

Suddenly a Mortal Splendor, by Alexander Blackburn.
Dallas: Baskerville, 1995. Pp. 309. \$20.00.

Alexander Blackburn has witnessed firsthand a phenomenon which has consumed part of our childhoods and adult lives in dream or dread—a nuclear explosion. A G.I. in the early 1950s, Blackburn was deployed to the Nevada desert, a human guinea pig, hungover and hunkered down at dawn in his slit trench. He describes the experience as follows:

I got sunburned in twenty seconds. But then it seemed adventurous. It was a beautiful bomb out in the desert. You didn't think about 100,000 people being killed. (Interview, *The Colorado Springs Independent*, March 22-28, 1995)

Blackburn's ability to twist the horrific into something meaningful, hopeful, beautiful even, is readily evident in his recently published novel *Suddenly a Mortal Splendor*, the chronicle of Hungarian refugee Paul Szabo's unpromising beginnings and varied journey across three continents and thirty-five years. It is a story rife with shifting identities, a tale which engages as topic some of the more frightening examples of political and personal oppression the 20th century has offered, and a novel with roots firmly planted in the picaresque tradition. Blackburn, author of a previous novel, *The Cold War of Kitty Pentecost*, has also authored two works of criticism. One, *The Myth of the Picaro*, clearly has had a profound effect on the concepts of character and plot in *Suddenly a Mortal Splendor*. It is a tribute to Blackburn's craft that the theory underlying his novel nourishes the deep structure of the book without ever impinging on its vitality, humor, and moral weight.

Paul Szabo is at once a myth of modern man and a flesh and blood character with a believable, if eventful past. Consider: the son of an artist persecuted by the Nazis, he is taken from his mother during the dark days of the Stalinist regime of post-WWII Hungary only to be trained under the tutelage of his supposedly deceased father (who refuses to acknowledge their blood connection) at a state school for orphaned young boys in need of political redirection. He

loses his father (again) and is reunited with his mother, only to lose her in a tumultuous border crossing shortly after the 1956 uprising. Hence begins his journey in the Western world.

In light of Blackburn's critical theories on the picaresque, Szabo is by definition a *converso*, "a person abandon[ing] one faith without gaining another—a potentially lost soul" (*Myth*, Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1979, 9). Szabo, like Fernando de Rojas, one of the earliest Spanish authors of picaresque work, has lost a father to an inquisition and is of suspect faith and lineage in his native land. Both are *conversos*, "at the center of society and also on its margins" (*Myth 10*), alienated insiders. Szabo is also clearly a picaro by Blackburn's own stipulation, entering Austria on the cusp of adulthood an orphan, a "marginal man condemned to live in two worlds" (*Myth 11*), beset by tricksters he both freely and coincidentally engages. That Szabo manages to more than merely maintain in this world, that he ultimately achieves not only a sense of wholeness for himself but that he drags together fragmented characters who surround him says something about Blackburn's vision of human nature and how we might collectively walk the minefield of the 20th century and exit on our feet, looking forward and with hope.

A picaresque novel is a seriocomic form that tends to appear at times when the literary imagination is unusually threatened by catastrophe: times when the very idea of existence commingles with the world of illusion. (*Myth 14*)

Paul Szabo is not the picaresque archetype, a rogue, an antihero. He is not abrasively contrary to anything or anyone in his environment, nor does he conspicuously try to change it. He is rather what Blackburn terms a "half-outsider," an individual physically alienated from his society but willing, if not anxious, to reenter it. He is not a literary construct who stands outside society and passes judgment, but evidence that "after the silencing of good and trust [in the picaresque novel] something resilient and stoically good-natured clings to life" (*Myth 16*). The half-outsider "can neither join nor reject his fellow man" (*Myth 218*). This is Szabo's position virtually throughout the novel. The rejection suffered is almost all at

Szabo's expense; his failure to find human solidarity throughout much of the novel is another feature which earmarks Szabo as a picaro.

In Blackburn's words, "one of the sure clues of the absence of a picaro is the representation of a fellowship" (*Myth 20*). Almost all of Szabo's fellowships are false and defeating in some sense: he is let down in turn by his parents, who despite their efforts leave him abandoned, by his stepmother, who saves him to later seduce him, by his first wife, who leaves him for an earlier love and in so doing separates Szabo from his beloved stepdaughter. Blackburn further cements Szabo's picaro identity in that Szabo is clearly "a conformist with little antisocial tendencies . . . implicitly accepting social values no matter how hostile to his dignity" (*Myth 20*). Szabo, despite the indignities heaped upon him by the Stalinist Hungarian regime, cannot actively engage in the 1956 resistance, has difficulty rejecting his smarmy stepmother's sexual advances, fights in Vietnam for an only recently adopted country, and cuckolded, attempts to recusatate his dying marriage when for all practical purposes it is beyond code blue.

But if "Western civilization as a whole could [now] be described as 'picaresque', the picaro modern man without a living faith" (*Myth 25*), Blackburn has broken with the picaresque tradition in that Paul Szabo creates faith out of shattered remnants of family and society, a personal and psychic New Deal hammered out of the moral Depression of mid-20th century life: WWII, Stalin's killing echo, the thwarted Hungarian uprising, the failed promise of America in the 1960s, Chile in 1973. Blackburn is simultaneously working another literary wavelength parallel to but separate from the myth of the picaro. Tony Tanner characterizes Blackburn's impulse in his *City of Words* (New York: Harper, 1971):

The notion that the ordinary individual and the artist alike may be living their lives within an intricate system or pattern of fictions, and the related search for some recognition of non-fictional reality, form a recurrent American theme. (393)

Tanner's response to William Gaddis' prescient novel *The Recognitions* indicates both a connection to the picaresque

tradition and a way out of the dead-end dilemma it creates, a world of “lonely individual[s] cut off from, though yearning for, community and love” (*Myth* 25). Virtually every significant character in Blackburn’s novel is self-made; Paul Szabo’s condition is by implication the human condition, the shaky ground he stands upon is the rule rather than the exception. Almost every character in the novel is estranged from his or her biological parent. There is hardly a single individual who is not known by another name and who does not inhabit more than one radically altered identity. But what distinguishes Paul Szabo and the handful of characters around him who achieve some sense of wholeness and peace by the novel’s end, who aspire to as true and “non-fictional” an identity as the modern world will allow, is that these characters have consciously acknowledged the negative forces surrounding them without losing an integral desire to “endeavor to create a meaningful place for man in a world oblivious to his presence” (Vickery qtd in *Myth* 6). Blackburn’s novel is a chronicle of life lived as a pattern of fictions, a recognition that some fictions are truer than others, and that the only “non-fictional” identity we may be able to achieve is that of a conscientiously selected set of fictions by which we can best live with each other. This, Blackburn seems to imply, is the way out of the picaresque dilemma, a literal reading of which might insinuate we are doomed to alienation, pointless wandering, the vagaries of human unkindness, and a permanent outsider status on the periphery of a hollow society.

Ultimately, Blackburn in *Suddenly a Mortal Splendor* offers as radical a sense of optimism as could be hoped for at the end of the current millennium, a vision that from a survivor’s perspective, nuclear blasts and other manmade human catastrophes can be as beautiful as they are devastating, and that mass destruction and human cruelty and depravity can be made meaningful only by our reaction against it, by our personally breaking tragic cause and effect chains otherwise certain to chase humankind to oblivion.

—Tracy Santa
The United States Air Force Academy