

**Transatlantic Pícaros: The Only-ness of Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and
Quevedo's *El Buscón***

The pícaro(a) is a universal literary figure¹. We can find him or her anywhere. From *Lozana Andaluza* (1528) to *Mano Cruel* (1953), and everything in between. It has become a mythical figure like Don Quijote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe and Faust. Critics Robert Blaber and Marvin Gilman (1990)² identify well known authors such as Graham Greene, Saul Bellow, Alberto Moravia, Albert Camus, William Faulkner, André Malraux and others, as writers of pícaros (14). To that list I would add the names of Juan Rulfo (1953), Augusto Roa Bastos (1953) and Camilo José Cela (1942)³. In the Canadian landscape, the picaresque tradition traces its roots as far back as the 19th century novel *The Clockmaker* (1836) by T. C. Haliburton.

However, after *The Clockmaker* there is a gap in which we do not find another significant picaresque⁴ example until Earle Birney's publication of *Turvey: A Military Picaresque* (1949). And it is with *Turvey* with which a picaresque boom initiates and continues till the present days. Novels like *The Words of My Roaring* (1966), *Farthing's Fortunes* (1976), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983) and *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* (1986), *The Robber Bride* (1993) among others, are just a few examples of works with picaresque traits published in Canadian mainstream.

Nevertheless, and despite the steady picaresque production indicated lines above, there is a significant lack of scholarship around the topic of the pícaro and the picaresque in Canada.

1 The word 'pícaro' is translated into English in many ways, such as rogue, wanderer, swindler, trickster, etc. I will keep the word pícaro in order to pay homage to the Spanish picaresque tradition in which the first picaresque works were published. In addition, I think the word pícaro is more widely accepted among the critics and thus, more useful for my analysis.

2 Roguery. *The Picaresque Tradition in Australian, Canadian and Indian Fiction*. Australia: Butterfly Books, 1990.

3 Indeed, in the Spanish world, Juan Rulfo's "Anacleto Morones", Roa Bastos' "Mano Cruel" and Camilo José Cela's "Pascual Duarte" would all be canonical examples of pícaros.

4 There are indeed published works in Canada, between 1836 and 1949, which present picaresque characteristics, like Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). But this and other novels do not meet most of the requirements set forth by critics Claudio Guillén (1971) and Ulrich Wicks (1974): first person narrative, obscure origins, exploration of the world, attempt of social mobility, rejection, loneliness, critique of society, grotesque elements or situations, etc. Leacock's novel doesn't meet all of these requirements and it's not my intention here to search and identify picaresque novels in Canada, but rather to pick one that is considered a full fledge picaresque example (*Lady Oracle*) and compare it to another one from the Spanish 17th century (*Buscón*).

Blaber and Gilman (1990) set the tone with a groundbreaking work on the picaresque tradition in Canada, Australia and India. But other than a few articles scattered around in the last two decades, nothing major has been published with the pícaro as the central theme. It seems as if the pícaro as a literary figure/protagonist is deliberately avoided, neglected, overlooked and ignored, focusing the critics instead on the genre ‘bildungsroman’ in all its variations, where a ‘development’ is clear and even predictable (artistic, educational, etc.). The picaresque, at least the way I understand it, contains elements of the bildungsroman (adolescence, journeys), but it goes well beyond its domain. This article explores the relationship between two canonical picaresque novels; one published in the Spanish 17th century, *El Buscón*, by Francisco de Quevedo (1626) and the other one published in contemporary Canada, *Lady Oracle*, by Margaret Atwood (1976). By doing so, this study also pretends to fill a scholarship gap around the pícaro figure and to spark a more intense, continuous debate on the nature and relevance of the pícaro in Canadian literary mainstream.

In particular, this essay wants to stress one emotional, physical and even metaphysical condition that, more than anything else, characterizes the pícaro in general and the protagonists of both *Lady Oracle* and *El Buscón* in particular: exile. While some critics, such as Berard (2002) and Freibert (1982), have pointed out the rootlessness of pícaras in Canadian literature, their works however, fail to recognize this ‘rootlessness’ as a primordial, metaphysical state of existence of the pícaros, focusing exclusively on the relationship between rootlessness and the trinity of concepts identity, gender and power.⁵ Indeed, scholarship around the pícaro figure has been centered too often and too much on the pícaro either as a social rebel or as a typical

⁵ Berard, Nicole J. “Wandering Women: The Emergence of the Picaresque in Postmodern, Feminist Canadian Literature (Margaret Atwood, Susan Swan, Aritha Van Herk)” MA thesis. Acadia University, 2002. 115p and Freibert, Lucy M. “The Artist as Pícaro: The Revelation of Margaret Atwood’s “Lady Oracle” *Canadian Literature* 92 (Spring 1982): 23-33. Indeed, these two writers particularly stress the way these picaresque works undermine the traditional tropes of Canadian Literature on one hand, and the subversive development of the protagonist, on the other one.

bildungsroman character, well in his/her way towards self-fulfillment and maturity, be it artistically, monetary or spiritual.⁶ It is certainly true that both protagonists (Don Pablos from *El Buscón* and Joan Foster from *Lady Oracle*) are searching for something (home, nobility, love, identity, etc.), but their search is useless and perpetual; the search itself is the true motivation and aim. Like Robert Alter indicates, the pícaro “is a man who does not belong, a man on the move, and a man who takes things into his own hands” (107).⁷ Thus, there is no definitive, ultimate goal for them, only constant movement, wandering. Likewise, the great German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1972) defines the primordial state of being of man in the world as “not being at home in it” (272).⁸ It is this radical, ontological sense of rootlessness and homelessness that my article is mostly interested in showing.

Berard and Freibert’s assertions about the feminist tone of these picaresque novels are accurate, but while it is true that Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* challenges patriarchal notions of genre and writing, I contend that Joan Foster, the protagonist, goes beyond those political goals, and she prefers, instead, to install herself in a state of permanent homelessness and wandering, due to her ingrained, innate inability to fit in any social, political or economical class, just like Don Pablos, protagonist of *El Buscón*. Both Joan Foster and Don Pablos represent the pícaro figure as eternal exiles, and to show this exilic link between the two works is the main goal of this essay.

In addition to displaying an exilic condition both novels set out to challenge and modify the picaresque genre (and the Gothic genre as well) in order to achieve several goals: the Aristocratic Francisco de Quevedo wants to “annihilate” the pícaro figure, by turning him into a caricature, and by doing so, hoping to prove the uselessness of the picaresque literature. More

6 Indeed, Shuli Barzilai (2005) considers *Lady Oracle* a typical Künstlerroman, that is, a rogue-to-artist story. P. 249

7 In Lucy Freibert’s “The Artist as Pícaro: The Revelation of Margaret Atwood’s “Lady Oracle” Canadian Literature 92 (Spring 1982): 23-33.

8 Barrett, William. *Time of Need: Forms of Imagination in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper, 1972.

specifically, Quevedo wanted to ridicule the figure of the pícaro in order to prove the impossibility of social mobility (Bjornson, 106-107).⁹ Atwood, likewise, attempts to demonstrate how subversive to our patriarchal societies the picaresque genre can be, by showing a des-centered, homeless woman roaming around the world, writing “cheap and frivolous novels” (Atwood, 169)¹⁰ and having affairs. Atwood, likewise, sets out to establish a dialogue between *Lady Oracle* and the Gothic Literary Tradition, which *Lady Oracle* questions and challenges, in specific the way in which women are portrayed.¹¹ Let’s not forget that most of the picaresque stories, from *Lazarillo* (1554) to *Mano Cruel* (1953), have been centered around male protagonists and written by male writers, so by changing the gender of the picaresque hero, the rootless wanderings of the pícaras:

allow authors to put their heroines into contact with varying levels of social strata, allow for non-traditional representations of female sexuality, and create a forum for discussing the woman’s role within the contemporary Canadian political landscape, from the realm of the family to the employment options open to women. (Berard, 2)¹²

The present analysis between these two novels will start by outlining the most widely accepted picaresque characteristics which will help me situate *Lady Oracle* within a tradition of self-

⁹ Bjornson, Richard. *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977.

¹⁰ *Lady Oracle*. Canada: M & S, 1976.

¹¹ Indeed, *Lady Oracle* contains multiple stories within a major story, and these stories interact with each other, but the analysis of this particular narrative process goes well beyond the scope of this study.

¹² Berard, Nicole J. “Wandering Women: The Emergence of the Picaresque in Postmodern, Feminist Canadian Literature (Margaret Atwood, Susan Swan, Aritha Van Herk)” MA thesis. Acadia University, 2002.

reflexive, exilic picaresque works, of which *El Buscón* is the leading example.¹³ Next, I will move on to define the concept of ‘exile’ and articulate the similarities of *Lady Oracle* and *El Buscón* in regards to the ‘exile’ concept, or the pícaro as Wicks (1975) explains: “a cosmic orphan” (24).

Pícaros and Picaresque

Defining the picaresque genre or the pícaro figure is, of course, problematic. Each author attempting to define the picaresque genre offers a different approach to describe it, a different set of characteristics.¹⁴ Others, as a way to define it, distinguish between the Myth of the Picaro¹⁵ and the Picaresque Genre or Structure¹⁶, and others set out to explain the essence of the pícaro by linking it to delinquency traits.¹⁷ However, it is Ulrich Wicks, who, assimilating from Claudio Guillén (1971) the distinction between pícaro and picaresque (Blaber, 20), better understood the complex nature of the picaresque genre, establishing a few general but useful, defining principles of the picaresque genre. Indeed, Wicks understood that the definition of this genre has to take into account several dimensions of the picaresque such as form, content, socio-economical and psychological traits, etc., and not only one of them, as it had been previously done. Due to this all-inclusive approach, I will mainly be following some of Wicks’ picaresque principles in this

13 Of course, someone may object to this, arguing instead that some of Cervantes’ *Novelas Ejemplares* constitute a better example of self-reflective, parodying novels. However, the fictional and parodying nature displayed in those *Novelas Ejemplares* transgress the limits of the picaresque and cannot be considered part of it, but rather a brutal critique of this and other genres (Chivalry, Pastoral, etc.).

14 Such as Claudio Guillén (1995, 19998, 1971), who, along with Wicks, remains one of the true picaresque authorities, when it comes to defining the picaresque. In particular, I refer the reader to his *Literature as System: Essays Towards a Theory of Literary History*. Princeton: University Press, 1971.

15 For instance, *The Myth of the Pícaro*, by Alexander Blackburn (1979). Here, the author offers a historical survey of the Myth of the Pícaro. His analysis spans 4 centuries and covers several works in different languages.

16 *Estructura Mítica de la Picaresca*, by Rudolf Van Hoogstraten (1986). This author believes the definition of the Picaresque has been confused, ironically, by the attempt to simplify its very nature. Scholarship has defined picaresque either according to its content or according to its formal aspects, like autobiography, etc. In contrast, this author tries to approach the elusive picaresque definition by applying psychoanalysis.

17 *Literature and the Delinquent*, by Alexander Parker (1978). This author attempts to apply a sociological analysis to the pícaro figure.

study. Thus, trying to be all-embracing, Wicks (1974) outlines the following descriptive points of the picaresque.

1) The fictional mode of the picaresque hero. (242). Although the pícaros normally try to make ‘a case’ and appear to give a realist account of events, their stories, nevertheless, are highly fictionalized by the evident application of literary rhetoric devices such as constant metaphors, hyperboles, ellipsis, similes, grotesque and carnivalesque descriptions (*Buscón*), multiple temporal narratives (*Lady Oracle*), parodying, allegory, among others. Francisco de Quevedo fictionalized his novel by caricaturizing Don Pablos (and the figure of the pícaro in general) in order to advance his ideologically conservative agenda. Don Pablos is subjected, throughout the novel, to humiliating experiences, like receiving a massive spitting attack at the hands of dozens of Alcalá students (Quevedo, 72), being beaten up (74), landing on a pile of excrement at the King of Cocks festivities (53), etc. So, by “exaggerating and distorting” the traits of Don Pablos, Quevedo not only undermined the verisimilitude of the picaresque narrative point of view, but undermined the genre itself as well (Bjornson, 108). Quevedo is constantly reminding us of his main goal in the novel: to remind the pícaros and other fools, of the existence of a social hierarchy in society, and therefore, to give up any desire to move up in the social ladder (107). Margaret Atwood (1976) also fictionalizes her protagonist Joan Foster. Indeed, Atwood turns Joan into an overweight teenager who “with my waist, arms and legs exposed, I was grotesque” (44) or “I was fifteen and I weighed two hundred and forty five” (74) in order to build/develop Joan’s imperceptible identity, to make her almost invisible, or “less noticeable” (83). Likewise, Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* can be seen as a *Roman à Clef* (using real people in fictional ways), according to Margery Fee (1993). This critic argues that Atwood intentionally used real people and cultural symbols from Canadian society to construct *Lady Oracle*’s main characters (30),

something that Atwood herself vehemently denies (31). In conclusion, both *El Buscón* and *Lady Oracle*'s leading characters are fictional entities, but with real, human dimensions.

2) The knitting together of several single narrative units (Wicks, 1974, 242). Here, Wicks describes the picaresque structure as Sisyphean in nature, because the pícaro, like Sisyphus, is constantly forced to start anew. This Sisyphean nature of the picaresque is the core connecting principle of this comparison between *Lady Oracle* and *El Buscón*. Don Pablos sets out to explore the world and find fortune, but when he thinks he has reached the top of society he inevitably falls back down to the ground, the mud or the excrement. The world seems to tell him that no matter how hard he tried he will never be a 'noble' or 'antiguo cristiano' con 'sangre pura" (Bjornson, 109). Don Pablos, like Sisyphus, tries to climb the mountain but just to slide down before reaching the zenith. His obscure origins are a burden that will prevent him from improving his life condition; he is "incapable of escaping his origins" (111). Sadly, Quevedo placed Don Pablos in a world which "operates to punish the *buscón* whenever he attempts to rise in society and to reward him whenever he abandons himself to overtly roguish behavior" (113). Likewise, Joan Foster is always on the move, changing identities and lives. As Lucy Freibert (1982) explains, the picaresque is a literary form where

"a protagonist usually of uncertain origins...is thrust into society early, and left totally dependent on the whims of Fortune...and cast from one adventure to another one" (23).

Indeed, both *Lady Oracle* and *El Buscón*, unfold plots which are very episodic in nature, almost arbitrary. This makes us think in a never-ending narrative process or even an eternal circularity of events. There is no attempt to close either story: Pablos, in a desperate move, flees to El

Nuevo Mundo, thinking it will be different, but only to be humiliated again, because people find it easy to change geographies, but they don't modify their bad habits (Quevedo, 191). *Lady Oracle's* Joae fakes her own death, only to start anew, and the story goes on and on, like an always-spinning carrousel.¹⁸

3) The first person point of view (Wicks, 1974, 244). Both Joan Foster and Don Pablos narrate and play the main roles in their own stories. Here, however, one may wonder whether the accounts of these two pícaros are worth believing them, due to their own inability to tell the truth. Don Pablos is always lying and pretending to be someone that he is not and he seems to go on a downward spiral of moral degeneration. First, Pablos embezzles from Don Diego, steals in the marketplace in order to gain prestige among the Alcala students, poses as Don Felipe Tristán and tries to trick a rich woman into marriage, and overall, he seems to become more and more despicable as his the story progresses, reaching a climax of moral deterioration with the murder of the policeman or 'corchete' (Blackburn, 84) Joan Foster does her own share of lying and deceiving too. Unlike Pablos, Joan recognizes the immorality of lying, but, like Pablos, she does nothing to put a remedy to her moral vices. She acknowledges her lying addiction, but does nothing to change that. It's almost as if the narrative lying allows for the *Lady Oracle* story to keep going. The lying, in turn, prevents her from forming any solid identity. She recognizes her own power of invention and lying skills numerous times throughout the novel: "I invented a mother" (Atwood, 39), "I represented myself...as Miss L Delacourt" (143), "I had the wrong past...I had to construct a different one" (148), "The story I told Arthur was a lie" (157), "I fabricated my life" (158), "the truth was not convincing" (158),"this was a version of the truth"

¹⁸ Indeed, the carrousel is an accurate metaphor for the picaresque pathos, due to the circularity and aimlessness of its very function. The carrousel or 'tiovivo' in Spanish is a recurrent figure in picaresque tradition; for instance in Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* and Roa Bastos' *Mano Cruel*. The 'tiovivo' is essentially a Sisyphean machine.

(180), “He’d have to be told I’d lied to him” (208), “I...was a sorry assemblage of lies and alibis” (224). What is evident here is that Pablos and Jane are both unreliable narrators. Pablos at his own expense, because this self-delusional attitude only takes him further down into the abyss, and Jane because she’s unable to tell the truth, she is a professional identity fabricator. Pablos’ story then, would be an “autobiography of nothing” (Blackburn, 80), because nothing really happens in *El Buscón*, other than situations in which Pablos is humiliated. Jane’s account would be a self invented anti-patriarcal, postmodern romantic story in which the narrator finds herself trapped between sticking to a realist account of events or a fictionalized one. Both narrators problematize the picaresque genre to the point of destroying it, for the initial purpose of the picaresque was to raise a case before ‘vuestra majestad’ in order to gain some recognition, reward or evade jail time.

4) The protagonist as a pícaro (245). The essential characteristic of the pícaro is his/her inconsistency. A constant flow of masks and role plays. Both Joan Foster and Don Pablos adjust names and identities as they see fit. We could say that neither protagonist has ‘substance.’ They are both ghosts who only leave traces behind, but whose identity is always metamorphosing into something else, always changing. The lack of substance is also a characteristic we could tie to the Sisyphean nature of the pícaro figure I suggested before. According to Van Hoogstraten (1986), the pícaro figure’s continuous setbacks in life are the result of an absence he or she cannot replace: the family as a womb. But the pícaro, nonetheless, embarks on a trip around the world trying to fill this emotional, existential void. In other words, Pablos’ parents are the real cause of all his misfortunes in life, they become a burden so powerful that Pablos develops an inferiority complex, which he will always try to compensate by stealing and lying, living in a liminal, conflictive state, between what he is and what he wants to be (35). Pablos’ identity has

been fixed even before he was born, so his entire life can be seen as an attempt to erase his past (Blackburn, 80). Thus, his identity will constantly be modified, twisted and adapted to Pablos' circumstances in the present. He doesn't accept his social class, so he will do anything possible to move up the social hierarchy. Quevedo will remind him of the impossibility of doing that. Similarly, Joan Foster will try to erase her overweight past, but the past will always return to slap her in the face, reminding her how difficult it is to run away from oneself. Ever since she was a child, Joan sought after attention, but she feared rejection (Fee, 38), which in turn develops into an embarrassment feeling which will push her to wanting to be invisible.

Joan Foster decides then to become a ghost. Her identity from then on is a constant flux, unstable, fluctuating and even vanishing at times, like when she fakes her own death (Atwood, 3). But this exilic, rootless condition is brutally shaken, when, as I mentioned before, the past returns. For instance, when she's headed to the house where she will marry Arthur, she discovers that Eunice P. Revele, the woman who will marry her to Arthur, is no other than Leda Sprott, an old acquaintance from childhood: "She looked me straight in the face, and I could tell she knew exactly who I was. I moaned and closed my eyes" (213). These encounters with the past are always painful, and they have lasting consequences in Joan's emotions. But these encounters with her past are not moral revelations, but reassurances of her desire to run away from herself, to evade her past. So the full circle is completed. She keeps lying and pretending to be someone else and the past keeps coming back, then she escapes again, and so on. There is no escape. Her fatness and her fake publishing name (L. Delacourt) may be seen as identity masks (Fee, 39), attempts to camouflage herself. Joan Foster is always eluding her past, thus, she needs to create new identities. But society also plays a role in her identity creation-process, because like Balzilai (2005) argues,

“Joan’s multiple identities—self-effacing wife (“Mrs. Arthur Foster”), closet writer of Costume Gothics (“Louisa K. Delacourt”), and renowned author of a book of visionary poetry (“Joan Foster”)—are the by-products of many institutionalized literary and social models (251).

We can see now that society and the ‘self’ of our heroes establish a very complex but interesting dynamics. The pícaro has a trauma early in his life. This trauma represents a handicap condition which will prevent any social or material improvement in their lives, at least in Pablos’ case. The pícaros harbor resentment towards society, so they become more ‘bellacos’ than before, or in the case of Joan Foster, they make the return to any sense of normalcy almost impossible. Pablos shows a similar pattern when he constantly and frantically tries to negate his origins: “me importa negar la sangre que tenemos” (Quevedo, 115). Pablos’ parents are delinquents and his uncle an executioner, so he is ashamed of his genealogy. In short, both Pablos and Joan possess similar origin-denying, phantasmagoric characteristics. They both want to forget a painful past, but while Pablos is looking for notoriety and material gains, Joan seems almost content with living in the shadows, under the radar of social scrutiny. However, Joan’s relation with her past is far from over. She obviously hasn’t resolved her identity issues, as we witness by the way she frightfully reacts when she meets, coincidentally, people from her past. The past is then an obstacle towards full self-fulfillment, because the past is always there, reminding her who she is: “I wanted to forget the past, but it refused to forget me; it waited for sleep, then cornered me” (Atwood, 227).

Exile and The Canadian Picaresque

Exile comes from ‘exilium’ where ‘ex’ means external, outside, and the root ‘solum’ means land homeland or country. The exiled individual is someone who has been forced to leave his land for political or economic reasons. Here we need to make note that Pablos and Joan leave home because they want to run away from the family and their origins, not necessarily to pursue wealth, although in the case of Pablos, money and economical well-being are also primordial reasons to keep wandering about. Pablos is then fully inserted in a capitalist world, unlike Lazarillo, who just tasted the beginnings of this phenomenon (like John Beverley explains¹⁹). It is useful to quote Ernest Bloch’s (1970) exile observation: “we only conceive happiness where we are not” (108). According to Bloch, scarcity and oppression are the true reasons of migrations (109).²⁰ Other great minds have tried to grapple with the exile concept. Edward Said (2000) explained, in his *Reflections on Exile*: “Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (186). According to Said, the exile experiments an “awareness of simultaneous dimensions” (186). Thus, for Said, exile means a dialectic process in which two cultural systems enter in contact, the old and the new one, like a contrapuntal melody.

In similar fashion, Claudio Guillén (*Múltiples Moradas*, 1998) develops a theory of exile and diaspora. Guillén, like Said, describes two extremes which the author inhabits. On one hand we find the “solar” exiles and on the other one the “inner” exiles (30-31). The former represents a universal attitude, the latter a localist attitude. Guillén’s inner exile concept is probably the most useful for my purposes, because, though Joan and Pablos are constantly moving, traveling and changing geographies, the real exile they experience is, I think, inside, intrinsic, natural in

¹⁹ Beverley (1982) explains the emergence of the picaresque genre by linking it to an incipient and even paradoxical capitalist condition in Spain that created massive numbers of unemployed people, a requirement for industrial capitalist growth.

²⁰ For more on Bloch, consult Neuss, A (ed.) *Utopía*. Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1997.

them, and not something that comes from outside necessarily. After all his misfortunes in Spain, Pablos comes to America, but only to be more humiliated. After this trip, Pablos realizes, ironically or not, that changing geographies doesn't promote spiritual and moral growth (Quevedo, 191). We can see then that a concept of exile that pays attention to geography only is doomed to fail, because Pablos was already an exile before going to America, he was an inner exile. Therefore, I think Guillén's ideas refer too much to the physical space in which migrants wander, and for this reason I will turn now to the concept of 'only-ness' as it has been set forth by Ulrich Wicks (1975),²¹ in order to link *Lady Oracle* and *El Buscón* as eternal errants,

For Ulrich, the "pícaro is the human expression of homelessness" (24), in his canonical essay on the figure of the 'pícaro'. And this homelessness "begins with his birth" (23), marking the pícaro forever, because this condition of exile will only intensify once the pícaro decides to explore the world, because the world will prove again and again to be a hostile place for the pícaro by rejecting and humiliating him. This condition of "only-ness" (24) or radical solitude and bitterness, as Wicks will call it, is the hallmark, the essence of all the literary pícaros, from *Lazarillo's* (1964) extreme loneliness: "solo soy" (43) to *Pito Pérez's* (1928) self-excluding attitude: "Even crazier are those people who do not laugh or cry or drink...slaves to social customs" (10). This cosmic condition of exile can be well explained by the Myth of Sisyphus.²² The *Buscón*, by Francisco de Quevedo (1981), is the embodiment of Sisyphus. Don Pablos embodies, more than any other, the aimlessness and meaninglessness of the picaresque life. Don Pablos, like Sisyphus, sets out on a quest for wealth and nobility, just to be rejected and forced

²¹ Wicks (1975) offers a new approach to the study of the pícaro figure. This author wants to place the pícaro in a modern context (radical loneliness) but still within traditional picaresque conventions, that is, following the 16th and 17th century picaresque models (*Lazarillo*, *Buscón*). Wicks, thus, tries to provide us a new, more 'useful' concept of the pícaro. See pages 2-4.

²² Sisyphus was an ancient King of Corinth, who, following the Greek mythology, was punished by the Gods to endlessly roll an immense boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down.

back down again and again. In addition, Pablos renegades of his family (“tío, no me busque más”), has no real friends (Don Diego had him beaten up) and no real love connection (his tricky attempts to marry wealthy women always end up badly). Pablos is allowed to reach higher levels in society only to be pushed down again (from horses, most of times). Then he would get up, will try again and will be rejected once again. Pablos is a human *tiovivo* (like Pedro from Buñuel’s *Los Olvidados* y Crispulo from Roa Bastos’ *Mano Cruel*).

On page 194, Joan Foster shares with us that she “sat in exile on the roman curb”, and this line sums up very well her psychological state throughout the novel. She is in permanent exile, and Terremoto, Italy, is just an accident, a temporary stop. Jane was already in exile when she was a very fat child and her own mother hated her for that. Her fatness (physical or mental) haunts her throughout her life (Fee, 36), just like Pablos’ ‘sangre impura’ chases him throughout his, and Joan will never get rid of that psychological burden, no matter how hard she tries to fabricate new identities. Even though she has obviously created tactics to fend off her ghosts from the past “writing became...important, I was two people at once” (225), the truth is that she never reaches self-fulfillment. Her origin, like Pablos’ origins, condemns her to roam the earth, aimlessly and painfully. In this process, it is true, she becomes an artist (an escape artist) but she is never able to confront her fears and let alone tell the truth to herself and others (like Arthur).

But Joan Foster also expresses her “only-ness” in other ways. First, like Pablos, Joan resents her parents/origins: “my father was an absence” (Atwood, 70) and “I was an accident” (79) or “I was an alien from beyond the borders” (52), “I’m lonely” (80), “I wanted to have more than one life” (148), etc. But there are two more indicators of the ‘only-ness’ or ‘one-ness’ of Joan Foster. These two indicators are linked clearly and indissolubly to the Myth of Sisyphus. I am referring, first of all, to the fact that Joan Foster became her own mother (Fee, 42). She became a self-

sufficient person as a way to compensate an unhappy, hostile home. Joan was never nurtured, so she made herself fat as a way to fill the void, to nurture herself: “she builds up her body around her, a comforting mass of flesh, a pseudo womb, an enormous breast” (41). This self-sufficiency though is only a tactic, a temporary mask. Indeed, Jane wears several masks to evade reality and herself: fatness, lying and writing. Later, she becomes a ghost and it is only in the end when some form of metaphysical substance is regained, if any.

The other symbol that links *Lady Oracle* with *El Buscón* and the concept of ‘cosmic orphan’ is the presence of the mythical figure Penelope in one of the embedded stories in *Lady Oracle* (Atwood, 31-32). Penelope waits twenty years for her husband Odysseus, after he travels abroad to participate in the Trojan War. Penelope is constantly harassed by the suitors who want to marry her, believing Odysseus is dead. Penelope devises a weaving tactic as a way to gain time and delay the almost inevitable marriage with one of the suitors, who are growing impatient. Odysseus finally returns home and finds out Penelope has been faithful to him. Joan Foster is Penelope, and they’re both escape artists, who only want to live in the present and refuse to accept to let the past affect her present and future life. Sisyphus, Penelope, Pablos and Joan possess all the same characteristics: involvement in complicated situations/escape from the situation/new situation. Joan articulates it very clearly for us: “the real romance in my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and locked trunk; entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again (334). About the pícaro figure, Wicks (1974) also tells us that the pícaro “can not only serve many masters, but play different roles” (245). We can conclude by arguing that, Joan, like Pablos, is a Sisyphean figure because of her evasive nature and also because of her engrained rootlessness, only-ness, invisibleness and perpetual wandering in a chaotic world (Canada, New York, London, Toronto, Terremoto, etc). Pablos, like Joan, refuses to accept his

social class and this propels him to move forward in the social ladder, but the world and Quevedo remind him, brutally, relentlessly, of his miserable, lonely place in the universe.

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