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THE PICARESQUE NOVEL
IN AMERICA: 1945-1970

A Dissertation

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The Department of English

by

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I.</strong></td>
<td>CHARACTERISTICS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRADITIONAL PICARESQUE NOVEL</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II.</strong></td>
<td>FELIX KRULL</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III.</strong></td>
<td>AUGIE MARCH</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV.</strong></td>
<td>INVISIBLE MAN</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V.</strong></td>
<td>ON THE ROAD</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VI.</strong></td>
<td>CATCHER IN THE RYE AND MALCOLM</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VII.</strong></td>
<td>POTPOURRI</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VIII.</strong></td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VITA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

Since the end of World War II there has been a definite resurgence of the picaresque novel in American literature. The emphasis of this study is on the major American novelists who have caused this picaresque revival. Although the American picaresque novels written since 1945 more or less adhere to the characteristics of the traditional picaresque genre, there seems a distinct difference in the social criticisms presented by the modern and traditional picaresque novels. This difference, at least in part, came about as a direct result of World War II.

In brief, the modern American picaresque novels present picaros who are alienated, absurd, and rebellious, as opposed to the traditional picaros, who are generally bent upon reentering their societies, intent upon becoming Good Citizens. The social and philosophical implications of the ways in which the modern American and the traditional picaros differ are the subjects with which this study deals. The first chapter presents the background and the general characteristics of the picaresque genre. The middle chapters present the individual postwar American novelists and novels and examine the individual picaros. The final
chapter presents a comprehensive overview and elucidates the social implications of the postwar American picaro.
CHAPTER I

CHARACTERISTICS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRADITIONAL PICAResQUE NOVEL

The last twenty-five years have seen a definite resurgence of the picaresque novel in American literature. Various theories might be applied in explaining this revitalization of the novel 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, however, seems adequate of itself alone. 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 the process of decline or dissolution.¹ Further, it would seem to be just as convincing to make the generalization that the picaresque novel regains its recurring popularity only in postwar eras—eras which appear to some moralists to produce a certain "moral decay." 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 revival 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." Although Kerouac may have been applying his statement to a definite segment of his society, his observation captures as well as words can 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 past twenty-five years.
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 in America. One must note that although 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 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.

In fact, the task of coming to grips with and clearly defining the contemporary picaresque novel is made difficult by the traditional ambiguity and uncertainty which has beclouded the whole genre. Not only is the term presently used carelessly, both by serious critics and the popular press, but there is no real agreement as to the origin of the word "picaresque." Therefore, in order to lay the groundwork for the discussion of the contemporary American picaresque novels, one must briefly examine both the term picaresque and the history of the picaresque genre. The history itself is comparatively easy to outline, but the prevailing opinions concerning the origin of the term must be accepted only for
what they are worth as hypothesis and speculation.

The term picaro came into the English language directly from the Spanish. The Oxford English Dictionary recognizes the direct borrowing, but does not explain where the Spanish word originated. The OED relates the word to the Italian piccare (meaning "to prick"), but admits that the etymology is doubtful. A picaro is defined by the OED as being a rogue, a knave, or a vagabond, the same definition given for the original Spanish term.

Picaroon, a term often used synonymously with picaro, comes from the Spanish picaron, itself an augmentation of picaro. A second meaning of the word picaroon is that of a pirate, corsair, or pirate's ship. William Wycherly uses it in the sense of pirate when in The Plain Dealer (1676) he has Manly announce that love is like "the treacherous picaroon" (Act II, Sc. I, l. 955). Thus one sees that in all its forms the term picaro is related to men who are outside the boundaries of conventional society, who are on the "outs" with the law. In passing one should note that in most instances the terms rogue and picaro are used synonymously, and any differentiations which have been observed in the two terms are at best technical. Consequently, in this study, the terms are employed interchangeably.

Moving away from the strict dictionary delineation of the term, T. E. May, in an article entitled "Picaro: A
Suggestion,\textsuperscript{2} presents a more specific commentary on "picaro." As May wisely indicates by his title, his account of the term's origin is hypothetical. It is, however, an interesting and noteworthy suggestion. May relates that 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. The Picards were interlopers, unwelcome and unwanted. Accustomed to roaming about nude and to being "outrageously antinomian in tendency," the Picards created unrest among the more conventional Bohemian society (p. 28). Because of their unorthodox religion and nonconformity, and for a myriad of other incomprehensible reasons that cause man to torment his fellow creatures, the Picards were persecuted, harassed, and damned. Actually, it does not seem to have been the Picards' libidinous behavior which stirred 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" (p. 28), and their prayer was more mental than oral. May calls it uncivilized "rogue's prayer" (p. 29). The Picards communicated with their god silently and in private, and to their Bohemian contemporaries this was apostasy and sin, and it

\textsuperscript{2}Romanic Review, 43 (Feb., 1952), 27-33. In this and the ensuing paragraph I follow May's thesis, and all references are to his article.
resulted in the Picards' being driven into a state of almost complete estrangement.

In 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" (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" (p. 30). Although the method by which the term carried from Bohemia to Spain is not clear, the link between the Picards and the early Spanish picaroons is obvious, for the earliest picaresque stories concerned religious heretics, and more often than not the hero was of a low social order, as were the Picards. In other words, the first Spanish picaro was little more than a naked and unwelcome Picard in disguise. Thus the name picaro developed. 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 problem of expanding the sparse information
about the origin of the term "picaro" into a workable and reliable set of characteristics by which to define the picaresque genre is almost as difficult as establishing the origin of the term itself. 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 after 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 each picaresque novel. In fact, 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. The picaro's formal education is limited, but he is by no means stupid, dense,
or insane, though in this last instance Don Quixote is again the glaring exception. The picaro seldom enters an institute 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 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 in grasping the reality or the absurdity of life. In a similar vein, the picaro seldom subscribes to any formalized philosophy or religious dogma. Being a "free soul," he ties himself to no narrow viewpoint or way of life.

Not surprisingly then, a further prerequisite of the picaresque is the element of movement. 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 modern examples of this latter type of mobility are James Purdy's *Malcolm* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, both of which shall be discussed later.

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 afore-mentioned characteristics, they are nonetheless worth noting. The first-person narration allows for easier transition from scene to scene and facilitates the hero's expression of his ironic outlook. The companion acts most often as a backboard against which the picaro can bounce his own rather unique philosophy. A ramification of the first-person narration is that more often than not the picaresque novel is written in the idiomatic tongue, the "common" speech of the picaro. *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 lends to 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 tightly together in one neat package, with all scenes and incidents tied and with all problems resolved. Even the picaresque novels of the eighteenth-century, such as Fielding's *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*, with their conclusions that attempt to explain all the various mixed identities and to marry the characters off to a happy tomorrow, are hardly great exceptions to this general rule. Such conclusions seem more contrived than natural.

After these requirements are accepted, the definition of the picaresque becomes both more specific and more diverse, for each critic seems to have his own 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.

The 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. 3

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." 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

Another translator of Lazarillo de Tormes provides a different, though again not an entirely adequate, definition of the picaro. Harriet de Onis's definition seems

4Lorente, p. 21.
more valid overall 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.

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." ⁶

Ronald Paulson adds another dimension to the picaro when he points out how the picaro is the antithesis of the chivalric hero, a literary type which Cervantes of course ridicules in Don Quixote. Lorente notes the dissimilarities between the picaro and the romance hero when in the above quotation he mentions the differences between the picaro and the knight-errant, but Paulson carries the distinction further.


⁶ De Onis, p. xiii.
The picaro is everything that the hero of romance is not; he is of low birth, self-centered, mercenary, realistic, and adaptable to his surroundings, however mean. His illegitimate birth parodies the mysterious birth of the knightly hero, and his travels in search of food offer a mocking parallel to the knight’s disinterested quest. The knight meeting dragons, beautiful maidens, and wicked magicians becomes the picaro meeting robbers, whores, and charlatans. The picaro’s adventures with his masters are conflicts, ending in the defeat of one party (usually the picaro), just as the knight’s adventures are conflicts with giants and monsters. Even the absolute contrast of good and evil in the romand is toned down until we can scarcely choose between hero and villain.7

Paulson’s comments serve to make the point that the picaresque genre is inherently satirical and throughout its history has held society’s conventions and foolish ideals up to scorn.

Other prominent critics have formulated equally acceptable general definitions of the picaresque, but in most cases these definitions simply reiterate the Lorente, De Onis, and Paulson statements. In the overall sense, these three critics 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 outlaw.

It is evident 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 mugs, rapes, or kills; and in fact, for him to be a picaro, it is essential that he not be a "monster," as Robert Heilman points out. There may be different reasons why the picaro, old or new, finds himself on the outs with the law, and these differing reasons must be dealt with later, but in general it is safe to say that all picaresques 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 women. In the early picaresque novels physical love was for the most part totally absent. At best it was gently hinted at, as in Don Quixote, or bluntly implied, as in Roderick Random or Tom Jones. But in the contemporary picaresque novel this is not necessarily the case. One will note when the modern picaresques are considered more closely that explicit sex is a predominant factor both in their success and in their failure. Unlike Don Quixote,

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whom faithful and frank Sancho Panza terms "Knight of the Mournful 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 or Dean Moriarty) sets out to seduce them, as many and as often as possible. Since this is not a study of the changing moral climate in regard to sexual mores, one cannot delve too deeply into the reasons for this difference, but one can note that the change seems to have commenced in the eighteenth-century, particularly with Fielding and Tom Jones, for hot-blooded Tom's escapades are legend, though not so graphically plotted in the novel itself. From Tom 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— and recent novels indicate that it has caught up with a vengeance— but it is fairly safe to surmise that the modern picaro's emphasis upon sex was set in motion by the rascality and the promiscuity of Fielding's Tom.

Readily evident, then, is the fact that in characteristics the modern and conventional picaros are both alike and different, and any portrait of the typical picaro must be painted with rather broad strokes. Kenneth Patchen
has sketched 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. 9

Unlike a definition of the picaresque, the historical development of the picaresque novel is fairly easy to ascertain. Since the primary concern of this study is the contemporary American picaresque novel, no great historical detail will be presented, but in order to place the current American picaroon in his context in the genre, certain novels in the development of the picaro must be mentioned. One should 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 and sophisticated novel, such as Felix Krull. In passing, one should note 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 Ascyltus, who discourse in a rather bawdy fashion on the society of the era

9This poem appeared in Northwestern University’s Tri-Quarterly with no line determination or pagination (Fall, 1961), and the above is a liberty taken with the poem.
of Nero. Though not a picaresque tale, the *Satyricon* is in content and structure similar to stories of the picaresque genre. For those interested in a thorough study in the history of the picaresque, Frank Wadleigh Chandler's *The Literature of Roguery* (2 vols., New York: Burt Franklin, 1958) is perhaps the best single study, even though it was first published in 1907 and does not include any novels published after that date.

To Spain must go credit for the picaresque novel. In fact, when Cervantes published *Don Quixote* (1605) he gave to the world what is perhaps not only the greatest picaresque novel but in some critics' opinions 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 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.¹⁰

*Don Quixote*, however, while being the first modern novel, was not the first Spanish picaresque story. That

¹⁰*De Onis, p. x.*
distinction belongs to Lazarillo de Tormes, the anonymous, pithy and succinct tale of an innocent and fatherless boy who is turned loose without 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 itself was to possess.\(^{11}\) Thus, by carrying De Onis's genealogical metaphor one step farther, one sees that if Don Quixote was the father of the modern novel then Lazarillo was the grandfather. 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 mouth of Roderick Random, Tom Jones, Huckleberry Finn, and that still reverberates today.

Though not as famous as either Lazarillo or Don Quixote, a third early Spanish tale deserves mention—Mateo Aleman's Guzman de Alfarache, Vida del Picaro (1599,  

\(^{11}\)De Onis, p. v.
Aleman's novel is presented as the autobiographical account of a Sevillian rogue. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of Guzman de Alfarache is the long moral which follows each episode. The morals, far from being "other worldly," are outstanding for their Franklinesque common sense. Don Quixote, the third of the three Spanish picaresque tales, was, of course, to overshadow both Guzman and Lazarillo.

Probably because of Don Quixote's impact, the picaresque novel spread from Spain. In its spread, like a plant adapting to a new climate, the novel changed. In Lesage's Gil Blas (1715), for instance, one can detect a certain alteration in the picaro, for this first French rogue is not quite so desperate nor so gauche as his Spanish cousins. Gil Blas is more overtly ironic than Lazarillo. In fact, as Robert Alter points out in Rogue's Progress, Gil Blas is an "habitual ironist." Lesage portrays the picaro as having become a little wiser and somewhat 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. Alter comments in this regard:

The picaresque novel is a form of narrative which concerns action and the external world. The tension

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of "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 principle interest; not the personality of the struggler, which is never even highly particularized. 13

Alter's observation is valid and important for the most part, but one can argue with him about the unparticularized quality of the picaro's character. Holden Caulfield and Ellison's Invisible Man, for instance, have distinctly "particularized" characters. Alter is correct, however, in implying that the modern picaresque hero's character is sometimes overshadowed by the sheer weight of his literary obligations, for he is often involved in so much and trying to say such a large amount that his own character--distinct or not--appears secondary. Augie March is a typical example of this trend.

The book which is usually conceded to be the first English picaresque "novel," The Unfortunate Traveller by Thomas Nashe, appeared in 1594 and obviously owes much to its Spanish ancestors, particularly Lazarillo. The humor, the satire, and the character sketches of the two books are similar, but Jack Wilton, hero of the Traveller, seems motivated more by an innate love of mischief than by any necessity of survival. Daniel Defoe, one hundred twenty-eight years after Wilton's peregrinations, gave to English

13 Alter, p. 31.
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 since to argue the point would serve no purpose, she is mentioned here as a mere curiosity. Strong arguments could be presented on either side, but more than a female picaro Moll seems to be an interesting whore, and even Robert Alter in his commendable study of the picaresque includes Moll only with qualifications. He wonders aloud if truly she belongs to the world of which she speaks.  

After Defoe, Tobias Smollett added his contributions to the picaresque genre. Evidently Smollett had trouble purging himself of the picaresque urge, for his three major novels are all of the picaresque persuasion, though Peregrine Pickle and Roderick Random are more strictly picaresque than Humphry Clinker. Smollett's own translation of Don Quixote may help explain his picaresque inclination, and one need only consider the puns inherent in the titles--particularly of the first two novels--to surmise that they are indeed picaresque in nature. Roderick Random is perhaps Smollett's best-known, though not necessarily his best-written novel, and of the trio it is the novel most indicative of the picaresque spirit.

14Alter, p. 40.
In true picaresque 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. The novel made its appearance in 1748, and less than a year later Fielding’s *Tom Jones* was published. Superficially the two novels are much alike. The plots and characters 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. Alter recognizes this difference:

> Tom Jones exists in a completely different world from that of Smollett's picaresque. It is a picaresque world only in a deliberately limited fashion. For in Fielding's great novel the picaresque tradition merges with—or rather, is assimilated by—a way of apprehending and reporting reality quite distinct from the mode of narrative first developed in the Spanish novels of roguery.\(^{15}\)

Though on the whole well within the picaresque tradition, *Tom Jones* is truly a rebel to the cause. Not only is the novel's grasp of reality more evident than in most previous novels, a fact perhaps best revealed in its comprehensive social characterizations, 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

\(^{15}\)Alter, p. 81.
picaresque first person. The reader, in fact, gets just about as much of Fielding as he does of Tom. In passing, one should note that Fielding's lesser-known work *Joseph Andrews*, written in close imitation of Cervante's *Don Quixote*, is perhaps a more truly picaresque endeavor than *Tom Jones*. This is a fact recognized by numerous critics, such as De Onis. And Fielding himself acknowledges his debt to Cervantes on the title page of *Joseph Andrews*.

After Smollett and Fielding the picaresque novel entered what might be termed a period of quiescence. Alter attributes the decline of the genre during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century to the sentimentalism of the age. Alter contends that the picaresque novel is the "characteristic expression of a vigorously active individualism" and that the romantic, rather saccharine sweetness of the period stifled the non-conformity necessary to the picaro's survival. Such a theory may or may not be valid. Yet, 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

16Alter, p. 79.
entire Don Juan legend. Poetry, however, is outside a study limited to the novel, and therefore cannot be considered further. Don Juan might suggest, however, that it was not the picaresque novel specifically but the novel itself which declined during the Romantic period.

Nonetheless, by 1844 the picaresque novel had been sufficiently revived in England with the publication of Thackeray's The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq., an effort Alter calls the "re-creation of the picaresque novel." However, Thackeray managed to turn what could have been a noteworthy picaresque novel into a failure when he wrecked himself on "the rock of his Victorian moral purpose." As Alter says, Thackeray turns Barry Lyndon from a true picaro into a melodramatic ass, lurking about with horsewhip in hand. Alter suggests that Thackeray was more comfortable in the eighteenth century than in his own age and that he lacked the rebellious spirit necessary for the production of a true picaresque novel.

Walter Allen, in his study The English Novel, notes the picaresque element in other writers of Victorian

17 Alter, p. 114.
18 Alter, p. 117.
19 Alter, p. 117.
England, particularly in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. Allen surmises, however, that "railways killed the picaresque novel" in England. This could well be so, but it was resurrected on a river in America, for in 1885 Mark Twain produced the classic expression of the American picaresque. Although *Huckleberry Finn* is not the first American picaresque novel, being preceded by such novels as Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1805), it is with *Huck Finn* that any serious consideration of the modern American picaro must begin. Ernest Hemingway's famous statement in *The Green Hills of Africa* that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*" is a contention which one cannot totally deny. More specifically, as a picaresque novel, *Huck Finn* could probably be considered the greatest of all time, for, as several critics note, it is possibly the most nearly perfect picaresque novel yet written, embodying not only a most appropriate idiomatic language but great artistic integrity. No purpose would be served by including a detailed discussion of Twain's masterpiece. Many books have been devoted to that undertaking. To understand *Huck Finn* in its picaresque context, however, there are several points that must be

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21 Allen, p. 193.
Just as the modern picaro expresses artistically the alienation bred by World War II and its aftermath, so in a way does Huck Finn express the different alienation that came out of the American Civil War. If one had to select a turning point, had to place his finger on that impossible moment in history when the old values which were to lead to the modern American picaroons came into being, that point would have to be the Civil War. That great exercise in mass fratricide which has, with some pride evidently, been termed the first Modern War wiped aside forever, for Americans at least, the Victorian delusion that "God's in his heaven/ All's right with the world." Undeluded 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, declaring that "I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it, I been there before." 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 the last things that he wishes to embrace. 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 that the money and his aunt's "love" would have guaranteed. For Tom Jones or Roderick Random or Lazarillo such an act would have been unthinkable. As will be seen later, such an active denial of the middle-class values is typical of almost all of the contemporary American picaros.

Let it not be inferred, however, that Huck 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 point 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, at least not in the beginning, and in fact his fight against conventionality is expressed most subtly and never in the overt and vocal way that epitomizes 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 and embitterment." Though one would be going out on the proverbial limb to say that the modern picaro's eyes are "clouded by the venom

\(^{22}\text{Alter, p. 119.}\)
of hatred," it would not be unsafe to say that the modern picaroons are often rather disturbed and dissatisfied with "the way things are" and do not hesitate to express their discontent. 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 rebels against them 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. He is an innately moral individual struggling against the "learned morality" of an immoral society. Like Tom Jones, Huck is a naturally good human being.

Huck 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 to Huck Finn. Just as Lazarillo de Tormes carried in his genes the determining traits for the picaresque literature that followed, so too did Huck Finn carry in his genes the determining traits of his American picaresque progeny. Philosophically the new

23Alter, p. 118.
picaroons differ greatly from their illustrious ancestor, but in literature as in life, few children place much store in their grandparents' ideology, at least overtly, and today's picaroons are no less rogues just because they express a new departure. In the conclusion of this study the "why" of this philosophical cleft will be 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 gardens—or, as some might think, deserts.
CHAPTER II

FELIX KRULL

To begin a study of the contemporary American picaresque novel by discussing a book written by a German requires some explanation. To be brief, there are three reasons why Thomas Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man* leads off in the journey into the picaresque desert-garden. First, Felix Krull is one of the outstanding picaresque novels yet produced in the twentieth century, and no study of the picaresque novel would really be complete without some accounting for Felix. Second, the novel stands as an interesting contrast to the other American novels to be encountered in this study. The contrast is not in the picaresque qualities of the novels but more importantly in the character and philosophies of the heroes. Felix Krull, in short, is not like Augie March or the other contemporary American picaros. Felix wants, for instance, to attain social prominence or at least to enjoy the best that society has to offer. The other picaros actively renounce society and all its values. Third, *Felix Krull* was technically written by an "American." When Mann finally finished the first part of the novel
shortly before his death in 1955, he had been an American citizen for more than ten years. On the basis of these three things and on the basis of its considerable influence on the contemporary picaresque *Felix Krull* is included in this study.

As stated, *Felix Krull* is probably one of the outstanding picaresque novels of the twentieth century. Yet the seeming virtuosity with which the novel is written belies the difficult time that Mann had in composing his picaresque masterpiece. The Felix Krull story was originally begun when Mann was only thirty-six years old but was abandoned when the task of mastering the picaresque style became unbearable. In fact, the novel was never really finished, and the first part, which was published just before Mann died, actually only begins to carry Felix on his round-the-world trip. In the existing part of the novel there are several indications about some of the things that will happen to Felix. One knows, for instance, that Felix eventually goes to prison. The novel must, however, be criticized only on that part which was published. One can only regret that Mann did not live long enough to carry the tale to its conclusion.

On the surface *Felix Krull* is not so far removed

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1Robert B. Heilman, "Variation on Picaresque: Felix Krull," *Sewanee Review*, 46 (Fall 1958), 547.
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 other picaresque novel of recent times. R. W. B. Lewis says that it is one of the purest instances of the picaresque genre, "an exemplary version of the familiar tale." \(^2\) The taut simplicity of the prose, even in translation, reveals the commendable 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 preeminent writer but of a philosopher, theologian, and social critic of high calibre. True to the genre, however, Mann saw that the plot beneath the artistry remained typically picaresque. Therefore, to understand and appreciate the novel, Felix Krull must be criticized on at least three different levels. First, of course, is that level of sheer artistic technique, which in itself could warrant a worthwhile study. Second is that level on which the novel is traditionally 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 interesting 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 its section 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 complex 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, but the second and third levels are of most importance here, and the first level can be left after stating that the novel's faults are minor and that its overall artistic and aesthetic achievement is superb. The few flaws all seem to stem from the fact that the novel was never completed. Perhaps the most jarring fault comes near the end of the novel when Mann suddenly jumps into the epistolary form. And the termination of the novel comes too abruptly, with Felix in the passionate embrace of a Portuguese madame. The epistolary technique is not compatible with the rest of the novel. The letters change the novel's mood and emphasis, and read too much like entries from Mann's working notebook rather than segments of a polished, completed novel; and the ending leaves too many episodes hanging fire, too many strings not played out. But, again, these complaints come about because of the novel's
incompleteness, and in a sense, instead of detracting from its merits, highlight its stylistic artistry.

The plot of the novel, part of the second stage of consideration, is pure picaresque. Felix Krull is a cheat and a confidence man, and the book carries him from 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. Immodest Felix describes himself at great length:

Whereas my hair was silken soft, as it seldom is in the male sex, and it was fair; like my blue-grey eyes, it provided a fascinating contrast to the golden brown of my skin, so that I hovered on the borderline between blond and dark and might have been considered either . . . . I should have to be a fool or a hypocrite to pretend that I am of common stuff, and it is therefore in obedience to truth that I repeat that I am of the finest clay.3

Robert Heilman thinks that Mann modeled Krull in his own image,4 and this may well be so, for Felix lives the free life and moves in a rarefied moral atmosphere commensurate

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3 Thomas Mann, Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man, trans. Denver Lindley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 11. All references to Felix Krull are to this text.

4 Heilman, p. 560.
with the life of a person 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, p. 309 f.) In Felix Krull itself, one cannot help but note the numerous times in which Felix identifies with the artist. He sees everything he does as "artistic," from making love to running an elevator; but his most significant identification with the artist comes toward the end of the novel when in a natural science museum in Lisbon Felix observes a display of Neanderthals. He is utterly fascinated by the entire scene, the man returning from the hunt, the woman cooking over the open fire; but the individual that impresses him most is the prehistoric artist, who "crouched in his barren cavern and with mysterious diligence covered the walls with pictures of bison, gazelles, and other prey" (pp. 305-306). Speaking of this aspect of Felix Krull, Robert Alter points out that other writers, notably Boccaccio, have "on occasion" presented the artist "as a rogue or trickster" and that, therefore, "in the literature of our own age, then, concerned as it has been with the tension between the artist and society, it is hardly surprising that a novelist should be attracted to elaborate upon this traditional
conception of the artist as picaroon."  

Artistic Felix 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 of Germany while before the novel ends he has literally switched identities and become a French count. His first sexual encounter is with a chambermaid; his last with a Portuguese noblewoman. In the interim he has been an elevator operator, draft dodger, gigolo, jewel thief, and general scoundrel. He is 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 middle-aged poetess who makes Felix "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-transmogrification. 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:  

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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. (p. 36)

Felix 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 still on the second level, however, one must explore further those facets of Felix Krull that make it an outstanding example 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. Although circumstances do not compel him to do so, Felix commences young to steal, a result of his discovering the thrill of pilfering candy from the corner sweet shop. To Felix, secure in his innate superiority, 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, shop-worn word, which does violence to all the finer
meanings of life—is one thing, and the primeval absolute deed forever shining with newness and originality is quite another (p. 43).

From snitching of candy, Felix moves to bigger endeavors. His father commits suicide after a severe business reverse—brought about as a result of extravagant and orgiastic behavior on the part of the entire family—and suddenly Felix finds himself poor and self-dependent. He has missed too many days from school because of "sickness," and consequently he is dismissed without a diploma. It is not, however, a misfortune which he long regrets. Left entirely to his wits, Felix commences his peregrinations. In one of the most humorous passages in the novel he manages to escape the draft, again by commanding his body into illness and by completely dumbfounding the examining physician. Shortly thereafter he is taken in by a young but worldly prostitute named Rozsa, who enjoys and cultivates his physical attributes and for whom Felix does some innocent pimping. From Rozsa he goes from woman to woman and place to place, working at various menial jobs, always stealing, cheating, lying. Eventually he changes identities with one Marquis de Venosta, a young man who does not wish to be sent around the world by his family and who therefore persuade Felix to go in his stead. So it is as the Marquis that Felix sets out literally to see the world, though the novel terminates just as the trip has begun.
Several things are unusual about Felix as a picaro. First of all he is what loosely could be called a "natural born" picaro. That is, he is granted by nature all the attributes, all the physical and mental necessities needed for the rogue's life. He does not have to learn any tricks of survival. 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, and even in the midst of what at first appears great adversity he emerges victorious. One must recall in this regard, however, that Felix's story was terminated in medias res, and one cannot know what Mann had in mind for his picaro. In the existing part of the novel one learns that Felix has spent time in prison, for he makes several references to prison life; but no evidence is given as to precisely why Felix went to prison nor how long he remained there. Other than this one hint at hardship, then, there is nothing in the novel that can be construed as showing Felix's life as being difficult--nor, for that matter, nothing that implies that he is to be "punished" for his "sins." Women adore and pamper him, men envy him, and sooner or later all bend to Felix's will. Felix sincerely
believes and lives by the idea that he is, as a priest tells him, one who has "found favor in the eyes of God" (p. 60).

A second unusual characteristic of Felix is that he seems convinced that his outlawry is in some way sanctioned by this god who favors him and to whom only he is attuned and to whom only he must answer. Never has there been a picaro with an ego to match Felix's:

Whatever I have done or committed, it has always been first of all my deed, not Tom's or Dick's or Harry's: and though I have had to accept being labelled, especially by the law, with the same name as then thousand others, I have always rebelled against such an unnatural identification in the unshakable belief that I am a favourite of the powers that be and actually composed of finer flesh and blood. (p. 43).

As will be noticed in studies of other modern picaros, such as Augie March or Ellison's Invisible Man, this belief that their anti-social behavior is sanctioned by the gods is not present. The typical picaresque hero, though having few qualms about his unorthodox behavior, does not delude himself into believing that his thieving, lying, and cheating are in any way condoned by any power higher than that which 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.
Thus, Felix's relationship with society is not really one of rebellion. In fact his main desire is to ensconce himself securely within the walls of upper-class circles. Poverty, Felix avows, "is in every way extremely repulsive, and any association with it may lead to unpleasant consequences" (p. 24). That he uses rather unorthodox methods in order to avoid poverty does not change the truth of his social desires. Even though he is typically picaresque in that he wants no ties to hinder his precious freedom, he nonetheless is not rebelling against society. He simply sees himself as having a god-given superiority. He indeed sees himself as "finer flesh and blood," and he does not waver in this viewpoint for one moment.

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 contemporary picaresque novelists and helps explain why Felix Krull is unique as a modern picaro. As James Hall, in his critical study The Tragic Comedians, points out, Mann "grew up in the nineteenth century and his works celebrate the bourgeois spirit."6 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 important to understand that Mann's roots were in the same chronological soil as the Victorian, who in turn was not far 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 Romantic movements. Hall, for instance, implies this strongly in his study. Felix's constant identification with and comments upon "Nature," for example, seem distinctly Romantic in many ways, though admittedly they are somewhat perverted by Felix's overriding ego. As will be seen in other modern picaresque novels to be considered later, the picaro is seldom if ever an orthodoxly 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 ever wishes to escape to "Nature," as Augie March is wont to do when he dreams of moving to the country, the typical modern picaro wants to do so not because of any desire to commune with Nature (at least not in the Coleridgean or
Wordsworthian sense) and not out of any identification with Nature, but because he wants to escape a society that he simply cannot tolerate. Further, if he believes in a god it is a distant and inexplicable thing, totally unreliable and without real substance. As David O. Galloway says of Augie March, for example, it is "his special fate to face the world alone," just as Albert Camus's Meursault of The Stranger had to do. 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 responsibility rest on that rather pantheistic god which has become his personal scapegoat. Such a god works not only in the impersonal vastness of the universe but within Felix himself, personally. Chapter VII of Book Three in its entirety deals with Felix's outlook on nature and religion, and one passage in particular seems worth quoting:

But if Nature wanted to defend him (the armadillo) by constantly increasing his coat of mail, why had she at the same time, steadily strengthened the jaws and sabre teeth of his enemy? She had been on both sides—and so, of course, on neither—had only been playing with them, and when she had brought them to the

pinnacle of their capacities she deserted them. What is Nature thinking of? She is thinking of nothing at all, nor can Man ascribe thoughts to her; he can only admire her busy impartiality when he strolls, as an honoured guest, among the multiplicity of her manifestations, of which such beautiful reproductions, in part of the creation of Senhor Hurtado, filled the halls of Kuckuck's museum (p. 303).

One must reiterate, in light of his quotation, that Felix steadfastly feels himself as part of this "impartial" universe and that he never forgets that he is one of the "honoured guests"—one of the very few, as he expresses several times throughout the novel—who are allowed to understand its magnificence. It is to this universe and to the god that rules it that Felix gives his allegiance. To borrow Felix's own term, his god may well be called the "Primeval Absolute."

Though it would be critically dangerous to accuse Mann of religionism, through Felix Krull one sees that the belief in an all-powerful deity is at least a vestige in Mann's mind. Only by knowing this can one appreciate Robert 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," 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 unusual aspect of Felix Krull as a

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8Heilman, p. 575.
picaresque novel is revealed, for, again quoting Heilman, 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." What then 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, despite his self-identification with Nature and God, 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. His thieving, whoring, and general skulduggery are common. The land he inhabits is tawdry. And no amount of rationalization can change the facts. Further, it never occurs to Felix in his immodesty that at the same time he is manipulating people, they too are manipulating him. As in the case of the grateful poetess, for example, Felix never stops to consider that what he gives—his body and his passion—accounts for far more than what she gives in return—her jewels, which mean nothing. Being rich, she can simply buy others to replace them. Felix is glib, expertly mannered, physically

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9Heilman, p. 558.
attractive, and mentally quick; and he envisions himself as being superior to all other mortals. 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 being honest with himself, 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 society 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, Felix 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. He wants, in the final accounting, to let God do the worrying. Felix 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—a world replete with sexual love but ironically barren of agape and filias, "Christian love." Felix 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.

Ironically, Felix symbolizes all that is bad about society and about its religion. He is at once Christ and Satan, Adam and Adonis, Christian and heathen. Throughout the novel he is closely tied to the Bible. More than once he refers to himself as one of the chosen few. He is born on the Sabbath day and is therefore "Sunday's Child," the finest and the best. The Catholic priest, epitomizing both Christianity and its "holy" men, praises Felix extravagantly and tells him that he has "favour in the eyes of God." The priest, typical of Felix's victims, is of course ignorant of the fact that Felix has come to the church only to finagle his suicided father a sanctified burial. Even the name "Felix" itself is Biblical, as Felix takes pains to note more than once. But even the priest, who calls himself "expert" in such matters, has failed to see in Felix the antichrist, failed to see Satan. Not only does Felix term himself "satanic," but several times in the novel he is likened to Hermes, the heathen
Greek deity noted for his cunning and for leading sinners into Hades. And one must note that despite Felix's many references to God, to Nature, and to Christianity (see particularly Book Two, Chapter II in this last regard), he enters a church but once—and then only to lie to the gullible priest about Herr Krull's death. Despite his lip service to the Church, his one dealing with it is to use it for his own end, to debase its very meaning and purpose. He wants simply to avoid the social scandal that would result if his father's suicide was revealed, and a non-church burial would of course be a revelation. The irony of Felix going to such lengths to "keep face" is self-apparent.

Yet despite his machinations, Felix is a naive and roguish Adam, removed from the paradise that his father's wealth and libidinous ways guaranteed, forced into the world with nothing save his intelligence. At times his Edenic character becomes almost literal, as in one passage in which he argues for the "Natural" state of nakedness and looks forward to presenting himself before the army physicians unclothed, because nakedness is the only way in which he can attain his natural "free form" (p. 90). He loves clothing, and dotes on wearing various costumes as he poses for his artist god-father. But he knows clothing is an outward sign of a lost innocence and
that nakedness is reminiscent of more pristine days.

So Felix is a hodge-podge of all the myths and morals by which man lives. He is a thief, a cheat, a liar, and a thoroughgoing phony. But he has the innocent appearance of a Christ, a pseudo-divinity that causes people to look up to him, see in him more than is really there. It is significant that one of the young girls whom he tries to corrupt quotes to him these lines:

> However fair and smooth the skin,
> Stench and corruption lie within (p. 356).

These lines express, of course, exactly the same thing that Mann is saying about society. The character of Felix is diverse, convoluted, and never easy to figure out. The same is true for the message that Mann intends for Felix to convey. The novel contains ironies within ironies. Already mentioned is the fact that Felix represents the artist in society, the man who traditionally attains the highest insights and who portrays his world most honestly. Yet the figure with whom Felix identifies just as readily as he identifies with the Greek and Christian gods is the clown, the charlatan. It is the clowns, those "half-grown sons of absurdity," who most attract Felix's attention at the circus and for whom he admits a "thoughtful fellow-feeling" (p. 191). And, again as mentioned, Mann sees himself as Felix, the artist. So while Mann derides and criticizes his society, he at the same time derides and
criticizes the one who criticizes. The condemner is as ridiculous as the condemned. Those who laugh at the clowns are as foolish as the clowns themselves.

So **Felix Krull** remains a paradox. This paradox arises at least partially from the fact that on the wide scale Felix 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. 10 Felix is, as Alter recognizes, enjoying an "advantageous duality" because he is in society taking his pleasure from it and outside of society acting as its critic. 11 Thus Mann has created a unique example of the modern picaresque, for Felix 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 both the critical artist and the charlatan whom he criticizes. He is in fact a microcosm, containing within himself both the failure and the artistic insight of a disillusioned society.

Thus Felix's conflict is not only with his society but with his god. He is waging war on both, trying through his well-oiled physical and mental machinery to bluff his

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10 Alter, p. 129.

11 Alter, p. 127.
way through and attain the heights on the other side. It is a dream of what Felix himself terms "The Great Joy" (p. 276). But this is an old Greek concept, this idea that by having once outsmarted 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 convinced himself that he has succeeded and is thereby destined to live his life sans love, sans hope, sans everything.

This, then, is Mann's final novel. It is a novel which was begun before World War II began, and a novel finished approximately ten years after that war ended. Mann himself suffered acutely and personally because of the War, and one can only conjecture as to what effect it had on his thinking, upon his view of the world. Uprooted from his native Germany, made literally an alien in a strange land, he must have reconsidered much. No one knows for certain just what segment of Felix Krull preceded the War and what segments came after, but one notes in the novel a change of tone from the first chapters. Just exactly what the change is is hard to describe, but a passage that begins Book Two seems a revealing paragraph, a thought that seems more Mann's than his fictive spokesman's:

These papers have lain for a long time under lock and key; for at least a year now indifference toward the enterprise and doubt of my success have kept me from continuing my confessions, piling page on page
in faithful sequence. For although I have often main-
tained that I am setting down these reminiscences
principally for my own occupation and amusement, I
will now honour truth in this respect, too, and admit
freely that I have in secret and as it were out of
the corner of my eye given some heed to the reading
public as well; indeed, without the encouraging
hope of their interest and approval I should hardly
have had the perserverance to continue my work even
this far. At this point, however, I have had to
decide whether these true recollections, conforming
modestly to the facts of my life, could compete with
the inventions of writers, especially for the favour
of a public whose satiety and insensitivity—the
result of just such crass productions—cannot be
exaggerated. Heaven knows, I said to myself, what
excitement, what sensationalism, people will expect
in a book whose title seems to place it side by
side with murder mysteries and detective stories—
whereas my life story, though it does indeed appear
strange and often dreamlike, is totally devoid of
stage effects and rousing denouements. And so I
thought I must abandon hope. (p. 57).

After the War, viewing the chaos of his homeland, envi-
sioning the horrors of the just arrived Atomic Age, Mann
too must have studied the world "out of the corner" of his
eye. And if the novel which he finally tried to complete
from that perspective is not a totally pessimistic novel,
not a novel which leads one altogether to "abandon hope,"
it is nonetheless a skeptical novel. The style of the
novel remains throughout smooth and even, and Felix him-
selt never wavers from his satiric, humorous character.
But the undertones of the novel are dark indeed, and it is
a darkness that will grow even thicker in the other pica-
resque novels which follow Felix Krull in this study.
CHAPTER III

AUGIE MARCH

In his study The Picaresque Saint, R. W. B. Lewis states that The Adventures of Augie March is much like Thomas 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, Lewis main­tains, the "picaresque element remains unmixed."¹ Lewis's observation is valid, 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, for Bellow seems to possess neither the editorial astuteness nor the cosmic scope that Mann displayed. Consequently the differ­ences in the novels are discernible.

The surface story of Augie March (1953) 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 boarder called Grandma Lausch, the "grande dame" as Augie terms her.

¹(New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1959), p. 34.
There is, as in most picaresque novels, no father, Augie and sibling being technical bastards. Like the typical picaro, Augie begins early to survive by his wits, becomes a rebellious youngster, and refuses to fill the pre-described mold of the ambitious Jew. Brother Simon, who is in many ways as much a petty thief and as rootless as Augie, and who in fact helps introduce Augie to the ways of crime, parlays his abilities into a well-made marriage and a million dollars. But Augie succeeds at nothing, though it is evident from his intelligence and personal magnetism that he could, if he wished, succeed at just about anything. But he simply grows older, going from one scrape to another; and in the end he is no further along than when he began, except perhaps that he is a bit more cosmopolitan. As a child he steals "coal off the cars, clothes from the lines, rubber balls from the dime store, and pennies off the newsstands," and as a man he is a small cog in an illicit blackmarket deal in France and Germany, spending his days lamenting a hollow marriage and dreaming a hollow dream of saving unfortunate children. Despite peregrinations that take him from Chicago to Mexico to Italy to France, Augie goes nowhere.

This precis is nothing new. The novel, however, is really a more important book than first glances reveal. Augie, with the exception of Felix Krull, is perhaps the
most influential picaro of the twentieth century, particularly in America, and in all fairness probably deserves the critical acclaim that has been heaped upon him, even though no critic seems yet to have explained just exactly what it is that makes the novel so outstanding. In 1965, for instance, Book Week, working through a survey of several hundred writers of one type or another, selected Bellow as America's most "distinguished" novelist of the past twenty years (1945-1965) and placed Augie March as the sixth best single novel for the same period. Yet Book Week chose to elicit no one critic's explanation of either ranking. The editors simply stated in two anonymous blurbs that Bellow was outstanding for his "strong intellect and mastery of style" and that Augie March is "a picaresque account of the ups and downs of a Chicago youth's coming of age."\(^2\) The vapidity of such surveys in general and of such remarks in particular is self-evident. Augie March deserves better criticism, for in a way it is an even more important novel than Felix Krull, because it deals more directly with the American social and moral atmosphere, an element with which Mann was of course unable to cope adequately. Maxwell Geisman says that Augie March "is a literary survey, or an anthropological study," a "belated proletarian picaresque account of the American

social depths—which is accurate, informative, aware—everything but authentic." Both Geismar's praise and his accusation of inauthenticity seem valid, for Bellow's evocation of Chicago life during the Depression rings as being particularly "accurate" and "informative," whereas the overall genuineness of the novel seems to disintegrate for one rather simple reason: Bellow tries to say too much.

For Augie March Bellow seems consciously to have chosen the picaresque form, the form that would give him the widest possible field in which to operate. 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 Jack Ludwig 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 concept. Bellow tries to involve Augie in every conceivable situation, from sex to high finance 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

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shortcoming. When a writer composes in the picaresque vein, it is almost mandatory that he make relevant and poignant comments about his contemporary social conditions. This is true simply because the picaresque novel, unlike, for example, the type written by Dickens or James, has no plot, no real thematic unity, nor any specific "axe to grind." Mark Twain and Thomas Mann succeeded in making such comments in their picaresque masterpieces, but when Bellow created Augie March he far overdid his attempts at 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. As a result the commentary is neither very relevant nor poignant. As Charles Thomas Samuels comments in The Atlantic, speaking of Bellow's fiction in general and of Augie March in particular:

The division in Bellow's fiction between mimetic vividness and extraneous discourse is even more gaping in The Adventures of Augie March because this book's marvelous collection of grotesques, babbling in polyglot plenitude, would overwhelm even a professional sage. In the novel's first half, Augie's refusal to be appropriated is only an amiable pretext that allows him to meet, seriatim, the urban Machiavellians. At midpoint, however, Bellow decides to make Augie not a reflector but an interesting character; and now things begin to collapse. Though Augie has been a lover only in the vaguest sense, we are asked to regard his disaffiliation as a sin against Eros. The plot, heretofore so richly realistic, suddenly turns symbolic, while characters (like the mad scientist, Bateshaw /Sic/) become exemplary, and the tangy blend
of idiom and erudition loses its savor through adulteration by rhetoric. Moreover, Augie starts playing Schlossberg /the raisonneur from Bellow's *The Victim* on himself. ... Then, perhaps exhausted by having breathed life into so ample a human parade, Bellow can only exhale, in conclusion, that existence is a bittersweet riddle.⁵

Other critics have noted the unevenness and the "polyglot plenitude" of Augie March, and it seems apparent that the book could have been reduced by one-third or even one-half. Its 536 pages are entirely too much, and even Augie himself seems to tire under the burden. John W. Aldridge notices that Bellow feels "his obligation to the picaresque too strongly, particularly to the requirement that he who begins as a *picaro* must end as a *picaro*, and so we are left at the end with the mission unfulfilled, the will unimposed, the man unsubdued."⁶ Aldridge's complaint may be a trifle severe, especially in its implication that the hero of a picaresque novel must be "subdued," for as will be seen shortly, Bellow does express in Augie March an overall social criticism that is both valid and in tune with the criticism expressed by other outstanding novelists. But nonetheless the complaints that Aldridge and other critics express about the novel are for the most part genuine.


By the last one-fourth the book was weakened badly, for it is at this point that Augie suddenly decides that his life's purpose is to become another "catcher in the rye." He eventually synthesizes his ambition thus:

I aim to get myself a piece of property and settle down on it. Right here in Illinois would suit me fine, though I wouldn't object to Indiana or Wisconsin. . . . I'm not thinking about becoming a farmer, though I might do a little farming, but what I'd like most is to get married and set up a kind of home and teach school. I'll marry . . . and then I'd get my mother out of the blind-home and my brother George up from the South. . . .

. . . . .

I thought maybe I could get accredited with the state or county, or whoever does it, as a foster-parent, and get kids from institutions. This way the board and keep would be taken care of, and we'd have these kids.7

Such an ambition has a certain "nobility," one supposes, but in light of what has transpired for Augie up to this point in the novel, such a desire is not only unrealistic, it is fatuous. Augie has trod all over the United States and Mexico, has stolen books and cars, 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 could manage in six lifetimes—and suddenly he wants to withdraw like Thoreau to Walden and act as savior to his blind mother,

7Saul Bellow, The Adventures of Augie March (New York: Viking Press, 1953), p. 456. All references to Augie March are to this text.
idiot brother George, and downtrodden souls in general. It is, as mentioned, a wish closely akin to Caulfield's immature dream of acting as catcher of children so that they may not fall over "some crazy cliff." Yet the dream is far less out of character for Holden, for he is, one must remember, only seventeen years old, whereas Augie is considerably older and has experienced infinitely more. One expects Augie to be more mature, more realistic.

Of course, the types of people that Augie dreams of saving are the types of people with whom he himself identifies, and in hoping to save others of the lost and lonely caliber, Augie hopes vicariously to save himself. He is, in short, attempting to gain some sort of atonement for his own pointless life. He wants to repent. 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 such a benign dream as Augie's is the fitting approach to repentance. The story of Augie's brother Simon, which is recurrent, is necessary, for it is the antipodal tale, the theme which forms the background for Augie's own story. It provides a necessary contrast. But the entire section which comes late in the novel and which deals with Augie's desire almost literally to resurrect his idiot brother and blind mother, both of whom have been sent away to homes
early in the novel, seems out of character and out of place. Robert G. Davis makes this general appraisal:

The Adventures of Augie March is an ebullient 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.

In this absence of "governing design" Bellow seems to leave himself open to the accusation that he has perpetrated 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 March the accounting section of Viking Press evidently overruled the editing section.

Despite its faults, however, the novel has merit. His wishful dreams notwithstanding, Augie is nonetheless 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 long-absent father or his own effervescent identity—is the search of every young man, especially of every young man whose coming of age was during 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. It is not then surprising that *Augie March* is, like the society which produced it, a novel of alienation. In his growing up Augie is presented with numerous opportunities of joining with and succeeding in the middle class society. A wealthy couple offers to adopt him, but he refuses. Rich brother Simon attempts to carry Augie along with him, but Augie rebels. But even at that Augie does have moments when he almost gives up his struggle against the middle class values:

> There was a spell in which I mainly wished to own dinner clothes and be invited to formal parties and thought considerably about how to get into the Junior Chamber of Commerce... It was social enthusiasm that moved in me, smartness, clothes-horseyness. The way a pair of tight Argyle socks showed in the crossing of legs, a match to the bow tie settled on a Princeton collar, took me in the heart with enormous power and hunger. I was given over to it (p. 134).

But such impulses never last long for Augie, and almost without his knowing how, he is back again stealing cars or pilfering books. Even his eventual marriage—a step which most modern picaros do not take—is entered into more out of a desire to carry out the first step in his dream to set up a school than out of love. It is a move which, like most things in Augie's life, turns out poorly. So though there is in Augie some faint tendings toward all the socially "proper" things, he in the end cannot bring
himself to accept them, cannot fit himself into the bourgeois mold. He is on the "outs" with society. He is an alien.

Not only is Augie alienated from society in general, but he is, sooner or later, alienated from every individual with whom he comes into contact. Brother Simon moves into a rich world and away from Augie; Grandma Lausch, brother Georgie, and Augie's mother are all sent away to "homes"; Augie's wife leaves him. One could compile a veritable catalog of such cases. It is significant that in the final lines of the book Augie is alone in a foreign land, thinking back over the emptiness of his life. Unlike most traditional picaresque novels but more in keeping with contemporary examples of the genre, there simply is no love in *Augie March*. Sex yes, but love no. Agnar Mykle, a Scandinavian 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 on the war-ravaged beaches of Normandy, watching a sea that is "like eternity opening up right beside destructions of the modern world,"
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?" The real question becomes by extension "What am I doing anywhere?" 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.

The name Caligula is of course significant, and it is fitting that Augie is likened to the bird that bears that title. Albert Camus, in his 1944 play Caligula, interprets the Roman emperor as a sensitive man who is traumatized by the absurd condition of human life. In Camus's play, Caligula erroneously tries to escape the absurdity by severing all ties with humanity and by indulging in senseless acts of violence. That he fails is illustrated by his own complicity in his assassination. It is this Caligula more than the actual Roman emperor that Augie is most like. In fact, R. W. B. Lewis has called Camus's Caligula a "tormented picaro—a rogue beyond all roguery who yearns to be a saint." Lewis's usage of the term "picaro" may seem a bit broad, but the similarity between Augie and Camus' character is nonetheless noteworthy. Though Augie is not violent, there is in his rebellious acts a certain "senselessness," and

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9Lewis, p. 86.
one recognizes in Augie, particularly in his unrealized
dream to save the downtrodden, a messiah complex, a
yearning for saintliness. And, like Caligula, 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 Augie 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. In one of the most noted passages in the novel,
Augie finds himself lost at sea in a lifeboat with a
religious-scientific fanatic who literally tries to beat
Augie into being "saved." Basteshaw, the maniac,
epitomizes modern society in that he has been so taken
up by science and formulized religion that he is
literally mad. He has, in short, to pick up on Bellow's
pun, been "basted" so long in society's cauldron that his
senses have been boiled from him. He tells Augie that a
"great course of life" is being offered to him, a course
"worth taking a chance for." To Augie the man personi-
fies the conditions from which he has been trying to
escape. Augie knows that the man is crazy, yet at the
same time he fears that Basteshaw is also a "genius" and
in that bit of doubt Augie 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 (p. 510).

Augie cannot cope with the powerful insanity of the man, no more than he can cope with the "brass" society that Basteshaw symbolizes, for Basteshaw believes, just as society believes, that what he is trying to do is "right." Augie is unsure, and even though he escapes eventually from the madman—and ironically ends up by saving Basteshaw's life—he escapes 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 or outside the social walls. Significant is the fact that Augie's marriage comes to the same passive, non-communicative state as do his affairs which transpire outside of wedlock. Augie not only is an outcast from his fellow man, but he is inwardly alone and without much hope. If any love exists, then for Augie it is indeed the love defined as loneliness.

This, as indicated, is not characteristic of the traditional picaresque novel. Huckleberry Finn, though a
child of the river 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? And of course Tom Jones has loyal, loving Sophia. In more recent picaresque novels, Holden Caulfield has sister Phoebe and Dean Moriarty has Sal Paradise, though in other modern picaresque novels, particularly in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, isolation such as Augie's can be found. 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, albeit a very dim one.

Augie is untypically picaresque in a second way: he never develops the tough skin and resiliency common to the picaro. By definition the picaresque hero inhabits
a rough and tumble sub-world, a world outside the 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. Roderick 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 outsmart the next guy before he has a chance to outsmart them. This, of course, often leads to a certain personal hardness, a unique kind of thick-skinned understanding and insight, and perhaps even to vindictiveness; but without it the picaro's life would be intolerable.

This inability to roll with the punches, the inability to adjust 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 has humanitarian, compassionate pipe dreams, but he is temperamentally unable actively and positively to involve himself with anything that could improve society's ills. He is literally stomped, beaten, and generally pummelled by society's representatives, but he
seems never to learn that only the strong and active endure. He dreams of redeeming all the lost souls in the world, but is strangely passive to being himself subdued by the forces of evil, as the Basteshaw episode indicates. Augie remains ignorant of the hopelessness and the cruelty of his whole milieu, and in his naivete he is a lonely man, a fact which he apparently realizes only at the novel's inconclusive end. 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, a fact which was reiterated each day for him by the "Godly" priest who was cuckolding him. 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 vows, "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" (p. 509). 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 him, 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 does not believe in Basteshaw's "happy isle," and avers that even if he did believe in it he would still say "no." But Augie's own dream of founding a school for lost souls is just as visionary, just as unreal. So although Augie adopts the attitudes and suffers the torments of the existential individual, he never develops the hard shell demanded by such a philosophy.

Because Bellow does not let Augie develop and mature as an individual and because he lets Augie remain naive and thin-skinned, The Adventures of Augie March fails. It fails not as a study in the modern picaresque, for it epitomizes that genre; but it 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 is great because "it deals directly with the virtue and depravity of man's heart."10 Faulkner applied the same criterion in defining "great literature" in his Nobel Prize acceptance address. Saul Bellow ignores it—or, more precisely, he seems to pervert it, for those sections of Augie March which are meant to deal with the "heart," such as the Momma and Georgie references and Augie's

Waldenlike dream, do not really deal with the heart so much as they deal with the maudlin tweakings of a guilty conscience. Bellow has Augie immersed in the pathos and sadness of the human condition, yet Augie never really understands what is going on about him. He moans, groans, complains, laments, curses, cries, and philosophizes—but he never honestly feels. As Robert Gorham Davis notes, Augie passively "goes along," and sooner or later says "no" to everyone and everything "in the interest of what he thinks is freedom."11 Augie is so enraptured by his own personal loneliness and unrest and desire to be "free" that he fails to comprehend that those very qualities are what make him part of the humanity against which he is so rebellious. In the words of one commentator, Augie simply shows "no penetration to the human core which discloses the kinship to others."12

Near the end of the novel, in one of the numerous philosophical interior monologues that so encumber the final half of the book, Augie seems to relish the idea that everything is "internal." Where is everything and everybody, Augie asks himself rhetorically? "Inside your breast and skin, the entire cast" (p. 523). It seems true

11Davis, p. 122.

that almost any man's experience should harden him to the cruelty and indifference of the world. This is expressly so in the case of a picaro. Consequently it also seems true that this experience should make the individual commensurately tolerant of and understanding toward human frailty. In the majority of picaroons this awareness is present. Even Jack Kerouac's Sal Paradise, a far less astute picaro than Augie is supposed to be, realizes that he has "lived many lives" within the confines of his own flesh, meaning, as Walt Whitman meant, that he contains multitudes. But Augie does not gain this insight, for his comment that everything is inside his own "breast and skin" is couched more in the tone of self-pity, spoken in a moment of what he terms "heart soreness" and carrying the meaning that all his miseries are unique and unshared. Ironically, Augie 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 of times past, and he tells himself hopefully: "I thought if I could beat the dark to Bruges I'd see the green canals and ancient palaces." Symbolically of course he means that he wants to escape the dark and threatening sea, water as strange and frightening as life itself, and to move inland--inland, ironically, away from the "heart of darkness" to the placid, green, man-made canals lined by structures of permanence and security. One gets the rather empty feeling, however, that Augie is not going to "beat the dark" anywhere, not going to find any "ancient castles" to sustain him, for the castles are vestiges of a world long since blown away, and the dark is inside Augie's head and heart, and one cannot run away from that which constitutes himself.

In his own way Augie is as self-deluding as Mann's Felix Krull. Felix's delusion is that he has unique favor in God's eyes; Augie's is that he is unique in his loneliness and misdirected compassion. The irony, perhaps, in each case is that the "artistic" sensitivities produce neither social reform nor enlightening self-awareness.
CHAPTER IV

INVISIBLE MAN

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) 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 picaresqueness the two novels are not similar. Although they both deal with a picaro whose ancestry places him in a minority group (*Invisible Man* is Negro, *Augie* Jewish) and although they have settings similar in time and activities, 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 somberly philosophical book, not so ebullient nor so disjointed. The heroes, however, end up sharing the absurdist philosophy.

The nameless hero of *Invisible Man* is a Southern Negro youth who begins as a high schooler in some unnamed Southern state, wins a scholarship to a Southern Negro college (from which, in typical picaro fashion, he never graduates), and, not surprisingly, eventually goes to Harlem. The anonymous hero, whom Ellison assiduously avoids
naming, is "smart." He wins his college scholarship because, in addition to letting himself be made a fool of for the sake of white men's entertainment, 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 only until his junior year, when he is expelled. Before he leaves, however, he does encounter an old Negro man who has had sexual intercourse with his teenage daughter. Ellison tries in this scene to make a pertinent comic statement regarding the Negro's self-rationalization and inherent weak will, but somehow fails to bring it off, for the episode sounds more like a Vaudevillean black-face bawdy routine than a truly satiric social comment. The vignette does serve as the device which explains No Name's expulsion, for he has with him when he encounters the incestuous Jim Trueblood one of the college trustees, a white man of unbelievable neurosis and puritanism. The college president, Dr. Bledsoe, is incensed that one of his students should subject a trustee to such indecency, and consequently No Name is expelled. One mentions in passing the puns contained within the names here: Trueblood, for he is a "true blood" amoral "nigger" and intends to keep the blood true by breeding with his own daughter; and Bledsoe, for he "bleeds so" for his students, while in truth he has
absolutely no compunction about condemning them to a jobless hell. Both the vividness of Ellison's names and Bledsoe's actions will be considered later.

From college No Name journeys eastward to Harlem, thinking it to be Mecca but finding it almost literally to be Hades. He becomes involved in countless scrapes and adventures, episodes which follow each other with unrelenting rapidity and episodes in which the unsettled hero displays, for a long while, a naive gullibility uncharacteristic of the picaro. After finally learning that Bledsoe has sabotaged any meaningful job opportunities by writing damning letters of "recommendation," No Name commences in earnest his descent into "blackness," into "nothingness." He is almost blown up by the jealous old Negro Brockway at a paint factory, has his head damaged and falls prey to a group of semi-mad doctors and nurses who torment him with electro-shock treatments. Escaping this, he then comes under the spell of Brother Jack and his communistic Brotherhood movement. Assigned as a speaker in the Harlem district, No Name gets involved in riots, watches his best friend shot by the police, skewers an adversary named Ras the Destroyer through the jaws with a spear, and is himself shot and in general pummeled, both physically and psychically. During all this chaos No Name remains somehow myopic to the significance of what
is going on about him, even to the wenches, both black and white, who make themselves readily available to him. Not until very near the end of the novel does he realize that he has been a pawn in some dreadful, inexplicable game. And by this time he is alone in his hole, a black basement which is ironically lighted by 1,369 lights but which remains as "dark" as the coal which it once contained.

When he wins his scholarship that instigates his journeying, No Name is presented with a leather briefcase. That same night his dead grandfather comes to him in a dream and demands that No Name read aloud the contents of the briefcase. No Name obeys. The document inside reads: "To Whom It May Concern... Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." From beginning to end Elison does indeed keep his "Nigger-Boy" running. No Name suffers every indignity and is heir to every betrayal that society, both black and white, can heap on him. He is guinea pig for the hospital electro-shocks, fall guy for the communists, and is in general far more sinned against than sinning. Yet in the end he has finally "wised up" and has gained a rather mystifying wisdom which allows him to know that "men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health."

No Name finally comprehends 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 by sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it on 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 slowly 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. At first you tell yourself that it's all a dirty joke, or that it's due to the "political situation." But deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. That is the real soul-sickness, the spear in the side, the drag by the neck through the mob-angry town, the Grand Inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip in the belly with the guts spilling out, the trip to the chamber with the deadly gas that ends in the oven so hygienically clean--only it's worse because you continue stupidly to live. But live you must, and you can either make passive love to your sickness or burn it out and go on to the next conflicting phase.

This final realization, this ultimate awareness of No Name's sharing with all mankind a universal pain or sickness, keeps the novel from failing, and in fact helps make it a more valid social document than Augie March. Augie never approaches such a world view. Ellison's hero

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1Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1952), pp. 497-498. All references to Invisible Man are to this text.
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," that all men shared those "hygienically clean" ovens with the European Jews. 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. A very specific instance of No Name's sincere compassion comes in the scene with the lustful white woman, Sybil. She is overpowered by the desire to be raped by a black "buck," to be brutalized and called foul names. No Name almost goes along with the horrendous "game," but after Sybil passes out in a drunken stupor he cannot consummate her wishes. Yet when she awakens, thinking gleefully that she has indeed been raped, No Name assures her that he has "overpowered" her just as she wanted. He has, in short, brutalized himself to save the feelings of a whore. It is a true act of compassion that he reationalizes as having happened because "I'm invisible" and his own emotions therefore do not matter (Ch. 24).

In several ways the novel fails, however, Ellison writes while in the early stages of paresis. He gets himself 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. For example, Ellison's continuous interruption of his narrative to allow rather minor characters to tell long and involved stories, such as Brockway's tale, is disconcerting. Further, as F. W. Dupre points out in what is otherwise an encomium for the novel, "the hero's relations with the Brotherhood go on too long, produce too little in the way of fresh observation, and form the weakest part of Invisible Man." Other similar faults could be listed. This is not saying, however, that Ellison is verbose, for the problem with the novel is not that exactly. Verbosity is not necessarily a literary sin, and can at some times even be entertaining, as in Joseph Heller's Catch-22 or as in some of Faulkner's better novels. Ellison's literary 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 unsettling self-consciousness that cannot 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 strained 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 conscious effort that rules out the possibility of a light moment, something which no picaresque novel should be without. Felix Krull hoodwinks the army doctors and Mann's telling of the incident is funny. Augie March tries to train a recalcitrant eagle, and Bellow makes the scene humorous. But Ellison never presents scenes commensurate with these. He tries too consciously to be symbolic, and in his effort he emasculates the novel. For instance, his recurring black-white theme—black liquid in white paint, coal painted white, brilliant lights in black holes—is simply too heavy-handed. The symbolism, like all other aspects of the picaresque, should be secondary to the movement and irony, but Ellison's is too overt and too frequent; and as a result the novel suffers irreparably. There are times
when Ellison seems to want to be funny, such as in the Jim Trueblood episode, but for some reason he never is. Perhaps he is too self-consciously aware of his own blackness and thus feels the weight of his "serious" purpose too greatly. But whatever the reason, as Dupre says, there is somewhere in Ellison "an accomplished humorist" but unfortunately "the straight man in him often steals the show." Further, Dupre contends, "the humor potential in Ellison's scenes fails to emerge with enough point and emphasis." Elucidating, Dupre continues:

Perfection of texture is not, I suspect, an element in the book's great reputation. To me, some of the characters—caricatures—defy credibility on any principle other than that of the uncomic comic book. Was there ever, even in Dickens, a schoolmaster so invariably vengeful as Dr. Bledsoe, a puritan so monotonously naive as Mr. Norton? Was there ever a verbal medium so uncertain of its identity as to shift alarmingly, as the language of Invisible Man often shifts, from the richly colloquial to the archly pedantic, from "Bring up the shines!" to "I too have become acquainted with ambivalence"? I doubt it. Yet the book's faults are surely of the innocent or disarming, as distinguished from the slick and corrupted, kind; and they are overshadowed, on the whole, by the general forcefulness of the work.

Dupre's comments are valid. Ellison's symbolism is either 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. Despite Ellison's use of the black-white theme, the book itself

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4Dupre, p. 4.
remains 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 no doubt that it is truly a picaresque undertaking, but it is a rather strange picaresque novel. Dupre, while not criticizing *Invisible Man* as a picaresque novel, nevertheless inadvertently notices some aspects of the novel, both in a positive and a negative sense, that point up its unique picaresqueness. First of all, Dupre recognizes that No Name's antagonist, Ras the Destroyer, is a "malign Don Quixote, complete with horse and spear" who rides out pugnaciously to advocate "the sinister irrationality of Black Nationalism." Thus, if Ras be Quixotic in his advocacy of Black Nationalism, then logically No Name is no less Quixotic in what he does for the communistic Brotherhood, for the things that he preaches—love, equality, happiness, humanity—are as much pipe dreams as is Ras's militant dream of a Negro takeover. As stated, No Name does not see the futility of his desires until the end of the novel, just as Don Quixote finally realizes the futility of his romantic illusions. And just as Quixote returned home to die with

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his disillusionment, No Name retires to a hole in the
ground to attempt to cope with his disillusionment.
Further, one must recall that in the explosion at the
paint factory No Name has suffered considerable damage
to his head, a wound not helped by the electric shocks
that he undergoes ostensibly to cure the damage. It is
a wound that could have unsettled his brain just as the
reading of too many chivalric romances unsettled Quixote's,
and a wound from which he does not recover until it is
almost too late. Dupre, again alluding to a picaresque
character, further states that No Name has no one to play
"Huck Finn to his Jim."6 Here Dupre seems to have been
led astray by the Negro-Caucasian parallels, for he has
eliminated the wrong character type. It seems more
valid to say that No Name has no one to play Jim to his
Huck Finn. For No Name's journey through the Southern
college, through Harlem, and through life in general is
no less enlightening than Huck's journey down the
Mississippi. Both, before their trips are completed,
seem to have developed a profound social conscience,
tempered by a wise acceptance of "things as they are."
But it is "Jim" that is missing for No Name, for he has
no one who approaches Jim as a companion, a confidante.
He is, in fact, dreadfully alone. He is a solitary picaro,

struggling to work out his own dilemmas, with no one to
counterbalance his thinking, as Jim does for Huck. It
is this aloneness, as much as anything, that drives him
literally underground.

Walter Allen, discussing the modern novel, probably
qualifies Invisible Man best when he refrains from calling
it pure picaresque and terms it instead a "symbolic novel
rendered in terms of the picaresque."\(^7\)

There is no need of making a big point of this, for it is not so important
that it threatens to remove Invisible Man from the picaresque tradition, but in a way Ellison's novel seems closer
to the picaresque novels of the eighteenth century than to the early Spanish or modern American picaresque, despite
the aforementioned superficial similarities to Don Quixote. 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, novels which are closer in time
but further removed in spirit. Specifically it is
Fielding's Tom Jones which Invisible Man brings to mind
in this regard. Robert Alter, although expressing no

doubts that *Tom Jones* is a picaresque novel, qualifies Fielding's masterpiece by stating that it deals with a situation that "is a picaresque world only in a deliberately limited fashion," because in *Tom Jones* "the picaresque tradition merges with—or rather, is assimilated by—a way of apprehending and reporting reality quite distinct from the mode of narrative first developed in the Spanish novels of roguery." The same statement holds true for Ellison's novel, for in *Invisible Man* the picaresque qualities are definitely secondary to the social commentary. Further, more precise similarities between the two novels are noticeable. Each hero begins in a rural area and migrates to the corrupt city. The tales in *Invisible Man* (Jim Trueblood's, Brockway's, et al) call to mind such tales as The Old Man of the Mountain in *Tom Jones*. It is in this similarity to *Tom Jones* and other eighteenth century picaresque tales that Ellison's novel is distinct and perhaps a little out of its time.

A more important point, however, concerns the conclusions 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

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contemporary. For No Name comes to believe in Camus' doctrine of the absurdity of life. After partaking in a rather nasty race riot, No Name retires down a coal chute where in darkness he can contemplate what R. W. B. Lewis terms the "bitterly comic collapse of his high scholastic hopes." 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" (p. 498). American society, he realizes, has a code of "winner take nothing" and all of humanity plays "in the face of certain defeat" (p. 499). The only hope (and No Name does have hope, for in the end he prophesies that "I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out . . . .") lies not in collective society but in the individual, though "none of us seems to know who he is or where he is going." No Name is searching for identity out of chaos, and although his own invisibility is a form of negative identity he still sees the absurd state of his existence:

How had it all happened? And I asked myself if it were only a joke and I couldn't answer. Since then I've sometimes been overcome with a passion to return into that "heart of darkness" across the Mason-Dixon line, but then I remind myself that

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the true darkness lies within my own mind, and the idea loses itself in the gloom. Still the passion persists. Sometimes I feel the need to reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for all of it is part of me. Till now, however, this is as far as I've ever gotten, for all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd (p. 501).

This doctrine of absurdity, this attempt to escape a geographic "heart of darkness" only to discover that it is a territory of the individual soul, 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-five years.

In speaking of No Name's search for identity, one must note that perhaps the most significant and ironic facet of Invisible Man is the journey away from identity. As the novel's title of course suggests, No Name has no identity. He is "invisible." But he is not invisible in the beginning. Only through a steady progression of incidents and realizations does he lose all hope of identity and finally retire into his subterranean quarters. In the first part of the novel No Name's identity is latent. A poor Southern Negro boy, his primary aspiration is to join the middle class American society. His one great hope is to obtain society's approval. By the end of the novel, however, he not only has become alienated from society but has lost practically all claim to personal identity. Society does not know him and, more dreadful,
he does not know himself. The method by which Ellison plots this loss of identity by his hero is perhaps the most important factor in making *Invisible Man* an outstanding novel, and as such seems to warrant closer examination.

One must first remember that Ellison assiduously avoids naming his protagonist. Yet in contrast to this namelessness almost every other character in the novel is given a most distinct name. There are no Joneses, Smiths, or Johnsons in the entire novel, but only characters with names such as Bledsoe, Trueblood, Emerson, Mary Rambo, Brother Jack, Brother Tarp, Wheatstraw, and Hambo. The list could continue to encompass a myriad of characters, both minor and major; and each name is strikingly out of the ordinary. Only the hero is without a title (with one exception to be noted later), an ironic fact which makes his "name" more noticeable than all the rest. After becoming aware that Ellison has purposely accentuated the namelessness of his protagonist by affixing unusual names to the other characters, one realizes that from the beginning No Name's trip is as much a journey away from identity as it is a journey through social and geographical space.

When No Name commences his trip, which follows his winning of the scholarship, his major ambition is to become
an upstanding member of society. Even after he is ignominiously expelled from college by the irate and vindictive Dr. Bledsoe, No Name still dreams of social acceptance. As he leaves for New York he believes that he will be successful because he will never forget to "smile and agree." "My shoes would be polished, my suit pressed, my hair dressed (not too much grease) and parted on the right side; my nails would be clean and my armpits well deodorized" (p. 140). In the same vein No Name early in the novel makes associations or in some way identifies with specific people that he would like to emulate. "In those pre-invisible days," he comments, "I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington" (p. 21); and shortly thereafter, while his naive illusions are still intact, he asserts that he "would be charming" like Ronald Colman. As long as No Name can associate in his mind with these specific types, then he has a certain kind of identity—a vague identity, true, but an identity that is at least latent. But No Name's desire to fulfill the Madison Avenue / Hollywood concept of social acceptability is never realized. On the contrary, he moves further and further away from society and from personal identity. By the end of the novel he has come to view himself literally as nothing and nobody, has discovered that he is as "transparent as air."
No Name's journey into psychic nothingness is mapped by two major themes, which though at times intersecting, are nonetheless distinct. First is other people's refusal to acknowledge No Name's physical existence, and second is No Name's gradual realization of his own nihility. The first theme originally occurs in Chapter 1, when No Name is forced into a melee by the white citizens of his home town on the night he is awarded the scholarship. Ten young Negroes are blindfolded and instructed to battle until only one is left standing. No Name comments that "I felt a sudden fit of blind terror. I was unused to darkness." In the struggle No Name can neither see nor be seen and though the blows which are exchanged epitomize his physical contact with the other combatants, he and the other fighters neither know nor care whom they are striking. The theme is extended when during his first day in New York No Name enters the subway, itself thematic of the underground darkness. In the subway car he is "crushed against a huge woman in black," and although their bodies are in intimate contact for the duration of the ride and although No Name fears the consequences of the situation--for the woman is Caucasian--he finally discovers that "no one was paying me the slightest attention" and that the woman herself "seemed lost in her own thoughts" (p. 141). Even when No
Name should receive the utmost attention, he gets none. In the novel No Name has sexual relations with but one woman, and it is noteworthy that this woman is also nameless. A more significant aspect of the scene, however, is that when the two are discovered in bed by the woman's husband, he does not "see" No Name. The husband looks into the dimly lit bedroom, casually chats with his wife, then exits. No Name is dumbfounded:

Could I have seen him without his seeing me? Or again, had he seen me and been silent out of sophistication, decadence, over-civilization? ... Why hadn't he said something, recognized me, cursed me? Attacked me? Or at least been outraged with her (pp. 361-362).

No Name is acutely aware that by all the laws of society and traditional behavior he should have been attacked violently. But instead his existence is simply and perplexingly ignored.

The culmination of this theme comes in the Prologue, a section which initiates the novel but which deals with events that occur after the action of the novel itself. In the Prologue No Name tells that while walking one night he "accidentally bumped into a man," and No Name comments ironically, "perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name" (p. 8). (One notes here that even the "insulting name" goes unrecorded.) Incensed at the abuse, No Name commences to beat the man mercilessly, demanding that he apologize. The man
steadfastly refuses to do so. Then, just as he is about
to kill his victim, No Name thinks:

It occurred to me that the man had not seen me, 
actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the 
midst of a walking nightmare! . . . He lay there, 
moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a 
phantom. . . . Poor fool, poor blind fool, I 
thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an 
invisible man! (p. 8)

By this time, obviously, No Name has realized his own 
invisibility, has realized that the people do not ignore 
him out of smugness or white superiority, but ignore him 
simply because they do not see him. He almost literally 
does not exist.

Concomitant with this theme is the series of 
events which leads No Name to an awareness of his psychic 
"invisibility." Others have impressed upon him the fact 
of his physical nothingness. No Name impresses upon 
himself the fact of his psychic nothingness. As stated, 
No Name does not have this invisibility burst upon him 
in one frightening instant. Instead it comes to him in 
stages, until at last he acknowledges it and withdraws 
completely from society, all dreams of Ronald Colman and 
Booker T. Washington long since gone. It would appear 
that up until the middle of the novel No Name retains 
some hope for or belief in his own identity. However, 
the hospital scene in Chapter 11, during which No Name 
undergoes the electro-shock treatments, comes as the
pivotal scene. For it is in the hospital that No Name first commences to realize that his own name, his own ancestry is being muted by society, by life itself. One must recall that No Name is sent to the hospital because of an explosion in the paint factory, an explosion caused intentionally by the wily and defensive old Negro Brockway. Because No Name is unable to hear, his doctors ask him questions by scribbling on pieces of paper. "WHAT IS YOUR NAME?" they ask him. Horrified, No Name realizes that "I no longer knew my own name. I shut my eyes and shook my head with sorrow." Persisting, a doctor writes "WHO . . . ARE . . . YOU?"

Who am I? I asked myself. But it was like trying to identify one particular cell that coursed through the torpid veins of my body. Maybe I was just this blackness and bewilderment and pain . . . (p. 210).

The questions continue. The doctors ask No Name who his mother is, where he was born, but No Name does not know. "I tried, thinking vainly of many names, but none seemed to fit, and yet it was as though I was somehow a part of all of them, had become submerged within them and lost" (p. 210). He escapes the hospital and the malicious doctors, but he is now totally confused as to who or what he is.

Returning to Harlem, No Name becomes involved with the communistic Brotherhood organization. The co-leader, Brother Jack, immediately assigns No Name a new "identity."
At his initial meeting No Name is handed an envelope:

"This is your new identity," Brother Jack said. "Open it."
Inside I found a name written on a slip of paper. "That is your new name," Brother Jack said. "Start thinking of yourself by that name from this moment. . . (p. 268).

The words "name" and "identity" are emphasized in this passage in order to dramatize the fact that even the pseudonym is not revealed to the reader. At the same time one is reminded that No Name is progressively more vague about his own identity. From viewing himself as a potential Booker T. Washington or Ronald Colman, No Name moves to referring to himself in equivocal terms—"new name," "new Identity," or, as later, "someone else."

With his "new identity" No Name is assigned as a speaker for the Brotherhood. As an orator his identity becomes even more obscure, for at his first speaking engagement he admits that "the moment I walked out upon the platform and opened my mouth I'd be someone else" (p. 291). For a short while he appears to be happy at being a generalized "somebody." He feels he has gained some modicum of identity as an actor playing a part, an imprecise Everyman momentarily strutting and fretting upon the stage. But even this faint hope for identity is frustrated. Because he is outstanding as a speaker No Name's picture appears in a magazine, accompanied by a complimentary article. Far from winning the approval of the
Brotherhood, as No Name thought it would, the story is
condemned by Brother Jack and others of the communist
league because they see it as a plot by No Name to
"advance his own selfish interests" (p. 346), as a
maneuver to gain personal recognition. Therefore, in­
stead of bringing to him the distinction that such
publicity would ordinarily demand, as it had brought
for instance to Ronald Colman, the picture and story
bring to No Name censure and punishment from the Brother­
hood. It is shortly after this demoralizing experience
that No Name likens himself to a "small distant meteorite
that died several hundred years ago and now lives only
by virtue of the light that speeds through space at too
great a pace to realize that its source has become a
piece of lead" (p. 382).

All the various facets of No Name's "invisible"
predicament finally coalesce near the climax of the novel
in the Rinehart section, Chapter 23. Here No Name's
descent into psychic and literal darkness culminates.
Ironically he again becomes "somebody." While fleeing
from Ras the Destroyer, his militant antagonist, No Name
decides to purchase a pair of dark glasses to disguise
himself. From this point onward the episode becomes
complex with irony, and is perhaps the most moving portion
of the novel. Having bought the glasses that "were of a
green glass so dark that it appeared black." No Name puts them on and is immediately plunged into "blackness." Upon discovering this darkness he is thrilled by "a strange wave of excitement." The excitement comes because the darkness this time is inner darkness. Whereas before he has been viewed by others as being in darkness, now he at last sees himself in darkness—a literal blackness which brings both comfort and exultation. It is a discovery that will lead him to the larger, more encompassing darkness of his underground cell, an abandoned coal bin which he eventually illuminates with hundreds of electric bulbs so that its "darkness" will only be made more dreadful.

Now, trying at last actively to escape being identified and having found the comfort of darkness, No Name is immediately mistaken for Rinehart. Even people who obviously know Rinehart personally—girl friends, policemen, bartenders—cannot distinguish No Name from the mysterious Rinehart. Finally, in trying to avoid identity, No Name has discovered it. But No Name soon learns that the identity which he has gained is an unwelcome identity. As Rinehart No Name is harassed by police, involved in a fight with an old man who liked him as No Name but who hates him as Rinehart, and is ousted from a bar by a bartender who also knew him well as No Name but cannot tolerate him as Rinehart. The glasses turn out to be a
comic-tragic mask or an ironic perversion of the proverbial rose-colored lenses. But despite such discouraging receptions No Name begins to see the world almost literally as Rinehart:

I walked, struck by the merging fluidity of forms seen through the lenses. Could this be the way the world appeared to Rinehart? All the dark-glass boys? (p. 424)

Eventually No Name learns that Rinehart is a preacher, crook, woman chaser, and generally sinister character. Yet No Name never sees Rinehart himself, never sees the man whose identity he has accidentally usurped.

No Name cannot actually "see" Rinehart because Rinehart is of course No Name himself, is No Name's alter-ego, the Doppelganger that has been with him all along and whose existence has been made realizable by the "magic" glasses. Rinehart is that ghostly other self that exists in a negative world. He is all the evil things that No Name himself is not. He is the obverse side of a compassionate human being. No Name is nameless, but Rinehart is distinctly monikerred—he is the "rine" (rind) and the "hart" (heart) of life itself, proof positive that there is a name for evil but that love and compassion are nameless, invisible, nothing. Remember that No Name has said in a previously quoted passage that he carried half his sickness within himself. Rinehart is the other half of that sickness, the half that No Name
attributes to society's corruptness and evil. Symbolically then No Name "sees" the price that he must pay for identity.

For the moment, however, No Name decides that living as Rinehart is too "vast and confusing," and removes the glasses and returns to his former "nobody-ness." At this point he inadvertently becomes involved in the Harlem riot, and once again finds himself running from the followers of Ras the Destroyer. In trying to avoid discovery by Ras's people, No Name attempts once again to hide behind the dark glasses, tries ironically to hide behind his alter-identity, the "Rineharts" as he now calls them. But even this identity beyond identity is destroyed:

I opened my briefcase and searched for my dark glasses, my Rineharts, drawing them out only to see the crushed lenses fall to the street. Rinehart, I thought, Rinehart! (p. 481)

As the heart-rending exclamation indicates, No Name has now realized once and for all that all hope of identity, in all possible forms, is gone. When Rinehart "dies" No Name's last vestige of identity dies too. He must admit now that he is nothing but a "little black man with an assumed name" who is lost in invisibility. And only minutes later he plunges into his black hole, where at last he gives up, goes to sleep, and dreams:

It's a kind of death without hanging, I thought, a death alive. . . . I moved off over the black water, floating, sighing. . . . sleeping invisibly (p. 490).
From the hole he sums up his entire life, the aspirations with which he began his journey, his associations with others, his disillusions. Ironically he has realized that in the South which he has left in search of identity "everyone knew you," but that "coming North was a jump into the unknown," a journey into the heart of a darkness far more horrible than negritude. "Thus I have come a long way," No Name ruminates sardonically, "and have returned and boomeranged a long way from the point in society toward which I originally aspired" (p. 496).

As noted previously, the major motif of the picaresque novel is the journey. Predominant are the journey through geographical space and the journey through the social strata. But Ellison has succeeded in inculcating a third, less traditional but far more terrifying journey—the journey into psychic and social "nothingness."

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. Ellison's novel is as much or more a 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. And perhaps one should not even attempt to draw such a line. For the purpose of this study, 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. Hamlet's lament of "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" seems most applicable to Ellison's *Invisible Man*. 
CHAPTER V

ON THE ROAD

Jack Kerouac's On the Road (1957) is probably the most raucous picaresque novel to protest against the post-World War II American society. Such characters as Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty and their Beatnik friends are passé now, almost fifteen years after the novel was published, and most of the crew that one meets in On the Road are well into their forties, considerably past the age of dissent. Dean, for instance, was born in 1926. No doubt they are bankers or secondary school principals, or have succumbed to narcotics poisoning or sexual hyperaesthesia. Kerouac, like the Bohemians he created, slid before his recent death into relative obscurity, having been abandoned by a society which changes its fads with the tides and which constantly demands something "new." His Beatniks have been superseded in the public's eye by Hippies, Yippies, and Black Panthers, and his free-swinging approach to sex— which no doubt helped popularize his novel for several years— has been rendered bland by a relaxed censorship which allows novels such as Portnoy's Complaint and stage plays such as Oh, Calcutta! On the
Road, which created such a furor in the fifties, thus seems dreadfully antiquated in the seventies. Only the passing of time will determine whether or not Kerouac will ascend from the literary depths to which he now seems to have been relegated.

Yet, when Kerouac published On the Road he added a new chapter to American literature and dumped a wild new kind of picaro into the picaresque tradition--two picaros in fact, for Sal Paradise, the narrator, is no less a picaro than Dean Moriarty, his loose-footed ex-convict companion. Kerouac wrote other novels, created other characters, but On the Road is the quintessence of his efforts and none of his other writings bear exposition separate from On the Road. As one critic observes:

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 happened establishes the pattern for all his later writing.

"Pattern" is perhaps a poor choice of words to apply to Kerouac, for his writing is certainly not "patterned." Unless, of course, one considers constant disorganization a pattern. Kerouac's prose seems at best a highly chaotic, grotesque mixture of Wolfean verbosity and dope-induced

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obscurantism. It is a kind of anti-prose that abuses the English language unmercifully. How can one help but flinch at such writing as "nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old"\(^2\) or "Her brother was a wild-buck Mexican hotcat with a hunger for booze, a great good kid" (p. 91). It is indeed "beat lyricism." The novel, as numerous critics have complained, has structure neither in narrative nor in syntax. In all fairness to Kerouac, however, this structureless structure is commensurate with the natures of the characters about whom he writes.

Dean and Sal suffer most acutely from rootlessness, for no other picaro remains in any one place for so short a period of time as do Kerouac's rogues. Boxcars, buses, cars, and airplanes are their real homes. Whorehouses, borrowed apartments, and temporary "pads" are only places where they lounge between trips. Any jobs that they take—cotton picking, fruit moving, and even one stint for Sal as a policeman—are retained just long enough to get sufficient money to move on. Actually the novel deals with a period of slightly less than ten years—a period during which Sal manages not only to attend college but to complete a novel—but the reader is not

\(^2\)Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 310. All references to *On the Road* are to this text.
really aware that so long a time is involved, for the novel handles only the peregrinations. It deals with them, in fact, to the point of tedium. After a while one loses tract of how many times Sal and Dean leave New York, go to San Francisco, reverse the process, then leave New York and go to San Francisco again. The trips soon become predictably repetitious, for both literally and figuratively Dean and Sal cover the same ground each trip. Such repetition is obviously one of the many organizational flaws in the novel, and one feels that a writer more careful than Kerouac would have telescoped the various journeys into one trip. Kerouac apparently felt the addiction to movement too strongly, not realizing that after one once reads about Sal's passing through Lake Charles, Louisiana, and Davenport, Iowa, there really is not much desire to read about them a second and a third time. Part of the final trip does take Sal and Dean into Mexico, but even this segment of the journey rings of old familiar places, for Kerouac does not really describe any one particular place. Mexico City comes off sounding pretty much like Denver or Los Angeles. This is partially due to the fact that Kerouac had a road map approach to geography. He is infatuated with place names and ticks them off as if he were running his forefinger down a page in a Rand-McNally atlas. So Sal and Dean do move, but in the process they
evidently do not see very much and certainly do not learn very much.

Kerouac's characters suffer from the same stereotyping as his geography. Sal Paradise is meant to be the only "sane" member of the cast, but even he is skeletal as a literary persona (he is obviously Kerouac's alter-ego) and appears just about as crazy as Dean and the rest of the Beatniks. Dean is supposed to be the book's pivotal character, but he remains an unchanging cardboard figure. He begins crazy and ends crazy. Before the novel is thirty pages gone one knows all that he really needs to know about Dean Moriarty. Sal implies that Dean is "a new kind of American saint," but if this is true, then sainthood has been perverted. For one learns early in the novel that Dean is in fact a woman-chasing, sex-starved, mentally deranged graduate of the reform school, and at novel's end one has not learned anything that changes that description. Furthermore, all the supporting figures are cliches. The multitude of women are in fact one woman: a dumb but sexy product of the lower classes who has the morals of a rabbit and who, when taken as wife, becomes a possessive, jealous, blood-sucking termagant. Eliot D. Allen recognizes that Kerouac's women are "about as unrepresentative of the women of ordinary American
life as they can be." The policemen are all "bad
guys" who needlessly torment innocent dope addicts and
thieves and who in their stupidity are easily outsmarted.
The minor Beatniks, like Sal and Dean, are all philoso-
phizing, pill-popping rebels. There are slight variations
within the types, but all in all the characters are dread-
fully predictable. As Norman Podhoretz says of On the Road,
"it is all unremarkable and commonplace." 4

If all of this sounds negative, it is supposed to.
For by almost any standards On the Road is not a "good"
novel. As Edmund Fuller observes, On the Road "adds up to
the great American goof-off." 5 Kerouac himself describes
Dean as "the HOLY GOOF" (p. 194). But even in all this
"goofing-off" the novel manages somehow to gain—almost
forces one to grant—recognition as a noteworthy fictional
and social document.

Most important in the present frame of reference,
On the Road is a significant picaresque novel. And, more
generally, it is an influential novel. Admittedly, it is

3 "That Was No Lady . . . That Was Jack Kerouac's
Girl," in Essays in Modern American Literature, ed. Richard
E. Langford (Deland, Fla.: Stetson Univ. Press, 1963),
p. 99.

4 Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in
American Writing (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Co.,

5 Man in Modern Fiction (New York: Random House,
lot of variation in the picaros that make up the separate limbs of the picaresque family tree, and Kerouac's heroes are perhaps the strangest members of all. Sometimes in fact they seem to jump from the tree entirely and go off through their own private bushes, howling and bawling and raising hell. But they always return. Though aberrant, On the Road certainly is a picaresque novel. Jack Ludwig states that as a picaresque undertaking, Kerouac's novel has twisted Huck Finn into a "hood" and has badly confused "violence with vitality." On the other side of the ledger, Gilbert Millstein, in what must have been an overly enthusiastic moment, states that On the Road "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 was a part. No matter which critic one chooses to believe, he must admit that On the Road has the important qualifications of the picaresque novel: first person narration, young men as heroes (or anti-heroes), and, as already noted, movement. Then, too, in their own insane ways, Dean and Sal are sharp witted and wise. They steal everything from cigarettes to automobiles and are never apprehended. And in their few

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7 Quoted in Man in Modern Fiction, p. 148.
encounters with the law they manage always to escape punishment, at least within the novel itself. Furthermore, it is their guile and cunning that gets them across the continent so many times, for they seldom have the money or food to get more than a few miles. Yet they somehow acquire the essentials when they must have them. They are at war with the "squares," and though it is debatable whether they eventually win or lose the war, they nonetheless win all the battles. Moreover, one must note that the entire novel is in essence a "search for the Father." Sal's father is nonexistent in the novel and Dean's deserted when Dean was about six years old. It is therefore significant that the very last sentence of the novel is a lamentation of "the father we never found." This Telemachus theme is one of the most common themes in all of literature, but it is particularly common to the picaresque novel, both traditional and modern. Tom Jones's entire motivation is to find his real parent and to gain his deserved birthright. Augie March is motivated in his journeys partly by a father whom he cannot really remember but whom he nonetheless envisions as a kindly, concerned man who had to go away.

One may question, however, whether or not On the Road is a legitimate social criticism, as are most picaresque novels. Yes, it is—on two distinct levels. First
it is a condemnation of conventional American society. And second—it is ironically a severe criticism of the very life and people it seems on the surface to celebrate. Critics have commonly recognized the first level of criticism of *On the Road*. Norman Podhoretz, for instance, in his book *Doings and Undoings*, discusses at some length the ways in which Dean's and Sal's ravings and roamings and sexual escapades are manifestations of their nay-saying to society. Podhoretz first points out that Bohemianism itself is nothing new, but then makes it clear that Kerouac's type of Bohemianism is unique. The Bohemianism of the 1920's, for example, "was a movement created in the name of civilization: its ideals were intelligence, cultivation, spiritual refinement." Kerouac's type of Bohemianism, however, "is another kettle of fish altogether. It is hostile to civilization; it worships primitivism, instinct, energy, 'blood.'" Particularly in their sexual abandon do Dean and Sal demonstrate their revolt "from conventional moral standards, and a defiant denial of the idea that sex is permissible only in marriage and then only for the sake of a family."

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8 Podhoretz, p. 146.
9 Podhoretz, p. 147.
10 Podhoretz, p. 148.
is also unlike the rebellion demonstrated by Augie March, Holden Caulfield and other modern picaroons. The difference admittedly is hard to clarify, 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. At least within the context of the novel itself one is not given any real reason for Sal and Dean's rebellion, other than a vaguely implied unrest for Sal because of World War II and a freedom urge for Dean because of prior stays in penitentiaries. For the most part Sal and Dean seem a priori to reject society and its laws and to set about to create out of whole cloth a new kind of existence, an anti-society of individualism and indifference, based on Active Boredom. As David L. Stevenson recognizes:

... 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 post-war generation find it increasingly difficult to surrender their whole lives to old values and traditional patterns of action.11

11Stevenson, 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 without first ever having examined what "convention" is.

Edmund Fuller's comment that the book is "the great American goof-off" probably comes as close as anything to explaining exactly what *On the Road* and its characters are about. It is a "goof-off" book for 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? It is, of course, a moot point; but one has to think that the latter possibility is at least partially valid, if not totally so. The Beatnik craze, which fortunately seems to have passed with the hoola-hoop and phonebooth stuffing and to have given way to its
offsprings the Hippies, 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 smells of reefers. It appears to be Kerouac's Game.

Ironically, however, like most games, Kerouac's game is a devastating commentary on the very thing which it praises so volubly. Take as a parallel the game of football. Nowhere in American society is there a more bitterly ironic statement about war, the "pastime" which the game so imitates with its controlled battles and its beloved phrases about "blitzes" and "bombs" and fullbacks that run like "tanks." War, of course, is that atrocity which civilized man is supposed to abhor so deeply, yet by the literal millions, men, women, and children trek exultantly to the stadiums to feel the old war cry in the throat and to vent their anger in cries of "win" and "go" and "kill" and then to hide their secret joys behind a hypocritical silence when an opposing player is writhing in agony on the ground. They seldom stop to consider that the very thing which they cheer so violently on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, microcosmically, is the exact same thing which they condemn so vocally in Israel or Vietnam. So it appears for Kerouac and his crew.
Inadvertently they have produced the most damaging of documents against the type of life which they advocate. 

On the Road is both a condemnation of the society which forces the creation of Bohemians such as the Beatniks and a condemnation of the Beatniks themselves. Dean's and Sal's yells of "Wow" and "Yippie" in favor of the Beatnik life are as bitterly satirical as the football fan's war whoops. In this way On the Road is similar to Mann's Felix Krull, for Felix too satirizes himself as he satirizes society.

One must remember that despite all their moving around, Dean and Sal really come to nothing. This is particularly true of Dean, the novel's titular hero. All of his insane drive for freedom and individuality has brought him nowhere. Even his own kind do not really want to have much to do with him. Bull Lee and his wife, a dope-gulping pair who let Dean and Sal stay with them for a while, soon tire of Dean and tell Sal that they want the crazy man to move on. At the end of the novel Remi Boncoeur, once a Beatnik himself, does not want Dean riding in the Cadillac, even for a few blocks. And Sal himself, who is supposed to be Dean's most loyal and trustworthy friend, does not protest Remi's exclusion of Dean. In fact Sal rides off with Remi, leaving Dean forlorn on the New York streets. "The only thing I could do," Sal
says matter-of-factly, "was sit in the back of the Cadillac and wave at him" (p. 309). It seems a dreadfully weak good-bye to one who is supposed to have meant so much to him.

So deserted, Dean, "ragged in a moth-eaten overcoat," disappears around a corner and is gone again. Even Sal himself really comes to nothing. He does succeed in publishing a novel, but it does not bring any real satisfaction. At the end of On the Road he is sitting "on the old broken-down river pier," lamenting the sadness he feels and the father he and Dean never found. So in the end all the exultant screams are silenced and the roving feet are growing tired. And that, of course, is the one thing that a philosophy based on "movement" cannot tolerate, for once the movement stops, then the dread ennui and malaise come. Dean and Sal are fairly safe in their "goofing-off" as long as they can move, but when the movement has to stop, the "goofing-off" dies and the resultant facing of the future is unbearable. In short, all the peregrinations and vociferations in the name of freedom have led Dean and Sal to the worst kind of servitude: almost total dependence upon others. They arrive at the immature and insecure point where they are unable to sit alone with themselves. They must have the noise and the furore and the chaos that comes with wild travels and from "friends" like themselves.
Past that they have nothing. In the final accounting they are the best advertisement against themselves. In the concluding paragraph of the novel Sal thinks of a child's sparkler burning in the night. His allusion is ironic, for that is precisely what the Beatnik life is like: a useless gimmick that burns brilliantly in the night, giving off thousands of sparks, and once it burns out, nothing but ashes remain. So, in saying no to everything, Sal and Dean have said yes to "nothing."

Doubtlessly Kerouac did not intend for his road to be quite so barren, for his writing is replete with Whitmanesque, Wolfean passages that supposedly celebrate America. Kerouac substitutes a bus for Thomas Wolfe's train and comes up with passages such as this:

At dawn my bus was zooming across the Arizona desert—Indio, Blythe, Salome (where she danced); the great dry stretches leading to Mexican mountains in the south. Then we swung north to the Arizona mountains, Flagstaff, clifftowns... Every bump, rise, and stretch in /the American landscape/ mystified my longing. In inky night we crossed New Mexico; at gray dawn it was Dalhart, Texas; in the bleak Sunday afternoon we rode through one Oklahoma flat-town after another; at nightfall it was Kansas. The bus roared on. I was going home in October. Everybody goes home in October (pp. 102-102).

It is one of many such kaleidoscopic descriptions. Further, Kerouac indulges in one of the oldest pastimes in American writing: singing the praises of the mythical and mystical "West." Wolfe did the same thing in a sense, for he was
sincerely fascinated by the vastness of that part of America where "the states are square." But Kerouac goes beyond mere love of the geographical beauty and spaciousness of the West. He would almost have one believe that when he crosses the Mississippi River he becomes an entirely new man—a new western phoenix rising out of the eastern ashes. Sal crosses the river for the first time in Iowa, goes to sleep in a room in Des Moines, and awakens in the dawn to the "one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was." Suddenly he is "just somebody else." He explains the phenomenon:

   I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon (p. 17).

Such romanticizing of western America is older than America itself. The first white men on the continent, caught in the brutal eastern winters, dreamed of the warmer and friendlier land that lay across the mountains and over the river, the land of Cibola and riches beyond the imagination. So, for better or worse, Kerouac places himself in a very old American tradition.

Yet all of Kerouac's poetizing about America in general and the West in particular seems to be nothing but lip service, a reiteration of songs sung by Wolfe and Whitman and a lot of other writers, but without the underlying
positivism. Being lyrical about mere geography is well and good, but it counts for nothing unless one has an understanding of the values and ideas and the people that make a country more than physical landscape. And Kerouac certainly does not demonstrate that he either knows or cares about the traditional American values; nor does he seem to think much of the "average American" with whom he comes into contact. In fact, he sees the "good" American only as those who are most like himself. In Nebraska, for instance, Sal waxes exultant over a farmer that he encounters. But this farmer definitely is not the person that comes to mind when one tries to invoke a vision of the "typical" midwest farmer:

He didn't have a care in the world and had the hugest [sic] regard for everybody. I said to myself, Wham, listen to that man laugh. That's the West, here I am in the West. He came booming into the diner, calling Maw's name. . . . "Maw, rustle me up some grub afore I have to start eatin myself raw or some damn silly idee like that." And he threw himself on a stool and went hyaw hyaw hyaw hyaw (p. 21).

At the sight of such a free-swinging man of the soil Sal cannot help but emit a silent "Whooee." Not many farmers are without "a care in the world," and certainly not many of them run around hollering "hyaw hyaw hyaw hyaw." But Sal and his Beatnik friends do. In other words, Sal tries to force his own image onto America. He never reflects the true image. He is contemptuously disappointed, for
instance, when in Council Bluffs, Iowa, he has his image of wagon trains and open prairies ruined by reality. Instead of the "great wagon parties that held council there" Sal sees "only cute suburban cottages of one damn kind or another, all laid out in the dismal gray dawn" (p. 19).

Unlike Sal and Dean, and perhaps unfortunately, most Americans happen to live in "cute suburban cottages of one damn kind or another."

Admittedly, these are isolated passages; but one could catalog others that illustrate the same point. The point is simply that to accept Kerouac's image of America as being valid 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 for Sal and Dean, and the edicts and traditions of America, and for that matter the world, have been ditched. Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism calls for total commitment to "something," and the commitment of the Beatniks is to women, liquor, dope, 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 laments in one passage that he has "prayed to God for a better break in life and a better chance to do something," but in the "dark sky"
"nobody was paying any attention to me" (p. 96). It is strange that Sal should even expect anybody "up there" to pay any attention to him, for he has willfully negated everything of traditional value—marriage, family, country, friendship—and God, of course, is the most traditional concept of them all. Sal is being as audacious in calling on God for assistance as Kerouac is when he calls upon the reader to accept On the Road as a positive statement about America, or about anything else. In the words of the Beatnik's latter day cousins, the Hippies, Kerouac just is not "telling it like it is." One critic sums it up this way:

Disjunction for the characters in On the Road goes beyond their mere isolation from the traditional values of our society. Indeed, we view the separate episodes in their lives (as the created, narrative "I" of Kerouac's novel views them) as disjunctive in time itself, existing not as parts of a continuum, but in cut-off fragments of time. The lives of Kerouac's characters are presented as a series of happenings, but ones self-isolated, not explored as if they were interrelated in cause and effect sequences. The events in which Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty, and the endless Marylous, Camilles, Terrys, Galateas are involved are mutually exclusive and have no communicable fictive significance to the reader beyond their mere occurrence. We know nothing cumulative or coherent about Sal Paradise or Dean Moriarty at all.\(^1\)\(^2\)

But negative or not, Sal and Dean are picaros. In fact, one must admit that all picaros share part of the negative attitude which Kerouac instills in his heroes. One recalls that Harriot De Onis points out that the picaro

\(^{12}\)Stevenson, p. 208.
in general is a "marginal, negative being." But De Onis qualifies her statement by adding that the picaro "has the invaluable quality of being a lens through which we view society." If Kerouac's picaros are lenses, they are faulty lenses, and the vision one gets when he views society through them is a distorted vision. The fallacy of Kerouac's view of society lies in the fact that one does not need to distort the "way things really are" in order to criticize society. In other words, society is its own severest critic. But Kerouac has a tendency to distort the society which his heroes rebel against, thereby making the rebellion itself pointless and valueless. Mann, Bellow, Ellison, and other writers who have produced picaros give as the background of their heroes' rebellions a society which is in keeping with the traditional view of people as they live and work. Thus their heroes' discontent attains meaning and purpose, whether or not one agrees with what the heroes do in retaliation. One never knows, however, what it is that Kerouac's men are so disgusted about. One assumes that there is a reason behind Sal's and Dean's revolt, but Kerouac never reveals what it is. As a result all his complaints remind one of screams coming through a madhouse window—the pitiful wails of unbalanced souls bemoaning a pain that lies within themselves and that no one else can really comprehend.
So *On the Road* remains a mad picaresque tale. By almost all presently applicable literary standards, it is inferior to practically every major novel discussed in this study. But paradoxically it is probably a more influential novel than most of the other books. This is a fact which is difficult if not 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 and Faulkner, Kerouac somehow has managed to hack out a new kind of expression, commensurate with the disjointed and alienated people whom he claims to depict. The novel first appeared in 1957, and thirteen years is too short a time to measure accurately the impact which any one book or any one writer has had upon literature in general; but there have already appeared minor novels since 1957 that bear a striking similarity to Kerouac's broken-backed writing. Some of the writings of William Burrough and J. P. Donleavy could be cited to support the contention, as could Richard Farina's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*. But, as stated, it is entirely a moot question, and one does not wish to belabor it. It may well be true, as already hinted, that Kerouac in *On the Road* is, as Edmund Fuller states,
"engaged in telling the great lie about man,"¹³ but one must recall that meretriciously bad books have in the past carried great weight in influencing those books which followed, and Kerouac's writing seems to have gained its niche for this reason if for no other. John P. Fisk suggests, with some plausibility, that "Kerouac's irrationalism counters the positivism of a society huddled desperately around its nuclear experts."¹⁴ If so, then a further value is added to Kerouac's novel, for who can deny that atomic-age America needs some counterbalance to its fears and insanities, irrational though the counterbalance may be? What Fisk recognizes in Kerouac is a theme common to other modern picaresque novelists, and a theme that will be further explored in the concluding chapter of this study.

¹³Fuller, p. 152.

In 1955, in his novel *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov coined a word which he hoped would denote a pubescent girl who somehow had come of age too rapidly and who knew more about life than a girl her age ordinarily should know. Such a girl is a distinct product of the modern world, in which everything is done in double time—or more precisely, in which everyone thinks everything should be done in double time. Nabokov chose to term his creature a "nymphet," a word which has since become a part of the language. It is a term describing a girl who is not fully realized, but a girl who is almost a lot of things. Lolita is certainly not the "nymph" or the maiden, though in her there is definitely some of the ingenue. Nor is she a "nymphomaniac," though in her blase acceptance of the sex act there seems to be a Brave New World brand of nymphomania. And because Lolita is Nabokov's creation, one suspects there is another quality in the word "nymphet," one which furthers the unrealized aspect of Lolita. This quality is that of the nymphalid, a type of beautiful butterfly which has front legs that are completely
functionless, their potential or purpose "unrealized" as the case may be. The point is that "nymphet" seems the perfect word for Lolita. It captures just about all that she is, literally, and just about everything that she is in the minds of those who know her, or more precisely, those who read about her.

The purpose of so much ado about Lolita in a study of the modern picaro is that the term "nymphet" arouses in one the desire to coin a similar phrase to describe properly two young men who are not quite picaros but who are so tantalizingly close that ones does not really know how to go about explaining their place in the picaresque tradition. J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield and James Purdy's Malcolm are, technically, picaros. They have been freely termed that by critics who should know of what they speak. But yet there remains in Holden and Malcolm, as in Lolita, a quality of "almost." It is a quality that makes them seem to be—if one may be forgiven for extending Nabokov's butterfly parallel a bit further—picaros in the chrysalis stage, almost as if one leaves them alone for several days he can go back to find them full-fledged picaros. As stated, one searches for a term for such pupal picaros. Perhaps, if Lolita is a nymphet, Holden and Malcolm could be labelled "picarets." For, like Lolita again, both young men are adolescents who know
more than boys their ages traditionally know and who have undergone more physical and psychic beatings than most men twice their ages. And, too, they are a distinct product of modern society—children who have been force fed on the atomic age pap, but whose bodies and souls have not quite kept pace in producing the cynicism and hardness that such a diet demands. Unlike their picaro cousins, such as Lazarillo and Huck Finn, Holden and Malcolm do not survive whole into adulthood. Malcolm dies while still a teenager, and Holden ends up in a mental institution. They are picarets who do not manage to kick through the cocoon and become full-fledged picaros, children who do not make it into maturity. All the other picaros somehow stumble through into adulthood, somehow survive, but Holden and Malcolm remain aggravatingly "unrealized." How, then, does one explain such "almost" picaros?

J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield has been examined from just about every conceivable angle, and although he has been likened numerous times to Huck Finn, he has seldom been called an unqualified "picaro." Ihab Hassan, for instance, chooses to call Holden and Catcher in the Rye (1951) "neo-picaresque."¹ John W. Aldridge calls them examples of the "spiritual picaresque."² One is not


exactly sure what such qualifying terms mean, for Hassan does not attempt to explain how a "neo-picaresque" novel differs from a traditional picaresque novel and Aldridge leaves it unclear as to how a "spiritual" picaresque novel differs from a "non-spiritual" one. It would seem necessary, then, to make an attempt to unmuddy the waters a bit and to examine just how Holden does and does not share kinship with his picaresque friends.

First of all, *Catcher in the Rye* exhibits all the major technical and structural requirements of the traditional picaresque novel. It is written in the typical first person, idiomatically in the contemporary teenage jargon. It is this facet of the novel that evokes immediate comparison with *Huck Finn*, as illustrated by such critics as Edgar Branch and Donald P. Costello.³ The novel has as its hero a young man who is in rebellion against his society and all that it stands for. He refuses literally to the point of psychosis to reconcile himself with his fellows. And, the hero travels. Technically he travels from Pennsylvania to New York to California, but the most significant segment of his travels is his three-day sojourn in New York City. Further,

the novel itself is a serio-comic satire on society and its false values. The people Holden meets in his travels form a cross section of the society which he condemns: school teachers, alumni, concerned mothers, taxicab drivers, prostitutes, transvestites, pimps, socially conscious girls, nuns, parents, and just about any other representative of society, both good and bad, that one would care to mention. Almost without exception Holden excoriates them one and all. But in its bitterness— for *Catcher in the Rye* is bitter— there is humor, and a near-perfect contrast is formed between laughter and pathos. Take, for example, some of Holden's adolescent ruminations concerning sex:

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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 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 spare 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 married. Caulfield and his Magic Violin, boy. 4
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This and the following scene with the prostitute are in the

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4 J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1951), p. 121. All references to *Catcher in the Rye* are to this text.
best sense of the word humorous, comparable in many ways to some of the wild ramblings of Don Quixote. Yet, again like Quixote, such humor is paradoxically sad, expressing the loneliness and the vulnerability of man's heart, the unsalved hurt of his isolation and the futility of his dreams.

There are additional ways in which Holden is like the true picaro. He is, as noted, much like Huck Finn, not only in his idiomatic language, but in numerous other ways. As Edgar Branch says, "The Catcher in the Rye, in fact, is a kind of Huckleberry Finn in modern dress." \(^5\) Since the purpose here is not to reiterate all that has been said of Holden in this connection, no paraphrase of Branch's article will be given; but Branch's extensive and thorough discussion serves to answer any doubts that one might have about the multitude of similarities and parallels that exist between Catcher in the Rye and Huck Finn. Even more interesting than Holden's kinship to Huck, however, is his kinship with Don Quixote, a kinship which is not so readily obvious beyond the level of humor. The most striking similarity between Holden and Quixote is their mutual mental derangement. Quixote is of course rendered temporarily insane by the reading of too many chivalric romances. Holden, on

\(^5\)Branch, p. 144.
the other hand, is driven to distraction by the pressures of a society with which he cannot cope, and it is significant perhaps that he escapes into the unreal world of movies and plays, just as Quixote escapes into his romances. Holden is in fact telling his story from a mental institution, the "here" to which he refers in the opening paragraph of *Catcher in the Rye*. The similarity between the two is deeper than this, however, or at least it extends further along the same line.

As Ihab Hassan points out, Holden is forever "performing the quixotic gesture."

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He picks fights with Stradlater, a youth twice his size, because he feels that Stradlater has seduced Jane Gallagher. He spends the afternoon trying to rub obscenities off walls so that little kids will not see them. Similar incidents occur throughout the novel. Further, Holden is thoroughly 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 ten 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

\[6\] Hassan, p. 273.
attempt to eradicate the dirty words. One sees, in fact--and again Holden's constant identifying with movie heroes supports the vision--Holden charging forth on Rocinante to assail a cruel and harsh world, set on rescuing the fair damsels, who in fact may be whores and streetwalkers but who to Holden are the exemplars of maidenhood, lovely Dulcineas.

If, then, Holden is so much like the picaro in general and Huck Finn and Don Quixote in particular, why is he not a full-fledged picaro? Some of the ways in which he departs from the picaresque tradition are apparent, others far more subtle and therefore more perplexing. First of all, Holden is not really the scoundrel that most picaros are. He does not steal and, despite his outrageous fabrications, he never maliciously lies. Moreover, he is not vindictive or cunning. Lazarillo de Tormes thinks nothing of tricking his blind master into splitting his head by jumping into a marble column, and he avows more than once that it was his cunning and wits alone that saw him through to adulthood. But Holden never vents his anger at the expense of others, with the single exception of his futile attack upon Stradlater. On the contrary he is acutely aware of the feelings of those about him. Does he not hide his expensive suitcase so that his roommate will not feel inferior? And far from being cunning, he is pathetically susceptible to the
cunning of others. When Maurice the pimp shakes him down for the extra five dollars, which of course Holden does not owe, Holden thinks neither of a way of avoiding the payment nor of redeeming his loss. He remains throughout the novel distressingly—and tragically—thin skinned.

This quality of susceptibility is one of the main traits that keep Holden from being a complete picaro. There are other qualities involved too, and Holden's thin skin alone would not prevent his being an unquestionable picaro; but coupled with the others, it seems to be a major factor in keeping him forever the "picaret." For Holden is simply too susceptible to the feelings of others. He suffers from too much compassion. As Holden himself admits in the end of the novel, he "misses" everybody, even "that goddam Maurice." This is not to imply that other picaros do not have compassion and sensitivity, because of course they do. Tom Jones, despite his roguery, is probably one of the most innately "good" men in all literature. And Huck Finn swears that if it is a sin to help Jim, then Huck will just "go to hell." Further, the compassion of Ellison's Invisible Man has already been discussed. But the significant difference between these picaros and Holden is that Holden's sensitivity causes him to overreact to everything. He is not at all capable of selectivity. The traditional picaro, sooner or later,
realizes what kind of world it is that he inhabits, realizes that he must temper his sensitivities with practicality, with common sense—sometimes even with violence. In short, the typical picaro comes to accept the world for what it is—a place full of greedy people, licentiousness, brutality, yet with a modicum of goodness. Holden, however, never really comes to accept the world on its own terms. He wants to reform it, make it over in his own image, eradicate all its obscenities and make it safe for innocent children to remain forever untouched. The dream is unrealized and leads him to the edge of insanity, leads him to the brink of the abyss that he so ironically wants to save other children from plunging into. As John W. Aldridge puts it, Holden is moving 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." 7

As stated, such a character as Holden (and Malcolm, as will be seen shortly) is a direct product of the modern world. Perhaps Holden's uniqueness hinges on the fact that he is solely the product of the Bomb Era. Unlike Augie March or Invisible Man, Holden's age of awareness does not predate the war years. He is not a child of the Depression, nor is he a result of Southern racial hatred. He is

7 Aldridge, p. 129.
distinctly the product of A-Bomb America, having come of age entirely under "The Shadow." For this reason, if for no other, perhaps one should grant Holden his right to a strange and almost inexplicable individuality. And also for this reason one must pay attention to the criticism which Holden presents against his society. In his own right, Holden has much 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 (p. 37).

It is of course Allie with whom Holden identifies most, for does Holden not wear the red baseball cap in emulation of Allie's red hair and carry Allie's mitt around like a religious artifact? Not surprisingly then, on the night that Allie dies, Holden shatters 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."
It is an act of passion (and compassion) which leaves
Holden's right hand partially paralyzed, forcing him even
further into the "left-handers" world. To Holden Allie
signifies the death of goodness in an unfair and unkind
world. The battle again is the conflict of art versus
dilettantism, of sensitivity opposed to bourgeois in-
difference that one sees in other picaresque novels,
notably Mann's *Felix Krull*. But for breaking the windows
in mourning for his younger brother's death, Holden re-
ceives 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 machanic for repair
and reconditioning. It is no wonder that Holden, later in
the book, says that a mother's love for her child is about
as kind as a "goddam wolf."

The right-handed world is also the world which pro-
duces such people as Stradlater, the secret slob; the world
that causes obscenities to be inscribed on buildings where
little girls can see them. It is the world of all the
gross pain and injustice that man inflicts on man. It is
the world of noncommunication, lovelessness, the Big Bomb,
the world of the Great Indifference. Holden, one must
remember, is an idealist, a dreamer. He sees himself as 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 reality of life, the harshness and the indifference of the Stradlaters or with the perverted selfishness of the Antolinis. Holden is the latent "saint" in a world of demonic "Old Maurices" who whop the hell out of him in payment for not lying with a prostitute. In this capacity, one critic, Albert Fowler, compares Salinger to Rousseau. Both present a character who "is born good and corrupted by his institutions." 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 commonplace-ness of a "society which botches things so terribly." It is befitting that in trying subconsciously to escape such a society Holden, like Felix Krull, finds in the museum of natural history—that "unreal" world of unchangeability, of peace—characters, such as the Eskimo hunter, with whom he can readily identify and whom he most admires.

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8 "Alien in the Rye," Modern Age, I, No. 2 (Fall 1957), 193-197. In J. D. Salinger and the Critics, p. 34.

9 Fowler, p. 35.
Yet, even in the actual world and under harsh conditions, Holden somehow manages to maintain a vestige 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 at least suspects 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 (p. 276).

Holden may be just as overly sensitive as he ever was, but he realizes, as Thomas 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 commences to miss 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.

Admittedly nothing is drastically original about Holden's feelings, for as Fowler and other critics have
noted, the loneliness and alienation which Holden experiences are common to everybody as he grows up—and common, also, one might add, to practically every picaresque novel written since World War II. 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, particularly in post-war America.

In this tragic inability of the innocent to endure in the harsh environment of the modern world James Purdy's Malcolm is most like Holden. Malcolm is, in fact, a lamb sacrificed to the pagan gods by a supposedly Christian society. Purdy does not handle his character nor approach his novel in the same fashion as does Salinger, however, and there are several aspects of Malcolm that must be explained before the similarities between Malcolm and Holden

10James Purdy, Malcolm (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1959). All references to Malcolm are to this text.
First of all Malcolm is not a realistic novel. It is an impressionistic or symbolic story, albeit not a very satisfying one. Purdy deals with his symbols too self-consciously, manipulates his characters too much like puppets. In the end none of them are believable either as people or symbols. Superficially the story is the tale of a fourteen-year-old orphan, Malcolm, who is discovered sitting on a hotel bench by an astrologer named Cox. Taken by Malcolm's naive honesty, Cox gives him a series of addresses to visit. Each visitation introduces Malcolm to a new freak in Purdy's menagerie of rotten souls, and each visitation carries Malcolm a step closer to destruction, from total innocence to complete degradation and death. Perplexingly enough there are but several qualities about the novel which are picaresque in nature, yet Malcolm is more readily termed a picaresque novel than Catcher in the Rye. Bettina Schwarzschild, for instance, matter-of-factly terms Malcolm "Purdy's picaresque novel."11 Thus, if the novel itself is picaresque, then Malcolm must be a picaro. But he is not—at least in the traditional sense. True, he comes close in several ways, but like Holden, Malcolm must remain a chrysalis picaro, a picaret. Like the

traditional picaro, Malcolm is a young man, without parents and on his own. And the novel itself is episodic. But unlike the traditional picaro, Malcolm is not only without formal schooling, he is unbelievably ignorant, amazingly stupid. Far from surviving by his wits, he has no wits about him. From the time Malcolm is introduced at the beginning of the novel until his death at the end, only several months have elapsed, if one can judge from the hazy chronology Purdy gives. Yet, one is surprised that Malcolm even survives that long. One would imagine that even innocence—which Malcolm is meant to symbolize—would somehow endure longer than a season. One must give Purdy the benefit of the doubt, however, and suggest that he means to illustrate the accelerated way in which the modern world corrupts; but if this is his intent, his "message" is somehow lost in the garbled context of the novel as a whole.

Moreover, not only does Malcolm fail to learn from his journeys, the journeys themselves are unique, at least to the picaresque. They are not really geographical. Malcolm goes from house to house in some anonymous "city," and the closest he ever comes to travelling is during a brief motorcycle ride. Thus his "travels" are journeys of the mind, of the psyche; or perchance they are journeys through society, though the characters that he encounters
at each "address" are at best grotesqueries, representing no discernible social types. He meets first Estel Blanc, an etiolated former mortician, who entertains Malcolm by having an equally etiolated dancer, Cora Naldi, perform. Cora Naldi may or may not be real. Next Malcolm meets Kermit Raphaelson, an artist (one can almost forgive Purdy some of the puns he applies to the characters' names) and a midget, though he does not admit to being a midget. Kermit is about to be divorced by his ex-prostitute wife Laureen. From here Malcolm goes to Madame Girard and her husband Girard Girard, a multi-millionaire whose main business seems to be the pursuit of easy-virtued women and a man who is about to divorce his Madame to marry Laureen. Malcolm's fourth visit is to Eloisa Brace, also an artist, who along with her husband Jerome, runs a house devoted to homosexuals, Jerome included. The other people whom Malcolm meets are his wife-to-be, Melba, a singer of bawdy but popular songs; her coterie of weird "contemporaries"; and various other strange characters. Malcolm's "addresses" constitute a world straight out of an opium nightmare. Warren French calls it a "surrealistic world." 12 Less kindly, Sidney Finkelstein says that Malcolm and his "friends" are like

puppets in a Punch and Judy show. Here is a grotesquely "absurd" world, alienated from the reader because nothing in it can be related to the reader's own life and hopes, no figure is meant to awaken any emotional response in him, and everything has the fearful hostility of an "anxiety" nightmare.  

Indeed one is not sure what Purdy means for Malcolm's impressionistic journeys to represent. One suspects, however, that Purdy is trying to do in Malcolm what Thomas Mann did in Felix Krull--trying to convince the reader, as Robert Heilman observes, that "more is going on than meets the eye." At best, Purdy is only partially successful. The religious undertones of the novel are all too obvious, but the undertones never emerge into any clear or discernible pattern. Thomas M. Lorch, in one of the few serious pieces of criticism specifically concerning Malcolm, notes that several themes appear in the novel; the initiation of youth; the search for the father; the quest for a personal identity; and the victimization of the innocent by society. Further Malcolm is a comedy of manners and a satire on marriage, according to Lorch. Lorch struggles to bring all of these themes and topics into some meaningful focus, but after making several

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14 "Purdy's Malcolm: A Unique Vision of Radical Emptiness," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 6 (Summer 1965), 205. All references to Lorch in this paragraph are to this article.
general and sometimes all too painfully apparent observations ("Every alley turns out to be blind" (p. 2107!)) he himself must admit that the novel "reveals baffling surfaces and inexplicable incongruities" (p. 205). Perhaps Lorch's most worthwhile statement comes in his recognition that Malcolm's relationship with his father implies "an ironic theological parody of God the Father and His only begotten Son which further suggests the emptiness of the Christian religious formulation" (p. 208). One can extend Lorch's observation by pointing out that in the beginning of the novel Malcolm possesses an unshakable faith in his father. The orphan sits on his Edenic Golden Bench day in and day out, waiting with infinite patience for a father whose very existence is questionable, like Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot. But Malcolm progressively loses faith in his father, because of the disbelief of the people with whom he comes into contact. At first Malcolm will admit only that his father has temporarily "disappeared"; later he concedes, in the face of his "friends'" skepticism, that his father is gone "and/or dead"; and finally he admits that he is "dead." Malcolm moves progressively from total faith to doubt to "nothingness." And, with bitter irony, Malcolm spends his last days in writing down the "conversations" he has had with his grotesque friends, a sardonic reversal
of the disciples' transcriptions of the preachings of Christ.

Another critic, Bettina Schwarzschild, recognizes this same Christian allegory in Malcolm. Miss Schwarzschild observes that when "Malcolm leaves the bench and begins his travels" he is moving "not towards life and self-realization in the company of the good father," but is moving instead "under the misguidance of Mephistopheles towards destruction and death." Further, Miss Schwarzschild sees Malcolm as a victim of his age, for he "faces the moral catastrophe of our times, that which arises when archetypes are attacked and old values lose their validity without new, satisfying ones coming to replace them." As a result he dies simply because his innocent spirit has been "starved to death."

All these observations are valid, as far as they go. For like Felix Krull, Malcolm is truly a bitter denunciation of modern religious practices, and like Catcher in the Rye, a damning statement concerning a society that does not have the time for God or for compassion toward its individual members. The novel is, as the title of Lorch's article indicates, a "vision of

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15 Schwarzschild, p. 172.
16 Schwarzschild, p. 177.
17 Schwarzschild, p. 177.
radical emptiness." Yet, amidst all the satire and allegory, the character of Malcolm himself is lost. What Purdy is saying certainly is nothing new—society and religion have been condemned many times before, by better novelists and in better novels. In fact such a condemnation has almost become a modern cliché. So if a novelist wishes to reiterate the complaints in this regard, it would seem that his hero must have a distinct purpose and personality. Felix Krull and Holden Caulfield are first of all human beings, totally believable and completely successful both as people and as literary characters. The "messages" which they convey are subordinate to the characters themselves, as it rightfully should be. But Malcolm remains non-descript and unbelievable. Admittedly, Purdy may have meant for Malcolm to be without any discernible personality, for throughout the novel Purdy carefully avoids giving any definite details about anything. Malcolm himself has no last name; the city in which the novel is set is just any "city"; the exact date of the action is never given; and the characters fade in and out, interact with each other almost as if they were all variations of one mind. So, perhaps the ephemeral character of Malcolm is just in keeping with the impressionistic character of the novel itself. Or perhaps even, Purdy is trying, with Malcolm of the no last
name, to draw parallels with the Matthews, Marks, Lukes, and Johns of the Bible, men who are more names than real personalities and men who are far overshadowed by the messages they convey. But whatever the case, Malcolm does not emerge from the perplexing context of the novel as a real human being--and for a picaro this is a deadly failure.

Every literary character who deserves the name "picaro" must develop, both physically and mentally. One recalls a scene in Tennessee Williams' play Suddenly Last Summer in which the newly hatched turtles are set upon by the ravenous sea birds. The baby turtles are vulnerable because they have not yet developed the hard protective shells, thus allowing the birds to tear through to the vital organs. Such turtles live but a few hours, their lives consisting of the time it takes for them to crawl from the sand of their hatching nest to the spot before the sea at which the birds descend upon them. Malcolm is like one of these turtles. He is set upon by the vultures before his shell solidifies. And like the infant turtles struggling to reach the sea, Malcolm's life becomes "such a short long life," as he laments several times. But unlike the turtles, Malcolm never really seems intent upon reaching the freedom of the "sea" nor upon developing a protective shell. Near the end of the
novel, after the sexually insatiable Melba has gotten him into her talons, Malcolm, instead of making any effort to escape, decides that "he did not care now what anything was" (p. 171). He gives himself over to the sacrifice without a whimper of protest. To switch metaphors, Malcolm literally oozes blood like the sacrificial lamb, and, one might add, like the crucified Christ. He bleeds when he is tattooed to satisfy Melba, and he bleeds when he is knocked to the floor by a man whom he mistakes for his father. And, of course, he is finally and ironically "loved" to death by the over-sexed Melba. He dies but a few feet from the nest, as naive and soft-shelled as he ever was. As Miss Schwarzschild notes, Malcolm's "impervious innocence" renders him "utterly unprotected from the destructive forces descending on him."¹⁸

Throughout the novel one keeps hoping that Malcolm will suddenly awaken to what is happening to him, keeps hoping that Malcolm will realize, as Lazarillo de Tormes realized when his blind master tricked him into slamming his head against a stone bull, that he must awake "from the simplemindedness in which, being a mere boy, I had been asleep." But Malcolm never wakes up. In fact his one paltry defense against the evil forces about him is to fall asleep. He is constantly falling into "one of his sleeply

¹⁸Schwarzschild, pp. 172-173.
attitudes." It is a defense which protects him against nothing. Even Holden Caulfield, who himself ends up by retreating into mental collapse, at least rebels against the injustices he sees in society. The revolt is perhaps futile, but at least Holden recognizes enough of the evil about him to protest. He at least runs away from that which torments him. Malcolm, on the contrary, runs toward that which is his nemesis. He finally requests that Madame Girard be brought to his bedside before he dies—Madame Girard, a woman who has contributed so much to his fall.

One cannot forget, however, that Holden and Malcolm inhabit the same world. It is a world, as Bettina Schwarzschild and other critics have noted, that has seen death of all the old values and ideals, of the once sustaining "archetypes." And a world which has not yet come up with any worthwhile replacements. Warren French offers a more specific reason for Malcolm's and Holden's emptiness. Comparing the two characters, French says that "the unwilling mothers, the indifferent fathers continually shun change and destroy their children's youth in order to preserve their own."\(^{19}\) Of course French's explanation is not far removed from Schwarzschild's and the other critics', for the parents' wishes to remain "youthful"

\(^{19}\)French, p. 115.
come about as a result of having no sustaining archetypes to support them through the age of wrinkles and menopausal horrors. But whatever the reasons, the most dreadful aspect of both Malcolm and Holden is that each feels that he will simply disappear, cease to exist as an individual. Their environment has completely depersonalized them.

"You see," Malcolm explains in the utmost honesty, "my difficulty is I can hardly place any estimate on myself. I hardly feel I exist" (p. 64). It is the same feeling that Holden has when, walking the streets of New York, he suddenly senses that he is disappearing and prays to his dead brother Allie to save him: "I'd say to him, 'Allie, don't let me disappear. . . . Please, Allie'" (p. 257). Significant is the fact that Holden calls not upon the conventional God, nor upon any living individual, but upon one who is dead.

Holden and Malcolm are not deprived Negroes like Ellison's Invisible Man, nor poor Jews like Augie March, nor nihilistic Beatniks like Kerouac's Sal Paradise. They are instead products of upper-middle-class America, that segment of society which strives so truculently to uphold the values of church and state and to fulfill all the requirements laid down by Madison Avenue. In short, they both have just about the "best of everything." They do not need to struggle to attain social success—they are
born into it. So they are thereby cut off from at least half of the motivating force of the typical picaro, for more often than not the picaro is the product of the lower classes, and he must decide, first, whether or not he will struggle to attain the middle class goals, or, second, whether or not he will reject entirely all standards and goals that society has to offer. As noted particularly in Augie March and Invisible Man, the usual picaro is at one time or another in his life strongly attracted to all the middle class has to offer, but for one reason or another, he rejects it. The picaro's struggle is therefore twofold—he struggles first with himself to determine which direction he will take, and then, after his decision is made, he struggles with society to maintain the integrity of his decision, the independence of his action. But Holden and Malcolm are cut off from the decision-making aspect of the struggle. Having been born into opulence they never have the privilege of determining for themselves whether or not the middle class plateau will be their goal. True, they rebel against the world, but for both young men, their rebellions are disturbingly passive. Holden talks a great deal, and damn just about everything and everybody. But he does nothing actively to better his own life or anyone else's. He has no new archetypes to replace the ones he rails against. Further, he is somewhat
hypocritically willing to accept most of what his family's money can buy for him. He thinks nothing of skipping coins into the lake in Central Park, nor of buying foolish presents, nor, for that matter, of spending what must be phenomenal sums on movies, plays, and bars, the most feeble kinds of escape from the life around him. As Sidney Finkelstein wryly notes, Holden's "weekly allowance would probably feed a poor family for a month." Malcolm's reaction against his society is even more passive. He idly enjoys all the luxuries that his father's money has purchased for him--fine hotels, good clothing, the best food. And his greatest worry is that his money is running out. He seems to recognize dimly near the end that all the things that society has been for him are without value; yet far from rebelling in an effort to attain some individuality, he lapses into the ultimate "sleepy attitude," death.

Perhaps it is this factor more than any other that keeps both Holden and Malcolm from being full-fledged picaros--they simply do not know what the forces are that cause their downfalls. Being direct products of the wealthy class, they are, without knowing it, instilled with the upper-middle-class values. Some primordial biological stirrings tell them that something is amiss, but the environment in which they have been reared effectively (and

Finkenstein, pp. 219-220.
frustratingly) shields them from realization of what is wrong. Some other picaros have been born into the upper classes, such as Tom Jones and Felix Krull, but even they are soon reduced to poverty and are thrown among the lowest types of humanity, into situations in which they must learn quickly to survive or else perish. No picaro leaves uncut the strings that tie him to family and money, as both Holden and Malcolm do. If he does he is not a true picaro, for to be a picaro one must have freedom and independence, and nothing negates freedom and independence faster than money from home.

Thus, though Holden observes from a distance the most vulgar forms of humanity (the transvestite he sees from the hotel window, the short-tempered taxicab driver), and though Malcolm eventually marries into the grossest kind of life, neither is ever a part of the lower depths; neither has actively to survive in the midst of the harsh sub-world that the picaro knows so well. So their innate yearnings for individuality, for "identity" are frustrated. And as a result they cannot endure. They are never forced to rely upon their basic will and wits, never compelled to call upon the most fundamental of nature's gifts. One recalls the scene in Felix Krull in which Felix identifies so closely with the prehistoric Neanderthals. He feels kinship with such cave dwellers for various
reasons, but a primary reason is his knowledge that his own life is like the Neanderthal's—a life set in an unfriendly world and a life in which only the fittest survive. The Neanderthals are to Felix doppelgangers. But it is an association that Holden and Malcolm could never make. Holden, for instance, in the museum of natural history, identifies with the taxidermal animals and hunters because they are dead, secure, safe from the world's moil. Holden and Malcolm are insensitive to the fact that nature demands of one that he face up to the life about him and thrive or die within its framework. One must not sit in the darkness of his cave and curse the harshness of the world beyond the entrance, for if he does he is sure to die from atrophy if from nothing else. The picaro runs from the cave and announces to the world that he is coming and challenges it to stop him if it can. It is a primeval, innate challenge, but one that for Holden and Malcolm has been successfully quelled by a society that gave them so much while in the process of giving them nothing.

The genre of the picaresque is a house of many rooms, inhabited by a diversity of picaros. One cannot really deny to Holden and Malcolm admittance to the house. Yet it seems that they must be assigned a rather special room to themselves. For they appear to be in the final summation picarets, not fully realized picaros. Like
Nabokov's nymphet they are types not totally formed, 
products of a society that weaves the cocoon too tightly, 
then flits away to other things.
Catcher in the Rye and the other novels discussed up to this point can, for various reasons, safely be called important books in American literature. Numerous other recent novels in the picaresque tradition have received either considerable critical attention or a wide reading audience, or both. Though they do not seem to be works of high literary significance, 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 appear to be proliferating. This discussion of the novels makes no pretense of being comprehensive, but only attempts to demonstrate the popularity of the genre by noting briefly several novels that are usually considered picaresque.

J. P. Donleavy's Ginger Man (1958) is such a novel. Donleavy writes in what Ihab Hassan calls the "post-Joycean" school¹ and his novel is pure picaresque. The hero, Sebastian Dangerfield, is an American ex-G. I. at

loose ends in Dublin. He lives the typical picaresque existence, whoring, fighting, and ostensibly studying law as a cover-up. In the end he inherits what to him is a fortune, and though Sebastian envisions continuing his roguish life in ease, he discovers that the money is not payable for twenty years. In other words, his family well knows what Sebastian is, and demands that he "settle down" before any financial assistance is forthcoming. As Hassan notes, 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 Throughout the novel man's values and society's expectations are shown to be ridiculous, assinine, totally incompatible with human biology and nature's intentions. Two passages will substantiate the point. The first is an example of Sebastian's own mental ramblings, the second is Sebastian's interpretation of the thoughts of a girl he has rescued from a lusting mob.

²Hassan, p. 197.
cheap these days. . . .

But after a while you get to hate everyone and everybody and you get very bitter inside because you haven't money and clothes and wealthy boy friends asking you out to smart places and even though you know that really all of it is false, it somehow manages to seep in and you find yourself resenting the fact that all you have is a good brain and you're smarter than they are but you would like to wear false breasts because your own are flat but you feel it's such a horrid lie and yet they do it and get away with it and then in the end you're faced with the blunt truth that they will get married and you won't and that they are going to hate their marriages but then they will have tea parties and cocktails and bridge while their husbands are sleeping with other men. . . (p. 107).

As the first quotation indicates, Sebastian is a wife-beating, child-deserting, adulterous, callous rogue who willfully overturns all the traditional values without a twinge of conscience. He himself asserts in the concluding section of the novel that "Violence is forever on my mind" (p. 325).

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; and 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

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is not sure. Somewhere along the way, however, Sebastian strays, and that from which he flees lashes back to destroy him. He abhors convention and the established life; yet he hungers after money—the epitome of a commercialized society—and is embittered when he discovers that his inheritance will be delayed. Though longing for the very things which the commonest of man seeks, Sebastian is a stranger and alone, trying throughout the novel to make some fragile contact with another human being. "I need people to talk to," he says wistfully more than once. And ironically, the last of the many women he has during the book, Mary, is a nymphomaniac interested only in "making babies," the one form of human life that Sebastian does not want to "talk to." Mary is a perverted earth-mother figure who cares nothing for Sebastian's soul but who almost literally wants to devour his body, much as Melba consumes Malcolm. But Sebastian is tougher than Purdy's picaret, and he endures. He realizes, however, that he remains "a straight dark figure and stranger" who has spent his entire life "running out to death" (p. 327). In the end he is sadder but wiser, having realized that there are but two things in which man is united: loneliness and death. Like Holden Caulfield, Sebastian ultimately "misses" the things he has criticized the most.
How are you now, Mary? . . . Can they really all be in the houses? In there is Christmas and fire and the kids having a time with tinny toys. This is the strangest part of London being not one thing but certainly not another (p. 327).

Norman Podhoretz compares Sebastian to Yossarian in Heller's Catch-22, a novel which also possesses picaresque elements but which on the whole is not a picaresque story. Podhoretz states that both Catch-22 and Ginger Man deal with

the youthful idealist living in a world so insane that he can find nothing to which his idealism might genuinely attach itself, and who therefore devotes all his energies to exposing the pretenses of everything that claims to be worthy of his aspirations and his loyalty. He hungers desperately for something that might be worth laying down his life for, but since nothing is available and since he is above all an honest man, he tells himself that he has in effect chosen to live only for his own survival and that he had better not kid himself about it. But of course he is kidding himself--he is not capable of the ruthlessness and opportunistic cunning it takes to live such a life.\(^4\)

Thus, of course, since Sebastian is unable to cope with life on its own demanding terms, he tries, again like Yossarian, to escape. Because escape is impossible, and because his attempts to run are so futile, Sebastian ends up not an admirable individualist but a pathetic nihilist. As Arland Ussher comments in the introduction to Ginger Man, Sebastian is just so much "flotsam-jetsam" (p. ix).

Like Kerouac's Beatniks, Sebastian does a lot of vociferous complaining, but neither he nor the reader is ever sure what Sebastian is really complaining about or what he offers in lieu of the values he condemns.

Although Donleavy may indeed manage to convey what Hassan calls "the acid sense of life," Ginger Man is not an outstanding novel. Much of it hackneyed and ill-expressed. Chapter 19, for instance, with its extended description of Sebastian's seduction of the prudish Miss Frost, seems both trite and unimaginative. Segments of Ginger Man are well written and interesting, but it has no real artistic unity. Even the pivotal figure of Sebastian does not articulate the novel. All picaresque novels are episodic, but Ginger Man is simply sporadic. Gene Baro observes that the "chief limitation" of the story is that Donleavy does not explain how Dangerfield got the way he is. As noted, The Ginger Man reveals an "energetic dislike of all social institutions," but the unevenness of the novel obscures Sebastian's motivations for the dislike. Consequently the novel is a dissatisfying one.

An equally disappointing novel is Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me (1967), a first novel which has received the usual overblown encomiums from certain sections

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5Hassan, p. 199.

of the popular press. One suspects that the praise comes more because the author, Richard Farina, was killed in a motorcycle accident before the book itself saw print than because of any real literary value that *Been Down* possesses. It is a novel much in the vein of *On the Road* and *Ginger Man*. Its "hero" can be admired only by the most psychotic of readers. Gnossis Poppadoupolis is a marijuana-smoking, sex-driven Greek-American whose prized possession is a rucksack in which are kept his earthly belongings—mostly prophylactics, wine, and goat cheese. The rucksack is forever packed and hanging on a nail, ready to go. Gnossis is supposed to be a mad genius who refuses to conform to society's whims. The setting of his escapades is an anonymous Eastern college of the Ivy League calibre, but in the novel Gnossis has just returned from some mysterious, mythical odyssey about the country, and before the novel's end he has trekked down the east coast of American to Cuba, accompanied by an assortment of Beatnik type freaks. Gnossis has no compunctions about anything. He steals cars indifferently, lies, connives, and in general pursues a perverted course. Those who sing the praises of the novel—blurbs of course quoted on the book's cover—say that Gnossis's actions are "hilarious" and "audacious," but anyone who is not quite so zealous in favor of *Been Down* probably would look upon most of Gnossis's "adventures"
as the acts of a very psychotic individual. The firmest of misogynists would find it hard to laugh, for instance, at Gnossis's brutality toward women, especially in the concluding scene of the novel when he binds and gags an ex-girlfriend and forces a wad of heroin into her rectum because he feels that she has misled him. To understate the case, there is nothing positive about anything that Gnossis says or does. His basic approach to revamping and revitalizing the social structure is to kick its representatives in the groin, both figuratively and literally. The following brief passage is a good example of his overall solution to social dilemmas:

Gnossis pointed a trembling finger at the policeman's Adam's apple, his arm rigid. "If you touch me now," he said in an even lower tone, "so help me Jesus, one of you will get a testicle torn up."

One sees Gnossis as an offspring of Kerouac's Dean Moriarty—and the son has grown sicker than the father. Farina, in fact, seems to have been laboring under the hodge-podge influence of several modern writers when he wrote Been Down. Gnossis, for example, blatantly wears a hunting cap backwards, a gimmick for which Farina should have given Salinger at least a footnote's worth of credit. But, as stated, it is Kerouac that Farina appears most intent upon emulating. He even strains the reader's

credulity in order to do so. Despite the fact that the novel was published in 1967, its setting is 1957—a ten-year jump backwards which allows Farina to deal with the same milieu that Kerouac dealt with. Yet, for the reader, the lost decade is strangely disturbing and the novel was in effect passe the day it was published. One finds, for instance, Gnossis's trip to Cuba in order to join Castro's rebels to be both sophomoric and unworkable. This particular brand of collegiate idealism has long since passed into oblivion. But most unacceptable of all is the similarity in character between Farina's hero and Kerouac's Dean Moriarity. Both are hell-raising, insane, nay-saying demoniacs, full of bitterness which they try to pass off as universal love and individuality. The Beatnik craze itself disgusted one with such anti-philosophy, and the Hippie craze has since totally killed the issue. So the most provoking question that Farina's novel raises is, simply: Why would anyone bother to rehash the whole situation? One regrets that Farina had to die so young, for had he lived he might have matured and produced a relevant novel—and Been Down is a flimsy document to leave as one's legacy.

Another last novel which is almost as embarrassing-ly bad is William Faulkner's The Reivers: A Reminiscence (1962). Although the book won a Pulitzer Prize, one again
feels that the prize must have been awarded in tribute to Faulkner himself and not as any particular recognition of the novel. Ostensibly a "funny" book—the book-jacket blurb hails it as "one of the funniest books in our literature"—it is in fact a boring tale. It is the story of one Lucius Priest and his journey from Jefferson, Mississippi, to Memphis, Tennessee, with an illiterate named Boon Hoggenbeck and a Negro scoundrel named Ned. These three constitute the "reivers" of the title—the stealers or plunderers. Actually one is not ever sure that the book is picaresque, though it has been called that. All that happens in the novel is that eleven-year-old Lucius goes with Boon and Ned to Memphis in 1905, gets involved in a whore house and a horse race, sees everything through to a happy ending, then returns home, where many years later he tells his grandson the story. There are picaresque elements in the novel, but it is more a "coming of age" story, a little bildungsroman. Lucius certainly is no picaro. He is more a young prig who at times becomes appallingly sanctimonious. One almost shutters when Faulkner has Lucius encounter the good-hearted whore, makes her promise never to sin again, and sees her happily married to Boon and expecting a child that shall be named Lucius Priest Hoggenbeck.

The novel is Faulkner at his worst, and when Faulkner
is bad he is very, very bad. He overloads his story with superfluous historical excursions, side trips which ruin any humorous continuity that The Reivers may have had. For instance, in Chapter IV, Faulkner has Lucius and his companions stop at an inn called Ballenbaugh's, then he promptly sets about giving a long history of the inn. It is a chronicle with all the appeal of a tour guide's spiel on Martha Washington's birthplace. Furthermore, Faulkner's innumerable parenthetical explanations are disruptive to the point of tedium. Take at random this passage:

So he bought the automobile, and Boon found his soul's lily maid, the virgin's love of his rough and innocent heart. It was a Winton Flyer. (This was the first one he--we--owned, before the White Steamer which Grandfather traded it for when Grandmother finally decided two years later that she couldn't bear the smell of gasoline at all.) You cranked it by hand while standing in front of it, with no more risk (provided you had remembered to take it out of gear) than a bone or two in your forearm: ... 8

And within less than four pages of these lines appear thirteen more such parenthetical interruptions of varying lengths.

But one does not need simply to carp about such stylistically questionable practices, for there is a greater overall fault with the novel. In brief, one just does not care about Lucius Priest and his corny friends. The whole novel is a cliche--all the way from the

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great excitement of the first car in Jefferson to Miss Reba's whorehouse in Memphis. Who cares, in all honesty, to hear once more that a motor car scares horses and that whoever sits in the back seat gets tobacco juice in the eyes when Grandfather spits into the wind? Who cares that Miss Reba has a working agreement with the Memphis police to keep her old profession going? Who cares that Grandfather is going to be really mad when he finds out his motor car has been traded for a race horse? Who cares that all whores are actually good-hearted girls who have just been led astray for a while? And who cares that the biggest whore of them all—both literally and figuratively—repents and will name her kid after the novel's titular hero? The Memphis whore, the Mississippi Negroes, the good guys and the bad guys are all here—and they add up to make The Reivers a "reminiscence" that would have been better forgotten. The novel adds nothing to Faulkner's reputation, and of course it adds nothing worthwhile to picaresque literature or to literature in general. It simply is an all-too-painful illustration of the depths to which a great novelist and a great genre can sink. Fortunately for both the novelist and the genre the book will have no effect upon either.

Another ineffectual recent picaresque novel is John Irving's Setting Free the Bears (1969). Irving is an
American, but the two quixotic "heroes" of the novel are Austrian students and the action takes place in Europe. The setting, however, really does not matter. Quixote's Rocinante has here become a monstrous Royal Enfield Motorcycle, and whereas Quixote is pummelled by windmills, Siegfried Jovotnik—the idealist of the two rogues—crashes full speed into a wagon of beehives while fleeing the police. Thus, on a road aflood with honey, Siegfried dies. One suspects symbolism here but is never sure of just what it is meant to be. The main aim of the two picaros—and one which indirectly leads to the honey-covered death—is to free the animals from the Vienna zoo, for the beasts are tended by an ex-Nazi Jew torturer. *Time* magazine, in reviewing the novel glowingly, elevates *Setting Free the Bears* to historical, universal significance:

> When the great zoo bust finally comes through and some of the beasts run free, the drama encompasses the longings and agonies of youth, whether they endured the horrors of World War II or merely are trapped in the confused present.9

Perhaps *Time's* praise is partially justified, but on the whole the novel is uneven and sometimes hackneyed. The Jew-hating Nazi episode in particular seems a long cliche. And one doubts that *Setting Free the Bears* really possesses the "historic resonances" that *Time's* article attributes to it. The novel does, however, help to reiterate the impact that

World War II has had upon American writers, especially those of the picaresque interests. Although *Time* seems in the above quotation to distinguish between "the horrors of World War II" and the "confused present," it is a distinction that does not exist. Irving and other recent novelists realize, if nothing else, that the horror of the present is closely connected to the War.

There exists, however, a strain of recent picaresque novels that demonstrates no awareness of the War nor of much else that is presently of social relevance. As a whole this group of picaresque novels has no real literary value, and seems for the most part to be atavistic literature, harking back to a more pristine time. These novels are the "Westerns," or in the present frame of reference, picaresque novels which are set in the American frontier. One does not wish to speculate about the continuing popularity of such writing, but he suspects that they appeal to a certain escapist streak in the American reading public. By reading such novels, a reader can, at least vicariously and momentarily, go back to what he thinks is a simpler time in American history, back before the Bomb and all other of the pressures of contemporary American society. It seems that such "throwback" novels, if they are in the least bit decently written, are assured a wide reading audience and widespread critical approval from the
popular press.

One such novel is Robert Lewis Taylor's *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters*, the Pulitzer Prize winning novel of 1958. The book is, in short, a literary throwback to *Huck Finn*, without any of *Huck Finn*'s literary significance. Taken from the actual journals of one Dr. Joseph Middleton, who made the trek from the East to California in the mid-1800's, *Jaimie McPheeters* is well enough written, though it definitely is not a picaresque *piece de resistance*, as it was called by the San Francisco *Chronicle*. The novel at best is 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 of the novel is trekking happily away to marry one of his Indian friends, an act parallel to *Huck Finn*'s leaving his aunt for the West. Some indication of the popular success that *Jaimie McPheeters* attained, in addition to the Pulitzer Prize, is the fact that it was made into a television series, which, fortunately or unfortunately as the case may be, was short lived.

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Taylor's later picaresque undertaking, *Journey to Matecumbe*, is a rerun of *Jaimie*. It is an even more blatant plagiarism of *Huck Finn*. Both of Taylor's novels are examples of the atavistic type fiction, harking back much too strongly to a bygone era. And as such they contribute very little to modern understanding or to modern fiction. Unlike their master *Huck Finn*, Taylor's novels lack both the insight and the literary subtlety that could raise them above place and time and lift them into universality.

The same complaints can be made about another very similar and more recent novel, one which has been acclaimed with praise at least equal to *Jaimie McPheeters*. *True Grit*, by Charles Portis, was published in 1968 and has been given about all the exploitation that the Madison Avenue sellers can give it. The only difference between *True Grit* and the other *Huck Finn* imitations is that Portis's novel has a young girl as its picaresque "hero." Gender has little meaning here, however, for young Mattie Ross has about as much femininity as a cactus. *Life*, reviewing the book, recognizes *True Grit*'s similarities to *Jaimie McPheeters*, and that Portis's novel "may not really be Literature." It does, however, do "a whole lot better in the Huck genre than anybody since Twain has."11 Such a statement, meant

to be praise, is of course a backhanded compliment. Imitation may indeed be the highest form of flattery, but it usually does not offer much in the way of literature. To write under the "influence" of another writer or novel is acceptable, but to "imitate" is another matter altogether. Twain does not need the "flattery" and serious literature does not need secondhand copies. But, as stated, True Grit has been given about as much acceptance as the mass reading public can offer. It is still a novel which sells well, and in case one does not wish to read the slender book he can get True Grit in movie form.

Other "Western" picaresque novels which may be mentioned are John Culp's The Bright Feathers (1963) and Thomas Berger's Little Big Man (1964), a novel which inculcates some of the popular "black humor" but which remains predominantly "Western." Neither novel is of any significance, though the latter has also been made into a movie.

Most of these novels, both the Western and the non-Western, have received at least some popular critical attention and a fairly large reading audience, but none of them seems to be of any lasting literary importance. They are noted in this study not simply to emphasize their lack of literary value but to emphasize the fact that the picaresque 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. America's is a "travelling" society—a society that seems to want to get somewhere or away from something as often and as fast as it possibly can. Its people are oriented to cars, planes, buses, trains—anything that will propel them. Its government spends billions of dollars to rocket to the moon. The national infatuation seems to be "movement," and it is this rootlessness which perhaps best explains the contemporary novelists' turning to the picaresque genre. The ramifications and undertones of the continued popularity of the picaresque novel and the implications of the ways in which the recent picaro differs from the traditional rogue must be explored in some depth, however. It is that exploration that constitutes the subsequent and final chapter in this study.
CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION

This study began with Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull*, a novel in which one witnesses the conflict that exists between the Artist and the Burgher. Although Mann was not writing directly about American society, his theme of discordance can be seen permeating the whole of picaresque writing in America during the period from the end of World War II to 1970. Mann utilizes the term "Artist" to mean not only one who is skilled in the fine arts but also one whose life is governed by sensitivity and taste. It is this broader meaning of the term that he has in mind when he christens Felix an "Artist." And one does not need much imagination to surmise what Mann means by the term "Burgher." Though the other writers considered in this study do not employ the same terms, the social divisions which they erect are the same. Whether one refers to the conflict as Artist versus Burgher or Beatnik versus Square, the point remains the same: the modern picaro is the artist at war with mass mediocrity.

The battle is evident in Salinger's Holden Caulfield, who with his dead brother Allie, represents the
artist at war with an indifferent and selfish world. It is evident in Bellow's Augie March, who has "opposition" in him and who tries to outrun the "darkness" to Bruges. It is evident in James Purdy's Malcolm, whose inchoate sensitivity is destroyed by society's lust; in Ellison's Invisible Man who is driven literally underground; and in Donleavy's Sebastian Dangerfield, who remains a stranger in a strange land. The repetitive theme is Art versus Dilettantism and Freedom versus Servitude. The modern picaresque hero is striking back at the T. V. mentality, the mass vegetation of mind 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 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." It is against this "cosmic insensitivity" that the picaresque hero battles, and it is with full realization of the impending confrontation with his own fate that the picaresque hero strives to make sense out of what appears a senseless era.

This conflict of Artist and Society is in several 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

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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. And he was perfectly willing to ignore his wife's adultery so that he might keep his "position" in the community. Don Quixote was certainly void of true artistic inclinations. A certain warped elan vital he possessed, but it was the product of insanity and was directed at anything but artistic or philosophical freedom. At the end he repents of his mistakes and goes quietly home to die. Gil Bias 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 birthrights (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 necessarily 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 of the early picaresque tales were unaware of the satirical impact and the social ramifications
which their novels possessed.

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, sought only to gain a rightful position in society. Of course, there is irony here. One must recall that by definition the picaro cannot be an "evil" character. In fact, almost to a man the early picaros—and many of the late ones for that matter—are naturally "good" individuals, despite the deceits and trickeries to which they sometimes stoop. But the societies in which the picaros operate are shown to be vicious, greedy, lustful. Why, then, one must ask, would a good man want so desperately to be assimilated? One finds it difficult to see such joining of society as being a victory for the picaro. The answer, perhaps, is that the authors of these picaresque novels were ultimately optimistic about their societies. As Arnold Kettle surmises, speaking of the eighteenth-century in general and of Henry Fielding in particular:

Fielding, like most of the writers of the eighteenth century, is very sure of his world. He is not complacent but he is fundamentally confident—confident that the problems of human society, that is to say his society, can and will be solved
by humane feeling and right reason. It is this broad and tolerant confidence which gives Tom Jones its particular tone.

The modern American picaresque novelists seem to share none of this optimism, nor do their fictive heroes want any part of wealth, place, social prestige. True perhaps, Tom Jones, after securing his "social standing," returns to the country, a place usually considered less "sinful" than the corrupt city. But the modern picaro rejects all society, whether it be in the country or on Madison Avenue.

At this point the differences between the conventional picaresque hero and the modern American picaro become evident. One must remember that Lazarillo de Tormes becomes in the end a respected town crier and is willing to be a cuckold to maintain that position. Roderick Random finds his lost father, marries Narcissa, and settles down to a life of ease and comfort on his own estate; and Tom Jones is finally revealed to be in fact Tom Allworthy, marries virtuous Sophia and turns into a solid citizen. It does not matter that Tom Jones and other conventional picaros at one time or another "fight" society—the point is that they ultimately and happily join their fellows. But remember on the other hand that Felix Krull in the end is still a shiftless and opportunistic

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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, the Invisible Man has hidden in a black hole, Sebastian Dangerfield is a wasted alien in Ireland, and Dean Moriarty is yet a bum 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 conscious desire to revolt. They were outside because acts of providence put them there, and outside they did not wish to remain. While on the "outs" they complained about, laughed at, and ridiculed society, but once "in," they ceased all complaints. The Spanish and early English 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, an upstanding citizen. He begins as a young, immature rogue, but he journeys into "maturity" and into acceptance of society's ways and values. As Martin C. Battestin recognizes in his introduction to Joseph Andrews, the entire novel presents a journey "to virtue and true contentment."\(^3\) Ronald Paulson notes, in reference to the Spanish picaro,}

that "the picaro is anything but a rebel; he is in fact, aspiring to become part of the social order with its security, comfort, and privileges." 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 pursuit of his birthright. He goes to war with his fellow man because he feels, though perhaps subconsciously at times, that the ideas and the mores of his society 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, and in no case does he repent of his unorthodoxy to be assimilated by society.

One could compile a veritable catalog of the ways in which the modern American picaro is alienated from the traditional social values and institutions. Most obvious perhaps is his almost total lack of familial connections. Augie March is a bastard. His mother and brother are committed to institutions, and Augie dreams futilely of redeeming them. His other brother inhabits a different "world" and shares nothing in common with Augie. Augie's attempt to establish some form of personal communication

through marriage disintegrates into a meaningless sham of the husband-wife union. His many sexual encounters are merely physical exercises, with no "soul" involved. He dreams of saving children, but has none of his own. Ellison's nameless Invisible Man never mentions his mother or father, and his grandfather comes to him only in a mocking dream, telling whomever it may concern to "Keep This Nigger Boy Running." No Name has neither the time nor opportunity even to think of marriage. His one friend is killed by the police. His efforts to establish "brotherhood" are rendered farcical by a self-seeking, jealous group of communists. His final "home"--a coal bin--has never before been inhabited by humans. Holden Caulfield never sees his mother and father. When he sneaks home to visit sister Phoebe he in fact takes pains not to awaken his parents in the next room. His beloved brother Allie has died and his other brother has become a well-known author with whom Holden can no longer communicate. Only sister Phoebe offers any solace to Holden, and even she is unable finally to prevent the derangement that engulfs him. Malcolm seems almost to have had no mother at all, and his father leaves him to the mercy of a merciless world. His wife literally saps him of both soul and vital energy. Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise have no fathers, no mothers, no brothers, sisters, or wives. They
fornicate but never love, watch their own "friendship"
dissolve on a cold street in New York. Sebastian Danger-
field hates his family, his wife, his child— and ulti-
mately deserts or is deserted by them all.

Furthermore, political and religious associations
either never enter the lives of the modern picaros or are
totally unsuccessful when they do. Augie March has some
faint political connections, and like Invisible Man becomes
involved with communism. But his expedition to Mexico to
assist Trotsky is summarily a farce and a failure. The
collapse of his political idealism is one of the things
that drive Augie to Europe in a futile effort to escape
the entire American continent. Invisible Man experiences
the same bitter disillusionment with communism and retire
from this world into darkness. The other important modern
picaros have not expressed interest in politics or govern-
ment.

As for orthodox religion, it simply is not present.
That Augie March is Jewish is ironic, for he has none of
the religious (or familial) orientations usually asso-
ciated with the Jewish minority. He is Jewish in name
only—or more precisely only by birth. It is a birthright
that he does not actively renounce but one that he simply
does not acknowledge. Invisible Man is symbolically denied
religion. The college to which he wins a scholarship is a
church affiliated school. Throughout the segment of the novel that concerns the college, Ellison satirizes or parodies religion and religious types. President Bledsoe is a self-seeking, hypocritical religionist. The white college trustee Mr. Norton is a puritan personified. He is much too interested in Negro Trueblood's tale of incest, and he sees to it that No Name is removed from college for introducing him to "sin." Symbolically then religion ousts No Name and it is an ouster that precipitates his journey into nothingness. His own interests in the college, however, had not been religious but social and academic, and he views his expulsion only as one event in an absurd world. In Holden Caulfield's life, religion plays no part. Indirectly, Holden rejects it, for he feels only pity for the poor nuns that he encounters in New York. The entirety of Malcolm is a sometimes bitter parody of the whole Christian mythos.

For the modern picaro, therefore, the home is gone, the hearth is cold, the church is dead, and the polls closed. Only the road is open.

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." He is, for instance, offered a permanent and lucrative position as a nobleman's valet. Augie March is presented with numerous opportunities to settle down, be a Jewish businessman, 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 job opportunities, to reach a middle class plateau, if not within the white milieu than at least within his own. These picaros choose not to pursue the straight and narrow path—a path paved with hypocrisy and greed, and a path that leads to the happy corral of what Thomas Mann refers to as the Burgher society. They choose to revolt and to answer to no one save themselves as individuals. Far from wanting actively to become a part of their contemporary society, they want rather to tear that society apart and rebuild it in their own images. They are, in a word, idealists, loose in a world void of both meaningful ideals and ideas.
The world of which the older picaro—particularly the English 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," managed 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 sincerely to feel that such things possess value. To borrow the term that David M. Zesmer applies to another era, these societies still held firm to the concept of "God, King, and Fair Lady." Perhaps even the novelists themselves, though no doubt far more realistic and perspicacious than their fellows, subscribed to this same sense of values, a possibility suggested by Arnold Kettle's quotation above. 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 probably constitutionally unable to believe that man could be answerable for his own deed to himself alone. They

therefore would not tolerate any novel in which the hero was, in the final accounting, 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.

One need only look at the contrived endings of Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews to get an idea of how essential it was for the novelist to end his tales with all sinners punished (or forgiven) and all "good" men rewarded. Anthony Trollope, mulling over how to conclude his own Barchester Towers, refers to "leave-takings" such as Fielding's and decides that "promises of two children and superhuman happiness are of no avail." Furthermore, Trollope implies, had Fielding "hung his hero" his novels would have gone unread. In a similar vein Lazarillo de Tormes ends with Lazarillo—a cuckold and still carrying the scars of his unfortunate life—thanking "God and Your Worship" for all the bounty that has befallen. And Don Quixote dies repentant. The point is that the audience of the traditional picaresque novels accepted the traditional values, and the novels themselves had to conform more or less to these values. 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 the prospect 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 All-Powerful deity and those who feel that man's life is finite and valuable only within its own framework. The modern American picaresque novel expresses time and again the existential philosophy. (The exception is Felix Krull, who seems never to lose the belief that his outlawry is sanctioned by some higher power.) Augie March, when he is offered religion and the chance to be "saved" by a seemingly omnipotent power—the maniac-fanatic in the lifeboat—rejects the offer flatly. "Even if I was sure you knew what you were talking about," Augie avers to Basteshaw, "I'd still say no." Augie is the most representative spokesman for the modern American 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."6 Galloway recognizes that

6"The Absurd Man as Picaro; The Novles of Saul Bellow," 7 (Summer 1964), 138-139. All references to Galloway in this paragraph are to this article.
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" (p. 235) and that because of this it is "Augie's special fate to face the world alone" (p. 237), just as Camus' protagonist in The Stranger had to do. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man expresses this same absurdity, for after the horrors of society have driven him literally underground he suddenly realizes that humanity 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 existentialism, are expressed in every major picaresque novel of the last twenty-five years. In the words of Holden Caulfield, that "David Copperfield kind of crap" does not work anymore.

This doctrine of the absurd is almost exclusively the product of the Atomic Age, a final admission perhaps that man's life has significance only in its insignificance and that society has failed utterly in finding for the individual security and the way to inner peace. Marc Slonim, writing on the existential or absurdist 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." 7 Alienation and annihilation are the key words in Slonim's synopsis, for the modern existentialist 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 methods 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 forms of moral and social pessimist.

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 of the overall picaresque genre apply as much to the present picaro as they do to the picaro of four centuries ago, no more and no less. All the picaros, from Lazarillo de Tormes to Augie March, are young men struggling to survive (with the notable exception of Don Quixote). 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—

7 April 18, 1965, pp. 28-29.
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 coal bin. This is not to say that the modern picaro has no hope, for somehow he does. It is not, however, the hope of a collective "good life." It is the hope for individual freedom and the unhindered right to be wrong if one chooses. As Invisible Man observes, it is "better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others." Even inarticulate Malcolm, in his passive, persistent refusal either to accept or reject society, is in effect asking for freedom, the privilege to choose his own destiny, no matter how unsure 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 actual father is either dead or totally uninterested in him, as Malcolm finally realizes, and he knows that there exists nowhere in the universe a Father who can offer him peace and
security. It is significant, for instance, that Holden Caulfield identifies more with the mummified figures in the Museum of Natural History than he does with his live but uninterested father. Overall the "father" in the modern picaresque novel seems to emblematize a great Absence, a constant reminder of a security that does not exist, either literally or religiously. Not surprisingly then, the modern picaresque hero never realizes his goal, for though he searches for individual freedom, he recognizes at the same time that as an individual he is part of mankind as a whole. Though he may indeed ask himself, as Thomas Wolfe asked, "Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?" the modern picaro nonetheless recognizes the "no man is an island" truism. Even freeswinging Sal Paradise 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 . . . you step into chaos."

Is such a realization a contradiction of the very existential 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 upon both the old and the new picaro. Tom Jones and his kind were victims of the centripetal force, while Augie March and his contemporary picaresque cousins 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 fashion, does the conventional and the modern picaro realize his affinity to the 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." One must question the truth of such a generalization. This discussion has concerned itself with the picaresque novel in America between 1945 and 1970, a period during which the picaresque genre flourished. Yet, one hesitates to compare these years 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 twenty-five year period under discussion was a period of decay or a "period of national and moral disintegration"—though indeed it sometimes appears to have been. More realistically, one must understand that the years since 1945 have been the time of the Great Paradox, a paradox that had perhaps been developing for decades, but one that did not come to fruition until World War II and the A-Bomb. 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 on to something before the Big One falls; or perhaps the second is the final brutal irony of the first, whereby man, in searching for bodily ease and comfort, has created out of his own rapaciousness, his own hedonism, a means for his ultimate 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 sample the proverbial apple.

Almost as a postscript one must wonder how viable such philosophic absurdity is. What does it portend, if anything? The question at best is moot, for viable or not, the absurdist philosophy does indeed characterize the modern picaresque hero, and the hero himself is characteristic of his age. Perhaps it is worth pointing out that of the major novelists noted in this discussion none has yet really gone beyond the existential stance. Salinger has produced no novel since *Catcher in the Rye*, *Franny* and *Zooie* being in fact two short stories. Salinger seems to have retired, like Ellison's Invisible Man, from this world. Nor has Ellison produced anything of fiction since *Invisible Man*. Jack Kerouac died in 1969, never having written anything other than extensions and pale copies of *On the Road* and having lived the last years of his life in isolation and misery. Only Bellow has continued to produce notable fiction, and neither Herzog nor Sammler (of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*) really expound a philosophy any more hopeful than Augie March's existentialism. In fact, both characters of the later novels seem to be Augie in middle age. As Bellow himself commented recently, humanity

"is standing on a tight, long rope over an abyss. There are too many crushing and possibly insoluble problems. Now seems a particularly chancy time to rock the boat merely for the sake of *joie de vivre.*"¹⁰ Thus one is almost afraid to question the viability or portent of the absurdist philosophy expressed by the contemporary picaresque heroes. One can only note its presence. He cannot profitably offer a prognosis of where it will lead. Perhaps the absurdism is the abyss over which Bellow's rope is stretched, and perhaps the modern picaresque novelist is trying to warn his fellow man that the fall from the rope is dreadful.

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¹⁰ Jane Howard, "Late Thoughts of a Novelist of Ideas: Mr. Bellow Considers His Planet," *Life*, April 3, 1970, p. 60.
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