

## Clichés and cultural icons in Percival Everett's fiction

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If Percival Everett changes styles, forms and topics every time he writes a new novel, nevertheless all of them have in common the author's preoccupation with language and representation. In this paper I shall examine Percival Everett's work on clichés. Not only does Everett disrupt stereotypes or fixed ideas, but as will be seen, he also teases the reader by interfering with her reassuring reading habits.

For this analysis three novels were selected among Percival Everett's vast work, in order to give an account of the variety in tones, styles and genres that characterizes his work. *God's Country*, published in 1994, is a parody of classic Western novels, with cowboys seeking revenge and Native Americans fighting Colonel Custer's army. *Wounded*, published in 2005, and called by its author a realistic novel, tells the story of a series of murders perpetrated in a small town in nowadays Wyoming, while *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, dating back to 2009, is a non-*Bildungsroman* which tells the curious journey of Not Sidney Poitier across the United States.

I shall first analyze the effects and possible aims of the use of clichés in these novels, so as to show how they are part of a game played with the reader's expectations in the general process of the creation of meaning. Social criticism appears as the most obvious function of clichés in these novels. The use of stereotyped characters brings to the fore oppositions between groups of individuals, as in *Wounded*, for instance. Beside the violence that sets the homosexual community against its assailants, there is a rivalry between townspeople, as embodied by the characters of Howard Thayer, Pamela and Robert, and country people, whose most striking representatives are the main character and narrator, John Hunt, as well as his friend Duncan Camp. Any arrival of newcomers in the city of Highland, Wyoming is the occasion to confront two visions of the American space and culture.

From the very moment of David and his boyfriend Robert's arrival in Highland for the gay pride rally, the reader is given to understand that Robert will play the role of the militant in favor of the oppressed. Being himself marginalized, as a homosexual, he feels free to ask questions about the state of those he considers his fellow sufferers, that is to say colored people:

Robert asked, "how many black people live out here?"

I was a little startled by the question. "Good question. I don't know. How many black people live in Chicago?"

Robert stumbled.

"I've never counted people around here, Robert. Black or white. A whole bunch of Indians live over that way."

"Ever have any problems?" Robert asked. "With race, I mean."(52)

The underlying cliché takes it that any minority equals another, so that a homosexual may identify with a black person since both belong to minorities likely to be the victims of violence. Everett thus suggests a subtle criticism of the widespread attitude which consists in separating people into categories, according to what is considered to be their identity. This phenomenon tends to erase differences, depriving people of their original cultures to force them into the dominant group, a phenomenon which is sometimes called "assimilation" but whose violence does not seem to be quite taken into account by such term. Ethnologist François Laplantine states in *Je, Nous et*

les Autres that “*L’homme identitaire [...] est l’homme à idées fixes*”<sup>1</sup>, “The man who is obsessed with the issue of identity [...] is a man of fixed ideas”. Often enough, “*l’homme identitaire*” tends to tone down nuances, and generalize so as to gather people to his cause. His is a subtractive vision of identity, which denies the multiple aspects of personality.

The issue of identity runs paramount in Everett's work, despite the author's legitimate protest, as he states that saying that work deals with identity is not saying anything: from the day we are born we all spend our lives dealing with the issue of our identity. Through his provocative statement Everett may be once again rejecting the reductive –and potentially offensive- label of “African American writer” and claiming his status as an American writer, be it on the simple ground that skin color is never specified in the case of a white American writer.

The question of identity is once again illustrated in *Wounded*, with three of the characters having as part of their role to highlight the differences between townspeople and Western people:

“That room will be just fine,” Howard said.

“It's sweet,” Pamela said. “It has a real, ranchy, rustic feel. And I like all the wood.”(132)

or further down:

The guests, Morgan and I sat in the living room. The stove doors were open and the fire actually looked beautiful.

“It's like a postcard,” Pamela said. (140)

By resorting to the word “postcard”, the author makes his intentions clear in his dealing with clichés, the cliché of the West but also of the blonde. Nevertheless Pammy is not the only one to have a limited view of her others:

“What kind of meat is it in the stew?” [Howard asked].

“Elk.”

“You hear that, Pammy? Elk. We're on the frontier.” (143)

Pamela and Howard's ignorance apply to the West equally to the place in which they live, about which they may have been expected to have a wiser sense. Yet here again their vision is reductive and dominated by prejudice perhaps to the point of preventing them from actually seeing their own environment:

“So, it was a messy drive,” I said.

“Just awful,” Howard said. “I could hardly see the road.[...] We got gas in that funny little station at the edge of the town. I went in to pay first and he told me to go ahead and pump it and then come back and pay.”

“So trusting,” Pamela said.

“You don't do that in New York, I can tell you that.”(141)

Howard and his fiancée Pamela go by clichés about the Frontier, or the imagined part of Western America, where innocent trusting people live in harmony with a luxuriant wildlife. Such clichés have been put to use in Frontier humor, as early as the 19th century, in scenes staging a rough Westerner taking advantage of a gullible Easterner, as in the following quote, which offers a striking example of young David's naivety:

“Duncan, Ellie, this here is my friend David. He's from Chicago.”

Duncan shook Davids' hand. “Where's Chicago?”

David looked to me.

<sup>1</sup> François Laplantine. *Je, Nous et les Autres*. Paris: Le Pommier, 1999, p. 31.

“Just kidding you, son,” Duncan said. (77)

Clichés certainly offer fruitful material for humor, as we shall see, and in Everett’s fiction often prove instrumental in exposing questionable social behaviors. Scenes involving Sheriff Bucky Edmonds and Deputy Hanks in *Wounded* combine stereotypes and frozen visions to create sometimes hilarious passages, loaded with satire. The following quotes show a duo of law enforcement officials whose incompetence may bring to mind the Keystone Kops, a fictional team of policemen from silent comedies in the 1920s:

“You know a fella named William Caitlinburg?”  
I shook my head. “I don't believe I do.”  
“Says he works for you.”  
“Wallace Castelbury?”  
Bucky shot a look at Hanks. “Damn your handwriting, Hanks.”(16)

or again:

Hanks picked up the can. “Pabst,” he said. “Still has beer in it. Whoever it was will drink anything, that's for damn sure.”  
Bucky shook his head. “Hanks, are you holding that can in your hand?”  
Hanks dropped it [...] “Well, pick it up again, with a stick this time, and put it in an evidence bag. Maybe we can still get a print off the damn thing.”[...]  
“I'm sorry, Sheriff”, Hanks said. (94)

Their comic presence alleviates tensions between two violent events – the first dialogue between Bucky and John Hunt is located after Wallace has been arrested for murder – while allowing a criticism of inefficient officials.

This duo is echoed in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* by yet another inoperative team, Ted Turner and Nonsense Professor Percival Everett. These two characters are somehow responsible for Not Sidney Poitier's education, Ted Turner as being the closest relative to Not Sidney Poitier, and Everett as his professor at Morehouse College. Despite their statuses, Turner and Everett will never teach Not Sidney anything effective. Their speeches are made of such confused ill-chosen comments as:

“You know where the name of the Ouija Boards comes from, Nu'ott?”, Ted asked. “It's from the French and German words for yes. Could just have easily been called the non-nein. Of course that's just one theory. There are probably many. I find it simply strange that the skin they pack sausages in is edible. Edgar Cayce thought they were dangerous.”  
“Sausages?”  
“No, Ouija Boards. Why would Edgar Cayce care about sausages? Maybe he did. He was a weird dude. And sausages are everywhere.”(81)

Their talk is made of approximations and pseudo-knowledge, illustrated in:

“I've often wondered how the soldiers in the Civil War could do it,” he said. “Imagine, charging across a pasture with men getting blown to smithereens to the left and right of you and you keep going. What is a smithereen?” (40)

Tentative resorts to vague etymology fail to help:

“Wow,” Everett said. “I've always wanted to see a tornado, if in fact this is one. Could be just a bad storm.”  
“I read that tornado is a messed-up form of some Spanish word, *tronada* or something like that.”  
Everett scratched his head. “Could be from the Latin *tonare*, to thunder. Anyway, I like the word *twister* better.”(226)

All in all their concerns seem irrelevant and absurd to the reader:

Ted turned to Everett. “Does rock beat paper or does paper beat rock?”

“Paper beats rock, but I have no idea why,” Everett said. “A rock should go right though paper, don't you think? I mean, I love paper as much as, or more than, the next guy. My guess is that it's the function of some kind of privileged intradiological and embedded enunciator.”

“What are you talking about?” Ted asked.

“Paper beats rock. What beats paper?”

“Scissors.”

“Ah, yeah.”(229)

Both Turner and Everett –the character- go from one idea to another without the least coherence and apparently without the least care for their listeners, from whom they do not expect anything, as shown in one of Professor Everett's monologues, thus commented upon by Not Sidney:

“I suppose what we're talking about in this class is art. If it's not, then I'm lost, but of course I'm lost anyway. At least I've been lost before and it looks just like this. Let's consider art as a kind of desacralization, perhaps a sort of epistemological discontinuity that is undoubtedly connected or at the very least traceable to an amalgam of very common yet highly unusual sociohistorical factors. In this, the end of our rapid expansion into mass-media pop- industrial urbanization, all of which changes daily, not only in and out of itself, but transforms the texture and the intertexture of daily life and discourse, we find the degree of expansion or unfolding modified and tested by the parallel distension and unfurling of moral and ideological attitudes, even those and perhaps especially those of religion and traditional repositories of the so-called and so-seen sacred.”[...]

I knew that he was uttering gibberish but what wasn't clear was whether he knew it. I don't think he did. There was no snide, sidelong glance at me or anyone or even an imagined mirror. It was just his voice attached to his head. (100).

One of the functions of these characters is to serve a form of menippean satire, aimed at mocking encyclopaedism and vacuity going by the name of knowledge. As has just been shown, Turner once uses the phrase “blown to smithereens” without knowing what the last word means. This may be a subtle hint at how easily meaning may get lost. Clichés, as expressions or sentences that have been so often used as to lose their original meaning, may be a means for Everett to emphasize the same threat – the vulnerability of meaning, its instability, the lack of meaning of many a discourse.

Thus, clichés in these novels have to do with the loss of meaning, but also with its creation and that in more than one way. They point at the reader's often not so open nor flexible reception of the text. Indeed her natural tendency to add sense to what has none while thinking that she recognizes what is yet unknown is challenged. Percival Everett plays with the reader's horizon of expectation, putting the reader face to face with her preconceived ideas about the plot and the direction that the novel will take.

It is particularly noticeable in *God's Country*, in which elements belonging to the genre of the Western novel are expected. To a certain extent, these features are present in the novel: the action takes place in the late 19th century United States, the plot deals with a white cowboy, Curt Marder, seeking revenge for the abduction of his wife, and expected characters are to be found, such as cowboys, Indians and Army men. Yet, and this is typical of Percival Everett's work, these traditional characteristics are twisted. The play with the reader consists in disturbing her preconceived ideas. Clichés concerning the main character's personality, for instance, are questioned when the reader discovers that Curt Marder is as far as can be from embodying the expected hero. He cheats, lies and steals all along the novel, and his supposed noble quest is but a mere excuse to actually swindle the black scout he has hired to find his wife. To the reader's

surprise, his troubled sexual attraction is even evoked, when he discovers Colonel Custer wearing women's clothes:

[Bubba] crawled closer to the window.[...]  
 "There's a whore," Bubba said. "Why, that's a man."  
 I looked in through the window over his shoulder.  
 "Why, that's Custer. Why, he's wearin' ladies' unmistakables. Why is he doin' that?"  
 "Why, I don't know," Bubba said. "But it won't make no never mind. I come here to kill him, and that's the thing what's got to be done."  
 "Have pity, man. Look at him, gussied up like that. That there's a disturbed fella." The thought crossed my mind that he didn't look half bad. (182)

As to the tracker, Bubba, he is just as far from embodying the "stock figure of the faithful Negro servant"<sup>2</sup> that James K. Folsom mentions in his essay *The American Western Novel*. On the contrary, he proves to be the one moral hero in the novel, endowed with a sense of justice and honor.

Along with the main character in *God's Country*, the reader of Everett's novels is to discover how deceptive appearances are. First in the literal sense, when Jake, the young boy who accompanies Curt and Bubba in their quest turns out to be a girl, then with Colonel Custer's unexpected cross dressing. But it is also to be experienced in the figurative sense: one can not say to what genre Everett's books belong. Just like *God's Country* can not be called a traditional Western novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is not a Bildungsroman. The reader will recognize elements belonging to this genre: the novel deals with a young man's coming of age, from his birth to the beginning of his adulthood, in a journey across the United States, from Georgia to California. Nevertheless, similarities to a Bildungsroman end there. Not Sidney's goal, expressed as early as chapter 2 – "I'm going to drive back to Los Angeles" (45), his birthplace – is the opposite of a traditional quest in coming-of-age novels. He has not been anywhere yet, but already wants to go back. In addition to that, the conventional geographical journey is replaced with back and forth moves, all twists and turns leading Not Sidney back to his starting point, Atlanta, Georgia. The character literally does not progress, and the non-Bildungsroman ends with the exact opposite of what is expected from a coming-of-age novel: not only has the main character not discovered who he really is, but on the contrary, his final statement is "I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY" (234).

Percival Everett's talent partly lies in his ability to disturb the reader while maintaining her attention by refusing to give her what she expects. This playful use of clichés upsets the reader for encountering them is no longer reassuring, since their purpose and meaning have been modified, from markers of common views to triggers of disordance and symptoms of both semantic emptiness and symbolical load.

On the other hand, a real freedom is given to the reader, who is the one who eventually gives meaning to the novel. Interpretations and the creation of meaning do not only fall in the competence of the writer, but most certainly in the reader's.

## Works cited

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<sup>2</sup>James K. Folsom. *The American Western Novel*. College and University Press of New Haven, Connecticut. 1966, p. 147.

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