

Huckleberry Finn as a crossroads of myths: the Adamic, the quixotic, the picaresque, and the problem of the ending

Pedro Javier Pardo García
Universidad de Salamanca

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to discuss once more the controversial ending of *Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective afforded by comparative literature and myth criticism. Huck Finn has been related to the myth of the American Adam, but also to the picaresque hero and to the quixotic figure. The paper claims that the myth of the American Adam as formulated in *Huckleberry Finn* results from a creative and ironic crossing of the picaresque and quixotic myths. Huck's Adamic nature is defined by a blending of both picaresque and quixotic qualities and in relation to pícaros and Quixotes presented by Twain in the novel. The ending plays a very important part in establishing Huck's compound mythic identity.

Key words: Mark Twain, picaresque, quixotic.

In the realm of literary controversy there is a site which has been so frequently revisited by Mark Twain scholars that one could say about it what Huck says in the very last sentence of his narrative: 'I been there before.' This is the so-called 'problem of the ending', which was characterized by Lionel Trilling as follows:

In form and in style *Huckleberry Finn* is an almost perfect work. Only one mistake has ever been charged against it, that it concludes with Tom Sawyer's elaborate, too elaborate, game of Jim's escape. Certainly this episode is too long, in the original draft it was much longer and certainly it is a falling-off, as almost anything would have to be, from the incidents of the river. (1950: 326)

The 'game of Jim's escape' consists mainly in Tom's attempt to free Jim according to what Tom takes to be the authoritative rules established by romances he so avidly consumes. Tom's rules entail a considerable amount of pain, even agony (psychological as well as physical), for Jim, and most important, they jeopardize and finally frustrate an escape that could have been effected by much more expeditious means. What is puzzling in this long episode is not only that Huck who is really concerned for Jim goes along with Tom's pranks, but also that Tom becomes the protagonist of a story which

to this point was mainly concerned with Huck, and that he is allowed to initiate a completely different line of action. Not only is Huck 'out of character', but, in a different way, the book is also 'out of character.' What does Twain mean by all that, if he means anything at all?

This question has been answered in different ways by different critics. Trilling himself and T.S. Eliot justified the ending. Leo Marx, however, disputed their arguments and affirmed that «the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* makes so many readers uneasy because they rightly sense that it jeopardizes the significance of the entire novel. To take seriously what happens at the Phelps farm is to take lightly the entire downstream journey» (1953: 337). This statement was sustained by a different interpretation of the book, so, when James M. Cox replied to Marx, he did so by offering still a different interpretation, as has Richard Hill in what is, to my knowledge, the latest contribution to the debate. Hill asserts that «the more one looks at the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*, the tighter draws the noose of theme and plot» (1995: 332). This problem recurs every now and then in studies of *Huckleberry Finn*, since even works not dealing directly with the ending provide an implicit or explicit assessment of it (see for example Bradley's (1977) or Inge's (1985) anthologies). The fact is that any interpretation of the work has a bearing on the understanding of the ending, in the same way that any position about the ending implies an interpretation of the novel. It is not clear whether the interpretation determines the assessment of the ending, or, conversely, whether this assessment orients the interpretation. But, in any case, the firm interconnection of the ending and the meaning of the book as a whole reveals that the problem is not a minor one, one of those trifles scholars love to contend about, but a serious and important issue.

My discussion of this problem will be carried out from an unusual perspective, that afforded by comparative literature, and, more specifically, in the light of myth criticism. Huck Finn has been related to the myth of the American Adam, but also to the picaresque hero, and, as his identification with Tom Sawyer's romance folly in the novel's final episode demonstrates, he may also be related to the quixotic figure. It is my contention that the myth of the American Adam as formulated in *Huckleberry Finn* results from a creative and ironic crossing of the picaresque and quixotic myths. Huck is neither a picaro nor a Quixote, he is an Adam; but his Adamic nature is defined by a blending of certain qualities from both and in relation to other picaros and Quixotes presented by Twain in the novel. The controversial ending plays an important part in establishing Huck's compound mythic identity. I do not claim this to be *the* explanation, but it explains something of the meaning and purpose of the ending and of the book in general, and it does so by exploring the book's rich intertextuality.

The mythic figure traditionally associated with Huck Finn is that of the American Adam. The figure, however, has two distinct dimensions, which I will call for the sake of clarity the Edenic and the Adamic, Huck being a clear

representative of the latter. The Edenic dimension of the myth, explored by Frederic Carpenter in *American Literature and the Dream*, concerns the utopian vision of America as a new Eden, the land of opportunities where the individual, the new Adam, may start anew and, unhindered by the corruption and misery of society, reach success through luck and pluck and build a better world. In its Adamic dimension, the myth refers to the hero described by R.W.B. Lewis in *The American Adam* as «fundamentally innocent», an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. (1955: 5)

In his analysis of one of the better known Adamic figures, Cooper's Natty Bumppo, Leslie Fiedler makes it clear that the moral purity, the idealism and innocence of this new Adam, sets him at odds with a society which has abandoned utopian values and embraced in their place corruption and cruelty. As a consequence, the American Adam is a character on the move, in permanent escape from civilization and its corrupting effects. The utopian vision of America is kept alive by a few upright individuals whose search for purity is pushed to the ever decreasing margins of civilization. The American Adam thus becomes a solitary figure, a misfit or outsider, and the myth not only one of individualism but also of marginality.

The Adamic dimension of Huck has been studied extensively and is obvious enough to any reader to need further clarification. The woods where he takes refuge from a stifling social life at the beginning of the story, then the river in his journey with Jim, and finally the Indian territory he may head for at the end of the novel, are the margins of civilization to which the Adamic hero escapes. The opposition between river and shore, raft and village, embodied in the contrast between the kind of life, people, attitudes, portrayed in one and the other, is invested with symbolic overtones and stands, among other things, for the opposition between the individual and society, innocence and corruption, freedom and slavery (both Jim's and Huck's). The conflict becomes interior when Huck, confronted with the choice of helping Jim escape or turning him in to the authorities, becomes the subject of an inner debate between his inborn, Adamic moral sense and the social perversion of it or, in Twain's well-known description, between «a sound heart and a deformed conscience.» This conflict reaches its climax in the famous crisis of conscience in which, taking Jim's side, Huck affirms his individual benevolence and decides to do the right thing by saying that he is going to be wicked and do the wrong thing: «All right, then, I'll go to hell.» Liberation from a socially created conscience is the necessary condition for keeping Adamic purity, but it is also the confirmation of his marginality. Huck refuses to be civilized, but this implies a permanent flight from and conflict with civilization.

Ironically, Huck associates this marginality with that of the picaro, the rogue or delinquent who does not conform to established social and moral norms because of his corruption, his sinful, wicked, fallen nature (the oppo-

site of the Adam). His readers know, however, that his marginality is that of the upright individual who confronts a corrupted society, and this is a feature of quixotic marginality. In *Don Quixote*, however, idealism and innocence go hand in hand with madness, which is literal not just misrepresentation but even hallucination it is also literary, both in its origins (romance reading) and in its effects (the inappropriate imitation of romance literary conventions). In Huck they do not, since he is not mad; in fact they go hand in hand with the opposite, a down-to-earth and sometimes debasing ability to survive through guile and wile that he shares with the picaro. Instead of the quixotic formalistic servitude to anachronistic models which render the Cervantean hero unfit for practical action, Huck possesses the picaro's resourcefulness and pragmatism. The connection with the picaresque myth is shown by Huck's roguish features and his association with real rogues, the King and the Duke, while his connection with the quixotic myth is revealed by Huck's quixotic behavior and his association with a full Quixote, Tom. Together they make clear Huck's Adamic position astride the Quixote and the picaro.

The presence of picaresque features in *Huckleberry Finn* and specifically in Huck Finn has been remarked in books on the picaresque (Alter, Blackburn, Wicks) as well as in articles dealing with this particular issue (Barnett, Metzger, Powers, Williams, Broncano). It is evident that Huck shares the radical loneliness and alienation of the picaro: although not an orphan in a literal sense from the very beginning, he becomes one very early in the novel, when Jim finds his father dead in the bawdy house. But even before that point Huck's difficult relationship with his father had left him in the typical picaresque plight of a young man without family or roots, homeless in the deepest sense of this word. In the picaresque homelessness is always coupled with the peripatetic, even with wanderlust, and consequently Huck initiates the typical series of adventures on the road or, in this case, down the river. In these adventures he features as the picaresque trickster, the marginalized outsider struggling for survival by means of his wits and tricks, stealing and lying, in a picaresque universe with its emphasis on material conditions of existence or rather subsistence. In addition to this, his inclination to assume false identities and to disguise himself bespeaks the role-playing and manipulation of appearances characteristic of the picaro. Like the picaro, in Claudio Guillén's fortunate phrasing (1971), Huck moves not only horizontally through space but also vertically through society, thus turning into a perfect means for satire and the critical examination of contemporary reality. Finally, Huck also conforms to an essential feature of the picaro as described again by Guillén, his condition as a half-outsider. He does so, however, only partially or in a problematic way: he deviates from a real picaro, and deviation becomes as significant as conformation.

Guillén describes the picaresque as the story of somebody who is no longer a picaro, since, when he starts writing his own life, he has been assimilated or socialized, although only in an external or superficial way. The

best picaresque novels end in a sham or at least dubious integration, sometimes the result of conversion or spiritual regeneration, sometimes of material success; but this is usually ambiguous because there are certain indicators suggesting that in fact socialization entails a compromise with values that the picaro recognizes as empty, that he only apparently conforms to the norms:

While the picaro becomes 'socialized', while he assumes, quite lucidly, a social role, a process of 'interiorization' is also taking place. An inner man (embracing all the richness and subtlety of one's private thoughts and judgments) affirms his independence from the outer man (the patterns of behavior, the simplicity of the social role). (1971: 89)

That is why Guillén affirms that the picaro ends as a half-outsider, that is, a hero who can «neither join nor actually reject his fellowmen», (80), or, in other words, an outsider who fails, who pretends not to be one. In Huck's case, however, this socialization comes at the beginning rather than at the end (although it is again anticipated by Huck at the end), and leaves no room for ambiguity. When the story begins, Huck is rich (the denouement every picaro dreams of) and is being 'civilized', that is, socialized by Widow Douglas. Huck, however, is still marginal at core, and therefore a half-outsider, but he will eventually escape socialization. The picaresque pattern is thus inverted: this is not the story of a picaro who is no longer one because his tricks have apparently succeeded, but that of a picaro who cannot stand success and has a longing for his picaresque life. He escapes the picaro's fate because he enjoys being a picaro, which for him amounts to being free. This makes a big difference with the original Spanish picaros, and also brings Huck close to Cervantes' half-picaros, specially Rinconete and Cortadillo; because he does not accept the division between the inner and the outer man or the compromise with empty values, and because this compromise is unacceptable for his Adamic core.

But of course that is not the only aspect associated with his Adamic core which implies a deviation from the traditional picaro. Curiously enough, Huck's involvement with other rogues, with the King and the Duke, who are professional tricksters or confidence men, and his participation in their deceptions and swindles, which firmly plants him in a picaresque universe, make even more explicit that Adamic core. The presence of these swindlers has thus the paradoxical effect of undermining as well as of establishing Huck's picaresque nature. The King and the Duke act as foils to Huck, they make the differences as well as the similarities stand out (in the same way as the delinquents in Monipodio's courtyard do with Rinconete and Cortadillo): Huck's goodness and innocence separate him from them and from the real picaro. The significance of the presence of these real picaros next to Huck the Adamic picaro is aptly explained by Blackburn:

When the confidence men take over the raft, Huck reacts passively. For a long while he is unable to take action against them because, and the novel is clear about this, the con men symbolize a deformed part of Huck that is in conflict with his natural goodness. Not until or not unless this inner conflict is resolved will Huck be free to contend with his part-self, the Duke and King. (1979: 181)

As Blackburn suggests, Huck is revealed as the innocent Adamic figure in the contrast between him and the real rogues, as a result of a conflict out of which his innocence and idealism emerge from the corruption and debasement of his picaresque affinities. At the same time his passive alliance and collaboration with the con men underlines those affinities: the American Adam, like the picaresque, is not just an outsider, but a self-reliant, mentally sharp, practically bent, pragmatic individual.

This innocence and idealism present in Huck and lacking in the picaresque appear in a third myth of marginality, the quixotic one. The quixotic figure is also an outsider, but his marginality stems from heroism or idealism in the face of an anti-heroic and debased society, not from delinquency or corruption; or, in other words, from his incapacity for compromise. The question then is, can we consider Huck's innocence and idealism quixotic, or, in other words, is the quixotic an active myth in the configuration of Adamic Huck? The question has been tackled in different ways by scholars dealing with the relationship between Twain and Cervantes (Moore, Gilman, Serrano Plaja, Bryant, Harkey).

Two aspects of the book suggest an affirmative answer. First, Huck's innocence is an island or rather a river in the fallen and debased reality represented by the shore; or, to put it another way, it is immersed in the quixotic dialectics of the ideal and the real, or, in Marx's words, the actual world of slavery, feuds, lynching, murder, and a spurious Christian morality and the «ideal of the raft» (343), which gives Huck's unquestionable moral idealism and honesty a touch of the quixotic. Second, this touch is made clear by his involvement with a fully quixotic character, Tom Sawyer, in the first chapters of the novel narrating his participation in Tom's quixotic gang of robbers, which defines Huck's character as a curious blending of the picaresque and the quixotic from the very beginning. This involvement, however, is developed at length and expanded to its furthest limits actually, according to some critics, to the point of compromising the unity and quality of the book in the final episode of the novel. This is why we can utilize the mythic dynamics I am describing to suggest a resolution to the controversy with which this essay opened the problem of the novel's ending.

The assertion that Tom's behavior at the Phelps farm is fully quixotic needs very little explanation. When Tom delays Jim's escape in order to organise it according to his own literary notions of romantic escape, this is quixotic not only because of its imitation of bookish models, which are explicitly mentioned and discussed by Tom, but also because of the formalistic

nature of this imitation; that is to say, this imitation has no basis in reality, it is not supported by a similarity between literary model and reality, and therefore it requires the transformation of that reality in order to fit the model. Don Quixote performs this transformation through hallucinatory madness; Tom and Huck through more practical schemes (Tom also has something of the picaresque's practical acuity). What is important is that Huck's passive acceptance of Tom's quixotic course of action reveals that at least a part of Huck's core self responds fully to the quixotic pattern of behavior, and this is emphasized by his assuming Tom's identity at the beginning of the episode. But, as happened with the King and the Duke, this acceptance is accompanied by many interior objections; Huck is a grumbling imitator of a willing imitator, Tom. His quixotism is thus distinct from Tom's. His passively accepted quixotic formalism is as anomalous as the passively accepted picaresque corruption of the con men. Huck's problems with Tom's quixotism serve therefore to highlight his own habitual and active picaresque pragmatism. In his acquiescence to Tom's 'adventures', Huck is betraying his picaresque resourcefulness, just as he was betraying his quixotic idealism and innocence in his acquiescence to the con men. This idealism is also highlighted by contrast with Tom: in freeing Jim, Tom, unlike Huck, is not challenging society's moral and legal codes and asserting the claims of the ideal, but playing in conformity to them, since Tom knows that Jim has already been freed by his mistress. Tom is being selfish and irresponsible in subjecting reality to his literary whims; Huck is at least acting out of moral idealism. Tom represents the most negative aspect of quixotism: Huck the most positive.

In the final episode of the novel, Huck defines himself as Adam in contrast to a negative Quixote, just as he had previously done in contrast to negative rogues. The ending of *Huckleberry Finn* thus provides the quixotic foil which alerts us to the differences as well as the similarities between the Adamic and the quixotic myths. The figure of Tom simultaneously indicates that Huck is quixotic but not fully quixotic; he points to and at the same time qualifies his quixotic nature, exactly the same thing that the con men did with regard to his picaresque nature. As Blackburn remarked in this case, when Tom takes over Jim's escape, Huck is again unable to react because Tom symbolizes a deformed part of his own self that is in conflict with his natural pragmatism. That this inner conflict with his part-self is once more resolved is shown by his decision to go to the Indian territory (escaping now from Aunt Sally's civilizing efforts) alone, and not with Tom, as they had formerly planned. In this respect it is worth noting that the novel not only ends in a quixotic key, but also, as has been mentioned, starts in it, with the episode of the band of robbers led by Tom and their formalistic imitation of romances and novels. This symmetry allows one to discern a change in Huck's attitude towards Tom from beginning to ending. It also allows us to observe how the quixotic adventures in the beginning and at the end provide a frame for the central picaresque episodes. And this is a way to articulate in struc-

tural or formal terms Mark Twain's conception of the American Adam as a quixotic picaro, or as a picaresque Quixote.

The ending of *Huckleberry Finn* completes the definition and shaping of the Adamic myth through its position at the crossroads of the picaresque and the quixotic myths, as a paradoxical blending of quixotic idealism or innocence and picaresque pragmatism and resourcefulness, idealism and realism, ingenuousness and ingenuity, which will be the trademark of so many American heroes who follow this Adamic archetype. What he shares with the picaro, his pragmatism, separates him from the Quixote and his formalism; what he shares with the Quixote, his innocence, separates him from the picaro and his corruption. The discarded negative aspects are represented by those characters who act as foils, who exert their revealing influence on Huck when he is on the figuratively pernicious shore, whereas the raft appears as the natural place for the positive aspects of his Adamic nature. The ambiguity created by this blending of the quixotic and the picaresque leaves room for a number of ironies and paradoxes. The Adam, for example, has a picaresque view of his quixotic dimension; when helping Jim, he sees himself as wicked delinquent rather than as good idealist. And, conversely, he behaves as the foolish Quixote he is not (in the same way that he considers himself as the debased picaro he is not) rather than as the resourceful rogue he is. There is an ironic conflict between what the character consciously thinks of himself or what he does when in company on the shore, and what he really is. This ironic absence of self-awareness and of a coherent social behavior amounts to a critique of the society that is responsible for it. The corrupted and distorted values of society, epitomized by the prevailing attitude to slavery, are to blame for Tom's distorted view of himself and for his distorted social behavior.

The Adamic, Quixotic, and picaresque myths are all three myths of marginality, alienation, individualism, although the sources and features of that individualism differ. In Huck's case, a marginality which he considers to be the result of his picaresque condition turns out to be the result of his innocence and goodness, and is therefore quixotic. This complex position and the difficult balance it requires between the two myths leaves the Adam in perpetual danger (perfectly illustrated in the dealings of the protagonist with the con men and with Tom) of becoming one or the other, Quixote or picaro. In so doing, Mark Twain is perhaps pointing to a problem in American history and culture: the gullibility of the Adam, or, in other words, of the American. The individualistic and marginal American hero is easily attracted and deformed by corrupt picaros or visionary Quixotes, since he shares certain features, certain common ground, with both of these figures. A great deal of American literature, from Washington Irving to F. Scott Fitzgerald through Herman Melville and Henry James, turns around the exploration of this plight, which can also be found in such unexpected places as hard-boiled detective fiction, whose heroes are quixotic picaros or picaresque Quixotes who must be on their guard so as not to be abused by either side of their per-

sonality. A great deal of American history and politics, I am afraid, conforms also to this pattern, in this case providing numerous examples (let's only think about the Bushes and their respective crusades against their former allies and customers Hussein and Bin Laden) of how difficult it is to distinguish corrupt picaros from visionary Quixotes in real life, because life does not offer the clear-cut distinctions that Twain does by means of the con men and Tom Sawyer.

Viewed in this larger context, *Huckleberry Finn* provides both the insight and the foresight that is the hallmark of myth. The problem with the American Adam, and perhaps with the American in general, Twain seems to tell us, is that he is easy prey both to extravagant, formalist idealism, and to opportunistic, immoral pragmatism; in other words, to the worst aspects of the Quixote and the picaro that make up his Adamic nature.

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