THE PICARESQUE NOVEL IN AMERICA
SINCE WORLD WAR II

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THE PICARESQUE NOVEL IN AMERICA

SINCE WORLD WAR II

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The last two decades have seen a definite resurgence of the picaresque novel in American literature. Various theories might be applied in explaining this revitalization of the novel of roguery, all of them based almost entirely upon conjecture and all of them perhaps equally valid as far as they go. None of these speculations seems adequate of itself alone. As we shall see later in this study, some critics claim that the picaresque novel can gain wide popularity only during a period of moral and social decay and that the fictional rogue can flourish only if the reading public is part of a society which is rootless and baseless and in process of decline or dissolution. Further, it would be just as convincing to make the generalization that the picaresque novel regains its recurring popularity only in postwar eras—eras which seem to some moralists to produce a certain "moral" decadence. But the answer is not that simple, for if postwar eras bred picaros, then the period of the 1920's and the 1930's should have been inundated by picaresque novels. It was not.
It stands more to reason to say that the current resurgence of the picaro is not necessarily the result of a decadent morality but more the result of a new morality, a morality born, true enough, out of the Second World War but a morality no more putrescent or sick than any morality which preceded it. This new morality can be called, for lack of a better name, the A-Bomb Morality. Today's world is a world different from the world prior to August, 1945, and needs different criteria by which to operate. The picaresque novels which are to be considered in this study must be understood in the light of that fact. Jack Kerouac, in his picaresque novel On the Road, defines his generation as "the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn." This, as well as words can, captures the essence of the New Morality—a new morality for a new world that may soon both figuratively and literally burn, burn, burn.

This is not intended to be a definitive study of all the picaresque novels of the last two decades. It is, instead, a representative study which includes those authors who have attained the most prominence and who have contributed most to the delineation and advancement of the
picaresque genre. It is to be noted that though some of the authors are of minor significance, most of them are major American novelists, who probably have a permanent place in the development of American letters. These are the criteria by which most of the authors included in this study were chosen, and the study makes no claim to being an exhaustive criticism of all those novels and novelists which have been termed picaresque during the past two decades.
CHAPTER I

CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORY OF THE TRADITIONAL PICARESQUE NOVEL

The task of coming to grips with and clearly defining the contemporary picaresque novel is made difficult by the traditional ambiguity and uncertainty that beclouds the whole genre. There is not even any real agreement as to the origin of the term "picaresque." The prevailing opinion, however, can be summed up rather briefly, and must be accepted only for what it is worth as hypothesis and speculation.

In Bohemia during the last part of the fourteenth and the first part of the fifteenth centuries there flourished a group of people known as the Picards, originally from Picardy (6, p. 27). The Picards were interlopers, unwelcome and unwanted. Accustomed to roaming around nude and to being "outrageously antinomian in tendency," the Picards created unrest among the more conventional Bohemian society (6, p. 28). Because of their unorthodox religion and non-conformity, and for a myriad of incomprehensible reasons that make man wish to torment his fellow creatures, the
Picards were persecuted, harassed, and damned. Actually it does not seem to have been their libidinous behaviour which caused unrest among the populace so much as it was their religious practices (or lack of them). The Picards' basic religion was a "primitive religious inspiration," (6, p. 28) and their prayers were more mental than oral. (E. May calls it uncivilized "rogue's prayer" (6, p. 29).) They communicated with their god silently and in private, and to their contemporaries this was apostasy and sin, and it resulted in the Picards being driven into a state of almost complete estrangement.

To make a long and rather unpleasant story short, the Picards became a people totally isolated from Bohemian society. The name "Picard" came to be applied "contemptuously and indiscriminately to any churchgoer whose sincerity was suspect or who gave evidence of anticlericalism" (6, p. 30). In time the derisive application of the word carried over into a more general usage and was tacked onto any group of rogues and vagabonds who "pursued a life of their own on the fringes of society" (6, p. 30).

The link between the Picards and the early Spanish picaresques is obvious, for the first picaresque stories concerned religious heretics, and more often than not the hero was of a
low social order (6, p. 30). In short, the early Spanish picaro was little more than a naked and unwelcome Picard in disguise. Thus the name picaro. The Picards themselves passed away, assimilated into the society which had so thoroughly deplored them (and it is ironic to note that the word Bohemian has come to mean almost exactly what the word Picard meant so long ago!), but the picaro has persevered and is as active today as he was five centuries ago.

The task of finding a workable and reliable set of characteristics to define the picaresque is as difficult as establishing the origin of the term. The story of the Picards gives some faint hints as to what the picaresque can and cannot be, but the task of definition must extend further than that. After weighing all the "rules" and considering all the exceptions one can only conclude that a definition of the picaresque must, at best, be left vague, and breaks down if it is adhered to too strictly. Yet there are certain basic characteristics of the type that are almost invariably present, even though one must not expect to find all of them present in every picaresque novel, and one should expect to find considerable variation in the characteristics from novel to novel.
Obviously, one thing which any picaresque novel must have is a rogue as its central character. This rogue lives either totally outside the pales of society or precariously on the fringes. He is a character who has gone into conflict with his contemporaries; or more precisely, he is a character who feels that society has gone into conflict with him. In his own eyes he is more sinned against than sinner. As a rule he is a young man, though Don Quixote is a notable exception. His formal education is limited, but he is by no means stupid, dense, or insane. (Again, ironically, Don Quixote is the glaring exception.) The picaresque hero must never enter an institution of higher learning, or if he does, must find himself removed abortively. Yet, more often than not, the picaro is a man of keen insight and high native intelligence, though at no time is he pedantically intellectual. In the vast majority of picaresque literature, especially that of the modern persuasion, the hero is innately "sharper" than his contemporaries and is just a little bit quicker to grasp the reality of the absurd predicament which man calls life.

A further prerequisite of the picaresque is the element of movement. The picaro must move. From Don Quixote astride Rocinante to Dean Moriarty in a wrecked Cadillac,
the picaresque hero has been mobile, and in fact must be so before he is a true picaro. Semantics, however, intrude, and one must decide what constitutes movement. Must the movement be in the form of a long and episodic journey (a physical geographical trip), or may it be a movement in time, mind, or pretense? The answer must be a hybrid of the two extremes, for there must be in a picaresque novel some sort of trip long enough to constitute "journeying," just as there must be some degree of subjective mobility, such as could be expressed in lateral or vertical progression in the social scale or within the mind of the picaro himself. (Two examples of this latter type of mobility are James Purdy's *Malcolm* and Saul Bellow's *Augie March.*)

Two other characteristics of the picaresque novel are first person narration and a companion for the picaro. Though each of these is probably less essential to the picaresque novel than any of the aforementioned characteristics, they nonetheless are worth noting. The first person narration allows for easier transition from scene to scene and makes it easier for the hero to express his ironic outlook. The companion acts as a "backboard" against which the picaro can bounce his own rather unique philosophy.
One must not overlook the fact that the picaro's story is told in his own language. That is, the story is related by the hero himself. Thus, more often than not, the picaresque novel is written in the idiomatic tongue, the "common" speech of the picaro's contemporaries. Lazarillo de Tormes is a good example of this idiomatic speech. In a more modern vein, both Huckleberry Finn and Catcher in the Rye are outstanding examples. True, application of the vulgar speech no doubt enhances the "loose" grammatical construction of the picaresque novel, but at the same time, it contributes to the overall effect of movement and freedom, elements essential to the picaresque tale.

In this same area the episodic structure of the picaresque novel must be mentioned. The very nature of the picaro makes it necessary for him to move about, to "bounce around" as the case may be; and as a result the novel itself is composed not of one protracted incident but of many differing incidents. The picaro moves from one scene to another, and unlike most novels the picaresque novel is not in the end brought together in one neat package, with all scenes and incidents tied together and with all problems explained.
After these general requirements are accepted, the definition of the picaresque becomes both more specific and more diverse, for each critic has his peculiar working criteria. Mariano J. Lorente, writing in the introduction to his translation of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, strikes a definition that is generally adequate, though not specifically so. Even in this case, however, one must remember that Lorente is speaking more in terms of the conventional picaresque and not necessarily in terms of the modern picaresque.

A picaresque novel is the real or fictitious autobiography of a picaro who relates his adventures through life cynically, but in a humorous rather than in a sarcastic manner.

A picaro is a young fellow of low extraction. His parents belong to the lowest strata of society. Heredity and environment tend to make a criminal out of him, but he is saved from utter degradation by his lack of ambition and by his wit. Instead of a vulgar criminal, he becomes a genial parasite. He is enough of a philosopher not to take life too seriously. His one aim in life is to have a moderately good time with a minimum of effort, and he likes to satisfy his physical wants without, however, carrying anything to excess (4, p. 19).

Lorente goes on to say that the picaro is something of a "psychologist," a clever fellow who survives by finding his fellow man's "soft spots" (4, p. 19). Lorente concludes his definition of the picaresque with a rather simple but important point.
But what has insured the popularity of the picaro is his humanness. The picaro is a man; he is not an imaginary freak like the knight-errant. His very weaknesses and transgressions make him human (4, p. 21).

Another translator of Lazarillo de Tormes provides a better, though again not an entirely adequate, definition of the picaro. Harriet De Onis's definition seems more valid than Lorente's; but one must note that it is also a more idealistic explanation:

The picaro's vision of society is, of necessity, partial and circumscribed. It is realistic, but focused on reality from a single angle. He sets out as a child or youth, poor and inexperienced, who must make his own way and look out for himself. He passes from master to master, from job to job, living by his wits. He quickly learns how little he can expect from his fellow man, and detects the shams and deceits and cruelty hidden under the most respectable facades. He begins his career in innocence and trust, and the disillusionments he suffers engender in him a wariness of all with whom he comes in contact. But he has the priceless compensation for his precarious life: freedom . . . . Aspiring to nothing but subsistence, he is free from responsibility. His life has something of the charm that the gypsy's or vagabond's existence holds for all those hemmed in by the walls of respectability (5, pp. x-xi).

The picaro is a "marginal, negative being," continues Miss De Onis, but "he has the invaluable quality of being a lens through which we view society" (5, p. xiii).

Other prominent critics have formulated equally valid general definitions of the picaresque, but in most cases
these definitions are either rehashes or slightly altered copies of the Lorente and De Onis definitions. In the overall sense, De Onis and Lorente have come as close to an adequate general definition as one can find. There are, however, one or two specific points that must be considered before the definition of the picaresque can be concluded.

The first of these points deals with the picaro as an outlaw. It is quite true that from Lazarillo de Tormes to Augie March the picaro has been on the shady side of the law. Lazarillo pilfers food and drink; Huck Finn snatches watermelons; Felix Krull swipes candy; and Augie March lifts books. Yet at no time is the picaro a hard core criminal. He never robs, rapes, or kills; and in fact, to be a picaro, it is essential that he not be a "monster" (3, p. 548). There may be different reasons why the old and the new picaro finds himself on the outs with the law, and these differing reasons must be dealt with later, but all picaroons are akin in that they are indeed "unlawful" in the strictest sense of the term. Never do they really become a Jack the Ripper or a Dillinger, but they flirt with crime in all its petty manifestations; in this regard the modern picaro stands arm in arm with his predecessors.
The second specific point that must be mentioned deals with the picaro's attitude toward and his dealings with the opposite sex. In the early picaresque novels physical love was for the most part totally absent. At most it was gently hinted at, as in Don Quixote or, in a somewhat stronger vein, as in Roderick Random. But in the contemporary picaresque novel this is not necessarily the case. One will note when the modern picaroons are considered more closely that sex is a predominant factor both in their success and in their failure. Unlike Don Quixote, whom faithful and frank Sancho Panza termed "Knight of theournful Countenance," the modern picaro is physically attractive and sexually desirable; and whereas poor deluded Don Quixote sets out to protect fair damsels, the modern picaro (to wit, Felix Krull and Dean Moriarty) sets out to seduce them, as many and as often as possible. Since this is not a study on the changing moral climate, one cannot delve too deeply into the whys and the wherefores of this difference, but one can note that the change seems to have begun with Fielding and Tom Jones, for hot-blooded Tom's escapades are legend, though not so graphically plotted in the novel itself. From this point onward, more lenient censors and a decreasing provincialism have permitted the artist to make
his hero more explicitly sexual. One must, of course, account for the time it took America to catch up in this regard (assuming that it has caught up), but it is fairly safe to surmise that the modern picaro's emphasis on sex was set in motion by the rascality and the promiscuity of Fielding's Tom.

It is readily evident that in characteristics the modern and the conventional picaros are both alike and different, and any portrait of the typical picaro must be painted with rather broad strokes. Kenneth Patchen has painted a word picture that probably captures the true picaro better than any other definition:

He is either going away
Or coming back,
And in between there
You can put all the rest of it (7, unpaged).*

Unlike a definition of the picaresque, the historical development of the picaresque novel is fairly easy to ascertain. Since the concern of this paper is the contemporary American picaresque novel, no great historical detail will be presented. In order to place the current American picaroon in his context in the genre, however, certain novels

*The poem appeared in the Fall, 1964, edition of *Tri-Quarterly* with no line determination, and the above form is a liberty taken with the poem.
in the development of the picaro must be mentioned. One must at least be acquainted with the novels which epitomize the entire picaresque tradition and which show its evolution from a rather brief and oversimplified episodic tale (such as *Lazarillo de Tormes*) to a complex, sophisticated novel (such as *Felix Krull*). In passing, it must be mentioned that prototypes of the picaresque extend back further than the Spanish sixteenth century (when *Lazarillo* was written). Chief among these is the *Satyricon* of Petronius, a fragmented account of a pair of incorrigible rogues, Encolpius and Ascytus, who discourse in a rather bawdy fashion on the society of the era of Nero. Though not a picaresque tale, the *Satyricon* is in content and structure similar to stories of the picaresque genre.

To Spain, however, must go credit for the picaresque novel. In fact, when Cervantes published *Don Quixote* he not only gave to the world the greatest picaresque novel but the novel itself. Like many newborn things, the import of the event was to be felt only after a considerable lapse of time, when the infant novel had grown into man's most predominant form of creative written communication. Harriet De Onis expresses succinctly the credit that should be given not only to *Don Quixote* and Cervantes individually
but to Spain:

To Spain belongs the distinction of having created the modern novel with Don Quixote. Not only was it a satire of the romances and chivalry—and also, in a sense, the greatest of them all—but it likewise subsumed most of the types of novel which had preceded it, and blended all into an unparalleled whole through the genius of its creator (5, p. x).

Ironically, however, Don Quixote, while being the first modern novel, was not the first picaresque story. That distinction belongs to the unknown author who wrote Lazarillo de Tormes, the pithy and succinct tale of an innocent and fatherless boy who is turned loose sans love, luck, or forewarning into a harsh and vindictive world. The diminutive book first appeared in 1554, fifty-one years before Don Quixote, and immediately became what today would be called a "best seller." Its literary significance, however, far outweighs its popularity. As De Onis states, Lazarillo "carried in its blood stream" the genes of all the characteristics that went into producing the modern novel. "Not only did it create a new literary genre, the picaresque novel," it also determined the style that the novel was to possess (5, p. v).

Thus, by carrying De Onis's genealogical metaphor one step farther, it is easy to see that if Don Quixote was the
father of the modern novel then Lazarillo was the grand-father. When the much harassed Lazarillo said, "To tell you the truth, if I had not helped myself out with my cunning and wits, time and again I would have died of hunger," he spoke the credo of the picaresque hero—a credo that echoed in the mouths of Roderick Random, Tom Jones, Huckleberry Finn, and that still reverberates today.

In 1715, with the publication of Gil Blas, the picaresque novel moved out of Spain and into the rest of Europe. In Lesage's novel one can detect a certain change in the picaro, for this first French rogue is not quite so desperate nor so gauche as his Spanish cousins. Gil Blas, in contrast to Lazarillo, is ironic. In fact, Gil Blas is a "habitual ironist" (1, p. 18). Lesage portrays the picaro as having become a little wiser and a little more perceptive. He has given the picaro the traditional French polish, and it is obvious that in moving away from his Spanish homeland the picaresque hero has undergone transformation.

The picaresque novel is a form of narrative which concerned action and the external world. The tension or "conflict" that keeps this narrative taut is the individual's incessant and ingenious struggle to take a livelihood from a grudging world. As the picaresque novel moves away from its Spanish origins, the stress tends to be more on the ingenuity and less on the struggle. The events and motions of this struggle are the
principal interest; not the personality of the struggler, which is never even highly particularized (1, p. 31).

This is an important change to note, for it is the harbinger of the trend in the modern picaresque which has the picaro involved in so much and trying to say such a large amount that his own personality is overshadowed by the sheer weight of his literary obligations. (Augie March is the typical example here.)

Defoe gave to literature perhaps the only picaresque heroine when he produced the flippant and easy-to-bed Moll Flanders. Critics seem equally divided as to whether or not Moll Flanders is a true picaresque novel, and because of her uncertain standing it is mentioned here as a mere curiosity. Strong arguments could be produced on either side, but more than a female picaro Moll seems to be an interesting whore, and even Robert Alter in his commendable study Rogue's Progress includes Moll only with qualifications. He wonders aloud if truly she belongs to the world of which she speaks (1, p. 40).

After Defoe and Moll came Tobias Smollett, who gave not one but three picaresque novels to the genre. Evidently Smollett had trouble purging himself of the picaresque urge, for his three major novels are all of the picaresque
persuasion. One need only consider the puns inherent in the
titles of Peregrine Pickle, Roderick Random, and The
Expedition of Humphrey Clinker to surmise that they are in-
deed picaresque books. Roderick Random is Smollett's best
known and best written book, and it is, of the trio, the
novel most indicative of the picaresque spirit. In true
picaroon fashion Roderick is passed from pillar to post,
stomped, kicked, and tricked into a certain wisdom before
he finally gains his rightful place in society. Roderick
made its appearance in 1748, and only a year later
Fielding's Tom Jones joined the novel on the English book-
stalls. Superficially, as Alter and other critics point
out, the two novels are much alike. The plot and the char-
acters are at first glance amazingly similar, down to Tom's
finding in the end his deserved birthright and place in the
country. Closer study, however, reveals quite a contrast
in the two picaroons, for in Tom Jones there is an important
deviation from the strict picaresque tradition:

... Tom Jones exists in a completely different
world from that of Smollett's picaroon. It is a
picaresque world only in a deliberately limited
fashion. For in Fielding's great novel the pic-
aresque tradition merges with—or rather, is
assimilated by—a way of apprehending and re-
porting reality quite distinct from the mode of
narrative first developed in the Spanish novels
of roguery (1, p. 81).
Though on the whole well within the picaresque tradition, *Tom Jones* is a rebel to the cause. Not only is the novel's grasp of reality more evident than in most previous picaresque novels, but the novel is less episodic and better plotted, not to mention the fact that it is related in the third person and not in the typically picaresque first person (1, p. 83). Before leaving Fielding, it should be noted that his lesser known work *Joseph Andrews* (written in close imitation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*) is perhaps more truly a picaresque endeavor than *Tom Jones* (5, p. xv). The debt, in fact, is acknowledged by Fielding on the title page of the novel.

After Smollett and Fielding the picaresque novel hit what might be termed a period of quiescence. Alter attributes the decline of the picaresque novel during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the sentimentalism of the age. The picaresque novel is, as Alter points out, the "characteristic expression of a vigorously active individualism" (1, p. 79) and the romantic, rather saccharine sweetness of the period stifled the nonconformity necessary to the picaro's survival. Yet, rather ironically, if one were considering poetry in the study of the picaresque he would have to credit the early nineteenth century with
perhaps the greatest picaresque poem of them all, Byron's Don Juan, which is not only a biting satire on the English social structure but which is also the culmination of the entire Don Juan legend. Poetry, however, is outside a study which limits itself to the novel, and therefore cannot be considered further.

Though down, the picaro was not yet out, for when Stendhal published in 1830 The Red and the Black the picaro was revived. Though not strictly or totally picaresque, Stendhal's masterpiece is yet strongly picaresque in nature and led to the rebirth of the genre. It was followed in 1844 by Thackeray's The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq., an effort Alter calls "the re-creation of the picaresque novel" (1, p. 114). However, Thackeray managed to turn what could have been a great picaresque novel into a failure when he wrecked himself on "the rock of his Victorian solid moral purpose" (1, p. 117). As Alter says, Thackeray turns Barry Lyndon from a true picaro into a melodramatic ass, lurking about with a horsewhip in hand. Thackeray was more comfortable in the eighteenth century than in his own age and he lacked the rebellious spirit necessary for the production of a picaresque novel (1, p. 117).
In America, however, Mark Twain lacked no such spirit and in 1885 he produced the classic expression of the American picaresque. It is with Huckleberry Finn that any consideration of the American picaro must begin. Ernest Hemingway said once that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn" (2, p. 612). One cannot argue too strenuously with the Old Man in this regard. More specifically, as a picaresque novel, Huckleberry Finn could probably be considered the greatest of all time, for, as Alter says, it is possibly the most nearly perfect picaresque novel yet written, embodying not only a most appropriate idiomatic language but great artistic integrity (1, p. 120). It would serve no purpose here to include a detailed discussion of Twain's magnum opus. Many books have been devoted to that undertaking. To understand Huckleberry Finn in its picaresque content, however, there are several points that must be discussed.

Just as the modern picaro expresses artistically the alienation bred by the Second World War and its aftermath, so in a way does Huckleberry Finn express the different alienation that came out of the American Civil War. If one had to pick a turning point, had to place his finger on that impossible moment in history when the old values that produced
the old picaroons began to change and the new values which were to lead to the modern picaroons came into being, that point would have to be the Civil War. That great exercise in mass fratricide which has, with pride evidently, been termed the first modern war, wiped aside forever the Victorian belief that "God's in his heaven/All's right with the world." Incorrigible Sam Clemens produced in Huck Finn the first picaro to express the change, for Huck, unlike his picaresque counterparts of a few decades earlier, is, in the end, still unreconciled to his society, still a young rebel, moving onward toward the west. In contrast to Tom Jones or even Lazarillo de Tormes, Huck has in no way found succor for his malcontent, and the old values of God, Mother, and Country are far from his thoughts. He is the first picaro with a modern sensitivity, and if one should doubt this let him be reminded that Huck gives up a fortune in order to retain his freedom, which he values far more than he values the middle class comfort which the money would have guaranteed. For Tom Jones or Roderick Random or Lazarillo such an act would have been unthinkable.

Let it not be understood, however, that Huck Finn is truly a modern picaresque hero, on the order of Augie March or Sal Paradise, and kin, for he is not. Huck is the
transition figure, the pivot upon which the old and the new picaroons revolve. He is much akin to his predecessors in one major area: he does not by choice go contrary to his society, and in fact his fight against conventionality is expressed most subtly and never in the overt and vocal way that characterizes his modern offspring. Alter notes that "Huck would not dream of rebelling against the society to which he cannot fully belong; his keen boy's eyes are never clouded by the venom of hatred or embitterment" (1, p. 119). Though one would be going out on the proverbial limb to say that the modern picaro's eyes are "clouded by the venom of hatred," it would not be unsafe to say that the modern picaroons are often rather disturbed and dissatisfied with the "way things are." Huck, unlike the modern picaro but like the conventional rogue, is much influenced by the conventions to which he is heir, and he rebels against them not so much because he feels that they are deadly to his freedom and individuality but more because he feels that he must be "committed to the impulses of his own heart" and must act toward Jim and all others in a way that he feels is right and not in the way that he has been "taught" to act (1, p. 118). He is an innately moral individual struggling against the "learned morality" of an immoral society.
Huck Finn is therefore a literary Janus, looking back into the picaresque tradition of the past, but facing also into the picaresque tradition that was to come after him. The American picaroons that will be discussed on the following pages owe much, and in some cases all, to Huck Finn. Just as Lazarillo de Tormes carried in his genes the determining traits for all picaresque literature that followed, so too did Huck Finn carry in his genes the determining traits of his American picaresque progeny. Philosophically the new picaroons differ greatly from their illustrious ancestor, but in literature as in life, few children place much store in their grandparents' ideology, and today's picaroons are no less rogues just because they know a new departure. In the conclusion of this paper the "why" of this philosophical cleft will be hopefully explained, but for the present one must deal with the new breed of picaroons and let them lead themselves into their own literary and philosophical garden...or, as some might think, desert.
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CHAPTER II

THE ARTIST VERSUS THE BURGHER

Perplexingly enough, the journey into the picaresque desert-garden must begin with not an American novelist but a German. His novel is an American novel via a technicality, and since no study of contemporary picaresque would be complete without it, Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull* is included. When Mann began the novel, in his thirty-sixth year, he was very much a German. When he finally finished it, however, in 1955, he was no longer a German but an American. He had been an American citizen for more than ten years. It is on this basis and on the basis of its tremendous influence on the contemporary picaresque that *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man* is included in this study.

Felix Krull is without a doubt the outstanding picaresque novel yet produced in the twentieth century. Long before it was finished Mann had established himself high on the pinnacle of world literature, his *Magic Mountain* being perhaps the greatest *bildungsroman* novel of all time. Yet the seeming virtuosity with which *Felix Krull* was written belies the difficult time that Mann had in composing the picaresque
tale. The Felix Krull story was originally begun when Mann was quite young but was abandoned when the task of mastering the picaresque style became unbearable (4, p. 547). Mann did not complete the book until shortly before his death.

On the surface the novel is not actually so far removed from any other well-conceived picaresque story, except that Mann's genius and facility stand out vividly and make the book stylistically superior to any picaresque novel of modern times. The taut simplicity of the prose, even in translation, reveals the almost awe-inspiring artistry that Mann labored so long to capture, and one need not delve beneath the surface to see that the novel is the work of not only a pre-eminent writer but of a philosopher, theologian, and social critic of the highest calibre. True to the genre, however, Mann saw that the plot beneath the artistry remained strictly picaresque.

To understand and appreciate the novel, Felix Krull must be criticized on at least three different levels. First, of course, there is that level of sheer artistic technique, which in itself could warrant a worthwhile study. Second, there is that level on which the novel is typically picaresque. On this level criticism of the novel can be directed alone at Krull's place in the picaresque tradition,
and appreciation of the book can be gained simply because of the exact and enthralling way in which Krull exemplifies the rogue, moving not only from place to place geographically but moving upward through society, slicing the social cake like a razor to leave it bare and exposed. On the third level, into which the second merges without clear demarcation, one encounters the depth and significance of the book as a whole, not simply as a picaresque tale nor as a stylistically admirable composition, but as a social and ethical document, a moving and sometimes bitter exposition of man and his foibles, of life and its banality.

One must deal with the book on all three levels in order to understand its significance in the present frame of reference. The second and third levels are of most importance, however, and the first level can be left after reiterating that as an artistic and aesthetic achievement Felix Krull is unsurpassed by any other novel considered in this study.

The plot of the novel, part of the second stage of consideration, is pure picaresque. Felix Krull is a cheat and confidence man, and the book carries him from late boyhood into early manhood, recounting his uninterrupted success with women, money, and with life in general. He is totally
outside the realm of conventional morality, or at least he has nothing within him that resembles in any fashion the morality by which ordinary mortals operate. And, of course, he is endowed by nature with such gifts that he is physically and mentally superior to the common man. Robert Heilman thinks that Mann modeled Krull in his own image (4, p. 560), and this may well be so, for Felix lives the free life and moves in a rarefied moral atmosphere commensurate with the life of a man of Mann's nature and perspicacity—and commensurate, one might add, with the theme of artistic freedom which is repeated constantly in Mann's other works. (For a discussion of this, see Jethro Bithell's Modern German Literature, pages 309 ff.)

Krull ascends from the bottom rung to the top rung of European society, using his sexual prowess and natural attraction as climbing tools. His success may be indicated by the fact that as a child he pretends to be the Kaiser while by the end of the novel he has become the lover of the Queen of Portugal. In the interim he has been an elevator operator, draft dodger, gigolo, jewel thief, and general scoundrel. He is a confidence man, par excellence; so much so that his victims not only refuse to notify the authorities but in a way consider themselves blessed to have been swindled by
incomparable Felix, as in the case of one passionate matron who makes him steal all her jewels in repayment for the pleasure he has given. Yet, despite what first glances might indicate, Felix Krull is no ordinary picaro. He is almost a mystic, possessed of the strange and useful gift of self-transformation. He is a chameleon of Zen Buddhist proportions. Just to miss a day from school he goes to fantastic lengths. He does not feign sickness, he commands his body into sickness:

But I—I had produced these symptoms as effectively as though I had nothing to do with their appearance. I had improved upon nature, realized a dream, and only he who has succeeded in creating a compelling and effective reality out of nothing, out of sheer inward knowledge and contemplation—in short, out of nothing more than imagination and the daring exploitation of his own body—he alone understands the strange and dreamlike satisfaction with which I rested from my creative task (5, p. 36).

Krull speaks of his ability as a deity might speak of having created a world out of chaos. His bragging has a sound of Genesis about it. Indeed, this god-and-mankind relationship must be encountered when the third level of meaning is considered.

While yet on the second level one must explore further those facets of Felix Krull that make it the paragon of the modern picaresque novel. Quite obviously it has all the
mechanical qualifications of the picaresque. Krull relates his own story, in reminiscent fashion. As a boy, precocious and unruly, he enjoys wealth and family position. His thievery and skulduggery begin young, when he first realizes the thrill of pilfering candy from the corner sweet shop. To Felix, however, there is something more than petty theft involved:

No doubt I shall be accused of common theft. I will not deny the accusation, I will simply withdraw and refuse to contradict anyone who chooses to mouth this paltry word. But the word—the poor, cheap, shopworn word, which does violence to all the finer meanings of life—is one thing, and the primeval absolute deed forever shrouded with newness and originality is quite another (5, p. 43).

From the stealing of candy, Felix moves to bigger endeavors. His father commits suicide after a severe business reverse, and suddenly the boy finds himself poor and on his own. From this point onward, Felix is on his way. In one of the most humorous passages in the book he manages to escape the draft, again by commanding his body into illness. Shortly thereafter he is taken in by a young but worldly prostitute named Rozsa, who enjoys and cultivates his physical attributes. From Rozsa he goes from woman to woman and place to place, never working, always stealing, cheating, lying, living.
Several things are unique about Felix Krull as a picaro. First of all he is what loosely could be called a "natural born" picaro. Never does he undergo the adversity of a Lazarillo de Tormes or Don Quixote. In truth the opposite seems to be more applicable, for despite his scandalous and thieving ways Felix never encounters the physical hardships to which most picaresque heroes are heir. His life is smooth and easy, from earliest youth to manhood.

A second unique characteristic of Felix is that he seems sincerely to believe that his outlawry is in some way sanctioned by a higher power, to which only he is attuned and to which only he must answer. As will be noticed in studies of other modern picaros this is not usually the case. The typical picaresque hero, though having few qualms about his anti-social behavior, does not delude himself into believing that his thieving, lying, and cheating are in any way condoned by any power save the power that lies within himself and that makes him think and act as he does. Most modern literary rogues seem willing to accept the responsibility for their actions, whether good or bad, but Felix is more prone to place the responsibility and the initiative upon higher shoulders.
To understand the other ways in which Felix is unique, one must move into the third and last level of criticism, the level upon which the personality not only of Felix Krull but the personality of Thomas Mann as well must be considered. One very simple fact sets Mann apart from the other picaresque novelists dealt with in this study and helps explain why Felix Krull is unique as a modern picaresque. As James Ball, in his critical study *The Tragic Comedians*, points out, Mann "grew up in the nineteenth century and his works celebrate the bourgeois spirit" (3, p. 100). The term "bourgeois spirit" can safely be ignored here, for it is a much abused and little understood phrase; but the fact that Mann was a product of the last century cannot be ignored. It is essential to understand that Mann's roots were in the same chronological soil as the Victorian, who in turn was not far removed from the Romantic. At no time can one accuse Mann of being either sentimental or bourgeois in *Felix Krull*; yet in order to understand the underlying socio-religious significance of the novel one must appreciate the fact that Mann not only experienced a close chronological proximity with the Victorian but was no doubt in some ways influenced by both the Victorian and the Romantic movements. (Jethro Bithell
calls **Felix Krull** "a picaresque novel in the sense of the English eighteenth century" [2, p. 314]). As will be seen in modern picaresque novels to be considered later, the picaro is seldom if ever a religious person, either consciously or intrinsically. He is for the most part existential, willing to make his own decisions and to stand or fall by those decisions. If he believes in a god it is a distant and inexplicable thing, totally unreliable and without real substance. Felix Krull, on the contrary, despite his anti-social and "sinful" ways, believes rather strongly in a supreme being. Not, one must point out, the usual Judeo-Christian deity, but a real deity nonetheless. Throughout his escapades, Felix is more than willing to let the blame and the responsibility rest on that rather pantheistic god which has become his personal scapegoat. To borrow Felix's own term, his god may well be called the "Primeval Absolute."

Though it would be absurd to accuse Mann of religiosity, through Felix Krull one sees that the belief in an all-powerful deity is at least a vestige in Mann's mind. It is in this light that Heilman's statement that "in the foreground, we see an analogy between picaro-victim and artist-audience; and in the background . . . that of deity
and mankind" makes sense (4, p. 575), for indeed there is throughout the novel that third level of conflict—the conflict between man and his god. It is in this way that the most unique aspect of Felix Krull is revealed, for (again using Heilman's words) Mann is able to convince the reader that "more is going on than meets the eye—which is precisely what does not happen in most picaresque" (4, p. 558).

What exactly is going on? This is a question which neither Heilman nor any other critic seems willing to answer. They are shying, however, from something which is not really that hard to grasp, though in a sense it is indeed a paradox. Felix Krull, despite his reliance upon (or at least his acknowledgment of) a higher power, and despite his suave and calculating ways is a first cousin to Eliot's hollow men. For Felix Krull suffers most acutely from self-delusion. He tries to make both himself and the reader believe that the world which he inhabits is a special domain, open only to those who have the natural gifts and the gall to kick in the door. Krull is glib, expertly mannered, physically attractive, and mentally quick, but he is also as hollow and as void of real values as a child's balloon. He does not even possess the saving trait of self-honesty, which his picaro kinsmen have had through the ages. He is, to use Holden Caulfield's terminology, a phony.
The implications of this phoniness are diverse, but the most obvious and most important implication is that Thomas Mann, in Felix Krull, has captured the essence of modern man, or at least the essence of that segment of present day mankind which still has the audacity to believe in a supreme being and which has not found it necessary to accept a nihilistic philosophy. Krull is a microcosm, expressing for all men like himself the absence of value and the selfish way in which they abuse their deity. Unlike the picaro who accepts only the inevitability of his own demise, Krull is unwilling to cut himself loose from the comforting strings of the god image and to carry upon his own back the burden of his individual existence. He wants to enjoy the fruits of a hedonistic, orgiastic life, but he does not want to pick up the tab at the end. Krull is, like that segment for which he speaks, so utterly selfish that he cannot harbor the possibility that he might be wrong; and in that selfishness he has succeeded in alienating his own god and in creating a world completely devoid of honesty and love. He is a hollow man living in an arid land, driven to distraction by the brilliance of his self-made sun, which to him glares so brightly that the sobering truth cannot be seen.
So Krull's conflict is not only with his society (for in many ways he is the epitome of his hypocritical society) but with his god. He is waging war on both, trying through his well-oiled physical and mental machinery to bluff his way through and attain the heights on the other side. This is an old Greek concept, this theory that by having once put something over on the gods one gains for himself immortality; and the tragedy of Felix Krull is not so much that he has failed but that he has succeeded and is destined to live his life sans love, sans hope, sans everything.

It was stated above that Felix Krull is a paradox. This paradox arises from the fact that on the wide scale Felix Krull is very much the modern picaro. As Alter points out in his discussion of Krull, Mann has drawn his hero to represent the artist in conflict with a middlebrow society, a "distinctly modern" treatment of the picaro (1, p. 129). Krull is, as Alter realizes, enjoying an "advantageous duality" because he is in society enjoying it and outside of society acting as its critic (1, p. 127). Thus Mann has created a unique example of modern picaresqueness, for Felix Krull is shown to be both the best representative of his somewhat wishy-washy and indifferent society, while at the same moment he is its most satirical and perspicacious
observer. He is in fact a microcosm, containing within himself both the failure and the artistic insight of a disillusioned society.
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In September, 1964, Saul Bellow commented to Newsweek magazine that he had finally "broken out" of his own skull and was ready to "break into other skulls" (8, p. 114). Those who admire Bellow and who wish for him a secure place in American letters can only hope that this is so, for he has stewed in his own juices too long. When he wrote The Adventures of Augie March, published in its entirety in 1953, Bellow definitely was still inside his own skull, and as a result the novel disintegrates near the end.

R. W. B. Lewis, in his study The Picaresque Saint, states that Augie March is much like Mann's Felix Krull, since both are "purer instances of the traditional genre" than any other picaresque novels composed in modern times. In the two novels, he maintains, the "picaresque element remains unmixed" (6, p. 34). This is quite true, for Augie and Felix are without a doubt the most clearly defined picaroons to be encountered in the last fifty years or so. Augie March, however, is not on the same literary
plane with Felix Krull. Bellow is not the writer Mann was, and in his novel the difference is obvious.

The surface story of Augie March is not unlike the story of Felix Krull or, for that matter, any other typical picaresque novel. Augie, a young Jewish boy, lives helter-skelter with his mother, ambitious brother Simon, crazy brother Georgie, and an aristocratic Grandma Lausch (the "grande dame" as Augie calls her). There is, as in most picaresque novels, no father, Augie and siblings being technical bastards. Like the typical picaro, Augie begins early to survive by his wits, becomes a rebellious youngster, and refuses to fill the predescribed mold of the ambitious Jew. As he grows older he goes from one scrape to another, and in the end he is no further along than when he began, except perhaps that he is wiser and older.

This surface story is nothing new. The novel, however, is really a more important book than first glances reveal. Augie, with the noted exception of Felix Krull, is the most influential picaro to be discussed in this study, and in all honesty probably deserves the critical acclaim that has been heaped upon him. In a way Bellow's novel is even more important than Mann's for it deals more directly with the American social and moral atmosphere, an element with which
Mann was of course unable to cope adequately. Maxwell Geismar says that the novel "is a literary survey, or an anthropological study—this belated proletarian picaresque account of the American social depths—which is accurate, informative, aware—everything but authentic" (5, p. 217). Both Geismar's praise and his accusation are valid.

For Augie March Bellow consciously chose the picaresque form, the form that would give him the widest possible field in which to run about. No other fiction type could have served his purpose so well or allowed him to make so many remarks about such a diversity of topics. As one critic has said, rather disparagingly, Bellow is, in Augie March, writing "free style" and the limits are imposed not by the novel itself but by Bellow's own inability to realize his personal limitations, the narrowness of his "skull" (7, p. 13). He tries to involve Augie in every conceivable situation, from sex to falconry; and it is this wide range of interests that is one of the major defects of the novel. In fact, the novel is irreparably weakened because of this shortcoming. When a writer composes in the picaresque vein it is necessary for him to make relevant and poignant comments about his contemporary social conditions, as Mark Twain and Thomas Mann were able to do; but when Bellow
created Augie March he far overdid the social commentary. He slathered it on with a big spatula, made it so thick and gummy that one bogs down in the middle and has to plod with sticky feet to the end. Without a doubt the book could have been reduced by one-third or even one-half. Its five hundred thirty-six pages are entirely too much, and even Augie himself seems to tire under the burden. As John W. Aldridge said, Bellow feels "his obligation to the picaresque too strongly, particularly to the requirement that he who begins as a picarо must end as a picarо, and so we are left at the end with the mission unfulfilled, the will unimposed, the man unsubdued" (1, p. 132).

By the last one-fourth the book has weakened badly, for it is at this point that Augie again meets his long absent brother Georgie, free somehow from a home for the mentally incompetent. Upon encountering Georgie once more, Augie decides to return home to Mama, whom he feels he has treated slovenly. He has roamed all over the United States and Mexico, has stolen books and cars, has trained an eagle, seconded a prize fighter, helped one girl with an abortion and slept with countless others, and has been involved in more doings and undoings than a mortal human being could manage in six lifetimes—and suddenly he wants to go home to Mama. Guilt
and an aching conscience, one supposes, are natural outgrowths of the human predicament and are valid subjects for a realistic novel, but one wonders somehow if the inclusion of the "Mama" episode is the appropriate approach to repentance. It appears, in the light of the course that the novel takes up to this scene, that neither Georgie nor Mama should have been exhumed. The story of Augie's brother Simon, which is recurrent, is necessary, for it is the antipodal tale, the "young man in a rut" theme which forms the background for Augie's own story. It provides the proper contrast, but the "Georgie and Mama" section seems out of character and out of place. One critic makes this general appraisal:

The Adventures of Augie March is an embullient book. Its people are emphatic, resourceful, full of ideas, sexually charged. One may ask, however, whether there is not too much freedom of invention, whether Augie, for all the knocks he takes, does not keep changing his mode of life a little too easily, whether the failure of his search for design is not ultimately reflected in a lack of governing design in the book itself (3, p. 124).

In this lack of "governing design" Bellow seems guilty of a gross literary sin: the desire to make a big, hefty book at the price of quality. Big books sell big, and in the case of Augie the accounting section of Viking Press evidently overruled the editing section.
Despite its faults, however, the novel has merit. Augie is a realistic young man. He is also, in typical picaresque fashion, a sharp-witted young man, and in a way his search (and he is searching for something, perhaps his nonexistent father or his own effervescent identity) is the search of every young man, especially of every young man whose starting point was the Depression and who went through the debacle of World War II to emerge on the other side with a fist full of values as worthless as Confederate currency. Such values will not buy love, hope, nor the substances that keep one's soul together. Augie is, like the society which produced it, a novel of alienation.

In Augie March, unlike most picaresque novels both past and present, there is no love. Sex yes; but love no. Agnar Mykle, a Scandanavian novelist, in his almost-picaresque book The Song of the Red Ruby, defines love as "something others do not know of. Love is loneliness." By this definition alone could Augie March be said to contain love, for despite his multitude of "friends" and his long list of women companions, Augie is a lonely young man, disillusioned, dissatisfied, and very much at odds with himself. At the end of the book, alone with an indifferent whore in France, Augie suddenly realizes the absurdity of
his existence. "How queer it was! I started to laugh loudly. And what was I doing here in the fields of Normandy? How about that?" Like Caligula, the eagle whom Augie tried to train for a rich lady in Mexico, Augie himself has failed to be that which he set out to be: better than he was. Caligula simply refused to "play out his Darwinian and Hemingwayish role as an eagle" (5, p. 218), but Augie fails to find out of his own life an experience any more valid or real than the life against which he rebels. The society which he fights is to him valueless because it exists without honest emotions, without feelings, and without love. It is a grave with the ends kicked out, an unending rut of sham and lies and hollow people. There is a scene near the climax of the novel in which Augie finds himself alone in a lifeboat with a religious-scientific fanatic who literally tries to beat Augie into being "saved." The maniac tells Augie that he is offering him "a great course of life," one which is "worth taking a chance for." To Augie the man personifies the conditions from which he has been trying to escape. Augie knows that the man is crazy, possessed of a wild and demonic drive, yet at the same time he fears that the man is also a "genius" and in that bit of doubt he is
uncertain about his own position. He knows somehow that he must lose the battle he has tried to wage.

Two demented land creatures struggling on the vast water, head to head, putting out all the strength they had. I would certainly have killed him then if I'd been able. But he was the stronger man. He threw his immense weight over me, he was heavy as brass, and I fell over a thwart with my face on the cleats of the bottom (2, p. 510).

Augie cannot cope with the powerful insanity of the man, for the fanatic believes that what he is trying to do is right. Augie is unsure, and even though he escapes eventually from the madman, he does so only to return to a society that is as empty and compassionless as it ever was. He searches for meaning but does not find it, searches for love and learns only that for him no such thing exists, either within the limits of the social structure of his contemporaries or outside the social walls. He not only is an outcast from his fellow man, but he is inwardly alone and without much hope. If love exists, then for Augie it is indeed the love defined as loneliness.

This, as indicated, is a unique characteristic for a picaresque novel. Huckleberry Finn, though a child of the road and parentless, nonetheless has true friendship and love, for the slave Jim does love the boy Huck, and although Huck hates to admit emotion for a "nigger," he too
loves Jim. Don Quixote has the same friendship, for who can imagine a more devoted, though skeptical companion than dull-witted Sancho Panza? In more recent picaresque novels, Holden Caulfield has sister Phoebe and Dean Moriarty has Sal Paradise. So Augie's position is rather special. He is alone in a world of his own choosing, outside the pale, unloved but searching for his something to love, something which the reader doubts very seriously that Augie will find. Man was not made to be alone, at least to Augie's way of thinking; yet Augie's only hope of being otherwise rests on his rationalization that just because Columbus was considered a flop, that "didn't prove there was no America." To Augie, just because he has not yet found love, that does not prove it is nonexistent. He has hope.

Augie is untypically picaresque in a second way: he never develops the tough skin and resiliency common to the picaro. By definition the picaresque here inhabits a rough and tumble sub-world, a world outside nice society; and unless he soon develops the thick exterior and learns the trick of bouncing back like a rubber handball, then his task and his life are doomed to torment, if not total failure. Lazarillo de Tormes learns it, after only a few kicks, gouges, and general hardships. Don Quixote has it in the
very beginning, a product of his own madness. Richard Random, Tom Jones, Huck Finn—they all have it in one form or another. They all develop the trait of learning to "take things" and to keep coming without flinching, ready to out-smart the next guy before he has a chance to outsmart them. This, of course, leads to a certain personal hardness, a unique kind of thick-skinned understanding and insight, and perhaps to even vindictiveness; but without it the picaro's life would be intolerable. This inability to roll with the punches, the inability to just and anticipate and retaliate, is Augie's big fault as a picaro, for never does he give up hoping that human beings and the human predicament will improve. He remains ignorant of the hopelessness and the cruelty of the whole situation, and in his naivete he is a lonely man. Lazarillo de Tormes at least became the town crier and was content in his knowledge that man's life tends not toward heaven but toward a certain earthly passivity. (Was it not a man of "God" who in the end was making of him a cuckold?) Augie, however, ends as he began, hoping that tomorrow things will improve, yet knowing undoubtedly that they will not. He knows that life is absurd, for he even tells the madman in the raft that he is "dead against doing things to the entire human race." "I don't
want any more done to me," he says, "and I don't want to tamper with anyone else." Augie realizes that no one becomes a "poet or a saint because you fool with him." He knows that a man becomes a "poet or a saint" simply because that man, through his own powers and with no outside forces acting upon his destiny, decides that a poet or a saint is what he desires to be. Augie, however, even with such a realization, refuses to let himself be divorced from the influence of that society against which he is struggling. He fails to develop the hard shell of the existential individual.

Because Bellow does not let Augie develop and mature as an individual, because he lets him remain naive and thin-skinned, The Adventures of Augie March fails. It fails not as a study in the modern picaresque, but fails more significantly as a commentary on modern America, the subject with which it is supposed most directly to deal. Lionel Trilling, speaking of Huck Finn, said that the novel was great because "it deals directly with the virtue and depravity of man's heart" (4, p. 605). Faulkner applied this same criterion in defining "great literature." Saul Bellow ignores it. Bellow and Augie do not see the pathos and sadness of the human condition, nor do they see the
torment of the human heart. It seems that any man's experience should harden him to the cruelty and indifference of the world. This is expressly true in the case of a picaro. Consequently it also seems that this experience should make the individual commensurately tolerant of and understanding toward human frailty. In the majority of picaroons this awareness is present, but not for Augie March. One of the things which make Augie unique at the same time fails to make him understand the conditions against which he rebels; he is rebelling against man's selfishness and cruelty and lack of love, against man's brevity and against man's insignificance; yet in his rebellion he fails to see that he himself suffers from these very shortcomings and is therefore part of the human predicament which he apparently abhors.

The world, alas, is not so simple as to be composed of Jews and Protestants, rebels, and conformists, good and bad. Bellow should know this, yet he does not impart that knowledge to his creation, Augie. Augie wants things to come in white and black packages, labeled good and bad; and when things do not come so marked he is unable to cope with them. Augie ruminates near the end of the book as he stands and watches the black and white sea break on the beach at
Dunkirk. He is still running and is headed, alone, to Bruges, thinking still of Mexico and a girl he had there, and he tells himself hopefully: "I thought if I could beat the dark to Bruges I'd see the green canals and ancient palaces." One gets the rather empty feeling, however, that Augie is not going to "beat the dark" anywhere, because the dark is inside his head and heart, and one cannot run away from that which composes himself.
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CHAPTER IV

KEEP THIS NIGGER-BOY RUNNING

Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man predates Augie March by one year. The two books, however, seem to have been written concomitantly, parts of each having appeared as short stories in the mid and late forties. Except for their common picaresqueness the two novels are not similar. Although they both deal with a picaro whose ancestry places him in a minority group (Ellison is a Negro, Bellow Jewish), the novels take different roads and end up at different places. Whereas Augie March is a wild, rambunctious undertaking, Ellison's Invisible Man is a strangely low-keyed and quiet book, not so embullient nor so disjointed.

The nameless hero of Invisible Man is a Southern Negro youth. He begins as a high schooler in the South, wins a scholarship to a Southern Negro college (from which, in typical picaro fashion, he never graduates), and ends up, not surprisingly, in Harlem. The anonymous hero is "smart." He wins his college scholarship because, in addition to letting himself be made a fool of for the sake of white man's fun, he is "the smartest boy we've got out here in Greenwood"
and knows "more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary."
But No Name remains in college for only a short while before he is expelled. He does stay long enough to meet an older Negro man who has had sexual intercourse with his teenage daughter. Ellison tries in this scene to make a pertinent comment regarding the Negro's self-rationalization and inherent weak will, but he fails to bring it off and the episode becomes just another case of adding incest to injury.

From college No Name journeys eastward to Harlem, where he becomes involved in countless scrapes and adventures. He leads a labor movement, gets involved in a Brotherhood Organization, and has every white wench in New York running after him and calling him "beautiful." On the night the hero wins his scholarship, which is presented to him in a leather briefcase, he has a dream in which his grandfather comes to him and demands that he read aloud the contents of the briefcase. No Name obeys. The document reads: "To Whom It May Concern ... Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (1, p. 318). From beginning to end Ellison does indeed keep his "Nigger-Boy" running. No Name suffers every indignity and is heir to every betrayal that society (black and white) can heap upon him. He is a guinea pig for hospital experiments, fall guy for a racist organization,
and is in general far more sinned against than sinning. Yet
in the end he has "wised up" and has gained a strange and
mystifying wisdom which lets him know that "men are differ-
ent and that all life is divided and that only in division
is there true health."

No Name knows in the end that the white man did not
make him black and that Nature or God or whatever one chooses
to call the main force of creation is the real culprit.

I'm not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, mind you; nor merely crying *mea culpa*. The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me. It came upon me slowly, like that strange disease that affects those black men whom you see turning from black to albino, their pigment disappearing as under the radiation of some cruel, invisible ray. You go along for years knowing something is wrong, then suddenly you discover that you're as transparent as air (2, p. 434).

This final resolution keeps the novel from failing, and in fact makes it a more valid social document than *Augie March*. Ellison's hero realizes that the horror of being white is as real as the horror of being black, that each man is beset not by blackness nor whiteness but by fear and discontent, and that in some macabre and pathetic way all men are "invisible." Though physically the book is much like *Augie*
March, long and oftentimes ponderous, it comes closer to
dealing face-to-face with the anguish of the human heart,
which knows neither color nor place.

Yet, in several ways the novel does fail. Ellison
writes while in the early stages of paresis. He gets him-
self involved in situations from which he seemingly finds
it difficult to escape, and Invisible Man is redundant with
scenes that serve no purpose and are in fact deadwood.
This is not saying that Ellison is verbose, for it is not
that exactly. Verbosity is not necessarily a literary sin,
and can at times even be entertaining, as in Joseph Heller's
Catch-22 or as in some of Faulkner's better novels.
Ellison's sin is more akin to ennui, as if he starts to
write, then writes and writes and writes, all the time
filled with a terrible boredom and strange guilt that can-
not help but permeate his writing and carry over to the
reader. One gets the feeling while reading Ellison that if
only he had J. D. Salinger's reticence and his own grasp
of reality, then he would be a great novelist. But such is
not the case and one is literally exerted in reading Invisible
Man.

This strain is not usual with the picaresque novel.
As a rule the picaresque novel moves, not only because the
hero moves but moves in its prose and structure, so that the reader is carried along, so that he is in a sense "entertained." In a picaresque novel, if the reader is forced into mental labor pains in order simply to read the story, then much of the impact is lost and the novel's value is therefore dissipated. It is in this capacity that *Invisible Man* fails, for the mere reading of it requires a constant conscious effort that rules out the possibility of a light moment, something which no picaresque novel should be without. Ellison tries too consciously to be symbolic, and in his effort he emasculates the novel. The symbolism, like all other aspects of the picaresque, should be secondary to the movement and the irony, but Ellison's is too overt and too heavy; and as a result his novel suffers irremediably. There are times when Ellison seems to want to be funny, but for some reason he never is. Either his symbolism is too thick or his hero too self-conscious, and since there is no humorous background for the more serious scenes to be set against, these scenes lose their impact. The book is monochromatic, and one wishes that Ellison had used a gayer backdrop and more vivid colors.

Because of this heavy symbolism and lack of laughter, *Invisible Man* must be qualified in order to explain its
place in the picaresque tradition. There is, of course, no doubt that it is truly a picaresque undertaking, but it is a rather strange picaresque novel. Walter Allen, discussing the modern novel, probably modifies *Invisible Man* best when he refrains from calling it pure picaresque and terms it instead a "symbolic novel rendered in terms of the picaresque" (1, p. 318). Ellison at times appears more at home in the genre of Dreiserian naturalism than in the picaresque mode, but this is purely an impression left by what Allen calls Ellison's "subdued and controlled hysteria" which manifests itself in the prose (1, p. 318). There is no need to make a big point of this, for it is not so important that it threatens to remove *Invisible Man* from the picaresque tradition; but it is a point worth noting, for in a way it places the novel closer to the picaresque novels of the eighteenth century than to the early Spanish or modern American picaresque. The differences in the picaro are not so pronounced as to warrant undue criticism, but the picaro has undergone a rather cyclic transition, which in numerous ways places the modern picaresque tale closer to the original Spanish picaresque than to those picaresque novels of the eighteenth century (*Tom Jones, et al*), novels which are, of course, closer in time but further removed in spirit.
(The difference seems basically to be the same difference that exists between the schools of Naturalism and Realism in fiction). It is in this sense that Ellison's hero is unique and perhaps a little out of his time.

Another point, and a more obvious and important one, concerns the conclusion that Ellison's Invisible Man reaches as an individual. Though in structure the novel may at times lie near to the novels of the Tom Jones era, in philosophy (that is, in the final realization of the hero) it is most contemporary. For No Name comes to believe in Camus's doctrine of the absurdity of life. After partaking in a rather nasty race riot, No Name retires down a manhole, where in darkness he can contemplate what R. W. B. Lewis terms the "bitterly comic collapse of his high socialistic hopes" (3, p. 151). No Name himself explains it by saying that "I believe in hard work and progress and action, but now, after first being 'for' society and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or any limit." American society, he realizes, has a code of "winner take nothing" and all of humanity plays "in the face of certain defeat." The only hope (and No Name does have hope) lies not in collective society but in the individual, though "none of us seems to know who he is or where he's going." No Name is searching
for identity out of chaos, and although his own invisibility is a form of negative identity he still sees that "all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd." This doctrine of absurdity is important to remember, not only in regard to Ellison but in connection with the total scheme of American picaresque literature of the last twenty years.

Some of Ellison's uniqueness is evident and has been mentioned. More of it is equally evident, but lies outside the limits of this study. His book (and one must remember that Ellison is a Negro) is more a social study of modern America than it is an undertaking in the picaresque genre, and it is difficult to draw the line and know where the true picaresque ends and the strictly social commentary begins. For the purpose of this paper, however, it must suffice to say that as a novel *Invisible Man* is indeed an exercise in picaresque writing, but at the same time it is not surprising nor unfitting that Ellison is more often criticized in terms of the social critic than as a picaresque novelist. He is a picaresque writer not by choice but simply because the hero he chose to carry his social message happened to be a picaro. Shakespeare's lament of "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" is most applicable to Ellison's *Invisible Man*. But quite clearly such a lament
in the mouth of Ellison's hero would lack the implications 
and the philosophical depth of Shakespeare's Hamlet.
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... I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy.

So saying, Holden Caulfield introduces himself to the world. Since that introduction was first made in 1951, Holden has become one of the most famous young rogues in the annals of literary history; and yet, ironically, he is seldom considered in discussions of the picaresque, even though he has been likened *ad nauseam* to Huck Finn, America's apotheosis of the picaro. There is, however, strong argument that Holden is indeed a picaro and that *Catcher in the Rye* is one of the finest American picaresque novels to be written since *Huck Finn*. It has all the major requirements and no characteristics that would disqualify it from the picaresque. It is written in first person; it has as its hero a young, rebellious rogue, it has movement, though admittedly movement as much in mind as in space; and last but not least it is a rather biting satire on society and on
false values. Also, uproarious humor is interspersed among its bitterness (for it is bitter), and a near perfect contrast is formed between laughter and pathos. In passing, one may mention an element in *Catcher* that puts it closer to *Don Quixote* than any other novel considered in this study: Holden, in the strictest sense of the term, is mentally deranged, for he is in fact telling his story from a mental institution, the "here" to which he refers in the quotation above.

Ihab Hassan probably comes closest to putting the real finger on Holden when he terms *Catcher in the Rye* a "neo-picaresque" book (4, p. 272), for despite his standing as a picaresque protagonist, there is much about Holden that sets him apart from not only the likes of Lazarillo de Tormes and Don Quixote but from the modern picaro as well. This uniqueness is not easily identified, but it hinges on the fact that he is solely the product of the Bomb Era. Unlike Augie March and Ellison's *No Name*, Holden's existence does not predate the war years. He is not a child of the Depression, nor is he a result of the Southern racial hatred. He is uniquely the product of A-Bomb America, and for this reason, if for no other, Holden has the exclusive right to a strange and inexplicable individuality.
Partially because of this individuality, critics have done much with Holden; yet somehow he has persevered and is beginning to emerge as an important character of American literature. Salinger seems destined to write nothing else of significance, but what he created in *Catcher in the Rye* assures him a prominent position in American letters. *Catcher* may well be, as Donald Barr testifies, "one of the half-dozen or so best novels ever written by an American" (2, p. 53). It is not the purpose here to analyze the book in its entire scope. The purpose is to examine the novel's picaresque element, and the comment herein will be limited to that aim.

It was previously mentioned that Holden Caulfield was akin to Don Quixote in that he was mentally unstable. Such a kinship does exist, but the similarity between the two picaros is deeper than this, or at least extends further along the same line. As Hassan points out, Holden is forever "performing the quixotic gesture" (4, p. 273). He picks a fight with Stradlater, a youth twice his size, because he feels that Stradlater has seduced his friend Jane Gallagher. He spends the afternoon trying to rub dirty words off walls so little kids will not see the obscenities. Similar incidents occur throughout the novel, and Holden is
forever convinced of the undaunted maidenhood of all girls, even to such an extent that he is unable to accept the offerings of a young prostitute—a refusal which costs him five dollars nonetheless. Holden is not only young and gauche, he is constitutionally unbalanced, unable to see things in their proper order and in the proper perspective. One sees no more insanity in Don Quixote's headlong assault of the windmills than in Holden's pitiful and fruitless attempt to eradicate the dirty words. One sees, in fact, with a little imagination, Holden charging forth on Rocinante to assail a cruel and harsh world, set on rescuing the fair damsels, who in fact are whores and streetwalkers but who to Holden are the exemplars of maidenhood.

Yet Holden's foray is somewhat more subtle than Don Quixote's, his search a little less motivated by innate madness. Oddly enough, what Holden searches for is exactly what he is losing: innocence. As John W. Aldridge puts it, Holden's journey is a journey from "holy innocence to such knowledge as the world offers, from the reality which illusion demands . . . to the illusion which reality insists, at the point of madness, we settle for." Aldridge goes so far as to label the novel "a study in the spiritual picaresque" (1, p. 129), and at this point Holden must obviously part company with the illustrious Don
Quixote, for Don Quixote definitely was not going away from innocence toward knowledge, but more from sublimity into absurdity.

The picaro with whom Holden is most often compared, sometimes quite carelessly, is Huck Finn. The similarities are rather obvious: both are young boys, both speak the idiomatic tongue of their contemporaries; both are at odds with parents or guardians; and both somehow find a set of values which sees them through, though Huck's is more profane and less idealistic. A major difference between the young rogues hinges on the fact that whereas Holden is almost completely divorced from the adult world, Huck, though admittedly a little weary of the adult environment, has a workable if not companionable relationship with his elders. As Edgar Branch points out, Holden, after the "petting" incident, can no longer depend on his former friend Antolini. The event leaves Holden more "screwed up" than ever and his already unstable relationship with the adult world is almost completely destroyed. Huck, on the other hand, has a very close relationship with Jim, and the boy realises that regardless of what happens he can always count on the Negro friend (3, p. 20).
This does not imply that Huck resolves all his troubles and reaches an ideal understanding with the adult society, for as one recalls, Huck is in the end of the novel heading westward to avoid just such a predicament. The ironic thing here is that while Huck goes west to escape his aunt and the hodge-podge of conventionalities which she represents, so too does Holden go west, but to see a psychiatrist. The difference between the two picaros is that Huck's presence of mind and his ability to react quickly to any situation are almost diametrically opposed to Holden's rather delicately balanced mental condition, a condition which causes him to over-react. Whereas Huck journeys westward healthy of mind and more assured of his own existence than ever before, Holden moves westward in search of a healthy mind and what has become known as "identity."

The books are most similar in the abstract sense, since they are both "a devastating criticism of American society" (3, p. 29). It is in this closeness of "ethical-social import" that Catcher in the Rye is a "haunting reminder" of Huck Finn (3, p. 25). This is not an attempt to prove that Holden is a carbon copy of Huck, for he certainly is not. The two differ in numerous ways. But it is important to remember that Holden is indeed a continuation of the literary
type first created in America by Mark Twain and is most assuredly as much a picaro as the indomitable Huck Finn. Branch and other critics agree with this contention.

In his own right as an American picaro, Holden has something to say. He says, if one may be metaphorical, that the world is made up of "right handers" (synonymous here with "do-gooders," the "right way," and similar catch phrases) and there is no room for "left handers." The left hander's world is the world of poetry and art and general sensitivity, whereas the right hander's world is the world of the baser, cruder breed. One recalls the episode of Allie's catcher's mitt, a left handed catcher's mitt with poetry scribbled on all the fingers in green ink. Holden describes his brother:

But it wasn't just that he was the most intelligent member of the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody. People with red hair are supposed to get mad very easily, but Allie never did, and he had very red hair . . . . God, he was a nice kid, though (5, p. 37).

The night Allie died, Holden shattered all the garage windows. "I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it." To Holden Allie signifies the death of goodness in an unfair and unkind world. It is the conflict again of art versus
dilettantism, of sensitivity opposed to bourgeois indifference. (One recalls this same basic conflict in Mann's *Felix Krull.* ) For breaking the windows in mourning for his younger brother's death, Holden receives not commiseration but psychoanalysis. He receives not even the negative reinforcement of punishment, but is given instead the cold and impersonal doctor's couch, like a malfunctioning automobile sent to the mechanic for repair and reconditioning. It is no wonder that Holden, later in the book, says that mother's love for her child is about as kind as "a goddam wolf."

The right handed world is also the world which produces such people as Stradlater, the secret slob; the world that causes "fuck" to be scribbled on buildings where little girls can see it. It is the world of all the gross pain and injustice that man inflicts on man. It is the world of non-communication, lovelessness, the Big Bomb, the world of the Great Indifference. It is the laughable, pathetic world.

But in pathos there is humor:

Anyway . . . I sort of figured this was my big chance, in a way. I figured if she was a prostitute and all, I could get in some practice on her, in case I ever get married or anything . . . . I read this book once, at the Whooton School, that has this very sophisticated, suave, sexy guy in it . . . . He had this big chateau and all on the Riviera, in Europe, and all he did in his
sparer time was beat women off with a club. He was a real rake and all, but he knocked women out. He said, in this one part, that a woman's body is like a violin and all, and that it takes a terrific musician to play it right. It was a very corny book--I realize that--but I couldn't get that violin stuff out of my mind anyway. In a way, that's why I sort of wanted to get some practice in, in case I ever get mar-

This and the following scene with the prostitute is in the best sense of the word humorous, comparable in many ways to some of the wild ramblings of Don Quixote. Yet, again like Quixote, it is tragically sad, expressing the loneliness and the vulnerability of man's heart, the unsalved hurt of his isolation and the futility of his dreams. Holden, one must remember, is an idealist, a dreamer. He sees himself as the protector of the innocent and the curator of the weak, so much so that all he aspires to be is the "catcher in the rye" so that he might keep little kids from falling over a cliff. Being a dreamer he is unable to cope with the hard reality of life, the harshness and the indifference of the Stradlaters or with the perverted selfishness of the Antolinis. Holden is the "picaresque saint" in a world of demonic "Old Maurices" who whop the hell out of him in payment for his not having lain with a prostitute. In this vein, one critic,
Albert Fowler, compares Salinger with Rousseau. Both present a character who is "born good and corrupted by his institutions" (3, p. 34). Each author characterizes his hero as a youth "full of love and courage, innocent and good, a wise sheep forced into lone wolf's clothing." He is capable of penetrating the phoniness and the commonplaceness of a "society which botches things so terribly" (3, p. 35).

Yet, in such a world and under such conditions, Holden somehow manages to maintain a certain presence of innocence—not real innocence, but a shadow of it. In the end, after his journey, Holden is really no closer to what Aldridge calls the "reality which illusion demands" than he was in the beginning; but he realizes that he is no closer. He is perhaps no nearer to "reality," but he is wiser:

About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told you about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody (5, p. 192).

Holden realizes, as Tom Wolfe realized, that every man is forever a stranger and alone, beset by his own limitations and torn by his own torments of body and soul. But at the same time he realizes, as John Donne realized, that no man is an island, but is part of the totality of existence, a fragment of the tortured whole, unified by pain and a common
malaise. When he starts missing everybody, Holden is in fact missing himself, mourning his own loss of dreams and innocence. He is a left hander in a right handed world, and he knows, though without deep bitterness, that the right handers are winning the battle.

There is really nothing so drastically unique about Holden's feelings, for as Fowler and other critics have noted, the loneliness and alienation which Holden experiences are common to every boy as he grows up. They are part of life. What Salinger has done with Holden, however, cannot be denigrated on this basis. Salinger makes Holden into the high priest of youthful alienation and discontent. It is not that Holden's emotions are so rare, for indeed they are not; but Holden expresses them in a way that causes one to think, to stop and consider for a moment not only the isolation of Holden Caulfield but the isolation of every man. Behind the laughter and the satire and the buffoonery, one suddenly realizes a definite sadness and a very real pathos, both relevant to the human situation.

In this sense Salinger has created an undesirable latter-day picaro. He has placed that young picaro squarely within the picaresque tradition and has made him say poignant and worthwhile things about his contemporary
society. *Catcher in the Rye* no doubt has many levels of meaning, depending on the purpose for which the novel is criticized. It will not be argued here whether or not the book is truly one of the great American novels; but it is safe to say that the novel is quite well established, not only in the minds of American youths and young men, but in the picaresque tradition as well.
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CHAPTER VI

THE NAME OF THE GAME

From Salinger's tight, sparse prose one moves to the
Beat lyricism of Jack Kerouac. His writing is a grotesque
mixture of Wolfean verbosity and Faulknerian obscurantism,
a hell-raising kind of anti-prose that abuses the English
language unmercifully and makes it cry for alleviation.
On the Road is the quintessence of this strange writing,
and although Kerouac has since written other Beat fiction,
none of it bears exposition separate from On the Road.

In a sense, in accounting for On the Road one
has accounted for all of Kerouac's "beat"
fiction, because its view of events and people
as intermixed in sequential episodes having no
fictional importance beyond their having hap-
pened establishes the pattern for all his later
writing (1, p. 209).

There is no doubt that when Kerouac published On the
Road in 1957, he wrote a new chapter in American literature,
as well as in the more specific area of picaresque litera-
ture. He dumped a wild new kind of picaro into the tradi-
tion--two wild picaros in fact, for Sal Paradise (the
narrator) is no less a picaro than Dean Moriarty, his loose-
footed companion. Yet the novel is hard to locate precisely
within the picaresque tradition. One knows that it belongs there, but he wonders just where. If Salinger's Holden Caulfield is unique enough as a picaro to occupy his own separate limb on the picaresque family tree, then Kerouac's heroes are clear out of the tree, swinging through their own private shrubbery, howling and bawling and raising hell. It all goes to create a situation which is hard to account for.

Sal Paradise explains his peripatetic friend Dean by saying: "Schooled in the raw road night, Dean was come into the world to see it." This may clarify things in Beat Talk but it does not reveal much in standard square English. To understand Dean and the novel itself, one must accept a completely new kind of morality— the morality of sexual freedom and personal abandon, where no law is law and where man answers, in a wild existential fashion, to no one but himself. Somewhere down the line the gods have died and the edicts and traditions of man's endless ages have been ditched. Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism calls for total commitment to "something," and the commitment of the Beatniks is to women, liquor, and the unending road, a road that winds and twists around a million fallen idols and then doubles back upon itself to begin all over again.
Sal and Dean's rebellion is unlike the rebellion of Augie March and Holden Caulfield and the other picaresque heroes. The difference admittedly is hard to explain, but it lies basically in the fact that whereas the other picaresque heroes rebel within the limitations of man's society, Dean and Sal rebel outside those limits. That is, the other rogues have seen society's fallacies and shortcomings; they have, in effect, weighed society in the balance and found it wanting. But the Beatnik picaro does not even bother to examine that which society has to offer. Sal and Dean, a priori, reject society and its laws and set about to create a new kind of existence, an anti-society of individualism and indifference, based on Active Boredom.

... Kerouac's noisy exuberance in the cause of individuals who steal cars, ride the freights, copulate indiscriminately, is a demonstration of the need of a certain kind of person to survive sui generis, uniquely, outside the decorums of society. His fiction ... is a raucous reminder that we have reached a period in our civilization where many of the eager and thoughtful, and not necessarily neurotic, members of the postwar generation find it increasingly difficult to surrender their whole lives to old values and traditional patterns of action (1, p. 200).

This rebellion against surrendering one's life to society and the difficulty with which the disjointed postwar generation faces tomorrow is more or less a valid uprising; but
it is not really so new among contemporary picaroons. What is truly unique about Kerouac's picaros is the total and emphatic way in which they shun convention. One must ask, however, just what is their gripe and what values have they created to replace the old ones? Kerouac presents no answers.

Edmund Fuller says that On the Road "adds up to the great American goof-off" (2, p. 152), and this probably comes as close to anything to explaining just exactly what the novel and its characters are about. It is a "goof-off" book for a goof-off people, a paean to laziness, parasitism, immorality, lust, and ignorance. It makes of the Seven Deadly Sins virtues, and it reverses the image that man once held of himself: a noble creature striving for a goal and attempting to become better than he is. It is a negative book, an inducement to sick mentalities and weak wills; and one wonders: is the novel about people who really exist, or do such people exist because of the novel and other writings like it? Maybe it is because one has never lived in such a world as Dean and Sal know, maybe his experience has been limited to ivied walls and musty study rooms, and maybe his own world is too narrow; but whatever the cause, such characters not only seem unreal, they do not even seem to be good fiction. They appear, in fact, as fantasies.
And as for the bearded coffee house addicts, long chinned and guttural-voiced, do they thrive because they wish really to rebel against something, or do they exist because Jack Kerouac wrote such books as *On the Road*? One has to think this latter possibility at least partially valid, if not totally so. The Beatnik craze, which fortunately seems now to be passing like hula-hoops and phone-booth stuffing, has no philosophy behind it, though it claims some sort of occult and sick existentialism. It strikes one as a sad kind of game for adults, a mad sort of charades wherein men play zombies and heaven resounds of jazz and reeks of reefers. It appears to be Kerouac's Game.

As a novel *per se*, where exactly does *On the Road* stand in the picaresque tradition? Jack Ludwig states that as picaresque novel, *On the Road* has twisted Huck Finn into a "hood" and has badly confused "violence with vitality" (3, p. 6). On the other side of the ledger, Gilbert Millstein of the *New York Times*, in what must have been a wild moment, states that the novel "is the most beautifully executed, the clearest and most important utterance" not only of American picaresque literature but of the entire generation of which Kerouac is a part (2, p. 148). As literature, *On the Road* comes closer to fitting Ludwig's
estimate than Millstein's, but approached as picaresque writing alone it must be given its rightful place, though that place is a rather confusing one. It has all the positive qualifications for picaresque novels: first person narration, young men as heroes (or anti-heroes), and movement. In fact, the "one and noble function of the time," according to Sal and Dean, is movement (2, p. 151). Then, too, in their own insane way, the two picaroons are sharp-witted and wise, for they pull the proverbial wool over the eyes of the squares time and time again. Also, in passing, one must note that, as in most picaresque novels, the father search motif is evident, for Sal admits in the end that he often though of "the father we never found."

Picaresque the novel definitely is, and again like many such books it is a paradoxical tale. By almost all presently applicable literary standards, On the Road is inferior to both Catcher in the Rye and Aucie March, and to most of the other novels discussed in this study; but it probably is a more influential novel than either Catcher or Aucie. This is a fact which is practically impossible to prove, but Kerouac seems already to have affected the trend of the American novel with his loose and intentionally careless use (or abuse) of the English language, his anti-prose.
Himself laboring under the influence of Wolfe and Joyce, Kerouac somehow has managed to hack out a new kind of expression, commensurate with the disjointed and alienated generation of which he claims to write. The novel first appeared in 1957, and eight years is too short a time to truthfully measure the impact which any one book or any one writer has had upon literature in general; but there have already appeared minor novels since that time that bear a striking similarity to Kerouac's broken-backed writing. (One could make a strong case for this argument by citing some of William Burrough's fiction.)

It may well be true, as already hinted, that Kerouac in On the Road is "engaged in telling the great lie about man" (2, p. 152), but it is not true that the book is a total failure, either as a picaresque novel or as literature in general. Meretriciously bad books have in the past carried great weight in influencing those books which followed, and Kerouac's writing seems well on its way to establishing itself for this purpose if for no other.
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Several recent novels in the picaresque tradition have received either considerable critical attention or a wide reading audience, or both. Though they are not works of high literary importance, they are worthy of mention, if for no other reason than to show that the genre has continued to the present day, and that novels of this type seem to be proliferating.

J. P. Donleavy's *Ginger Man* (1958) is such a novel. Donleavy writes in what Ihab Hassan calls the "post-Joycean" school (2, p. 194), and his novel is pure picaresque. The hero, Sebastian Dangerfield, is an American at loose ends in Dublin. He lives the typical picaresque existence, whoring and lying and studying law as a cover-up. In the end he inherits what to him is a fortune, and lives, one imagines, a life of financial ease, though not a life of mental ease. The plot of the novel is "a gag, and the attainment of wealth is an absurd accident," for in a world without value—such as Dangerfield inhabits—money "is the ultimate absurdity" (2, p. 197). Throughout the book man's
values and society's expectations are shown to be ridiculous, asinine, totally incompatible with human biology and nature's intentions.

What is Donleavy trying to say via poor harried Sebastian? One must remember that the title of the novel comes from the Gingerbread Man of nursery rhyme fame (2, p. 198). Sebastian, not unlike his namesake, tries to run away only to be destroyed by that from which he runs. He has dissatisfaction, a sickness inherent in the human animal, and in his discontent, he searches for something—for what, one is not sure. Somewhere along the way, however, he strays, and that from which he flees lashes back to destroy him. Throughout the book Sebastian is a stranger and alone, longing for money, yet really trying desperately to make some fragile contact with another human being. "I need people to talk to," he says wistfully more than once. When finally he does get that for which he has longed, money, he nonetheless remains a "straight dark figure and stranger" who realizes that he has spent his entire life "running out to death." In the end he is sadder but wiser, knowing that there are but two things in which man is united: loneliness and death.
Although Donleavy manages to capture what Hassan calls "the acid sense of life" (2, p. 199), the novel is on the whole a failure. Much of it is hackneyed and ill-expressed. It is the kind of book that could best be handled chapter by chapter, for as an artistic entity it is almost impossible to explicate or to truly understand.

An equally disappointing novel is James Purdy's Malcolm, a rather boring harangue on lost innocence which was published a year after Ginger Man. When on page six of the novel Malcolm tells Mr. Cox, the friendly astrologer, that "my father has disappeared," one suddenly gets the premonition that he has been here before, only with better company. The entire book hinges on Malcolm's search for his father. Malcolm is a "very young man" and can be forgiven for being so gauche, but James Purdy is not a very young man and one expects him to do better than Malcolm. The gist of the plot is that Malcolm is destroyed by his contemporaries because he is innocent and they are debased. He is kicked, tricked, and abused, but ends up no wiser than he began. He is a dumb picaro. He is not roguish by nature but only at Cox's explicit urging, and in the end he pays the price for his gullibility: he is literally loved to death by an oversexed songstress.
Not only does the book fail as an artistic entity, it fails more specifically as a picaresque story. Malcolm is just too good to be true, and from Lazarillo de Tormes to Augie March this is in no way characteristic of the picaro. True, Malcolm is young, fatherless, alone in the world, and travels about, but he does not learn to live by his wits, as a picaro should. He is in fact destroyed simply because he has no wits about him. He has only a fatal and somewhat sickening effeminate charm. He does not steal, lie, cheat, or love the ladies (the only one he does love kills him). At best he is an emasculated rogue, a second-rate picaro who acts not of his own free will but at the direction of another. He cries out once to his friends: "Keep your hands off my soul," but he does not have the backbone to make them do so, and because of this lack of will he is destroyed.

A third novel that must be mentioned is Robert Lewis Taylor's *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters*, the Pulitzer Prize winning novel of 1958. It is unlike both *Ginger Man* and *Malcolm* and all other modern picaresque novels. It is, in fact, a literary throwback to *Huck Finn*. Taken from the journals of one Dr. Joseph Middleton, who made the trek from the east to California in the mid-1800's, the novel is well written, though it is not a picaresque piece de
resistance, as it was called by the San Francisco Chronicle (1, p. 26). It is more precisely a fair imitation of Mark Twain's picaresque masterpiece.

Like Twain's picaro, Jaimie is by book's end a wiser "man." He has traversed a wild and danger-ridden continent, has witnessed more brutality than half a hundred men, has been stolen by wild Indians, has been seduced by a middle-aged saloon "girl," and has lost his father to murderers. He passes from boyhood into early manhood and in the end is trekking happily away to marry one of his Indian friends. Jaimie McPheeters, and Taylor's later picaresque undertaking, Journey to Matacumbe (an even more blatant plagiarism of Huck Finn) are both examples of atavistic fiction, harking back much too strongly to a bygone era; and as such they contribute nothing to modern understanding or to modern fiction. Unlike their master Huck Finn, Taylor's novels lack both the insight and the literary savoir-faire that could raise them above place and time and lift them into universality.

Other recent novels which have been termed picaresque include Terry Southern's Candy, Thomas Berger's Little Big Man, John Culp's The Bright Feathers, and William Burrough's Nova Express. Although two of these (Candy and Little Big
Man) have received much attention and a fairly large audience, none of them seems truly to be of any lasting literary importance. They are, however, picaresque, to a more or less degree, and indicate that the genre is yet very active and that the modern American novelists are still finding in the picaresque mode a literary style commensurate with their needs of expression.
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CHAPTER VIII

A TOTAL LOOK

America is a country of middlebrows, a land of middle class morality. Extreme ends of the continuum exist, occupied not necessarily by the very rich and the very poor but occupied more by the very intelligent and the very ignorant. The peoples of these extremes (each in their own way extremely fortunate) are so completely overshadowed by the middle class multitude, however, that for critical purposes they are nonexistent. In literary and social criticism one must deal instead with what has become a national mediocrity, a state in which dilettantism rules supreme and in which the Artist feels compelled in many ways to compose an apologia for possessing sensibilities and sensitivities keener than his fellow man. It is in such an atmosphere that criticism of modern picaresque literature must be couched.

In Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull* one sees manifest the conflict between the Artist and the Burgher. This same conflict permeates the whole of contemporary picaresque writing. It
is evident in J. D. Salinger and Holden Caulfield, who with his dead brother Allie, represents the artist at war with an indifferent and selfish world. It is evident in Augie March, who has "opposition" in him and who tries to outrun the "darkness" to Bruges. It is evident in Malcolm (artistic sensitivity destroyed by lust), in the Invisible Man, and in Sebastian Dangerfield. The theme over and over again is Art versus Dilettantism and Freedom versus Servitude. The modern picaresque hero is striking back at the TV mentality, the mass vegetation of mind, soul, and heart. For the modern picaro is in no way an ordinary "middle-of-the roader" seeking hearth, home, and fringe benefits. Henry Miller observed recently that "We are now passing through a period of what might be called 'cosmic insensitivity,' a period when God seems more than ever absent from the world and man is doomed to come face to face with the fate he has created for himself" (4, pp. 28-29). It is against this "cosmic insensitivity" that the picaresque hero battles and it is with full realization of the impending confrontation of his own fate that the picaresque hero strives to make sense out of a senseless time.

This conflict of Artist and Society is in many ways a new facet of picaresque literature. One must recall that in
the early Spanish picaresque and throughout much of the later picaresque this specific antagonism did not exist, or at least existed on an entirely different level. Lazarillo de Tormes was no artist, was not particularly sensitive, except to an empty stomach and to cracks on the pate. Don Quixote was certainly void of true artistic inclinations. A certain warped élan vital he definitely possessed, but it was the product of insanity and was directed at anything save artistic or philosophical freedom. Gil Blas was no artist, nor was Roderick Random or Tom Jones. These early picaroons were rascals, some educated, some not, but they were all akin in that their reasons for warring with their societies were more concrete and immediate than those of the contemporary picaresque heroes. These earlier picaros went into battle because they lacked food (Lazarillo), because they had lost their birthright (Tom Jones), or simply because they lacked mental stability (Don Quixote). They had no philosophical gauntlet to throw down to the world. They did not challenge their fellow man's ideas or actions. They just happened to go contrary to the way things were, for secular reasons. This is not meant to imply that the authors who composed the early picaresque tales were unaware of the satirical impact and the social ramifications which their
novels possessed, for such is not the case. The point is that the picaros themselves, not their creators, had no such intrinsic values of a metaphysical nature which drove them onward. Lazarillo de Tormes simply wanted to eat regularly enough to keep stomach and backbone separate, and Tom Jones and Roderick Random (though rogues to the core) only sought to gain a rightful place in society.

The difference between the conventional picaresque hero and the modern picaro is now becoming evident. Remember that Lazarillo de Tormes becomes in the end a respected town crier; that Roderick Random finds his lost father, marries Narcissa, and settles down to a life of ease and comfort on his own estate; and that Tom Jones is finally revealed to be in fact Tom Allworthy, marries good Sophia and turns into a solid citizen. Then remember on the other hand that Felix Krull in the end is still a shiftless and opportunistic gigolo; that Augie March is yet alone and lost, cutting out for "Dunkerque and Ostend," a failure in a foreign land; and that Malcolm is dead before reaching his majority. Holden Caulfield is an inmate in a mental institution, Invisible Man has hidden in a black manhole, Sebastian Dangerfield is a wasted though wealthy alien in Ireland, and Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty are yet bums of the road. The point is
obvious. The earlier picaros were, like the modern picaros, outside the pale of society; but not by choice and not because of a conscious desire to revolt. They were outside because acts of providence put them there, and outside they did not wish to remain. The early picaro's whole struggle was a struggle not to prove his own philosophy but to enter society, to be accepted by the masses, and to become, in effect, a solid citizen. On the contrary the modern picaro is a rebel by choice and by conscience. He does not wander about in search of food, nor does he hit the road in search of his birthright. He goes to war with his fellow man because he feels, though perhaps subconsciously, that the ideas and mores of his fellow man are false and valueless. Each modern picaro is an alien because by choice he believes that society is wrong and that his own ideas and methods are right. He is the Artist at war with Mediocrity.

The modern American picaresque novel is thus the literature of voluntary alienation. The contemporary picaro is a conscious rebel, not a rebel or an outsider by birth, providence, or circumstance. In practically every modern picaresque story, the hero, despite the oftentimes impecunious circumstances of his birth and early childhood,
has the chance to "make good." Felix Krull, who is less a stranger to the conventional picaro than any other modern rogue (and remember, he was created by a European), has more than one chance after his father's suicide to make "an honest living." Augie March is presented with numerous opportunities to settle down, join the masses, and lead the Happy Life. Holden Caulfield is born of wealthy parents and needs only to "straighten out" in order to enjoy his just rewards. Even Ellison's Negro invisible man has the chance, via a college scholarship and good job offers, to reach a middle class plateau, if not within the white milieu then at least within his own. But no. These picaros choose not to pursue the straight and narrow path—a path paved with hypocrisy, greed, and a path that leads to the happy corral of what Thomas Mann refers to as the Burgher society. They choose instead to revolt and to answer to no one save themselves as individuals. Far from wanting to actively become a part of their contemporary society, they want rather to tear that society apart and rebuild it in their own image. They are, in a word, idealists, loose in a world void of both ideals and ideas.

The world of which the older picaro was a part (or, more precisely, of which he finally becomes a part) was a
world of more definite values than the present world. Tom Jones wanted marriage, his rightful wealth, a home in the country. Roderick Random sought the same. Even Moll Flanders, who felt all along that "poverty is the worst of all snares," manages after many men and twelve children to reach America and settle down to an honest life. The societies for which these novels were written were societies still able to believe in the invulnerability of god, home, and country, still able to sincerely feel that such things possess value. Perhaps even the novelists themselves, though no doubt far more realistic and perspicacious than their fellows, subscribed to this same sense of values. Whether they did or did not, however, is not the point. The point is that the audiences for which these tales were originally composed refused and in fact were constitutionally unable to believe that man could be answerable for his own deeds to himself alone. They therefore would not tolerate any novel in which the hero was, in the end, left hanging as he had begun--alone, still without a concrete set of values, his eyes still unopened to the rewards of the Good Life. But the new A-Bomb world, of which the modern picaro is a direct product, denies the old belief of "Pie in the sky by-and-by," and must accept instead that if anything comes from the heavens it shall not be goodness but annihilation.
Just as Huck Finn expressed artistically the change which the Civil War wrought in mores and values, so too does the modern picaro express the ever-widening chasm between those who once believed in an All-Good and an All-Powerful deity and those who have the inner fortitude to admit that man's life is finite and valuable only within its own framework. The modern picaresque novel expresses time and again the existentialistic philosophy. (The exception, as noted, is Felix Krull.) Augie March, when he is offered religion and the chance to "be saved" by an omnipotent power, rejects the offer flatly. "Even if I was sure you knew what you were talking about I'd still say no," he avers. Augie is the best spokesman for the modern picaro, for he expresses better than any other contemporary picaresque hero the doctrine of existentialism and absurdity.

David O. Galloway, in an article in Texas Studies in Literature and Language, compares Bellow with Albert Camus and states that Augie, in "refusing to reconcile himself to adverse reality and in rejecting death as a solution to his dilemma," strongly asserts his "position as an absurd man" (2, pp. 238-239). Galloway recognizes that Augie's "persistent refusal to become involved or to conform to the will of others is in effect positive criticism of things as
they are" (2, p. 235), and that because of this it is
"Augie's special fate to face the world alone" (2, p. 237),
just as Camus' protagonist in The Stranger had to do.
Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man expresses this same absur-
dity, for after the horrors of society have driven him
literally into a dark hole he suddenly realizes that hu-
manity plays "in the face of certain defeat." He discovers
that "all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd."
Variations of this same theme, of this same eccentric exist-
tentialism, are expressed in every major picaresque novel
of the last two decades.

This doctrine of the absurd is almost exclusively the
product of the Atomic Age, a final admission that man's
life has significance only in its insignificance and that
collective society has failed utterly in finding for the
individual security and the way to inner peace. Marc
Slonim, writing on the existential novelists in the New
York Times Book Review, states that "they are concerned
with the absurdity of the human condition; they represent
the insoluble conflict between reason, as man's attribute,
and the stolidity of his aloof environment; they insist on
the individual's solitude and alienation; they stress the
horror of his ultimate annihilation" (3, p. 4). Alienation
and annihilation are the key words in Slonim's synopsis, for the modern existentialistic picaro is a figure of complete alienation who is painfully aware of his eventual annihilation. The ironic duality of modern science, which strives for utopia for man while at the same time it produces the method for his total destruction, has guaranteed such annihilation and has made such alienation a certainty. The artist cannot close his eyes to the conditions under which he and his fellows exist, and for this reason the picaresque hero has evolved into his present form of moral and social pessimist.

Perhaps it is safe to say that the major differences between the modern picaresque hero and the traditional picaro are not so much overt as innate. The definitions outlined in the beginning of this paper apply as much to the present picaro as they do to the picaro of four hundred years ago, no more and no less. All the picaros, from Lazarillo de Tormes to Augie March, are young men struggling to survive. It is the form which that struggle takes and the stimuli which cause the struggle that have changed. Whereas the conventional picaro seemed able to believe (as his society believed) that the future, though often gloomy indeed, held for him something better than the present, the
modern picaro looks into a future of doom, a future as unpromising as Augie March's darkness and Invisible Man's sewer tunnel. This is not to say that the modern picaro does not have hope, for somehow he does. It is not, however, the hope of Tom Jones or Roderick Random or Moll Flanders; nor is it the hope of a collective "good life." It is the hope for individual freedom and the unhindered right to be wrong if one chooses. When young Malcolm tells one of his antagonists to "Keep your hands off my soul," he is in effect asking for freedom, the privilege to choose his own destiny, no matter what that destiny might be.

The conventional picaro somehow managed always to reach his goal, simply because that goal was a real and not an abstract thing. Even the "Father" for which both old and new picaros search is not the same, for the modern picaro searches not for his real father, as did Tom Jones and Roderick Random, nor does he search for the symbolic Father of the Christian church. He deludes himself in neither instance. He knows that his real father is either dead or totally disinterested in him, as young Malcolm finally realizes, and he knows that there exists nowhere in the universe a Father who can swing open the Pearly Gates
and lead the way to streams of milk and honey flowing past streets of purest gold. The father for which he searches is more strictly the symbol of his own right to be free as an individual. It is not surprising then that the modern picaresque hero never realizes his goal, for though he searches for his individual freedom, at the same time he recognizes that as an individual he is part of mankind as a whole. Even free-swinging Sal Paradise realizes that he has "lived many lives" in his tired flesh, just as Holden Caulfield realizes that he "misses even those people who have been unkindest to him." Invisible Man admits the same emotion when he states that when you "step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos."

Is such a realization a contradiction of the very existentialistic philosophy which the modern picaros seem so truculently to expound? No, it is not, no more than the striving for a rightful place in society is a contradiction of what Tom Jones preached. The two main forces of the universe are centripetal and centrifugal, and they work commensurately on both the old and the new picaro. Tom Jones and his kind were victims of the centripetal force, while Augie March and his contemporary picaros are victims
of the centrifugal force. The former were pulled inexorably inward toward the center of society, while the latter are flung outward away from that same center. Both laws are valid, but they go their separate ways. So too, each in his own way, does the conventional and the modern picaro realize his affinity to the totality of mankind. One simply is moving forward to the vortex of that totality, whereas the other moves, sometimes quite pathetically, away. It is to be expected that both forces act upon both types of picaro. The difference lies in which acts more forcibly.

Werner P. Friederich, writing in *The Outline of Comparative Literature*, states that the picaresque is "possible and convincing only in a period of national and moral disintegration" (1, p. 110). One must question the truth of such a statement. This study has concerned itself with the picaresque novel in America since World War II, a period of some twenty years and a period in which the picaresque novel has flourished. Yet, one hesitates to compare these two decades with the Spanish seventeenth and the French eighteenth centuries, the two eras Friederich utilizes to prove his statement. One must remember, before taking Friederich's indictment too seriously, that the prophets of doom and decay have bemoaned human decadence
since the beginning of man. Adam, no doubt, was the first moral pessimist. So it makes little sense to say that the last twenty years have been years of decay or a "period of national and moral disintegration." It is more realistic to understand that the last twenty years have been years of the Great Paradox, a paradox born of the Second World War and its aftermath. This Great Paradox is simply the time during which man has moved closer to material perfection and comfort than ever before imagined possible, while at the same time he lives under the shadow of instant annihilation. Perhaps the first is the result of the second, an attempt by man to hang onto something before the Big One falls; or perhaps the second is the final brutal irony of the first, wherein man, in searching for bodily ease and comfort, has created out of his own rapaciousness a means for his own destruction. But whichever the case, the Great Paradox remains, and the modern American continues to guide his Cadillac with one eye and scan the heavens with the other—waiting for the end, an end which today is probably relatively no nearer than when Adam chose to engurgitate the proverbial apple.

So today, as Don Quixote did four centuries ago, the modern picaro continues to charge full steam into the
twirling arms of the moral windmills. No doubt, again like Quixote, he will not win.
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