

Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel

Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel:
A First Exploration into Commensurable
Perspectives

Edited by

Binne de Haan and Konstantin Mierau

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This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5989-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5989-9

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present volume is the fruit of the conference *Participating in the City: Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel*, held at the University of Groningen in March 2012. The editors would like to express their gratitude to the contributing authors, Robert Folger, Giovanni Levi, Matti Peltonen, and Hans Renders. They accepted the challenge to look beyond the boundaries of their respective fields and contribute to the proposed interdisciplinary perspective. It is our most sincere hope that this first exploration may inspire more such collaborations. Our gratitude also goes out to the other speakers at the conference: Philiep Bossier, Liesbeth Korthals Altes, and Fabien Montcher.

This project was a joint effort by our home institutes, the Biography Institute and the Department of Romance Languages and Cultures, both at the University of Groningen. Moreover, we would like to thank the research institute ICOG (Groningen Research Institute for the Study of Culture) and the Nicolaas Muleriusfonds Foundation for their generous support of the conference and this publication.

This volume is dedicated to our loved ones, wherever they may roam.

Groningen, Utrecht, February 2014

Binne de Haan
UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN

Konstantin Mierau
UNIVERSITY OF UTRECHT

INTRODUCTION

BRINGING TOGETHER MICROHISTORY AND THE PICARESQUE NOVEL: STUDYING MENOCCHIO, GUZMÁN DE ALFARACHE, AND KIN

KONSTANTIN MIERAU AND BINNE DE HAAN

Menocchio and Guzmán de Alfarache

At what points of intersection do Menocchio and Guzmán de Alfarache meet? Menocchio was a sixteenth-century miller whose bookshelf and inquisitorial trial records form the material for a microhistorical reconstruction of a rural miller's cosmology in Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*; Guzmán de Alfarache is the protagonist of the first fully-fledged picaresque novel, published in 1599, whose life's journey and retrospective narrative have taken readers into the mind of a supposedly repentant delinquent narrating his failed attempts to rise in standing by often illicit means, thereby giving an inside view of life in the sixteenth century.¹ Both the man and the literary character represent individualized subjective perspectives on early modern Europe. Yet whereas one is the reconstruction of a historian who helped establish the practice of microhistory in the 1970s, the other is the creation of a late-sixteenth-century author who was a foundational figure for the literary genre of the picaresque novel.

For all the intersecting interests and subject matter shared by the picaresque novel and the practice of microhistory, the relationship between

¹ Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*; *Guzmán de Alfarache* was first published in 1599, an apocryphal sequel appeared in 1602, and a sequel by the original author, Mateo Alemán, followed in 1604. It was an instant bestseller and was almost immediately translated into most European vernacular languages and Latin.

them remains largely unexplored. The emphasis of the first generation of microhistorical studies was on rural actors, whereas the picaresque novel was in many ways an urban phenomenon. This may explain why there has been little direct rapport between the practice of microhistory and the scholarship concerned with the picaresque novel: scholars of the picaresque novel would not immediately recognize the relevance of the microhistory classics for their field. The present volume aims to initiate a dialogue between these fields; it is the result of an encounter of scholars from the fields of microhistory, biography, and the picaresque novel, who met at the conference *Participating in the City: Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel*, held at the University of Groningen in March 2012.

The Picaresque Novel

The picaresque novel finds its origins in the humanist search for an expansion of the historiographical genre. The conventions of literary narrative were merged with those of historical narrative, becoming what Mateo Alemán, author of the *Guzmán*, called “poética historia,” in order to understand the motives and practices of urban delinquents.² The protagonist of the picaresque novel is the *pícaro*, a character of lowly descent who, by passing through a wide array of professions, attempts to rise in social standing.³ The genre found its prototype in *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), was fully established as such by *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599), and went on to flourish throughout Europe in sequels and translations of the founding texts. Classics of the genre include *Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1669), *Gil Blas* (1715-35) and *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67). The picaresque novel represented, in the form of a first-person narrator, a class that had rarely been portrayed at the centre of literary works. According to Claudio Guillén:

² Alemán, *Guzmán de Alfarache*, 113.

³ The picaresque genre is favoured by an extensive bibliography. An enlightening and recent study on the genre of the picaresque, and its influence on European literature, is Meyer-Minnemann and Schlickers', *La Novela Picaresca*. Prior to that, Dunn's *Spanish Picaresque Fiction* provides an overview of the debate on the genre of the picaresque. See also the study by Rico, *The Spanish Picaresque Novel and the Point of View* (which is a translation of the Spanish original published in 1969), on the point of view in the picaresque, which may be complemented with Friedman, *The Antiheroine's Voice*, who makes a particular study of narrative discourse in the female picaresca. See also Smith, *Writing in the Margin*, for a post-structuralist reading of subjectivity in the picaresque. On the literary sources of the *Guzmán* see the still very authoritative study by Cros, *Protée et le gueux*.

Lazarillo attributes a central role to the representative of a social class which hitherto had contributed only small parts and supernumeraries to works of imagination.⁴

This position still characterizes much of the current thinking on the picaresque genre. More recently, Maiorino writes:

Mateo Alemán, Francisco de Quevedo, Ribera, Murillo and Velázquez brought to the fore folks who begged at street-corners, worked for low wages, and starved in destitute hamlets [...] No one wrote about the dispossessed existence of common folks until the novelists gave them a voice.⁵

However, this does not mean that these subaltern classes spoke for themselves, as the authors of picaresque narrative were, more often than not, members of the cultural elite.

A central notion in the study of the picaresque is the first-person perspective of the narrator, which allows for the development of a singular subjectivity and a psychological depth of character hitherto reserved for the lives of saints and emperors. The *pícaro* evolves, reflects on his deeds as a younger man—or sometimes woman—and thus recontextualizes events from the vantage point of advanced age, allowing for a perspective enriched by accumulated insight, which is projected on the experience of the character's youth in a complex retrospective narrative. This complexity of perspective puts the picaresque novel at the very root of the modern European novel.

Among other things, the *pícaro*, as a literary device, excels in the representation of particularity. The *pícaro* provides a literary perspective on social groups that have relatively less representation in institutional archives, learned correspondences, and contemporary historiography; his tale is that of the urban transient marginal, the criminal, the drifter, but

⁴ Guillén, *The Anatomies of Roguery*, 70. See also the letters by Mateo Alemán concerning his interest in delinquency and false poverty, and his attempt to understand this subject matter by means of a literary narrative based on the perspective of a delinquent. See Cros, *Protée et le gueux*. This approach to understanding poverty and delinquency countered the many learned treatises on the subject of urban poverty, which viewed the phenomenon as a large-scale problem requiring large-scale remedies, published by such contemporaries as Cristóbal Pérez de Herrera and Miguel de Giginta. See Cavillac's introduction to the *Amparo de Pobres...* by Pérez de Herrera, in particular CLXXIX and *passim*, and Cruz, *Discourses of Poverty*.

⁵ Maiorino, *At the Margins of the Renaissance*, 3.

also of the soldier in between contracts, and of many once-upstanding citizens who, through war, famine, or changes in fortune, find themselves living on the margins. As a research topic, the *pícaro* and his particular narrative representation of the world have been the subject of a substantial body of analysis, which has the tendency to read the *pícaro* in the light of emerging mentalities (such as the rise of the bourgeoisie and emerging capitalism) and in the light of the evolution of literary form.⁶ The historical material used to develop these analyses is often taken from historical studies dedicated to large-scale developments. This translates into a problem of commensurability. The *pícaro*, the representation of a particular subjectivity, is generally contextualized in relation to large-scale social, economic, cultural, and psychological phenomena. In other words, he is subjected to a close reading that is then elaborated in the context of rather large-scale historical narratives, such as the work of the eminent scholars of Spanish social history Elliott, Domínguez Ortiz, and Maravall.⁷ A problem here is that these very historians—Domínguez Ortiz and Maravall in particular—equate in their studies the literary *pícaro* with his nonfictional counterparts, the vagabonds, idle beggars, and delinquents, and in fact use the picaresque novel as a source for social history. By failing to distinguish between representation of the marginal in social space and representation of the marginal in literary space, they make impossible an analysis of the selections and manipulations that characterize the relationship between the literary *pícaro* and the vagabonds, idle beggars, and delinquents of the time.

Microhistory

Microhistory has come to be known as the detailed historical investigation of circumscribed units of analysis, often an individual event,

⁶ For a set of recent analyses that connects the picaresque novel to emerging capitalism and the development of social capital associated with a rising bourgeoisie, see Sánchez, *An Early Bourgeois Literature*; Ruan, *Pícaro and Cortesano*; Cooley, *Courtiers, Courtesans, Pícaros and Prostitutes*. For a still relevant study (although it would be superseded in certain aspects by subsequent research) of the notion of the baroque as a phenomenon in the history of a supposed Spanish mentality, see Maravall, *La cultura del Barroco*. Maravall also applies the large-scale thematic approach to the picaresque in Maravall, *La literatura picaresca desde la historia social*. For a psychoanalytical study of the Guzmán, see Johnson, *Inside Guzmán de Alfarache*.

⁷ Elliott, *Imperial Spain*; Domínguez Ortiz, *Extranjeros en la vida de los españoles*; Maravall, *La literatura picaresca desde la historia social*.

place, or life. Among the classics of the genre we could count *The Return of Martin Guerre* by Natalie Zemon-Davis, *Montaillou* by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and *The Cheese and the Worms* by Ginzburg. This approach aims to reveal previously unnoticed layers, spheres, or structures in history, which can also belong to the domain of large-scale history.⁸ In its first phase in the 1970s, the practice of microhistory intended to find and represent in historical discourse peoples it considered lost: historical agents who had disappeared from the narrative as history's losers or supernumeraries.⁹ Other schools within historiography tried to represent the "invisible" inhabitants of history through collective approaches: quantitative and serial history or the history of mentality, such as the U.S.-based "new economic history" or "cliometrics," developments within the *Annales* school, but also "women's history" and "labour history." The founding microhistorians Carlo Ginzburg, Edoardo Grendi, and Giovanni Levi proposed to do the opposite: to scale down the level of analysis. In defining its place in historical discourse, in terms both of the scale of analysis and the use of sources, microhistory can be related to the notion of the "agent-based perspective." This interest in agency also links it with the practice of biography. Individualized, particular perspectives are quintessential for microhistory, biography, and the picaresque novel. In taking such a vantage, microhistory has produced a kind of counterproof to established historical narratives, by showing in which aspects individual experiences or specific events are characteristic of, or distinct from general historical narratives. In this approach, the exceptional and the particular have prominent roles. As Ginzburg and Poni stipulate: "marginal cases function [...] as clues to or traces of a hidden reality, which is not usually apparent in the documentation."¹⁰ Whether and how micro and macro levels can be combined or integrated within historical scholarship is still a matter of debate. According to microhistorians, the dimension of agency on a micro-level provides for a unique but essential vantage point within historical writing: "by moving on a reduced scale, it permits in many cases a reconstitution of 'real life' unthinkable in other kinds of historiography."¹¹ Microhistorians use as a guiding thread the names of individuals, in order to discover "bit by bit, a biography, albeit fragmentary, [that] emerges

⁸ Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It"; Levi, "On Microhistory"; Peltonen. "Clues, Margins, and Monads"; Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*; Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*.

⁹ Ginzburg and Poni, "The Name and the Game."

¹⁰ Ginzburg and Poni, "The Name and the Game," 8.

¹¹ Ginzburg and Poni, "The Name and the Game," 8.

from the network of relationships that circumscribe it.”¹² In doing this, microhistorians break through the one-sidedness and constraints of institutional archival sources, which often serve to support grand narratives: “The great strength of the microhistories comes from this sensitivity to the nuances of power and the changes of voice in documents.”¹³

The present state of microhistory is perhaps marked by the paradox of its success. Once historical practice has assimilated the basic themes and conceptions of microhistory (e.g., the notion of lost peoples), and a lively practice with its own internal debates has evolved, where does the general program of microhistory go?¹⁴ Moreover, what are the benefits of microhistory in an interdisciplinary perspective, as perceived from the outside, by, say, literary historians? What are the new paths it opens up? One of the options the current volume wishes to explore is the contextualization of literature through a microhistorical approach to relevant historical sources in order to study the processes of representation. This option is most relevant to genres of literary representation that focus on particular subjectivities of members of marginal classes, which tend to be used as historical sources. A case in point: the picaresque novel.

Benefits of an Exchange

The probing attitude of microhistory is directly relevant to the contextualization of the literary *pícaro*. If “lost peoples” have been ignored because of their supposed insignificance and marginality, where does this leave the marginal nonfictional counterpart of the *pícaro*—commonly held to be the *ne plus ultra* of representations of marginality? Literary representation is an important aspect of the notion of “lost peoples.” However, these literary representations tend to be read in the light of established historical narratives, which, in turn, tend to disregard particular experiences that may prove to be exceptions to the rule; this is a problem precisely because the *pícaro* is so exceptional. If the exceptionality of individuals of lower classes is disregarded as an object of study, the referentiality of the literary character of the *pícaro* is not discussed in light of the particularity of life on the margins. In the very texts used to contextualize picaresque novels, this particularity has been sacrificed in historical narrative for the sake of the bigger picture, thus

¹² Ginzburg and Poni, “The Name and the Game,” 7.

¹³ Muir, “Introduction: Observing Trifles,” xx.

¹⁴ Brewer, *Microhistories and the Histories of Everyday Life*.

creating a disparity between the object of analysis (a particular literary character) and the context chosen for analysis (large-scale socio-economic phenomena). Apparently, the comparative study of the literary representation of exceptional individuals based on a juxtaposition of historical and literary sources (e.g., Philip II, the man and the myth) is reserved for members of the elite. This disparity constitutes a considerable lacuna in our understanding of picaresque representation.

With increasing awareness of this problem, the scholarship of the picaresque novel now looks to nonfictional contexts for the interpretation of marginal subjectivities.¹⁵ We argue that, by taking cues from microhistory, scholars of the picaresque can uncover *hidden realities* that have up to now not been considered in the contextualization of picaresque narratives. This is all the more pertinent given the changing profile of the early modern reader. Our hypothesis is that microhistory may be an apt tool to identify for the picaresque novel a “community of interpretation” in Stanley Fish’s sense.¹⁶ For example, it will help to identify the micro-level references—encompassing urban spaces, social types, and individual histories—that informed the reading practices of the new urban reader of the turn of the seventeenth century, who was not especially learned and whose readings of picaresque texts were less determined by *auctoritas* than by his own experience of the street corner.¹⁷ This brings us to speculate that the new urban reader’s deciphering of picaresque texts is best understood using the tools of microhistory to reconstruct places, peoples, and practices at the street level. There is increasing research into non-literary (e.g., administrative) narratives of self in early modern Spain that has helped us to develop our understanding of picaresque narrative; what we find there is that many of the picaresque novel’s formal aspects derive from everyday practice rather than from literary tradition, for example the case of the professional curriculum vitae written up by Spaniards seeking to establish themselves in the colonies. The idea is that this is the origin of the first-person narrative of individuals of the lower classes. Whatever applies to paradigms of self-evocation found in the curriculum vitae produced by the system of the “mercedes” or graces extended by the king, also applies to the many authors of the curriculum vitae, now as readers of the picaresque. Subsequently, whatever applies to the curriculum vitae also applies to urban space and urban practices, which may also have affected literary form. Bringing microhistory to the

¹⁵ Folger, *Picaresque and Bureaucracy*.

¹⁶ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*

¹⁷ See, for changing readership in Early Modern Spain, Chevalier, *Lectura y Lectores*.

picaresque novel also means bringing microhistory to the study of urban space and its literary representation.

Microhistory, on the one hand, and the picaresque novel and the discipline that studies it, on the other, are both concerned with the agent-based perspective, yet each one makes a different claim to referentiality. The distinction between fictional and factional narrative is a highly debated theme in both history theory and literary theory, and is of principal importance both to microhistory—which has shaped its narrative form borrowing heavily from literary narrative—and the picaresque, which due to its proximity to everyday life is often taken as a source for everyday life.¹⁸ As we have seen, many historians, among them Domínguez Ortiz, have treated the picaresque and related costumbrist representations of urban marginals as being fully realist representations of life on the margins. However, the picaresque is far from a reliable source for an intersubjective, reconstructable, everyday social space. The ambiguous nature of picaresque referentiality, and the first-person narrator of humble origins that opens the narratives of Guzmán and kin, have not ceased to fascinate scholars; they represent a source both for life on the margins in the sixteenth century, and for the subjective, individualized experience of that life. It is precisely the space between an intersubjective social space and the particular subjectivity of the *pícaro* that provide the potential for micro-level analysis. The meticulous reconstructions by microhistorians of the subjectivities of Menocchio, Martin Guerre, or the townspeople of Montaillou are carried out with much the same objective in mind. By focusing on one miller's bookshelf, Ginzburg attempted to understand how Menocchio digested the dozen or so books he had read throughout his life, and how this reading was merged with a cosmology he had acquired through oral exchange. This phenomenon could not have been understood in its particularity based on large-scale research into—to name but a few examples—book ownership, increased general literacy, or education in the early modern period.

Both fields are marked by polemics concerning subjectivity, representativeness, and the quest to juxtapose a still marginalized voice with the grand narrative. The picaresque genre as such originated in the desire to find a new protagonist whose voice would allow for a more profound and psychologizing representation of a view on society that had not yet been expressed in such a way. In this sense the practice of

¹⁸ A recent contribution and overview of this discussion is Schaeffer, "Fictional vs. Factual Narration"; more specifically concerned with the question of the narration of specific agents is the still pertinent Cohn, "Fictional versus Historical Lives: Borderlines and Borderline Cases."

microhistory in the 1970s introduced an interest in particulars in the field of historical narrative that is quite similar to Mateo Alemán's quest to augment the debate on false poverty via the particular perspective of a delinquent narrator-protagonist at the end of the sixteenth century. In the choice of protagonists as units of analysis, that then allow for more general speculations about (the history of) human behaviour, the picaresque and microhistorical canons yield some intriguing correlates: Guzmán and Menocchio, the imposturous Buscón and the fake Martin Guerre, the German *Schildbürger*—a village of fools famous for sowing salt and warehousing sunlight for wintertime—and the frivolous villagers of Montailou.¹⁹ Reading these correlates against one another, we argue, establishes an as yet insufficiently explored commensurability in the study of fictional representation. It allows us to understand the selectivities of sixteenth-century authors when they tackled the marginal experience, and it allows us to understand the bearing of the recent reconstruction of a sixteenth-century miller's cosmology on how the minds of marginal peoples were perceived by authors of their own times. In a sense, Carlo Ginzburg and Mateo Alemán describe the same sort of individual. Juxtaposing the sixteenth century and the contemporary narrative reconstruction of an exceptional marginal may also provide insights into the distance between the perception of the current historian and the historical author, and particularly between current and historical conceptions of exceptionality. There is, in short, great potential for a comparative contextualizing approach that takes into account the extraliterary particular before abstracting immediately to a contextualization of the *pícaro* in relation to macro-phenomena. The *pícaro* may, in many ways, be a *pars pro toto*; however, this does not mean that in the study of the fictional *pars*, the nonfictional *pars* can be omitted in the analysis.

First Explorations

Microhistory and picaresque novel scholarship, then, share an interest in the problematic relation between the individual participant's perspective and the generalizations of historiography. In different ways they pose the same question: How can the perspective of an individual be used to problematize the understanding of the larger context? This publication is intended to open up the dialogue between two disciplines that have been

¹⁹ For studies of early modern folklore and picaresque narratives see, in addition to the standard works on the picaresque mentioned above, Kuper, *Zur Semiotik der Inversion*; Geremek, *La estirpe de Cain*.

labouring on shared problems, but have not been much exposed to each other's discourses. The papers in this volume provide a "first approach," a first selection of thoughts by scholars working on microhistory, the agent-based or biographical perspective, and with picaresque texts.

The first essay is by Giovanni Levi, one of the founders of microhistory. In it, he discusses a wide array of picaresque classics, using each to reflect on questions for historical research. He states that the two approaches coincide in their "enduring endeavour to comprehend humanity." This endeavour is, as we have also indicated, pursued by both approaches by their focusing on an often marginal character. Levi goes on to discuss half a dozen challenges posed by picaresque narratives for historiography, among them the plurality of points of view, the veracity and representativeness used by historians to construct biographies, the chronological treatment of time, and the way that picaresque narrative—through the superposition of various narrative times—deconstructs chronology, and

breaks with the banal teleological causality that would have every event the consequence of the event preceding it, to imagine instead intersecting and alternating rhythms in a more complex system of organizing a story and its possible interpretations.

Levi also points out that "picaresque literature raises the problem of documenting that which leaves no documents behind" and that, from the start, it was intended to present the previously unrepresented, the "unusual and the unexpected." That is to say that much of the picaresque is programmatically concerned with the previously undocumented, such as social and genealogical determination. In a more general sense, this points toward a challenge for the microhistorical contextualization of picaresque narrative: namely, lacking documentation, how can we contextualize picaresque narrative? The picaresque may—as Levi suggests—provide perspectives that are apparently lacking in other documentation, but how, then, are we to study the referentiality of these picaresque representations? Perhaps this is one of the most pertinent questions and challenges for current scholars of the picaresque.

In his chapter "How Marginal Are the Margins Today?", Matti Peltonen probes into the increasingly mainstream interest in the marginal. He discusses a question that relates to both the valuation of the practice of microhistory and to the historical contextualization of the picaresque novel's protagonist. As the role of the marginal becomes a central object of study, the change in valuation reflects on the relative place of the object of study in historical narrative, giving it an incongruous amount of

scholarly attention. Therefore, an analysis of research practices provides depth to our understanding of the changing implications of the study of the marginal in light of the increasing body of work on the marginal. In his text, Peltonen reflects on the widespread association of microhistory with postmodernism due to a supposed bias toward the marginal, warning against the simplification that lies in this association.

Extrapolating from Peltonen's text to the study of the picaresque novel, we could posit that the shift in the appreciation of the marginal reflects on the historical contextualization of the picaresque novel's protagonist, a character associated with the voice of the margin.²⁰ His choice for discussing John H. Elliott's dismissal of microhistory is quite illustrative of the problematic lack of microhistorical contextualizations of scenes in the picaresque. Peltonen refers to the lecture given by Elliott in 1991, when he criticized the work of Carlo Ginzburg on Menocchio for taking as its subject "a rather confused human being" who is not typical or representative, only "fascinating but confused."²¹ Would Elliott extend this notion to the *pícaro*, who is perhaps a perfect example of the early modern interest in a representation of the marginal? The reluctance of such an eminent professor as Elliott may help us to understand why the nonfictional analogues of the *pícaro*—one could consider Menocchio and Martin Guerre as such—have received so little attention in historical scholarship. We are—if we continue Elliott's tradition—in danger of continuing the problem of explaining the literary *pícaro* by way of the very same literary *pícaro*, as do Domínguez Ortiz and Maravall. Scholars of the picaresque tend to refer to historical studies such as those by Elliott. If, then, the approach of microhistory is dismissed by such authoritative figures, how then are scholars of the picaresque in need of micro-level contextualization of city life to find material on a commensurable level to facilitate the analysis of individual urban scenes? The questions raised by Peltonen also have implications for the literary representation of the marginal as a preferred object of study for literary history; the scholarly selectivity of the marginal may result in overexposure.

In his contribution, Robert Folger studies representations of the city in the picaresque novel, based on two key texts of the picaresque genre, the 1626 *Buscón* and the 1645 *Vida y hechos de Estebanillo González*. Folger characterizes the picaresque novel as an urban phenomenon, showing that the *pícaros'* narratives are mainly set in cities and concerned with

²⁰ See Friedman, *Cervantes in the Middle*; Smith, *Writing in the Margin*; Rico, *The Spanish Picaresque Novel and the Point of View*.

²¹ Elliott, *National and Comparative History*, 10–11.

problems of urban social space. Folger reflects on the problematic nature of picaresque perception, based on the case of the *Buscón* by Quevedo y Villegas, which, Folger writes, is “an elite member’s vision of the subaltern space.” Using Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, Folger discusses the spaces that intersect in the *pícaro*’s perception of urbanity as constructed by Quevedo. In his analysis of urban space Folger also refers to de Certeau’s seminal essay “Walking the City.” He shows that the space of the picaresque novel is one where authority inflicts violence on the poor in search of social advancement.

Folger’s contribution raises several pertinent questions. Problematizing social space as heterotopian reveals the ability of picaresque narrative to juxtapose intersecting conflictive perceptions of space, while at the same time raising questions of referentiality; if, as Folger demonstrates, the space of the *pícaro* is one of violence inflicted by authorities, then how can the picaresque narrative give a voice to the marginal, as Maiorino suggests in the citation above? One could extrapolate from Folger’s analysis that the notion of heterotopia also extends to the readership of picaresque texts. Readers in the early seventeenth century alternately interpreted the *pícaro* as a victim of, or menace to, society. Present-day scholars see in the *pícaro* anything from the representation of the general social phenomenon of urban poverty to the representation of a modern-day individualized subjectivity. The heterotopic space of the *pícaro* is actualised by the communities of interpretation that have continued to imbue the literary space of the picaresque with different, perhaps conflictive, meanings. This leads us to believe that many of the current conflicting interpretations of the literary *pícaro* are not mutually exclusive but much rather representative of the complex, heterotopic, identity of the *pícaro*. Microhistory can help us to investigate how particular agents actualised specific meanings from the many potential meanings provided by the picaresque text. The *pícaro* may potentially represent different and conflictive meanings; a policeman in sixteenth-century Madrid will most likely actualise only one of these meanings, whilst a social reformer may choose to actualise another.

In his contribution, Hans Renders discusses the relationship between biography, as a micro-level, agent-based perspective on history, and the construction of national histories. Referring to a number of biographies, he discusses the problem of agency in the master narrative of the Dutch phenomenon of the “pillarization” of society into supposedly separate communities with common religious and/or ideological foundations. This phenomenon is not considered to have played a role in urban history. In his contribution, Renders demonstrates how biography and microhistory

can contribute to urban history by understanding the way pillarization did or did not affect the lives of particular agents. He discusses the drawbacks of approaching the city as an organism whose inhabitants' fates are determined by the nature of the organism, in particular the idea that members of specific religious and ideological communities were marginalized in certain areas of society.

By abstracting from Renders' case study, we could posit that this idea turns out to be less productive for understanding the lives of particular agents at the micro-level. This causes us to raise questions about the applicability of such macro-notions for the understanding of the *pícaro*, who may retain many of the features of medieval Everyman yet has also been considered the prototype of the individualized subjectivity that would become the hallmark of the modern European novel. Like Peltonen, Renders also dismantles the unduly prevalent association of microhistory with the concept of marginality.

According to Binne de Haan, increasing attention has been paid to the experience of the city by its residents and visitors in the field of urban history. He discusses how this emergence of the agent-based perspective has manifested itself in microhistorical or biographical approaches in urban historiography. Not only can a biographer or historian investigate the significance of the city for a life, but, conversely, information obtained from biographical and microhistorical studies can lead to adjustments of the historical representation of a city. The microhistorical investigation of an obscure Londoner, for instance, revealed the untold story of a dramatic increase in lodging after the Great Fire of 1666, with implications for the city's history.

De Haan argues that the representation of the experience of city life—a concept that has often been considered too elusive to be useful in scholarship by historians themselves—does not belong exclusively to the domain of fictional forms. The “agency perspective” provides for the insertion of other types of sources, specifically “ego-documents” like letters, diaries, and other personal documents, and a different scale of analysis that enables historians to come closer to the experiential pasts of a city, as compared to macrostructural analyses. “Street-level” research opens up a world of historical possibilities, without, however, abandoning historiographic claims. De Haan's contribution can also be viewed as an indirect incentive to study in a comparative perspective the representations of micro-level urban contexts in literary representations—among them obviously the picaresque novel—on the one hand, and historical reconstructions of urban life based on the agent-based perspective, on the other hand.

In the last chapter, Konstantin Mierau provides a reading of the short story *Los dos Mendozas*, published in 1623 by Gonzalo de Céspedes y Meneses, court historian to Philip IV and author of a limited oeuvre of narrative works. A central aspect of the representation of the city of Madrid in *Los dos Mendozas* is the movement of gossip. In the narrative, a connection is established that reaches from Philip II down to members of the criminal underworld. Mierau argues that in the text there is a rhetoric that links the urban underworld with quality of information. This connection finds its origin in the *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599) and is a common motif of the picaresque novel, which breaks with a literary tradition in which characters of lower standing were associated with simple speech and thought. However, Mierau argues that merely an intertextual reading does not lay bare the significance of the represented practice in the context of late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century Madrid. A study of this literary representation in light of municipal sources reveals that in late-sixteenth-century Madrid—the setting of the narrative—gossiping in public space is a forbidden practice. Microhistorical contextualization thus reveals that the literary representation omits a part of the urban context that is referred to, thus creating a discursive space marked by impunity and control over information that juxtaposes differing and contradictory representations of space with the practice in the city. Mierau uses this case study to reflect on the microhistory-inspired methodology applied to lay bare these levels of significance, which must have been quite evident to readers in early-seventeenth-century Madrid.

All in all, the contributions are proof of the wide array of research paths opened up by the introduction of the notion of microhistory for the study of the picaresque novel; likewise, the contributions point out the problematic nature of some of the key concepts of microhistory, concepts that have been explored for characters of the picaresque (psychological depth, representation, perception of space) and may also have a bearing on the reconstructed places, events, and people so central to the approach of microhistory. These questions are also relevant to the more general discussion of fictional narrative as historical source material, a rich, promising, but still underexplored domain of humanities scholarship. It is our sincere hope that these first explorations will inspire scholars to investigate the research trajectories thus outlined.

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CHAPTER ONE

MICROHISTORY AND PICARESQUE

GIOVANNI LEVI

The combination of microhistory and picaresque immediately suggests a problem which has been much discussed in recent years: the relationship between history and literature. With a view to avoiding misunderstandings, it seems a good idea to start with some considerations on this issue. History does not correspond with literature for three fundamental reasons:

1. The historian seeks a historical truth based on the factual truth. Back in 1927 Freud underlined the essential difference between historical truth and factual truth: reality exists, but its significance cannot be conveyed by mere factual reconstruction; rather, it must be extracted from the meaning and possible interpretations of the facts.¹ This is not to deny that literary truth also exists, but it is not constructed through the use of, and within the constraints of, the documentary sources.
2. Historical reality does not exhaust the possibilities of reality, but implies a progressive approach *ad infinitum* in the direction of reality.
3. For this reason historians—in contrast to novelists—constantly rewrite the same story: every year sees another dozen books on Philip II, not because each one gives the lie to its predecessor, but because through each new point of view we take another step towards a fuller account of reality. Similarly, in the Jewish religion you cannot affirm the existence of God because the essence of that existence cannot be wholly embraced by mankind, who must nonetheless endlessly interpret and engage in debate about the Deity, in an infinite process of coming closer to understanding.

There is one thing, however, that brings history closer to fiction, though not in the postmodern sense of the impossibility of grasping, even

¹ Freud, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*.

partially, the truth, as Hayden White would have it,² but rather in the common and enduring efforts of both endeavours to comprehend humanity.

So here we have an interesting challenge: to see what we historians can learn from a literary genre—the picaresque—which arose out of a specific argument both with the aristocratic society of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and with the stylistic constraints imposed by a literary tradition alien to popular and daily life.

It is my conviction that the very successes of historiography in the last fifty years have sometimes led to a certain stagnation and closing of the mind: it seems to me that the study of history, among all the behavioural sciences, has lagged behind the others in questioning the rationality of human decision-making (as economics has been ready to do), the linearity of biography (as literature has), the assertive authoritarianism of our own discourses (as anthropology has) and the residual positivism that opposes a supposedly more “scientific” quantification to a science of values and relations (as mathematics has). A closer look at the experimental and provocative licence of picaresque literature might suggest a number of useful ideas, not in the sense of a picaresque historiography, but through a new alertness to questions concerning ways of reading and representing reality that others have adopted from different perspectives. We are not talking about specific approaches but about problems that we historians have insufficiently addressed, and that we ought to address, if only to resolve them on our own terms.

These considerations seem to me—I should say at the outset—quite close to microhistory as it has been conceived in Italy, and not far from the questions that we have posited in recent years on how to construct a biography, in a non-linear fashion, that is not forced into a straitjacket of implausible coherence. Just as in literature the “male lead” has had his day,³ so we must kill him off in historiography and bring him back to life in a more convincing guise. I will try to list some of the features of picaresque literature that offer a challenge to historiography, without strictly confining myself to any rigid historical definition of the genre: certainly, to begin with, we should not overlook the seminal importance of *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), often excluded by literary historians who tend to see the beginnings of true picaresque literature in Mateo Aléman’s *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599), and bring it to an end with *La vida y hechos*

² White, *Metahistory*.

³ Debenedetti, *Il personaggio-uomo*.

de Estebanillo González, hombre de buen humor (1646).⁴ But not only do ancestors such as Rabelais and any number of descendants, from Alain-René Lesage's *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (1715–35) to the Yiddish writings of Mendele Mocher Sforim and Sholem Aleichem, offer a rich field of suggestion, but we should also consider the general importance of picaresque themes and stylistic forms in the creation of the modern novel.⁵ Furthermore, the literature of the late fifteenth century had already tackled the themes of begging and vagrancy, with ties both to the sacred character of the beggar as representative of Christ and to the beginnings of the crisis in and confutation of such ideologically positive readings. The *Liber Vagatorum*, which had circulated in manuscript before appearing in print in 1509–10, was itself indebted to the *Cronaca di Basilea*, a manuscript by Johannes Knebel recounting the 1475 proceedings against the beggars and vagabonds of the Swiss city.⁶ But it is the *Speculum Cerretanorum* (1484–86) by Teseo Pini, published for the first time by Piero Camporesi in 1973, that first fully describes the begging system and its subterfuges. It is “certainly the first treatise,” says Camporesi, in fact,

to be written in Europe, contrary to what has previously been asserted about the primogeniture of ‘vagabond literature’, which necessarily has consequences for the picaresque genre, backdating it and pulling it back, at least in part, into a mediaeval matrix.⁷

Nine points in particular seem to me to be of concern to the historian:

- a) A plurality of points of view. All picaresque literature involves a dialogue between an author, often an educated humanist, and a reader of aristocratic or bourgeois extraction, passing through a lower-class protagonist, often having criminal tendencies and always in dire straits. This three-way construction is frequently multiplied through a series of further refractions, generally dictated by the practice of dissimulation, assuming two different aspects: an internal one reflecting on the character's own life and circumstances, and an external one made up of the wiles and expedients he adopts to confront his difficulties. There is

⁴ *Lazarillo de Tormes*: also available in English translation, see Bibliography; Quevedo, *Historia de la vida del buscón*; Aléman, *Guzmán de Alfarache*; *La vida y hechos de Estebanillo*.

⁵ Lesage, *Histoire de Gil Blas*.

⁶ *Liber Vagatorum*; Knebel, *Johannis Knebel capellani ecclesiae Basiliensis diarium*.

⁷ Camporesi, *Il libro dei vagabondi*, xxi–xxii.

also a further dislocation between real circumstances, usually bad, and the image and pursuit of a different future, of tranquillity or social advancement. All this against a background of continually mutating circumstances, occupations, and status. A model, it seems to me, of the considerations that ought to be taken into account when constructing any biography that is alive to inconsistencies, uncertainties and unrecorded failures. The clearest example might be Vicente Espinel's *La vida del escudero Marcos de Obregón* (1618), which is notable for a kaleidoscopic mutation of points of view, as both narrators and interlocutors succeed one another, as when, for example, Marcos recounts his past life to his friend the priest, an intermediary for the reader. Here, too, the temporal sequence is continually interrupted according to the fiction of a narration rehearsed on different occasions and with different interlocutors.⁸

- b) The biographies that historians construct, on the other hand, are falsified by the fact that rigid reference back to the documentation entails an optical illusion. Documents are always created by actions or decisions that exclude any hint of uncertainty or incoherence, and the historian's reading of persons and events is generally made from a fixed point of view implying linearity and consequential, homogeneous identity. Documents are also socially selective; they speak of men more than of women, of the old rather than the young, of those who succeed rather than those who fail, more of the rich than of the poor. In the end, according to the historicist paradox, history accumulates signs of progress and success, and forgets the actual daily lives of the great majority of people. Not for nothing does Espinel declare to the contrary that "no hay vida de hombre ninguno de cuantos andan por el mundo de quien no se pueda escribir una gran historia, y habrá para ella bastante materia."⁹
- c) The chronological treatment of time is consistent with this relationship with the documentation, which conversely in picaresque literature is constructed less literally but more realistically, whether through inversion, flashback, and speeding up or slowing down, or through the adoption of a montage that does not follow the strict succession of events but seeks causal explanations via a return to origins or memory, having started from the point at which we are to imagine the character beginning to recount the chronicle of his life, and never, as in history, when the end of that life has been reached. This breaks the banal

⁸ Espinel, *La vida del escudero Marcos de Obregón*.

⁹ Espinel, *La vida del escudero Marcos de Obregón*, 230.