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Eighteenth Century Pícaras Heading the “Promised Land”

A comparative study concerning two of the best known eighteenth century Western novels – Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* made the subject of one of our previous articles¹, but on that occasion we skimmed over several of the most exciting aspects shared by the two literary works. To fill a gap, the following pages are entirely devoted to one such half-neglected pattern, namely the American exile. The theme is somehow emblematic for the French novelist, who is mentioned in the dictionaries as Prévost d’Exiles, in agreement with his prolonged exile in the Netherlands, but also for Defoe who was fascinated by the social consequences of human alienation, that he tried to give a coherent literary shape in his best known prose pieces, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* included.

The impact of Defoe’s *Moll* on Prévost is common knowledge among the literary specialists of the period, though the actual *influence* (in the old meaning theorized by the French school of comparative literature) of *Moll Flanders* on *Manon Lescaut* should be taken with a grain of salt. Etiemble criticized, in his ruthless way, a certain “scholar”, “maniac of realism”, who pretended the resemblance between the two female protagonists to go as far as their name identity: „Pensez donc: Moll est en anglais le diminutive de Mary; Manon en français celui de Marinette! Flanders veut dire Flanders, et l’Escaut coule en Flandres!”² The irritation of the French comparatist in front of such a far-fetched interpretation is highly understandable. No obvious similarity of plot or narrative mechanisms between the two novels; only a vague influence at the character level, underlined, among others, by Claire-Eliane Engel: „Ce n’est pas dans ces ouvrages [Defoe’s] qu’il [L’Abbé Prévost] a trouvé le modèle de ses personnages: les héros de Defoe sont des êtres simples, énergiques, droits, même Moll Flanders. Ils ne se révoltent pas contre le sort, mais l’acceptent; tout au plus parviennent-ils à se débrouiller. Leurs passions sont fortes, mais sans frémissement d’extase ou de perversité. Elles s’encadrent dans la vie courante – évidemment mouvementée, mais qu’il faut bien accepter puisqu’il n’est pas possible de faire autrement. A partir de cette simplicité, Prévost créera ses personnages torturés, tumultueux et raisonneurs.”³ Nor do *Moll Flanders* and *Manon Lescaut* properly belong, according to “traditional” criteria, to the same literary genre: as a rule, Defoe’s novel is approached as part of the Western picaresque tradition, while *Manon Lescaut* is seen as much of a romance; with a picaresque touch however. Pretty Manon and her

¹ *Pícara in the Novel & in the Street*, Analele Științifice ale Univ. „Al. I. Cuza” din Iași, serie nouă, Limbi și literaturi străine, tomul III-IV, 2000-2001, Iași, Editura Univ. „Al. I. Cuza”, pp. 133-152.

² René Etiemble, «Prévost», *Préface*, in *Romanciers du XVIII-e siècle*, Paris, N.R.F., Gallimard, 1987, p. 1209.

³ *Le véritable abbé Prévost*, Monaco, Editions du Rocher, 1957, p. 192.

teenage knight make up a rambling couple, defying the rules of the social game and paternal authority, leading a non-conformist and adventurous existence – a behaviour pattern included into the picaresque paradigm. The commonality of the picaresque themes makes up the basis of the current comparative approach.

The idea of *pícaro*'s/*pícaro*'s long travels should not be taken as granted. Manon, for instance, rarely leaves Paris or its outskirts, but she often moves from one part of the city to another. Theoretically, this practice was as efficient at the beginning of the eighteenth century as a voyage to America, because the absence of a centralized police and administration allowed criminals to hide in the middle of the heterogeneous crowd. *Pícaros* preferred the urban milieu to the countryside: Manon chooses Paris as an alternative to the too quiet Chaillot, because the country place could not offer her any entertainment during the long winter nights. As to Moll Flanders, the countryside life cannot bring satisfactions, in the absence of obvious economic advantages. Then the course of events offers the occasion of further rambling, on the other shore of the Atlantic: „On sent Prévost très sensible « au nouveau ciel et à la nouvelle terre », non pas dans le sens que donne l'apocalypse à ces mots, mais dans un simple sens géographique. Ses héros cherchent à se dépayser pour recommencer leur vie sur de nouvelles bases. Sans grand succès, peut-être, mais lorsque l'existence leur devient intolérable dans leur cadre traditionnel, ils disparaissent pour chercher une autre ambiance et un autre destin. C'est le sens secret de leurs errances, (...)”⁴ Prévost's critic refers mainly to Des Grieux' evaluation of the American perspectives that seem to him milder than life in old “decaying” Europe: „Ils [les sauvages] nous laisseront du moins vivre en paix. Si les relations qu'on en fait sont fidèles, ils suivent les lois de la nature. Ils ne connaissent ni les fureurs de l'avarice qui possèdent G... M..., ni les idées fantastiques de l'honneur qui m'ont fait un ennemi de mon père.”⁵ Fear of the unknown („Que la mort finisse d'un coup nos malheurs!” Manon exclaims. „Irons-nous les traîner dans un pays inconnu, où nous devons nous attendre, sans doute, à d'horribles extrémités, puisqu'on a voulu m'en faire un supplice?”) is compensated by an overwhelming feeling of freedom: („Je ne regrettais point l'Europe”, confesses the knight. „Au contraire, plus nous avançons vers l'Amérique, plus je sentais mon coeur s'élargir et devenir tranquille.”) Later in the novel, the same character jubilates at the simple thought of the American freedom of conscience and of decision: „en Amérique (...) nous ne dépendons que de nous-mêmes, (...) nous n'avons plus à ménager les lois arbitraires du rang et de la bienséance”⁶ – words which bring to the mind passages from Rousseau's *Social Contract*, and that echo, at the same time, one of the most touching confessions of Moll. She is sixty one, she is tired and still craving for financial and social stability, and these words addressed to her Lancashire husband – the man of her heart – make up a fine farewell to old Europe: “I thought our mutual misfortunes had been such as were sufficient to reconcile us both to quitting this part of the world, and living where nobody could upbraid us with what was past, or we'd

⁴ Claire-Eliane Engel, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-232.

⁵ Abbé Prévost, *Manon Lescaut* [the original title: *Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*], Bibliothèque Lattès, Editions Lattès, 1990, p. 228.

⁶ Idem, *ibid.*, p. 238.

be in any dread of a prison, (...) we should consider that our enemies should entirely forget us, and that *we should live as new people in a new world, nobody having to say anything to us, or we to them.*"⁷

At the time, most of the rambling people, of women especially, were compelled to change lands by social and financial reasons: "vagrant women" were "helpless unemployed women"⁸; however, the hedonistic taste for a wandering life coexists with the socially motivated vagrancy: "the vagabonds defended mobility, freedom, and the right of women to have fun."⁹ The *pícaro's* passage to America¹⁰ is part of a scenario bequeathed by the genuine Spanish model: at the end of the *Buscón*, Pablos makes a bitter experience of the New World, and he sails back to Europe without any fortune or illusions. This literary scenario, however, is based on a historical reality: the imposed or self-imposed exile to the Indies of a large social variety of people was part of everyday life in Western Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The colonial policy of the time, that encouraged communication between Europe and America, by supporting the myth of the Promised Land, encountered tremendous success: "Throughout this period [seventeenth and eighteenth centuries], the Atlantic Ocean was as much a highway as a barrier to cultural exchange. A constant stream of religious ideas, practical innovations, and political points of view flowed in both directions."¹¹

The *pícaro's* itinerary illustrates a worldview. Travelling eastwards was the limit of the mediaeval dream: the world was flat, and the Far East was the ultimate destination for the European adventurer – the last point in Marco Polo's agenda. When the earth "becomes round", the European traveller gets a new sense of the longitude, and the entire attention is focused on the newly discovered lands across the Atlantic. It was a paramount change of perspective: America becomes the new Promised Land – it promised prosperity and redemption, and it was expected to satiate the hunger of the body and of imagination equally. The voyage to the Promised Land becomes a compulsory stage of initiation for the *pícaro*. His/her world has no boundaries – it is there one of the main messages of the picaresque novel – and such an insignificant obstacle as the Atlantic Ocean would not stop his/her progress. It is natural for both writers to choose the American colonies as a background for the final act of the characters' personal drama. The forced exile to Virginia – for Moll, to New Orleans – for Manon, might be taken as the last challenge of a picaresque destiny. The American exile has multiple implications, because it brings forward a new understanding of the human limit. It is there – in the

⁷ Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, Penguin Popular Classics, Penguin Books, 1994, pp. 333-334.

⁸ Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: a View of Women through Time*, Sage, 1992, p. 146.

⁹ Idem, *ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁰ V. Harry Sieber, *The Picaresque*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1977, chapter 4, Epilogue: *pícaros* in the Promised Land, pp. 63-74.

¹¹ Richard W. Pointer, *Protestant Pluralism & the New York Experience. A Study of Eighteenth-Century Religious Diversity*, Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 4-6.

“Promised Land” – that Moll and Manon get the complete meaning of their lives, by discovering that the real limit is neither geographic, nor social, but utterly spiritual.

The American exile is – according to the order of the events imagined by the two writers – a challenge that only the mature *pícaro* can face. For Moll Flanders the deportation to Virginia is actually her second visit to America. Her first voyage to the Promised Land, in company of one of her five husbands (a clear case of serial monogamy – the anthropologists would say), an American farmer, was made of her own will and fed her with all the “promises” of a thriving life. It might have been a good happy end for Defoe’s novel; but he chose to go on with the narrative and for good reason. The American experience brings all the psychological depth the novel needed to be taken as more than a literary work approaching a social subject. During her first stay in Virginia (a good name for a colony that received the prostitutes and felons from Newgate), Moll touches the lowest step of moral decay, by marrying her own brother. The crime – like the Oedipal sin – was committed in full ignorance of the fact, and it would bring the trespasser much inner torment and in the end will make her leave America for England. It is true that Moll’s stays in America, unlike Pablos’, brought her material stability, but it is also true that the departure to the Indies occasioned the anti-heroine two most important epiphanies: the revelation of sin, caused by the violation of the incest taboo, and the revelation of eternity, under the pressure of the death proximity. Capable of repentance after much resistance, Moll discovers in awe the power of fate, superior to individual will. It is much more psychological effect here than a reader would expect from a novel generally considered to focus on money matters.

Conspicuous in both novels, money matters are not the obsession of a couple of *pícaros*, but of a whole age. It was “not crass commercialism but a fetishism of capital”¹². Avarice was a common deviation at the time, so that the characters cannot but ply the current tendencies: “I took care”, Moll confesses, “when I gave him [the boatswain] the shilling, to let him see that I had a little better furniture about me than the ordinary prisoners, for he saw that I had a purse, and in it a pretty deal of money: and I found that the very sight of it immediately furnished me with very different treatment from what I should otherwise have met with in the ship; (...)”¹³ Robert Alter summarizes in a picturesque sentence Moll’s mercantile spirit: “Whatever the dubious bypaths on which Moll sets her shapely feet, she always keeps her eye fixed firmly on the pound sterling.”¹⁴

On the other shore of the English Channel, the currency unit is different, but the same mercantile spirit prevails. It is no wonder that *Manon Lescaut* is, almost as much as *Moll Flanders*, a novel about the power of money. Corruption through lust, that preserves a somehow Biblical sense of bodily sin, is completed by corruption through money that imposes a modern image upon the traditional idea of wealth. Fortune is no

¹² Walter L. Reed, *An Exemplary History of the Novel: the Quixotic versus the Picaresque*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 109.

¹³ Daniel Defoe, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

¹⁴ Robert Alter, *Rogue’s Progress – Studies in the Picaresque Novel*, Massachusetts, Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1965, p. 48.

longer the fabulous treasure under the dragon's belly; it is a means that ensures survival in hard times and an unfriendly world, such as prison and the land of exile. While Manon is fatally enslaved by a totally improper and unpractical understanding of wealth – as a game, a whim or a vanity parade – Des Grieux shares with Mall a more realistic view of material matters. Moll's acrobatic use of relations and money in the preparations for her second voyage to America has as a counterpart Des Grieux' persistent appeal to money in his own travel throughout France and across the Atlantic, up to New Orleans, as a relatively practical company of his beloved Manon (despite his quite frequent, so Richardson-like sentimental effusions): „J'ai proposé aux archers de me permettre du moins de les suivre, en leur offrant de les récompenser. Le désir du gain les y a fait consentir. Ils ont voulu être payés chaque fois qu'ils m'ont accordé la liberté de parler à ma maîtresse.”/ „Je fis en sortant quelques libéralités au valet qui la servait, pour l'engager à lui rendre ses soins avec zèle. (...) Un louis d'or; dont je lui fis présent, acheva de me l'attacher.”/ „La délicatesse de ce coquin n'était qu'une envie de me faire payer la voiture plus cher.”/[G...M...] „offrit à Marcel, non seulement la vie, mais des récompenses pour sa confession.”/ „Je recommandais Manon au concierge, en lui apprenant que j'étais un homme de quelque distinction, et lui promettant une récompense considérable.”/ „Il [the chief of the guards] me répondit que les ordres qu'ils avaient de veiller sur leurs captives étaient d'une extrême rigueur; que je lui paraissais néanmoins si joli homme, que lui et ses compagnons se relâcheraient un peu de leur devoir; mais que je devais comprendre qu'il fallait qu'il m'en coûtât quelque chose.”¹⁵

Deportation means for both Manon and Moll the essential turn of their destiny. The American exile helps the characters rearrange their priorities, reconcile the world of objects and that of feelings. The formation of a capitalist conscience is doubled by a return to emotion through regeneration of the soul and the revision of a philosophy of life, based on mercantilism. Symbolically, both women, now utterly socialized, go back to nature, which means in their case, to healthy instincts and feelings. After having successively passed through all the stages of bodily sin, money searching and avarice, Moll discovers the redeeming dimension of love. Moll's meeting with Jemmy in prison and her sentence turned from death to deportation are episodes of mystical importance in Moll's conversion through fear of death and love. More experienced and stronger than Manon, Moll is saved through the awaking of her latent instincts of a wife and a mother. In Defoe's novel, it is the final reunion of the family (Moll, Jemmy and Moll's son by her Virginia husband-brother) around the quasi-mythical image of the Mother (a force of nature¹⁶), that accomplishes the revelation of universal happiness.

Manon's revelation of love is the result of purification through shame and poverty experienced in the preparation of the imposed exile; she remarks herself the inner transformation: „J'ai été légère et volage; et même en vous aimant éperdument, comme j'ai toujours fait, je n'étais qu'une ingrante. Mais vous ne sauriez croire combien

¹⁵ Abbé Prévost, *op. cit.*, pp. 15, 126, 128, 199, 223.

¹⁶ Ulrich Wicks, *Picaresque Narrative, Picaresque Fictions: A Theory and Research Guide*, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1989, p. 269.

je suis changée.”¹⁷ Her redemption becomes possible through self-sacrifice and death, and her agony stands for a moment of complete awareness and happiness: „Sous l’effet du malheur, ce petit être tout en instinct se découvre une sorte de grandeur. Elle comprend alors la noblesse de l’amour de des Grieux et se met à l’aimer avec reconnaissance, avec abnégation et enfin avec passion. Le malheur l’a éclairée et purifiée.”¹⁸ The New World reveals itself as the Promised Land for the practical-oriented spirits – such as Moll Flanders’ – who find/found a new home, by the recycling of old, half-imported bases, but it is also a Promised Land for the fragile, unpractical spirits – such as Manon’s – who, after much torment, meet peace before an eternal home. The foundation of America was not solely due to the honest, pious voyagers on the “Mayflower”, nor to the adventurers who came there to settle, but also to those who – like the *pícaros* of Prévost and Defoe – came only to die or to leave, suspended between old and new, ensuring thereby the dialogue between the worlds.

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Rezumat

Printr-o abordare comparativă a două capodopere ale literaturii europene din secolul al XVIII-lea – *Moll Flanders* a lui Daniel Defoe și (titlu prescurtat) *Manon Lescaut* a Abatelui Prévost – s-a încercat o interpretare a exilului în America în curs de colonizare, ca drum inițiativ spre revelație și auto-revelație.

¹⁷ Abbé Prévost, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

¹⁸ Claire-Eliane Engel, *op. cit.*, p. 141.