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Decimonónica. Paper 32.

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On Larra's Construction of Authority in his Articles: Humor

Donald E. Schurlknight

In this essay I will be attempting to cast light on some aspects of Mariano José de Larra's construction of authority as a writer. In particular, I will be focusing on the use of humor as a means of achieving authority in times of contentious political strife—a civil war was raging—and limited political freedom. However, I will also draw attention to other closely related aspects of this construction. More succinctly, I will be arguing that humor is the significant stratagem that allows Larra to construct his “authority,” by which I mean his ability to convince the readers of his articles to see things in a different light; the readers become willing, at least for a time, to believe the narrator who is guiding if not necessarily completely controlling their way of thinking as they proceed through the text.¹

I will be drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud and, to a much lesser extent, Henri Bergson and then Norman Holland, who provides not only his own theory but also a useful history and critique of theories of the psychology of humor over the ages. I do not presume to present an exhaustive account of the topic in this brief space, but I do hope to cast new light on the topic and to indicate possible directions for future development.

With the death of Ferdinand VII in the fall of 1833 there was a sudden proliferation of discourses in an atmosphere of increasing political liberalization. A wide range of conservatives, moderates, and liberals competed to have their voices heard at a moment in history when it seemed that freedom of the press was at hand. However, the government's decree of January 1, 1834, the *Ley de imprenta*, still prohibited discussion in the press of politics, religion, and philosophy, with the result that the authorities still did not permit much freedom. With the term “authorities” I will be referring to a system of control over the press exercised by censors who served at the pleasure of the government.² The censors themselves represented a diverse field of control over the press since, as Fermín Caballero has pointed out, some were more tolerant than others, but they occupied a precarious position. They could lose their jobs for approving a text that displeased the government. The “government”—with which term I mean the president of the *Consejo de Estado*, the equivalent of prime minister—exercised considerable control over the press and in practice frequently permitted little opposition to its published policies and opinions.³ For example, the government of Martínez de la Rosa was responsible for the suppression not only of *El Siglo* for having dared to defy it by

publishing blank columns where censored material would have appeared, but it was also responsible for the suppression of the *Boletín de Comercio*, which enjoyed the greatest readership of any periodical in Madrid at the moment of its disappearance in March of 1834. His administration likewise eliminated in one blow four newspapers, the *Universal*, the *Eco del Tiempo*, the *Nacional*, and the *Tiempo*, on May 14, 1834, for opposing his policies, or, in the words of Fermín Caballero, for having published “un número subversivo” (qtd. in Seoane 144).⁴ As critics have repeatedly argued, Larra’s voice in his articles was identified with a liberal ideology that placed him in constant jeopardy of being silenced by the conservative and moderate governments—such as that of Martínez—reluctant to move quickly in implementing liberal or democratic reforms.

Larra obviously lived in a time of considerable danger for writers wanting to express their thoughts overtly or directly, for censorship continued to exist, both external censorship—that is, censorship exercised by the official government censors—and in-house censorship, that exercised by the editors of periodicals fearing to displease the authorities. Any criticism was fraught with peril. It was not unusual for writers who had displeased the authorities to discover that they were suddenly without employment, nor was it unusual for an entire periodical to be suppressed for the same reason, leaving all of its employees without work.

Jean-Marc Pélorsón in an important essay makes the first significant contribution to analyzing Larra’s use of humor in this repressive climate. He remarks on what he calls the author’s “desacralization,” because, as he explains, Larra “en vez de presentarse como un espíritu lúcido y activo, de antemano seguro de su verdad, se muestra—como todos—sometido a las contingencias, a las presiones, y a las dificultades con que se tropieza para pensar y hablar libremente”; he is, in essence, constrained by the forces of the dominant ideology to adapt his discourse (172), that is, if he wishes to see his work published, an adaptation that results in adopting different writing strategies. The final result can even be the creation of a new type of writer or writings.⁵

Clearly, the historical context is instrumental in molding the nature of such writers and publications. However, even in power systems of seemingly monological discourse, there are other voices. The dominant discourse of power, that exercised by the president of the *Consejo* through the government apparatus, attempted to limit opposition to its policies, but with limited success, because, as Richard Terdiman explains, there are always differences, always discrepancies, always other voices competing to make themselves heard (18). Terdiman writes of the nineteenth-century intellectuals who contested the dominant discourses of the establishment in a continuous struggle to produce a new discourse: “Writers sought [. . .] to project an alternative, liberating *newness* against the absorptive capacity of those established discourses” (12-13). He calls these destabilizing discourses “counter-discourses”—those in opposition to the homogenizing power of the dominant discourse and in a constant struggle with that power intent on appropriating the transgressive for its own ends. He comments too on how all cultural systems intent on stability are by implication totalitarian, that is, functioning “to exclude the heterogeneous from the domain of utterance” (14). Nevertheless, we see such systems as never totally monological: other voices exist, however reticent, subdued or subjugated. Larra’s is one of these, “desacralized” as it may be, since he was not permitted to express his opinions

directly or overtly. In his articles he is searching for truth as well as information, as were the readers in a Spain where information and truth were frequently distorted or suppressed.

Of relevance to our investigation, too, and to the suggestion of desacralization, is Rosalía Cornejo-Parriego's research on postmodern writing and power, in which she establishes an interesting parallel between *la narrativa del poder* and *la novela del dictador* in Latin American fiction. She remarks on a constant paradox in the earlier of these novels, for they attack the dictatorships by using authoritarian discourses, by maintaining the tyranny of the author: the author sees, knows, and controls everything; s/he is our sole source of knowledge. She concludes that this procedure led the authors to repeat the myth of authority with which the postmodern novel breaks, for the latter will question or destroy the notion of authority (15), a procedure which, I contend, is similar to desacralization, since it too destroys the concept of monological totality.⁶ I say this is relevant, not to assert that Larra is a postmodern, which would strike us as anachronistic, but in order to draw our attention to the fact that he, in the construction of his own authority, shares some concerns and/or strategies with postmodern writers. In particular, he is constantly undermining the official discourses of power while at the same time constructing his own alternative discourse of power. Why would the authorities permit this transgression?

If the author is desacralized, as Pélorsen contends, then how does he attain the authority that allows him to make others perceive the world as he sees it, which is "the greatest power of all," as Sharon Magnarelli writes (20), and which we believe is the case here? How does he exert his narrative power so that the readers become willing subjects of manipulation, especially if, as Matthieu P. Raillard argues, his narrative is polyphonic? Larra, as do all writers, creates a discourse that he would want to be sufficiently authoritarian in order to attain power over his readers and, in this case, to attack the discourse of the authorities. That, after all, is the objective of the essayist: to persuade, to lead the readers to see things in a different way, while perhaps entertaining them at the same time.⁷

I believe that the answer to the questions I have posed lies both in the historical context and in the writing strategies employed in Larra's articles. Pélorsen suggests that the historical context permitted only a limited range of interaction with the perceived "realities." This limitation, due in large part to censorship, was an imposition forced on the writer from an early stage in his career. There were things he was not permitted to say or discuss directly. As mentioned, the *Ley de Imprenta* of January 1834, considered by many as the beginning of a thaw in governmental control of the press, still prohibited the discussion of religion, philosophy, and politics. Larra adapted his discourse magnificently, however—and it did not hurt to have some influential patrons. In fact, as G. Cervantes Martín has shown, Larra early in his career would never have gotten his start as a writer without such "friends" (71).⁸ One did not simply start writing and publishing in the reigning political circumstances. With a modicum of protection provided by such patrons, Larra had gained popularity as a writer by focusing on customs and theater. He offered a style infused with humor and irreverence, and the smiles and laughter he evoked on the part of his readers were instrumental in permitting him—by making his readers relax, by

disarming them for a moment with humor—to shift his focus subtly by means of nuanced references to current events, especially politics, topics which without that element of laughter most surely would have brought down on him the wrath of the censors, which it did nevertheless on many occasions. Humor was very important in such trying times, as Pierre Ullman has stated (38), and Larra provides evidence of his awareness of its psychological value.

Humor was not only important, it was strategic. It was a tactical maneuver in these moments of national distress, because humor functions to relieve this distress, which explains in part why the authorities too would countenance the presence of Figaro. As Sigmund Freud explains in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), “humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it” (*Jokes* 293), or, as he explains in “Humour,” “the yield of humorous pleasure arises from an economy in expenditure upon feeling” (161). That is, humorous pleasure replaces the feeling of injury, pain or distress in the observed victim(s) of that injury. Humor is a sort of defensive process (*Jokes* 299) that, without withdrawing the “ideational content bearing the distressing affect from conscious attention,” nevertheless produces pleasure since “an emotion is avoided which we should have expected because it usually accompanies the [painful, distressing] situation” (*Jokes* 301). We are induced to smile or laugh at a situation otherwise painful. Humor, as he explains, “is concerned in denying the distinction which might give rise to motives for special [negative] emotions” (*Jokes* 294). One particular peculiarity connected with the conditions under which humorous pleasure is generated is especially relevant to the study of humor in Larra’s articles. Humor prevents “a possibility implicit in the situation that an affect may be generated which would interfere with the pleasurable outcome” (*Jokes* 298). However, humor may stop this generating of an affect entirely or only partially; this last is actually the common case since it is easier to bring about, and it produces the various forms of “broken” humour—the humour that smiles through tears. It withdraws a part of its energy from the affect and in exchange gives a tinge of humour (*Jokes* 298).

But how does this happen? What makes us smile or laugh when one should expect an unpleasant emotion? In the later essay titled “Humour” Freud returns to the topic to explain the process.⁹ That “expenditure on feeling that is economized”—the avoidance of pain, despair, horror, etc., such as by means of a jest—“turns into humorous pleasure in the listener,” or reader in this case, as the emotional expectation is disappointed (“Humour” 162). But how does the humorist “bring about the mental attitude which makes a release of affect superfluous?” Freud asks. He theorizes that humor has something of grandeur and elevation, something that is liberating about it. “This grandeur,” he states,

clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocation of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also

of the pleasure principle, which is able to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances. (“Humour” 162-63)

As Holland has shown, such theories of the comic presenting “a revolt against control” were developed early, as in the writings of the Earl of Shaftesbury (90). I suspect that Larra, far from resigned to the prevailing circumstances, as is well known, was not at all unaware of the rebellious character of humor, nor of the liberating feeling it achieves in the listener/reader. Proof of this lies in the fact that the authorities repeatedly—over a period of years—countenanced his transgressive voice. They, too, I contend, were in need of “relief,” which helps to explain why such a relatively conservative and “ministerialist” periodical as *La Abeja* would still speak admiringly of Fígaro.¹⁰ As Freud comments in the closely related case of jokes, “If the joke has made us laugh, [. . .] a disposition most unfavorable for criticism will have been established in us” (*Jokes* 182). We all need to smile and laugh at some time, even the authorities, although, we should add, not all the authorities all the time—thus the importance of other voices surfacing through a subdividing of power, especially by means of a system of censors. As Holland explains in his theory of identity on the relation of humor to the individual, “We do not laugh when we feel our identity in jeopardy” (174), but we can laugh at others.

Nevertheless, Freud recognized that humor has something in it, too, that approximates it to “the regressive or reactionary processes which engage our attention so extensively in psychopathology. Its fending off the possibility of suffering” makes one think of repression (“Humour” 163). “In what, then, does the humorous attitude consist,” he asks, “without overstepping the bounds of mental health?” (“Humour” 163). To explain this he turns to his theories on the structure of the human psyche and posits that the humorist is behaving towards [the unpleasant situations] as an adult does toward a child when he recognizes and smiles at the triviality of interests and sufferings which seem so great to it. Thus the humorist would acquire his *superiority* by assuming the role of the grown-up and identifying himself *to some extent* with his father, and reducing the other people [the listeners or readers] to being children. . . . One asks oneself what it is that makes the humorist arrogate this role to himself?” (“Humour” 166; my emphasis).

Larra, of course, was not speaking directly to his readers; rather it is the narrator who occupies the role of the “humorist” in Freud’s terminology. This superiority therefore is that of Larra’s narrator who serves as guide and seer through the bewildering maze of political and social circumstances of a society in transition and in the midst of civil war—and under the severe restrictions of censorship. Nevertheless, Larra did not have all the answers, nor would he have been allowed to express them if he had possessed them, but he was convinced that it was his mission to lead, as he says in his review of Espronceda’s pamphlet “El ministerio de Mendizábal.”¹¹ Not unlike his readers in some senses, who, left in the dark, still search for answers, Larra has his narrator Fígaro turn the humor on himself, as at the end of “Vuelva usted mañana,” where Fígaro confesses to suffer from the same fault—procrastination, among others—as do other Spaniards. Freud sees this turn as another step in explaining the processes of humor when he recalls the situation “in which a person adopts a humorous attitude towards himself in order to ward off possible suffering. Is there any sense,” he asks, “in saying that someone is treating himself like a child and is at the same time playing the part of a superior adult towards that child?”

(“Humour” 164). In response to this question he explains that the ego is not a simple entity. It harbours within it, as its nucleus, a special agency—the super-ego. Genetically, the super-ego is the heir to the parental agency. It often keeps the ego in strict dependence and still really treats it as the parents, or the father, once treated the child. We obtain a dynamic explanation of the humorous attitude, therefore, if we assume that it consists in the humorist’s having withdrawn the psychical accent (cathexis or psychical energy) from his ego and having transposed it on to his super-ego. To the super-ego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial; and, with this new distribution of energy, it may become an easy matter for the super-ego to suppress the ego’s possibilities of reacting, that is, reacting with unpleasant emotions (“Humour” 164). He concludes that “the subject suddenly hyperconnects his super-ego and then, proceeding from it, alters the reactions of the ego” (“Humour” 165). In this context it is the narrator Fígaro who functions as the superego altering the reactions of the ego, the readers.

Nevertheless, Freud realizes that in his theories the super-ego is “known as a severe master” and that “it accords ill with such a character that the super-ego should condescend to enabling the ego to obtain a small yield of pleasure” (“Humour” 166).¹² However, as he continues, “It is also true that, in bringing about the humorist attitude, the super-ego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion” (“Humour” 166). Yes, it is offering an escape from that reality by affording the pleasurable feeling that we call humor, although the “ideational content” never disappears, for Larra though his narrator Fígaro never allows the serious thought behind the humor to vanish completely.

Freud asserts that, although we do not know why, we feel this pleasure produced by humor to be especially liberating and elevating. Moreover, the jest made by humour is not the essential thing. It has only the value of a preliminary. The main thing is the intention which humour carries out, whether it is in relation to the self or other people. It means: “Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children—just worth making a jest about!” (“Humour” 166).

These are profound words for those who propose to analyze the works of Larra, who almost always attempted to make his readers laugh or smile at the inanities, absurdities, and abuses rampant in Spanish life. We feel uplifted with his humor, looking down upon this little world and all its flaws and trivialities, but Freud’s account of humor is not exhaustive either. As if he were recounting a cautionary tale, he concedes that “[i]f it is really the super-ego which, in humour, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, this will teach us that we have still a great deal to learn about the nature of the super-ego” (“Humour” 166; my emphasis).

However, we should ask, was Larra cognizant of this psychology of humor as sketched in the preceding pages of this essay? Was he aware of the strategic elements in the art of using humor? We should not expect some statement from him along the lines of “I use humor in order to . . .” or “My criticism is couched in humor because. . .” Nevertheless, as critic of theater, customs, and—when allowed—politics, Larra reveals a keen awareness that his success was owed in large measure to the employment of humor in his articles. Evidence of the expectation of humor on the part of his readers is to be found early in his career, when, for example, in “Reflexiones acerca del modo de hacer resucitar

el teatro español” (20 December 1832) he alerts his readers to the fact that in this article they will not be getting the usual dose of humor: “Hase apoderado hoy la murria de nosotros: no espere, pues, el lector donaires ni chanzonetas [. . .]” (I, 122a). Knowing that his readers expect humor in his critiques of what he considers bad or unpleasant, he provides a similar warning at the beginning of a much later article, his review of *Antony* (23 June 1836): “Por hoy y hasta mañana seremos graves: la primera impresión de este drama, más importante de lo que a primera vista parece, no nos deja disposición alguna para la risa con que suele *Figaro* anatematizar los dislates que se agolpan en nuestra escena [. . .]” (II, 246a).

In addition, and most importantly, we encounter evidence of his awareness of how humor functions to make criticism more palatable to those who might otherwise be profoundly offended in “Carta de Andrés Niporesas al Bachiller” (30 December 1832):

[N]osotros [. . .] creyendo que cuando la autoridad protege abiertamente la virtud y el orden, nunca se la podrá desagradar levantando la voz contra el vicio y el desorden, y mucho menos si se hacen las *críticas* generales, *embozadas con la chanza y la ironía*, sin aplicaciones de ninguna especie, y en un folleto que *más tiende a excitar en su lectura alguna ligera sonrisa* que a gobernar el mundo. (I, 130a; my emphasis)

To all appearances, Larra understood the psychological value of humor in the precarious art of criticism in these troubled times of censorship. Humor also had a monetary value, of which Larra was clearly aware, a topic to which we shall return later.

With humor, Larra, through his narrator, shared with the public a sense of disquiet over the nature of society and the government’s mismanagement of the nation’s problems. In doing so, he was establishing a bond with the reading public that was helpful in constructing his authority. Although perhaps more lucid than they in his appraisal of the circumstances, he was, in a sense, a “fellow traveler” or companion to his readers on that road to the future, in search of truth and even very basic information at a time of great political uncertainty and in an atmosphere of confusion and secretiveness. He and his readers shared the same concerns; on the political front, he was more like his readers in the 1830s, left so frequently in the dark. However, this circumstance, this search for knowledge in trying conditions, is also a strategy aimed at making his readers identify with his narrator, since they too lacked free access to what was occurring on the political stage.

Important too in establishing a writer’s authority is the *acuerdo* between author and readers, of which Pélorsen writes, a shared perspective that must exist concerning a topic of discussion, or, lacking this *acuerdo*, must be constructed by the writer (171). In his study he focuses on how Larra uses humor in his “Tercera carta de un liberal de acá a un liberal de allá,” written in October of 1834 although not published until the collection of his articles began to appear in book format in 1835. Drawing on Henri Bergson’s theories, rather than those of Freud, who nevertheless frequently mentions Bergson, Pélorsen asserts that humor always demands a sort of creative participation on the part of the recipient of that humor, that is, in this case, the reader (171).¹³ In other words, an

ideological or affective connection is established between writer and reader. Bergson argues that “laughter is always the laughter of a group” and that it implies complicity (6). Furthermore, Bergson states that laughter has a social function and that “[i]t must have a *social* signification” (8), indeed, as we have already seen in exploring Freud’s theories. Holland reminds us that Ernst Kris, in working with Freud’s theories, also came to the conclusion that “laughter is a way of making contact with other people in the environment; hence it is purposeful” (55). Humor was almost always a significant component of Larra’s journalistic style, as his choice of the pseudonym Fígaro seems to suggest. In the epigraph to his article “Mi nombre y mis propósitos” (15 January 1833) he cites these words from the first act of Beaumarchais’s *Le Barbier de Seville*:

Le comte: *¿Qui t’a donné une philosophie aussi gaie?*
 Fígaro: *L’habitude du malheur; je me presse de rire de tout, de peur d’être obligé d’en pleurer.* (I, 173)¹⁴

The writer was obviously aware of that connection between unpleasant realities and the value of humor in repressing them to a certain extent, as Freud explains. Furthermore, Larra’s penchant for political allusions or references, which constantly got him into trouble with the authorities and frequently resulted in the mutilation or suppression of his articles, is a clear indication of his desire to provide a useful function, as Bergson insists.¹⁵ By using humor, as well as by his frequent use of the first person plural “we” to express his opinions, the writer was attempting to reduce the distance between himself and his readers; he was establishing a community of interest. However, this discursive tactic is two-directional on the part of Larra. On the one hand, he is drawing the readers closer to himself ideologically and affectively. Like any good essayist, he is using all the arms at his disposal to make the readers feel closer to sharing his way of seeing things, like one friend making another laugh over the absurdities they are forced to endure. At the same time, nevertheless, Larra is constructing his own discourse of power that allows him to convince the readers of his perspective on the world. By making the readers smile or laugh, by seemingly befriending them, by arrogating to himself—or at least to his narrator—the role of the parent, the super-ego, and making his readers not take so seriously for a moment the unpleasant reality, the writer is bridging the gap that separates him from his readers: the readers are becoming not only his “children,” as Freud would have it, but also his subjects, his puppets, the willingly manipulated.¹⁶ The writer through his narrator then serves as their guide and interpreter and will lead them to think and see as he does. Evidence of his success in using this tactic, and thereby in establishing his authority, is seen in his enormous popularity: *La Abeja*, the “ministerialist” Madrid newspaper mentioned previously and which was in competition with the *Revista Española* for which Larra wrote, notes admiringly on August 14, 1834, “how everyone in the provinces loves to read [Fígaro’s] articles,” and on August 12 it had mentioned his great appeal to women readers (Schurknight, *Spanish Romanticism* 106; 110).

Another aspect of Larra’s humor that is important in achieving the reader’s complicity is brought to our attention by Pélorsón. The narrator in the “Tercera carta,” as in many other essays, presents himself as a naïve witness of the current events, as someone who observes what is occurring in the world of politics and who seemingly concurs that the government’s actions in every instance are the appropriate ones.¹⁷ However, by means of

irony, allusion and word play, the reader is convinced that the opposite is the truth. The apology for the government, magnificently crafted discursively, is quite clumsy ideologically. As Pélorsón comments, there are so many winks or *guiños* on the part of this narrator in his pseudo-apology of the authorities' actions that we end up identifying the narrator with the author himself (172). We are reluctant to identify the narrator with the real author, but we are inclined to agree that no narrator could be so insistently naïve as to misinterpret absolutely everything that was happening on the “real” stage of politics—he is obviously a fictional creation being manipulated by the author in the real world; or, as I would suggest, the narrative is so unreliable that the reader detects the true “meaning” of the implied author who, in the realm of politics at least, could possibly be identified with the real author.¹⁸ This is a strategy employed by Larra in many essays: use irony to say the opposite of what the words appear to say on the surface, but in such a clumsy, laughable way that the truth is lying right there just below the surface. It might even be considered Larra's trademark, an element that permitted readers to recognize his style and to exclaim, “This must be Larra!” or “Fígaro”—the name of his narrator which Larra had contributed to conflating with himself the real author.¹⁹ It is this recognizable presence of the author's style, I believe, with his heavy doses of irony and, at times, sarcasm in an otherwise seemingly authoritarian discourse—one that tries to tell us what to think—that at one and the same time deconstructs that authority and reconstructs a “disguised” or surreptitious authority based on the faith that the readers have deposited in the narrator to help them perceive the “truth.” In other words, there is always another way to interpret the “events”; and, despite the dialogic or multi-voiced quality of Larra's articles, as Raillard so well explains, the author does have a preferred and frequently transgressive perspective on events and conditions.²⁰ Larra's art was not only a form of escape through humor; the “ideational content” was always there. Larra was teaching his readers to see below the surface, to read between the lines.

The article chosen by Pélorsón to explain Larra's humor is heavily charged with the politics of the moment in Spain, as Ullman has demonstrated clearly (214-27). By way of example, I offer the following excerpt as indicative of the author's satirical style as well as fondness for the theme that “all the world is a stage,” and all the world is theater. The passage revolves around the word *representar* as the writer plays with its meanings, ranging from representative government to performance, acting, theater, memorials, petitions, masks, and unreality:

¿Me preguntas si es gobierno representativo lo que tenemos? No entiendo yo muchas veces tus preguntas. Todo aquí es representativo. Cada liberal es una pura y viva representación de los trabajos y pasión de Cristo, porque el que no anda azotado, anda crucificado. Luego, no hay oficina en que no se encuentren representaciones de algún quejoso: hay, por otra parte, muchos que están representando a cada paso sobre lo mucho que no se hace y lo poco que se deshace; verdad es que no se cuida más de estas representaciones que de las teatrales; pero ¿son o no son representaciones? Cada español, por otra parte, representa un triste papel en el drama general, y *toda nuestra patria* está a dos dedos de representar el cuadro del hambre . . . Todo es, pues, pura representación [. . .]. (II, 46a; my emphasis)

The reader is led to conclude that the world of politics is one of pure performance, a masking of the unpleasant realities that lurk behind the façade; but the unmasking is done so skillfully, so delightfully, that the reader is more prone to smile or laugh than to cry. The narrator sums up the situation with this ironic statement: “Rectifica, pues, amigo Silva, tus ideas con respecto a España, y cree no sólo que vivimos bajo un regimen representativo, sino que somos libres más que ninguna nación del mundo, y que tenemos amplia libertad de imprenta” (II, 47b). The readers know that the opposite is true, but, thanks to Larra’s humorous representation of the political scenario, they smile for a moment at the disagreeable reality.²¹

Word play and, especially, irony are tools employed by the writer to invite the readers to observe the discrepancy between what is being said and what is actually “meant.” At times, as mentioned, irony is lying right there on the surface for the reader and does not require much penetration, particularly when the topic seemingly lacks political allusions. For example, in “Yo quiero ser cómico” (1 March 1833), another article relating to theater, the readers are treated to a succession of ironic statements by the narrator. In the following passage the writer first prepares the reader for the tone of what is to come: “Ni fuera yo Fíguro, ni tuviera esa travesura y maliciosa índole que malas lenguas me atribuyen, si no sacara a luz pública cierta visita que no ha muchos días tuve en mi propia casa” (I, 187a).

Then, having refreshed the reading public’s memory about the character of his narrator, he presents a dialog between Fíguro and an aspiring actor who has come to ask him for a letter of recommendation:

- [. . .] [c]omo yo quiero ser cómico . . .
 - Cierto. ¿Y qué sabe usted? ¿Qué ha estudiado usted?
 - ¿Cómo? ¿Se necesita saber algo?
 - No; para ser actor, ciertamente, no necesita usted saber cosa mayor . . .
 - Por eso; yo no quisiera singularizarme; siempre es malo entrar con ese pie en una corporación.
 - Ya le entiendo a usted; usted quisiera ser cómico aquí, y así será preciso examinarle *por la pauta del país*. ¿Sabe usted castellano?
 - Lo que usted ve . . ., para hablar; las gentes me entienden . . .
 - Pero la gramática, y la propiedad, y . . .
 - No, señor.
 - Bien, jeso es muy bueno! Pero sabrá usted desgraciadamente el latín, y habrá estudiado humanidades, bellas letras . . .
 - Perdone usted.
 - [. . .]
 - Y de educación, de modales y usos de sociedad, ¿a qué altura se halla usted?
 - Mal; porque si va a decir verdad, yo soy un pobrecillo: yo era escribiente en una mala administración; me echaron por holgazán, y me quiero meter a cómico porque se me figura a mí que es oficio en que no hay nada que hacer . . .
- Y tiene usted razón. (I, 188a-b; my emphasis)²²

As in the previous case of the “Tercera carta,” Larra is here engaging with the historical context in order to present with humor and by means of irony his displeasure with the current state of affairs in Spain. Pélorson, through Bergson, had drawn our attention to how humor and irony are interconnected (170-71). Both are in fact rampant in the articles we have looked at: the reader is led to understand that the “truth” is the opposite of what is being said; and the humor radiates in great part from the accumulation of detail upon detail, of absurdity upon absurdity. As the words emphasized in the quote from “Yo quiero ser cómico” indicate, *por la pautta del país*, this is how things are in Spain, but the narrator’s humorous attitude has allowed the readers to avoid temporarily the pain of that realization.

As mentioned, Larra was obliged by the historical context to avoid engaging in any direct criticism of the political circumstances. When he limited his critique to customs or to theater, this avoidance was not as difficult as when he broached topics of political interest, such as representative government, as seen above in “Tercera carta,” which was suppressed, probably for the reasons suggested by Ullman (224-27). Nevertheless, even in essays on customs and theater he had to be careful not to lay the blame for any wrongs, abuses or stupidities on the authorities but, rather, to suggest that these shortcomings were the fault of the people or *la sociedad* in general. However, in these highly charged political times, the readers were attuned to politics and probably were looking beyond the official statements; they were indeed reading between the lines. As Larra’s contemporary F. Fernández de Córdova states, “Creo yo que, al revés de lo que sucede ahora, en que la mayoría del público permanece indiferente ante la lucha de los políticos, no existía entonces español alguno que no ocupara su puesto en los partidos y defendiera sus ideas por todos los medios imaginables” (I, 113). Many stood up and expressed their ideas, and many fell victim to an intolerant structure of authority. Larra expressed his ideas in an oblique fashion, for the most part, with relative success in circumventing the censors.

Although he may certainly have wished to express his political opinions openly and freely, I conjecture that with time he had forged for himself a mask—his acclaimed narrator—of such great popularity and power that his style, highly infused with humor, irony and sarcasm, became an element clearly identified with his fictional persona, Fígaro.²³ That is, a discourse of veiled reference and suggestion, at first imposed on him from without by the circumstances, became assimilated by the writer to the point that it constituted part of his professional mask. Perhaps Larra was always a satirist at heart, but the popularity and economic success of “Fígaro” would have certainly been a powerful incentive to continue donning this mask which was his narrator.²⁴ As Espejo-Saavedra notes, the discourse associated with the mischievous, malicious, mordant Fígaro was recognized and applauded by the public (41). In the 2009 biography of Larra written by one of his descendants we see that Larra was evidently aware that the amusement he provided the reading public with his humor was a significant key to his success. In the prospectus for his own newspaper titled *Fígaro* that he had hoped to found he refers to the kindness of the public “que se ha dignado tributar algunas sonrisas a su alegre pluma” and promises to include *artículos jocosos* in the new periodical (Miranda de Larra 135-37). In fact, it is the same expression—*artículos jocosos*—that Larra utilizes when drawing up contracts for his prospective employment in 1836 with *El Español*, *El Mundo*, and *El Redactor General*. In the draft for the first of these newspapers we see that he will perhaps need to “sustituir mi

contrato nuevo por el cual quede obligado en las mismas formas y condiciones con la sola diferencia de firmar mis artículos con mi apellido o mi inicial en vez del seudónimo *Figaro*, que supone *artículos jocosos* [. . .]” (Miranda de Larra 143; my emphasis). In the contract for the last two we read that Don Mariano José de Larra “procurará al periódico titulado *El Redactor General seis artículos jocosos* al mes, firmados *Figaro*, no pudiendo usar de esta firma ni género en ningún otro periódico sino *El Mundo* [. . .]” (Miranda de Larra 235; my emphasis). *Figaro* clearly implied humor: Larra recognized both its psychological value and its economic value.

As I have argued, one of the methods of establishing his authority was by means of humor, laughter; through humor he was pulling the curtains aside and exposing the “verities” that lay behind them, and in doing so he was cunningly breaking the rules and drawing the readers closer to him as accomplices. He was not attacking straightforwardly, or, as Pélorsen suggests, he was not presenting himself as a lucid clairvoyant who knew all, saw all, and had all the answers. Larra’s was not a monological discourse but, rather, a discourse of questioning, that is, a transgressive discourse that awakens uncertainty and provokes all sorts of questions as it prods the readers to look more closely for the motives that lurk behind the façades, as we saw in the passage on *representar*.²⁵

Through his narrator the writer is drawing closer to his readers by insinuating that he is more like them, that he too does not have all the answers, but that he can certainly see many of the wrongs, the abuses, the many issues that are left waiting for some governmental authority to act upon. He too was suffering in these trying circumstances, just as they were, and humor and laughter established a bond between them that transcended political affiliations. The public, so tired of the ineffective steps, lack of steps and inaction of the authorities, so frustrated at having to endure the harsh circumstances associated with a civil war that seemed to defy resolution, established a bond with this writer who dared to voice his complaints, even if cautiously—and with humor. As Ullman has commented, Larra, “the people’s jester,” was just what the people needed in these difficult times (38).²⁶

Larra’s themes, I believe, were always “serious,” although his discourse was most often infused with humor—achieved with word play, allusion, irony, and sarcasm. This latter was his forte, his triumph, his public mask and performance. Humor—the irreverence and the liberating of inhibitions—was the tool employed to achieve acquiescence and consent. It was the tool not only crucial to creating his authority and to circumventing the censors, but to providing economic prosperity, a clear proof that his authority had been established. Such “authority” would also open the doors for him to politics eventually. To his remarkable talent and skill in using humor he owed his success and the public’s attention. Indeed, Larra had his own power that he himself had created. He had created a discourse that, once allowed and acknowledged by the authorities, competed with and attacked the dominant ideological discourses. In a sense, his discourse too was authoritarian, for it commanded assent and respect; it controlled the way one thinks and

sees, even if it invited the reader to question things; but it was not associated with the authorities. Such a powerful voice would become, eventually, the object of the efforts of the authorities wanting to appropriate it for their own purposes.

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Notes

- ¹ I employ the narratological terms as found in Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse*.
- ² See María Cruz Seoane (141-55) for an overview of the press in this period, and Larra's contemporary Fermín Caballero for his comments on the censors (qtd. in Seoane 141-42).
- ³ These policies and opinions of the government are what I call the official or dominant discourse.
- ⁴ See Schurknight's discussion of this topic in "The Madrid Press and Rebellion: *El Tiempo* of 1834."
- ⁵ F. Courtney Tarr, in an article commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of Larra's death, writes that Larra was "no mere *costumbrista*" and that, abandoning the "outmoded style and subject-matter of the *artículo de costumbres*," he created essays that "transcend the limits of the *genre*" (47-48). See Mary Lee Bretz, who writes of the changing characteristics of the essay.
- ⁶ I employ the terminology "monological totality" as used by Stephen Greenblatt in "Towards a Poetics of Culture" (8).
- ⁷ José Escobar discusses other means of establishing authority employed by Larra: for example, drawing on the support of already established, eminent writers such as Horace, who commanded respect (120ff).
- ⁸ See Gregorio C. Martín's discussion of Larra's influential, especially pages 71-90.
- ⁹ James Strachey, translator and editor of Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, writes that "after an interval of more than twenty years" since the publication of this work, Freud "picked up the thread again with his short paper on 'Humour' (1927), in which he used his newly propounded structural view of the mind to throw fresh light on an obscure problem" (33-34).
- ¹⁰ See Chapter 4 of Schurknight's *Spanish Romanticism in Context*, especially pages 103-110, for an account of *La Abeja*'s ministerialist affiliation.
- ¹¹ Larra also refers to his "mission" in the much earlier "El casarse pronto y mal," 30 November 1832 (I, 113a). All citations of Larra's works are from the Carlos Seco Serrano edition *Obras*, with volume, page number, and a lower case letter indicating the left (a) or right (b) column. The Romantics, convinced of their superiority, also were convinced that it was their mission to lead society toward a better future. See Schurknight's *Power and Dissent*, 117-20. David T. Gies provides an illuminating assessment of Larra vis-à-vis Prime Minister Mendizábal in "Larra and Mendizábal: A Writer's Response to Government."
- ¹² With "small yield of pleasure," Freud proposes that "humorous pleasure never reaches the intensity of the pleasure in the comic or in jokes" ("Humour" 166). The comic in Larra's art is yet to be fully explored.
- ¹³ Pélorsón states that "hemos renunciado a discutir la definición freudiana del Humor. Nos parece que tal discusión no aportaría mayores elementos para la comprensión del humor de Larra en su especificidad literaria. Por lo demás, ahí aparece un enorme problema: el de la aplicación del psicoanálisis a la literatura" (174 n.4). I believe, however, that Freud's theories on humor can help us to understand some aspects of Larra's construction of authority.
- ¹⁴ This quote appears as an epigraph after the title of the article, therefore there is no indication of column.

- ¹⁵ The “Tercera carta” never appeared in the Madrid press, most surely the result of censorship, but instead appeared in the collection of articles Larra began to publish under the title *Figaro* in 1835. See Ullman (388, n.1) and Pérez-Vidal (*Artículos* 561, n.1), who revisits this matter in his edition *Figaro* (274, n.1).
- ¹⁶ Perhaps related to this mention of the “willingly manipulated” is Peter Standish’s suggestion that the popularity of “illusive writing” can be taken “as evidence that people want to be deceived in literature and perhaps in other areas of life, too” (77). Of relevance also to this topic of the construction of authority, which is a kind of power over the reader, is Michel Foucault’s statement in *Power/Knowledge*, where he is quoted as stating that “[t]he procedures of every form of power are suspected of being fascist, just as the masses are in their desires. There lies beneath the affirmation of the desire of the masses for fascism a historical problem which we have yet to secure the means of resolving” (139). This thought, I believe, dovetails with Freud’s theories of humor and the super-ego, wherein the humorist or parental agency—in this context the narrator—attempts to control the behavior of his readers or “children.”
- ¹⁷ This article appears in the collection *Figaro* of 1835, but it was signed “El liberal de acá” (Pérez Vidal, ed., *Figaro* 274-77), as Ullman had already reminded us (388n1).
- ¹⁸ On the topic of real author versus narrator in Larra’s political articles, see Schurknight’s *Power and Dissent*, 26-27. In Miranda de Larra’s reproduction of contracts penned by Larra for his new employment we encounter the fusion of narrator and real author on several occasions, as, e.g., when he writes “*Figaro* escribirá para *La Revista Española* [. . .]” (141-42).
- ¹⁹ Ramón Espejo-Saavedra writes that Larra realized that “el narrador que él había inventado creaba ciertas expectativas en el público y condicionaba la percepción del autor mismo y de las intenciones de su obra” (36).
- ²⁰ Linda Hutcheon, in the *The Politics of Postmodernism*, draws our attention to the difference between “events” and “facts”:

“Among the consequences of the postmodern desire to denaturalize history is a new self-consciousness about the distinction between the brute *events* of the past and the historical *facts* we construct out of them. Facts are events to which we have given meaning.” (57)

See Raillard’s excellent article examining what he calls Larra’s “rhetorical authority,” its decentralized narrative achieved through the use of polyphony.

- ²¹ Irony, as Freud writes, “produces comic pleasure in the hearer” [or reader] (*Jokes* 232). The universality of Freud’s ideas on humor is attested to in the following nod to popular culture, a letter to the editor appearing in *Newsweek* (22 June 2009: 6). It is a response to the magazine’s use of humorist and comic Stephen Colbert as guest editor in the previous edition of June 15: “Thank you for putting politics at the forefront of serious humor. I want and need more humor in my day-to-day. Life is very hard. I recently lost my job of 11 years, and my wife lost hers of 15 years. Keeping a sense of humor has worked for me so many times.” We should not forget that Larra too was a writer of popular culture in his own times.
- ²² Of course, this passage and this article could indeed be interpreted in a political key. Servodidio refers to the writer’s use of irony in this article as “el método de presentar la ironía mediante la exageración” (148).

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- ²³ Although we should be careful to discern between *narrator* and *real author*, there is no discernible difference between Fígaro and Larra in the expression of political ideas.
- ²⁴ Michael Iarocci discusses the market commodification of Fígaro in *Properties of Modernity*.
- ²⁵ This is the sense, too, of his self-accusatory words appearing in “La nochebuena de 1836”: “[I]nventas palabras y haces de ellas sentimientos, ciencias, artes, objetos de existencia. ¡Política, gloria, saber, poder, riqueza, amistad, amor! Y cuando descubres que son palabras, blasfemas y maldices” (II, 317a-b).
- ²⁶ Tarr had written at an earlier date, “As the people’s jester—for such, in effect, was *Fígaro*—he could permit himself liberties of critical expression impossible in any other form” (47).

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