events. Thus, the narrative implicitly or explicitly offers a model for how to live the good life. In a similar vein, Russian semiologist Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) argues that a novel's genre not only regulates its formalistic aspects, such as a 'particular type of plot' and 'a particular composition of a given novel', but also its 'particular conception of the world' (p. 10). A genre, in other words, comes with its own set of norms and values because it represents reality in a certain way: it builds a specific type of world-word-construct (Wicks, 1989) that includes a specific moral assessment of the events that take place in it.

In this paper, I will explore how genres regulate narrative ethics. When a narrative is a hybrid of different formalistic generic characteristics, it also mixes the moral and ethical conceptions of the world that belong to the genres that these characteristics stem from. Authors can use this to create significant tensions allow their narratives to intervene – or be read as interventions – in their social contexts.

I will first discuss the four genres that Bakhtin discerns in his article. Bakhtin's (1986) generic typology is specifically rich because it is divided based on 'how the image of the main hero is constructed' (p. 10). As I clarified elsewhere (Huisman & Moenandar, 2015), his typology enables narratives to be assessed according to how they posit the relationship between the individual and his or her world. Next, I will analyse three literary works in which elements of two of Bakhtin's four genres, the picaresque and the *Bildungsroman*, are mixed in an (ethically) interesting way. It is poignant that these novels' authors have chosen these two genres, since they are direct opposites in Bakhtin's typology – especially in an ethical sense. While the plot of the *Bildungsroman* values personal growth and fruitful dialogue with the outside world that leads to a meaningful whole, the plot of the picaresque values episodic fragmentation and a nonchalant or even hostile relationship with our surroundings. Picaresques often deploy 'unnatural narrative' (Richardson, 2015), a narrative mode that constructs a reality that blatantly reveals itself to be fictional and constructed. Because this kind of antirealistic narrative reminds us of the constructed and fictional nature of all narrative, including non-fictional narratives (cf. Ricoeur, 1984, p. 64), it, like the picaresque, offers the possibility of resisting coerced wholeness and accepted notions of truth.

The novels I will analyse are *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie and *The Long Awaited* by Abdelkader Benali. Although each of them are clearly part of the picaresque tradition, they also modify this tradition to suit a certain narrative of transition that each is attempting to shape. They do so most notably by adding aspects of the *Bildungsroman*. There is a strong, deliberate intertextuality between these texts; each novel builds on its predecessor to devise a narrative form that can solve the trauma of transition (from being part of a German minority in Poland before the Second World War, to living in the re-emerging West Germany after the war; from colonial rule to independence; and from village life in Morocco to city life in the Netherlands).

My thesis is that throughout these three novels a hybrid genre is developed, with a plot that oscillates between the nonchalance with which the picaro experiences events and the need for belonging that drives the main character of the *Bildungsroman*, and between the norms and values that each of these attitudes imply. I call the main character of this hybrid genre a 'tragic picaro' – tragic because he exemplifies the impossibility of reconciling the irony of the picaresque with the affective of the *Bildungsroman*. That is not to say that this hybrid genre is a failed genre: exemplifying this impossibility is its very aim. This will become apparent when I discuss how these novels show the workings of a society – very different for each novel, but similar in how it establishes relationships between the individual and the multitude – and how it dooms the main character to his tragic existence. They show this not only by representing those societies, but by representing, metafictionally, narrative itself. Their plots are constructed by narrators who believes they can talk themselves into existence by reinventing – and thereby resisting – official national and historical narratives. However, the narrators are fundamentally unreliable and the plots they create – meant to provide the picaresque outsider with a place to belong – ultimately crumble under their own weight, taking the narrators with them. Irony and unreliability negate the affective possibility of

belonging.

Thus, the literary tradition that appears when looking at these three novels together shows both the necessity and the futility of resisting nationalism and history through narrative. Narrative works towards an end point that is always oppressive since it subordinates all events prior to it (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 141). Any resistance to oppression through narrative is therefore bound to be oppressive itself. The antirealistic narrative deployed in these novels foregrounds this and facilitates a continuing resistance, not only to the narratives of nationalism and history but, ultimately, to all narrative. As such, these novels offer a narrative model that is not only interesting in the light of literary history, but that may offer a way out in real-life cases of narrative oppression, where dominant stories are imposed on us.

Genre and ethics

In his essay on the history of the European novel, Bakhtin (1986) proposes a typology of genres that – since he claims that a genre comes with its own type of worldview – can function as much as a typology of ethics as a typology of style. This becomes especially clear when we notice how Bakhtin differentiates between genres according to two implicit axes: one indicating ‘the extent to which the protagonist evolves in the narrative’ and one indicating ‘the extent to which the protagonist and the story’s time and place influence each other’ (Huisman & Moenandar, 2015, p. 108). Crossing these two axes yields a typology of four ideal typical clusters that correspond with the four genres Bakhtin discusses in his essay: the biographical novel, the Bildungsroman, the novel of ordeal and the picaresque.

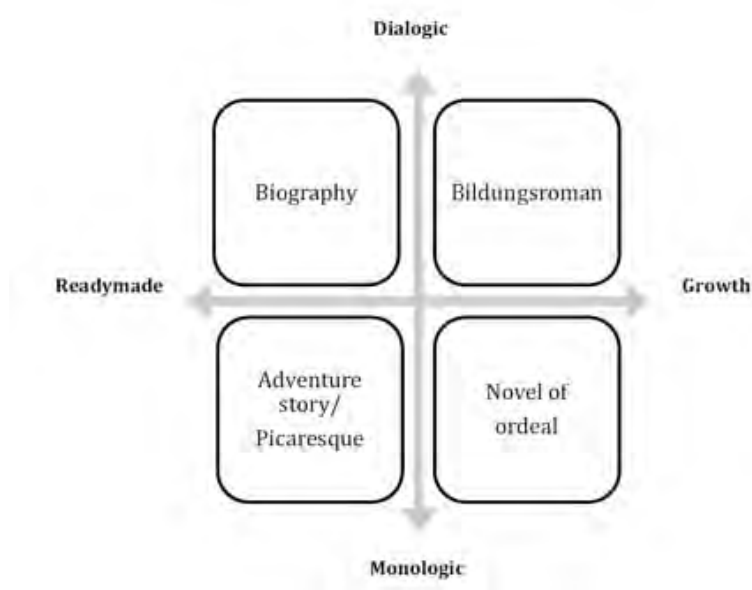


Figure 1: A typology of genres. Adapted from Huisman and Moenandar, 2015, p. 108.

The left-hand side of this typology includes genres with a protagonist who is merely ‘a moving point in space’ (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 10): the main character is ‘readymade’ and his or her personality is fixed as time progresses. The right-hand side includes genres with protagonists who are significantly different at the end of the story than they were at its beginning. The story is very much about their personal growth and the plot is mostly driven by that growth (Huisman & Moenandar, 2015). The genres on the lower half of this typology have protagonists who are not influenced by their surroundings and do not influence them in any significant way. The genres on the upper half have protagonists who are defined by their interactions with their surroundings (Huisman & Moenandar, 2015).

Elsewhere, I extensively discussed the nature of these four genres and their main characters (Huisman & Moenandar, 2015, pp. 108-111) and turned Bakhtin’s descriptive typology into a tool for analysing life writing by students for narrative counselling. I also claimed that ‘all life writing generally corresponds to one of these genres’ (109). Here I would like to argue that this claim can

be extended to all storytelling that narrates the life experiences of a main character (which probably includes all storytelling).

That would mean that this typology can be used to map the ethics (i.e. what the story implies, how it lets the main character relate to him- or herself and their surroundings, how to live a good life), plot and composition – as well as the interrelatedness of these – of most, if not all, stories. That does not mean that all stories belong firmly to only one of these four quadrants – we are, after all, dealing with ideal typical clusters – but it does mean that a story, together with the extent to which it incorporates elements of a specific genre, also incorporates the specific set of norms and values (formalistic, moral and ethical) that come with that genre. I will first discuss how this applies to the novel of ordeal and the biographical novel, but only in passing, as they are not relevant for the current analysis. Then I will address the other two genres more extensively.

The novel of ordeal has a main character who ‘either has to overcome something within him- or herself, or overcome something in his or her surroundings’ (Huisman & Moenandar, 2015, p. 111). Examples include hagiographies that recount the ordeals a character must withstand to reach enlightenment. As its place in the typology suggests, the worldview expressed by such novels values individual growth and striving towards clear goals and even perfection, but typically places no value on ‘dialogue with and conformation from’ the main characters’ surroundings (Huisman & Moenandar, 2015).

The biographical novel is the exact opposite. Its hero exhibits no growth over time, but is born with a series of talents and capabilities that are employed whenever time and context demand them. These talents are never developed, but may be trained. Interaction with the hero’s surroundings is extremely valuable to the worldview of this novel. Examples include biographies of great artists and statesmen, but also family sagas. One is the Forsyth saga, where the main character is a family instead of a person, and the traits that will be manifested and developed in future generations are already clearly discernible in the founders of the clan (cf. Bakhtin, 1986, p. 18).

The Bildungsroman is, typically, the tale of someone finding his or her self and place in the world. As the typology clarifies, the story values both personal growth and a continuous and fruitful dialogue with one’s surroundings – or, as Franco Moretti phrases it in his classic study on the genre: ‘flexibility and compromise’ (1987, p. 10). As Moretti illustrates, it is precisely because of those values inherent in the genre that the Bildungsroman fits the modern age so well. Moretti describes the Bildungsroman as a typically modern form of storytelling because it embraces modernity’s ideal of a permanent revolution where everything, including – especially – the individual, is merely the promise of a better version of itself. This seems especially true for the ‘neoliberal realm’ of contemporary capitalist society, where the freedom of the individual, just like all other freedoms, must be ‘measurable, controllable and manageable’ (Gielen & De Bruyne, 2012, p. 5). In Huisman and Moenandar (2015), I described how students invited to narrate their study experiences almost always chose to do so in the Bildungsroman genre (p. 110). As an explanation, I suggested that the values inherent in this genre are very similar to the neoliberal ideal ‘of continuing growth and innovation’ that students learn to internalise throughout their studies (p. 111). My thesis here is that the Bildungsroman narrative is used as a ‘tool’ (Gielen & De Bruyne, 2012, p. 5) to measure, control and manage the student’s becoming.

The Bildungsroman is particularly useful in this context because its plot is a perfect fit for the neoliberal obsession with constant growth and striving towards ‘excellence’ that is expected, not only of companies and countries, but of individuals. Neoliberalism turns us into ‘entrepreneurial selves’ and ‘one of the most valuable production forces of the entrepreneurial self is its learning ability; a force that produces new competencies, adds value to the self and fuels the accumulation of one’s human capital’. To facilitate the full exploitation of this ability, we ‘embrace the virtues of flexibility, innovation and productive creativity’ that are central to neoliberalism (Simons & Masschelein, 2012, p. 70) but also to the Bildungsroman. In the same way that the entrepreneurial self takes everything as a learning opportunity, the Bildungsroman is the story of a main character learning to better relate to him- or herself and the surrounding world: both offer narratives of continuous self-improvement and fine tuning. Thus, the plot of the Bildungsroman yields a story of reaching an equilibrium, both between the main character and him- or herself and between the

main character and his or her surroundings. Or, if this equilibrium proves to be unattainable, it becomes the story of the main character's demise: Goethe's *Werther* commits suicide precisely because the possibility of such an equilibrium escapes him. In any case, the worldview expressed by the story, its assessment of a good life, remains the same: personal growth and fruitful dialogue must be strived for.

This perfect fit explains the pandemic nature of the Bildungsroman plot in Western popular culture. A main character is only seen as successful if he or she testifies to a character development that leads to exchanging a 'second-choice life' (in which the main character is unable to fully blossom) for a 'first-choice life' (in which the main character, more in tune with his or her self and surrounding world, can become everything he or she dreamt of) (Ruven & Batavier, 2007). One only needs to compare a James Bond film from the 1960s to a more recent one to see how all-pervasive this plot has become. While it used to be enough for James Bond to shoot the bad guys and save the day, today he must face a childhood trauma or learn how to treat women before the end credits. He has to become a better man, more attuned to his surroundings. Flexibility and compromise are the main values spread through such storytelling.

Similarly, many pop songs, especially songs by female singers presenting themselves as role models (e.g. Beyoncé, Pink, Lady Gaga), contain what one scholar called a 'look, I overcame!' narrative: the main character works through the damage done to her, through some sort of trauma, and ultimately emerges more powerful and resilient. Even the most damaging experiences can become life lessons, can be made valuable and retrospectively be turned into an investment. Again, the Bildungsroman plot is used to create narratives that perfectly suit neoliberal capitalism because they are offered, both through the songs and the singers' lives as presented in the media (which tend to follow the same patterns), as models suitable for individual women becoming 'entrepreneurs of themselves' (James, 2015, pp. 78-87). The Bildungsroman has, I would argue, become a 'dominant story' when we want to talk about ourselves and how we relate to the world around us: 'The "normal" way of understanding a situation or a set of assumptions, that has become so ingrained or widely accepted within a culture, that it appears to represent "reality"' (Winslade & Monk, 1999, p.123).

If the Bildungsroman offers a narrative of reaching equilibrium through flexibility and internalising whatever life throws at us for our personal growth, the main character of the picaresque, the *picaro*, has no care for such equilibrium, nor is it presented as desirable throughout the story. This is first conveyed through the 'particular marginal location' of the *picaro* in relation to society. Often, the *picaro* is of uncertain descent (e.g. a bastard or a foundling) and therefore finds him- or herself outside the social order. Because of that outsider status, the *picaro* is also automatically a shapeshifter, someone who is not only physically on the move, but who also has an identity that is constantly in motion, fluid:

Born in – or rather outside of – a hierarchical society where each individual is assigned a fixed place, [the *picaro*] can envisage for himself the possibility of assuming multiple roles. Life is not for him a cut-and-dried product which the buyer must accept exactly as it is handed to him. (Alter, 1964, p. 41)

Therefore, this hierarchical society is often hostile towards the *picaro*. The *picaro*, a natural born trespasser, automatically challenges the lines and demarcations that keep this society fixed, raising the reader's awareness of them while simultaneously destabilising them. The picaresque becomes the story of someone who knows – and makes clear to the reader – that strict boundaries and borders can never be sustainable.

An important characteristic of the picaresque is its unrealistic nature: 'From his marginal position, the *picaro* deforms, almost spontaneously, the world in which he ends up' (Van Gorp, 1978, p. 48)¹. The picaresque narrator (usually the *picaro*) is often part of the 'unnatural narrative': a narrative form that is consciously anti-mimetic, that constructs a reality that markedly presents itself as *not* real (Richardson, 2015). The fictional world of the picaresque is often grotesque and perverse and thereby shows itself to be a constructed version of reality, to the point where notions such as reality and truth themselves become stabilised.

As a genre, the picaresque originated in Spain, in the second half of the sixteenth century. The Spanish *Novela Picaresca* was a very popular literary form in Europe throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The genre is characterised by a main character who leads a hunted existence because of their marginality. Driven by hunger, exclusion or the consequences of a trick gone awry (the picaro is clearly related to the trickster figure found in many mythologies), he or she moves from situation to situation. This enables the picaresque story to give 'a dissection of society' (Van Gorp, 1978, p. 47).

When I use the term picaresque in this paper, I do not necessarily mean this historical appearance of the genre. Narrowly defined, the term picaresque refers to a collection of literary texts that is limited in form and time. However, one could also 'regard the term "picaresque" as a collective name for a number of qualities, that can be present in a literary work to a higher or lesser extent' (Van Gorp, 1978, p. 13). In this regard, Ulrich Wicks (1989) has spoken of a 'literary mode': 'The picaresque mode offers a word-world-construct in which disharmony, disintegration and chaos prevail: nightmarish anxiety' (p. 45). One could therefore also use the term picaresque to describe a narrative form that is part of the 'storehouse of literary resources' writers may use. This is also true for the other genres mentioned in the typology above: the Bildungsroman, for instance, could be described as a literary mode offering a 'word-world-construct' in which integration and the steady emergence of order and harmony throughout the story prevail.

The picaresque and the Bildungsroman lie at opposite ends of both scales in the typology. This also explains why the picaresque mode is rarely used in contemporary popular storytelling. Granted, elements of the picaresque can often be found (probably due to the perennial seductiveness of the trickster figure), but they are almost always coerced into a plot that follows the mould of the Bildungsroman. In one striking example, Disney's Captain Jack Sparrow is in many ways a typical picaro. However, that is precisely why he cannot be the main character in *The Pirates of the Caribbean* series – not, at least, in the sense that the plots revolve around him. That function is left to Will Turner who, especially in the first film, follows the typical Bildungsroman transformation of finding himself and his place in the world, complete with exchanging a 'second-choice life' for a 'first-choice life' (in the fourth film, this narrative function is given to Philip Swift). And if the picaro does become the main character, they greatly lose their picaresqueness. The example of James Bond has already been mentioned and when Tim Burton announced that he wanted to 'try and make Alice feel more like a story as opposed to a series of events' (quoted in Rice, 2009), he meant turning it into something more like a Bildungsroman. Originally, Lewis Carroll's classics were very much structured like picaresques – or, rather, like reverse picaresques. If the picaro is usually an element of chaos in an otherwise orderly world, Alice is the exact opposite: an element of order in a fundamentally chaotic world. However, the picaresque structure is very much in place in the plot: Alice is a 'moving point in space' who never really engages with her surroundings but merely passes through. Although Carroll's stories are full of dialogue, they are never really fruitful, and Alice merely moves on after she once again fails to meaningfully engage with the creatures she meets (Matsier, 1996, p. 61). These stories are, as Burton notes, merely 'a series of events' that do not become a harmonious whole (like all picaresques, they are episodic). Burton 'remedies' this by fitting his film in the mould of the Bildungsroman: the timid Alice who lets herself be dominated by her demanding Victorian family blossoms into a conscious strong woman who leads the family business.

In this light, it is interesting to note that it has been argued that the Bildungsroman – as a historical genre rather than as a literary mode – has its roots in the picaresque. Bakhtin (1986) himself seems to say as much, presenting the picaresque as the predecessor of the Bildungsroman in his historical overview of the modern novel (with the other two genres, quite naturally, as in-between stages).

Similarly, David H. Miles (1974) sees the history of the German Bildungsroman as a gradual move from 'the "picaro" (the nondeveloping hero, the unselfconscious adventurer or man of action)' to 'the "confessor" (the hero of personal growth, the introspective hero, the protagonist of consciousness, memory and guilt)' (p. 980). It is easy to recognise the horizontal axis of the typology given above in this scale (and since Miles does not address how the main character relates to his or her environment, he does not need the vertical axis). Thus, an early Bildungsroman

like *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* still mostly written in the 'picaresque mode', with its main character living very much in the here and now and learning – despite its title – very little throughout the course of the novel (pp. 981-982). Indeed, his education is added almost as an afterthought and has as its 'central tenet [...] a picaresque *carpe diem*' (p. 982).

Increasingly, throughout the history of the Bildungsroman, the main character evolves into a true confessor and the plot coincides with the literary hero's personal growth: rather than merely being about 'what happened?' (the driving question of the picaresque plot according to Anniken Telnes Iversen) the plot describes 'what effects do these events have on the protagonist?' (Iversen, 2007, p. 72). Thus, the main character becomes the centre of the fictional world. Rather than being an account of episodic adventures, the novel is a coherent narrative whole, with the main character's 'end [...] already present in his beginning' (Miles, 1974, p. 984).

This ties in with Van Gorp's (2014) claim that when the picaresque novel reached Germany, the picaresque wandering acquired 'a spiritual significance': in German translations and adaptations of Spanish picaresque novels, the narrative of wanderings and adventures acquires a clear endpoint in the personal growth and reformation of the picaro, who 'says farewell to the world' or converts and leaves behind his past sins. Such translations became prototypes for a typically German 'hybrid of the picaresque novel and the "Bildungsroman"', brought about by the 'spiritualization of the picaresque theme of disenchantment'. Thus, a classic German picaresque novel such as Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* (1669) is rather a 'picaresque Bildungsroman' (pp. 146-147). Following Miles's argument discussed above, one could say that what Van Gorp calls the 'picaresque Bildungsroman' was the beginning of a narrative tradition that became less and less picaresque and more and more Bildungsroman.

In any case, hybrids of these two opposing narrative forms are nothing new, nor have they died out². However, as my short discussion of picaros in the popular storytelling of the neoliberal realm shows, as well as the necessity in earlier examples that the picaresque be spiritualised, the picaresque element in such hybrids often needs to be somehow neutralised to fit the mould of the Bildungsroman mode. What sets apart the three novels I will discuss in the remainder of this paper is that rather than spiritualising the picaresque (i.e. giving the picaresque wanderings an endpoint of personal enlightenment), they play the picaresque and Bildungsroman modes against each other.

A dynasty of narrators

Literature is many things. Paul Ricoeur has argued that one is its function as 'a vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations and judgements of approval and condemnation' (1992, p. 148), not in the least regarding identity formation. Precisely because writers have access to such an enormous storehouse of styles and literary modes, literature not only conveys an epoch's 'dominant story', but also offers alternatives. Thus, if the Bildungsroman has become ubiquitous because it is so in line with the norms and values of the neoliberal realm, literature may open a space where different models for relating to ourselves and the world around us can be found. Genres are 'memory schemata', as Bart Keunen (2000) claimed, adopting a term from psychologist Fredric Bartlett. A literary genre (Keunen uses the term in the sense of a 'literary mode', described above) contains 'a vast storehouse of experiential wisdom' that both readers and authors can access. This not only eases literary communication – the author provides generic characteristics the reader recognises and uses as pointers for how to read the narrative and which value the narrated events can be expected to have. Genres – as memory schemata – also allow us to organise the past: we can make sense of our own life events using the evaluative force that specific genres bring with them (Keunen, 2000). If only for the sake of diversity, it makes no sense to limit the narrative models available to us to only one type.

In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss one such alternative to the Bildungsroman narrative form. The storytelling ethics that *The Tin Drum*, *Midnight's Children* and *The Long Awaited* offer between them are especially interesting in light of what I discussed above. On one hand, these novels can be firmly placed within the picaresque tradition, but on the other hand they integrate characteristics of the Bildungsroman. Not, as *The Pirates of the Caribbean* and Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* did, to make them better fit the current demands on storytelling, but, as I hope to

show, to explore precisely how the word-world-constructs of Bildungsroman and Picaresque clash and how a narrative of resistance can be shaped through this very clash of storytelling ethics.

The Tin Drum (Die Blechtrommel, first published in 1959) is the story of Oskar Matzerath, a dwarf who chose to stop growing on his third birthday as a protest against the adult world in which National Socialism was on the rise. With this strange figure as its narrator, the novel offers a unique perspective on Poland and Germany before, during and after the Second World War. One of the most striking aspects of *The Tin Drum* is its enormous breadth: the story almost collapses underneath it. Oskar tells the story of his mother's forefathers, who belong to a German minority in Poland, and describes family intrigues (he suspects that his mother's Polish lover is his progenitor, rather than her husband, his putative father). He chronicles his trips to several German fronts as part of a theatre company entertaining the troops, and later describes the emergence of West Germany, where he ends up with what is left of his family.

Midnight's Children (first published in 1981) is the story of India – and to a lesser extent Pakistan – after and leading up to independence. Its central character is the disfigured Saleem Sinai, a boy born at twelve o'clock, 15 August, 1947, the exact moment when India became independent. This extraordinary time of birth has left Saleem with special gifts: first the gift of telepathy, later an uncanny sense of smell. He shares these gifts with other children born around the same moment. Saleem not only narrates his own life story, but the history of India as well. In his eyes, these two narratives are ultimately the same: Saleem is India and India is Saleem, born at the same moment in time, so their fates are intricately bound together.

The Long Awaited (De langverwachte, published in Dutch in 2002, no English translation) describes the migration of Moroccans to the Netherlands. Moroccans are the sixth largest ethnic minority in the Netherlands and their migration, starting in the 1960s, was quite massive, but this history is admittedly less encompassing than those in the other two novels. However, the interweaving between personal narrative and larger historical whole is no less striking here than in the other stories. Just like Saleem is India and India is Saleem, the narrator of Benali's novel – calling herself the Long Awaited – integrates the whole of multicultural Rotterdam into her personal story, always stressing the overwhelming muchness of the Netherlands' second largest and arguably most metropolitan city. The novel's main narrative is quite straightforward: the Dutch girlfriend of a teenage Moroccan boy becomes pregnant and their child is born at twelve o'clock on New Year's Eve 1999. Before that can happen, however, the unborn child feels she must tell her family's history, interweaving the lives of her Dutch, Moroccan and American parents and grandparents and their many friends.

The 'family resemblance' between these novels first consists of a series of clear and intentional references. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem describes how his grandfather – who has a German friend called Oskar – loses three drops of blood when he bumps his nose on the frozen ground in Kashmir. This may remind the reader of Oskar's anecdote about Parzival's 'story of the three drops of blood in the snow' in *The Tin Drum* (Grass, 2010, p. 453). Similar intertextual 'winks' can be found in *The Long Awaited*, mostly referring to *Midnight's Children*. The narrator's Moroccan grandfather, for instance, likes to watch Bollywood films. One of them features 'a man and a woman kissing apples, because the censor wouldn't let them touch each other' (Benali, 2002, p. 90). A fictional film from *Midnight's Children* seems to have crossed over to Benali's novel here. In Rushdie's novel, *The Lovers of Kashmir* was directed by Saleem Sinai's uncle, who scandalised his audience with a trick to bypass the censorship of 1960s India: 'Pia and Nayyar had begun to kiss – not one another, but things. Pia kissed an apple, sensuously [...]; then passed it to Nayyar, who planted, upon its opposite face, a virilely passionate mouth' (Rushdie, 2006, p. 195). At a certain moment, the Long Awaited even seems to directly address Saleem Sinai, who in *Midnight's Children* remarks that '[m]ost of what matters in your life takes place in your absence' (Rushdie, 2006, p. 230). Benali's narrator agrees when she arrives in her parents' bedroom too late to witness the moment of her conception: 'You see? The great events always happen when you're not there' (Benali, 2002, p. 205).

These references are not mere intertextual games, but work as a kind of reading manual: they draw the reader's attention to a far more fundamental intertextual relation between these novels. All

three of them use the picaresque mode to represent a longing for trespassing, a joyful crossing of lines that should not be crossed, while they simultaneously use the Bildungsroman mode to explore a desire to belong to a specific, clearly demarcated place and time.

All these authors belong to what Rushdie has called 'the world's community of displaced writers' (in which he includes James Joyce, Günter Grass, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Maxine Hong Kingston, Milan Kundera 'and many others'; Rushdie, 1992, p. 15). Günter Grass was born in Danzig (later Gdansk), but moved to West Germany after the Second World War; Salman Rushdie migrated from India to Britain (and later to America); and Abdelkader Benali's family moved from Morocco to the Netherlands when he was four years old. It is therefore unsurprising that motion and transition are important notions in their novels: the narrators are torn between a gleeful embracement of being in motion and transition on the one hand, and a desire for an end to that motion in a sense of belonging on the other. Picaresque glee and Romantic desire cancel each other out, however: one cannot be in motion and belong at the same time, which is what makes them *tragic* picaros.

Meanwhile, each novel builds upon its predecessor, resulting in an intertextual three generation dynasty of narrators. Every younger member of this dynasty (i.e. the author who created him) has learned from his predecessor that narrating one's own story may help one escape the repressive grand narratives of official histories. But, in the end, every form of narrative is repressive. To escape this, narrating itself must be dismantled, which is exactly what these tragic picaros undertake.

Three tragic picaros

Their first sentences already firmly place the novels of Grass, Rushdie and Benali in the Picaresque tradition:

Granted: I'm an inmate in a mental institution; my keeper watches me, scarcely lets me out of sight, for there's a peephole in the door, and my keeper's eye is the shade of brown that can't see through blue-eyed types like me. (Grass, 2010, p. 3)

I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date. I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. (Rushdie, 2006, p. 3)

I have a gift. There, I said it. They're waiting for me, just before the New Year will start, but I will postpone my birth for a while. (Benali, 2002, p. 7)

Immediately, the reader is confronted with the 'typical narrative situation' of the picaro: in a secluded location, locked away from the society with which the picaro has such a troubled relationship (Van Gorp, 1978, p. 86). The tone of these sentences is typically picaresque as well, starting with a self-conscious 'I' that becomes a 'provoking I-dare-you-to-read-me gesture' because of the strangeness and outsider status which the narrator assigns himself: 'even the narrative act does not integrate the picaro into the stable order of things' (Wicks, 1989, p. 334).

In the past, Grass denied that his novel is part of the picaresque tradition, based on his 'conviction that the picaresque as such is a morally non-committal narrative form' (quoted in Van Gorp, 1978, p. 131). However, the picaresque mode comes with its own set of norms and values. The picaresque perspective, 'which is traditionally from below and outside' (Wicks, 1989, p. 334), is certainly not morally non-committal. Oskar has the tricky nature of the picaro, as well as the typically picaresque position as outsider – in fact, he largely owes his outsider position to his trickiness, as one critic pointed out: 'By wilfully deforming himself, by stopping his growth at age three, Oskar rejects accommodation to a world he perceives as deforming' (Wicks, 1989, p. 334). With that, Oskar's perspective is a perspective from below, which is exactly the perspective that Grass needed to show how Oskar's world is fundamentally divided, fragmented and repressive.

That has always been the value of the picaresque perspective.

However, in his analysis of Grass's early work, John Reddick argued that Oskar is only partly a picaro. On one hand, Oskar fits the picaresque tradition perfectly. His typically picaresque relationship with the world around him is one example: 'a relationship marked by scepticism, detachment, independence, superiority, the operation of the mind' (Reddick, 1974, p. 58). On the other hand, Oskar relates to his surroundings in the opposite way: 'a relationship marked by involvement, dependence, vulnerability and impotence, the operation of feeling' (Reddick, 1974, p. 58). That would be a good description of the Bildungsroman mode, which Grass apparently also needed for the story he was trying to tell.

This makes sense: if Oskar had merely been a picaro, experiencing only gleeful sovereignty, his story would just be an ironic reflection of the society around him. But in 1959, when *The Tin Drum* first appeared, the fact that the Third Reich was evil and unsustainable did not have to be 'proven' through the deformation the picaresque perspective enables. That is why, Reddick argues, the picaresque perspective is combined with a longing to belong, resulting in a 'duality of the ironic and affective' becoming the main narrative mode in this novel (Reddick, 1974, p. 65). A real picaro does not mind trickily playing any role, if necessary, to fool their environment by wearing a mask. In that sense, the picaro, the perpetual outsider, can never truly be a victim of the society that disowns him or her. This is different for a character who tries to belong, and it is here that the tragic natures of Oskar, Saleem and the Long Awaited come to the fore: they are picaresque, but cannot exploit their hybridity and fluidness like real picaros would because of their desire to belong. Thus, Miles (1974) was correct when he described *The Tin Drum* as 'an anti-Bildungsroman, parodying both picaresque and confessional branches of the genre'. I would add that part of that parody is how the two literary modes cancel each other out, leaving the main character grasping for, but never reaching, the natural endpoint of the Bildungsroman: finding oneself and one's place in the world. To Miles, such parody is one of the two choices open to the modern writer who takes up the Bildungsroman tradition:

Either to take the final step into the world of total breakdown and psychic disorder, into that tangential sphere – Kafka's Archimedean point – from which *all* reality becomes problematic or, in a less drastic move, to raise the entire narrative to the saving plane of self-parody. (Miles, 1974, p. 990)

I disagree, however, with Miles's reading of *The Tin Drum* as merely an example of the latter. In a strangely apolitical analysis – given the highly politicised contents of Grass's novel – Oskar is read as 'mocking his entire literary parentage of the last two hundred years' (p. 990). I would assert that Oskar and the word-world-construct of which he is a part mock much more than that, and that the effect is more the first option Miles mentions: a problematising of *all* reality. The fact that Oskar searches for, but cannot reach, the endpoint of the 'classical Bildungsroman' where the 'self, God and the world' merge in one 'great harmony' (Miles, 1973, p. 347) is a warning against all notions of harmony. As a Bildungsroman figure, Oskar (like Saleem and the Long Awaited) is the victim of the history he narrates, but as a picaro he unmasks the notion of such a history (i.e. a harmonious whole in which everything and everyone will find the right place in the end). This is not a mere parody of narrative forms, but rather a deconstruction of how narrative creates and assesses such harmonies – a deconstruction with both literary and social relevance.

This becomes even more apparent in *Midnight's Children*, which has been called an 'Indian Tin Drum' (Merivale, 1994, p. 95). Apart from the aforementioned references, there are the similarities between Oskar and Saleem: 'the putative father of Rushdie's hero-narrator [...] must be (by a [...] genealogical model of intertextuality) Grass's dwarf, Oskar' (Merivale, 1994, p. 84). Both have a special gift – in Oskar's case, a voice that can shatter glass and the ability to summon the past through his drumming. And both are, as Saleem says at the beginning of his story, 'handcuffed to history' (Rushdie, 2006, p. 3). Personal and national history are strongly intertwined in their stories, to the point where the two can no longer be separated. What happens to Germany, happens to Oskar and what happens to India, happens to Saleem – and vice versa:

Oskar and Saleem link self and story through comic zeugmas of synchronicity, like Oskar's observation that "Kurt's whooping cough, simultaneously with the Afrika Korps, came to an end" [...] and hyperbolic assertions of responsibility, like Saleem's comment that "Nehru's death [...], too, was all my fault". (Merivale, 1994, p. 84) ³

Through the claim that they are the main characters of the history they narrate – not only of their own stories, but of history as a whole – these novels become metafiction: stories about storytelling. The absurd nature of that claim – that these men are somehow responsible for historical events through cosmic fate – can be read as a comment on how narratives operate. A narrative comes into being because a series of events is turned into a plot: something that happened after something else is presented as the result of that earlier event. However, because of the pretentiousness of Oskar and Saleem's claims, this principle becomes suspect: how can we be certain that something is indeed caused by something else? *Midnight's Children* goes one step further than *The Tin Drum*: the end of Kurt's whooping cough merely coincides with the Allied victory over Germany's Afrika Korps. Although the notion that these events are each other's cause and effect is certainly suggested, this is not as clearly stated as in *Midnight's Children*, where Saleem is the origin of certain historical events – or at least he claims to be, saying things such as 'I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay' (Rushdie, 2006, pp. 265-266) and 'the war [between India and Pakistan in 1965] happened because I dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rulers; furthermore, I remained impure and the war was to separate me from my sins' (Rushdie, 2006, p. 471).

A second element which Rushdie, again, not merely takes from *The Tin Drum*, but develops further, strengthens his novel's metafictional character. In *The Tin Drum*, Oskar suggests that he is all-knowing by connecting the most diverse and random things in the stories he drums up on his tin drum, but this remains a matter of suggestion: 'Omniscience as a narrative point of view or as a worldview, is impossible for Oskar' (Wicks, 1989, p. 333). Saleem, however, is effectively all-knowing, first through his telepathy and later through his uncanny sense of smell. At the same time, both Oskar's tendency to connect all kinds of seemingly random things and Saleem's claims that he knows everything and is the cause of everything have strong ironic overtones: such absurd claims can easily be interpreted as warning signals. These two highly unreliable narrators with their bizarre gifts parody the old-fashioned, omniscient narrators from nineteenth-century literature, narrators the reader can trust and take at face value. They foreground the artificial nature of their fictional world, so that the reader sees this world for what it is: a construction. This is especially significant because of the narrative breadth of these novels: both can be called 'an "encyclopaedic" fiction' (Merivale, 1994, p. 86). The impression that these narrators seem to aim for is that their stories include *everything*: they are not only the story of a life, but the story of an entire people, a complete world, a total history. It is the special gift that the narrator claims to have which enables him to take on this encyclopaedic project. However, because this gift (drumming, mind-reading, smelling) is so utterly bizarre, such a project is simultaneously unmasked as an impossibility: no story could include everything and a story that claims such totality must be a deceit.

It is this aspect that Benali develops further in *The Long Awaited*. *The Long Awaited* begins her story by saying she has a special gift that enables her to tell the complicated story of her family and their friends. This gift is located in her thumb, which is significant if one knows that the Dutch expression 'to suck something out of one's thumb' means to make something up or lie about it. With that, *The Long Awaited*, just like *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum* before it, becomes metafiction: the narrator has merely made up her story and it is suggested that because her identity is a mirror-image of Rotterdam, it is only through imagination that a multicultural society can become a whole. Thus, the narrator becomes a metafictional comment on the notion of plot – the notion that it is possible to meaningfully connect one thing to another – and Benali strengthens this effect by removing the narrator from the story: as an unborn child, she is present and yet she is not. If omniscience is realised in Saleem, then omnipotence – latent but impossible for Saleem, in a similar way that omniscience was for Oskar – is added to this in the *Long Awaited*. Even more so than Saleem, the *Long Awaited* is some kind of divine creature who intervenes whenever events

are not to her liking (e.g. she kills her father's best friend when she feels that his flirtations with orthodox Islam start to have too great an impact). Thus, the special gift is here – even more blatantly than in the two earlier novels – a symbol of the ability to emplot, to create narratives. With this omnipotence, the Long Awaited becomes, in a way, pure plot:

It is this gift that pushes me out, and with one eye on the clock and one eye on the road I must travel, the people I have to meet, introduce, and then get rid of like an indefectible sniper, no matter how much I love them, that I have to allow to grow old, to grow, so that I myself can remain forever young, this is how I make my way through life, this is how we make our way through life, this gift and I. (Benali, 2002, p. 9)

Thus, the Long Awaited drives picaresque outsidership to its extreme. The Bildungsroman plot is still present in this novel, but it is relegated to its actual main character, her father Mehdi, who is searching for himself and his place in the world. As the son of Moroccan immigrants he attempts to be simultaneously Dutch and Moroccan, but both Dutch and Moroccan people constantly tell him that this is impossible: he must choose. Unable to make such a decision, he consciously reinvents himself and history.

However, the actual outcome of the desire to belong – which led to the narrator's demise in the other two novels – is here placed as a utopian outcome outside the story. Just as for Oskar and Saleem, the Long Awaited's narrative can be seen as an attempt to talk herself into the world – an attempt at, as Merivale calls it, 'self-begetting'. But because she has not yet been born, this is a much more fruitful project for the Long Awaited. She has no need to bend reality to become the central point around which history revolves, but can create the reality into which she will be born. In the other two novels, irony and affection obstructed each other, albeit in a way that was very effective for the storytelling as a whole: the picaresque irony ensured an outsidership that would always prevent the belonging that the narrator desired. In *The Long Awaited*, however, they become complementary: the ironic thumb sucking creates the conditions for belonging.

Both *The Tin Drum* and *Midnight's Children* end with the approaching demise of their narrators. Oskar is about to leave the psychiatric ward and knows that the 'Black Cook', a grim, witch-like fairy-tale figure that 'signals Oskar's ultimate moment of confrontation with the past on a personal level' (Hall, 2007, p. 78) is waiting for him outside. The Black Cook is strongly linked to guilt, both in the form of Oskar's own sins and of the National Socialist crimes of the Third Reich, as well as the crocodile tears that Germany shed for those crimes after the Second World War. As a picaro, Oskar would have remained free and innocent, but as a tragic picaro he is consumed by the past, which is now at his doorstep to make him pay: 'Better start running, the Black Cook's coming! You're to blame, and you're to blame, and you are most of all' (Grass, 2010, p. 563)⁴.

Saleem knows that a similar fate is waiting for him when he leaves the factory for pickled vegetables in which he has been hiding while narrating his story 'to [...] be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes'. He is slowly starting to fall apart; his skin is ripping up and he knows that it will not be long before:

...rip tear crunch reaches its climax [...] and the cracks are widening, pieces of my body are falling off [...] only a broken creature spilling itself to pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons. (Rushdie, 2006, pp. 646-647)

The shapeshifting ability that is normally a source of strength for the picaro, the power to be anybody they need to be, becomes Saleem's demise.

The Long Awaited, in contrast, is not consumed by the history she narrates. Instead she consumes the history, dissolves in into her and thus sets her novel's characters free from this history. The Messiah symbolism that is apparent in the other two novels is made even more explicit here:

Everybody tries, in their way, to get away from history [...]. From the moment that I arrived, all attention had to be directed at me and my parents had to know that they could safely leave their past behind them so that they could embrace and cherish me, their living fossil. (Benali, 2002, p. 337)

However, to become this living fossil, carrying history so that it becomes superfluous, she must give up her gift: when the time has come to 'jump into life', she knows that 'the gifts must be gotten rid of for evermore' (Benali, 2002, p. 337). She must turn into stone – fossilise – to give up her fluid picaresque identity so she can be born. As a picaro, therefore, she is no less tragic than Oskar and Saleem: her birth is simultaneously her demise.

Concluding remarks

The point I have tried to make in this paper is that these three novels function as laboratories for identity formation, with the figures of the tragic picaro they develop as the outcome. Although they do not specifically address how neoliberalism coerces us into using the Bildungsroman plot to narrate our lives, they offer interesting strategies for resisting this hegemony, more so because they do this 'from the inside' as it were, taking up the Bildungsroman mode and having it clash with the picaresque mode to explore its possibilities and limitations. Thus, *The Tin Drum*, *Midnight's Children* and *The Long Awaited* develop a hybrid genre, combining the irony of the picaresque with the affective of the Bildungsroman. This reflects the hybridity of the narrators' backgrounds (Polish-German, British-Indian, Dutch-Moroccan) and it is exactly this hybridity that the surroundings in which they find themselves will not accept. This fundamental mismatch between surroundings and main character rules out a positive outcome of the Bildungsroman plot, while the narrator's need to belong simultaneously rules out the picaresque mask as the only solution. The generic hybridity therefore leads to a narrative in which the conflicting ethics of each narrative mode cancel each other out – and it is this that turns these narrators into tragic picaros.

As a role model, the tragic picaro may not be as effective as those proposed elsewhere in the neoliberal realm, but it may also be more honest. These novels also show how the grand narratives of (national) histories select and exclude what does not belong to the story, such as the narrators themselves. Moreover – and more importantly – they also show that this is not only true for grand narratives: all forms of narrative are engendered by emplotment and therefore by a selection process. All narratives are therefore repressive.

These novels resist this repression by employing two closely related narrative strategies. First, their narratives oscillate between picaresque outsidership and a desire to belong, letting neither take over to come to an inclusive totality, a harmonious whole. Second, they ironically suggest such totality and wholeness, but in the process they metafictionally lay bare the narrative process that establishes it, thereby showing how it can only come about by sucking on one's thumb: through fantasy and lies.

Notes

1 All translations from Dutch (Van Gorp, 1978; Benali, 2002) are the author's.

2 Cf. Anniken Telnes Iversen's (2007) argument that Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* (1989) is an example of the Bildungsroman rather than, as is usually thought, a modern picaresque. I think this novel mixes the picaresque and Bildungsroman modes in a somewhat similar way as the novels under discussion here and that its main character, Marco Fogg, can – to a certain extent – be seen as a tragic picaro. In any case, the fact that we can discuss whether a novel is a picaresque rather than a Bildungsroman shows how much these genres – despite being opposites – overlap. In such cases, it seems more productive to focus on the interplay between literary modes that make up its narrative rather than trying to pigeonhole a novel in either one or the other literary genre.

3 Merivale uses Ralph Mannheim's 1962 translation of *The Tin Drum* (which until Breon Mitchell's 2009 translation was the only English translation available). Breon Mitchell (whose translation I use throughout this paper) translates these lines as 'little Kurt's whooping cough and the Africa Corps both came to an end' (p. 299). Here, the notion of cause and effect is somewhat lost – but it is suggested much more strongly in the original German: 'mit dem Afrikakorps [fand] auch Kurtchens Keuchhusten sein Ende' (Grass, 2013, p. 416). A more literal translation could be 'together with the Afrikakorps, Kurt's whooping cough came to an end'. In any case, however, the cause and effect of the personal and the historical is mostly suggested in *The Tin Drum*, while Saleem Sinai boldly claims it in *Midnight's Children*.

4 The original text is: 'Ist die Schwarze Köchin da? Jajaja! Du bist schuld und du bist schuld und du am allermeisten' (p. 778). It is worth pointing out that the English translation loses some of the original text's forceful connotation of guilt, called forth by the German word *schuld*, which is a stronger notion than blame, since someone who is *schuld* is also very much guilty.

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