

Pito Pérez: Mexican Middleman

Robert S. Stone*

United States Naval Academy

This article situates the popular picaresque novel *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* (1938) in its context of literary and social history. As a comic text, the novel engages readers of all kinds in an attempt to foment change, despite the shortcomings of the protagonist and the revolution through which he lives. The work ensures the survival of the *pícaro* in Mexico as a sardonic hero who, nonetheless, will not wholly abandon revolutionary ideals and, indeed, wishes to pass these on to the growing middle class that spawned both Pito Pérez and his more fortunate author, J. Rubén Romero.

Este artículo sitúa la conocida novela picaresca *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* (1938) en su contexto de historia literaria y social. Como texto cómico, la novela atrae a toda clase de lectores en su intento de fomentar el cambio, a pesar de las fallas del protagonista y del contexto revolucionario en el que vive. La obra asegura la supervivencia del pícaro mexicano como un héroe sarcástico que, no obstante, no abandonará los ideales revolucionarios y, de hecho, desea transmitirlos a la creciente clase media que dio luz a ambos Pito Pérez y su autor más afortunado, J. Rubén Romero.

Many picaresque works resonate with historical tensions that appear at various moments in given societies. In Spain, at the dawn of the genre, the encounter with the New World allowed even the lowest-born member of society to dream of attaining wealth and honor, a hope which coincided with a rise in literacy and the emergence of the earliest picaresque heroes. Ironically, nearly four hundred years later the protagonist

*Dedicated to James Willis Robb

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of J. Rubén Romero's *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* (1938) faces many of the same obstacles that faced Lazarillo de Tormes, allowing for a seemingly "classic" appropriation of the genre to appear in the twentieth century (Ziomek 1970: 947).

In an earlier study, I traced the spread of picaresque narrative from Spain to other parts of Europe and to the New World, where Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816) transformed the Spanish picaresque legacy into a bildungsroman for a new Mexican elite and soon-to-be independent bureaucracy that needed to develop its own brand of competence (Stone 1998: 183). The novel's very visible literacy was indicative of Lizardi's will to validate his emergent nation and its people. But the new educated elite that Lizardi envisioned did not materialize after independence was won in 1821:

From the 1820s to the late 1870s, domestic unrest consumed Mexico. Rival military leaders vied for power in the aftermath of liberation from Spain; liberals clashed with conservatives over separation of church and state; the United States annexed mineral-rich northern provinces following the Mexican-American War (1846-1848); and the French conquest created additional turmoil. Under these circumstances, businessmen and ordinary citizens alike feared for their lives as well as their money. (Gonzales 2002: 10)

On the eve of independence, Periquillo's Mexico was a hopeful place, but the post-independent Mexico of Lizardi's other pícaro, Don Catrín de la Fachenda, was a nation where decadent old-world values flourished, as exemplified by the socially destructive combination of sloth and perceived privilege known as *catrinismo*. In this regard, the anthropologist Eric Wolf has asserted that "[t]he war of independence . . . gave many a part-time soldier his first taste of military power and of the personal benefits to be derived from its exercise, thus laying the basis for the emergence of a stratum of military entrepreneurs which was to plague Mexican society for more than a century" (Wolf 1969: 8). History thus intervened between Lizardi's two picaresques in the form of independence, and the cautious optimism of the first novel became the bitter condemnation of the second, a divide that would deepen in the revolutionary world of Pito Pérez. Don Catrín attempted to lift himself up by claims to *criollo* nobility and the pursuit of a military career, but Pito, a century later, never considers the martial path to power and advancement: he is a self-proclaimed man of peace.

Pito Pérez's social status, in fact, aligns him with the middle-class protagonists of the Romantic bildungsroman just as certainly as with the early-modern pícaro Lazarillo de Tormes. In what follows, I want to pursue *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* from the activist side of its genre her-

itage: as a conscious appropriation of the picaresque as a means to critique the dominant order in a time of change. In order to make this case, I will first outline how the picaresque novel is essentially a social-critical genre and, as such, able to speak for evolving social classes in various permutations. After that I will situate *Pito Pérez* in its context of Mexican history, showing how its message is articulated to a broad readership, and particularly to an emergent and vulnerable middle-class trying to transact the pressures of post-revolutionary Mexico. My conclusion will then return to the question of genre, namely to *Pito Pérez* as the harbinger of a new generation of picaresque heroes surviving in a world that looked to revolutionary ideals in order to overcome the old orders, but which was less than successful in realizing its hopes.

In previous work on the picaresque, I focus on certain moments (such as the description of Pito's clothes, to be discussed below) where texts teach readers to view the world in less conventional or new ways. By pursuing this idea along lines suggested by Bakhtinian dialogics, it can be asserted that the pícaro prefigures the hero of the bildungsroman—both are upwardly mobile and occasionally reprehensible representatives of an emerging class, torn between resistance and conformity. Narratives presenting these heroes, then, may be seen as didactic responses to class struggle, i.e., popular forms of literature designed not only to resonate with readers, but perhaps to *direct* and *define* them as well, encoding possible strategies of social resistance or conformity along with an awareness of their consequences (Stone 1998: 1–2).

In particular, in an effort to show how texts respond to socio-political and cultural realities, as hero and reader are presented with an inventory of social roles to be negotiated, I search for moments that foreground the act of reading and beg for interpretation. Picaresque narrative is thus seen as educational in the sense of fostering evolutionary change through exemplary lessons in how to read the book of the world. If we take this genre broadly, as a narrative depicting the success or failure of an individual in a semi-fictional world, then we unite the picaresque with the bildungsroman. The attention to social learning and to the “reading” of culture through the experience of literature brings together two genres as biographical responses to volatile times. While the bildungsroman typically depicts the rise of the middle class into elite status, the picaresque novel, its more durable comic forebear, dramatizes the trials facing the middle class from its Spanish beginnings to its current global explosion. The Spanish picaresque is at base a narrative portraying an attempt to achieve stability either among the bourgeoisie or as part of a traditional elite and, again, it is this thread that binds it to the bildungsroman, the genre that follows the rise of its hero to his destiny.

The world depicted in both the picaresque novel and the bildungsroman is a changing, unstable place, and a character or type emerges and evolves with it (Bakhtin 1981: 365).

In analyzing the initiation of picaresque narratives and protagonists into their historical settings, my guiding consideration is an attempted awareness of intended readerships and, more specifically, an awareness of what they may find in these popular works that not only entertains them, but also tries to engage them in dialogue with their own culture and history. Justification for such a critical stance need not be sought only in postmodern treatments or reader-response theory, for, as Frank Chandler noted in his groundbreaking monograph on the picaresque novel over a century ago, "We do not so much look at the rogue as borrow his eyes with which to see the world" (Chandler [1899] 1974: 60). (In borrowing the eyes of death, Pito Pérez takes this to its logical end, paving the way for such necropolitan narrators as Pedro Páramo and Artemio Cruz.) Accordingly, my emphasis here is to be upon a contextual reading of the hero's experiences of shaping and being shaped in the increasingly secular and capitalist world of post-revolutionary Mexico. By taking a cue from the protagonist's experience, a reader is positioned to absorb a text's lessons into his own worldview.

Just as *Lazarillo*, a nebulous figure of folklore, was given a definite lineage and locus in picaresque literature, subsequent works in the tradition show the topicalization of reading, attaching it to places and times easily recognized by a reader contemporary with the text. That is, these novels locate a reader and reading in a familiar setting and, furthermore, stage this meeting as a creative space in which social reform may take place. This is not to suggest, however, that *Lazarillo* is necessarily an Ur-text for my generic scheme. It is equally a product of its particular moment, as *Naufragios* (or, for that matter, *The Golden Ass*) was before it and *Guzmán de Alfarache* (or *La familia de Pascual Duarte*) was after. Mikhail Bakhtin's structuralist qualification of the picaresque as a road novel through one's own land (Bakhtin 1981: 243-44) is not so broad as to lose significance. Movement is inherent as a narrative strategy for the genre, but that movement is primarily social and sentimental, while only secondarily geographical. As seen in *Gil Blas*, the setting may be largely foreign or, as in the Brazilian serial novel *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias*, the action may occur entirely in a single city (a topos for the age of urbanization). Similarly, the episodes of *Pito Pérez* take place entirely in the towns of Michoacán through which Pito wanders before and after the military phase of the revolution (López 1997: 80). The picaresque hero is indeed a traveler, but he is more importantly a mover and a shaker, a social climber and an instigator (Stone 1998: 167-68). *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* uses the leverage of the provin-

cial small town to show readers how distant the hopes of the Mexican Revolution remain, attainable only in a future that Mexicans themselves can create.

The Pícaro in Mexico: a Dual Heritage

The century-long gap between Lizardi's two picaresque novels and Romero's *Pito Pérez* attests to the continuing associations of the genre with revolutionary moments in history: the first two appear just before and soon after independence, while the third intentionally frames the revolution. Still another difference between Lizardi's *Periquillo* and *Don Catrín* is that the first belongs proudly to Mexico's cultural patrimony, while the second is a relatively obscure work, known more to specialists than to the general public. As the first truly Mexican novel, *Periquillo*'s status in literary history is unassailable, its fame as high literature enduring, yet this status is not enjoyed by *Don Catrín de la Fachenda* (1832). Apparently, the readership of the nineteenth century was not very receptive to Lizardi's later ironies.

According to literary history, then, there are dual strands in the evolution of the Mexican picaresque genre, depending on whether we take Lizardi's first novel or his last as the prototype. The former is long, didactic, and idealistic; the latter short, subtle, and caustic. This dichotomy comes as no surprise to the student of picaresque literature, however, since the first two Spanish picaresque novels split along similar lines (although in opposite chronological order) with Guzmán de Alfarache's self-contradictory verbosity following Lazarillo de Tormes's acerbic concision. Structural differences notwithstanding, all of these works construct their protagonists' lives around real history and geography, and it is these "real" aspects that are of principal interest here, seen as vital to an understanding of the genre's continuing popularity and, more particularly, to the persistent fame of *Pito Pérez*. The key to such an understanding must begin with the history behind the character of the pícaro himself, as Italian critic Alberto del Monte has stated: "sólo una investigación histórica puede arrancar de la mueca del pícaro el secreto de su rebeldía y de su desesperación, de su fuga de la realidad" (del Monte 1971: 162). Despite being a pícaro who wants nothing more from the world than for it to let him live "decorosamente," Pito Pérez can be seen as Mexico's post-colonial heir to the tribe of Lazarillo, his life story the twentieth century's most fully realized picaresque in that tradition. Pito's modest desire is not revolutionary, but it becomes so in times that promise much change and deliver little.

In the wake of the Mexican Revolution, with increasing literacy and social awareness among members of all classes, Pito Pérez finds his au-

dience, suggesting that he fills a broad need for his readership, addressing issues topical not only at the time of publication, but even to this day, despite being largely ignored by academia.¹ Three film versions of *Pito Pérez* have been made—in 1943, 1957 and 1986—and Romero himself resurrected his character in the 1945 epilogue “Algunas cosillas de Pito Pérez que se me quedaron en el tintero.” Furthermore, Pito’s name resonates today as the name of a Guadalajara rock band that wanted to call itself something immediately recognizable as “muy mexicano” (Kooba 2003). The novel has obviously outgrown its original form.

This dialogue between a pícaro and a poet begins, poetically enough, with one looking to the future and the other to the past, both observing the Mexican horizon from atop a campanile reminiscent of *Guzmán de Alfarache*’s “atalaya de la humanidad.” The Poet asks, “¿Qué hace usted en la torre, Pito Pérez?” Pito replies, “Vine a pescar recuerdos en el cebo del paisaje.” And the Poet, “Pues yo vengo a forjar imágenes en la fragua del crepúsculo” (Romero [1938] 1968: 12).^{2, 3} Aesthetically, this exchange appears to establish the work essentially as a meditation on life’s transience—a classical trope from the world of the Baroque that is valued by scholars. Temporally, however, it situates the narrative liminally, on the cusp between past and future, memory and imagination, a place where the realism that *Lazarillo de Tormes* first introduced into fiction is found: “lo moral y lo social en lugar de lo poético que antes predominaba, y . . . la realidad presente en lugar de un pasado mítico o un mundo puramente imaginativo” (Ziomek 1970: 945). For Lazarillo’s heirs, it is cru-

1. A 1997 survey of Mexican picaresque narratives finds that “examination of the text in scholarly publications has slowed almost to a halt” despite the fact that “Mexicans continue to hold it as a favorite” (Compton 1997: 69). A general lack of academic writing on Pito Pérez may be partly explained by his origins in the middle class, not among the peasantry of which scholars of the Mexican Revolution are so fond.

2. All references to and quotations from *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* are taken from Romero [1938] 1968. Subsequent citations to this work will provide only applicable page numbers.

3. There is evidence that this opening scene is not far from the truth, that the historical Pito Pérez and author Rubén Romero did indeed sit together on occasion in the church tower at Sta. Clara del Cobre, where Pito (né Jesús Pérez Gaona) was born (MacKegney 1964: 26–27). Another scholar adds, The date of [Pito’s] birth is unknown. He had left his home and family while still quite young because he was unable to conform to certain patterns of accepted conduct. Romero wrote that Pérez Gaona then became a kind of vagabond, an itinerant salesman who traveled from village to village selling inexpensive items to any who would buy. Because of the notions he sold, he soon became known as Hilo Lacre. In time, [he] abandoned his role as salesman and turned to the charity of the provincial people for his living. He continued wandering over the Michoacán countryside, loitering in stores and *cantinas* where he amused the people with his tales . . . Jesús Pérez Gaona, better known as Hilo Lacre or Pito Pérez, died on November 9, 1929, in Morelia, in the hospital founded by Romero’s friend, Dr. Miguel Silva” (Cord 1961: 433–34).

cial to emphasize that picaresque phenomena are not the exclusive domain of literati. There is an inherent folk element that shadows the genre, traceable via Lazarillo's appearance in anecdotal jests prior to his appearance on the page. This has led me to argue elsewhere that "in a social sense, Lazarillo, a former emblem of proverbs and parables, becomes . . . the emblem for a new literacy, for a new way to rise from the dead . . ." (Stone 1998: 42). Below I will claim for Pito Pérez a comparable position with respect to Mexico in the twentieth century.

In fact, Mexican pop culture is rife with pícaros and their props, as evidenced by the deck of cards used to play *lotería* (a cousin to bingo). *Lotería* has been popular in Mexico since the late 1700s, and it is still played at fairs throughout the country, where callers sing out verses to accompany the game's standard images, which include the following: *el cotorro* (the parrot or *periquillo*), *el catrín* (the fop), *el mundo* (weighing on the shoulders of Atlas, with Mexico at its center), and *la escalera* (the ladder on a blue background, leading one to wonder whether it leads to heaven)—these cards describe the common heritage of the Mexican pícaro. *La muerte* (smiling), *el diablito* (also smiling), *la calavera* (the smiling skull), *la sirena* (smiling and beckoning), and *el corazón* (pierced and bleeding) suggest the tragic laughter and derision that picaresque heroes endure and embody. Finally, *la campana*, *el borracho* (wearing a large hat and holey shoes), *la botella*, and *el barril* are particularly appropriate to the alcoholic bell-ringer Pito Pérez. On the back of each card is a verse that cues the visual image. For example, *el árbol* (the tree) says, "El que a buen árbol se arrima, buena sombra le cobija." The words recall Lazarillo's mother's parting advice to "arrimarse a los buenos" in order to make good in the world, yet the Mexican verse recommends metaphorically that one look for a protector or *patrón*, someone Pito Pérez never finds (just as Lazarillo never found a decent mentor). He is thus exposed directly to the raw nature of society symbolized in the deck by *el sol*, "La cobija de los pobres," the shelter of the poor.

This interplay of high and popular culture echoes a real historical situation. In Mexico, the revolution was purported to have narrowed or closed the gap among classes. Indeed, its outbreak is attributable in part to a disgruntled middle class being oppressed by new domestic oligarchies and international business interests with names like Guggenheim, Rothschild, Rockefeller, and Hearst. Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer write that in 1910, the year the revolution began,

several factors converged to darken the horizon of the middle classes and the budding working class that Porfirian development had created. Foreign investment reduced the income of these sectors by two mechanisms: the high infla-

tion that was produced and the new taxes that the government had to create in order to compensate for the tax exemptions created for foreign firms and financial drafts from abroad. The consolidation of regional oligarchies, which at the turn of the century began to add the monopoly to their control of economic power, also reduced the space available for the middle classes. The intermediate positions in business, services and, above all, public office, began to be taken by friends and family of those oligarchies. The pyramid of monopoly reproduced itself, and both large cities and small towns saw their avenues of upward mobility being closed, as well as the deterioration of the most basic forms of local life. (Aguilar Camín and Meyer 1993: 6)

Pito Pérez finds this lack of opportunity when he goes to the town of Ario looking for work: “Me ofrecí como boticario, como barbero, como sacristán, rondé los juzgados para ver si alguien necesitaba presentar alguna demanda: todo inútil. O mi persona, a simple vista no inspiraba confianza, o el pueblo había adoptado esta doctrina Americana: Ario para los arienses” (128–29). The saying that finishes the passage, ironically adopted from north of the border, is both a condemnation of the protectionist policies of countries like the United States (a sentiment with which many an oligarch would agree), as well as an exhortation for all Mexicans to take the solution of their historical problems into their own hands, to adapt some of the habits of other nations to their own ends.

The political divide in Mexican society remained in play long after the actual revolution, the first goal of which was to overthrow the Porfiriato, “a regime committed to economic modernity without the alteration of premodern social relations of production or concepts of justice” (Gonzales 2002: 49), and in this it succeeded. Under Porfirio Díaz, a majority of Mexicans, including members of the moneyed classes, “resented their government’s role in helping foreign corporations achieve autonomy, power and wealth in Mexico” (Gonzales 2002: 49). But the new President Madero, himself a member of an elite mining family, soon made it clear that although he was a liberal, he was no revolutionary, “his desire to only tinker with the system rather than overthrow it” (Gonzales 2002: 74). In this history lies one explanation for Pito’s cultural survival, his enormous and lasting popularity. Where Don Catrín emerges after independence as an ironic beacon of the middle class rising to behave like the old elite, Pito echoes the pessimism of a class-conscious audience ready to receive a harsh post-revolutionary critique.

This is the political side of the dual strand of Mexico’s cultural inheritance. While European and North American academics (some moved perhaps by guilt at being cultural beneficiaries of multinational capitalism) often fixate on and thus celebrate the undeniably crucial role of the peasantry in the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican historians Aguilar Camín and Meyer point out that “the Revolution favored the growth of

the middle class and . . . this was, precisely, one of its great achievements,” growing from an estimated 8 percent of the total population in 1910 to 17 percent in 1960 (Aguilar Camín and Meyer 1993: 176). This moderate growth, however, attests to the revolution as something less than a complete social transformation, a phrase that Antonio Castro Leal applies to Pito Pérez, whom he describes as being comfortable in his role, not as desperate to escape his destiny as other pícaros: “El pícaro mexicano está acaso más conforme con su papel, tiene menos deseos de redención, no renunciaría a su destino *sino a cambio de una completa transformación social*, dentro del cual es más aceptable la miseria que la esclavitud a las normas sociales” (Romero 1963: xxii, italics mine). In other words, this pícaro will not change his ways until his world changes its own. While Pito’s attitude might fairly be termed fatalism, it is not characterized by resignation—quite the contrary, it is barely tempered rage.

According to Wolf, the 1930s, the decade that spawned *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez*, “laid the basis for a vigorous advance of Mexico’s business and industry . . . Yet the sharp advance in one sector . . . called attention to the relative stagnation of other parts of society” (Wolf 1969: 46). Such stagnation was compounded by the intransigence of bourgeois mores, in which the desire to fit in and not call too much attention to oneself competed with the desire to resist tired conventions imported from the Old World. However, the sardonic voice of the pícaro, familiar from cultural history, was ready to cut through the fog of conformity to preach a secularized gospel to cowed readers, i.e., to most people. Rubén Romero himself suggested as much when asked in 1949 to explain his novel’s popularity: “El libro mío que más se acerca al pensamiento de la mayoría es *Pito Pérez*, tal vez porque existen en el mundo muchas gentes con las mismas ideas, la misma rebeldía e idéntica tristeza que mi personaje, aunque no se atreva a desnudar sus pensamientos” (Cord 1961: 435).

In Pito’s own words, this silent majority for which he stands is a universal type: “Ya sé que lo que cambia en los hombres es la dimensión de sus empleos, pero que el tonto o el sinvergüenza, lo mismo lo son de alcaldes de un pueblo que de ministros en la capital de la República” (82). Let us note, however, that here Pito speaks (in the picaresque tradition) for urban working Mexicans, not for the peasantry that commonly interests scholars of revolution.⁴ If the Mexican Revolution was largely fought between a landed oligarchy and a landless peasantry, its effects

4. The revolution resists simple categorization as a peasant uprising and had a lingering impact on the middle class in Mexico (Wolf 1969; Aguilar Camín and Meyer 1993). Despite this, many scholars continue to focus primarily on peasant issues surrounding the revolution (e.g., Knight 1986; Becker 1995; Boyer 1998).

were felt no less keenly by those stuck in the middle like Pito, frustrated members of an emerging middle class.⁵

A Critical Genre in a Critical Situation

When Pito is old enough to rebel against domestic neglect, he runs away, vowing to return home a conqueror like El Cid—unfortunately, this upper-class exemplar from another culture is inappropriate for the likes of Pito. But he is immediately turned from epic heroism to another career by his first taste of liquor—“*olvidé que andaba huido de la casa paterna y fortalecióse mi ánimo para seguir adelante como descubridor de un nuevo mundo . . . Apenas una cuantas leguas me separaban de mi pueblo y ya pensaba que había realizado una proeza digna de los grandes conquistadores: Julio César + Hernán Cortés = Pito Pérez*” (39). The mock heroism is unmistakable, and at the same stroke, Pito’s *picardía* is loosed upon the world. The liquor fortifies him and he dupes a shopkeeper out of a sugar cake (“un piloncillo”). Thenceforth, it is thirst that drives Pito to travel, or so he claims: “*Así como la comida de la casa ajena nos resulta más sabrosa, el vino de otros pueblos tiene un sabor más incitante*” (77). Alcohol fires his imagination and emboldens him to speak the truth. In the historical context, there is also a high level of topicality in Pito’s alcoholism, which historians again have identified as a problem more or less unique to the peasantry: “*More than any other campesino habit, alcoholism incited Cardenista concern. However, Cardenistas wavered between the punitive approach that alcohol at times inspires among teetotalers and a sense that campesinos’ weariness and helplessness drove them to drink*” (Becker 1995: 89).

Wine, a more European and therefore upper-class taste, also followed Lazarillo de Tormes from the start of his career, if not to excess. Early on, Lazarillo, having been bloodied then disinfected by a pot of wine, was told that “*lo que te enfermó te sana y da salud*” and that “*el vino . . . te ha dado la vida.*” Furthermore, Lazarillo’s good fortune is fatefully linked

5. In making this claim, I follow Tierno Galván’s argument for the emergence of a comparable bourgeois mentality in Lazarillo’s Spain. The main aspects of this mentality are as follows: an awareness of money as a key to power and prestige; a profit motive; a sense that history is progress and that the new is generally preferable to the old; a curiosity about others motivated by a desire to learn and to better oneself, fomented by social and cultural contact across class lines; a consciousness of the impact of public policy on private life; and, finally, a desire to affirm oneself in the eyes of others (Tierno Galván 1974: 73–74). All of these ideas ferment in Pito’s world of small-town Michoacán, a region that includes “the economically ‘autonomous’ middle class of artisans, small and middle merchants, commercial agents, members of the free professions, and small and middling *rentiers*; and the ‘dependent’ middle class whose skills are at the service of a larger organization which employs them” (Wolf 1969: 23).

to wine: “Si hombre en el mundo ha de ser bien afortunado con vino . . . serás tú.” *Pito Pérez*’s most recognizable allusion to *Lazarillo* is the initial episode in which Pito surreptitiously sips wine from a cask through an extra-long straw. If *Lazarillo* ended up a *predicador de vinos*, a sort of walking advertisement cum town-crier, then Pito becomes a vituperative secular preacher (*predicador*) when under the influence: fire and brimstone without the faith. In a transformation of the genre’s archetype, Romero resurrects *Lazarillo* in the former New Spain, not now a critique of hypocritical honor and pretense, but of cruelty and missed opportunity. With drink replacing food as the picaresque desideratum,⁶ the potential upward emergence from dire straits becomes a despondent escape from an unbearable reality: a kind of slow, conscious suicide. Nevertheless, for the reader intoxicated by Pito’s life story, more positive results are possible as he returns from fictional reality to the historical world.⁷

Lazarillo de Tormes began his career as a beggar and ended up in the employ of the state. As his narrative concludes, he clings to the bottom rung of a civil bureaucracy, however tenuously. As such, and despite his compromised position, he rises from the lower to the middle class. *Pito Pérez*, on the other hand, falls out of the middle class into chaos, dramatizing a fear shared by many of his readers. The title of Romero’s 1940s novel *Una vez fui rico* expresses this fear, and it is telling that the book’s epigraph is attributed to Pito: “Si tienes dinero y lo malgastas, comprarás el placer de tu cuerpo y la desgracia del alma. Y si no tienes dinero, serán igualmente desgraciados tu cuerpo y tu alma.” If *Lazarillo*, in rising to “respectability,” learns to forget or ignore the hypocrisies recorded in his life (Beverley 1987: 61), then *Pito Pérez*, a more sensitive soul, anesthetizes himself to them and, furthermore, to alienation from his own class.

This dual aesthetic and political principle has been undervalued, if not totally ignored by critics. Following a tendency to take the novel in

6. Pito in effect abandons food along with his hometown in the first pages of the text: “¡Oh, las carnicas de Canuto! ¡Oh, el menudo de la tía ‘Susa’! ¡Oh. Las ‘tortas de coco’ de Lino, el panadero!—Pero acabo de dar fin a un a larga y azarosa borrachera, y mis parientes quieren descansar de mi persona, lo mismo que todo el pueblo” (13).

7. Henryk Ziomek comes close to my reading when he compares *Pito Pérez* to *El Licenciado Vidriera*: “De una manera semejante actúa *Pito Pérez*, quien de joven, destinado por la madre a monaguillo, fue cumplido y respetuoso en su oficio. Sin embargo, mal enseñado por su compañero acólito y a la vez pícaro, tiene que dejar su puesto al ser aprehendido por ladrón. Desengañado, como el *Licenciado Vidriera*, por no poder vivir comodamente ejerciendo su profesión, sale de su sitio y al fin, desconocido, termina tristemente, dejando su testamento y memorias en forma de aforismos en el cual condena a toda la humanidad” (Ziomek 1970: 949). In addition to choosing death over an intolerable life, the two figures also share the peculiarity that their picaresque nature is loosed by intoxication.

aesthetic terms, Sherman Eoff believes that “The lyrical style of Rubén Romero, which gives the novel its major charm, creates a dominant tone of melancholic nostalgia for something that was ardently desired and never possessed” (Eoff: 1956: 193). That something is sympathy and esteem, the lack of which lead to Pito’s “forlorn passivity,” which Eoff claims is “peculiarly Spanish and peculiarly compatible with the picaresque tradition” (Eoff 1956: 195). One must add that it is the defining condition of Pito’s class after the revolution. Other work on the genre would take issue with Eoff’s passive characterization, for, despite its elegiac charm, the text also evinces a more activist attitude when examined along socio-historical lines.

Even before the novel’s dialogue commences, the framing narrator tips his hand in that direction in his first description of the pícaro: “Sus grandes zapatos rotos hacían muecas de dolor . . . , y su chaqueta, abrochada con un alfiler de seguridad, pedía socorro por todas las abiertas costuras sin que sus gritos lograran la conmiseración de las gentes” (11). The aesthetically pleasing personification is also a literal attempt to give voice to the voiceless, to set up a sympathetic reading of Pito’s life story.⁸ Pito’s torn clothes thus provide a motif to be pursued throughout the text, something that will both draw the attention of a cultivated reader and engage the less educated one, who will recognize Pito’s “zapatos rotos,” or holey shoes, from the lotería depiction of the drunkard. This pícaro follows in the footsteps of his literary predecessors, but the road he travels is more complex, extending from Mexico’s past into its shadowy future: he is literary and real. The novel’s upside-down world personifies everyday items such as Pito’s clothes, while caricatured individuals symbolize general social malaise, as is the practice of the genre. The concrete becomes abstract, and vice versa.

Pito and the reader must try to synthesize these opposing aesthetic currents by viewing them in the realistic light of shared experience. Thus, in his first “job” as an altar boy, his first rung on the ladder to supposed social promotion, Pito meets his “mentor de picardías” (San Dimas, the acolyte who diverts him from a pious path) and learns “que los hábitos sirven para ocultar muchas cosas que a la luz del día son inmorales” (26). Although it ought to, society does not suspect young Pito of any transgressive behavior because it unquestioningly respects his red church robe. But once he is exposed and (unjustly) cast out from this protected position, he will wear the clothes that others have sloughed off; from then on, he has nothing to hide. Early on, Pito learns to reject all out-

8. This appeal is well in keeping with the theme of empathy for the other, which was established in the New World’s first quasi-picaresque narrative, the *Naufragios* of Cabeza de Vaca (Stone 1998: 21–45).

ward appearances, so it is up to the Poet to dress him in a way befitting the history lessons to be imparted.

Pito is doubtless a cynic on his own terms, but he is presented to the reader by “el Poeta,” the framing narrator who mediates *Bildung*—the cultivation of the upper classes—in spite of Pito’s self-conscious denial that that class has anything of value to impart to his own. The gazes of Pito and the Poet are fixed in opposite directions. Hence the contrasting backward and forward perspectives that begin the text, signaling an incomplete history of Pito’s Michoacán. These are not merely aesthetic poses; they are also social. The retrospective point of view is, of course, another hallmark of the genre since *Lazarillo*, but the Mexican pícaro is not trying to justify or explain away his actions.⁹ His literary stance is oriented towards the past, but his message is a call for future Mexicans to care for the weak, not just in word, but also in deed. To reiterate, Pito’s poetic decrepitude establishes an aesthetic frame in which the pícaro may put forth unpleasant truths that his author, mindful of his own semi-elite (but also precarious) status, cannot state directly without seeming hypocritical. This deflection has the added benefit of making the message, often rendered in popular speech, accessible and instructive to a wider audience.

The Aesthetics of Revolution: Pito Pérez as Mexico’s Pícaro

The dual inheritance of Romero’s narrative is taken equally from popular culture and literary antecedents, including *Don Quijote*. *La vida inútil* is Romero’s distillation of picaresque literature, with much the same effect as Cervantes’s famous debunking of chivalric novels. Both borrow elements of language and structure from established genres and test them against contemporary reality, thereby inviting the reader to entertain an alternative set of social values. Also, like Cervantes’s novel, *Pito Pérez* presages what is to come next for a timeworn type of literature. A further indication that the novel intends to display more than some aestheticized brand of Mexican fatalism is to be found at the end of that same first encounter between poet (equivalent to the *trovadesco* knight of yore) and pícaro (literature’s new didactic champion) with which we began. The Poet is embarrassed by his own shiny new shoes hanging down from the bell tower alongside those worn by Pito. Between them,

9. With regard to *Lazarillo*, John Beverley (contesting aesthetic readings of critics like Francisco Rico) has this to say about perspective: “El problema de *Lazarillo* es más que un problema de ‘perspectivismo literario’ en esos ranchos, favelas, barrios, villas miserias, campamentos que rodean las ciudades del Tercer Mundo . . . [L]a picaresca sigue siendo un género literario factible, ofreciendo hoy una forma para dar voz a las víctimas del capitalismo” (Beverley 1987: 64).

they are emblematic of social extremes: "Nuestros pies eran el compendio de todo un mundo social, lleno de injusticias y desigualdades" (15). Their shoes signal the gap between their economic conditions and resulting class positions, a gap every bit as large as that between Don Quijote and Sancho Panza, one that may be filled by the novel itself, a didactic tool for the reader.

Not surprisingly, the framing image of the shoes is duplicated in the novel's overall structure, indicating its axis. A fictional ten-year gap between parts I and II of the novel presents a narrative strategy that not only gestures toward the temporal gap between parts I and II of the *Quijote*, but, more importantly, frames the Mexican Revolution squarely (if silently) in the middle of the text. Romero's negotiation of that gap reflects the particular art of his adaptation, one that is thematically harmonious with the dominant political discourse of the 1930s, but tonally at odds with the decade's high seriousness, contrasting "dramatically with the sober and severe literature which dominated the thirties in Mexico" (Compton 1990: 14). The novel's didacticism is in keeping with the Mexican paradigm established by *El Periquillo Sarniento* and also fits the zeitgeist of the Lázaro Cárdenas years, when literacy was promoted as a key to social advancement, reaching a rate of approximately 25 percent in Michoacán by 1940 (Becker 1995: 42). Thus seen, the novel is a self-consciously comedic extension of the project undertaken by Michoacán's Cardenista governor "of modernizing the popular consciousness with a socialist education program [, which] fit in well with the emerging consensus in Mexico City that secular, public education should teach the popular classes how to take their proper place in the new civic order" (Boyer 1998: 431). Michael Gonzales adds, "Teachers became the shock troops of cultural revolution. They ventured into Cristero strongholds to teach reading, writing and technical skills and preach against clerical influence and traditional vices such as alcoholism" (Gonzales 2002: 225). Pito, the inspired drunkard, reclaims this cultural revolution from unpopular secular missionaries, turning his vice into a greater good.

Historian Marjorie Becker has compared the work of Cardenistas to that of sixteenth century missionaries, because "like the sixteenth century friars, the Cardenistas in Michoacán determined to undermine the previous ideological order and to create institutions reflecting their state-making project" (Becker 1995: 5). One feature of this project was its anti-clericalism: "As renegades from Catholicism, Michoacán Cardenista leaders set an anticlerical tone that dominated the approach to cultural transformation" (Becker 1995: 9). Of course, anti-clericalism has consistently characterized the picaresque novel since its inception in sixteenth-century Spain, which helps to explain why the picaresque genre

might thrive in Michoacán without undue recourse to twentieth-century narrative techniques. The fact that the popular culture of Michoacán is imbued with Catholicism explains why Pito so often speaks in parables. Still, the novel must negotiate the polarity of these antithetical missions that determine much of the state's history.

As we have observed in the opening dialogue of the novel, the historical liminality of *Pito Pérez* is indicated very clearly from the outset, even as the author's political goals are indirectly signaled. Fittingly, the novel retains the fertile opposition between poet and pícaro, between high art and popular wisdom, first negotiated by the idealist Don Quijote and the pragmatist Sancho Panza (Stone 1998: 95–133). And if Cervantes has often been identified with his most famous protagonist, a less imaginary relationship exists between Romero and “el Poeta,” his obvious alter ego in the text. While “el Poeta” is identifiable as a man of the world, a dreamer like Don Quijote, Pito is a purely regional (if universally recognizable) product, a semi-urban Sancho. The distance between these two narrative poles is narrowed by literary and historical allusion, not in order for the characters to mutually enlighten each other (as is often asserted for *Don Quijote*), but for the text to instruct readers from all walks of life.

In the early portion of the narrative, Pito's childhood is said to have been marred by a mother who, in misguided acts of charity, takes food from his mouth in order to feed the children of others and offers her breast to an orphan instead of to her own son, resulting in a Lacanian sense of abandonment. He comments, “Este fue mi primer infortunio y el caso se ha repetido a través de mi existencia” (24–25). Mentions of “infortunio” and “el caso” are possibly allusions to Pito's picaresque predecessors Alonso Ramírez and Lazarillo de Tormes, respectively—signs for the educated reader. But, more importantly, Pito's neglect also reads as a parable of classic colonialism in which goods removed from the periphery are consumed at the center, a pattern of exploitation that persists despite Mexico's hard-fought independence and revolution.

Later, Pito tells of a pharmacist who blithely administers placebos in order to fatten himself up, literally and figuratively. Pito learns this *oficio* well, adding colorants and alcohol to the prescriptions. In this negative exemplum, the young pícaro is ironically rewarded by being well fed and eventually seduced by the lazy pharmacist's wife (a generic false paradise from which he is cast out). The critique grows bolder in part II, after the revolution, when it is harder to blame the country's problems on neo-colonialism or capitalist greed, and some responsibility must be shouldered by the nation itself—at some point Mexico must hoist itself up by its own bootstraps. In part II, therefore, Pito tells of a hospital ward nurse who doles out medicines haphazardly, unconcerned

with potentially disastrous effects upon the wrong patients. These supposed caregivers—the mother, the pharmacist, the nurse and others—accumulate as metaphors for the failures of official policy, of poor or partial remedies administered by traditional charity or modern land redistribution. This kind of lip service is keenly felt in Pito's post-revolutionary world: "As Michoacán's politicians fell in behind the increasingly conservative agrarian policies of Mexico's national leaders, they began to emphasize revolutionary discourse over the actual restructuring of the land tenure regime" (Boyer 1998: 439). In the same vein, Pito observes almost in passing that medical treatment is given or withheld on the basis of political affiliation (163). A reader who may not catch the Freudian and belle-lettristic nuances of maternal neglect in part I will be more likely, possibly by virtue of first-hand experience, to appreciate such later parables. By revisiting sites of critique established in part I, the message of the novel is hammered home for a broader readership, one that includes new literacy alongside the old.

In appealing directly to the more modest reader, Pito distances himself from Europeanized, pseudo-aristocratic Mexicans, "aquellos mexicanos que fueron a Europa a traerse a un príncipe rubio como el champaña" (21). Like Periquillo, Pito praises native products (such as tequila and the liquor of Puruarán—"tan noble como la uva") over imported ones, but, in contrast to Periquillo, this preference extends explicitly to the political arena: "Hay que gastar de lo que el país produce: hombres morenos, como Juárez, que nos gobiernen" (21). The reference is of course to the liberal leader Benito Juárez, who, aided by the heroics of men such as Porfirio Díaz, drove out the French and executed their lackey, the Emperor Maximilian. In the revolution of half a century later, Mexico drove homegrown leader Porfirio Díaz into French exile—not much had changed. Later in the text, Pito casts more aspersions on city-dwelling aristocrats and exhorts the reader to ask why middle-class families would want to marry into such a "tinsel-town caste":

Después de esta casta de muñecos de oropel, vienen las familias de los empleados del Gobierno, las de los profesionales, las amas de los canónigos, y esa masa anónima de humildes menestrales que comen de milagro y cuyas hijas saludan en las serenatas a los pollos ricos, no sé por qué antecedentes o por qué razones: adivínalo tú, buen adivinador. (59)

In the very next sentence he throws in his lot with those who want nothing to do with social pretense and only wish to live with dignity: "En estas ciudades la miseria adquiere gestos trágicos, y los sinvergüenzas, como yo, no pueden vivir decorosamente" (59). In this manner, Pito speaks to the recently politicized, urbanized mestizo, not to the indigenous campesino or the fair-skinned criollo.

Sympathy for the Devil: Resolving the Revolution

Despite the novel's patently classic surface, the ease with which twentieth-century literary habits are blended into the text underscores how little of substance has changed since the time of Lazarillo, never mind the revolution. Time has passed, fashions have come and gone, yet twentieth-century phenomena such as psychoanalysis (125), pornography (in comic book form a common reading material in Mexico, 71) and surrealism (83) share the page with the anti-clericalism mentioned above. The novel is also sprinkled with European modernist touches that flatter the cultured reader, alongside exempla instructive to all. Cavafy's candles of life (74) and Kafka's door of the law are present, one as a *memento morii* and the other as an illustration of systemic callousness (83–85, see below). Also present is an episode of grisly female revenge that anticipates the apparently justifiable homicide of the Borges's "Emma Zunz" (125–28).

Furthermore, there is more than a touch of *esperpento* in Pito's delirious vision of heaven, in which the hereafter is populated by white sheep with human faces. Black sheep are the poor who cannot be accommodated because there are simply too many of them, so they wait patiently in purgatory or limbo, to be banished to hell should they rebel against this celestial status quo (171–73). Pito demythologizes biblical flock-and-shepherd cant: the sheep in his vision will inherit absolutely nothing because they do not do anything other than follow the uncaring shepherd, however absurd his instructions. This heaven is decked out with materialist and literalist renderings of earthly, blind faith: Christmas trees are abundant with toys and treats, and saints hang on the walls to debate dogma (Terán Elizondo 1991: 85). In light of the drunken wanderings of Max Estrella in Valle-Inclán's *Luces de Bohemia*, an urban universe in Spain that is parallel to Pito's, *esperpéntico* appropriately describes such a distorted, bestial reflection of reality.¹⁰

Yet another modernist touch is the way in which Pito talks back to his creator, resisting his literary nature while clamoring for his own authenticity:

¿Quién se ha interesado por mi con algún sentimiento afectuoso? Usted mismo, a quien estoy contando mi historia, ¿se ha preocupado por conocerme, por estudiarme con alguna indulgencia? No, usted quiere que yo le cuente aventuras

10. Indeed, an entire investigation might be carried out on animal and St. Francis imagery in Romero's novel, perhaps showing additional influence of Valle Inclán's *Divinas palabras, tragicomedia de aldea* (1920). There is also a reworking of the incident in the *Quijote* in which a boy is saved from his master's whippings, except that Pito saves a helpless burro. Pito regularly refers to humankind in animalistic terms, suggesting that human kindness, if it is to thrive at all, must be developed at an instinctive level.

que le hagan reír: mis andanzas de Periquillo o mis argucias de Gil Blas. Pero, ¿ya se fijó usted que mis travesuras no son regocijadas? (88–89)

The laughing-stock does not think it is funny anymore—he insists that we take him seriously.¹¹ Pito's aesthetic challenge to his author is an incitement to the reader to challenge the authorities outside the bounds of the text (in other words, in the world into which he was born as Jesús Gaona Pérez—see Kooba 2003). By calling upon the cultured reader to sympathize even as he harangues the downtrodden to stand up for themselves, Pito fulfills his destiny as a Middleman and usurps the “rightful” place of the author. It is just after the above-mentioned rebellion against his creator that Pito coins his most memorable phrase (which is also the epigraph to part I of the novel): “¡Pobrecito del Diablo, qué lástima le tengo!” It could be a new verse for a lotería card, or a Miltonian cry of angst. Probably it is both, one significant to the Poet, another to Pito, and carrying a third significance for readers being schooled in empathy. The Devil deserves our pity because, like Pito, he can get it from nowhere else and has fallen from a realm of limitless possibility. Both can only attain some level of satisfaction by “poisoning” the minds of individual souls—if Pito can sympathize with Satan, surely the reader can feel compassion for the pícaro.

Kimberle López rightly notes Romero's “vacillation between the desire to identify with, and the desire to assert his own identity in contrast to, the voice of his marginal protagonist, in his efforts toward the formation of a national literary language for post-revolutionary Mexico” (López 1997: 75), and although her reading hinges on a perceived class divide between Romero and Pito, she also notes the author's own “feelings of insecurity” stemming from his own good fortune in life (i.e., his father's participation on the winning side in the revolution) as well as an awareness of “his lack of scholarly background compared with other members of the Mexican academy” (López 1997: 89–90). In fact, Romero had even greater reason to feel vulnerable in the revolution itself, when he was taken before a firing squad for an execution from which he was saved at the last minute.¹² López holds that Romero “feels compassion for Mexico's indigent, but his very insistence on this sympathy confirms

11. Kimberle López, in the most recent article on *Pito Pérez*, follows John Beverley in comparing the novel to later testimonial narratives in which a privileged narrator mediates the life story of a marginalized individual.

12. This incident occurred upon return from a brief self-exile in Mexico City, where he felt some of the solitude and misery of his eventual protagonist, and therefore, decided to return to Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, where he was recognized (as “el poeta”!) and arrested. His homecoming proved nearly fatal (www.redescolar.ilce.edu.mx/redescolar/efemerides/julio/conme4.btm).

his social distance from them” (López 1997: 82), but I would argue that, on the contrary, the insistence is grounded in a feeling that there is in fact very little distance separating the lot of the semi-fictional Pito from that of his mediator Romero, semi-fictionalized as “el Poeta.” Pito is not of the peasantry; he is middle class, his poverty and marginalization largely the result of bad luck in birth order. His elder brothers are a lawyer and a priest, and Pito attributes his low estate to the fact that he is the third son in a large family—“no había recursos para costearnos carrera a los tres, ni becas para todos” (25). “He says that his two older brothers became a priest and a lawyer to provide the family with protection from above and below, respectively, and therefore there is no profession left for him” (Phillips 1964: 701). Or, as Timothy Compton puts it, “being the third son in his family dooms him to a life of dead-end employment since his parents spend their ambitions on their first two sons” (Compton 1997: 72). Indeed, as a confirmation of his essential “middleness,” Pito jokes about his first apprenticeship as an altar boy, saying that, as such, he can dress like one of his brothers and handle money (in the collection basket) like the other.

In part I, Pito relates his sad but funny life story, remarking that he has had the courage to live without worrying about the *qué dirán*—what others might think. Prior to the revolution, he follows a familiar picaresque career, careening from job to job and criticizing his stingy employers even as he steals from them. Yet in terms of progress for the early twentieth century, there is little or nothing exemplary in the world for young Pito, either socially or aesthetically. As mentioned, he works for a murderous pharmacist, as well as a priest, Padre Pureco, who teaches women to submit meekly to masculine authority (63) and who insults the congregation without fear of retribution (68). The fact that these recognizable types from the genre tradition are credible in modern Mexico is itself a kind of indictment. In this stagnant milieu, Pito hits bottom and must move toward a new way of being.

Without proper role models, Pito must develop his own brand of altruism, and he somehow manages to do so, taking the reader with him into a new way of looking at the world, one which begins to break with a fossilized society. Referring to his sister’s refusal to elope with one socially below her, perhaps her only chance at happiness, he notes,

Locos son los que viven sin voluntad de vivir, tan sólo por temor a la muerte, locas las que pretenden matar sus sentimientos y por el qué dirán no huyen con un cirquero. . . . y más locos que los que no ríen, ni lloran, ni beben porque son esclavos de inútiles respetos sociales. Prefiero a mi familia de chiflados y no a ese rebaño de hipócritas que me ven como animal raro porque no duermo en su majada, . . . (17).

Pito's true family is the family of *locos cuerdos* like Don Quijote and the Licenciado Vidriera, scorned by society but able to speak loud and clear from the margins. This "familia de chiflados" howls at hypocrisy and does not suppress empathy ("matar sus sentimientos") for fear of the qué dirán. In reality, Pito does not wish to command anyone's respect, which has the unfortunate consequence of isolating him from the aspirations of his class (as described by Tierno Galván—see note 4). After a series of disappointments, stripped of power, prestige and money, he is convinced of the futility and falsity of historical progress. His misfortune, however, turns into a new kind of fortune for his readers, who may begin to see distance from class-bound expectations as Pito fails to conquer his new world with old traditions.

Because of his middle-class origins, it is taken for granted that Pito knows how to read, and increased literacy was one of the revolution's successes.¹³ As in *El Periquillo Sarniento*, sophisticated literacy retains importance as a key to a success in the real world. For example, the revolutionary agrarian reform process created new political opportunities for ambitious villagers who were literate: "The [Obregón government of the 1920s] required peasants seeking land to complete . . . censuses, questionnaires, reports, and letters, and literate villagers emerged as the indispensable middlemen" (Gonzales 2002: 191). Like more traditional pícaros, Pito is at first confounded by Church Latin but soon learns to use it to his own benefit, and the reader's amusement, as he puts words in the mouth of the incompetent Padre Pureco. Pito berates his public for crying at the Latin mass—"lo único que hace llorar en el templo a los piadosos oyentes" (69)—yet remaining unmoved by more proximate, unspeakable tragedies.

Here again, however, a literary trope takes on specific topicality in Pito's Mexico, where traditional literacy is given a new face. The so-called saviors of the lower class, the Church fathers, are no help, because they themselves are political fossils. In the wake of Michoacán's failed Cristero revolt of 1926–29, priests "used the confessional to gather information that they shared with conservative allies, and they denounced agraristas [land rights activists] from the pulpit as communists headed for eternal damnation" (Gonzales 2002: 235). This ingrained conservatism carries over into the secular sphere, as illustrated by Pito's parable of the provincial who visits an old friend who has become President. Having been made to wait for days in an antechamber, the visitor is struck by the way in which self-important ministers grow obsequious as they near a

13. President Cárdenas himself was a comparable product of the middle class, the literate son of a grocer in Jiquilpán, Michoacán. Like Pito, he had excellent penmanship, and this led to his rapid rise through the military ranks in the first decade of the revolution.

door leading to the President's office. These are truly useless middlemen (high priests of politics), afraid to transact any real business with one whose power they both fear and covet. When the old friend finally passes the threshold, he comments on the Kafkaesque door to the President:

Esa puerta que separa lo real de lo ficticio, la puerta de las simulaciones, de las metamorfosis. Antes de entrar por ella los altos funcionarios esconden los anillos, los gestos, las ideas. Allá, afuera, son otros que olvidan tus doctrinas y te traicionan hasta con su porte. Afuera, desprecian a todos los hombres, aquí, adentro, no saben como hablarle a un hombre. (85-86)

He then asks who is to blame for this shift from apparent political activity to passivity, the people or the president (the congregation or the priest)? Both must share responsibility, one for the abuse of power and the other for its neglect.

While the chances for upward mobility improved marginally following the revolution, one guarantor of Mexican social frustration is corrupt officeholders whose callous attempts to consolidate power through cronyism defeat any real progress. The first steps in this vicious cycle, according to Pito Pérez, are to make grand promises, forget them and then surround oneself with toadies: "Primer año: ciclo de promesas, sonrisas y cortesías para los electores; segundo año; liquidación de viejas amistades para evitar que con su presencia recuerden el pasado, y creación de un Supremo Consejo de Lambiscones . . ." (14).¹⁴ This follows del Monte's observation that picaresque authors "no denuncian las estructuras de la sociedad, sino la corruptela de sus exponentes y los mitos que dominan en ella" (del Monte 1971: 158). Yet, beyond such widely accepted condemnations of easy targets, a more difficult task for the text is to stir a target audience from apathy, to move it from mere carping to true indignation. Those readers who identify with Pito are constantly tempted to fall back into middle class prejudices and solutions, making it very difficult to rethink their situation from the ground up. Mexico, and particularly Michoacán, cannot break easily from a stratified past that marks the lower orders as faithful peasants or servile bourgeoisie.

In Michoacán, after the revolution, speechmaking at town gatherings was one highly visible result of the revolution; another was an influx of

14. When Madero took office and chose new governors and local officials, "Many of the new officeholders were conservatives who had jumped onto the revolutionary bandwagon at the last moment. They had little sympathy for the plight of the rural masses, and their loyalty to the president was paper-thin" (Gonzales 2002: 87). When the forerunner to the PRI was formed in 1928, "The party would work hand in glove with the government to maintain a political elite in power through patronage and corruption, downsizing the military, and controlling political opponents through electoral fraud, violence and manipulation of the judiciary" (Gonzales 2002: 216).

teachers purveying a kind of unwelcome internal colonialism to displace the work of earlier missionaries. Like the picaresque novel itself, the oral tradition had split into two facets: official discourse and popular wisdom. On the one hand, teachers “read official correspondence aloud; political and educational leaders incessantly stumped in the village schoolyard and zócalo; and whenever a local event of any importance took place, posters and handbills rained down everywhere” (Boyer 1998: 446). The novel is thus a belated handbill of sorts, a palimpsest on the posters that promised miraculous cures for social ills. On the other hand, Pito’s reluctance to embrace popular orality shows that he, too, still clings to certain class-bound prejudices.

Pito is probably the first Spanish-speaking pícaro to feel ambivalent about orally transmitted wisdom in the form of *refranes*, and this leads him down a false path politically, allowing him to believe that because he does not *have* a support system, he does not *need* one. He appears to relegate aphorisms to the past when he interrupts the Poet to say, “No me diga usted más refranes, que cada uno de ellos puede servir de epígrafe a los capítulos de mi vida” (34). Indeed, Romero generally shuns traditional refranes in his literary output, preferring newer, more authentic idioms gleaned from the speech patterns of *michoacanos*;¹⁵ in this way the author tries to achieve the integration of tradition and modernity that his character cannot.

With regard to oral and literate knowledge, past and present forms of wisdom, Pito’s life position becomes critical: he must specify more clearly what part of the legacy must be left behind for the next generation to realize the promises of the revolution. By inversion, his nostalgic perspective must engender ideas for the future. Unlike the majority of schoolteachers, immigrants from other parts of Mexico, Pito is a native interpreter of urban life in Michoacán, and therefore in a better position to criticize without inciting the negative reaction with which the Cardenista educators were often met—forty-two were lynched according to Becker (1995: 125). Yet Pito, like others in Michoacán, cannot simply uproot himself from four hundred years of Catholic tradition. After the Cristero rebellion, “a cacique ordered the closure of the local church in Charapan and prohibited the local religious leaders from ringing its bells” (Boyer 1998: 452). In the novel, Pito is jailed for breaking the very same injunction; he is thus conspicuously designed to bridge the gap between small-town traditionalists and ideologues freshly imported from the big cities.

Attempting this transaction, Pito rejects tired slogans and clichés,

15. “En efecto, los refranes recogidos por Romero, por lo general, no se encuentran en las colecciones de refranes anteriores a él” (Pérez Martínez 1991: 103).

coining his own poignant and outrageous pronouncements, such as “¡Pobrecito del Diablo, que lástima le tengo!” (The famous line also recasts another piece of advice concerning wisdom Lazarillo learned from his blind master: “el amo de ciego un punto ha de saber más que el diablo.”) Pito moves from serious revolution to even more serious, more threatening comedy, and beyond. Turning to secular blasphemy, he is jailed for his parody of the famous *grito* that hailed the start of Mexican independence. Instead of “¡Viva . . .!”, Pito shouts “¡Muera el cura Hidalgo!” and is arrested for this transgression (119). The incident almost certainly takes place at one of the Cardenista *fiestas patrias* (e.g., Cinco de Mayo, 16 de Septiembre, 20 de Noviembre) designed to draw the public away from religious holidays and toward more worldly celebrations. Writes Christopher Boyer,

[T]he celebrations had a distinctly secular flavor in Michoacán. The *fiestas patrias* commenced (as they still do) when a political figure such as the governor in Morelia or municipal authorities elsewhere shouted Miguel Hidalgo’s battle cry of independence. . . . In the late 1920s, the architects of *fiestas patrias* celebrations de-emphasized . . . pseudo-religious acts of allegiance to the fatherland in favor of speeches that extolled good hygiene and sports, and warned against the evils of sexually transmitted diseases and alcoholism. (Boyer 1998: 442–43)

Pito’s black humor makes secular preaching more accessible and, furthermore, makes even more scathing accusations tolerable. “If *Pito Pérez* were not a picaresque novel, but some other form of writing, the criticism would be almost unpalatable, even libelous” (Terán Elizondo 1991: 86). When he is gulled into standing in for a newspaper editor brave enough to denounce a local politician’s crimes, but afraid to face the consequences (131), Pito allows his drunken pride in literacy (his true means of independence) to cloud his judgment, and he finds himself again being dragged off to jail. It is not enough merely to know how to read; one must read between the lines, as this incident illustrates. In a better world, the editor and the reader would work together against corruption; here, they turn on each other. With this *mundo al revés* evoking the inversion familiar to readers of Baroque drama, Pito finally reaches the point of alienation that changes his consciousness, a point reached not through books, but through experience.

As a reader, then, Pito could become consciously independent from wisdom received from the Church, the people and the politicians. But he fails in this because he is driven to reject it all, the good with the bad. He dies for the sins and the senselessness of the revolution, and so it is up to the reader to synthesize popular wisdom and high culture, to achieve the integration and indignation that could continue a revolution (indeed, save humanity). In a larger sense, this interrogation of the new

orality is also a rewriting of Master Narratives of Spanish colonial culture (the Bible, the picaresque novel and *Don Quixote*), and of the nation's unfolding history (the glorifications of the revolution in its immediate wake). Also, as mentioned earlier, the novel's humor "contrasts dramatically with the sober and severe literature that dominated the thirties in Mexico" (Compton 1997: 70), which is crucial in view of Pito's role in spurring a new revolution for his readers (even if he cannot see it himself). His tragic laughter is somehow very Mexican (witness the smile of death on lotería cards) and it is therefore significant, in light of the novel's popularity, that Romero is "the only humorous writer among the most important novelists of the Revolution" (Castagnaro 1953: 303).

Deprived of liberty in jail, Pito ironically proclaims that he has found the fraternity and equality that are never found on the outside. Inmates share food and stories with each other, and even intimacies beyond those detailed in love letters that Pito, calling himself an "amanuense obligado," writes for others: "¡Los banquetes que yo me he dado dentro de la cárcel, aceptando de mis colegas, ya un plato de arroz, ya un chile relleno, a cambio de una consulta de tinterillo, o de una afectuosa palmadita en la espalda!" (117). With these last phrases, the narrative exhibits a euphemistic reticence and double entendre about homosexuality that is evident in many early picaresque works, ranging from *Lazarillo's* fourth *tratado* to "El Licenciado Vidriera" (Stone 1998: 15-94). At the same jail, Pito alludes to official and popular forms of high tragedy and high culture literacy, even choosing to overstay his sentence in order to play Jesus in a passion play. This, however, rapidly devolves into a drunken parody of the Crucifixion (a carnivalesque touch, as Bakhtin would say). His last words in the play, "Todo se ha consumido!" refer not to life's end but to the empty bottles littering the ground below the cross. Despite one inmate's exemplary refusal to betray his fellow prisoner (in contrast to the above-mentioned newspaper editor, this St. Peter will not deny Pito's Christ), Pito is laughed at by the crowd and left hanging, achieving a parodic martyrdom. After all, his Christian name is Jesús.

Thus ends part one of the novel, with a mock death that finds Pito surveying humanity (which has again turned its back on him) from on high, just as we found him in the novel's first pages. He almost gets the last word, however: "¡Padre, castígalos; se hacen que no saben lo que hacen!" (Punish them, Father, for they pretend they know not what they do!) It is this penchant for denial and self-deceit that infuriates the Mexican pícaro. Standing up for oneself (or independence, the one status that Pito doggedly achieves) is not enough; it requires follow-through in the form of benevolent institutions that back up the rhetoric and the reforms. The uselessness of those state institutions when it comes to fostering real revolution may be detected in Pito's experiences in jails, hos-

pitals and newspaper offices. His world has turned over and so a revolution has come, as both Marxism and the aesthetics of carnival require. The dialogics of this world have engaged in a new way, and a new order must emerge to dislodge the fossils.

The Dialectical Transformation: A Pícaro Radicalized

While Pito's cynicism triumphs in the end, the novel's tone becomes more overtly political after a revolution that has politicized even those (such as poets) who might prefer to remain above it all. Thus, in spite of himself, Pito's eyes are opened to more than just the individual faults and foibles that comprise part one of the novel; he becomes aware of institutional injustice, and the reader is drawn along for the vicarious lesson.

Ten years later, in part II, after the revolution that was supposed to improve the lot of the average Mexican, the situation has become more sinister. The revolution is almost a blank in the narrative, described only metaphorically as a leaf storm that passes through Michoacán from the north. The immediate audience needs no education when it comes to this reference; its experience probably meshes with Pito's own. Writes Boyer, "no Michoacano variant of Zapata or Villa had succeeded in sparking a statewide peasant movement. Most locals experienced the revolution as a period of want, insecurity, and epidemic illness punctuated by the occasional appearance of troops passing through on their way somewhere else" (Boyer 1998: 427). The leaf imagery extends into Pito's observation that the revolution took everyone away except for those rooted like trees to the earth, i.e., the indigent and the indigenous: the upper and middle classes are gone to safer ground. The revolution has not reached the country's roots, but simply moved its debris around for another season—they will come back, like next year's leaves.

Beyond this easily read simile, the interreferentiality of the two sections with literary antecedents is undeniable, as Pito's personal quest in part I (his ludicrous vow to return home in triumph) becomes in part II a more generalized discourse on humankind's basic needs. In contrast to the jail teeming with life, he witnesses in a hospital grotesque quantities of starvation and death. In this upside-down world he is reduced to eating flowers, exhorting other patients to follow his fantastic example in order to overcome reality, to let *themselves* eat cake:

Sobrepónganse a la realidad . . . y coman con la fantasía, a imitación de los hambrientos que se dan banquetes espirituales, contemplando los aparadores de las pastelerías. Sigán mi ejemplo: yo tomo violetas cocidas como demostración de mi cultura; los aristócratas las saborean cristalizadas con azúcar, acaso para inspirarse despertando sus aficiones poéticas. (159)

Romero, a career diplomat (like so many Latin American literary figures of the modern era), takes a swipe at himself and his own social class as pretentious consumers of candied violets. And Pito locates himself between this absurd would-be aristocracy and the impoverished who do not yet know how to help themselves (like Lukács's bees at the window). "Follow my example," he says, and simply *eat* as a sign of culture.¹⁶ The exemplum is underscored by the mention, just after it, of Cotija, the birthplace of Rubén Romero. Like all good picaresque narrators, this one chews on both sides of his mouth, educating the common reader while chastising the cultured one, attracting the attention of both whenever possible.

The tree motif is further elaborated by an ecstatic alcohol-induced vision in a passage reminiscent of Grimmelshausen's *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (a picaresque of the Thirty Years' War) (Stone 1998: 146–58).

Cierta ocasión me sentí árbol: mis pies eran las raíces y mis piernas troncos por cuya corteza, áspera y dura, subían hormigas de todos tamaños. El ejército de pequeños animalitos cosquilleaba con sus patas de alambre mi carne rugosa, desesperando mis nervios. Yo los veía subir, y subir, y me asaltaban deseos de limpiarlos, de arrojarlos lejos de mí, pero deteníame una idea: los árboles tienen obligación de prestar ayuda a estos parásitos, hijos, como ellos de la naturaleza y, por lo tanto, hermanos suyos. (164–5)

It is only from delirium that Pito can muster up idealism in part II, here preaching (in the secular-humanist tradition of Cervantes, as opposed to scriptural or official Cardenista rhetoric) the moral obligation of the mighty to succor the weak. Note that whether a reader recognizes the image of the tree from literature or *lotería* is unimportant as long as the critique is communicated: protection is needed.

In part II, Pito has finally left his class behind, and he has found the voice of the new generation, a new indigenous voice of Mexico's "roots." He is a "barillero," a trinket-seller known as "Hilo Lacre," and will not change his occupation again. The position is biographically accurate as well as metaphorically apt: he peddles needles and thread to repair torn fabrics and sells notions to improve appearances. Pito, nattily dressed in tatters, has himself been turned inside out. When he and the Poet meet once more by chance, the Poet notes that Pito has now become a political orator, no longer the cynical philosopher (148). What was inspirational and revolutionary, politically and personally, has become mere hot air. The anarchical anecdotes and "life according to nature" (in the way of the classical Cynics) of part I have given way to a rush from reality born of a latter-day cynicism that sees human nature as eternally

16. The *banquete espiritual* will be taken up again in by Romero in "Algunas cosillas de Pito Pérez que se me quedaron en el tintero," which describes an olfactory feast.

unalterable, and human need as basic and unfulfilled in this world. Pito, inverting the Poet's observation, says that in reality one needs more cynicism to practice politics than philosophy (148). This kind of double-speak, again, appeals to both the elite and mass audience.

In part II, in the reading of a more elite public, Pito has completely lost faith in progress as his career reaches a dead end; he has irrevocably fallen out of the middle class. After the revolution, whatever illusions Pito had as he reminisced high atop a bell tower in Santa Clara del Cobre have been dashed. Now a kind of ambulatory dollar store—the clown of carnival who will enact the top-to-bottom reverse of the world—he wears little bells in order to drum up business, and each bell reminds him of a particular town in Michoacán that he has visited (in the way of the English song “Oranges and Lemons,” the Poet dubs him “un carillón humano” as he seeks to strike sympathetic chords). Pito says he hears his bells speak to each other, “dialogar entre sí de lo que han visto y de lo que han vivido” (149), yet he becomes the fool of the *commedia dell'arte*, the harlequin of God who will speak to the masses as a wise fool because of what *he* has seen and lived.

The class-bound and literary allusions are given a final twist, as the last pretenses of high literature are taken down. Love, in literature (and especially poetry), is the usual means to transcend the quandary of past, present and future that the novel posits at the start; love drives knights errant and supposedly redeems them. While pícaros are typically frustrated in love, the trope is labeled more realistically here. In part I, Pito is shown to be a literal fatalist, giving his girlfriends up for dead as soon as they have left him for a better prospect, such as his brother, his go-between (as in the *Quijote*) and, finally, a “receptor de rentas,” this last being the office in which the young José Rubén Romero held his first formal job (Ochoa 1991: 51–52)!¹⁷ Pointing out that the “knight” who saves the damsel is actually a cuckold, Pito exacts a kind of revenge on this tax collector, spoiling his wedding by recounting in verse certain privy details of the bride's body (111). At the end of this chapter on lost loves, Pito again turns the tables on his author and his tradition of literacy, imposing his version of popular verses upon the lyric theme of unrequited love:

¿Qué favor le debo al sol
 Por haberme calentado,
 Si de chico fui a la escuela,
 Si de grande fui soldado,
 Si de casado cabrón,

17. He was appointed tax collector in Santa Clara in 1912, “a reward for having served under his father, . . . who had taken to the field in support of Madero” (Phillips 1964: 698).

Y de muerto condenado?
 ¿Qué favor le debo al sol
 Por haberme calentado? (113)

The sentiment and images parallel those of Lou Reed's American pop song "Who Loves the Sun?", but to a Mexican audience contemporary with the text the lines no doubt strike another chord, quite possibly recalling the *lotería* card of the sun, "La cobija de los pobres." It is supremely ironic that lyricism, with its noble heritage, should be the last refuge of the down and out, yet here it shows subversive possibilities as an expression of ingratitude to the seemingly eternal powers that be.

As a three-time loser in love exposed to ridicule and disdain, Pito has neither social nor sentimental protection from the world, so he drowns his sorrows in drink, as when he learns that the rich old Don Santiago, whom he has sent to ask for the hand of Chucha, has asked instead for the girl to marry *him*. Pito's reaction to this event is telling: "Cuando regresé a acostarme, todos los frascos de la tienda temblaron; *las botellas* tuvieron temor de ser violadas, *los barriles* creyeron llegada su última hora hasta que, al fin, Baco se compadeció de mí y me durmió en sus brazos como en los de un padre cariñoso" (103). As we have noted, the personification of inanimate objects is an element of Romero's picaresque adaptation, and here it underscores Pito's painful realization. His resulting violent rage, however, is aimed at those familiar objects (*las botellas* and *los barriles*) and not at any person; his dilemma is that of a man who feels the urge to do violence, but at the same time feels that it is futile.

The setting of this epiphany is quite telling: Pito's mother has just tried to set her son on the straight path by arranging a sales position at his uncle's store—by setting him back on the path to his "proper" class position. He takes the job eagerly, "dispuesto a ser más honrado que San Dimas, el auténtico, y a no ingerir sino lo preciso para mantener incorrupto el cadáver de mi última esperanza" (95). Knowing this is his last chance for a normal middle-class life, Pito works hard until he learns that he is only being paid in meals. Therefore, after Don Santiago snatches away his beloved, Pito avenges himself on his stingy uncle (one of his own class, unlike the rich Don) by giving away most of the goods in the shop: "Dios había tocado mi corazón y sentía, por primera vez, el regocijo de ser generoso con los necesitados" (104). Even if the upper class continues to treat all of its social inferiors with disdain, the middle class must not follow its bad example, as this comic parable demonstrates.

Throughout life, Pito courts death, which, paired with drunken oblivion, creates the dark frame that lights up his "useless" life with urgency and perverse meaning. It is therefore only fitting that in part II he

takes death as a kind of wife who will redeem him into an afterlife with revolutionary potential. His consort is at first described enigmatically, in the way of *lotería* cards:

¡La Caneca
no es gorda, ni seca
ni come manteca! (178)

La Caneca is the name he gives his spouse, but the word refers literally to a liquor bottle—an empty vessel to be filled with spirits.

In any event, she turns out to be a research skeleton he steals from the hospital—a Baroque image of death-in-life, such as those still found in rural churches, as well as a Day of the Dead allusion. Unburdened by the flesh, she becomes an ironic universal type for ideal humanity. As Pito asks the Poet, “¿No somos nosotros otros esqueletos más repugnantes, forrados de carne podrida?” (178). Pito is not really a survivor like so many pícaros; he is rather a liver (in the *carpe diem*, not the cirrhosis sense of the word), focused on the here and now. He embraces death as the only sure thing in his unstable world, yet their close relationship seems to have started during the revolution. “He pasado victorioso como un general por campos de batalla, cubiertos de cadáveres, aspirando el hedor de la carne podrida, y he visto como los ojos de los difuntos adquieren brillo de celuloide al ausentarse la luz del pensamiento” (157). This passage recalls and modernizes a horrific deed of that other alcoholic pícaro, Estebanillo Gonzalez, who, on the battlefield of Nördlingen, stabbed the already dead in order to pass himself off as a hero. But Pito is completely uninterested in personal glory and is, furthermore, a pacifist, even when fortified: “soy hombre pacífico y odio toda clase de armas, aún en mis mayores borracheras” (169). Indeed, Pito claims to have borrowed from death celluloid eyes such as those he finds on the battlefield in order to see the world clearly and to announce the possibility of a different one; he has entered into a different life. “Yo estoy seguro de que existe todo lo que veo, y que la muerte me presta sus ojos para que me divierta, como un anticipo sobrenatural, con el panorama de otros mundos” (169).

It is, however, significant that Pito will only point toward the unfinished work of salvation from the revolution: he himself will have no future. When death does come to him, Pito’s last will and testament, *pro forma* in much picaresque literature,¹⁸ is a predictably bitter document

18. Even the framing narrator feels compelled to leave a testament of sorts in “Algunas cosillas de Pito Pérez que se me quedaron en el tintero,” which begins “Será bueno dejar asentadas en el papel antes de que la muerte que llevo en el alma descienda a mi mano algunas travesurillas de Pito Pérez . . .”

in which he spits in the face of humanity with his dying breath, willing to the rich “la mierda de mi vida” and to the poor, “por cobardes, mi desprecio” (182). Yet what he leaves behind is a wake-up call that can be useful to his survivors, his readers. Where Periquillo and Don Catrín, both spoiled children, parroted behavior imported from the Continent, Pito whistles a tune that is completely Mexican and more easily followed. Fatherless in birth and childless in death, he is nevertheless a fertile progenitor for his adoptive children—not via the nepotism of the patronage system, but through the voluntary affiliation of believers.

While the name “pito” refers literally to the flute he often plays (with necessary allusions to St. Francis preaching to the birds), it also draws attention in common slang to his generative organ. Indeed, Romero grants this hero betrothed to death a truer form of paternity, as well as saintliness, when he describes his character in part II (revisiting the clothing trope established on the novel’s first page) as wearing a “pantalón con unas rodilleras tan amplias que podría guardar en ellas a sus hijos, a semejanza de los canguros; sombrero de carrete haciendo equilibrios para conservarse sobre la melena alborotada y que por su color de oro viejo, parecía aureola de santo” (155–56). The halo was already present in the earlier description, which mentioned that a straw hat “nimbaba de oro la cabeza de Pito” (12). But the kangaroo children are a new image, symbolic of future generations that will need protection from the elements. Of course, Pito is really neither a father nor a saint, yet his “useless” life becomes exemplary for a Mexican readership, a good portion of which lives in fear of following his path to indigence.

Politically, Pito is one continuous *grito*, a cry to finish the revolution, echoing the prediction of the assassinated President Carranza that “a dead revolution will have to be fought again” (Gonzales 2002: 82). But he cannot go it alone, so he drinks to stifle his rage. “El problema del pícaro es un problema colectivo, compartido por todos esos sectores que han perdido [sic] una forma de vida sin ser completamente integrados a otra” (Beverley 1987: 58). Indeed, Pito taps into a collective problem that continues to the present time, the socio-economic insecurity felt by much of his readership. The new family of Mexico, he insistently implies, must be quasi-socialist—an open, sympathetic affiliation rather than a closed, old system of cronyism; a passage into redemption rather than a cycle of corruption.

Conclusion

The dual heritage of *Pito Pérez* is a culmination of the genre in Spanish, but it also suggests a new beginning for the form as a political entity, a beginning that, according to the present reading of the genre, must reach

a wide audience in order to fulfill its socio-critical role. The final image of Pito in the novel is the photograph found in his corpse's pocket—"en éste aparecía sonriendo, del brazo de la muerte" (182)—smiling on the arm of death, as if to confirm the iconic status of his duality in a double lotería card (and again, the lottery, the wheel of fate is another Baroque figure for destiny). As a Middleman, Pito is located between orality and literacy, folk art and high art, fiction and reality.

The Mexican pícaro has come a long way since Lizardi. However, despite Lizardi's admirable didactic efforts, the Mexico of Rubén Romero has not achieved his predecessor's high-minded goals, either through art or revolution. *Pito Pérez* asks why not, and the answer would seem to be the neglect of the lower echelons of society by that emerging elite that Periquillo had addressed; the middle classes (a la Don Catrín) have chosen to become a new elite rather than tend to the roots of their nation. Pito Pérez perches between a moribund past and an unborn future, and Romero revives the picaresque genre by returning to its roots, even as he depicts an apparent dead end in terms of social progress. Still, Pito's fate need not be that of his readers: by seeming not to care he teaches them to do so. The tragedy is that this blasphemous pícaro must still look to the afterlife in order to find a better world, although the fight is never gone from his useless life, which culminates in a final act of defiance, daring the reader to follow his example, to live life in one's own way, not in some way imposed from above. Thus Pito dies exposed on a garbage heap with eyes wide open, "los ojos muy abiertos mirando con altivez desafiadora al firmamento" (181).

Encouragingly, Pito's courting of death in life paves the way for his cultural survival through his heirs by affiliation. He sees life through the "celluloid eyes" of death, but his heirs live on in the celluloid medium of the cinema, which is only fitting since film has replaced the novel as the best-selling narrative form. Who are the post-Pito pícaros, then? According to Aguilar Camín and Meyer,

. . . beginning with the industrialization of the 1940s and 1950s, [the middle class] has graduated to become a new social majority. It is no longer the traditional majority of the old Mexico—rural, provincial, Catholic, or indigenous; neither is it a new proletarian majority. It is a new urban majority, related both to the students of 1968 and the opposition voters of the 1980s; it is related to the new society of Mexican masses, the peasants who emigrate to cities and lose their peasant origins or already have one generation in the cities; it is the expression of the base of the demographic pyramid of young people, fully incorporated into urban life, for whom there seem to be no prospects, and who have begun to find their own forms of barbarous organization in the juvenile violence [of] street gangs in the populous barrios . . . of the great cities. (Aguilar Camín and Meyer 1993: 261)

This is a new, mixed heritage, creating new forms of being as opposed to simply occupying old ones. The new pícaros, then, are perhaps found among the homeless urban youth of Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950), which used non-actors to tell its story. Del Monte would seem to concur, noting "es raro que ningún crítico se haya acordado de Luis Buñuel, cuyo libro de cabecera es el *Lazarillo de Tormes*, y en quien cada film es una constante de la temática picaresca" (del Monte 1971: 161). Indeed, in crossing the Atlantic, Buñuel's films become less experimental and more experiential in nature; they follow the track we have seen in the new picaresque novel, taking a form from high culture and making it more concrete. In this new medium, then, the picaresque genre continues to be used in the more openly critical sense outlined by *Pito Pérez*. No wonder film has become one of Mexico's more important exports.

Yet literature has not been left behind; rather it has been recreated into new, more popular forms. Certainly Elena Poniatowska, to name but one example, takes up the mantle for *mexicanas* with *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969), a novel that emulates Romero's use of a real-life protagonist named Jesusa, who fights in both the revolution and the Cristero wars, concluding, "La revolución no ha cambiado nada. Nomás estamos más muertos de hambre" (Poniatowska 1969: 126). Furthermore, we may observe from a feminist point of view the intermingled issues of birth order and national heritage (including aspects of the revolution in the north) in both the novel and film versions of Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (1989 and 1992, respectively). To repeat, in order to find the broad-cast didacticism inherent in the form, we must look to the movies, where we find the middle class fearful, like Tenoch in *Y tu mamá también* (2002), of sliding back into poverty even while emulating an elite lifestyle, or, alternately, dreaming of leaving home in order to prosper in another land (just as many of the first pícaros did), as in Gregory Nava's American film *El Norte* (1983). These emigrants find that life in the new land presents new obstacles, not least of which is the fact that middle-class Hispanics will most probably live among the underclass in the United States.

With *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez*, the picaresque genre has become indigenous to Mexico as a whole, not only to its upper classes; and so, while it alludes to high literacy and pretensions to aristocracy, or high modernism, it speaks most eloquently about tensions between official and popular culture. J. Rubén Romero, an author whose place was not unlike Cervantes's—not from the elite but perhaps aspiring to be—has snatched the genre, moribund in Mexico for a century, out of the hands of the literati and restored it to emerging readers who occupy a place comparable to Pito's own, in between historical reality and idealism, pessimism and optimism. As mentioned, Rubén Romero was a career civil

servant and diplomat, and it was while in his first consular post in Barcelona, a new member of Mexico's post-revolutionary elite, that he began to assuage his homesickness by writing about Michoacán, home to a real-life picaresque figure named Jesús Pérez Gaona. The Poet and Pito find themselves at opposite ends of a spectrum, but not as aristocrat and peasant, rather as rising and falling members of the middle class, one a winner and the other a loser in the lotería of the revolution, as the wheel of fate finally rolls the upper classes under—or not.

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