

Reviews



El periquillo sarniento

(The first Latin American novel)

Fernández de Lizardi, José Joaquín
Obras XI. Folletos (1821-1822). Edited
by Irma Isabel Fernández Arias,
México, UNAM, 1991, and Obras XII.
Folletos (1822-1824). Collected, edited
and annotated by Irma Fernández Arias
and María Rosa Palazón Mayoral,
México, UNAM, 1991.

Latin American novels are read the world over. Few people know, however, that the first Latin American novel was written in Mexico in 1816. Its title, in the translation attributed to Katherine Anne Porter, is *The itching parrot*. The author, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, customarily a

journalist, found in the novel a means to circumvent censorship and propagate his social and political ideas.

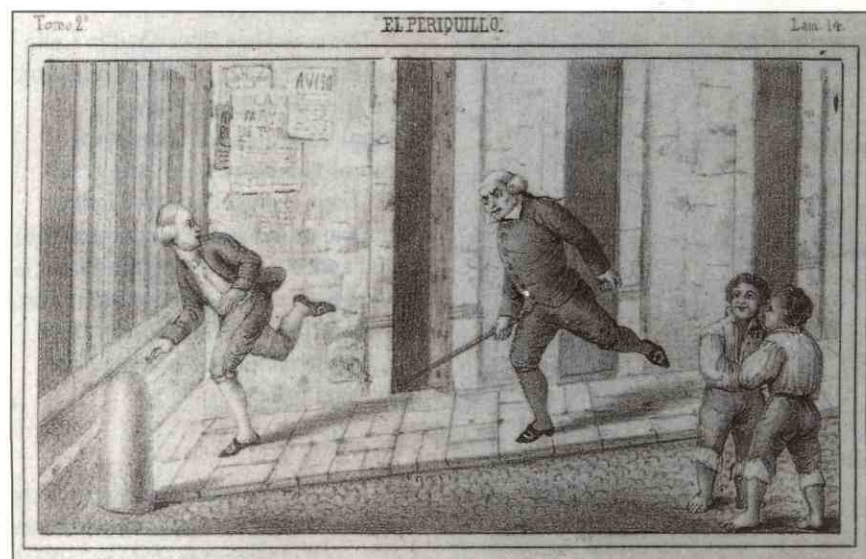
It was a titanic effort to find the peace of mind to write, to hire publishers who dared face censorship, to find ways to distribute and finance those writings. He was surely one of the first politically independent Mexican intellectuals. But he paid for it: he was twice incarcerated by the Colonial government, and later excommunicated by the Church.

Those were the final days of Spanish domination; freedom of speech was out of the question. Like an unpredictable tornado, the independence movement increasingly involved all sectors of society. Fernández de Lizardi, dubbed "the Mexican thinker", was mostly interested in guiding public opinion on the events of the day, using thought-provoking and attention-getting devices in the catchy titles of his newspapers and pamphlets. He was

widely read, and those who could not read could hear the street vendors hawking his point of view.

In November 1814, Lizardi was jailed for defending a pro-independence faction of the clergy as a matter of principle. By the end of December freedom of the press was revoked. This measure clearly ran counter to the spirit of the liberal constitution promulgated in Spain, but it was enforced by the Colonial government in self-defense. Lizardi's writings were quoted in official documents as examples of the excessive liberties native Mexicans were taking, and to justify the restrictions imposed. Soon the cries of street vendors were also banned.

After nine months in jail Lizardi clearly saw the need to disguise his advocacy of liberty and independence. He then produced a seemingly innocent novel, *El periquillo sarniento*, which had no apparent relation to the insurrection. He fooled the censors



responsible for authorizing the weekly installments, ostensibly offering them no more than tales of adventure in the Spanish picaresque tradition.

Pedro Sarmiento, the picaresque hero, has all sorts of adventures and misadventures due to his faulty education. For a reader conversant with the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the equivalent would be a literary rendition of the popular English engravings known as *A rake's progress*. In the opinion of the Board of Censors, the novel was educational and commendable in the light of its moral intent.

The chapters sold well as they appeared, until one, well into the fourth volume, discussed slavery. Abolition was recognizably part of the feared Insurgents' program. The censors now read the novel in a new light, as a radical critique of the state

of affairs in colonial Mexico.

Publication of the novel was abruptly suspended and a complete edition was not available until 1830, three years after the author's death.

Literature as such was not Lizardi's main objective, though he wrote four novels, several plays, poems and fables to get his message across. Once Mexico was independent, in 1821, he went back to the expository and argumentative style of journalism.

The literary genre he boldly inaugurated in the Spanish dominions was essential to the making of independent Mexico. Freedom of thought and imagination are prerequisites for freedom of speech. The right to explore ideas freely, unfettered by political, historical or economic constraints is inherent in literature. It is not surprising that novels were banned from New Spain, as Plato had banned the works of poets from his ideal Republic.

A "nation-in-the-making"—as all nations are—needs endogenous works of fiction to describe Utopia or its opposite, and life and human relations therein. Latin America in general, and Mexico in particular, has been prodigal with such proposals for alternative modes of viewing the world, the ethics of shared human life on Earth, amid divine forces.

The novel has flourished in Latin America; fireworks of the imagination have amazed readers of diverse cultural traditions, enriching their views of themselves and "the good life." From its inception, the Latin American novel has been imbued with social concern, with imagining what is not yet but can be. And in that we can see the influence of its founder, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, "The Mexican thinker."

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Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico: The Illusion of Eden

Thomas Walsh

University of Texas Press, Austin
Texas, 1992, 269 pp.

Thomas Walsh's book, *Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico*, is a carefully researched text, to be studied and savored as a source book of both Mexican history and literary analysis. The author has used Porter's fiction as a framework to tell the story of the world of politics and intellectuals in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s.

Porter came to Mexico as a foreign correspondent in 1920, encouraged by the musician Tatanacho (Ignacio Fernández Esperón) and Adolfo Best Maugard, whom she met in New York, where Best studied anthropology at Columbia University under Franz Boas.

Walsh elegantly fuses Porter's experiences and the people she meets with passages taken from *Pale Horse*, *Pale Rider*, *Flowering Judas*, and many other short stories.

Every person mentioned is meticulously identified. The author provides the reader with critical information about each individual's role in the overall scenario, his or her relationship to other significant figures, their field of action, and the period in which they lived. The reader is provided with an overview as well as detailed key information about the relationship each one of these persons had with Porter and his or her role in Mexican history.

The world of radical intellectuals in Mexico in the 1920s is described with extensive quotes from Porter's fiction, including portraits of figures such as Diego and Lupe Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Manuel Gamio, Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), Xavier Guerrero, Roberto Montenegro, Carlos Mérida, Miguel Covarrubias, and Rufino Tamayo. The foreign cast of

