

# Originary Debt (1816)

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All of a sudden we find ourselves having to pay in full (*payer comptant*). It is a matter, as they say, of *accounting* for your crimes—which moreover means, that if you know how to account for them, you won't be punished.

—*Jacques Lacan*, Seminar II

Latin American literature begins with duty, in service and in servitude to an extrinsic truth that seems to rule it. José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's 1816 *El Periquillo Sarniento* commences Latin American letters through a paradigmatic reflection on the political economy of writing. If the book describes the life of the picaresque figure Pedro Sarniento, whose unfortunate nickname furnishes the work's title, and whose tale establishes the parameters of a newly (or nearly) "independent" Mexican society, the prologue begins the task of defining the duty of Latin American writing as such. The self-educated son of a humble creole family, Lizardi (New Spain, 1776–1827) counts among the writers who advocated for the literary emancipation of Spanish America, a project contiguous with the struggle for its political independence.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in 1810 he was briefly imprisoned following his participation in the first rebellion against Spain, and in 1812 he published the first edition of his pro-independence newspaper, *El Pensador Mexicano*. His first novel (the first of postindependence Latin America), *El Periquillo Sarniento*, was originally published in biweekly installments. Narrating his life to his children from the deathbed, throughout 50 chapters the narrator recounts a life characterized by misadventure. Developed through a thoroughly picaresque plot, the author ventures a fierce social critique. The novel's protagonist, its secondary characters, and its diverse settings serve a didactic purpose toward preparing the reading subject for life under independence. The work strives to prepare the future grounds of literature and emancipation, culture and enlightenment. Literature is born, but it comes about in an obligatory relation

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<sup>1</sup> The work's prologue, on which I focus my attention here, deploys a not-so-subtle statement along these lines, relating the material economy of book production to the late colonial condition: "[H]az de cuenta que mi obrita, ya impresa y encuadernada, tiene de costo por lo menos ocho o diez pesos; pues aunque fuera una obra de mérito, ¿como había yo de mandar a España un cajón de ejemplares, cuando si aquí es cara, allí lo sería excesivamente?" (2).

to the material conditions of its writing and publication. Writing is thus answerable to an outside both necessary and *real* as its condition of possibility.

There is, to be sure, always some difficulty associated with the designation of “firsts.” No one wishes to declare, effectively, that a given work places the future of all works like it under the purview of its sign, or that such a work holds all of the works after it in its debt. To thus, without qualification, greet Lizardi’s *El Periquillo Sarmiento* as the first Mexican novel cannot but recall a series of disagreements and indecisions that haunt our enterprise: What *is* a novel? What is the meaning of that demonym, *Mexican*? Why this privileging of the “first”? What and whose ends does it serve? And to be sure, compounding this field of indeterminability is the fact that, in a certain sense, the 1816 publication of the work can hardly guarantee its “Mexican” or “Latin American” character, for despite the Mexican state’s official celebration of the somewhat more popular but failed attempt of 1810, Mexico only achieves independence some years later, with Spain’s 1821 recognition of the First Mexican Empire under the brief reign of Agustín de Iturbide.<sup>2</sup>

Such reflection is common to the tradition, almost compulsive. Ramírez-Pimienta, for example, identifies these tensions in the work and in its reception, qualifying the novel as “la primera novela hispanoamericana,” through the authority of the “many” who “recognize” it as such (225). He goes on to acknowledge the debates regarding the literary genre to which it best corresponds—whether the work can truly be considered picaresque—as well as the site of its publication and reception, placing the words “México” and “mexicano” within quotation marks (225–26). Or as Vogeley notes, “*El Periquillo Sarmiento* has been widely regarded as the first Mexican, indeed the first Latin American novel” (“The Concept” 458). It is held in *regard*, widely, but its status remains somehow undecided. It requires the qualification of “regard” rather than the simple designation of being, *ser* or *être*, the most *originary* word (Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* 34), which we might restitute in the following fashion: “*El Periquillo Sarmiento* ~~has been widely regarded as~~ is the first Mexican, indeed the first Latin American novel.” Benítez-Rojo, for his part, begins his study of the text with an extended consideration of the work’s degree of “Spanish Americanness,” concluding that, “properly speaking,” it is indeed the “first” Spanish American novel, appealing simultaneously to the “lack of consensus” regarding this fact, as well as to the “majority opinion” that it is so (“José Joaquín” 327).

Perhaps by way of evading such questions, or else answering them otherwise, I will here outline the more speculative conditions according to which *El Periquillo Sarmiento* might well be recognized as the first Mexican novel (or the first Spanish American novel, or the first Latin American novel—I wish to maintain the flexi-

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<sup>2</sup> What I mean to suggest is that the Grito de Dolores and the rebellion with which it is associated belong to a somewhat different historical sequence than the one that led to the independence claimed by Iturbide, who, as is known, struggled against the early uprising, a posture, Dabove notes, to which Lizardi himself was sympathetic: “The presentation of banditry in Fernández de Lizardi’s novel shows an impossible alternative to the colonial order: the alternative that the popular insurgency was proposing to Mexico, the danger of sovereignty from below that made Lizardi share Iturbide’s project of ‘independence from above’” (53).

bility or possible slippages between these adjectives and what they would claim to designate). Indeed, buried within the repeated obsession with the “firstness” of *El Periquillo Sarniento* remains the symptomatic misrecognition of its more properly *originary* status. As I will argue here, Lizardi’s work institutes the order of the works to come not merely by virtue of the largely contingent or coincidental fact that his appeared *before* some other. More significant, indeed, is the precisely originary quality of the early work, the ways in which this novel brings about the specific forms of existence of Latin American letters as the dual inscription of a duty-debt, a *deber* that haunts the literary task to come. The residue of this debt and duty, as both ethico-political impetus and politico-economic necessity, *inaugurated* by Lizardi in *El Periquillo Sarniento*, is the continued shame of the literary, the specifically Spanish American form of the question “what for?” to paraphrase Adorno, which the arts struggle to answer and overcome.<sup>3</sup>

The following pages indicate a way to read this trace by way of establishing its originary moment (which is by no means to say its “first” appearance). My approach to the question of origin, of beginning, takes me directly to the prologue of Lizardi’s novel, an opening not only to the novel, but to the future possibility of any Latin American writing as such. In so doing, I take a cue from another foundational Latin American text, the prologue to Hernández’s *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879), in which it is written that “[l]a originalidad de un libro debe empezar en el prólogo” (265). Lizardi’s prologue, a beginning before beginning, I suggest, holds still the trace of a beginning, an opening to originality and origin, more and more legible today closer to the end of a literary enterprise than to its initiation.

Aníbal González reads in the work’s titular protagonist “a triple emblem” of writing: “an orphan, a ‘parrot,’ and a writer” (34). Among a series of Lizardi’s “dissimulations,” the greatest, González suggests, “is *El Periquillo Sarniento* itself: a text that is fundamentally a pamphlet passing itself off as a work of narrative fiction” (37). The pamphleteering thrust of the novel along with Lizardi’s journalistic vocation thus point ironically not only to the framing of the text in the Periquillo’s prologue, upon which González insightfully comments (33, 39), but also to “Lizardi’s” own prologue, which I will analyze below. For González, the text’s most enduring irony is that “Spanish America’s first self-proclaimed novel was actually a covert form of journalism, a pamphlet ‘in drag,’ passing itself off as a work of narrative fiction” (40). Its “parroting” imitativeness and also its formal “dissimulation” (leaving aside the way in which imitation and dissimulation are so thoroughly thematized in the text) might finally suggest that the novel is not original or originary in the way we have imagined. Rather, as González begins to suggest, *El Periquillo Sarniento* “democratizes writing” through its adoption of a more properly journalistic register. It opens writing to the *demos*. González writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Adorno writes: “The contradiction between what is and what is made, is the vital element of art and circumscribes (*umschreibt*) its law of development, but it is also art’s shame (*Schande*): by following, however indirectly, the existing pattern of material production and ‘making’ its objects, art as akin to production cannot escape the question ‘what for?’ which it aims to negate” (226).

Arguably, journalism democratizes writing, not only by broadening readership in general, but also by giving a greater number of would-be writers access to a knowledge about rhetoric that was once the exclusive province of the university and the academies. But, more radically still, journalistic discourse deflated forever . . . the notion of language's divine origin; henceforth, language would be an all-too-human phenomenon, subject, as Nietzsche's well-known metaphor of the coin suggests . . . to semiotic and economic evaluation and devaluation. (41)

The work becomes the site of literary democratization and also of the peculiar economization of writing (and, I will argue, in ways perhaps even more literal that González imagines). This irony seems to mirror, as González suggests, the peculiar situation of Lizardi's deceitful didacticism, his novel's imitative originality and, even more, the final subordination of the teacher to his students or of the didactic writer to his public through the realm of economic necessity.

*El Periquillo Sarniento* is both Lizardi's first novel and his masterpiece (both are disputed determinations). The work presents the story of Pedro, the titular *pícaro* figure, whose misadventures allow Lizardi to critique broadly the late-colonial society in which he wrote. To be sure, such critique not infrequently takes as its object the work's very narrator, the selfsame "Periquillo Sarniento." A moralistic tale written to Pedro's children from his deathbed, the text is developed throughout a very long and detailed series of accidents or adventures. The early chapters describe Pedro's education. The book then turns towards his "professions," his criminal activities, and his travels—all leading, after the picaresque tradition, to a kind of stability.

Early in the text, the reader is presented with the conflict between Pedro's parents concerning the very questions of education and social class that are among its author's central preoccupations. Pedro's father is a gentleman, an *hidalgo* fallen on hard times, while the mother, clinging to the family's "noble" blood, or the pretense thereof, insists that Pedro receive a professional training, rather than the practical education he is due. After graduating with a degree in philosophy, he retreats to a ranch belonging to the family of his best friend Juanuario, who is nicknamed Juan Largo. After returning from the hacienda, Pedro's father demands that he choose a profession. He decides to study theology, but lacking rigor and enthusiasm, he leaves school. His father wants him to learn a trade but Pedro resists. As a sort of compromise (as it requires neither a course of study nor the corresponding economic expenditures), Pedro takes the habit and becomes a monk, a decision he regrets that same day. His father dies, and he leaves the convent. Pedro misspends his inheritance. His mother dies. Impoverished, he reunites with Juan Largo and becomes a cardsharp with him. In one of their schemes, a *campesino* becomes aware of their trickery and attacks Pedro, whose injuries require that he go to hospital. He recovers his health and returns to the street, where, with Juan Largo, he commits a robbery and is incarcerated. In jail he is finally employed as a scribe under his new master Chanfaina. Released from prison, he continues to work with him and has an

affair with the maid. He leaves this life behind and becomes an apothecary. He next works with the unappealingly named Dr. Purgante.

And so on: the reader experiences something like a “total” picture of the late colonial society and its institutions. Anyone who has read a picaresque work can well imagine just how delirious and often silly this itinerary becomes—Pedro even makes it to Manila and beyond! Later in the work, his life becomes more secure; he marries, finds more stable employ, enjoys a better social position and reputation, and begins to think of the composition of a book—the book we are reading, naturally. He meets a man called Lizardi and decides to leave him the notes from which to compile the text, a sign of the book’s unfinished appearance within itself. Here Lizardi, the author, returns and tells of the final moments of Pedro’s life, as Pedro was too ill to complete the narrative. Lizardi relates Pedro’s dialogue from the deathbed, a kind of sermon. Lizardi concludes by narrating the protagonist’s burial.

Of the quite surprising and largely symptomatic ways in which the question of the novel’s “originary” character emerges in the body of criticism, of particular note is the consistency with which scholars have debated whether the work can rightly be considered a masterpiece. Bancroft asks this question by way of comparing Lizardi’s first novel to his later, posthumous *Don Catrín de la Fachenda*. “Which is the Masterpiece?” he asks in the very title, and concludes that “despite its defects *El Periquillo* must still be considered Lizardi’s masterpiece” (538). Among the reasons for this judgment remains a certain force claimed by the work, a certain future projection and influence: “On the score of historical significance and of influence upon subsequent fiction writers,” writes Bancroft, “there is no room for question. *El Periquillo* . . . was the first Mexican novel and its *costumbrista* and reforming tendencies set the standard in Mexico for the rest of the century” (534). Benítez-Rojo, writing some 30 years later, will consider much the same problem: “*Don Catrín de la Fachenda* owes much of its literary quality to its brevity and simplicity. It is artistically superior to *El Periquillo Sarniento*; yet for all its defects the latter, because of its great vitality, is a major work of Mexican literature, as well as a forerunner of *Don Catrín de la Fachenda*” (“José Joaquín” 336).

To be sure, the projection of influence exerted by the work extends far beyond Lizardi’s *oeuvre* or the sphere of Mexican letters. The work is also stunningly didactic—not only with respect to the tradition that it hopes to at least partially inaugurate, but also with respect to the reading public as such. As Spell puts it, “in this novel, Lizardi proclaimed himself above all the champion of an improved system of education which would enable Mexico to take a place among the enlightened nations of the world” (415). In this regard, the “first” Latin American novel already forms an enterprise of national articulation, socio-political pedagogy, and the integration and edification of the popular. On this score, Vogeley writes:

Evidence that Lizardi was aware of the special character of the colonial reader survives in the text of *El Periquillo Sarniento* and in statements he made about the novel. Significantly, he pluralizes his reader at all times; his readers are his ‘children,’ whom he addresses in a

fatherly way through the voice of his narrator, Pedro Sarmiento, a reformed *pícaro*. In his dedication to the novel, Lizardi in his own voice enumerates his readers' identities and emphasizes their diversity. ("Defining" 787–88)

The work addresses itself to a nascent collective, to a "young" reading public. While my reading of the work's dedication—the principal task I have outlined here and which I shall undertake below—differs slightly from that of Vogeley, it remains clear that the work has an addressee: the people, or in my view, the people to come.

Such an enterprise today appears to form part of the early constitution of what Bartra has called the *oficio mexicano*, the logic of canonization in Mexican art and letters. In Lizardi's novel, as is the tendency of most "foundational" novels, we encounter an early appearance of such an attempt to curate, to enframe, and, above all, to determine the exact purpose of the arts, understood precisely as the privileged site for the establishment of certain norms of what is Mexican. "Es probable," writes Ramírez-Pimienta "que si bien no sea la única posibilidad sí sea la más adecuada para lograr lo que el escritor se propone; ayudar precisamente a la construcción y fijación de este gentilicio 'mexicano' y de una nación formada por éstos, es decir, los mexicanos" (226). This desire, as Benítez-Rojo has suggested, is inscribed in the very topography of the *pícaro*'s journey:

As Benedict Anderson notes, the illusion of accompanying Periquillo along the roads and through the villages and towns of the viceroyalty helped awaken in the novel's readers the desire for nationness. They could associate Periquillo's universal professions—he was student, monk, physician, barber, scribe, pharmacist, judge, soldier, beggar, thief, sacristan, and merchant—with the particularities of the country, in the sense of imagining what it was like to be a soldier or a thief in Mexico, to be in jail or in a hospital in Mexico, and in no other place. . . . From the spectrum of customs and stock characters he included . . . we can clearly appreciate the important nationalist role his narrative has played ever since. ("José Joaquín" 335)

*El Periquillo Sarmiento* maps a territory both to document its present and to provide the coordinates of its future appearance—hence the duality of Lizardi's purpose, a simultaneous gesture of satire and didacticism. "Given its foundational nature," writes Benítez-Rojo, "*El Periquillo Sarmiento* was the obligatory point of reference for later Mexican novels, which generally continued to explore its theme of social marginality and combined its journalistic style, its *costumbrismo*, its didacticism, and its melodrama" (334).<sup>4</sup> Something is *established*

<sup>4</sup>It has been suggested that Lizardi's use of the novel for such critical and didactic purposes is in some sense contingent, a ploy to avoid censorship in light of the end of the constitutionality that once protected the author's activities (Constitución de Cádiz): given conditions of censorship, some have argued, the novelistic formalization of Lizardi's critique is inessential. Skirius follows the germinal work of Spell (*Life and Works*) to argue that "la censura de prensa le había obligado a suspender la publicación de su periódico didáctico *El Pensador Mexicano* y a buscar un medio menos estridente para expresar sus opiniones" (257). See also Benítez-Rojo's entry in *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*: "The first

in Lizardi's work. Benítez-Rojo's use of the word "obligatory," I would like to think, suggests the work's very submission of the works to come (of the people that will come and the society and institutions they will populate) to an order established in *El Periquillo Sarmiento*, an early imposition of a law of modern Latin American letters.

This rule or obligation is visible even on the surface of many of the "foundational" texts and the ways in which we think about them. In a prologue to Sarmiento's (not the fictional Pedro, but a distant and more real relative, Domingo Faustino) *Facundo*, Noé Jitrik, exiled in Mexico, traces the effects of a debt long inscribed in the literary, its justification for beginning even "before" a beginning of Latin America itself. He writes of the "[f]inalidad moral que da, otra vez, idea de servicio de la literatura pero no en el sentido filosófico sino político, porque de lo que se trata es de construir una sociedad: moral es política para Sarmiento, y literatura, un *instrumento* que encuentra en la biografía su máxima posibilidad" (xxxii; my emphasis). This other prologue—of a different order, written, as it is, by a critic and not the work's author—points to the moral ends that produce the "instrument" of writing as a "service" to the political in its endeavor to construct the social.

Perhaps, then, since its origin, Latin American literature has felt the duty to pursue edification. Or it has felt the duty—as duty—to resist this duty. It seems, today, that it was once the task of Latin American literature to bring marginal subjects under the purview of the modern State (Legrás), and also to symbolically compensate the subject for the economically and ethically incongruent development of his or her modernity (Avelar), or, put otherwise, for the perceived limits of this modernity (Moreiras). In a formulation that probably no longer requires citation, Rama described precisely this foundational duty of the literary in the following terms:

La constitución de la literatura, como un discurso sobre la formación, composición y definición de la nación, habría de permitir la incorporación de múltiples materiales ajenos al circuito anterior de las bellas letras que emanaban de las élites cultas, pero implicaba asimismo una previa homogenización e higienización del campo, el cual sólo podía realizar la escritura. La constitución de las literaturas nacionales que se cumple a fines del XIX es el triunfo de la ciudad letrada, la cual, por primera vez en su larga historia comienza a dominar a su contorno. (91)

Rama has indeed been a quite frequent point of reference for readers of *El Periquillo Sarmiento*. Yet, my purpose here is not so much to read the way in which

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appearance of Lizardi's narrative work coincides with his efforts as a journalist. If he decided to write *El Periquillo*, it was surely because he understood that prose fiction had potentially more influence on the creole mentality than the anonymous satires he was publishing in the newspapers. Furthermore, he probably thought that the novelty of the work, as well as its length and fictional nature, would help fool the censorship apparatus of which he had already been a victim" (437). A strong reading of such a critical perspective might well hold that *El Periquillo Sarmiento* is finally a novelized social critique and the condition of truth for the work is the social critique it extends and not its appearance as art.

the text constitutes and upholds the lettered city, or to index its foundational character *vis-à-vis* Spanish American letters (a status it holds, and for which it has been argued extensively). My purpose is rather to see it as the place of a debt, the site of an origin that the literary enterprise upholds as a duty. Mozejko, in an argument still circumscribed by the foundational argument in which so many critics have engaged, powerfully registers the more properly economic moment of circulation that, I suggest, is the most compelling and *obligatory* innovation claimed by Lizardi's first novel:

El nuevo modo de inserción social del letrado que se educó en la Colonia no consiste en la adquisición de un oficio de los llamados “mecánicos” en la novela de Fernández de Lizardi, sino en la transformación de la escritura en magisterio y éste en bien que hace circular el dinero. Ésta parece ser la base del funcionamiento de la nueva sociedad: cada uno produce riqueza según sus capacidades: a los hombres cultos les corresponde la transmisión del saber; a los demás, el trabajo manual. Los grupos no productivos quedan fuera del modelo mientras que el trabajo del letrado ha adquirido nueva significación: *el saber y la escritura se transforman en mercancía*. (240; my emphasis)

It is such a relation to money that forms Latin American literature's debt. And here *debt* should be understood not only in the monetary acceptance, but also in the sense of a duty: *deber* as both material debt and obligation. To again paraphrase Adorno, here the debt resurfaces in a cynical reappropriation of the question “what for?” that haunts artistic production. Latin American art (art in the whole of the Third World, perhaps, to recall Jameson's formulation) cannot shy away from this demand, no matter how much it might wish to do so. For Latin American literature begins in *service* to something extrinsic and real that seems to rule it: necessity—a final ground that it must, but cannot, negate, cannot pay down. If, as I note above, the work's narrative occupies itself with a largely derivative, picaresque journey, thematizing in the process the parameters of late-colonial Mexico, its prologue thinks through the relation between writing and money, or more precisely, reflects on the material conditions of publication and printing. Thus I turn now to the work's prologue and dedication, for here Lizardi claims to have done something novel, merely by trying to maintain the tradition, as he sees it, of opening literary works with dedications.<sup>5</sup>

Directing himself to the reader, Lizardi notes that one of the difficulties of writing his book has been deciding on the object of its dedication:

[P]orque yo he visto infinidad de obras, de poco y mucho mérito, adornadas con sus dedicatorias al principio. Esta continuación o esta

<sup>5</sup> Lizardi's prologue is precisely a sign of his debt to other authors: “[I]n the Prologue of the first volume he employed a literary device—a discussion between the author and a friend concerning the publication of his work—that is also used by Cervantes in the *Quijote* (Part I) and by Jose Cadalso in his *Cartas marruecas* (1793) . . .” (Spell, “The Intellectual Background” 415).



costumbre continuada, me hizo creer que algo bueno tenía en sí, pues todos los autores procuraban elegir mecenas o patronos a quienes dedicarles sus tareas, creyendo que el hacerlo así no podía menos que *granjearles algún provecho*. (1; my emphasis)

There must be a kind of profit reaped or benefit gained from the dedication extending precisely to the person to whom the work is dedicated. Works of (and without) merit hold to this custom for a reason. Lizardi seems to observe it directly: authors are able to select the most advantageous addressee for their efforts and, in so doing, stand to gain (as do those to whom such works are dedicated). The work awaits precisely this moment of “provecho,” for which reason Lizardi identifies its difficulty even in advance of “giving birth” to the work, the “life” of Periquillo. As he writes, “[u]na de las cosas que me presentaba dificultad para dar a luz la VIDA DE PERIQUILLO SARNIENTO era elegir persona a quien dedicársela.” The dedication haunts the enterprise of writing, of production, before the beginning, for it is a sign of the economic necessity into which all production enters.

Our author narrates a recent conversation with a friend in which he asks him to whom he should dedicate the work, the kind of “didactic dialogue” that, Ochoa notes, so frequently appears in Lizardi’s writing (60).<sup>6</sup> The dedication bears witness to the goodness of one man, “separating him,” as Lizardi puts it, “enteramente de la común masa de los hombres” (1), for which reason, too, Lizardi maintains his doubts regarding the persons to whom such works are dedicated. There is something shameless, for Lizardi, in “allowing” oneself to be the object of such dedicatory praise. Lizardi says, “quién ha de ser tan *sinvergüenza* que deje dedicarse una obra; desempolvar los huesos de sus abuelos; levantar testimonios a sus ascendientes; rastrear sus genealogías; enredarlos con los Pelayos y Guzmanes; mezclar su sangre con la de los reyes del Oriente; ponderar su ciencia aun cuando no sepa leer; preconizar sus virtudes, aunque no las conozca . . .” (1; my emphasis). He who allows himself to be dedicated to is shameless, a *sinvergüenza*, for the florid and dishonest manner of the genre, as well as its very logic, “separates” the addressee from the common mass of men whose edification and elevation Lizardi proposes as his task. To dedicate in the singular disrupts a principle of community that the novel wishes to bring forth—it indulges the vanity of the vain, wasting its effort, precisely in an effort not to see its labor wasted, that is, to guarantee the publication of the work. For, wonders Lizardi, “quién será . . . tan indolente, que viéndose lisonjeado a roso y a velloso *ante faciem populi* . . . se maneje con tanta mezquindad que no me costee la impresión. . . .” How could this person not pay for the work’s publication, seeing himself so “lisonjeado” in front of everyone, in view of the public?

“¿Y a quién piensas dedicar tu obrita?” his friend asks him. Lizardi responds: “A aquel señor que yo considerase se atreviera a costearme la impresión.” His would appear to be the most distasteful option: to dedicate it to a count or some

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Bush makes a claim similar to the one I offer here in the context of his reading of Lizardi’s 1825 “constitutional dialogue,” in which, through an invented conversation between *Sacristán* and *Payo*, Lizardi “suggests that an independent and a modern America will be constituted by social types previously suppressed by the colonial regime” (186).

other wealthy patron. But it would also be a wasted effort not to publish at all, so the dedication must take place. “[Y] ésta,” that is to say politico-economic necessity, “es una de las trabas más formidables que han tenido y tendrán los talentos americanos para no lucir, como debieran, en el teatro literario” (2). Indeed, many potential books will go unpublished or even unwritten, given, as Lizardi explains, “lo expuestos que están no sólo a no lograr el premio de sus fatigas, sino tal vez a perder hasta su dinero. . . .” It is for this reason that a sponsor will be necessary, and thus, it is also for this reason that Lizardi must pay tribute in the dedication. “[É]sa es una verdad,” responds his friend, “pero eso mismo debe retraerte de solicitar mecenas. ¿Quién ha de querer arriesgar su dinero para que imprimas tu obrita? Vamos, no seas tonto, guárdala o quémala, y no pienses en hallar protección, porque primero perderás el juicio.” The manuscript is in danger of disappearing, of becoming wasted effort and returning to ash. His friend notes that Lizardi has already spent money that he does not have: “Ya parece que veo que gastas el dinero que no tienes en hacer poner en limpio y con mucha curiosidad tus cuadernos. . . .” And moreover, he chides, just because someone is rich, liberal, and spends a thousand pesos throwing a party, does not mean he will pay for the work’s printing: having decided on a patron, Lizardi’s friend predicts, he will go to his home and honor the patron’s last name. As his friend puts it, “lo haces descender de los godos” (2), producing a flattering fiction about his noble lineage. In the most favorable case, the patron will laugh at Lizardi’s “simpleza”: “Entonces el señor, que ve aquel celemín de papel escrito, y que sólo por no leerlo, si se lo mandaran, daría cualquier dinero, se ríe de tu simpleza.” In the best case, says the friend, that is, if Lizardi is not simply thrown out, the potential patron will appeal to present conditions of instability and insurgency that do not permit him to help Lizardi. And thus Lizardi will be forced to waste more time, as the friend puts it, on the “marqués K” and on the “canónigo T,” and so on, until he gives up after exhausting the entire alphabet. The writer has no choice. The compromising position into which writing is placed—its final potential to always already have amounted to a waste of time and an expenditure that cannot be restituted—leads his friend to despair. As he finally concludes: “[L]os pobres no debemos ser escritores, ni emprender ninguna tarea que cueste dinero.”

There is no excess that will pay for its own production. Writing thus must already expend what it does not have, that which it is not: money. We should not set out on any task that costs money, yet the “we” for whom Lizardi speaks has already done so. The fact that one is reading these words means that a debt has occurred, that “we,” the “poor,” have set out on an impertinent task: one costing money. This should not have occurred, for one should not spend money that one does not have. The debt is thus necessary. But to whom is it owed?

Lizardi faces thus the originary decision—whether to keep (to put away) or to burn (“guárdala o quémala”). This burning, this nearly missed publication (a manuscript’s near incineration), recalls the proximity of an origin to the blaze, not only of the hearth but of the flame’s destructive flight.<sup>7</sup> Many of these early Latin American texts seem to hold to this gesture, the book’s near disappearance or accidental existence. The avoidance of authorship and insistence upon the

<sup>7</sup> The point of reference is Derrida, *Cinders*.

book's contingency are perhaps common to the prologue, yet in Latin American letters such openings evoke the book as a debt. "Por distraerse de momentos de ocio y melancolía han sido escritas estas páginas," writes Gómez de Avellaneda in the prologue to her *Sab* (1841). "La autora no tenía entonces la intención de someterlas al terrible tribunal del público" (97). A judgment awaits, before which the book shrinks, desiring, if momentarily, its own disappearance. These origins and beginnings avoid the very will to appear—before this *appearance* as material inscription before a public (whose time and money it will steal in order to await its judgment), no debt has been incurred. *Sab* begins as a singular and private distraction. But now, in appearing—the emergence into the public that requires the explanatory gesture of the prologue—, it owes something to its public, some justification for the economic investment that it demands. And what is most intriguing about this justification for reading remains its very indivisibility from the author's justification for having written the book. These texts cannot be simple distractions from boredom or melancholy, but rather are defined by their didactic purposiveness.

The prologue to the second part of *Martín Fierro*, the reterritorializing "vuelta," similarly comments on the intimate relation of the work to its public as a peculiar function of the work's involuntary materiality, closing on the following note: "Ciérrase este prólogo, diciendo que se llama este libro LA VUELTA DE MARTÍN FIERRO, porque este título le dio el público, antes, mucho antes de haber pensado yo en escribirlo, y allá va a correr tierras con mi bendición paternal" (265). The public's demand figures the author as a conscript to his duty to write precisely *their* desire. And yet this authorial disavowal simultaneously turns on the writer's fatherly relation both to text and reader in fulfillment of the demand of both (for here they are one) for a sibling.<sup>8</sup> The author obeys the demand he inaugurates. This demand *begins* at the "beginning" of Latin American letters, with *El Periquillo Sarniento*.

Peculiarly, this first prologue, Lizardi's prologue, the "Prólogo, dedicatoria y advertencias a los lectores," signed "El Pensador," is followed by Pedro Sarmiento's prologue, "El prólogo de Periquillo Sarniento." "Cuando escribo mi vida," writes the protagonist, "es sólo con la sana intención de que mis hijos se instruyan en las materias sobre que les hablo" (5). A fatherly, didactic moment is established as the work's reason for being. Pedro continues:

No quisiera que salieran estos cuadernos de sus manos, y así se los encargo; pero como no sé si me obedecerán, ni si se les antojara andar prestándolos a éste y al otro, me veo precisado (para que no anden royendo mis podridos huesos, ni levantándose falsos testimonios) a hacer yo mismo, y sin fiarme de nadie, una especie de *Prólogo*; porque los prólogos son tapaboca de los necios y maliciosos, y al mismo tiempo son, como dije no sé quien, unos remedios anticipados de los libros. . . .

<sup>8</sup> In this regard my reading of Lizardi owes an especial debt to Dove's interpretation of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, which is organized by the resonances throughout the novel of its opening demand for restitution, for inheritance: "The mother's dying words to her son introduce issues of memory, justice and restitution as the possible terms and conditions of a proper (future) identity" (37).

The circulation of the work must occur, but its dissemination must be protected in the prologue. The prologue is the site of the book's final law, what the narrator refers to as "remedio anticipado," for the writer cannot know the future of the work nor exert his influence over its legacy once it is bequeathed to his heirs. Perhaps at the same time, this definition of the prologue as "remedio anticipado" should be annexed to or associated with the work's other prologue (its real prologue, written by its true author). Accordingly, the work finds its own "remedio anticipado" in the prologue by Lizardi, which inaugurates with Latin American letters the relation of reading and writing to debt and duty. Its dissemination is strictly the one permitted by the prologue. Lizardi protects the literature to come from his heirs, who must continue to pay down the debt into which Lizardi enters.

Lizardi's friend hatches a plan: "Calla . . . que yo te voy a proponer unos mecenas que seguramente te costearán la impresión" (3). Lizardi, filled with pleasure, asks who these people are. "Los lectores," responds his friend. "¿A quiénes con más justicia debes dedicar tus tareas, sino a los que leen las obras *a costa de su dinero?*" (my emphasis). The publication of the work dedicated to such readers establishes literature's material debt. Unlike a patron who might normally commission the work up front, the expenditure for pressing the work will be recuperated only much later, when the readers purchase its installments. Such an emphasis on material and economic inscription captures the most literal tones of what Derrida describes as "originary writing": if there is one, [it] must produce the space and the materiality of the sheet itself" (*Writing and Difference* 263).

The gesture of widening the dedicatory invocation in order to include a nascent reading public prefigures the uses of literature for the integration of marginal subjects under the symbolic rule of the State; it opens onto literature's debt as obligation, its duty, which is nothing less than literature's construction of a people as its grounding reason and its pragmatic support. When Lizardi dedicates the work to his readers he is constructing a people whose consumption will provide the material support for the literary task: "¿Qué diré de vuestras gloriosas hazañas, sino que son tales, que son imponderables e insabibles?" (3).

Lizardi writes:

Sé que acaso seréis, algunos, plebeyos, indios, mulatos, negros, viciosos, tontos y majaderos. Pero no me toca acordaros nada de esto, cuando trato de captar vuestra benevolencia y afición a la obra que os dedico; ni menos trato de separarme un punto del camino trillado de mis maestros *los dedicadores*, a quienes observo desentenderse de los vicios y defectos de sus mecenas, y acordarse sólo de las virtudes y lustre que tienen para repetírselos y exagerárselos. (4)

Lizardi's nearly spiteful offering to the reader already demonstrates the desire for cancellation with which the debt begins.<sup>9</sup> "I owe you nothing," Lizardi seems

<sup>9</sup> Dabove offers a way of reading this contradictory movement, which I see as complementary to the interpretation I undertake here: "For Lizardi, the *letrado* should not submit to market forces but should educate the buying public" (314, n. 12). One could say that the debt is always between the writer and a public (a *certain* public, whose access to consumption

to say. But it is also in this necessarily ironic delivery that the debt can conceal itself as such (and through this concealment, it persists). Yet it is true, Lizardi owes nothing to this extrinsic people, to this series of different predicates: “plebeyos, indios, mulatos, negros, viciosos, tontos y majaderos.” Rather, his debt—our debt—is to the people that literature constructs, the people that will come.

“Esto es,” Lizardi continues, “oh serenísimos lectores!, lo que yo hago al dedicaros esta pequeña obrita que os ofrezco como tributo debido a vuestros *reales* . . . méritos.” Lizardi “conceals” the economic relation, his own indebtedness to the buyer who will pay down the debt he has incurred in order to revise and print the book, beneath a surface of cutting “flattery.” The triple meaning—an early *albur*, as it were—of the word “real,” moves between adjective and noun, between the pole signifying *royalty*, through the question of the real, and then finally to the name of the currency, the *real*. This movement is ironic, certainly, given Lizardi’s *occupatio* regarding the possibly low social status of the reader: “Pero no me toca acordaros nada de esto. . . .” Yet the reader’s access to the sphere of consumption, indeed, the possibility that the reader may purchase Lizardi’s installments is then the reader’s only true and royal merit. In this sense, the *real* merit of the reader is his guarantee of the real; his status as both purchaser and edified subject allows for the existence of the work. On the side of duty, this reader secures the work’s necessity; on the side of debt, his purchase assures that the work will be published and read.

This inscription of debt, I suggest once more in conclusion, organizes Latin American literature as the principle of its order. After all, *El Periquillo Sarmiento* is the first Latin American novel: first because it must be so. In this moment of origin, Latin American literature marks itself as traversed and constituted by the exigencies of economy, by the real need to produce the very grounds of its existence. Fiction is submitted to the demand of *money* as the figure of its relation to what it hopes to bring forth: *the people*. And the people can only be figured for the literary through some material medium: money. The people, as a truth that is both extrinsic and intrinsic, forms the reason or duty of Latin American literature. The aesthetic is thus in a sense prophetic, future-oriented in the fashioning of the people-as-ground, but it is also, because of this, original, originary. If literature were not to undertake this task there would be no way for it to answer to the economic necessities that pursue it. In undertaking this debt, in answering to what it owes, literature assumes the very duty that it must—but cannot—renounce.

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is the condition of entry into public life) in spite of, with a feeling of spite towards, the forces of the market, that is, the most direct trace of necessity.

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