The Novel of Porfirian Mexico: A Historian’s Source. Problems and Methods

Carmen Ramos Escandón

Fernand Braudel, in an essay dealing with the interdependence of the social sciences, expressed the idea that all the social sciences were by their very nature imperialistic in character. According to him, this is true not only because they all pretend to render a global view of man but also because while engaged in this task they often step on neighboring grounds to freely seize the results and findings that may have been achieved in other fields. From this perspective one can easily see how History has always been one of the most aggressive disciplines. Having defined the past as the object of its inquiry, it has incorporated into its realm the totality of the human experience. Since history has not remained indifferent to the other social sciences and the arts, it would certainly be surprising if it took exception in the case of literature. Therefore, in theory at least, one expects history to consider the literary work as one possible source for the reconstruction of the past.

The question then is to find whether in fact, literature can help historians in their task and if so to what extent. Or, to put it in other terms, how can the historian use literary fiction to gain knowledge of the past? Furthermore, are literature and history two opposing endeavours that exclude each other? The variety of answers given to these questions can be grouped into opposing camps. On the one hand there is a crucial literary tradition which conceives the literary work as an artistic creation that is immune to the social conditionings of its time, and has been recently restated by the New Humanists in the United States and the French school known as the Nouvelle Critique. According to these currents the literary work acquires the category of a ficticious and self-contained reality whose final raison d’être lies in the imaginative capacity of the creator. The writer believes he has detached himself from his historical circumstances and may remain enclosed in an ivory tower from which he can exercise the full power of his genius.

In direct contrast, it has also been argued that the literary work, both in form and content, is directly conditioned by its environment and thus it mirrors the basic components of the social reality of its time. The theoretical foundations of this interpretation are based on certain aspects of Marxist thought which consider artistic creation as determined by its social and economic contexts. This view maintains that literature, and art in general, express the values of a specific class which attempts to consecrate its own social goals and to preserve the established social order.

Between these two contending interpretations it is still possible to propose a third alternative which, in fact, considers the literary work neither as a faithful and objective reproduction of society nor purely as subjective creation. Instead, the objective element—external reality—and the subjective element—creative imagination—are two inseparable components of the creative act. Literature, like art in general, is not a photographic copy of reality nor is it a unique personal experience disconnected from it. Percy Lubbock argued persuasively that every work is “life filtered through an imagination.”

The key that will allow the historian to search for relevant historical materials lies in understanding this fact. A novel is a product of the imagination even though the elements with which it has been built were taken from life itself. In any case, in the creation of this fictitious reality a whole set of opinions, beliefs and, in sum, a way of perceiving reality is the collective heritage of a specific epoch filtered through the mind of the writer.

With this in mind the historian should be able to discriminate which is creative imagination from what is a cultural or social representation. Pierre Vilar has accurately expressed this idea when he stated that the most important task for the historian is to establish the relationship which exists “between the structure of literature and the structure of society in a specific period.”

It is true that in any historical period there are a number of literary schools and of formal styles which in their own way reflect the general framework of the times: however certain literary genres express more clearly than others the prevailing central themes of an epoch and they become the characteristic literature of the time. Works that depart from this general tendency and which promote innovation are especially helpful to perceive the inherent contradictions of a period. In line with Pierre Vilar’s argument we shall try to analyze the literature which is considered most characteristic of the Porfirian regime in Mexico (1876-1910); namely, the realistic novel.
It has been pointed out repeatedly that the Latin American novel differs from other types of historical materials in that it is capable of conveying a vivid social reality by penetrating into the individual and collective psychologies of its members, and help us understand the motivations of different human and social groups in a given period. A novel that reflects a plurality of viewpoints, opinions and perceptions of the same event enriches understanding of society. In the case of the realist novel these advantages are even greater. It consciously intends to be a faithful copy of its social milieu and, therefore, it contains abundant descriptions and external references. Thus, the realist novel is an especially valuable source for the writing of social history, since it is likely that we will find in it a valuable account of the problems of an epoch. Also, the realist novel is concerned with describing society the way it is, rather than trying to set norms on how it should be. Because of this, it often pretends to pay more attention to documenting events; it stresses empirical evidence over imaginative traits; it emphasizes the pragmatic aspects of society and, finally, it provides a critical examination of contemporary institutions. In sum, it becomes clear that the relationship between these novels and history is much closer than what may have appeared at first.

Comparatively speaking, it is true that the methodological approach of a literary critic confronting a novel differs from that of the historian. In general, the literary critic will tend to emphasize the formal aspects of the work of fiction. The historian, in turn, being more concerned with the historical veracity of the novel, pays little attention to its internal structure. Yet, the historian will do well to remember that, as many structuralist studies have shown, every style or form also embodies an ideology.

In other words, to correctly read into the ideological content of a novel, it is important to know something about such formal characteristics as its style, its literary tradition, the viewpoint from which the story is told, the ideological relation between author and narrator, the possible autobiographical information in the text (social class, ideology, background), and so on. All these are questions of great importance and demand that the historian be familiar with the methodological tools of literary criticism.

The question of objectivity is another problem which the historian must face when dealing with literary sources, and in the final analysis, the concerns of the historian when using a literary document are not very different from those present when dealing with other historical materials. It is generally admitted that every document no matter its origins reflects consciously or unconsciously of a partial reality which tends to distort facts. In this sense the novel suffers of the same limitations and human prejudices that affect other testimonies. For this reason it is impossible to dismiss all literature as being pure fiction or to accept all documents as being objective and factual. It is the historian's task to establish and verify the degree of objectivity in all cases.

In our study of the Mexican realist novel we will attempt not only to define its general character but, more importantly, to see to what extent it helps to understand the Porfirian era. The novels that have been chosen were all published between 1885 and 1890, the golden age of the Porfiriat, and have been considered as the most important representatives of the Mexican realist novel. These are: La Bola, La Gran Ciencia, El Cuarto Poder, and Moneda Falsa, by Emilio Rabasa; all four were published as parts of a single work, between 1887 and 1888. The other two are La Parcela, by José López Portillo y Rojas, published in 1889, and La Calandria, published in 1890 by Rafael Delgado.

That these writings appeared at the peak of the Porfirián power is not a simple coincidence, but points to the close affinity between the political and economic orientation of the period, class ideology and its literature. While positivism conformed ideological goals, literary realism offered a new technique and a new perspective for the analysis of society through fiction. As soon as European realism entered Mexico, around 1880, it was transformed to fit the specific circumstances of the country. While the French realists rejected the moralizing attitude of the Romantic novel, Mexican novelists did not abandon the strong emphasis on local customs and the moralizing tone of the previous era. On the contrary, both tendencies were further accentuated to a point where it has been argued that realism "favored the rebirth of the regional novel in Mexico."

This originality in style of the Mexican writers has led to question the very existence of a realist trend in Mexican literature. It is important that we consider this problem for it is indicative of a generalized misconception as to the true nature of Mexican society. Contrary to what happens in Europe, where the appearance of a literary style is the product of an internal evolution, in the case of Mexico cultural forms are imported and modified to suit concrete circumstances of time and space. In the course of this process, as Leopoldo Zela has pointed out, older forms are not fully assimilated or superceded by new ones but tend to co-exist side by side. This is similar to what was happening in...
the economic realm where new modes of production did not replace traditional ones but interact giving way to a specific set of relationships. Thus, the old hacienda system and new capitalist forms of exploitation were part of a single system during the Porfirián regime. I suggest that the asymmetric development that we find in the economic structure can be extended to cover the literary forms of the period.

Before dealing with the social background of the authors of our concern it is important to discuss the place and role of the writer in society. It has been pointed out, especially among Marxist critics, that literature as a part of the general ideological structure is a privilege exercised by the upper classes and as a means to defend and preserve the values of those groups.13 However, it is also clear that we find many cases in which writers have become the spokesmen of oppressed groups and have attacked the privileges of the social class to which they belong. How can we explain this situation? Is the intellectual a misfit or is he a member of the ruling elite? It is difficult to give a definite answer at this point; the best we can do is to suggest the direction in which a solution may be found.

The less industrialized a country, the least diversified is its social structure and the sharper its class divisions. It is likely that within this context the intellectual will be a full-fledged member of the dominant group sharing in its values and wealth. On the other hand in the case of industrialized societies the appearance of intermediate or middle groups tends to make the social structure more complex and class divisions less clear. In this case, the intellectual, although of upper class extraction, finds himself dispossessed of the means of production and, therefore, has a great deal to share with the cause of the lower ranks. We shall see that the Mexican novelists of the Porfiriato fit the former pattern.

Instead of integrating the biographical data of the writers whose works we shall analyze within the text, I have given this information as a footnote,14 and concentrated on the general patterns that emerge from it. All three writers were born in the provinces, a fact which may explain the strong regional flavor of their work. In each case we find that they come from wealthy families of the Mexican oligarchy and that, with the exception of Delgado, they all held important political posts. Finally, their educational background conforms to the social norms of the time: they all attended the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and later studied law. During those years they were exposed to the ideas of Positivism and Spencerianism, which were reflected in their works. These traits allow us to group them together, and to provide some general ground common to other representatives of the Mexican realist novel.

II.

Traditionally considered as one of the most important works of Mexican realism in literature, the four-part work of Emilio Rabasa speaks of a common phenomenon: the mechanics of social mobility in Porfirián Mexico. It is the story of Juanito Quiñones, a native of a small rural town, San Martín de las Piedras, who after performing obscure and minor tasks in his native town, rises to public notoriety as a newspaper editorialist in the national Capital. Throughout his career Quiñones discovers the secrets of government factioning; namely, that corruption and compadrazgo are the keys to a successful public life. In narrating the story of Juanito Quiñones, Rabasa is, to a certain extent, describing an experience similar to his own. He too came from the provinces and later became a journalist and a legislator in the Capital. This adds a special quality to his writings: a first-hand knowledge of the events he describes. One might venture that the description of the events and situations that Rabasa portrays are drawn from his own personal experience. Though the novel pretends to be a level-headed criticism of the corrupt and bureaucratic life of Porfirián Mexico, it accomplishes another more significant purpose: that of portraying politics and political life as a futile exercise, a ridiculous game which is not even worth playing.

The evolution of the main character through the four volumes of the novel could be interpreted at two different levels. On the one hand, at a concrete level, it can be seen as a rather common process of a small town politician who works his way up to the national Capital. It is also the story of the difficulties that a small politician encounters in his way to seeking recognition in Mexico City. However, in a more abstract and general way, Quiñones' story could also be an example of the general pattern of centralization of the political, economic and cultural structure of Mexican society at the time. The movement of the main character from the small town to the state capital and later to the national Capital follows the established pattern that tells of the vertical orientation of the country during the Porfirián regime.

A central theme in the first book, La Bola [The Mob] is the portrait that the author draws of a phenomenon which he considers typical of XIX century politics: the caudillistic revolts. In his analysis of this phenomenon Rabasa makes sure to distinguish between the local mob upheavals and what he
In Rabasa’s work the characters are part of a new social group that began to emerge as a product of the relative modernization affecting the social structure of Mexico during the second half of the XIX century. The mere fact that the characters are not the traditional peasant and hacendado but, instead, members of the urban middle classes—a lawyer, a student and a military man—points to the shift in the composition of the Mexican society of the time.

Cabezudo, another character, represents the typical caudillo: an unscrupulous soldier whom the central government, fearing his influence, tries to suppress by asserting its strength. It sends to San Martín, his home-province, a representative of the national authority, and the rivalry between this newcomer and Cabezudo is solved in a typical Porfirian way: Cabezudo is deprived of his local authority by being appointed to Congress and sent to the national Capital. Thus Cabezudo clearly illustrates the devices that the regime used to eliminate potential adversaries.

The cycle of the novel ends with all the main characters going back to settle peacefully in their native town of San Martín de las Piedras. In giving this idyllic end to the work, Rabasa seems to suggest that the hope for the regeneration of Mexican society ultimately lies in the countryside and not in the corrupt atmosphere of the Capital.

José López Portillo y Rojas’ novel, La Parcela, has been considered by critics as one of the best Mexican novels of the last quarter of the XIX century. The novel appeared in 1898 and a second edition was already in print in 1904. The author’s aspiration to objectivity is quite clear. The narrator is consistently a detached observer who does not try to get into the psychological or subjective motivations of the characters in order to explain the cause of their actions, but, rather, simply describes their outcome. In spite of this aspiration to objectivity, Portillo sees literature as a means to show society the evils of the world, and he attempts to incite society to put an end to the evils depicted in his novel. The comparison of his work with that of Mrs. Beecher Stowe in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and of Dickens in Pickwick Papers seems very appropriate.

In short, Portillo sees the task of the writer as that of an objective denouncer of the social ills that can be corrected when society becomes aware of them.

In the preface to his novel, López Portillo states his views about literature. In his opinion, Mexican literature has lacked originality and so far as has been only a poor copy of French literature, whose style was so popular in Mexico. He is against this
superficial imitation of foreign literature and shows the irrelevance of reproducing in Mexico the ideas and stereotypes of Parisian society. At the same time, he is a strong advocate of a truly national literature, one "in accordance with our race, our nature and with the ideas and tendencies that are a product of those two factors."

Clearly influenced by the positivistic views prevalent at that time, the author considers the national character as a product of race and nature and sets forth the task of promoting the emergence of what he considers the "national being." The in-depth search for this "true being" should be a source of inspiration for the arts and the culture of Mexico, in the same sense that natural resources are the raw materials for industry.

At the beginning of his work Portillo openly expresses his admiration for the rural classes on whom the novel focuses. For him these classes form the young nation, and this will develop once the political struggles are over. It is upon them that the basis "of our future glory will emerge, as a coronation of civilization."

However, when he refers to the rural classes, his vision is undoubtedly limited to the countryside oligarchy. His view of the rural masses is rather different, and he is surprised by the peasants' sacred veneration for the land, which he considers primitive and fierce.

In *La Parecla*, probably his most famous novel, Portillo tells us the story of a phenomenon which was common in Porfirio Díaz's Mexico, that of land disputes. The topic is, in itself, a very interesting one since we know as a fact that one of the most frequent phenomena of rural Mexico was that of land struggles between rural Indian communities and encroaching haciendas. In Portillo's work, however, the fight is between two powerful landholders, hacendados, compadres and former friends. The land in question, the Monte de los Pericos, is of little relevance to any of them, since both their haciendas operate as complex, commercial enterprises for which the ownership of this land is of no great value. However, the novel is built around the events concerning the dispute and the legal intricacies to which the hacendados resort.

By focusing on the conflict between the two hacendados instead of between the Indian communities and the haciendas, López Portillo is depriving the novel of its social content and leading us to believe that the land struggle was rather a pastime in which the hacendados engaged, more out of boredom than out of economic interest. However, the landowners who entered this dispute, participate in it with a clear conscience that their social prestige was at stake. This attitude confirms the views that the hacendado class of Porfirian Mexico still operated very much within the framework of a feudal mentality in which economic motivations are not the determinant element of their conduct.

The confrontation of the two hacendados resembles that of two medieval lords, equipped with their own personal armed body guards and serfs. The novel by no means reflects any kind of confrontation between peons of the hacienda and their masters. The fight is rather between peons of the two opposing haciendas. In this respect all possibilities of class conflict were annulled. The point here is to show the persistence of the personal, caudillistic type of relations that existed between peons and landowners, which, once again, had clear seignioral reminiscences.

Throughout the novel there is an insistence upon the trust the hacienda peons have for their masters. This attachment excluded all possibility of rebellion and tended to reinforce the idea of a patriarchal society in which patron-client relations prevailed. The master felt that they had every right to punish their servants for the slightest fault. The servants on the other hand, behave according to this pattern showing all the signs of respect and obedience, and never discussing the masters' orders. A good example in which the novel portrays this phenomenon is in the scene where Don Pedro, one of the hacienda owners, gathers his peons for an expedition to take revenge from the ills caused by the opposing hacendado. The author describes this moment as one where the men followed orders blindly, because "Don Pedro was one of those persons always confident of himself and who inspired trust to everybody. Whatever his orders, he was always right." The master is portrayed very favorably, as to erase all doubts of where the sympathy of the author lies. Even when López Portillo chooses to characterize one of the hacienda owners as the good guy and the other as the bad one he is repeatedly stating how much both masters are concerned with the well-being of the peons, and shows the paternalistic relation between masters and peons in a very favorable light: "The servants promptly obeyed his orders although he seldom scolded them or took advantage of their poverty. Talent and character were two of his most gifted qualities."

It is not hard therefore to discover what were Portillo's opinions of the landed Mexican oligarchy. For him, it was a noble class whose merit rested precisely upon the continuation of the traditional values entrenched in rural society, even at the expense of exploitation and corruption. In this attitude, Portillo clearly shows the influence of the positivistic doctrines so prevalent at his
time and the blind faith in progress present in this doctrine.

Rafael Delgado’s *La Calandria* is one of the few works of the Porfirian era that deals with the social conflict between urban lower and upper classes. The story takes place in Jalapa, the capital city of the state of Veracruz and the descriptions of the rural surroundings and the natural beauties of the area shows the same idealization for the countryside that we found in Portillo’s and Rabasa’s work.

However, *La Calandria* is more concerned with urban problems and describes life in a tenement inhabited mostly by peddlers, artisans and washwomen; in short, the self-employed and the artisan class that was disappearing at this time.

Calandria is the nickname of the illegitimate daughter of an important engineer who has kept her and her mother out of sight of his well-to-do social world, trying to hide what is described by the author as a “sin of youth.” However, when the mother of the young girl dies she has no place to go, but her father is still reluctant to take her into his bourgeois home, where he lives with another daughter, approximately the same age. Since Calandria has no place to go, an older neighbor (Doña Pancha) takes her in, because having been a friend of the girl’s mother she feels a moral obligation; but also—and one must presume mostly—because the father would give her a small monthly allowance. The story becomes more involved when Calandria and the landlady’s son fall in love. The love affair becomes impossible because of the difference in social class between the two youngsters. Although Calandria has lived and grown in the neighborhood with her poor mother, a washwoman, the fact that she is the illegitimate daughter of an important engineer turns the novel from a simple love story into a full-fledged statement about the impossibility of interclass marriage among two people of different social backgrounds.

The two main characters, Gabriel and Calandria, are described as examples of the social classes they represent. From the author’s description of Gabriel’s daily life we learn a number of interesting social traits about artisans as a group. Gabriel is portrayed as an efficient and well-trained craftsman who labored in the workshop of an older and well-established carpenter, and is presented as skillful and ambitious enough so as to hope opening up a shop of his own someday. Yet, he is also portrayed as somewhat irresponsible since he never shows up for work on Mondays. From these schematic references to Gabriel’s work we learn, for example, that the artisan group in Porfirio Díaz’s Mexico continued to function pretty much as a corporate guild, and this is reflected in the relationship master-apprentice which is maintained between the shop owner, Don Pepe and Gabriel.

The reference to Gabriel’s absenteeism the first day of the working week is significant. The manner in which the author provides this information—only as a passing remark and without any criticism attached to it—suggests that this was believed to be a common practice among urban workers at the time. This social behavior has been often mentioned in other sources, such as manufacturing and mining companies reports of the period. Absenteeism on Mondays was an extended practice assumed to be caused by the extended alcoholism among the urban poor.

In the book we learn about the economic and living conditions of the artisans. Life for Gabriel was not easy; he lives in a small room that has almost no furniture: a few chairs and an old cot for sleeping. After a hard working day he comes home to a meal consisting of rice, fried bananas and “tortillas.” This is not surprising, and the description fits with what we know about the difficult conditions of the Mexican artisan sector due to the devastating impact of foreign imports during the last quarter of the XIX century. As we may well imagine this state of affairs created a deep resentment on the part of workers engaged in traditional trades against imports and foreign industry. We are told in this respect that Gabriel never imitated foreign furniture models, for he was proud of creating his own, according to his own ideas.

The social life of Gabriel is also rather simple: a favorite pastime is to go to the main plaza and watch the girls go by. At other times he gets together with neighbors of the tenement for singing and chatting. On special occasions, however, Gabriel goes to the parties organized by the Railroad Workers Union. Unfortunately although we learn something about the socializing effects of this organization we are left with no clues as to the politicizing impact that this type of meeting may have had among the laboring classes at the time. Calandria, as a character, offers us few possibilities for understanding the social conditions of the period. Her class affiliation is rather ambiguous because in spite of her having been raised among workers the fact that she was the illegitimate daughter of a rich man makes her different and ultimately not accepted by her fellow co-workers. On the other hand she does not belong to her father’s bourgeois world either, so that she is really an outcast to the very end when she finally kills herself.

Don Eduardo Ortiz de Guerra—who unlike the members of the lower classes is presented by the author with his full and long name—is the father of *La Calandria*. Although he is not a main
character in the plot his brief appearances provide us with interesting sketches of the class to which he belongs. Socially he is a newcomer, a member of the emergent bourgeoisie which grew out of the economic expansion that took place during the last quarter of the XIX century. The author insists on the fact that Don Eduardo, as well as the members of his class have lost touch with the traditional roots of the Mexican aristocracy. According to Delgado, the behavior of this class no longer reflects nobility but rather "a lack of solemnity and superabundance of audacity and words. Its members are in great demand in political circles and due to their superficiality are constantly praised by what is now called a select society." As to their values we are told that money is the main motivation in the attitudes of this group, and "the only thing deserving his attention." When paying attention to the background of Don Eduardo we discover a good deal about patterns of social mobility and access to wealth in late XIX century Mexico. Thus we learn for example that being from a humble origin Don Eduardo had risen through the ranks of the military during the French intervention. Later by means of a shady military business deal with the Federal government he ends up as a wealthy individual in society.

Although the works that we have discussed have no significant literary merit they are nevertheless useful instruments for learning and understanding about social conditions of the period and the perception of those conditions by the most coherent voices of the Mexican establishment at the time. The characters that we have just analyzed are but a few examples of the rich possibilities that this kind of literary work can offer to historical inquiry.

In general the analysis reveals no substantial departure from the social and political trends that we already know for the Porfirian regime. However, by describing patterns of social behavior these novels offer good clues for understanding the nature of basic institutions such as the rural hacienda and the government. It is precisely the description of specific traits of social life where the relevance of this kind of study tends to confirm our initial hypothesis in regard to the use of literature as a significant source for the writing of history.

The analysis has shown that the reality depicted in literary works should not be taken at face value by the historian. The picture rendered by the novels that we have studied is clearly conditioned by the social background of the authors and by the viewpoint from which the story is told. Nevertheless, once these limitations are understood the information can then be placed into proper context and be of great value for the writing of history. The materials obtained from literary works should always be considered of supplementary nature and need to be checked constantly against other documentary sources.

The novels we have considered in this study have proved to be invaluable instruments for analyzing the mentality of the ruling elite during the Porfirian era and the way in which the dominant sector views the main problems of the period. The social crisis that we know from other sources to have been prevalent at this time are presented here in a different light. From the reading of these novels class conflicts never seem to emerge in Porfirian society and the roots of all social disorders can ultimately be traced back to moral deviations. We do not read about peasants fighting against their landlords in the countryside nor do we learn of any struggles waged by the workers in urban centers. This balanced picture of society was one of the myths disseminated by the government and became a principle of state policy during the Porfiriato. There is no reason to assume that the authors tried to hide intentionally the social maladies of their time but rather that they themselves believed that the Pax Porfirianna was the best of all possible social orders. The only friction detected is when the writers talk about foreign interests in Mexico. They all seem to react against the disruptive effects that foreign investments had upon the old structures of Mexican society and the national bourgeoisie. Here again the plight for a Mexican nation should be understood as a call to safeguard the traditional order of society and the privileges of the Porfirian middle-class.
Notes


10. Azuela, *Cien años*, p. 140.


14. Rafael Delgado was born in Córdoba, Veracruz, on August 20, 1853, the child of a rich family. When he was still young he went to Orizaba to study at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, where later he became a teacher. José López Portillo y Rojas was born in Guadalajara, on May 29, 1856. The son of a wealthy family, he was able to have a polished education and to travel through Europe and the Far East. He engaged in politics and became a Senator and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Emilio Rabasa was born in Ocuautla, Chiapas, on February 22, 1856. He studied in Oaxaca and became a prominent lawyer in the region. As in the case of López Portillo he too held various public posts.


