

JENS ELZE (Hg./Ed.)

Das Enigma des Pikaresken/ The Enigma of the Picaresque



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Introduction: Enigmas of the Picaresque

Jens Elze

The Picaresque and the Enigmatic

Despite their great spectrum of variety, it seems that the journeys which the narrator-protagonists of (fictional) autobiographies embark upon often share a common pursuit: that of formulating a transcendent and binding notion of self, either by finding God (*confessio*), by becoming their true and necessary social selves (classificatory *Bildungsroman*) or by achieving emancipation from repressive forces (transformative *Bildungsroman*). These narrative sujets all follow the trajectory of the quest to seek a framework – no longer shared by and evident to everyone – within which to make sense of oneself and the world.¹ Especially in negative versions of the *Bildungsroman* this quest may include the eventual awareness of its failure, as no framework of meaning within and beyond the self may offer itself for meaningful accommodation. The quest may, therefore, be abolished prematurely by embracing necessity and compromise, by regression towards the interior, and in naturalism the intractable social world has even lead to premature death and suicide. Evidently, picaresque autobiographies form a very clear exception to these trajectories. Precisely because the pícaros do not follow these quests for the hidden values and meanings that ought to transcend the falsity of the social world in most modern novels,² their narratives may read as inherently ambivalent and as allegorically and ethically enigmatic. Pícaros do not seek to metaphysically overcome the constrictions of the social world towards a more meaningful existence, but expose the physical difficulties of living according to the official protocols of the dehumanizing social environments that they typically traverse. Rather than seeking to overcome the “vulgar conventions” of their social worlds,³ they exploit these conventions for their own survival, which often renders their actions roguish and socially unacceptable. Consequently, Matthias Bauer in the opening chapter of this

¹ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 17ff.

² See Lucien Goldmann, *Soziologie des modernen Romans* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1970), 32-4.

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 162.

collection, places the pícaro in an uninhabitable interval between the options of social death and physical death. The pícaros usually try to blame their roguish actions fully on the societies that surround them, but the relation between autonomy and heteronomy, between the substance of character and the accident of social circumstance, is notoriously difficult to resolve and remains, thus, highly enigmatic throughout the history of the genre.

The picaresque is often taken to be parodistic of the values and life trajectories of the above-mentioned autobiographical traditions. At the same time, however, the pícaros clearly do aim to participate in the cultural prestige and the self-assertive potential that these forms offer, as their narrator-protagonists attempt to demonstrate their reformed selves through their stories. This pragmatic ambivalence of picaresque life-narratives highlights the fact that any projected image offered by a self is always distorted. Ontologically distorted by non-identity with the moment of utterance, epistemologically distorted by language's inability to seamlessly translate experience into narrative, pragmatically distorted by existential motivation: the situation of utterance towards which the narrative is explicitly or implicitly designated and designed in almost every picaresque novel. The pícaro is certainly no enigmatic character unto himself; no character that is unable – or even interested to – access its own deeper truth, but in its specific enigmatic pragmatics and its enigmatic relation to the social world, the picaresque exploits those other autobiographical traditions for its own ends, while also exposing their misleading assumptions about self and narrative, society and individual, and about allegory and genre.

The sociology, mythology, psychology, and topography of the pícaro have been the focus of many generic and modal approaches since the beginning of scholarship on the picaresque in the early twentieth century with the classic studies of Frank Wadleigh Chandler (1899/1907) and Fonger De Haan (1903) and again since the 1960s in contributions by Robert Alter (1964), Stuart Miller (1967), or Harry Sieber (1977).⁴ Many of these studies have tended to identify and de-ambiguate the picaresque as literature of roguery and have seen the continuity of the genre in this occupational preference and thematic continuity. Andreas Gehrlach's essay in the current collection explicitly continues this identification of the picaresque with theft, but more productively observes delinquency and theft as philosophical structures, rather than sociological motifs. By reading picaresque characters in the context of Hegel's Master-Slave-Dialectic, Gehrlach argues that the pícaro's thefts show all the thriftiness and

⁴ See Frank W. Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907); Fonger de Haan, *An Outline of the History of the Novela Picaresca in Spain* (The Hague / New York: John Hopkins University Press / Nijhoff, 1903); Robert Alter, *Rogue's Progress: Studies in the Picaresque Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); Stuart Miller, *The Picaresque Novel* (Cleveland, OH: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1967); Harry Sieber, *The Picaresque* (London: Methuen, 1977).

world-knowledge that the slave acquires while serving the master, but unlike Hegel's slave the pícaro does not eventually aim to overthrow the master, but manages to make his living by using his wits to steal from him. One central enigmatic aspect of the picaresque is precisely this propensity to act outside of the established, often allegorized, temporalities of dialectics.

Other approaches, such as those of Claudio Guillén (1971), Walter Reed (1981), Alexander Blackburn (1979), and Ulrich Wicks (1974) to name but a few, have displayed a more flexible typology, proposed more open readings and have put more attention on the ambivalent structure of the picaresque than the above-mentioned.⁵ Nonetheless, the enigmatic dynamic of picaresque narratives is still under-represented in research. William Riggan's discussion of transhistorical picaresque unreliability (1981) has been one of the exceptions, even though narrative unreliability is not a distinctive enough phenomenon to describe this dynamic. It focuses solely on the epistemological inability or rhetorical unwillingness to represent past events adequately.⁶ More recently, Jochen Mecke's (2000) reading of the multiply paradoxical structure of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, Christoph Ehland's and Robert Fajen's (2007) focus on picaresque masquerade and illusion in a contradictory reality, or Matthias Bauer's (1994) concept of a *Komplementärlektüre* (complementary reading) – stating that the radical mono-perspectival structure of the picaresque always leaves a contestant position for the reader – have participated in pushing picaresque scholarship towards the inevitability of questions of enigma, in which the personal and social truth of actions have become impossible to be salvaged or distinguished from another.⁷

⁵ See Alexander Blackburn, *The Myth of the Picaro: Continuity and Transformation of the Picaresque Novel 1554-1954* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System: Essay towards the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971); Walter Reed, *An Exemplary History of the Novel: The Quixotic versus the Picaresque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Ulrich Wicks, "The Nature of Picaresque Narrative: A Modal Approach," *PMLA* 89.2 (1974), 240-9.

⁶ See Paul Riggan, *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs and Clowns: The Unreliable First Person Narrator* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

⁷ See Matthias Bauer, *Der Schelmenroman* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1994); Jochen Mecke, "Die Atopie des Pícaro: Paradoxe Kritik und dezentrierte Subjektivität im *Lazarillo de Tormes*," in *Welterfahrung - Selbsterfahrung. Konstitution und Verhandlung von Subjektivität in der spanischen Literatur der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Wolfgang Matzat & Bernd Teuber (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), 67-94; Christoph Ehland & Robert Fajen, ed., *Das Paradigma des Pikaresken/The Paradigm of the Picaresque* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2007).

The Enigma and the Picaresque

Some of the dimensions of the enigma from the history of rhetorics, theology, philosophy, and literary studies seem especially pertinent for theorizing and conceptualising the paradoxical and self-incriminating structure of picaresque narratives. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, aenigma was first defined as a trope that is created by extensive use of metaphor and whose essence it is to say things that can impossibly be connected. It should not be used excessively, so as not to degenerate into "gibberish". Rather, in order to create a balance between the dignity of poetic language and logic, metaphor must be mixed with the "clarity [of] current usage".⁸ Similarly, Quintilian preferred *allegoria permixta*, an allegory that articulates its tropical reference. Quintilian also introduced the influential trope of enigma as *allegoria obscurior*: extended use of metaphor brings about allegory, if that allegory is obscure, it is an enigma.⁹ Less well known today, a similar notion of enigma as an obscure allegory that through utter decontextualization or excessive usage cannot be (re)extended pragmatically had already been introduced earlier by Aristotle's pupil Demetrius, who warned that with respect to allegory "excess must be avoided, lest language become a riddle in our hands".¹⁰ A sustained difficulty to be read allegorically also remains the most striking link between the picaresque and the rhetorical tradition of enigma.

In both Jewish and Christian theology, enigma has often been related to prophetic revelation, signifying a speech of gods to prophets or prophets (or, in Greek mythology, of oracles) to men: an opaque speech that is still in need of interpretation, clarification, and decoding. St. Paul's famous assertion "videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate" [now we look through a glass darkly]¹¹ tied the enigma to the opacity inherent even in the presumably most transparent forms of mediation and representation and thereby relegated all worldly recognition to the deceiving form of a riddle. This almost anticipates the Spanish baroque distinction between worldly *engaño* and otherworldly *desengaño* that has been so formative for the context of early modern Spanish literature and culture in which the picaresque novel emerged and flourished. During the Renaissance, humanist rhetoric and pedagogy re-established the enigma as a trope, largely resting on the Aristotelian assertion that well-clad riddles are pleasing because they have the ability to educate. Enigma has, therefore, been newly conceptualised as obscure speech that hides a known entity, which it refers to

⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 36 [1458a].

⁹ Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, III, trans. & ed. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 331 [VIII. 6.52.].

¹⁰ Demetrius, *On Style*, trans. & ed. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 119. [2.102.]

¹¹ I Corinthians 13:12.

behind a veil of conscious and instructive ambivalence. As *exempla* apt for memorising and imitation, enigmas (now widely referred to in the corresponding terms from vernacular languages: such as German *Rätsel*) then entered many an early modern curriculum. Within picaresque texts and the historical, social, and philosophical paradoxes they comically emplot the enigma is not an example of a seemingly incoherent *allegoria obscurior* requiring an educated reader to reconstruct its hidden meaning; nor can it be solely understood as cryptical writing requiring hermeneutic explanation, as in Christian exegesis. Rather, picaresque narratives posit an often irresolvable tension between the pícaro's actions and the conditions of his social environment, and thus between the interpretative lenses of moral revelation and responsibility on the one hand and of social explanation and moral exemption on the other. Therefore, they expand these modes of hermeneutic inquiry into systematically irreconcilable perspectives, resulting in a textual dynamic that may be termed "enigmatic".

Romanticism with its privileging of authenticity, nature, and metaphysics as transcendent of the profanity of social reality also has a special relation to the enigmatic. Its concern with the metaphysics of "evil" that underly negative human action, displayed in the period's novelistic tendency towards the gothic and the uncanny, however, is somewhat at odds with the picaresque, which claims to have nothing to uncover underneath the vulgarity of social reality that allegedly determine the pícaro's rogueries. One of the few picaresque novels in the context of romanticism, offers the kind of detailed counter-perspective and exposes the enigmatic core that is typically lacking in the picaresque: James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). This title clearly reverberates the picaresque etiological structure, but the lengthy editor's narrative also exposes the protagonist's actions as precisely *unjustified*. While the enigmatic dimension of the picaresque often lies in an impossibility to decide as to the social or personal dimension of actions, Hogg's romantic picaresque turns the pícaro into an explicit agent of negativity that is affected by an enigmatic and mystical evil. Nonetheless, Hogg's novel also reproduces, perhaps even literalizes, the undecidability of the picaresque enigma of responsibility on a different level, as it remains unclear whether this evil is a force from outside or within the protagonist himself.

In the twentieth century, structuralist and psychoanalytic theories of emplotment have displayed a strong affinity to the enigmatic potential of language and text. In Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1970), a hermeneutic code is proposed, which denotes an enigmatic dynamics that moves any narrative forward via a series of questions and answers, delays and obstacles that are offered by the proairetic code, which is the series of events and actions contained in a text.¹² In his influential work on emplotment Peter Brooks has stated that "the limit-case of a purely proairetic narrative would be approached by the

¹² See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 17-19.

picaresque tale [...] Plot, then, might best be thought of as an ‘overcoding’ of the proairetic by the hermeneutic, the latter structuring the discrete elements of the former into larger interpretative wholes, working out their play of meaning and significance”.¹³ From this perspective enigma and its resolution are at the heart (of the ideological pleasures) of novel reading, while the picaresque novel – though otherwise not pertinent to Brooks’ study – is confirmed as a more thoroughly enigmatic (non-)form that proves notoriously difficult to be invested with a consistent meaning.

Finally, from a perspective of postcolonial and Marxist theory, Frederic Jameson’s work on both cognitive mapping and on national allegory may also be re-evaluated before the backdrop of enigma. Jameson (in)famously assumed that all third world texts are “overt” allegories, that separate private libidinal dynamics and public politics, but (only to) allow for a pragmatic extension of the former into the latter.¹⁴ Postmodernism has ostentatiously blurred this relation between individual action and political effect and declared it impossible to orient one-self, let alone act politically in the enigmatic complexities of modern global capitalism. Jameson’s notion of cognitive mapping would then be the identification and instantaneous construction of (allegorical) meaning from an, only ostentatiously, enigmatic structure: the meaningful embedding of individual action in larger social and material contexts.¹⁵ Russell West Pavlov’s essay takes on such seemingly enigmatic modes of engagement in the work of Jean Rhys from the perspective of colonial biopolitics. (Post)colonial biopolitics, conceived of as not only the administering, but also the representation of colonial subjects always elide interconnections that become misrecognized and depoliticized as enigmatic. Rhys’ colonial and modernist picaresque registers these modes of elision in a narrative frame that causally severs, yet spatially juxtaposes the human relations inherent in colonialism and biopower. These modes of picaresque embedding not only expose “the repressed topographies of cruelty”, but also the lacunae of meaning created in physical and semiotic trajectories from periphery to center, wherefore this apparent enigmaticity may even offer a biopolitical rather than linguistic source for the opacity of (post)modernist style. Given the hermeneutic and ethical difficulties and ambivalences generically encoded in the picaresque life-report, the enigma – as a rhetorical trope and a textual dynamic – may be a productive lens through which both the picaresque narratives themselves, their intertextual dialogues with other genres and their relation to dominant social forms may be newly examined

¹³ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 18.

¹⁴ See Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” in *Social Text* 15 (1986), 80.

¹⁵ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 51-54.

Enigmatic history of the picaresque

While recent scholarship has finally placed the narrative structure of the picaresque in the larger context of medieval European literatures,¹⁶ Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (2nd cent. AD) and St. Augustine's *Confessiones* (367-368 AD) have long been seen as the only potential historical reference points of the genre. As the only texts to offer some sense as to the riddle of its historical emergence. The former is emblematic of accidental meandering, explicit (and literal!) shape shifting, episodocity, and unreliability, the latter portrays its antipode: teleology, self-reflection, plausible gradual development, and – eponymously – (sincere) confession. Anonymously published in 1554, *La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades* combines the autobiographical forms of confession and comical metamorphosis into an enigmatic etiology that most subsequent picaresque novels build upon: their narrators tell the story of their unsteady life, “porque se tenga entera noticia de mi persona” [“so that you may know everything about me”]:¹⁷ yet the truth behind their life narratives remains obscured to their addressee. At the same time the meaning of their life-narratives in relation to the dominant socio-cultural paradigms remains impossible to resolve for a reader. Subsequent picaresque novels have of course offered variations on this initial structure. Mateo Alemán's *Aventuras y vida del pícaro Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599/1604) amplifies the etiological enigma in a highly discrepant relation between life story and moral commentary and strongly invites hermeneutic deciphering, as it is at times unclear whether the story is supposed to redeem the repented narrator or also/rather the unrepenting protagonist. Francisco de Quevedo's *Historia de la vida del Buscón* (1626) identifies this structure and hyperbolically parodies its picaresque pretexts as well as the ultimately enigmatic status of a social world shaped by simulation and dissimulation and by the breakdown of a concept of reality in which everyone had a clear place assigned by genealogy and guaranteed by a timeless social order that was the worldly equivalent of a complex cosmological order. In Germany, Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen's *Der Abentheuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1668/1669), despite its numerous differences to the picaresque tradition, retains the moral discrepancy of *Guzmán* and its questionable autobiographic (dis)closure. Its allegorical and educational trajectory is pulverized in its apocryphal “Adieu Welt”, in which his conversion

¹⁶ See Jan Mohr & Michael Waltenberger, ed., *Das Syntagma des Pikaresken* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014).

¹⁷ *La Vida del Lazarillo de Tormes: de sus fortunas y adversidades*, ed. Francisco Rico (Madrid: Cátedra, 2008), 4. / *Lazarillo de Tormes*, in *Two Spanish Picaresque Novels*, trans. Michael Alpert (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), 7.

is strangely in-authenticated by being embedded in a quotation and ultimately reversed in a further continuation of his picaresque meandering.

In the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe's *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722) follows this elusive picaresque structure, from its highly enigmatic hermeneutics in the editor's preface to Moll's implausible moralisations and her ostentatious and (self)deluding reliance on moral sincerity that Jens Elze's essay will discuss. Later in the century, Alain Lesage's *L'Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (1735) and Tobias Smollet's *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) partly resolved the enigmatic structure of their texts by largely making plausible and motivating the developmental metamorphosis of the meandering protagonist whose comic journey finally results in his becoming a fully integrated member of bourgeois society. Their arrivals are marked by a smaller moral discrepancy between conversed narrator and meandering pícaro and are ultimately backed by a number of conventional eighteenth-century motifs and techniques, most notably anagnorisis. The novels' self-assured satiric tone confirmed this social bourgeoisisation of the protagonist on the level of the narrative assessment and devaluation of social reality. It is this kind of 'bourgeoisisation of the picaresque' that enabled the popular misperception that the form eventually diffused into the *Bildungsroman*.¹⁸

The nineteenth-century novel is often seen to have synthesized the satirical bourgeois assessment of this eighteenth-century tradition with more realist forms of narration.¹⁹ Therefore, this "serious century" was marked by a relative absence of picaresque narrative and a relative (if at times overstated) dominance of the *Bildungsroman*.²⁰ At the same time, scientific progress and optimism had declared the access of the natural and social world transparent – and decidedly non-enigmatic. Realism, in a similar gesture of confidence, has at times actively transposed the epistemologies of the field of science onto the field of literature, as in Balzac's grand project of the *Human Comedy*, which despite its eponymous allusion to comedy and its harsh rebuffal of many – if not most – characters, participates in formal realism's larger project to provide for a dignification of everyday experience, including poverty and delinquency, by putting them into frameworks of seriousness.²¹ Therefore, the enigmatic and the picaresque seemed less pertinent narrative strategies, to the degree that, for example, J. Hillis Miller's concept of a Victorian picaresque seems almost oxymoronic from

¹⁸ See Arnold Hirsch, *Bürgertum und Barock im deutschen Roman: ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des bürgerlichen Weltbildes* (Köln: Böhlau, 1957), 5-30.

¹⁹ See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (London: Pimlico, 2008), 297.

²⁰ See Franco Moretti, "Serious Century," in *The Novel. Volume I: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Moretti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 364-400

²¹ See Erich Auerbach, "Über die ernste Nachahmung des Alltäglichen," in *Erich Auerbach. Geschichte und Aktualität eines europäischen Philologen*, ed. Karheinz Barck and Martin Treml (Berlin: Kadmos, 2007), 439-465.

the dominant perspective of literary history.²² In this volume Eike Kronshage's essay will help pluralize this conception, by looking at a today little known text by a little known author: R.S. Surtees's *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour* (1853). Kronshage argues that the picaresque in Anglophone fiction thrived especially on the geographical margins of an otherwise centrifugally ordered nation, whose long established modes of controlling vagrant mobility made it an unlikely topography for the picaresque form. The picaresque however, was also never fully absent from the now canonic British tradition, Kronshage argues, but maintained a parasitic relation to other genres in which it inscribed itself and on whose development it relied. This parasiticity of the form also defines the content of Surtees's novel, in which the protagonist is able to successfully embed himself parasitically in the economies of prestige and the epistemologies of conjecture of the landed nobility and gentry. Also based in the 19th century – and on the opposite end of the European periphery - Gautam Chakrabarti's essay observes the role of the picaresque in Russian literature. Chakrabarti reads Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842) as a version of the picaresque that infuses the macabre financial practices of its protagonist with moments of undecidable enigma, in the face of the vulgar realities of Czarist Russia and the bureaucratic absurdities that persist in the early capitalist administration across the vast geographic distances and cultural differences of the Russian Empire. Often when the 19th century novel turned to the financial and bureaucratic epistemologies of capitalism and to the peripheral residues of feudalism, rather than the bleak realities of industrialism and trade it became infused with grotesque, macabre, and comic elements that tend towards the enigmatic frame of the picaresque. The works discussed by Kronshage and Chakrabarti, but also texts, or at least sections of texts, by Balzac, Dickens, Melville, or Thackeray amply attest to this picaresque residue in the serious nineteenth century.

In recent years, early twentieth century modernism has repeatedly been singled out as a period of resurgence of the picaresque in European and American literatures.²³ Its impact has been especially well-researched for Germanophone novels in Bernard Malkmus' recent volume *The German Picaro and Modernity: Between Underdog and Shapeshifter*.²⁴ At the same time, the pressures of modernization, epistemological and representational crises, urban life, and the increased social distance from one's material surroundings under industrialization and imperialism, made the enigmatic a more pertinent mode of (failed) engagement with the world and of projecting oneself into it. What has been conceived as a crisis of the *Bildungsroman* under modernism and

²² See Joseph Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 22.

²³ See Jürgen Jacobs, *Der deutsche Schelmenroman: eine Einführung* (München: Artemis, 1983), 72; See Blackburn, *Myth of the Picaro*, 201.

²⁴ Bernhard F. Malkmus, *The German Picaro and Modernity: Between Underdog and Shape-Shifter* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

colonialism may in reverse be seen as a proliferation of the picaresque that provides the literary technology to articulate (social) “reality as that which cannot be mastered by the self”, a subtext that the picaresque’s oscillation between autonomy and heteronomy, or between history and cosmology has perhaps always enigmatically articulated.²⁵

The catastrophic experiences of Nazism and the Shoah have also sparked – paradoxically it may seem at first – a wide range of picaresque responses, which might lie in the form’s traditional social relation to plight and violence and its ethical propensity to problematize human agency and responsibility in contexts of utter negativity. The picaresque potential to expose and exploit the assumed experiential split in human self-projections is rendered especially blatant in these texts’ attempts to grasp the truth of uninhabitable experience – something that has not been a staple of picaresque texts before – and in their tendencies to assign and deflect agency. Günther Grass’ *Die Blechtrommel* (1959) and Jurek Becker’s *Jakob, der Lügner* (1969) are among the most notable exponents of this picaresque tendency to come to terms with catastrophe. In the current volume Matthias Bauer, Andree Michealis-König, and Rosa Pérez Zancas all discuss the importance of the enigmatic picaresque to the representations of Shoah experience. Pérez Zancas looks at how Ruth Klüger uses aspects of picaresque unreliability and picaresque narrative form in her autobiographical memoir *weiter leben. Eine Jugend* [Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered] (1992) to embed the status of childhood perception and memory, especially in the contexts of radical violence and catastrophe. Ever since the first chapter of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the picaresque has always been prone to what seems like a rhetorics of naivety in terms of communicating a past perception that lacks experiential contexts to make sense of events. Therefore, it lends itself to the expressions of both the perception of children and the bafflement in the face of unprecedented catastrophe. Klüger – a trained early modernist – uses the picaresque to convey this lack of meaningful perception in her configuration of childhood events, which she does however balance and frame with later more experientially detached and reflexive positions.

Michaelis-König also sees the enigmatic as inherent to the Literature of the Shoah. Literary and autobiographical works that engage with this experience are always also the attempt to articulate the riddle of survival and to get a grasp at the inaccessible and uncommunicable. Yoram Kaniuk’s highly controversial novel *Adam Hundesohn* (1969) [Adam Resurrected] is a prime example of how the picaresque with its propensity to laughter, violence, and disjunct modes of

²⁵ Hans Blumenberg, “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeit des Romans,” in *Nachahmung und Illusion* (Poetik und Hermeneutik I) ed. Hans Robert Jauß (München: Fink, 1964), 9-27 / “The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel,” in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism*, ed. Richard E. Amacher and Victor Lange (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 29-48.

narrative and narration can be the literary rendition of that which cannot be accessed by established patterns of hermeneutic encoding and understanding. Instead the form, especially so in the context of pseudo-autobiographical accounts of the Shoah, resorts to the elusive dynamics of enigma which in Kaniuk's case translates into an aesthetics of madness.

In the opening chapter to this volume Matthias Bauer argues that the life of the pícaro always takes place in an enigmatic, precarious, and ultimately uninhabitable interval between social death, which derives from his roguish survival artistry and physical death, which is looming in the form of hunger or institutional violence. Picaresque fiction is therefore a form of reflection that occurs when reality is especially hostile towards life, as in the scarcity of early modern Spain or during the upheavals of early modern wars of religion and the inquisitions of the counter-reformation. Bauer culminates with an analysis of Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber* (1971) to observe how this potential of the form to grotesquely express conditions of unviable life also links it to the contexts of Nazi Germany and the Shoa.

In contemporary postcolonial literature the picaresque has also experienced a recent flowering. Decolonization literatures have largely operated in the mode of the *Bildungsroman* and realist nationalism and were said to have thrived on their didactic potential, to such an extent that some critics have asserted that "all third world texts are national allegories".²⁶ More recent texts such as Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and even Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) clearly turned (the screw of) national allegory towards enigma, as the life narratives and life trajectories projected therein can no longer be decoded by reference to the developmental subjects of emancipation, (Euro)modernity, and subjectivity. In the current volume, Kira Schmidt's essay applies these insights to relate the (post)colonial multi-perspectivity of Ilja Trojanow's novels to questions of the enigma of the picaresque. She observes how the various picaresque perspectives in and across different works concerning the colonial explorer Richard Burton and his servants and collaborators serve to create an irresolvable network of (post-colonial) relations that is irreducible to simplistic concepts and allegorical readings of delinquency, responsibility, subversion, victimhood, and agency.

Enigmatic Plots

In terms of the narrative structure of the self, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, unsafely situated at the threshold between the middle ages and (early) modernity, or

²⁶ Jameson, "Third World Literature," 69.

between cosmological and historical time,²⁷ has been seen as a narrative that performs the interval in which guaranteed theistic, social, and cosmological frameworks were slowly challenged by other frameworks or “moral sources”, that have, however, not yet offered explicit alternative beliefs and/or goods. Jochen Mecke has termed this structure “the atopy of the picaresque” that socially dislocates him between “conflicting positions which he can neither reject nor fully comply with”.²⁸ The frames of reference with which to decode the picaresque life narrative were, therefore, also in relative flux and highly paradoxical. New “moral sources” were already set into motion in the surprisingly ordinary (in term of social realism) and inwardly (in terms of the centrality of the I) narrative of the picaresque; two prime indicators of (early) modernity that offer two sources of seemingly unending bafflement and made the text a genealogical enigma in the context of the mid-sixteenth century, with no direct literary historical precursors and vague classical influences that oscillate between Apuleius and St. Augustine.²⁹ The sources of the picaresque self-exploration have been strongly debated and were sometimes escaped by simply ascribing its emergence to the genius of its author.³⁰ More recently, Jan Mohr and Michael Waltenberger have, however, firmly historicized the picaresque syntagm in its orientation towards historically contiguous pre-modern episodic patterns and biographical genres.³¹ Other recent scholarship has historicized the narrative form of the picaresque to suggest a socio-rhetorical origin of the picaresque. While Lázaro’s “writing in obedience to a command” had already been tentatively associated with the “autobiographical confessions responding to admonitions by the Inquisition”³², Susanne Zepp, by using a range of archival material, has provided conclusive evidence of the structural similarities of the prologue and narrative situation of *Lazarillo de Tormes* with

²⁷ See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Cosmological Time and the Impossibility of Closure. A Structural Element in Spanish Golden Age Narratives,” in *Cultural Authority in Golden Age Spain*, ed. Marina S. Brownlee and Gumbrecht (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

²⁸ Mecke, “Atopie des Pikaro,” 93. Translation mine.

²⁹ See Hans Robert Jauss, “Ursprung und Bedeutung der Ich-Form im *Lazarillo de Tormes*,” *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* 8 (1957), 290-311; See Margot Kruse, “Die parodistischen Elemente im *Lazarillo de Tormes*,” *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* 10 (1959), 292-305; Peter Baumanns, “Der *Lazarillo de Tormes* als Travestie der augustinischen *Confessiones*,” *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* 10 (1959), 285-92; Fernando Lázaro Carreter, “*Lazarillo de Tormes*” en la picaresca (Barcelona: Ediciones Ariel, 1972), 33.

³⁰ See Marcel Bataillon, *Novedad y fecundidad del Lazarillo de Tormes* (Salamanca: Anaya, 1968).

³¹ See Mohr and Waltenberger, *Syntagma des Pikaesken*

³² Antonio Gómez-Moriena, *Discourse Analysis as Sociocriticism: The Spanish Golden Age* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 33.

concrete inquisition protocols.³³ Besides a report from the inquisition officer these protocols included a self-information and a family genealogy by the accused, making these narratives at once autobiographies and self-defences. Zepp's approach firmly historicizes the picaresque and, thereby, implicitly questions the status of the Spanish picaresque as transition narrative that, like most early modern literature, it is otherwise widely associated with. The dialectic notion of the transition narrative is problematic insofar as it operates in a secure trajectory of 'old order – crisis – experiment – new order', that is projected retrospectively and that many scholars find too simplistic for the contested and diverse developments of early modern Europe. While I don't always share these concerns and see the heuristic value of some of the better readings of the anticipatory and probing status of early modern texts and works of art to exceed the problematization of a stated teleology, such a narrative nonetheless is simply inappropriate to the idiosyncrasies of the Spanish context. "The short and happy life of the novel in Spain",³⁴ in the sixteenth century is followed by a seventeenth and eighteenth century that are marked by a catholic and aristocratic conservatism that was only slowly replaced in the nineteenth century and consigned the country to perpetual poverty. Though this development may sometimes have been overstated in the modern(ist) myth of *España Negra*, the country was marginalised in Europe well into the twentieth century, wherefore the sixteenth century picaresque simply cannot have been the transition narrative in the sense of a probing of an eventual accommodation with capitalism and secularism.

Therefore, it seems more pertinent to read *Lazarillo* as a text that operates uneasily and irresolvably *between* historical concepts of reality. Even more so because a certain proliferation of humanism and capitalism in the fifteenth and sixteenth century – paired with the persistent regression of charity as dominant means of allocating basic goods – was not successful in eventually establishing itself as a new social dominant. In this context *Lazarillo de Tormes* offers an enigmatic plot that reacts to and plays through the motions of emerging – meritocratic and historical – modes of self-authorization but ultimately pretends to reconstitute the structures of feudalism. It destabilizes and lays bare the precarious foundations of the still dominant order that creates large scale destitution without, however, articulating and accommodating to a new structure, due to both the social (and rhetorical) pressure that generates the narrative and to a lack of such articulated alternatives. The worldly transgressions and meritocratic ambitions that the novel initially deploys are thus ultimately re-

³³ See Susanne Zepp, *Herkunft und Textkultur: Über jüdische Erfahrungswelten in romanischen Literaturen 1499-1627* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 85-108.

³⁴ See Joan Ramon Resina, "The Short, Happy Life of the Novel in Spain," in *The Novel. Volume I: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 301-312.