

# Alan Sillitoe and the Topsy-Turvy Universe of Trash Literature

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## The Few and the Many

In the preface to the 1965 edition of Robert Tressel's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, Alan Sillitoe disclosed in no uncertain terms his bitter appraisal of a class-oriented literary establishment prone to marginalize proletarian novels and demote them to the rank of an unsophisticated and lowbrow kind of art:

Critics and reviewers often refer to such novels as "kitchen-sink school" with contempt, and to their authors as "the dark people" with derision or fear, and pontificate so glibly on "the angry young men". The poor will never be forgiven for not having the same "civilised" values – but if they did have them perhaps those who criticise them now would be in their place instead. Such critics are, in any case, the people against whom Owen fulminates so ardently – so why should they condescend to be interested in him and his ilk, and even admit that his poor folks could be the right material for "art"? Their ivory tower is stuck up England's arse forever it seems. (Sillitoe 1975b: 148-9)

Only for a fleeting moment working-class fiction had enjoyed a fair degree of popularity in the late 50s partly as a result of the huge impact produced by the enticing pocket editions and the cinematographic adaptations of its stories. A rapid decline followed; the working-class 'set' of the Angry Young Men had reached a dead end, for criticism was inclined to reproach them either the attempt to



explore new literary paths or the reiteration of the documentary realism that had brought them to the fore (Laing 1986: 79). So much so that in 1960, within a few years from his rise to stardom, Alan Sillitoe's fame was already declining. *The General*, his third work of fiction, was deemed a flop. The novel, telling the story of a wartime orchestra conductor, resisted conventional realist assumptions of historical and geographical accuracy. In Walter Allen's opinion Sillitoe had better get back to «his factory hands and Borstal Boy»(Allen 1960: 765)<sup>1</sup>. Equally preposterous was John Dennis Hurrel's idea that Sillitoe suffered the pressure of a demanding literary elite enforcing adjustments of his debut realism along the lines of a less emotional and socially grounded type of fiction. In order to comply with such subliminal intimations, Sillitoe had «submerged his literary identity [...] under the desire to be *significant*» (Hurrel 1961: 3-16). The indictment of significance hardly camouflaged the underlying implication that Sillitoe should have stuck to his 'inborn' simplicity, which makes us wonder whether Hurrell was not by any chance a worthy specimen of that circle of literary illuminati whose flaws he seemed to contest.

Those were the days in which the controversial views on culture and society of a panjandrum like F. R. Leavis prevailed. Despite the New Left's crusade to bury class notions and Raymond Williams's objections to the «arrogance and scepticism» inherent in «the concept of a cultivated minority, set over against a "decreated" mass» (1983: 255), the conviction that the demarcation line between high and low art pertained to the elite and needed to be a solid one, was largely shared.

In the aftermath of World War II and the ensuing decades, critics addressed the question of whether the novel had come to a standstill or was instead undergoing a transformation that while continuing tradition, explored at once more daring formal and moral perspectives. The mapping out of the literary landscape resulted in dogmatic classifications based on criteria of originality and linguistic sophistication that rather than marginalizing, in fact came to ignore a whole set of post-war writers. John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, David Storey

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<sup>1</sup> Also quoted in Laing 1986: 80.

and Stan Barstow failed by the standards of what was considered to be serious literature and were consequently expunged from the canon (Laing 1984: 237). Emphasis was clearly placed upon:

the selection of the few (texts, activities, people) from among the many – to ensure continuity of a certain set of values in the face of the threat of “mass civilization” (Leavis), “equalitarianism” (Eliot), and “the louts in the back row” or “proletariat groups who manifest not culture but cultural discontent” (Bradbury). (*Ibid.*: 225)

Postmodernism in its subversion of authoritarian structures narrowed the gap between highbrow and popular art (Hutcheon 2000: 80-1) and yet John Fowles, one of the most remarkable British exponents of that cultural enterprise and of its most distinctive expressive medium, parody, took a rather disenchanted stance on the masses: since chance, genes and environmental conditioning were discriminating forces or agents of inequality among mankind, one had to choose whether to belong to the Few or the Many. In 1963, in an interview with Roy Newquist, Fowles declared that having been influenced by the ideas of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus, he had explored the tension between the binary poles of the Few and the Many in *The Collector*, his debut novel. He contended that according to Heraclitus «[...] the Few were the good, the intelligent, the independent; the Many were the stupid, the ignorant, and the easily molded» (in Vipond 1999: 1). Miranda Grey and Frederick Clegg, the central characters of his first novel, personified the opposition between the Few and the Many, their story being essentially a parable whereby he contested the idea «that there is something noble in the inarticulate hero» (*ibid.*). Fowles was vitriolic about «James Dean and all his literary children and grandchildren, like Salinger’s Holden Caulfield, and Sillitoe’s Arthur Seaton (in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*)» (*ibid.*). But more importantly, he added, «I’m against the glamorization of the Many. I think the common man is the curse of civilization, not its crowning glory. And he needs education, not

adulation» (*ibid.*). Miranda voices Fowles's objections, when in a page of her diary, she confesses her utter dislike of Arthur Seaton and his ilk: «It's the inwardness of such people. Their not caring about what happens anywhere else in the world. In life. Their being-in-a-box» (Fowles 2004: 230).

The contention went far beyond the contemporary glamorization of the "inarticulate hero"; in 1974 in an interview with James Campbell, Fowles deemed working-class fiction a genre intrinsically limited that had soon run out of steam. Besides, it was his belief that its very subjects lacked the complexity and the depth which middle class people offered (Vipond 1999: 39).

Sillitoe did not try to romanticize what Fowles referred to as "Calibanity"; he rather provided dignified portraits of the people he knew from birth allowing them to live on the fictional stage of his stories and profess their own non-negotiable individuality in the face of forces that conveniently categorized them as masses. In the author's note to *Men Women and Children*, (1973) he remarked:

The problems of the simple are the problems of the gods. Those complicated people who are less down to earth are in many ways easier to describe, or at least no more difficult. [...] The people in my stories have the same sufferings as kings and queens, but their daily problems are more fundamental and tormenting. Their court is a street-corner or a housing estate. (Sillitoe 1975a: 10-11)

*The Collector* was just one of the parodies of the kind of anti-hero epitomized by Arthur Seaton. Malcom Bradbury also created hilarious travesties of the fiction produced by the so-called "louts at the back." "Room at the Bottom", whose title patently echoes John Braine's novel (*Room at the Top*), subverted the codes of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, through the addition of a younger member to the Seatons' clan. Eustace, as his mother Vera tells us, «e's the runt o' the pack, he's bin brought up soft wi' all this beddy affluence» (Bradbury 1976: 186). Unlike Arthur Seaton, whose days at the factory finance careless weekends of boozing and social transgression, Eustace studies Classics

at university and spends his bus fare on «books about Spinoza and Descartes and ‘umanistic rationalism» (*ibid.*:187). His feat is reminiscent of the ambition of a more dignified ancestor, Jude Fawley whose wish to embrace a world far removed from the one of his birth, precipitates tragedy. Eustace’s diversity, instead, propels tragedy’s antithetical domain, comedy, and lampoons the notion of the uneducated proletarian underdog. His old father caustically remarks: «‘Yo’ allus was the mardarse. Right from the nipper. When all the others wor on probation from nickin’, all yo’ wanted to do with yer bleddy sen was to go to the grammar school and read Theocritus on pastoral» (*ibid.*).

In fairness, Bradbury’s parody did not simply mock Sillitoe’s illiterate downwardly mobile anti-hero but also the mannerisms of other contemporary writers including Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark. However, for all his parody’s side-splitting humour, we cannot fail to notice that Bradbury ultimately denied the Angry Young Men’s fiction the aesthetic resonance allowed instead to novelists that made it into the canon with loftier subjects, style and themes.

Between 1959 and 2004, Sillitoe produced thirty-two works of fiction, four plays, fourteen collections of poems and ten non-fiction books. Humble and unassuming, he shunned literary awards and hardly uttered words of bitter discontent at the arrogance with which the literary establishment denigrated or neglected most of the works of such a wide writing career (see Bradford 2008: 330). The deep critical vacuum in which most of Sillitoe’s writing lies today raises doubts about the objectivity of critical judgement and urges a more careful appreciation of his most under-researched works, regardless of whether they enter the canon or not. This is the critical belief that informs the present essay. After outlining the context that in the long run undermined Sillitoe’s art, it narrows its focus to *Life Goes On* (1975), in order to unveil the writer’s sarcastic grin. Finally, it looks at the carnivalesque, nether universe of trash literature through the novel’s violation of high-octane, established fiction.

## The Louts at the Bottom

Sillitoe's abiding fascination with roguish characters is perhaps the quintessential hallmark of his fiction. Arthur Seaton and Colin Smith, the prototypes of his anarchic rebel, will dissolve and resurface in various degrees and permutations across a portrait gallery of devious anti-heroes merging Camus's 'homme revolte' with the protean imprint of the Spanish picaro.

*A Start in Life*, Sillitoe's first truly picaresque novel, was published in 1970 while its sequel, *Life Goes On*, appeared after a fifteen-year gestation period. Sillitoe's fascination with the picaresque tradition dated back to the 50s when he began to read such works as Mateo Aleman's *Guzman de Alfarache* (1559), *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1553), Francisco de Quevedo's *El Buscon* (1626) and Alain Le Sage's *Gil Blas* (1719) first translated in English by Tobias Smollett. He was of course also deeply influenced by the British forerunners of the picaresque, namely Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett himself (Sillitoe 2003:18-19). Implicit reference to specific novels in the picaresque canon informing his appropriation can be traced in *A Start in Life*. As a matter of fact, the character of Gilbert Blaskin is evocative of Le Sage's *Gil Blas* (Donapetry 1986: 205), just like the intrusion of the author upon the fictive space of the novel, aiming at warning the reader that Michael Cullen mistakenly attributes the authorship of *Roderick Random* to Fielding (Sillitoe 1970: 195), alludes to Smollett both as translator of Le Sage's novel and as an inspiring representative of a less high-blown picaresque. Smollett and Sillitoe, albeit in different ages, shared more than a mere interest in a genre suiting their subversive views of society. Both found themselves competing with literary giants and their fiction came to be unfavourably compared to theirs. Like the picaros conceived by their imagination, they were liminal figures, «sitters on the fence» (Malkmus 2007: 212), standing on the threshold of their own society, never willing to trade in their individuality and their own system of values for those acknowledged by hegemonic powers.

*A Start in Life* portrays the adventures of the picaro Michael Cullen, a working-class orphan and a jack-of-all-trades, with an inveterate penchant for lying. Constantly on the run from looming disaster, Michael manages to escape the clutches of his girlfriend, Claudine Forks, who wishes to trap him in a mediocre dream of marital bliss, and sets off on a southbound journey to the capital. His first-person narration becomes the outer frame of the stories told by the people he will encounter while en route to London. A time of vagabondage and delinquency follows during which Michael works for Claud Moggerhanger, a dangerous crook, types up drafts of Gilbert Blaskin's novel and even improves the work he is currently writing by plagiarizing *Roderick Random*, before turning to gold-smuggling and being sent to prison. Eventually, upon his release, after years of unrepentant debauchery, and having meanwhile become the owner of an old railway station, he settles down for a mildly uneventful life by the side of Bridgitte Appledore, in the Cambridgeshire village of Upper Mayhem.

*A Start in Life*'s dramatis personae feature again in *Life Goes On*. Following the collapse of his marriage, Michael gravitates again towards the London underworld. He is reinstated in his old job as chauffeur of Moggerhanger, who besides being a powerful racketeer is now also a respectable lord. Blaskin too has been employed by the old crook as his ghost writer and in such a role he is penning his memoir. Michael, who as *A Start in Life* drew to a close, had come upon the incredible news of being none other than Blaskin's son, as a chip off the old block, writes a trashy novel for his grotesque father, which earns the latter the Windrush Prize. Furthermore, on Moggerhanger's behalf, he is to deliver a batch of heroin that after being produced in the Soviet Union is laundered in Britain and finally sent back to the producing country. This is the plot outline of *Life Goes On*.

The novel does not simply pick up the loose threads of its prequel, interrupting Michael's idyll at Upper Mayhem and creating a new stage for his picaresque undertakings, but also heightens and exaggerates its constitutive comedy and underlying satirical pull by shifting the axis of the sequel towards the grotesque.

In Donapetry's view, *Life Goes On* is essentially a parody of Sillitoe's earlier picaresque novel whereby the writer mocks his own previous work through the exaggeration of its constitutive elements (Donapetry 1986: 171). I beg to differ. *Life Goes On* is incontestably a parody as, *Spoof*, the very trash novel that rests within its frame, implies. However, it is my belief that rather than looking back to its prequel, it targets more than a single work. In fact, it is precisely its inherent debasement of highbrow literature that reveals the aim of parody's subversive thrust. By foregrounding the violation of the canon, the novel leaves in the background high-minded literature, its own opposite. The novel persistently, refers, alludes to and/or apes, a whole series of classic texts. Many of them have been singled out by Donapetry herself. She acknowledges for instance the following works: *Of Mice and Men*, *Little Dorrit*, *The Aspern Papers*, *The Hound of Baskervilles*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Collector* (Donapetry 1986: 177). I would add *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well as *Jane Eyre* to the above-mentioned novels. It is indeed no mere coincidence that the last chapter of *Life Goes On* rehearses the opening of the thirty-eighth chapter of Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece. *Life Goes On*, the novel Michael Cullen writes, ends with a final chapter that "borrows" its first line from *Jane Eyre*. He exclaims: «Reader, I married her», replacing Jane's "him" with the feminine object pronoun "her." All of these works permeate the fabric of the novel but Sillitoe's lens does not magnify them. If anything, *Life Goes On* zooms in the nether universe of trash literature, in which clownish rogues thrive.

What is more, this no-man-land of writing pokes fun at the satellite domain of publishing companies, book clubs, retail shops and literary magazines. The publishing houses Harridan Press and Crone Books are overtly travesties of the feminist press Virago. Notwithstanding, lampooning need not have a precise target beyond the text as is the case of such hilarious deformations as the Throwaway Bookshop, the Dustbin Edition, the Flagellation Book Club, the Daily Retch and the Soho Review.

Parody is in Linda Hutcheon's words «a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity»

(2000: xii). My contention, as far as Donapetry's reading is concerned, is that the ironic distance between *Life Goes On* and *A Start in Life*, is not necessarily evidence of parody especially because it does not entail any violation or subversion of the codes embedded in the background text, and parody does involve ironic inversion (Hutcheon 2000: 5-6). More to the point, if we recognize that what *Life Goes On* actually parodies is the canon, the picaro's critique of the language of power and the carnivalesque ingredients of the picaresque – scatology, banqueting and the sense of utopian equality fulfilled by the obliteration of norms – are put into perspective.

It is Michail Bakhtin's theoretical approach to the study of the language of the novel and his notion of the carnivalesque that provide us with an effective interpretive tool to break the code of a long forgotten work. As David Lodge argues, while for Saussure the word was a "two-sided sign", for Bakhtin it was a "two-sided act" (Lodge 1990: 21). The language of novels is always dialogic as it does not merely incorporate different types of speech but also a variety of discourses both within and beyond the text. The 'langue' outside the narrative space is conjured through doubly-oriented speech, which includes the subcategories of stylization, 'skaz', parody and hidden polemic (*ibid.*: 59-60).

Krystyna Pomorska, in her foreword to the 1965 edition of *Rabelais and his World*, stresses that Bakhtin constantly refers to the Socratic dialogue as «a prototype of the discursive mechanism for revealing the truth» (in Bakhtin 1984: xi). Dialogism and carnival counteract and unmask the "authoritarian word" of hegemonic culture, its rejection of the Other, its simulacra and values. Indeed «any official culture that considers itself the only respectable model dismisses all other cultural strata» (*ibid.*).

Although *Rabelais and his World* concerns the folk culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, its significance lies both within the historical perspective it embraces and beyond it, since, as Michael Holquist remarks, the book is above all a «hymn to the common man» (in *ibid.*: xviii). This is the spirit of my adaptation of Bakhtin's theoretical perspective to a twentieth-century novel that, in directing

its attention towards the nonsensical underworld of thrash writers, posits the transient liberation of the non-conforming word from the shackles of closure and dismissal.

In Bakhtin's words carnival:

[...] celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. [...] We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (*à l'envers*), of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrownings.  
(Bakhtin 1984: 10-11)

Bakhtin's carnival and all its connotations smoothly intersect in the texture of *Life Goes On* since the literary models on which Sillitoe's novel draws are deeply imbued with the carnivalesque in the first place. Sillitoe simply derived them from those novels that resonated with his own notion of individuality and his own view of a society where inequality and ideological manipulation were deeply ingrained.

The presence of a motley crew of writers in the topsy-turvy space of the novel aims at imploding the authoritarian word of official literary culture into its opposite: a triumph of semantic misrule, convoluted plots with unlikely twists and absurd characters, an explosion of illogical words meaning nothing. The acknowledged citizens of this universe are the northern poet Ronald Delphic, Gilbert Blaskin, the jumped-up novelist who writes under the pseudonym of Sidney Blood, adventitious trashy storytellers like Bill Straw and Michael Cullen himself, and, potentially, all the people whom Michael runs into during his business journeys along the British motorways.

Ronald Delphic is a flamboyant, working-class poet from Leeds who lives in a cottage named Doggerel Bank, an amusing allusion to the trivial and burlesque character of his verse. His poems may consist of lines that rehearse slavishly each and every stop of a tube map or all the entries of a pocket dictionary listed under the same alphabetical

letter. Michael stumbles upon him during one of Delphic's itinerant reading tours.

Before I could climb into the car I was transfixed by the apparition of a man in a blue forage cap with flowing hair and a dayglo orange cape pushing a laden pram along the hard shoulder towards the layby. A pennant said POMES A MILE EACH, and as he came into the space which scented rightfully mine, with the tinny wail of music from a transistor, I saw that on one side of the pram had been aerosolled: POETRY COUNCIL ART-MOBILE and on the other RONALD DELPHICK'S ARTE-FACTORY. A huge black-and-white panda-doll in the pram looked as if it hadn't had its nappy changed for a week. (Sillitoe 1987: 160)

How lower can one go in the debasement of the poetic aura? Poetry is no longer the refined art of a supreme spirit but a ludicrous fabrication, an unconvincing pretence of meaningfulness. The poet, stripped of all his bardic dignity is dragged down from his ivory tower and demoted to the rank of any itinerant street vendor, selling "pomes" rather than poems. His art, now impoverished and vilified, can be appropriately associated to a prosaic object like the kitsch panda doll.

Little is known about Gilbert Blaskin's past, except that having had a fling with Michael's mother in his youth, twenty-five years later he acknowledges Michael's paternity and marries her. He is the most representative specimen of a recurring motif in the novel whereby dubious artistic creativity is coupled with an overflowing sexual appetite and fertility. In *A Start in Life*, Michael describes Gilbert as a travelling trickster and adds: «this sky-licker, this grub who rubbed his prick along the bare earth so that wheat and sunflowers shot up in abundance and gave him a great and lazy life, was my one and only unsuspecting father» (Sillitoe 1970: 314). When we meet him again, in *Life Goes On*, he is working at his new novel, *The Hijacked Vampire*. Like Delphic he is no authoritative embodiment of a stately novelist, but

rather its absolute negation: «He went into his study, and I heard the clack of a single key on the typewriter. He came back smiling. "I wrote a comma. Now I can go out again"» (Sillitoe 1987: 61).

Yet, Blaskin has his flock of adoring readers. Kenny Dukes, «the forty-year-old skinhead only half-reformed» (*ibid.*: 85), who works for Moggerhanger, is an avid consumer of trash fiction. He indulges in the reading of works like *The Crimson Tub*, *The Running Gutter*, and *Orgy in the Sky*, a gory novel, rich in pornographic details, telling the story of a criminal gang of robbers that page after page, is involved in endless episodes of sex, bloodshed and violence. Dukes finds the experience so engaging that he even underlines what he considers the most momentous segments of the story: «He smashed his fists into his smirking face» (*ibid.*), or leaves comments of thorough appreciation like «That's good!» (*ibid.*) on the margin of the book.

The self-reflexive conflation of writing and reading in *Life Goes On*, that typically metafictional involvement of the reader within and without the text, echoes Bakhtin's idea that:

Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. [...] Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (Bakhtin 1984: 7)<sup>2</sup>

Michael Cullen, whose initials are oddly enough Claud Moggerhanger's ones in reversed order – possibly to suggest antagonism between them – like many of the rogues that are centre stage in Sillitoe's novels, has a natural proclivity for lying. His lies are masks he wears whenever he senses he is expected to be who he is not, or when his lascivious drives take over. He has a «contra pathetic nature» (Bakhtin 1981: 406) and epitomizes Bakhtin's merry rogue, to whom the dialogical category of “gay deception” is associated; indeed:

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<sup>2</sup> See also Linda Hutcheon's study of parody (2000: 72).

Opposed to the lie of pathos accumulated in the language of all recognized and structured professions, social groups and classes, there is not straightforward truth (pathos of the same kind) but a rather gay and intelligent deception, a *lie* justified because it is directed precisely to liars. (*Ibid.*: 401)

Michael's lies are essentially told to contrast with the pathos-charged seriousness of the language of power.

Being a picaro, Michael is what Claudio Guillén refers to as the «half-outsider» (1971:80), a man who is unable either to become part of the society on whose margins he lives or totally estrange himself from it. An emblematic image of his alienation is offered in *A Start in Life*. At night, in the darkness of his bedroom, he stands by the window, looking at the people living in the buildings across the road. Ranges of lit up windows disclose fragments of a life from which he is cut off:

A woman leaned in white underwear, and a man's arms pulled her to him, out of my sight. Then the blind went down. [...] In some, there was washing, because most of the rooms seemed to be kitchens. Light bulbs were often bare, a few were shaded. A shadow moved across the window now and again, too quick to see whether it was a man or a woman (Sillitoe 1970: 196).

If he made himself visible to them he would symbolically relinquish his diversity: «To join them all I had to do was to switch on my own bedroom light, and stand there, imprisoned in the oblong of window so that they on the other side could then see that I was a prisoner like the rest of them» (*ibid.*:197). Ultimately he resolves to remain true to his insularity: «I got into bed in the dark» (*ibid.*).

Michael's gay deception is no ordinary vice. Neither is it too far removed from a storytelling inclination. He is a liar and a fabulist. His open-ended first-person narrations are replete with self-contained tales that foreshadow his future transformation into a writer of cock-and-bull stories. After all: «literature itself is a case of licit lying which turns again and again on the uncertain relation between appearance and

reality» (Blair 1979: 11). There is, indeed, something extremely serious in Michael's lies revealing the cogency of modern concerns about reality: «In times like our own when shared agreements as to what constitutes the “real” are disappearing at an unnerving rate, anyone who claim to speak the “truth” is suspect» (*ibid.*). Furthermore, one cannot be a fabulist without being a reader of either other people's lies or of books. Although Sillitoe ridicules Michael's youthful fascination for books by telling us that what tempts his picaro to read *The Divine Comedy* and *The Way of All Flesh* is a certain prurient curiosity, reading is among Michael's earliest pursuits.

As a storyteller Michael plays the God game: «he is the God who controls, who amuses himself by fabricating adventures and thereby instructing and entertaining his readers» (Sillitoe 2003: 21). By the same token he is also God's puppet, one, however, that being beyond any judgement and morality cannot know his grace: «God is for those who believe in the superiority of the spirit, the necessity of ethics, the comfort of morals. While they pray he preys on them, without whom he would have no existence» (*ibid.*: 17-18). It is precisely his genuine lack of morality that locates the story he tells on the far side of canon.

When Michael sets about writing Spoof he is sitting at the kitchen table, as Dismal, the dog that accompanies him in his adventures, stands by his side, carrying the paper balls he occasionally throws at him to the trash basket:

It's true, of course, that you bite the hand that feeds you, but usually there's no other hand close enough. Langham ran away with his best friend's wife, thinking that because he was his best friend he wouldn't hold it against him. In any case his wife had led him a dog's life, made his existence positively dismal, so he thought he was doing him a favour (Sillitoe 1987: 254)

As the story unfolds, we learn that John Weems, the cuckold husband, surprises Langham and his wife at Tinderbox Cottage. After a pause of about sixty pages, Michael resumes his drivelling narration:

The lover of Tinderbox Cottage now had the husband and wife prisoner at Peppercorn Cottage, and he proceeded to tell them his life story – in justification for his bizarre behaviour – which included three murders for which he'd not so far been apprehended, though the worst atrocity was when he'd held a red admiral butterfly captive in a cellar and forced it to listen to similar confessions before pulling its wings off and setting it free.  
(*Ibid.*:321-2)

Sillitoe is clearly poking fun at *The Collector*. Fowles's debut novel, tells the story of Frederick Clegg, a butterfly collector, and Miranda Grey, an ethereal middle-class art student, with a sensual «la-di-da voice» (Fowles 2004: 10). Having suddenly won a huge sum of money at the pools, Clegg decides to use his winning to buy a secluded cottage in the Sussex countryside, formerly owned by a retired navy admiral, with the purpose of kidnapping Miranda and keeping her captive in the underground cellar. The novel offers a multiple viewpoint narration in which Clegg's confession is followed by Miranda's account of her captivity in the form of a private journal.

Michael's Tinderbox Cottage is a travesty of Clegg's infamous cottage, just like Weems, the name given to the cuckold husband refers obliquely to Clegg's cellar: "weem" is a Scottish word designating an artificial cave used as lodging. Similarly, Weems's first name rehearses Fowles's. Besides, funny enough, Arthur Clegg, a character featuring both in *A Start in Life* and in *Life Goes On*, has a name that merges ironically the identities of Arthur Seaton and Frederick Clegg. While a discussion of Sillitoe's parody of Fowles's collector is beyond the scope of the present essay, for the sake of brevity, we can safely claim that Arthur Clegg is a hilarious inversion of Miranda's captor and that Michael Cullen is a foil to Sillitoe's travesty of Clegg.

As *Spoof* unfurls, non-sense and absurdity vertiginously escalate:

It was on television. The woman hostage began to have a baby.  
[...] From the open vagina of the wife, I went into the mind, if you can call it that, of the TV commentator and filled a page of phrases

such as ripping the sky, tearing at the stars, clouting out of the way—until Baby was born. (Sillitoe 1987: 323-4)

The reader is thus made increasingly aware that such idiotic drivel, this good-for-nothing story, laughs at its own comedy as much as it ridicules uplifting and morally sound literature.

*Life Goes On* pullulates with many of the images of the grotesque body Bakhtin discussed in his study of Rabelais:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. [...T]he emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breast, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking or defecation. (1984: 26)

Michael describes Blaskin as a «walking penis» (Sillitoe 1987: 59). The narrative span of the whole novel abounds with graphic descriptions of sexual intercourse designed to stir feelings of uneasiness in the reader and the critic. The words Michael whispers in the ears of a waitress are exasperately obscene (*ibid.*: 172); all the convexities, the ramifications and the offshoots, mentioned by Bakhtin, are involved repeatedly in encounters that seem to celebrate the freedom of the body and its procreative energy.

Sexual and food imageries tend to converge: «I had such a hard-on that, if need be, I could have balanced a plate of black pudding on it», Michael says (*ibid.*: 366). The unrestrained sexual prowess of *Life Goes On*'s picaros and tricksters is only equalled by their insatiable appetite. Bill Straw is undoubtedly the most gluttonous gourmand among them, as the following scene demonstrates:

The man in front, who was certainly thin enough, took three apple pies, three custards and a cup of tea from the counter. Only Bill Straw could be so sweet-greedy, and I recognised him at once. 'The pies are full of sugared turnip,' I said, 'and the custards are made out of mustard and brothel-come, and as for the tea, piss would be positively safe in comparison'. (*Ibid.*: 26).

Creativity and copulation go hand in hand in the novel and images of the pregnant body recur frequently. Michael aptly reminds us that the creative process makes trash writers permanently randy (*ibid.*: 366).

Forgotten children of inconsiderate fathers, they perpetuate endlessly the paradigm of orphanhood, that marked their existence from the start. Bakhtin tells us, indeed, that the grotesque is concerned with «the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs. [...] it knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving» (Bakhtin 1986: 21).

The carnival is only a temporary suspension of the pathos of power, which never posits a permanent dismissal of its coercive norms. Paradoxically it results in the sanctioning of the authoritarian word rather than in its absolute repudiation, it produces continuity and not enduring downfall. Still, by enabling a transient liberation from the dogmatic truth that hegemony enforces from above, it also propels renewal and emancipation, from the bottom of the social hierarchy. Linda Hutcheon has drawn attention to the fact that Bakhtin's carnival and parody are permeated by the same logic: «Parody is normative in its identification with the Other, but it is contesting in its Oedipal need to distinguish itself from the prior Other» (Hutcheon 2000: 77). This means that *Life Goes On*, being the objective correlative of Sillitoe's critique to the criteria underpinning tradition, only deceptively violates highbrow literature. That gilded world of established literary masterpieces adumbrated in the texture of the novel has still the eloquence of a model. Nonetheless, by bending the rules, Sillitoe pleads for renewal and continuity at once. The identification with the Other and the complementary emancipation from it, are both

formalized by parody and thematized in the father-son relationship between Gilbert Blaskin and Michael Cullen. It is worth recalling that Michael follows in the footsteps of his father but it is he who eventually writes the novel thanks to which Blaskin is awarded the Windrush Prize. Moreover, Blaskin connives with power; he agrees to be Moggerhanger's ghostwriter and tell lies on his behalf. Michael's gay deception, instead, serves the purpose of exposing the racketeer's illicit trafficking through the publication of *Life Goes On*'s truthful lies.

This essay does not question the significance of the value of a literary work but rather the idea that the judgements of value made by the literary establishment are offered as absolutes when in fact they are mere ideological constructions that only produce «catalogues of examples of “excellence”» (Laing 1984: 242). In compliance with Laing's advocacy, we should pronounce the death of the novel again to release writing from the trammels of official culture:

The novel is dead – long live novels, writers, readers and students of literature, as long as they begin by asking all those questions which for the guardians of the tradition are “scarcely open to debate at all”. (*Ibid.*)

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