

THE PICARESQUE AS A DECOLONIZING DISCOURSE IN JAMES STEPHEN'S THE DEMI-GODS

Laura P. Zuntini de IZARRA¹

- RESUMO: O fantástico é uma literatura de subversão, e foram poucos os críticos que leram as obras de Stephens sob essa perspectiva. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar o gênero picaresco comparando os modelos espanhol, inglês e irlandês para mostrar como James Stephens articula elementos da picaresca e do fantástico em *Os Semideuses* (1914) como tentativa de deanglicizar a Irlanda. Ele, desse modo, desconstrói a identidade irlandesa na virada do século e ilumina o processo de identificação sofrido por um país periférico. Stephens apresenta um novo paradigma literário no interior do conceito de modernidade, buscando novas formas de asserção no processo simbólico de construção de uma nação contra o discurso hegemônico de ascendência inglesa.
- PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Fantástico; James Stephen; gênero picaresco; *The Demi-Gods*.

Various literary analyses of the fantastic are generally limited to its poetics rather than the politics of its forms. Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, affirms that fantasy is not transcendental, “it has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (1981, p.8). In his novels *The Demi-Gods* and *The Crock of Gold*, James Stephens does not aim at inventing a non-human world to sublimize Ireland. He is rather interrogating the “nature” of the “real” through the fantastic just at the moment when an intensively politicized society looked at its art for ideological and political inspiration. *The Demi-Gods* is the focus of this paper because Stephens articulates the subversive function of the picaresque discourse with that of the fantastic to reject the process of identification of the Irish in relation to Englishness and of the English in relation to non-Englishness. In order to demonstrate his way of *deanglicizing* Ireland, I will identify some generic features of the Spanish picaresque that Stephens had appropriated in the process of re-reading and re-writing the Spanish and English picaresque discourses to criticise his own society and re-evaluate the old Irish values in the process of the re-construction of a ‘new’ nation.

The origin of the picaresque genre is traced back to the Spanish triad —*El Lazarillo* (1554), *El Guzmán* (1599) and *El Buscón* (1603). The convergence of a number of elements gave birth to the genre. Though its characteristics vary according

to different critical approaches, it can be affirmed that the theme is the life of a *pícaro*, a self-made man, in the process of outdoing his predetermined destiny. The *pícaro* is an urban product. He is poor and an orphan. He is thus condemned by his ‘blood’ in the Spanish aristocratic society. He is a parasite of society. He narrates the adventures and misadventures he has undergone in order to survive in a hostile world that has marginalized him because he is the antithesis of the values praised by the dominant ideology. Parody and satire permeate his narrative. Travelling, lies and guile, gambling and stealing are his defensive weapons. He exists as a *pícaro* as long as he is trying to rise in society in order to finally “resign” his rascal nature through “repentance and conversion”. This is why it is said that the *pícaro* moves horizontally through space and vertically through society. The episodic structure gives the idea of an open novel, but as the episodes are interlaced by the maturing of the *pícaro* in the school of life (*escuela de la vida*), the process is completed when he starts writing his autobiography: he is no longer a *pícaro*. Therefore, according to Claudio Guillén, the picaresque novel is “closed in form” (1971). The narrative is divided into chapters with an introductory epigraph to each. It is an autobiography revealing a duality through its point of view and discourse: as the narrator selects episodes from his past life there is a temporally modified self-evaluation. His whole past is linked to a present that is confined to the act of writing. The interplay of the two points of view of the *pícaro* simultaneously as narrator and as protagonist, produces a tension that is relieved through discourse. Folklore and religious and popular ideas play a double-game of subversion if we consider Gomez Moriana’s statement that the picaresque discourse is the confluence of three discourses of the time: the legal confessional form presented at the Inquisition Court, the soliloquies addressed to God and the confessions written at the request of a Confessor.

In my opinion, the process of the *pícaro*’s ascent is a *pseudo-extra-class-ascent* because it reveals the very degradation of the *pícaro*’s soul. The *pícaro* starts his “career” unconsciously and as soon as he is aware that lying and sagacity can help him to improve his situation, he becomes morally degenerate. When he narrates his own life, he knows the moral and religious values perfectly well, and this is why he satirises his own society, which is based on appearances rather than on the true practice of these values. As if it were a *doubly-bound* note in a musical composition, the pseudo-social ascent is followed by a degradation of the soul which is not “played” but it is still present, increasing the value of the musical note. Moral descent is the catalyst of pseudo-social ascent. This *doubly-bound* aspect of the picaresque is present in the structure, theme, moral-religious values of the novel and discourse. It seems to me that this is the key-note that defines the genre.

As the Spanish novels were translated in different European countries, they became models generating a new type of fiction, with specific characteristics of the native context and tradition of the country that adopted them. In this way, the *pícaro*

¹ Departamento de Letras Modernas – Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas – USP – 05508-900 – São Paulo – SP – lizarra@usp.br

was substituted by the English *rogue* and *foundling*, the Italian *vagabondo*, the German *Schelm*, the French *gueux* and the Irish *tramp* or *tinker*.

Thus, there is a reinterpretation and adaptation of the genre in England. The picaresque is introduced into the English social context via Italy and France. There is a symbiosis with the traditional travel literature, and the mercantile aspects of the Spanish novels were overemphasised when they were translated into English. The main English picaresque novels are Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller, or The Life of Jack Wilton* (1594), Thomas Head's *The English Rogue* (1663), Defoe's *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722), Smollet's *Roderick Random* and Thackeray's *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq., Written by Himself* (1844)². The Spanish theme is present as the narrative focuses on the life of their protagonists. The word *life* keeps the same central function of the classical novels that links action to theme. It also appears in the titles, blending theme and character. Therefore, there is an interaction of the three generic elements particularly when the words *adventure* or *fortunes and misfortunes* are also introduced in the title. The *pícaro* is an orphan of unknown ascendancy but he will be integrated into society through repentance (or pseudo-repentance) and Good Fortune. All of the English novels follow the same structural pattern as the Spanish novels: they are divided into books and chapters, and each of them is preceded by an epigraph (a short third-person narrative) which sums up the action of the chapter; there is an address to a patron and/or a preface to the reader in the Spanish mode where the writer explains his didactic intentions and the type of reader he is addressing. The *pícaro* is writing his own autobiography; he is author and actor of his own tale and popular proverbs, aphorisms and biblical quotations abound.

Though the English novel retains the classic plan of error and repentance, it misinterprets the nature and cause of the latter at the expense of excluding the *doubly-bound* functional situation of the picaresque which reveals the coexistence of *material success* and *spiritual degradation*. The author's objective is only the narration of his adventures with a didactic purpose. The absence of the ambiguous success of the *pícaro*, the morality implied in the narrative allowing the rogue to repent and retain the profits of his former dishonest enterprises, or to regain his former social status that Fortune had once taken away from him, the emphasis on the mercantile aspect, the episodic structure for the sake of action instead of portraying a psychological process, and the happy end are all the new characteristics captured in a loosely constructed tale, which is the most outstanding common denominator of the picaresque genre.

² In my opinion, Fielding's *The Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749), and Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837) are not picaresque novels as some critics affirm. They only contain some picaresque features with quixotic tinges.

Critics of both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literatures do not refer to the existence of a picaresque tradition in Ireland. However, writers depict rascals in their novels: the awkward fool, the witty adventurer and the scoundrel. The surface structure of the Irish novels of this type, such as Lever's *The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer* (1839) and *Confessions of Con. Cregan* (1849), Lover's *Handy Andy. A Tale of Irish Life* (1842) and W. Hamilton Maxwell's *Luck is Everything or The Adventures of Brian O'Linn* (1857), follows the classic structural paradigm. They are divided into chapters which are introduced with epigraphs fulfilling the same function as in the Spanish novels. They are autobiographies containing a preface that states that the narration is based on real facts and which plays a didactic function. The maturing of the *pícaro* is narrated but he does not show any sign of repentance of his misdeeds as happens in the Spanish and English novels. The objective of the Irish *pícaro* is to become a *gentleman*, to regain his lost place of the Irish ascendancy. Terry Eagleton says that since the twelfth century the Anglo-Norman forces has sought to subjugate the island established formal control although the Irish clan society has "proved too tenacious to subdue" (1995, p. 29). Nevertheless, from the eighteenth century onwards, the penal laws oppressed Gaelic gentlefolk, dispossessing them of their language, and thus it became more difficult to undo a long history of oppression. Politicians and writers started then to lay the foundations for a native nationalism.

The folk element plays an important discursive role in the Irish cultural movement. Popular sayings, proverbs and biblical references are intermixed with the narrator's discourse and take on a parodic function. Popular wisdom supports the protagonist's existentialist philosophy and proves to be better than the hypocrisy of high class society. *Honesty* is the Irish *pícaro*'s code of honour. Satire, one of the main elements of the picaresque genre, also predominates. In relation to the structure of the novel, neither the Spanish double-meaning of error and repentance nor the English single statement of it, is present in the Irish novel. However, the word *confessions* is substituted for the keywords *life* and *adventures* in some novels. *Confessions* contains two opposite meanings: a popular and legal meaning of the acknowledgement of a fact implying reassurance, and the religious meaning of the acknowledgement of an offence implying repentance. These two concepts produce a political and aesthetic tension within the text in the story-line as well as at the structural level. Whenever the Irish *pícaro* behaves badly, his attack is against cruel people who deserve it (the English oppressor). There is no meanness and corruption in his nature. If he has to transgress the law, it is because the circumstances force him to do so. The tension between those two concepts indicates the reason why there is no repentance in his confessions, only a denunciation *per se*. By birth, the Irish cannot belong to the colonizer's society, so Irish determinism resembles the Spanish *blood ascendancy* determinism while the English *pícaro* is actually integrated through repentance and good Fortune. However, there is a happy end in the Irish novels like in the English

ones because of the protagonist's attitude of spiritual sublimation due to the historical and political context. The Spanish *doubly-bound* situation of "social ascension – degradation of the soul" is absent in the Irish picaresque although there is a *doubly-bound* situation of 'social ascension – cultural and spiritual sublimation'. This *sublimation* means that the Irish *pícaro*'s values gain a collective power and turn into a cultural and political force because once he has attained individual respect through money, he is able to be true to those values he always tried to preserve during his adventures and sometimes had to deny.

The Demi-Gods is a clear example of an attempt to "invent the Irish" (KIBERD, 1995, p. 136), to construct an Irish identity through the creation of a national literature. James Stephens was member of the Gaelic League, which was concerned with the cultural nationalist movement for the preservation of Irish language and Gaelic memories and folklore. He thus searches for the essence of Irishness in the past, in mythology and in the old settled rural civilization. *The Demi-Gods* transgressed the limits of the picaresque genre using fantasy and transformed the aesthetics of the Irish Revival into political representations of historical facts.

The novel is about two tinkers, Patsy Mac Cann and his daughter Mary, travelling in the company of three angels throughout the worst poverty stricken countries of the west of Ireland. They live a *gypsy life* wandering freely and camping, grazing their donkey on other people's property and robbing their everyday food from the plantations or houses they pass by. In Chapter IX, Stephens deconstructs the basic elements of the picaresque genre: the protagonist, Patsy Mac Cann "had existed on the edges of a society which did not recognise him in any way", "laws were for other people, but they were not for him." Moreover:

For the average man there are *two dimensions* of space wherein he moves with a **certain limited freedom**; it is for him a *horizontal* and a *perpendicular* world; he *goes up the social scale and down it*, and in both these atmospheres there is a level wherein he can exercise himself *to and fro*, his *journeying* being strictly **limited** by his **business** and his **family**. Between the place where he **works** and the place where he **lives** lies *all the freedom he can hope for*; within that range he must seek such *adventures* as he craves, and the sole expansion to which he can attain is *upwards* towards another social life if he be ambitious, or *downward* to the underworlds if he is bored. For Mac Cann there were *no upward and no downward movements*, he had **plumbed** to the very rocks of life, but his *horizontal movements* were **bounded only** by the oceans around his country, and in this **gigantic underworld** he moved with **almost absolute freedom**, and knowledge which **might properly be termed** scientific. (1982, p.46 emphasis is mine)

Stephens builds up his text on *textual borrowings* (words in italics) taken from the picaresque novels widely read at that time. There is a parody of the words *limited*,

works and *freedom* that belong to the domineering ideology when compared with the ideology of the margins (words in boldface). The result is a sublimation of Stephens's *pícaro*. Thus, the writer deviates from the negative existentialism of the Spanish picaresque novels where there is no way out for the *pícaro*. There is an exit for his protagonist. It is not marriage, nor the telling of adventures showing no internal experience, nor the acquisition of wealth in order to be restored to the society that has marginalized him, as in the English and Irish picaresque novels. His *pícaro* takes a new road which gives place to a spiritual and political awareness in the evolution of man. Stephens uses the mythical figure of the Spanish *pícaro* and, deconstructing and opposing it to the English and Irish *pícaros*, he elevates his *own archetype* to a symbolic political meaning in an Irish context: he is the representative of freedom and transcendental consciousness within both individual and collective levels.

There is a satire of the society and a carnivalized vision of the world and human beings, as Mikhail Bakhtin affirms when referring to the picaresque novel. But in Stephens's novel satire is intertwined with the fantastic mode and plays a stronger political function. The physical world interacts with the supernatural, which becomes humanized when the angels consent to disguise and travel with Patsy to *learn* something about life on earth. The *pícaro*'s philosophical attitude towards life is justified by Billy the Music's story-within-a-story that tells us that "all the people are squeezers in their own place", even within the dominant society. He was once a very rich man who left his family and fortune and turned into a tramp. Thus, a sublimation of this social condition is dissected together with relations of power - high/low, superior/inferior, master/slave - when Patsy condemned Billy the Music's exploitation of his people:

'If I was one of your men', shouted Patsy, 'you wouldn't have treated me that way.'

Billy the Music smiled happily at him

'Wouldn't I?' said he, with his head on one side.

'You would not,' said Patsy, 'for I'd have broken your skull with a spade.'

'If you had been one of my men,' the other replied mildly, you'd have been as tame as a little kitten; you'd have crawled round me with your hat in your hand and your eyes turned up like a dying duck's, and you'd have said, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," like the other men that I welted the stuffing out of with my two fists, and broke the spirits of with labour and hunger. Don't be talking now, for you're an ignorant man in these things, although you did manage to steal a clocking hen off me the day I was busy.' (1982, p.107)

Moreover, Patsy's behaviour is over-justified by the angels' own acceptance of following this kind of life outside virtue and vice at the supernatural level of the structure of the novel. The narrator *surprisingly* shows it when he says, "It is to be remarked that the angels were strangely like Patsy Mac Cann. Their ideas of right and

wrong almost coincided" (1982, p.50). Then, he concludes that "to the angels these people were humanity, and the others were, they did not know what" (1982, p.49). The non-identity of those *others* is unmasked!

The Demi-Gods intersects the picaresque genre at the point of its conception; it takes the road of the political as a hidden agenda of subversion through intertextual and interdiscursive practices. Due to the writer's use of the fantastic mode, the text subverts, and there is a reversal of the celestial, which becomes terrestrial, while the terrestrial becomes celestial. An example of this is Caeltia's story-within-a story where he satirizes the celestial hierarchy. It is the story of "the threepenny-piece" stolen by an angel while Brien O'Brien, a very poor man, was waiting for his final Judgement and God sent him to hell.

In Stephens's narrative, the construction of a national identity was made through subversion. Metonymically, the oppressed people become demi-gods. Their deeds and strength necessary to survive in a world full of misery and hunger are as heroic as those narrated in the Greek myths. Thus, Stephens's demi-gods analogically resemble the heroes and demi-gods of classical mythology.

The subversive force of the narrative in different modes, especially the fantastic, transgresses the limits of the classification of genres. Stephens plays the game of disclosing the element of political subversion present in the law of the picaresque and the fantastic genres and shows its *contaminations* in the writing process of *deanglicizing* Ireland. It seems to me that *The Demi-Gods* reinforces the Derridean idea of the existence of a law of impurity within the law itself. The state of *aporia* cannot be dismissed when analysing the term *picaresque genre* historically. It really helps to identify the very rules that govern the law and counter-law. Thus, James Stephens presents a new literary paradigm within the concept of modernity, reaffirming that there is not a *continuity* or *reincarnation* of a *fixed norm* when historical time and social contexts are different from what gave origin to the genre. *The Demi-Gods* becomes part of the symbolic process of the construction of a nation and James Stephens innovates the picaresque genre with the introduction of the fantastic.

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- **ABSTRACT:** *Fantasy is the literature of subversion, and few critics have read Stephens's books from this perspective. The aim of this paper is to analyse the picaresque genre comparatively (Spanish, English and Irish patterns) in order to show how James Stephens links elements of the picaresque with fantasy in **The Demi-Gods** (1914) as an attempt to **deanglicize** Ireland. He thus deconstructs Irish identity at the turn of the century and enlightens the process of identification undergone by a peripheral country. Stephens presents a new literary paradigm within the concept*

of modernity, looking for new ways of assertion in the symbolic process of constructing a nation against the hegemonic discourse of English Ascendancy.

- **KEY WORDS:** *Fantasy; James Stephen; picaresque genre; The Demi-Gods.*

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