

Yu. V. Stulov
Minsk, Belarus

PARODYING “PROTEST NOVEL”: P. EVERETT’S “ERASURE”

Contemporary African American fiction keeps addressing the question of identity that has been its major concern throughout its centuries-old history. Among the many remarkable authors that have started their literary careers in the

recent decades one cannot miss Percival Everett who is, undoubtedly, one of the most interesting US writers of today. He is also a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California. Everett has received various kinds of prestigious literary awards, such as the PEN USA 2006 Literary Award, and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award as well as the PEN/Oakland-Josephine Miles Award for Excellence in Literature and the New American Writing Award. Most importantly, in 2024 his novel “James” won the National Book Award for Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. So far, P. Everett has authored about 30 books that include fiction, satire, collections of short stories, a story for kids, 2 books reworking Greek myths, collections of poetry and a philosophical pamphlet – all this done within a short period of time, his first novel written in 1983. The variety of genres in which he writes and styles that he employs for each particular work is amazing. According to him, “I play with styles. I think they’re amusing” [3, p. 48].

As he grew up in South Carolina, the realities of life in the US South found their way into his oeuvre, but it would be a gross misconception to think that his focus is the issue of race, as is the case with a number of his colleagues. His best-known novel “Erasure” (2001) that seems to turn on race deals, in fact, with erasure of African American subjectivity. It is a multi-layered novel which can be defined a satirical metafiction as it includes a novella within the novel (written by the protagonist), a few fragments of a possible play presenting Hitler, his cronies and artists like K. Kolwitz, and a parody of the academic paper presented by the protagonist at the Nouveau Roman Society meeting.

The novel is central for understanding Everett’s attitude to US publishing industry as it highlights the problems black writers have with getting their works printed. It got the Academy Award for Literature of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and aroused heated debates concerning African American literature. In his review of the novel David Maine calls it “a killer” and concludes that this “is a book that deserves to be read, and talked about, and argued over, by everybody” [2]. The writer plunges his readership into the discussion of what qualities a book by an African American author should have in order to be published and insists that today books like R. Ellison’s “The Invisible Man” can hardly be expected to be published. They are experimental and oriented towards a reader who would like to go beyond the surface and to get into the complexities of human predicament. They are not sensational or simplistic. Regretfully, people tend to lose the habit of reading; they get accustomed to “swallow” the information provided by popular mass media without giving it a thought. Everett insists that “Everybody should read fiction. I think everybody should read Joyce and Ellison. I don’t think serious fiction is written for a few people. I think we live in a stupid culture that won’t educate its people to read these things. It would be a much more interesting place if it would” [3, p. 49].

P. Everett shows the traumatic experience of his protagonist Thelonius (Monk) Ellison, an ambitious African American writer and university don whose last “intellectual” book has been rejected by a number of publishers, but much to his surprise, the novel “We’s Lives in Da Ghetto” by an unknown young black

woman instantaneously becomes a bestseller and its author a celebrity. In a review he comes across, she is said to have “written a masterpiece of African American literature. One can hear the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America” [1, p. 46], which is not true. In fact, the author showed things that were not really part of her experience. Her middle-class status did not give her a chance to know what life in Harlem was like – she spent there only a few days visiting her relatives. However, she understood what the book market required: referring to the stereotypes of black characters, their mode of life and language borrowed from the times of the “protest novel”. The success of “We's Lives in Da Ghetto” was carefully calculated and, therefore, predictable. Analyzing the recent output of African American cultural produce, R. L. Schur claims that “African American cultural workers have increasingly found commercial and critical success precisely to the extent to which they produce images, lyrics, and texts that revel in presenting the sordid “reality” of the African American experience” [4, p. 166.].

With “We's Lives in Da Ghetto” its author adds to the mythology of “bad niggers” and their ways of life that have been created by the racists throughout centuries denigrating and humiliating African Americans. It tries to imitate the speech of uneducated blacks playing into the hands of the diehards who try to prove that the present condition of blacks is the result of their inferiority, their unwillingness to study, work hard and their inability to conform to the rules of the “civilized” society. The novel enjoys enormous popularity; its author Juanita Mae Jenkins appears in prestigious TV shows (reference to the famous Oprah Winfrey’s show), gives interviews and has enormous financial success, the copyright being bought by Hollywood. However, in reality, it is an example of trash literature with its clichés and stereotypical characters. Ellison’s own novel is “too dense”, “not for us”, “the market won’t support this kind of thing” [1, p. 69] because what he cares for is not the superficial description of how horrible the conditions of life for African Americans are but existential problems where such things as family, home, identity, or ancestry and sense of belonging are of great importance.

The title reflects the most important themes of the novel. There are different kinds of erasure taking place with the novel’s characters. Thelonius erases his own writer’s personality by publishing under the name of Stagg R. Leigh the novel “My Pafology”, which he is disgusted with: “I hated writing the novel. I hated reading the novel. I hated thinking about the novel” [1, p. 70]. It is written in the mode of Juanita Mae Jenkins, which aroused Thelonius’s indignation and which is fundamentally a kind of “ghetto-lit”, and it is exactly this “poor black guy – racist white society” conflict that made the unknown (fictitious) author famous. The plot of “My Pafology is reminiscent of “Native Son” by Richard Wright and describes a “bad nigger” who defies social norms in every possible way, being an aggressive sexist, irresponsible dropout, macho, etc. and who is arrested during the detestable Jerry Springer’s show that appeals to the lowest instincts of human nature. This is a moment of his glory: he has appeared on TV, and it really does not matter that he is disgusting and horrible: audiences like this kind of show; he is a hero in his own eyes.

Now Thelonius has to live under the new name playing the role imposed on him and do things expected of a black celebrity. The price is the loss, erasure of his identity. As the writer says, “He’s the victim of misperception after misperception, until he no longer recognizes himself” [3, p. 49]. He puts on a mask, but it becomes more and more difficult to live his life as Thelonius, and not Stagg R. Leigh. It is all the more significant that the title of his book is so smartly printed that behind the red title one can see the glowing white f-word, which may denote his response to his “erasure” as a serious artist, expressing his annoyance or contempt for what has been done. He tests public sensitivity even more insisting that the novel should be published under the new title – “Fuck”; in spite of various objections on the part of the editor the publishers agree that it would promote the book, and it really does, both challenging the audience and catching the eye. The last sentence of the novel, a quotation from Isaac Newton, runs: “Hypotheses non fingo” meaning “I feign no hypotheses”, makes Everett’s point quite clear: the novel is his reflections on how African American literature develops today, what society’s expectations connected with it are, and what writing strategies can be welcome or unwelcome to ensure success with the readership. Everett’s trick is that Thelonius’s identity is erased: he is not the writer who is awarded the National Book Award but his invented mysterious author. As R.L. Schur writes, he becomes “a parody of himself in order to receive cultural recognition and material wealth” [4, p. 170].

On another level, “Erasure” introduces a personal touch connected with erasure. Thelonius’s mother is suffering from Alzheimer, slowly developing problems with cognitive abilities and losing a sense of reality; the reader slowly observes the erasure of her mind. Thelonius’s brother comes out as a gay man acquiring his identity but losing his family, social status, a job and dissolving in the environment of people who do not care about his personality. His sister is physically erased when she is killed by one of the anti-abortionists who organized rallies outside the clinic where she worked taking her job as a mission. Taking care of his father’s papers Thelonius finds out about his father’s unknown past and his daughter born of the secret love affair... This part of the book is definitely the most interesting as it delves into real problems of real people who have to discover the truth about themselves. It acquires psychological depth and sincerity. One cannot but agree with Martin Paul Eve who writes that “[I]n this blurring of the creative and critical spaces, however, the claims for sincere truth-telling spill over into the fiction” [5, p. 134].

The name of the protagonist is also full of referential meaning. On the one hand, it brings to mind Thelonious Monk, a US jazz pianist and composer known for a unique improvisational style whose music was not immediately appreciated by wider audiences for being “too difficult” but was later recognized and awarded a Pulitzer prize. In this case, associations speak for themselves. The books by the novel’s protagonist Thelonius are “too difficult” for general audiences because he does not want to capitalize on the “race” issue. He wants them to be appreciated

for their literary qualities, but this does not happen. When he writes “My Pafology” using all the possible clichés and stereotypes, he becomes a celebrity, though under an assumed name.

On the other hand, the name reminds of Ralph Ellison, one of the most prominent black writers of the 20th century, and his novel “The Invisible Man”. This book turned to be seminal for African American literature containing some of the most important features of the philosophical novel written against the grain of the traditional “protest novel”, which reduced the experience of African Americans to a number of stereotypical characters and situations. Along with James Baldwin, Ellison defies the ideology of the “protest novel” as it emphasizes racial oppression, horrors of black ghettos, violence and hopelessness that permeate the life of black Americans at the cost of going deep into human psychology and existential issues. The question of identity is of utmost importance to Ralph Ellison, and it is as important to Percival Everett. Thelonius does not want to be reduced to a stereotypical brutal African American. Likewise, the novels that he writes are far from simplistic, but the publishers insist that their audiences want things to be definitely outlined and divided along the oppositions “black – white”, “light – dark”, “day – night”. Everett’s novel is full of intertextual links that determine its special place in contemporary African American fiction. In fact, one can see the juxtaposition of Thelonius’s ambitious, intellect-driven novel that develops the strategies of “The Invisible Man” and the market-driven text written in the style of “Native Son”, which wide audiences see not as a parody but accept at its surface value.

Added to it, “Erasure” can be fully appreciated only in the context of metafiction with its text within a text, fragments of possible plays and an academic paper written in the specific metalanguage of literary studies that are built into the novel’s sophisticated structure making it a remarkable achievement in contemporary African American writing.

LITERATURE

1. Everett, P. *Erasure* / P. Everett. – London : Faber and Faber, 2001. – 294 p.
2. Maine, D. “Erasure” Is Bitter, Vicious, Hilarious and Extremely Important / D. Maine. – URL: <https://www.popmatters.com/erasure-percival-everett-book-review> (date of access: 02.05.2021).
3. Rone Shavers and Percival Everett // *Bomb*. – No. 88. – Summer 2004. – P. 46–51.
4. Schur, R. L. *Parodies of Ownership: Hip-Hop Aesthetics and intellectual property law* / R. L. Schur. – Ann Arbor, MI : University of Michigan Press, 2009. – 236 p.
5. Eve, M. P. *Literature Against Criticism Book : University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict* / M. P. Eve. – Cambridge : Open Book Publishers, 2016. – 237 p.