

The Return of the Pícaro in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

عودة البيكارو في رواية رجل خفي لـرالف إليسون

Le retour du Pícaro dans l'Homme Invisible de Ralph Ellison

SOUMIA BENNANI

Université Abdelhamid Ibn Badis – Mostaganem

Introduction

The period of post Second World War in America ; often described as a period of turmoil, alienation and despair, witnessed the resurrection of a number of picaresque novels such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*. Ralph Ellison's icon masterpiece *Invisible Man* (1952) has become internationally known as a magnum opus novel that gives a voice to the voiceless African-Americans in post war America. By regarding Ellison's novel from the scope of racism, it would be killing the negotiability to read it as a modern picaresque novel in the fashion of *Lazarillo de Tormes* or *Huckleberry Finn*. However, co-existing with existentialism could crucially add to the uniqueness of the picaresque's protean nature.

As for the picaresque, a significant mannerism about it is its protean type that could make the pícaro adapt to miscellaneous situations. This motif allows the pícaro's constant existence in different modes through "a constant change of masks on the world-on-stage." (p. 65) This paper studies the coexistence of the picaresque and existentialism after the Second World War in a renowned American novel: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). It suggests that, by mapping its place in the American literary matrix, the existentialist dimension of the picaresque has become indispensable in later American picaresque works.

The rest of the introduction will give a glance on the history of the genre's emergence and will clarify the obscurities of the picaresque problematic in the definition of its protagonist. The paper will refer to how Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is picaresque in nature. The last part deals with the existentialist dimension of the novel at hand.

1. The Picaresque Tradition

1.1. History of the Picaresque

The picaresque is mostly traced back to sixteenth century Spain. Nevertheless, some scholars- among which there is Professor Abbes Bahous, whose dissertation entitled : "The Novel and Moorish Culture" – traces it to the

Arab literary genre of Maqamat. Since its appearance in 1554, the anonymously published *Lazarillo de Tormes* is regarded as the trailblazing of the genre which witnessed the birth of a long line of picaresque texts in different countries in Europe and worldwide. The picaresque novel has progressively absorbed new concepts in literature due to its protean nature. (Alter 1964: 42) Translations of early Spanish texts, such as *Lazarillo*, *Guzmán*, *El Buscón*, *Don Quixote* have helped the acknowledgment of the genre.

In, England, Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* is taken as the first English picaresque novel. However, Robert Alter considers Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) as the truly first English pícaro (Donadieu 2000: 57). The early American picaresque texts, like Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), maintained a close kinship between the picaresque and the spirit of individuality, an English colonial heritage.

1.2. Problematic of the Picaresque

One could be in a muddling situation when perceiving the claims that deny the evolution feature of the picaresque and its hero (Pinçonnet et al. 1980, p. 22) or reading about Eisenberg's call for the abandonment of the use of the picaresque term by declaring solemnly: "the term has no validity and should not be further used." (Eisenberg 1979: 204) On its part, Robert Alter's *Rogue's Progress* sets the pícaro's features including criminality and denies its ability to be a philosophical prober. This implies that the picture of the pícaro changes from a scholar to another.

On the continuity of the picaresque, Ian Milligan believes the picaresque novel lost its keenness though recent fiction displays that fact that the genre bears more resemblance to its original "conception of the hero as outsider"; the fact that led to a revival of a pícaro figure living on the margins of a society he "views... cynically or critically..." Moreover, this figure is a character with the mastery of moving around "...society scrutinizing its institutions and influential figure." (Milligan 1992 : 28)

The pícaro, the protagonist in the picaresque novel, is the Spanish term for the English words "pícaro or pícaroon". According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, a pícaro is defined as an adventurer or a rogue. A pícaroon means being a pirate or acting like one. The soul meaning of the term should not be far from its original Spanish source which means "kitchen-boy", "low life", "rogue", "army deserter", and *piquero* (Sherrill 2020 : 20).

The pícaro's delinquency, dishonesty and immorality are signs of criminal attitudes on which there is a general consensus of his unshakable tendency

towards criminality to the extent of being an outlaw but not harmful. Most picaresques are thieves ; snitching, snatching or stealing run in their blood. Lazarillo steals from almost all his masters. The nameless character in *Invisible Man* steals electric power and wires 1369 bulbs of the old expensive-to-operate kind. To survive, the pícaro uses his wits and trickery- Wicks's essential motif in the making of any pícaro. The pícaro learns to trick and becomes "active more than reactive." (Wicks 1989: 64) His life is based on having-to-con-to-live code.

2. Reading Ellison's *Invisible Man* between the Picaresque and Existentialism as a Picaresque Novel

This part traces the picaresque in *Invisible Man*. Claudio Guillén put eight characteristics for a novel to become picaresque which are concisely referred to in Donadieu's dissertation ; however, he insists that "[no] work embodies completely the picaresque genre" (qtd. in Donadieu 2000: 4) The first characteristic is the presence of a half-outsider protagonist, who neither can join nor reject society. According to Alter, the pícaro is "an image of human solitude in the world and at the same time an image of human solidarity in the world" (Alter 1964: 10). Ralph Ellison opens his novel with a hard-to-forget prologue in which the protagonist is unnamed. The text contains a set of sentences almost all starting with the personal pronoun "I". He declares who he is in the eyes of people who deny that he is a man of substance. In other words, by people denying his body, he receives their image of him as the one that negates his humanity. The description in the opening paragraph evokes the sense of dreadfulness as if he were a bugaboo of morbid organism. It shows that this man is outside the range of other people's notice ; this is why they decide he is an outsider who is unworthy of their looks. The novel, therefore, opens with the protagonist being aware of his existence as an invisible man and with people denying his humanity.

Guillén's second characteristic deals with the pseudo autobiographical narrative style. Usually, the picaresque is narrated in the first person. It should not be expected from the part of the pícaro, a much individualistic character, to let anyone tell his own story ; it is his story and he is the only one capable of tell it. *Invisible Man* is narrated in a first-person voice but with the insightful regard of a third person. The stream of consciousness that dominates *Invisible Man* helps the reader to stay trapped in the protagonist's mind. It brings to mind the feeling of a person desiring to get rid of a horrible story but the speaker keeps adding horrible details.

In the prologue, the protagonist-narrator of *Invisible Man* introduces his story from distance. Though the text is narrated in the first person ; it almost gives the impression of the third-person narrator or the all-seeing one. What Ellison creates here is another dimension of narration where the first person narrator steps down and the third person one takes the lead indirectly into the minds of readers. It is much like a reptile's pineal eye which is sometimes called the third eye symbolizing enlightenment. By creating a prologue to his novel, à la *Lazarillo de Tormes*, Ralph Ellison makes of his unnamed character not just as an actor but as a drama chorus. The narration is moving from the all-seeing eye into the pineal eye ; the one that looks beyond the human eye ; it rather looks for the balance of the human soul.

The third and the fourth characteristics of questioning social norms and values with the subjective viewpoint of the narrative are at the heart of the pícaro's continual social observation. The young protagonist announces his issues with society that refuses his existence because of who he is. The inner struggle is displayed through the interior first person narrative.

Moreover, the unnamed character fails to recognize the society's racism towards him. In *Battle Royal*, he does not recognize reality ; this brings to mind the moments of Don Quixote's failure to recognize the reality of windmills. The only difference is that Don Quixote found the companion Sancho Panza by his side correcting the image at the moment. What characterizes *Invisible Man* is that the unnamed pícaro has an illusionary companion that accompanies the pícaro in his journey through his presence at the beginning of the chapter and through dreams later. It is the figure of the grandfather who foresees, through dreams, what is to happen years later for the narrator : When he wakes up, he states : "I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears. (It was a dream I was to remember and dream again for many years after. But at that time I had no insight into its meaning.)"

The grandfather's expression, "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running", is an indication of the reality that the unnamed narrator will discover later on in chapter nine when he was shown Mr. Bledsoe's letter to Mr. Emerson that suggests that the narrator is expelled from school definitely because he is dangerous. The narrator realizes the shocking truth about these letters and remembers his grandfather's dream.

Guillén's fifth characteristic refers to the protagonist's need for survival. The pícaro is constantly driven by the lack of food and money. The material side puts stress on the level of the pícaro's existence in a much alike materialist world. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator is in constant search for a decent job that can

afford him with enough money to live. The reader often reads expression that brings up money and food together such as : “Sometimes, when there was still money, or when I had earned a few dollars waiting table, I’d eat out and wander the streets until late at night.” (Ellison 2014 : 258). In Mary’s company, the unnamed protagonist notices Mary’s concentration upon cooking cabbage for the third time in a week. And it reminds him of his childhood years : “Cabbage was always a depressing reminder of the leaner years of my childhood and I suffered silently whenever she served it, but this was the third time within the week and it dawned on me that Mary must be short of money.” It is typical of the pícaro not to work regularly. The narrator informs us that he has just refused a job though he knows of Mary’s debt to him and now of her financial troubles :

“...And here I’ve been congratulating myself for refusing a job, I thought, when I don’t even know how much money I owe her. I felt a quick sickness grow within me. How could I face her ? I went quietly to my room and lay upon the bed, brooding. There were other roomers, who had jobs, and I knew she received help from relatives ; still there was no mistake, Mary loved a variety of food and this concentration upon cabbage was no accident.” (Ellison 2014 : 296)

Carrying reading the fourteenth chapter reveals that he has been living in Mary’s place for months. He asks the question : “What kind of man was I becoming ? (Ellison 2014 : 297) The answer lies in the nature of the pícaro that prefers idleness to work. He is another Lazarillo that would beg but not work.

Accounting for Guillén’s sixth and seventh characteristics, they are mainly concerned with the episodic structure of the picaresque novel and the fact that the pícaro is a close observer of the various conditions from all areas in life and as a result his observation satirizes the prevailing social conditions. *Invisible Man* cannot be read as an anti-racist novel ; most of the characters criticized in it are Afro-Americans. The narrator criticizes blacks who refuse their nature ; he observes the hypocrisy of Mr. Norton and the members of the brotherhood because they use blacks to achieve a luxurious life he could easily observe in their office.

It is often misleading to categorize a novel as picaresque upon this structural feature. Episodic novels have been called wrongly picaresque ; however, it takes more than this structure to be in nature picaresque. The episodes, whose only link is the pícaro, depict the experiences of the pícaro in which each chapter can stand alone as a short story. This shadows that there is no plot in this

kind of novels. The plot involves a series of related events with a climax and denouement ; which is not the case in a picaresque novel.

The last of Guillén's characteristics of the picaresque novel focuses on the pícaro as involved with travel and adventure through the spheres of life. The motion factor can be physical as well as spiritual. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator moves from one scene or adventure into another and from one job into another. He does not mind having money effortlessly ; when a woman mistakenly takes him for Rinehart, a gambler, and a reverend, he does not correct her. He takes the money she gives presumably to Rinehart.

In the light of the aforementioned references, it is worth-mentioning that scholars such as Marc Donadieu and Jens Elze added what each calls the ninth characteristic of the picaresque. Donadieu adds to "Guillén's system ... the protagonist's comic misadventures in life, which gives a picaresque novel its essential flair and zest" (Donadieu 2000: 5) and Jens Elze adds what he calls apologia. (Elze 2018 : 69-70) This element is seen when the attention towards answering the question of why the pícaro tells his story arises : "let me confess... feel the urge to affirm my feelings.." (Ellison 2014 : 346) The unnamed character in *Invisible Man* has the unmistakable need to write his "apologia" à la picaresque tradition as it entails the justification of one's opinions or conduct in a formal written defense.

3. A Pícaro with Existential Virtues

Existentialism is found upon principles set by Jean Paul Sartre, Heidegger, Camus and others. This paper refers, mainly but not exclusively, to Sartre's beliefs which range for the most part from : nothingness, responsibility, authenticity, time, Angst, death to faith.

3.1. The Existential Question in *Invisible Man*

To be existential or not to be existential : this is the question in *Invisible Man*. There should be a set of principle to take a person's life to be existential manifestation of Sartre's philosophical beliefs. His "Existence precedes essence" became the dictum of existentialism. To him, man's existence is achieved through the process of making decisions, choices responsibly. *Invisible Man* incarnates the creation of meaning and the recreation of meaning. In each of the episodes of the novel, the protagonist rediscovers who he is and who the people he meets are. Existentialists believe that it is people's choices, rather than destiny, that define who they. In other words, one is what one does ; and one is what one makes of existence.

The starting point of existentialism is optimism and hopefulness. Webber, author of *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* mentions that :

“Sartrean existentialism is an optimistic theory, which teaches that *we can learn to accept* the way we really are, to see one another as we really are, and thereby get away from the basic problem underlying many of our ills.” (Webber 2009 : xiii)

The highlighted expression calls the attention towards the idea that accepting one’s identity or distinctive nature does not come in a blink of an eye ; a man needs to summon up his acceptance through a process.

The idea of hope is deeply rooted in existentialism through the Myth of Sisyphus. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus cheated death ; therefore, the gods punished him by putting him in hell with the fruitless and the meaningless task of pushing a rock to the top of a mountain only to see it roll back and Sisyphus fail. But the key meaning behind this myth is the human existence in despair. Camus insists that one must imagine Sisyphus happy (166) and he smiles in the face of gods. He could have cried, begged, but instead he shows them his joy.

In *Invisible Man*, the character Mr. Bledsoe can be taken, more or less, as just one of the gods in the myth of Sisyphus. In his derogatory letters about the narrator, he explains that he “has been expelled for a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment.” (190) In the myth of Sisyphus, the gods expelled Sisyphus for his unaccepted behavior towards death. Mr. Bledsoe carries on : “ ...Due, however, to circumstances the nature of which I shall explain to you in person on the occasion of the next meeting of the board”. (idem) The word board insinuates the meaning of the decision-making organization. It could be echoed with the gods in the myth. A key notion about this existentialist situation is that man put into test is aware of his despair situation.

Mr. Bledsoe explains the reasons of holding the narrator from recognizing this situation : “... it is to the best interests of the college that this young man have no knowledge of the finality of his expulsion.” (idem) He confirms that it is the young man’s “hope to return here to his classes in the fall”. And like the gods, who punished Sisyphus, Mr. Bledsoe insists on letting the unnamed character degrade, without any disturbance, in “these vain hopes while remaining as far as possible from our midst” (idem) ironically for “the best interests of the great work which [he and the other members of the board] are dedicated to perform.

The existential side of the narrator is mixed with his picaresque side ; Mr. Bledsoe joins the hypocrisy the pícaro meets with the irony he aims behind. On the one side, he expels the narrator ending his hope of resuming studies

through falsified recommendation letters ; and on the other, he calls for a less painful truth which is absolutely anything but true sincere call for mercy and compassion. And who is the pícaro but a hopeful traveler whose situation is often mocked at ? The unnamed narrator often meets people who would try to take advantage of him. Mr. Emerson's son, the one who enlightened him with Mr. Bledsoe's true contents of the letter, seems to show sympathy with the narrator's case ; but he is in fact a ruthless white man who is interested sexually in the body of the young invisible man. The young man, as much as the pícaro, is often caught between the devil of inside the human beings and the deep blue sea of being tricked.

The young black protagonist adds to world's sufferings done to him by burdening himself with the meaningless point of living in a hole which resembles the rabbit's hole in *The Adventures of Alice*. The nameless narrator in *Invisible Man* jumps into it soon after he bumps into the white man just as Alice did after meeting the white rabbit. With the 1369 bulbs, his basement room denounces the superficiality of reality. The young man's words "truth is the light and light is the truth" is the incarnation of Plato's cave in *The Republic* where the cave's fire is a symbolism of truth and enlightenment. Nevertheless, he tries to create his own meaning in life as if he asks : what is the point behind living among people and feel alone ? He, then, thinks of culminating his alienation. He burdens himself with thoughts of how the other treats and thinks of him. He is his own sufferance-supervisor. He becomes aware of his own invisibility and since he exists but does not or he is invisible ; he would unite the spiritual invisibility with the physical one by choosing to be away from people. The nameless narrator is a character that longs for the grace of mind peace. He has been the "odd one" just like his grandfather, "the old odd one" (Ellison 2014 : 16), who does not live the way other slaves do ; he "caused trouble" by being a fighter.

On his deathbed, the grandparent passes on his experience. One could imagine him as a dying Sisyphus who advises his son Sisyphus Junior to overcome his enemies with yeses and not to be afraid :

"... to undermine or destroy them with grins" ; the expression that implies smiling with lips apart just like Camus portrays Sisyphus in hell pushing the rock endlessly in vain. Yet, Camus insists, Sisyphus keeps trying to succeed. It is all about the new beginnings and about being born anew : "...I am a new citizen ... I feel that here tonight... the new is being born and the vital old revived..." (Ellison 2014 : 346)

Sisyphus plays the role of a happy man because he decides he would. The picaresque side of the unnamed narrator is what keeps him playing roles ; it is what holds the unnamed narrator from being authentic. Can we wonder whether the protagonist is authentic or no ?

3.2. The Rivalry of *Invisible Man's* (In) Authenticity

In *The Picaresque Novel* Stuart Miller, declares :

“... there is no part the pícaro will not play... he assumes whatever appearance the world forces on him, and this a-personality is typical of the picaresque world, in which appearance and reality constantly mingle, making definition and order disappear.” He adds : “The pícaro is every man he has to be, and therefore no man.” (Stuart 1967 : 25 qtd in Elze 2018 : 107)

In other terms, it is part of the pícaro's nature to play roles and therefore to be inauthentic. The duality of playing roles and keeping man's authenticity is at the heart of existential beliefs. The Question of Authenticity in *Invisible Man* is put to true test because the existentialist is in search for meaning through authenticity. The game of disguise as Rinehart in the twenty-third chapter of *Invisible man* has been interpreted as an indication of the protagonist's double consciousness. (Du Bois Qtd in Muirhead 1981 : 74) When the narrator is mistakenly taken for Rinehart ; he appreciates the feeling this mistake does to him ; therefore, he decides he would carry on with the disguise game. At first, he did not choose to disguise in someone else's mask ; people classified him as a good spokesman, as a leader in the Harlem organization “I should have been blacker to play my role of Harlem leader” (Ellison 2014 : 512). But later, he chooses to keep this mask of a gang man or the role of the bold outlaw with all the possibilities of disguise. It is at this point of making the decision to keep the disguise, or to keep playing the role, that he is released of his inauthenticity. “Yessing them” (Ellison 2014 : 513) is his choice ; therefore it is the turning point of his journey towards authenticity.

Finding oneself on the margin in a meaningless world where it is necessary to use wits to survive and having a constant drive to move onward in life is part of the picaroon's character. A central idea is the relationship between its protagonist and the world in which it lives. Picaresque novels fall under realistic literature as the pícaro depicts life through its cynical remarks about society's hypocrisy. But sometimes, it needs what existentialists call the leap of faith or the leap of hope to carry on living. It was the leap into the hole that drove the narrator closer towards peace.

A world “of reified fragments which say nothing, into a world of human beings who talk past each other and into a time-stream of disconnected present moments without past or future” (Fowler & Childs 2006 : 78) where anxiety and inexplicable absurdities dominate. Angst or the mixture of dread and anxiety is the state in which the unnamed protagonist is in. The nameless narrator is drawn with a constancy of angst where he is anxious and experiences stress and strains that, most of the time, are out of his control. Still, he is determined to be a sufferer because of his skin color ; because of the expectations of whites and because of the demands of people of his race. Patrick Shaw declares that *Invisible Man*, “[though] physically the book is much like *Augie March*, long and often times ponderous, it comes closer to dealing face-to-face with the anguish of the human heart, which knows neither color nor place.” (79) The open ending of the picaresque suits the existential nature that calls for the experience of angst in one’s life to understand one’s existence. The state of anxiety of what is next or how things will go on at the end of the picaresque episodes is what creates questions in the mind of the reader about the essence of life. The dilemma of trying to be free and to assume responsibility but also find oneself trapped by destiny and being aware of all of this is an existentialist matter.

Conclusion

The paper sheds light on the continuity of the picaresque in post war America. Reading Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as a Picaresque Novel is relatively bringing it out of the box of anti-racism. With this novel, the picaresque genre is re-born, with an existential flavour. The early pícaro was obliged to be or to act as he is/ does. The American pícaro enjoys doing what he does and he does it the way he wants and appreciates. His actions are personally shaped and his meanings are constantly recreated. *Invisible Man* continues the legacy of the American pícaro rejoicing his picardy. Ellison adds the existential dimension of humanism as he makes his narrator speak as a unique human being longing for being seen as such not as people’s profile of him.

Like a phoenix, the picaresque keeps vanishing all of a sudden from world literature and keeps rising from ashes. The genre keeps hooking, like a magnet, free-spirited tricksters, to join the tribe of pícaros. The birth of the picaresque as well as its resurrection has made an open invitation for re-readings which, as much as the pícaro protagonist, are able to adjust and adapt to diverse layers of literary criticism. Ellison’s hybrid pícaro enjoys the rabbit hole and Plato’s cave. It is a Sisyphus who chooses to smile at the end of his journey.

Breaking the ice about the picaresque-and-the-existential-perspective reading of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, taken as anti-racist, invites re-reading other

novels, such as : Saul Bellow's *Augie March*, and *Henderson the Rain King* which are typically read as Jewish novels ; and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, typically read as a revolutionary beat-generation literary example. Novelist Leon Forrest believes that reading Saul Bellow is like reading Ralph Ellison because, according to him, to be an American intellectual, one must be either Jewish or black. (Forrest Qtd in. Sundquist 2005, p. 1) Further readings into the topic will reveal the accuracy of this hypothesis.

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Abstract

The paper sheds light on studying both the picaresque and the Existential aspects in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). First, reference will be upon the history and problematic of the picaresque and the pícaro, focusing on the studies of two pillars : Robert Alter and Claudio Guillén. Furthermore, it will focus on the Existential dimension in the novel based, mainly but not exclusively, on Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas on this philosophy. By the end, the research reveals Existentialism effect on the picaresque genre and offers to unfold a new chapter in its development in America.

Keywords

Modern picaresque, Post war American literature, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Existentialism, Pícaro

مستخلص

تحاول الورقة تسليط الضوء على دراسة الجوانب البيكاريسكية (الشطارية) والوجودية في رواية رجل خفي (1952) لرالف إليسون. أولاً، ستكون الإشارة إلى تاريخ وإشكالية البيكاريسك والبيكارو. لتجنب الالتباس حول هذا النوع وبطله، تسعى الورقة إلى التركيز على دراسات البيكاريسك لركيبتين هما: روبرت ألتروكلاديو جيلين. علاوة على ذلك، سيركز الجزء المتبقي على البعد الوجودي في الرواية استناداً بشكل أساسي وليس حصرياً إلى أفكار جان بول سارتر حول هذه الفلسفة. بنهاية هذه الورقة، يكشف البحث عن تأثير الوجودية على أدب البيكاريسك ويعرض فتح فصل جديد في تطوره في أمريكا.

البيكاريسك الحديث) الرواية الشطارية الحديثة (. الأدب الأمريكي في فترة ما بعد الحرب، رجل

كلمات مفتاحية

خفي لرالف إليسون، الوجودية، بيكارو

Résumé

L'article visait à étudier les aspects picaresque et existentiel dans le livre de Ralph Ellison, *Homme invisible* (1952). Tout d'abord, il renvoie à l'histoire et à

la problématique du picaresque et du pícaro, en se concentrant sur les études de deux critiques : Robert Alter et Claudio Guillén. En outre, l'article se concentre sur la dimension existentielle du roman en se basant, principalement mais pas exclusivement, sur les idées de Jean-Paul Sartre sur cette philosophie. À la fin, l'analyse critique révèle l'effet de l'existentialisme sur le genre picaresque et propose de dévoiler un nouveau chapitre de son développement en Amérique.

Mots-clés

Picaresque moderne, littérature américaine d'après-guerre, Homme invisible de Ralph Ellison, existentialisme, Pícaro