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The Modernist Picaresque: Moralists without Qualities
(Musil, Hesse, Hurston, Roth)

Most critics agree that European and American writing produced in the 1930s has an uncertain relationship with modernism of the 1910s and 1920s on two main counts. First, there was a general cultural and generational shift from the highly wrought formalism of Joyce, Stein and Woolf in the 1920s to the looser literary styles of Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus and Henry Miller in the late 1930s. Second, the 1930s was a period of economic and political transition in which socially-engaged writers such as Bertolt Brecht and John Steinbeck deliberately reacted against the formal complexity and the perceived pretensions of high modernism, or, in the cases of W. H. Auden and John Dos Passos, harnessed experimentalism to ideological goals. Rather than dividing these two modes into the camps of late modernism and anti-modernism, it is perhaps better to view 1930s writing as part of a mobile transatlantic culture in which defining categories of nationhood, community and personal identity were reconfigured. Although there is a hard-headedness to much 1930s writing and a renewed interest in social realism, a range of European and American writers continued to question the conventions of narrative representation by exploring artistic trickery and theatrical performance in their fiction. The next chapter deals with the tensions between aesthetic, moral and political concerns in Klaus Mann’s theatrical novel, Mephisto (1936), in which he rebelled against what he saw as the political evasion in the fiction of his father, Thomas Mann. Before that, this chapter discusses modernists who were interested in rejuvenating the literary picaresque as a narrative of trickery, particularly Robert Musil and Herman Hesse in Central Europe (selected from other European writers, such as Jaroslav Hašek and Camilo José Cela) and Zora Neale Hurston and Henry Roth in America (amongst Faulkner, Steinbeck,
Nathanael West and James T. Farrell). Although these writers developed the picaresque form for different artistic ends, the traditional mode in which the protagonist devises an alternative set of values to mainstream social morals remained central for them.

The picaresque has very precise cultural and historical roots in sixteenth-century Spain, but since then it has mutated into a number of literary strains that explore the ongoing tensions between stifling social values and disaffected individuals. In its original mode as a Spanish narrative of roguery, the picaresque tale follows the adventures of the *pícaro*, whose inclinations towards wayward living and moral proclivity position him (and it is almost always a ‘he’) in opposition to (often questionable) qualities of virtue and decency. Most picaresque narratives form a series of loosely connected episodes in the life of the *pícaro*, who usually narrates his adventures retrospectively, or whose encounters are recalled by a secondary figure who discovers records of the character’s life. Picaresques tend to be digressive and rambling as the *pícaro* wanders nomadically through various communities, revelling in his ingenuity as he deals with exacting encounters. There is some critical disagreement as to the essential qualities of the *pícaro*. Generally he is thought to be a delinquent figure who, although he transgresses social and moral values, is essentially non-violent, or he is seen as a character whose roguish tendencies are redeemed by a good heart and compassion. There are enough historical versions of the picaresque (from *Lazarillo de Tormes*, 1554, to Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, 1722 – a rare example of the female *pícaro* – and Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884) to defend either view of the *pícaro* as rebel or ultimate conformist. But many critics agree the figure is a prototype of the anti-hero, furnishing writers with a vehicle for ridiculing dominant social beliefs while sustaining the reader’s interest in the *pícaro*’s adventures. The picaresque is a loose narrative form (neither purely comic or tragic) involving a hotchpotch of caricature, burlesque and satire to attack dogma, hypocrisy and high seriousness. Due to this hybridity it has been open to creative distortion, with a range of writers adopting it to serve different cultural and ethnic agendas.

In the early twentieth century, a version of the picaresque re-emerged following a latent period in the nineteenth century when the *Bildungsroman* and the moral seriousness of the realist novel conspired to banish it as an acceptable narrative mode. The reaction by modernist writers against literary propriety and, specifically, the upward and prospective trajectory of the bourgeois narrative usually