Naturalism and the Picaresque in Jusepe de Ribera's Work

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Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652) was undoubtedly the most prominent painter of Spanish Naples in the first half of the seventeenth century and one of the most innovative interpreters of Caravaggio’s painting in Europe. A native of Xátiva, Spain,Ribera arrived in Italy around 1611, sojourned in Rome for some time and moved in 1618 to Naples, where he would reside for the rest of his life. The core of his production therefore concerns the vice-royal court of Naples, its officers and cultural milieu. Scholars have singled out two important aspects of Ribera’s art: his “naturalism” and the affinity of many of his paintings with themes treated in the contemporary Spanish picaresque literature. However, neither his “naturalism” nor his “picaresque vein” have been examined extensively, carefully and in parallel with one another. Scholars have almost systematically perceived Ribera’s “naturalism” in merely stylistic terms. By the same token, his connection with the picaresque literature is often reduced to Ribera’s predilection for “plebeian” models and his propensity to represent high subject matters with low-class figures and accessories.

The main goal of this research proposal is to offer a fully-articulated, precisely-documented and theoretically-grounded interpretation of Ribera’s naturalism and its interconnections with the picaresque novel as developed not only in Spain, but especially in Spanish Naples. My contention is, in fact, that these two aspects of Ribera’s art are not only inextricably bound, but also specifically rooted in early seventeenth-century Neapolitan culture and society, thereby reflecting the interests and tastes of Ribera’s patrons and cultural circles.

More to the point, I intend to demonstrate that the emergence of scientific experimentalism in Naples in the wake of Galileo’s “new science” and developed first in Rome, then in Florence and other Italian cities, is paramount for our understanding of both some crucial elements of Ribera’s painting commonly categorized as “naturalistic” and some parodic aspects of his picaresque vein. In the same manner, the poetics of the “miserable” that evolved in Neapolitan literature under the influence of Spanish models may be approached and sounded in order to establish the specificity of Ribera’s taste for the “humble”. In studying these two factors, their interrelation and their vast scope in Ribera’s painting will manifest themselves immediately and transparently. Although this research proposal relies on an interdisciplinary approach (linking together art history, literature and the history of sciences), its principal objective is to show the
uniqueness of Ribera’s art: that is, the ways in which Ribera created a new poetics of the picaresque through a new conception of naturalism.

Scholars have assumed that Ribera’s depictions of anti-heroes—thieves, gypsies, and beggars disguised as philosophers or apostles—originate in the Spanish picaresque tradition. This assumption rests substantially on a generic association of Ribera’s iconography with motifs of the picaresque literature. In other words, scholars have formulated parallels between Ribera’s paintings and picaresque novels on the basis of loose thematic comparisons, without analyzing the literary or pictorial backgrounds of the texts and paintings they study, and without reflecting on the methodological implications determined by their examination of paintings in the light of texts: figurative arts and literature are nevertheless different media, thereby operating through different procedures and with different effects.

For this reason, the transposition of picaresque motifs into painting may not occur in a straightforward way. This means that Ribera employed strategies and procedures of the picaresque genre without adopting themes or narrative episodes from it. Furthermore, given the wide diffusion of the picaresque literature in seventeenth-century Naples, it is also understandable that Ribera sought to create a pictorial equivalent to this literary genre on his own terms, that is, by developing subjects and motifs absent in, but evocative of, the picaresque.

Scholars have also remarked that Ribera magnifies the picaresque elements of his paintings through an optical accuracy that they have assimilated to seventeenth-century scientific experimentalism. In other words, Ribera’s naturalism is assumed to incorporate the detailed and dispassionate observation of nature that characterizes the scientific experimentalism conducted at the time by, among others, the Roman members of the Accademia dei Lincei. In this regard, it has not been noticed that Ribera literally thematizes some of the topics of debate specific to the Italian scientific experimentalism by turning them into parody. For instance, through the representation of scientific tools, Ribera’s series of the *Five Senses* clearly alludes to discussions about the senses, their functions and reliability that lay at the core of the new science of nature. And yet, by juxtaposing the tools of the new science with low-genre props inspired by the picaresque literature, Ribera offers an interpretation of the senses that comically subverts the tenets of scientific experimentalism. Similarly, in his *Philosophers* Ribera depicts the most illustrious representatives of ancient knowledge and paradigms of the scientific interpretation of nature in picaresque terms, bringing about a comic effect of strangeness.

By mentioning the *Five Senses* and the *Philosophers*, I mean to demonstrate not only that
naturalism and the picaresque interrelate in Ribera’s paintings to a great extent, but above all that their interrelation is not as linear and crystalline as scholars have thought it to be. Put otherwise, the picaresque also destabilizes the naturalistic components of Ribera’s painting, and naturalism in turn contributes to create new forms (visual forms) of the picaresque. Only through a methodical and closer analysis of the picaresque genre and scientific experimentalism as practiced in Ribera’s Naples is it possible to assess the functions of naturalism and the picaresque comic in Ribera’s art concretely and compellingly.

In order to achieve my research project, I shall therefore study the picaresque literature that developed in Naples in the seventeenth century either through translations of picaresque novels (such as the anonymous Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes, Francisco de Quevedo’s La vida del buscón and Mateo Aleman’s Guzmán de Alfarache) or the production of local picaresque literature (such as Giambattista Basile’s Lo cunto de li cunti and Giulio Cesare Cortese’s La vaiasseide).

On the other hand, I shall study the genesis and evolution of scientific experimentalism in Naples (especially in the aftermath of Giovan Battista della Porta’s work) and to reconstruct the interactions between the Neapolitan representatives of this milieu and Ribera’s network of patrons and friends.

Here follows a summary timetable that I intend to heed in order to complete my PhD dissertation in time. Firstly, I shall define and analyse the corpus of paintings on which I will focus my attention. I shall therefore examine Ribera’s works not only in museums, but also in private collections, in order to create a detailed photographic database for subsequent research. This preliminary activity is essential insofar as I need to identify and classify the “picaresque” props (utensils, vegetables, food) and unusual subjects present in Ribera’s works.

Subsequently, a close analysis of manuscript sources, archival documents and printed books will be necessary to ensure the correct interrelation of historical sources and texts with Ribera’s paintings. Archival research on Ribera’s patrons and their affiliation to scientific Academies will allow me to comprehend the cultural context in which Ribera developed and forged his personal path to a naturalistic “picaresque”.

In this second stage of my research, I shall access specialist libraries both in Italy and in the UK. The extensive resources available in the National Libraries of Rome, Naples and Florence and in the British Library will provide me with the bibliographic sources necessary to finalise my PhD dissertation.