Spring 2006

FLARR Pages #53: Teaching Larra: Approaches and Student Reactions

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FLARR PAGES # 53
The Foreign Language Association of the Red River

Volume #2; Spring, 2006

"Teaching Larra: Approaches and Student Reactions," Thomas C. Turner, UMM

Mariano José de Larra was one of Spain's finest journalists of the early nineteenth century. I teach a entire half-semester on Larra in a course on reform in Spain. Today's students are still interested in the subject of reform and they do, predictably, compare Larra's recommendations with what they see on their own trips to Spain as well as with similar issues in 21st century United States culture.

For this exercise, four basic approaches were designed, which were also the topics for a take-home, mid-term exam:

* Larra's Vision for a Reformed Spain
* Young Larra and Young Dickens
* Biographical and Psychological Views of Larra's Suicide
* Self-Control and Circumstances: Larra's Life and the 21st Century

Larra's Vision for a Reformed Spain

During the seven week study of Larra, students read 18 of Larra's essays and gave reports on outside readings in a seminar situation (see the sidebar for the selected essays). In the first part of their exam essay on Larra's reform ideas they were to select three or four interesting themes to fully delineate. As a summary exercise they would then append a paragraph, very succinctly listing Larra's other concerns in the essays they read. The critical thinking aspect of the exercise was to practice setting priorities among important themes, which would be developed in detail, while not losing contact with other important aspects of Larra's thinking. Students were to develop well-written arguments in depth, with adequate evidence, as well as a paragraph offering perspective on the breadth of Larra's ideas and concerns. It was explained that these were the tools that would be needed in any similar, complicated task in the working world.

Themes chosen by students by students for this exercise were the following:

* Young Men of Spain
* Young Women of Spain
* Larra and France
* Censorship
* Class Structure
* Marriage
* The Superficial
* Education
* The "Public"

By far the most popular theme selected by female students was that of the young men that Larra chose to satirize in his essays (see the sidebar on other side of the page). Also interesting was a selection of young women in these 18 essays: Elenita in *El casarse pronto y mal*, most elegant but untrained, and useless, a reader of sentimental novels; the jealous older women in *La sociedad*, who ruin (¿Quién es... Díaz Larios, 86-87), a lively young woman's reputation with gossip; a married woman looking for adventures while on a coach trip in *La diligencia* and a callous mother with her weeping daughter (she must leave her boyfriend) on the same trip; poor women in *Modos de vivir que no dan de vivir*, who struggle for existence ragpicking or running errands (wife of the zapatero). In *El castellano viejo* there is Braulio's brow-beaten wife. Most intriguing perhaps is Adela, wife to Carlos in *El duelo*, who through her abilities as a hunter of men eventually brings the downfall of her husband who is killed in a duel. Larra's picture of young women is not positive in any respect and that needs to be said, although the basic neglect of education for women in Spanish society is another of his complaints.

Larra Essas Selected for Reform Course:

* ¿Quién es el público y dónde se encuentra?
  August 17, 1832; El Pobrecito Hableador
* Empeños y desempeños
  September 26, 1832; PH
* El casarse pronto y mal
  November 30, 1832; PH
* El castellano viejo
  December 11, 1832; PH
* Vuelva usted mañana
  January 14, 1833; PH
* En este país
  April 30, 1833; PH
* La fonda nueva
  August 23, 1833; La Revista Española
* La planta nueva o el faccioso
  November 10, 1833, RE
* ¿Entre qué gentes estamos?
  November 1, 1834, El Observador
* La vida de Madrid
  December 12, 1834, El Observador
* La sociedad
  January 16, 1835; RE
* El hombre-globo
  March 9, 1835; Revista Mensajero
* La diligencia
  April 16, 1835; RM
* El duelo
  April 27, 1835; RM
* Modos de vivir que no dan de vivir
  June 29, 1835; RM
* La nochebuena de 1836
  December 26, 1836; El Redactor General
* Necrología
  January 16, 1837; El Español
* Las circunstancias
  December 15, 1833; RE

Some students were intrigued with Larra’s attachment to France and French thinking and customs. The most famous of the articles in which Larra criticizes Spain, by comparing it to France, is Vuelva usted mañana where he takes Spain to task for laziness. Another similar article is ¿Entre qué gentes estamos?, where lack of courtesy is satirized, among other things. We know that Larra received some negative feedback on his comments in En este país, where he says at the end of the essay that it is only to help Spain to a better future that he talks about better things in other countries (Díaz Larios, 196-197). Larra is influenced greatly by the ideals he sees in France: liberty, equality, fraternity, and progress, but he also sees some things that Spain is not ready for and other things that will not fit Spanish tradition, e.g. dismissal of religion, El casarse pronto y mal (Díaz Larios, 133).

Censorship was a great impediment to Larra and at one point he states that of all the notes he has (on article topics) only two can be used (Empeños y desempellos, Larios, 109) and at another point he says to a friend that he is a journalist, which means that he cannot write what he thinks, since only praise is acceptable (La vida de Madrid, Díaz Larios, 281). In perhaps his most famous essay, La nochebuena de 1836, his interior voice reminds him that he could just as well end up in jail rather than receive praise as a writer (Díaz Larios, 477). In El reo de muerte, he comes out explicitly and publicly against censorship, “Confieso francamente que no estoy en armonía con el reglamento…” (Díaz Larios, 323). We know as well that he continually suffered private commentary and criticism from friends and acquaintances, see El casarse pronto y mal (Díaz Larios, 121-123). These last criticisms, however, were not as dangerous. Students are amazed at the extent of the censorship in Larra’s epoch.

Class structure was recognized immediately by students. The most complete of the essays showing Larra’s attitudes on the various classes in Spain is in El hombre globo, where he characterizes the lower class as a most pejorative way: as an “hombre raiz” or “hombre-patata” with a lantern that was never turned on” (Díaz Larios, 312). Modos de vivir que no dan de vivir reveals trades of the lower class, but not very empathetically. Larra does see some hope for the middle class. Braulio has attained some success, but he possesses the most horrible manners in El castellano viejo. The upper class is satirized extensively throughout his essays, primarily for hypocrisy, but also for many other faults. Students do not react with favor to Larra’s rather undemocratic view of the abilities of the common people. He does appear to be a man of his time with such views.

Some students want to be educators and they were interested in Larra’s support for the value of foreign travel and experience, the interchange of ideas (La diligencia, Díaz Larios, 343). Larra wants to emphasize practicality and future employment in education, “Mi sobrino salía de mañana a buscar dinero, cosa mas difícil de encontrar de lo que parece,” (El casarse..., Díaz Larios, 130). He satirizes incorrect use of language, about Joaquín: “espafiol no lo habla, sino lo maltrata.” (Empeños..., Díaz Larios, 110). Adela in El duelo, as said before, is educated as a huntress of men and causes the downfall of her husband and family. Two gentlemen stand as models of well-educated People: Carlos, Adela’s husband, and the Conde de Campo Alange, one of Larra’s best friends. Both are similar and among their good qualities: Carlos is talented, capable of overseeing an estate, supportive of those dependent on him (El duelo, Díaz Larios, 358); Campo Alange a hero, a lover of liberty, noble, generous, a believer in equality, knowledgeable in Spanish literature, in the classics, non-political, and patriotic in the best sense etc. (Necrológia, Díaz Larios, 481-483).

Very delightful for students were Larra’s descriptions of the street life of Madrid, the foibles of the “public.” ¿Quién es el público y dónde se encuentra? is the best source for this information which ranges from the fun observation that “el respectable público se emborracha” (Díaz Larios, 88) to the conclusion that each separate public acts in its own interest, an observation that he applies to himself (Díaz Larios, 92). He condemns the public in El duelo for insisting on duels. In ¿Quién es... (Díaz Larios, 86-87), he deplors the public’s taste in food as well as superficial religion (84) and general courtesy is satirized in ¿Entre qué gentes...

Other themes? Popular as a theme as well with students were Larra’s ideas on marriage, see most vividly in El casarse pronto y mal. Education, money, and fidelity are themes. Students also found Larra’s arguments on the superficiality of certain Spaniards to be interesting, the laziness, the lack of knowledge of politics, literature, gossip, and just plain dull conversation. The passion expressed about things that people really know nothing about surprised students, e.g. military men about bullfights and lawyers about poetry (¿Quién es el público..., Díaz Larios, 87). Most telling seems to be the public’s trivial treatment of those about to be hung, “¿Va sereno?” (El reo de muerte, Díaz Larios, 327)

Interesting Young Men of Spain Which No 21“ Century Female Students Would Wish to Marry (So They Say in Class):

Augusto (El casarse pronto y mal) a young afrancesado, had no direction in his education in France and did always exactly what he wanted to do. No formal treatment of parents in the house, freedom. Turned out vain, presumptuous, poor, useless, always pushing the limit. Intolerant, angry, jealous.

Joaquina (Empeños y desempellos) pawns the pocket watch of a friend to go to a party where, with several changes of clothes, he can deceive a number of women; now he borrows money from his uncle (Larra) to retrieve the watch at a pawnshop, after which his treatment of his benefactor is very curt.

El joven (La vida de Madrid). True, he’s wealthy, but he is so bored! The routines of life are so dismally the same. To bed late (at dawn). Chocolate at 10 a.m. Newspaper the same every day. Cafés. To the Marquesa’s. More talk. Horseback riding. Same old theater. Same old authors. Cards. Life is so boring! Ho-hum!

Periquito (En este país) is basically lazy. Room’s a mess. What can you do in this country? No job! What can you do in this country? (Larra berates him silently for being useless). Can’t write for the public! What can you do in this country? (Larra says silently that for sure fools are published in France.)

For interesting young men of Spain that any 21st century student might marry, if it’s her own idea, see the well-educated and rich Carlos and Coude de Campo Alange, under “Education” above. Certain other changes in the relationship of males and females, must, of course be stipulated (I am told).
Young Larra and Young Dickens

One of the most interesting approaches to literature is the "structuralist" insistence that literature should not be viewed in a vacuum. In suggesting a cross-cultural comparison with Dickens, I wanted students to see the value of this approach in terms of the works of both authors, but also with regard to their both very similar and very different lives. How was it that early in 1837 Larra is ready to end his life while Dickens is poised to launch into an amazing career with the first of his serial novels? I asked students to compare and contrast lives and in particular the timing of events in their lives to see how this question might be answered. I also had students give reports on a group of Dickens’ newspaper articles, published in Sketches by Boz. See appended later in this article a detailed side by side dating of events in the lives of Dickens and Larra.

The following are some similarities between the lives of these two famous authors. Mariano José de Larra is born March 24, 1809, just four years before the birth of Charles Dickens, February 7, 1812. Both live in families that move quite often and both experience poverty at points early in life. Both also occasionally feel isolated from family early on. Both have early problems with their first love interests; both are married, separated, and divorced. The two men have affairs. Larra and Dickens develop important skills which would initially earn them money (Dickens takes up short hand and Larra uses his French for translation purposes). Both are writers, of course, choosing newspapers for their first attempts; they use pseudonyms (Boz for Dickens and El duende satirico first, then El pobrecito hablador, as well as Figaro, etc. for Larra). They write about many similar themes, and they write costumbristic descriptions of the people in their cities (see sidebar). As a consequence, both know their respective cities extremely well. They are involved constantly with politics. Both are interested in theater and playwriting. They are ambitious and fairly quickly rise to popularity and fame. The similarities are really quite striking, but so are the differences.

Dickens is born into a lower-middle class family (his father is a government clerk), while Larra is from the “sociedad de buen tono,” (his father is a medical doctor). Dickens’ family is poor, sometimes acutely poor due to the poor money management skills of the father. Larra is in poverty only at the time that he leaves his family to eventually settle in Madrid to take up newspaper writing. Dickens moves from place to place out of family poverty. Larra moves because his father is attached to the French army occupational force and the family is exiled to France. Dickens is spoiled from his family and forced to work at a shoe-blackening factory. Larra is put into boarding schools in France. Dickens’ education is cut short, Larra completes some time in college. Larra falls in love with his father’s mistress and is sent away from his family. Dickens is never ostracized from his family; he falls in love early on with older Mary Beadwell, from a higher class. She finally ends the four year relationship. Larra rushes into marriage without a proper economic foundation, while Dickens waits a year to earn more money before marrying his second love, Catherine Hogarth. Larra has an affair with Delores Armijo fairly quickly after he marries. This causes a scandal and a divorce. At this point Larra travels abroad to Portugal, England, and France (Dickens never travels abroad). Larra is in England in May of 1835, but probably does not meet Dickens, who would be known as Boz. Unlike Larra, Dickens has an affair much later, at age 44, with Ellen Ternan.

Professionally Dickens becomes a parliamentary reporter to earn money, and in the England of the times there are actually seats set aside in Parliament for reporters. He grows bored and tired, though, of the fruitless talk of the politicians. In Spain no reporters attend the Cortes. There is a strong censorship, especially of small newspapers (Larra publishes his first newspaper with the help of a friend who is high up in government circles). Larra runs for the Cortes from Cadiz, is elected, but the elections are annulled by the monarchy. Unlike Dickens, Larra is elected to the Cortes, but his hope for reform in his election to that body. Dickens began writing costumbristic sketches which are eventually collected in Sketches by Boz and published February 7, 1836. Larra’s first collection of essays, three volumes, is published by August of 1835. In February of 1837 Larra receives a visit from his lover, Delores Armijo, in which she severs the relationship permanently. Discouraged by censorship, by the annulled election, by seeming lack of progress in the country, by the death of his friend, Campo Alange, Larra commits suicide as Delores leaves the building.

From a more general point of view, the comparison of disastrous events in a short period of time seems to be one of the basic differences in the two lives, which is a real factor in Larra’s suicide. Their personalities and goals are different. Dickens is more social, loves people; Larra is isolated and withdrawn. Dickens loves acting and the public spotlight; Larra is sometimes shy, reticent to be in the center of public attention. Dickens’ goal is to succeed economically and his articles are intended to amuse, though they sometimes suggest reform, while Larra has reform in mind from the start, though his articles are often amusing. Finally, Dickens is from a country where there is much more freedom of press, while Larra is plagued by censorship. Spain is engaged as well in a civil war and Larra’s good friend is lost.

In the Dickens essays that students read, which constitute only a preliminary glance at Sketches by Boz, it appears that Dickens enjoys people more. He pokes fun, but in a mostly pleasant way, not so heavily satirical as Larra. Dickens’ humor is not as harsh or dry as Larra’s. Dickens often uses a more objective point of view: “one” or “you” or an omniscient, third-person point of view. Larra is an actor in the stories he tells. He uses the first person and adds comments after the story is finished. Dickens often shows sympathy to the poor, while Larra does not emphasize as much. Larra is very much a member of the “sociedad de buen tono,” and has little respect for lower class (e.g. El hombre globo satire) or lower middle class people (e.g. El castellano viejo satire). Larra loses friends with every article he writes. Most of all, Dickens seems to display a balance in his portrayal of happiness and sadness in life that Larra cannot achieve, especially toward the end of his life. A telling comparison can be made between the Christmas Eve description of Larra wandering alone in the streets (La nochebuena de 1836) and Dickens’ description in Christmas Dinner, written only one year earlier. In that essay Dickens says, “Dwell not on the past; think not that one short year of your history of Larra’s suicide. Their personalities and goals are different. Dickens is more social, loves people; Larra is isolated and withdrawn. Dickens loves acting and the public spotlight; Larra is sometimes shy, reticent to be in the center of public attention. Dickens’ goal is to succeed economically and his articles are intended to amuse, though they sometimes suggest reform, while Larra has reform in mind from the start, though his articles are often amusing. Finally, Dickens is from a country where there is much more freedom of press, while Larra is plagued by censorship. Spain is engaged as well in a civil war and Larra’s good friend is lost.

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<td>Larra is born (March 24, 1809). His paternal grandfather is conservative, while his father, a medical doctor in army of Joseph Napoleon, is liberal. There is a continual political tension in the family. Napoleon is defeated, the Larra family is exiled (1813), and Larra spends many early years in a boarding school in Bordeaux, France, isolated from family. Larra’s father becomes the physician in Paris of Fernando VII’s brother, el infante don Francisco de Paula, and the way is paved for a the return home to Spain. Larra returns to Madrid, in 1818, an “afancesado,” attends several schools, works on Spanish grammar text, other projects. In 1821, the family moves north from Valladolid to Corella in order to escape into France, if necessary. There are liberal uprisings in the army. This is the only time that young Larra resides for a time with his family. In 1823 Larra registers at the University of Valladolid; in that city he falls in love with his father’s lover, and must leave Valladolid, perhaps for Valencia. He eventually settles in Madrid (end of 1826 or beginning of 1826) where he lives a precarious existence and attends school intermittently. In 1825 (at 16) Larra lands a small job in the royal bureaucracy. In 1827 he applies to the “Voluntarios Realistas,” a para-military unit loyal to the king. At 19 he decides to live as a writer and frequently literary salons. From February to November of 1828 he publishes El duende satírico del día (5 issues; a small satirical newspaper or magazine published despite strong censorship, perhaps with the support of a powerful friend, Fernández Varela). However, Larra writes attacks against the editor of a rival paper, José Maria Carnero, and engages in altercations which result in the prohibition of “El duende...” He marries Pepita Wubern (Josefa Anacleta Wetoret y Velasco) Aug 13, 1829 and begins translating and writing plays. The first issue of El pobrecito hablador is published in August of 1832 (15 issues from Aug 17 to February 1, 1833). In 1832 Larra develops an illicit love relationship with Dolores Armijo, a married woman. Beginning in 1832 his articles appear in La Revista Española (November of 1932 to the Spring of 1935, under the pseudonym of Figaro). In 1833, at the death of Fernando VII, the conservative Carlists rise in arms (another brother of Fernando VII). In 1934 he writes in El observador (14 articles) and in 1935 the first volume of a three volume collection of his articles is published. His mother dies of cholera in 1834. Delores Armijo is idolized in a play and in a novel of Larra. At the end of 1834, his wife finds a letter from Dolores Armijo and sends it to Delores Armijo’s husband. There is a scandal. Delores must leave Madrid for Avila and Larra and his wife separate. In the April of 1835 Larra takes a trip to Bagadora (Is Delores there?), along with his friend Campo Alange, and then travels, in low spirits, to Lisbon (twenty days in Portugal), to London (he departs from Lisbon on May 17 and stays in London until May 29). In London he feels impressed by the</td>
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**Larra: Youth and Career**

Dickens: Youth, Early Career

Dickens is born (February 7, 1812). His father is a clerk in the navy pay office. The family moves many times, primarily due to the father, who is continually over his head in debt. In 1814 the family moves to London. Charles is sickly as a child; loves dramas, sings. Nurse, Mary Weller, tells frightening stories. Dickens’ father is proud of his son as a comic singer. Giles School. His father tells him to work hard and he will one day be a gentleman and own the house on Gad’s Hill (Dickens’ persistent dream). The family returns to London in 1822 to a worse financial situation. Dickens’ mother tries to found a school, which fails. Dickens is forced to work in a shoe blacking factory where he ties paper lids on jars and glues labels on the lids (Dickens works 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., 3 months). His father is imprisoned in Marshalsea because of debts, and the family lives in prison with him; Charles works and lives outside prison, and is lonely. His father is eventually declared legally insolvent. His sister, Fanny, wins piano awards; Charles is jealous, feels used, sees poor prospects. While his mother favors continued work, his father puts him back in school. In 1827 (at 15) Dickens is an office boy for several law firms. Dickens falls in love with an older woman, above him in class, Maria Beadnell, a banker’s daughter, and, after four years, is rejected and humiliated. He reads widely at the British Museum and contemplates acting. Dickens frequently attends both public and private theaters (he is very good at imitation and mimicry). While law-clerking, Dickens learns shorthand (through Gurney’s textbook, Brachygraphy or an Easy and Compendious System of Shorthand) and writes part time in Doctors Commons (various and sundry courts) as a reporter. He becomes a full-time parliamentary reporter at the Morning Chronicle in 1834. He had been youngest reporter on the Reform Bill of 1832. Voting seats were reassigned to larger population centers, much to the discontent of certain wealthy interests in the House of Lords and to the established church. Subsequent sessions produced the first factory bill, an act which abolished slavery, etc. The social problems at this time include poverty, industrialization, under capitalization, and restrictive class structure (Kaplan, 82). Young Dickens is impatient and bared, however, with the ranting and raving of the politicians. In 1833 Dickens begins to write fictional sketches of London life and has his first story published anonymously by slipping it into a letter box at the Monthly Magazine. The editor likes it, invites more articles, but without pay. Eventually many other articles appear in various magazines under the pseudonym of “Boz.” By 1835 Dickens is an experienced, established and highly respected parliamentary reporter, racing to be the first with the news. He is paid for 20 “sketches” in the Evening Chronicle (appearing after January 31 through August, 1835 and for five sketches in the evening chronicle). Later he writes more in Bell’s Life of London, pseudonym: Tibbs;
city, lonely, depressed and he probably does not leave the Spanish colony. He goes to Flanders, Belgium, and Paris (Paris, June 6), where he meets Scribe, Delavigne, and others, perhaps Hugo. After a brief illness, Larra returns to Spain on September 23, 1835. In his absence the remaining two volumes of his articles are published (in April and in August). In 1836 Larra writes El español and is well paid (two articles a week, 20,000 reales per year, a good salary for the times). The Cortes transfers land of the church to large landowners, aristocrats and bourgeoisie instead of to the peasant workers. Larra supports giving more say to the people of Spain. He backs the more moderate wing of the liberal party (lsturiz) and is elected as representative of the province of Avila (Is Delores there or in Segovia?) to the Cortes. The elections are annulled (August 23, 1836) because of a rebellion by the more radical liberal wing which forces the Regent to proclaim (on August 13) the Constitution of 1812 (lsturiz’s moderate views are trumped and he falls from power, taking the disillusioned newly elected Larra with him). This is a grave disappointment for Larra. His articles indicate an intense and deepening emotional crisis. On January 16, 1837, he writes of the death of his good friend, Campo Alange. There is some hope with Delores, but she comes, accompanied, to his house and rejects him definitively. As she is leaving on February 13, 1837, Larra fires a bullet into his temple.

Sources:  

These are a dozen articles, “Scenes and Characters,” beginning September 17, 1835 to January 17, 1836. From early May (on May 1 Dickens covers elections in Exeter and races back to London to print a speech by Lord John Russell) to November of 1835, Dickens is in London, where he is courting the temperamental Catherine Hogarth (he takes rooms in Selwood Place to be near her). Her father, George Hogarth, music and drama critic for the Morning Chronicle, and friend to Sir Walter Scott, has been of great help to Dickens and he supports the courtship. Dickens is engaged in the Spring of 1835. He writes a play and a libretto for opera. In the fall of 1835 he is working hard on his collection Sketches by Boz, contracted by Macrone, whom he meets at a dinner party hosted by Harrison Ainsworth, author of the popular melodramatic novel Rookwood. Dickens’ two volumes of collected essays are published on the February 7, 1836, on his 24th birthday, along with cartoons by the famous George Cruikshank, and to good critical acclaim. The first number of Pickwick Papers, a serial novel, is published March 31, 1836, a novel which will bring him immediate national fame. The novel is a personal triumph for Dickens over his childhood circumstances. With his finances secured from these last projects, at 24, Dickens marries Catherine Hogarth on April 2, 1836, about a year after his engagement. In 1837 and 1838 Dickens publishes Pickwick Papers and Oliver Twist as serial novels, and launches into a brilliant literary career. In 1856 at age 44 he buys Gad’s Hill Place, his boyhood dream. The next year he falls in love with a young actress, Ellen Ternan. He separates from his wife in 1858.

Sources:  