The Ideology of Costumbrismo

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Hispanists agree that the cuadro de costumbres emerged as a self-conscious, institutionalized genre in the early 1830’s, when Mesonero Romanos, Estévez Calderón and Larra defined its basic format and elaborated its subvarieties in the pages of the leading journals and periodicals. The origins of costumbrismo, however, have been the subject of much debate. The issue is problematic, it seems, because of the number of apparently conflicting accounts for the development of costumbrismo, each one convincing in its own right. Reasonable cases have been made for the claim of any one of the three most well-known costumbristas to be the first to practice and establish the genre. The question of the models or traditions upon which this hypothetical originator drew is equally ambiguous. 1. Corcu Calderón has shown that the Spanish tradition of journalistic costumbrismo began in the eighteenth century with Clavijo y Fajardo in 11 Pensador and continued unbroken until it fully flowered in the 1830’s 1. On the other hand, the costumbristas themselves are consistent and emphatic in presenting cuadros de costumbres as an adaptation of a foreign model that derives most immediately from the French journalist, Victor-Joseph Etienne, and ultimately from Addison and Steele in England 1. If we regard this multiplicity of plausible accounts as a clue rather than as a problem, it becomes evident that costumbrismo must be approached as an “over-determined” phenomenon, arising as a kind of condensation of several different developments—a convergence which necessarily shapes its contents 1. What I propose to do is to consider how the content of costumbrismo reflects the conjunction of factors which precipitated its popularity as a literary mode at a certain point in Spanish history.

Literary history tells us that several phenomena coincided in the institutionalization of costumbrismo: an indigenous tradition, a foreign model, the production of at least three different writers who adopted the basic format almost simultaneously, the promotion of a highly successful entrepreneur of the press, and a favorable response of the reading public 1. The common denominator perceptible in this diverse collection, the shared aspect which permitted coincidence, is not difficult to find. The national antecedents developed with the birth of the periodical press in Spain in the eighteenth century, and the imported model came from popular French and English journalism. The periodical press was also the link between three aspiring young writers, an entrepreneur, and the consuming public. Both Larra and Mesonero Romanos, perfectly conscious of their role in establishing a new genre in Spain, regarded the development of the modern newspaper and journal as the necessary condition for the rise of costumbrismo. Larra stated categorically in his famous essay on costumbrismo that “tales producciones no hubieran tenido oportunidad ni verdad, no contando con el auxilio de la rapidez de la publicación” (11, 239). Mesonero, putting the case negatively, asserted in the preface to the 1835 edition of Panorama Matritense that the sketch of daily life had been neglected in Spain before, “por la sencilla razón de ser en él [nuestro país] poco comunes aquellas publicaciones periódicas”. It was during the three of four years preceding this preface that the Spanish periodical press began its definitive growth and expansion, and cuadros de costumbres became an indispensable feature of new journals hoping to succeed with the public.

Thus, the key to the crystallization of diverse elements of purely literary form and practice is the emergence of a mode of literary production—the modern periodical— which in turn was determined by the interplay of economic developments and political conditions. The immediate explanation of the great surge in publication in the early 1830’s was the distinct thaw in the repressive policies of a monarchy threatened from the right by the pretender Don Carlos and seeking the support of the center and left. Yet the dynastic crisis itself, as well as the decisive allegiance of the aristocracy, army, and state bureaucracy to the Infanta Isabel, manifested the movement of the very foundations of Spanish society. The ancien régime, which had been able to maintain the traditional power structure in Spain as long as it remained economically viable, had gone bankrupt, unable to resist the simultaneous blows of the drawn-out war against Napoleon, dramatic changes in the world economic system, and the loss of its most important colonial markets 2. The ruling oligarchy splintered in this crisis, the Church and some of the nobility joining the reactionary faction of Don Carlos, but the preponderant bloc now identified its interests with certain gains to be made in the transition from feudal to modern capitalist economic institutions. For example, the great landowning nobles stood to gain, and did gain by the elimination of such feudal obstacles to a free market of land as entailment and mortmain and the transformation of seigneurial jurisdiction to clear title to property 6. Therefore, the power elite was willing to tolerate, within certain limits, the political and cultural institutions of bourgeois liberalism that were inextricably intertwined with the new economic system.

Such institutions already existed in embryo, the hard-won achievement of a scattered and heterogeneous middle class, which included
of the consumer/reader in a modernized nation of the type which Spain, for the first time, might feasibly become. Consequently, Mesonero Romános, Larra, Carretero, all members of the liberal urban middle class, concluded at pretty much the same time that cuadros de costumbres would appeal to the public.

What we must further recognize is that the very content of these articles, the marketed image, was determined by the function it performed in its context. The reading public was interested in consuming new images of itself because it was aware of being in an era of transition: it was disturbed by the disruptive events and deep turmoil of the previous thirty years, excited by the winds of change and possibility, confused about the implications of change and about its own directions and goals. The producers of these images—writers, editors, and financial backers—were concerned, not only with selling, but also with influencing the public, forming that amorphous mass into a coherent group, or class, a public opinion powerful in the unity of its values and goals. And the landed oligarchy which still stood at the center of power was willing to tolerate the propagation of bourgeois ideology to the extent, and only to the extent, that it permitted the structural changes which would paradoxically preserve its traditional hegemony.

All of these factors insured that the costumbrismo was necessarily an ideological manifestation of the transition to modern, bourgeois society, expressing, among other things, the perspective and will of the class whose interest it served. This instrumental aspect of costumbrismo, which expresses certain relatively conscious categories of a class perspective, comes to light, when we examine the ambiguous area between the costumbristas' explicit conception of their objectives and the implications of their practice. Such an analysis reveals the system of concepts and ideas, through which a bourgeoisie in formation struggled to consolidate itself and the new regime.

Mesonero Romános' statements about his intentions and motivation in writing his series of sketches are highly suggestive in that they function as an advertisement to the public, offering the reader a studied set of reasons for consuming his literary product. As such, these passages tell us something about the kind of image Mesonero thought would satisfy and please his public, and therefore, about the concepts which controlled his representation of social life. The article with which he initiated the Panorama Matritense series in 1832 is the prototype of his other statements of purpose, and deserves special attention. He gives particular emphasis through anecdotal extension to the idea that he intends, as a Spanish observer of Spanish customs, to correct the mistaken picture of his nation produced by foreign writers.

«Los franceses, los ingleses, alemanes y demás extranjeros, han pretendido describir moralmente la España; pero o bien se han creado un país ideal de romanticismo y quijotismo, o bien, desentendiéndose del transcurso del tiempo, la han descrito no como es, sino como pudo ser en tiempos de los Felipe...».
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«No pudiendo permanecer tranquilo espectador de tanta falsedad… me propuse… presentar al público español cuadros que ofrecían escenas de costumbres propias de nuestra nación, y más particularmente de Madrid, como corte y centro de ella, es el foco en que se reflejan las de las lejanas provincias (1, 38-39)».

In other words, his project both appeals to and embodies the nationalism which had become a powerful myth for Spaniards since the heroic popular resistance to the Napoleonic invasion of 1808.

The concept «nación» was in fact the site of struggle between the political ideologies of reactionaries and progressives at this time. The right attempted to define its content as tradition, religion, the old regime, while the left associated it with the people, independence, national sovereignty. Mesonero’s use of the term escapes this kind of political definition, for he identifies it with neither tradition nor popular will, and yet vaguely with both, thus astutely appealing to the broadest spectrum of public opinion. It is worth noting that the one way in which this passage concretizes «nación», namely its structure with Madrid as center and focus, reflects the perspective of his Madrid readership.

The upper classes of the capital supported the centralizing and rationalizing of the state necessary to the development of modern capitalism, regardless of their political affiliation: even the reactionary Ferdinand VII attempted to make the fiscal system more uniform and centralized. However, the function assigned to «nación» in the literary project, he outlines is even more significant. Nationality, national character, will be the common factor shared by the diverse scenes he promises; nation, in effect, forms a determining coordinate that will unify his fragmentary images of society.

Indeed, the heterogeneity of elements comprehended by «nación» constitutes an important theme in the article. In the first paragraphs, diversity is presented as temporal, as the differences between old and new customs:

«El transcurso del tiempo y los notables sucesos que han medrado desde los últimos años del siglo anterior, han dado a las costumbres de los pueblos nuevas direcciones, derivadas de las grandes pasiones e intereses que pusieron en lucha las circunstancias…».

«Los españoles, aunque más afectos en general a los antiguos usos, no hemos podido menos de participar de esta metamorfosis, que se hace sentir tanto más en la corte por la facilidad de las comunicaciones y el trato con los extranjeros (1, 37)».

This historical metamorphosis, which no doubt made the public want new images of itself, is identified, significantly enough, with the tendency to become un-Spanish: «nuestras costumbres [han] tomado un carácter galo-hispano». Thus, the reassurance Mesonero offers to a public made uneasy by change is precisely the continuity of national character: «Es a la verdad muy cierto que, en medio de esta confusión de ideas, y al través de tal estravagancia de usos, han quedado aún… muchos característicos de la nación, sí bien todos en general reciben paulatinamente cierta modificación que tiende a desfigurarlos.» Yet, the historical process is not the only source of difference and discrepancy in the Spanish way of life. Toward the end of the article, he announces another type of diversity, the heterogeneity of class, which his articles will reflect and embrace: «Las costumbres de la que en el idioma moderno se llama buena sociedad, las de la mediana y las del común del pueblo, tendrán alternativamente lugar en estos cuadros…» (1, 39).

He insinuates, then, that his articles are varied and disconnected because the social reality they represent is heterogeneous. By implication the function of the category «nación» is the same for society as it is for the literary image—to provide coherence. A reformulation of his attack on foreign observers asserts such coherence as the underlying reality: «El medio más prudente de combatir tan ridículas caricaturas… es el de presentar sencillamente la verdad, oponer a aquellos cuadros falaces o interesados el colorido propio del país, las acciones y hechos comunes de todas clases, la naturaleza, en fin, revestida de forma española».

That is, the variations, the multiplicity, or the confusions of social experience attributable to historical change and class difference can be resolved into a unity by the application of the concept of nation, and that unity can further be resolved into the universal, «naturaleza».

Yet, in Mesonero’s picture of society, «Spanishness» is not a characteristic of all classes equally. In the first article he wrote for the new journal, La Revista Española, Mesonero explained this in an assessment of the cuadros he had already written:

Tal es el plan que me propuse abrazando en la extensión de mis cuadros todas las clases; la más elevada, la mediana y la común del pueblo; pero sin dejar de conocer que la primera se parece más en todos los países por la frecuencia de los viajes, el esmero de la educación y el imperio de la moda; que la del pueblo bajo también es semejante en todas partes por la falta de luzes y de facultades; en fin, que la clase media por su extensión, variedad y distintas aplicaciones, es la que imprime a los pueblos su fisonomía particular, causando las diferencias que se observan en ellos. Por eso en mis discursos, si bien no dejan de ocupar su debido lugar las costumbres de las clases elevada y humilde, obtienen naturalmente mayor preferencia las de los propietarios, empleados, comerciantes, artistas, literatos y tantas clases como forman la mediana de la sociedad.

Mesonero describes here quite clearly the coordinates he has established in order to plot his map of social life: its center and focus, like Madrid for Spain, is the point of intersection, or identity, between the categories of nation and class, namely, the middle class. And in practice, that is precisely the orientation of Mesonero’s work throughout his life.
Thus, with conscious conviction, Mesonero represents the habits, styles, dilemmas, speech, and activities of Madrid’s bourgeoisie as the image of Spanish social life, as "naturaleza...vestida de forma española". His cuadros de costumbres appropriate the myth of the "nación" for the bourgeoisie, making in effect the ideological statement that the emerging bourgeois lifestyle and values constitute the natural, national character of Spain. The function of this representation in the transition process underway in Spain is double. Politically neutral in appearance, his sketches suggest that the growth of capital, industry, and consumer markets comes quite naturally and inevitably: "En todo sucede lo mismo; la civilización y la cultura hacen nacer necesidades nuevas que poniendo en circulación los capitales, alimentan la industria, dan aplicación a las ciencias y a las artes, modifican y embellecen las costumbres públicas" (I, 227). He portrays the triumph of the new regime as gradual and unproblematic, in keeping with the national character, and promoting the prosperity and refinement of all. Consequently, while projecting and supporting a bourgeois perspective, Mesonero in no way threatens the traditional oligarchy nor alienates the moderate sectors of the middle strata. The second function of Mesonero’s image of society is to be found in this capacity to disarm and attract a broad public, for it reflects the historical and not easily accomplished task of the Spanish bourgeoisie at that moment—to coalesce as a class. The disparate and divided groups that might ultimately form a bourgeoisie could find an ideological identity of class and nation structured into the many-sided reflection provided in Mesonero’s work.

Turning from Mesonero’s commentary on his own writing to that of Larra, who always went further than his contemporaries toward clarifying his assumptions and providing a theory for his practice, we shall see similar aims disclosed more directly. Explaining himself to his readers in an early piece, "Casarse pronto y mal", Larra raises the issue of uniting his public behind progressive values. He begins his article with a reference to the divided opinions of his audience through a series of brief dialogues that represent the conflicting reactions of his readers to previous articles. On one level a rhetorical device for self-justification, this image of a reading public so deeply divided in its attitudes that its contradictory expectations are impossible for any writer to meet is given added significance by the fact that it recurs under a different guise in the conclusion. There, in a forthright effort to make explicit the point of the little story which forms the main body of the piece, he emphasizes again the division of his public, this time into two sharply distinct groups—a majority still ignorant of the new lights of the age and a tiny elite, too precipitate in its eagerness to follow the latest trends emanating from France. He exhorts enlightened Spaniards not to try prematurely to catch up with more advanced nations, but to begin with the foundations of progress: "[E]mpiécese por el principio: educación, instrucción. Sobre estas grandes y sólidas bases se ha de levantar el edificio. Marche esa otra masa, esa inmensa mayoría que se sentó hace tres siglos; detengase para dirigirla la arrogante minoría, a quien engañó su corazón y sus grandes deseos, y entonces habrá alguna remota visiúmber de esperanza" (I, 113). In effect, he argues that any hopes of building a modern Spain must be based on bridging the profound divisions in education and enlightenment between Spaniards. The intellectual elite must lay down fully and solidly the foundations of the modern world view and devote itself to the dissemination of the new consciousness in order to unify a major sector of Spanish society behind its projects. He does not assume this role without misgivings. "Entre tanto, nuestra misión es bien peligrosa", he goes on to say, at once identifying his own calling as a writer to the task of consolidation and emphasizing its difficulty in a situation which was soon to explode into civil war.

Larra, then, takes on more explicitly than Mesonero the function of ideologist for the bourgeois Spain in formation. At the same time, his representation of the social context which defines that role depends upon the same fundamental categories we have found in Mesonero. Both his criticism of servile imitation of other countries and his project of consolidation grow out of the idea of "nación" and are opposed in a certain sense to class divisions conceived in terms of enlightenment. Although Larra gives his analysis of the social strata a rather different emphasis, it is in fact the same as that of Mesonero, who in the passage we have cited distinguished the upper class in terms of "el esmero de la educación y el imperio de la moda", and the lower classes in terms of "la falta de luces y de facultades". And Larra in the final analysis seeks to resolve the opposition nation/class in the same way as his friend and fellow costumbrista—by identifying authentic Spanish nationality with the middle class. The significant difference is that Larra defines this center as an absence; his argument addresses precisely the lack of a middle ground of common values and attitudes between the advanced elite and the ignorant masses. The difference reflects the dynamics of this transition period. What Mesonero represents as fact, Larra represents as problem and urgent historical mission: an ideological equation (nation = middle class) necessary for the consolidation and ultimate dominance of the bourgeoisie.

An ideological proposition can be at least as revealing in what it omits or bumbles as in what it asserts. Therefore, in our inquiry into the relationship between the costumbristas’ image of social life and the context in which that image was produced, it will be useful to focus our attention on the limitations and inconsistencies of the structuring categories we have identified. We might start with the paradox contained in our two costumbristas’ articulation of nation and class: on the one hand, shared national character and reality is represented as transcending class divisions to provide a unifying common identity, but on the other, it is conceived in the image of a particular class, the middle class. The extent to which it was possible for a costumbrista in this period to confront this paradox, to readjust its terms or to escape it,
defines what might be called the ideological horizon of writer and public, the line which marked the limits imposed by various factors of social life upon middle class consciousness.

Not surprisingly, it is Larra to whom we must turn for an example of how far a costumbrista could go in locating and resolving contradictions. As a result of his acute observation of Spanish society and politics, Larra’s view of the social classes and the differences between them changed considerably over the three years after he wrote “Casarse pronto y mal”. He gradually became convinced that classes were separated not just by education, but by customs, conditions, and above all, by conflicting political interests. As a consequence, the concept of “nation” no longer seemed fully adequate as a unifying category.

... [I]o que se llama en general la sociedad es un amalgama de mil sociedades colocadas en escalón, que sólo se rozan en sus fronteras respectivas unas con otras, y las cuales no reúnen en un todo compacto en cada país sino el vínculo de una lengua común, y de lo que se llama entre los hombres patriotism or nacionalismo (11, 83).

This formulation suggests that the cohesive power of nationalistic sentiment is minimal compared to the disintegrative force of class division, a point he emphasizes in the next sentence: “Hay más puntos de contacto entre una reunión de buen tono de Madrid y otra de Londres o de París, que entre un habitante de un cuarto principal de la calle del Príncipe y otro de un cuarto bajo de Avapiés, sin embargo, de ser estos dos españoles y madrileños.”

What is most significant for our purposes here is that this questioning of the real force of “nation” occurs, not in a political article, but in a cuadro de costumbres, entitled “El álbum”, which begins with a discussion of the costumbrista’s function. Indeed, the possibility that “nation” might be a term with little real substance demanded a reformulation of Mesonero’s earlier description and justification of the genre. Larra recognized that the costumbrista cannot claim to portray national character if class boundaries, rather than national frontiers, most clearly identify and distinguish one social group from another. Therefore, he argues that the painter of social reality must transcend class division through his impartiality:

El escritor de costumbres no escribe exclusivamente para esta o aquella clase de la sociedad, y si le puede suceder el trabajo de no ser de ninguna de ellas leído, debe de figurarse al menos, mientras que su modestia o su desgracia no sean suficientes a hacerle dejar la pluma; que escribe imparcialmente para todos (II, 83).

Thus, Larra reverses the emphasis (though not the terms) of Mesonero’s formulation, which had so unequivocally identified “nation” and middle class as the focus of costumbrismo, by suggesting that the function of the costumbrista, an impartial observer detached from all classes, is to make the different strata of society comprehensible one to another through what he writes. The main body of this article in fact illustrates these general assertions by describing for a general audience the current upper and middle class fad of keeping albums. We should note that Larra’s attempt to redefine the relation between writer, nation, and class so that it should be more consistent with what he saw as social reality is based on the idea of impartiality, on the detachment of the writer from any of the class cultures he observes. His refinement of the initial costumbrista position thus amounts to a statement of one of the ideological axioms of the modern bourgeois press—the class-transcendent objectivity of the journalistic observer. For Larra, the thrust of this claim is still clearly to promote social cohesion: Objective reportage must fill in the gaps whose insistent reality could be neither bridged nor hidden by the idea of common nationality.

It cannot escape our notice, however, that Larra states his new solution to the problem of costumbrismo and class with a peculiarly negative twist. Even if the pessimistic subordinate clauses of the sentence we have just cited are disregarded, it presents an extremely diffluent assertion: “El escritor de costumbres no escribe exclusivamente para esta o aquella clase de la sociedad y… debe de figurarse al menos… que escribe imparcialmente para todos.” Larra lacked confidence in the possible success of the enterprise he outlines for good reason. As he indicates in a qualifying clause, the writer cannot be assured that the public will read his work. Thus he refers to that historical context of his literary production which, as we have seen, he memorialized in another form as the absence of a broad-based, receptive (in its shared interest in progressive ideas) reading public. Although Larra typically voices this sense of absence as a complaint that those who can read will not read, this nagging preoccupation with the reduced size of the public accessible to him reflects a deeper and inevitable limitation of the public imposed by the very mode of production of costumbrismo: the mass of Spaniards were illiterate, and hence excluded as consumers of the periodical press. For the Spanish writer of the 1830’s the “public”, or the “society” he addressed could not be conceived as other than the literate classes. Thus, Larra’s tentative solution—that the writer should at least imagine that he writes for all—remains problematic, for “para todos” conceals a radical inequality. If, as the following paragraphs of his article makes clear, the “all” about whom the costumbrista writes includes “la capa inferior del pueblo, cuyo carácter trata de escudriñar y bosquejar”, this part of the population cannot be included in the ‘all’ to whom he writes. Larra, who was able to undermine the myth of national character because it could be replaced functionally by the idea of a class-transcendent writer, could not bring into critical focus that asymmetrical “all”, since to do so would call into question the basic nature of this project. And since he could not think of his total possible
public as a partial public, he could not wonder whether the writer could escape the exclusivity of his readership sufficiently to represent impartially all layers of society.

To consider how the constraints limiting the conceptual model of costumbrismo imposed themselves in practice, we have only to turn to an article Larra wrote a few weeks later. In «Modos de vivir que no dan de vivir» he follows the program set forth in «El album» by focusing on «la capa inferior del pueblo», the economically marginal masses of Madrid. Indeed, his opening paragraph immediately calls to mind the role of interpreting one class to another, earlier assigned to the costumbrista. He makes an almost explicit effort to change the perspective of his readership—tacitly characterized as middle class—by calling its attention to the fact that the occupations «known» to it are not the means by which all or even most of Madrid’s inhabitants earn a living.

Considerando detenidamente la construcción moral de un gran pueblo se puede observar que lo que se llama profesiones conocidas o carreras, no es lo que sostiene la gran muchedumbre; descártense los abogados y los médicos..., los militares..., los comerciantes..., los nacidos propietarios..., los artistas..., y todavía quedará una multitud inmensa que no existirá de ninguna de esas cosas, y que, sin embargo, existirá: su número en los pueblos grandes es crecido... Para ellos hay una rara superabundancia de pequeños oficios, los cuales, no pudiendo sufragar por sus cortas ganancias a la manutención de una familia, son más bien pretextos de existencia que verdaderos oficios; en una palabra, modos de vivir que no dan de vivir... (11, 103).

Thus, by a careful process of elimination, the author attempts to fasten the reader’s gaze upon a growing urban mass, hitherto as invisible in his articles as he assumes it has been to his public. He further points out that the performance of these minor jobs, has an economic function in terms of the social whole, as though his readers would not have recognized this on their own: «Los que los profesan, no obstante, como las últimas ruedas de una máquina, que sin tener a primera vista grande importancia, rotan o separadas del conjunto, paralizan el movimiento.» Having announced his intention of making one of Spain’s social strata «visible» to another with which it has no point of contact, he begins in the second paragraph to describe in accurate detail some of the ways in which Madrid’s economic outcasts are forced to make a living.

So far, the article has made clear its promise to demonstrate how the costumbrista impartially represents the reality of all classes. However, as the narrator makes his way through the list of minor occupations, the realistic reporting we have been led to expect is gradually replaced by another modality. As he describes the old traperas who go about gathering bits of rags and paper his imagery becomes self-consciously fanciful: «Su paso es incierto como el vuelo de la mariposa; semejante también a la abeja, vuelca de flor en flor (permítaseme llamar así a los portales de Madrid, síguiera por figura retórica...)» (11, 104). This humorous and ironic self-consciousness about his imagery provides the transition to another kind of discourse which belongs to a venerable tradition of literary symbolism.

En una noche de luna el aspecto de la trapería es imponente; alargar el gancho, hacerlo guadaña, y al verla entrar y salir en los portales alternativamente, parece que viene a llamar a todas las puertas, pretensora de la parca. Bajo este aspecto... invita a la meditación, a la contemplación de la muerte, de que es viva imagen (11, 104).

The stylistic alteration has changed the frame of reference; the trapería is no longer being categorized in terms of the economic structures of Madrid life, but in terms of an iconic representation of death which links Latin antiquity with the Spanish baroque. This second code, belonging to the «great tradition» of Spanish elite culture, governs the following paragraph as well, where literary satire based on a theme cited in Latin («la muerte, equo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas, regumque turres») refers to Cervantes, Calderón and Moratin, as well as contemporary writers like Martínez de la Rosa. Thus, Larra has veered away from representing the trapería in her real context, in order to subsume her image within precisely that elite, literate framework shared by his readers but not by her real-life counterpart. The text seems determined to make clear the distinction latent in «El album», between about whom and to whom the costumbrista writes.

The author, however, appears to struggle against this impulse to shift from social observation to literary convention, and abruptly moves back to the original mode of discourse, noting that «este ser, con todo, ha de vivir, y tiene grandes necesidades, si se considera la carrera ordinaria de su existencia anterior...» (11, 105). With this promise to present the life history of a trapería, the frame of reference appears once again to be the costumbrista’s impartial observation of one of the various strata of Madrid society. Yet the tale of the trapería’s life as a pretty young girl who sold fritters, was seduced, and passed from one adventure to the next, is told in the language, not of the case history, but of the serial novel: «de señorito en señorito, de marqués en marqués, no se hablaba sino de la hermosa corista». Another kind of literary convention thus takes the place of concrete reportage, suggesting that this woman is «unknown» to our costumbrista as well as his readers, except insofar as she has been represented in a literary medium, be it popular fiction or high art.

Having slipped into the realm of fiction and fantasy, the elaboration of the trapería figure moves irresistibly into lyrical outburst, as a new
character, a forlorn lover, is added to the story. Narration gives way to the bitter exclamatory expression of the lover's subjectivity:

Ved aquel amante, que cuenta diez veces al día y otras tantas a la noche las piedras de la calle de su querida. Amelia es cruel con él: ni un favor, ni una distinción, ninguna mirada de cuando en cuando... Pero ni una contestación de su letra a sus repetidas cartas, ni un rizo de su cabello que besar... El desdicha dería la vida por un harapo de su señora... La trapera es más feliz. ¡Mirala entrar en el portal, mirala mover el polvo! (II, 105).

A curious reversal has taken place: from objective examination of the forms of livelihood of the lower classes, we have moved to the subjective expression of an upper class lover’s disappointment, from whose perspective the wretched ragwoman «es más feliz». The text seems to obey some law of its own which pulls it away from the announced focus on one class, its object, to the language and point of view of another class, its readers.

As if to correct a disproportion, the passage which interrupts the contemplation of disappointed love refers back to the original theme as a justification for the meandering treatment of the trapera. The way Larra denies that he has digressed is most revealing of the hidden intentionality of this piece:

Me he detenido, distinguiendo en mi descripción a la trapera entre todos los demás menudos oficios, porque realmente tiene una importancia que nadie le negará. Enlazada con el lujo y las apariciones mundanas por la parte del trapo, e intimamente unida con las letras y la imprenta por la del papel, era difícil no destinarle algunos párrafos más (II, 105-106).

He appeals to the values of his readers to justify dwelling on the ragwoman —she is important because she is connected with high society and the world of letters. But the perspectives of the writer and his readers cannot be separated, since that of the latter is presented as le negar». In the writer-text-reader context, that «nadie» does what the «todos» in «El álbum» did: it refers to a part of the social whole (gentlemen and men of letters) as if it were the whole.

It is evident, then, that a discrepancy exists between the stated objective and what we might call the effective agenda in this piece. The latter shows itself with ever greater specificity in the second half of the article, which is largely devoted to another lower class figure —the old shoemaker who sets up shop in the entry way of large houses. Here, the pattern observed in the treatment of the ragwoman is repeated. After a paragraph describing this second occupation in considered detail,
across those chasms that made national unity an idea rather than a reality, inevitably fastening upon and reproduces its own reflection.

«Modos de vivir», therefore, stands in a curious relationship to the trite the costumbrista’s function by impartially describing to those who Madrid’s masses, the very structure of his article reveals precisely the capacity either to question the assumption that the journalist-observer can society, or to show in practice the validity of that assumption. Larra social life that reflected the perspective of the emerging bourgeoisie literate classes which stood to benefit by the new regime. Writers who its unification and expansion. Mesonero did so by representing social Larra, more lucidly critical, represented social division in order to show that of the petit bourgeois intellectual, observer and critic, as the agent to the traditional oligarchy since it would take more than images to forge the «público menudo» which so exasperated Larra an active, self-confident and triumphant bourgeoisie.

NOTES


2 Mesonero Romanos, describing the history of the cuadro de costumbres in as his models: «Addison, en Inglaterra, habia, puede decirse, creado este género los había hecho aún más ligeros, más dramáticos y animados a principios del Romanos, ed. Carlos Seco Serrano [Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, in parentheses in the text.] Larra, too, in an early article, «El casarse pronto y para este género el buenas intenciones de Addison» (Obras de don Ramón de Mesonero Romanos 1967), I, 40. Further references to this edition of Mesonero’s work will be cited as «MAR».

3 I use the Freudian term to suggest that the texts of costumbrismo, like the «manifest content» of a dream, are the condensation of a number of factors. and.

in addition, that the analysis of this convergence must be understood to reveal the latent content or significance of a text or theme rather than simply its cause.

4 Mesonero and Larra first tested the genre on the public (the former in Mis recuerdos perdidos in 1821 and the latter in El Duende Satírico del Día in 1828-29), and the editor and entrepreneur, José María de Carnerillo, shrewdly began to promote it in his journal of 1829, El Correo Literario y Mercantil. Carnerillo’s next journal, Cartas Españolas, regularly published sketches by Esteban Calde-
rón and Mesonero Romanos between 1831 and 1833, when Larra independently began publishing cuadros de costumbres in his El Pobrecito Habladur. For this history, see Carlos Seco Serrano, «Estudio preliminar», Obras de don Ramón Mesonero Romanos and José Escobar, Los orígenes de la obra de Larra (Madrid: Prensas Españolas, 1973), pp. 259-64.

5 The economic impact of these factors on the crisis of the ancien régime is described in Josep Fontana’s excellent study, La quiebra de la monarquía absoluta (Barcelona: Ariel, ed. revisada, 1974).

6 Fontana, analyzing the consequences of the agrarian reforms of the nineteenth century, concludes: «Lo que resulta claro es que la aristocracia latifundista salió del trance con su riqueza y poderio intactos, si no acrecentados. A mediados del siglo XIX, la lista de los viñedos primeros contribuyentes por propiedad territorio incluía ocho duques, seis marqueses, seis condes y sólo dos terratenientes no titulados» («Transformaciones agrarias y crecimiento económico en la España contemporánea», Cambio económico y actitudes políticas en la España del siglo XIX [Barcelona: Ariel, ed. revisada, 1975], pp. 164-165).

7 This is, however, only a first step toward analyzing how costumbrismo’s representation of society is ideological in a deeper sense. Such an analysis would be based on Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology as «the “lived” relation between men and the world» (Marxism and Humanities, tr. Ben Brew-
ter [New York: Vintage, 1970], p. 233). Or, as Juan Corradi puts it, ideology considered as the «phenostructure of society» —the structured appearance of things under a particular mode of production («Textures: Approaching Society, Ideology, Literature», I.L., I, num. 2, Feb-April, 1977, 12). A study along these lines would show how, by virtue of the very project of representing the appearance of Madrid social life, costumbrismo embodied the unconscious system through which the Spanish literate classes constituted their reality in the early nineteenth century. It might, for example, approach Mesonero’s whole corpus as a labor of cataloguing, naming, delimiting, and typifying the phenomena of a changing Madrid reality from 1830 on, or analyze the hierarchy of spatial and temporal relations which organize a cuadro. Edward Baker, in a fine paper on Larra’s «jardines públicos» (delivered at a Special Session of the Modern Languages Association Convention, December, 1977), demonstrates the possibilities of such an approach.

8 That is, «myth» as Roland Barthes defines the term—a semiological system which appropriates forms and meanings from a larger language of culture and history in such a way that they retain their original motivating power while becoming self-referential, impoverished, and distorting. See «Myth Today», Mythologies, tr. Annette Lavers (New York: Paladin, 1973), pp. 109-159.

9 This insistence on Madrid as center runs through all of Mesonero’s cuadros and most noticeably determines the structure and content of «El patio de corredores».

10 «Prólogo» in the first edition of Panorama Matriense, Madrid, 1855. Cit-
ed by Cornia Caldeirón, Costumbriistas españoles, pp. xxiii-xxx.


12 This orientation is well demonstrated by Carlos Seco Serrano in the section on «El mundo social de Mesonero Romanos» in his preliminary study to Las obras, pp. lxiii-lxxxvi.

13 This in an operation which Barthes describes as part of the ideology of the European bourgeoisie in general: «[T]he bourgeoisie has obliterated its name in
passing from reality to representation, from economic man to mental man... Politically, the haemorrhage of the name "bourgeois" is effected through the idea of nation. This was once a progressive idea, which has served to get rid of the aristocracy; today, the bourgeoisie merges into the nation... ("Myth Today", p. 138).

14 The process of Larra’s evolution in this regard is analyzed in detail in my book, Larra: El laberinto inextricable de un romántico liberal (Madrid: Gredos, 1977).

15 This theme, for example, forms the basis of an early article of El Pobrecito Hablador, "Carta a Andrés", where the refrain is «¿No se lee en este país porque no se escribe, o no se escribe porque no se lee?» (1, 80).