Abstract: The year 1910 marks the beginning of a civil war that ravaged Mexico for the next seven years, leaving an estimated death toll of well over a million. This conflict, known to Mexicans as ‘La Revolución’, gave rise to a vast literary output encompassing both oral and written genres. The former in the countless ‘corridos’, songs whose lyrics cover the whole gamut of actions, from the heroic patriotism of the caudillos to the savagery and sacrifice endured by the population. For its part, the written genre played a pivotal role in modern Mexican letters, in the form of what critics call ‘Novela de la revolución’. Apart from its representation in novels and short stories, this violent armed conflict also found its way into the poetic output of Ramón López Velarde (RLV), who is Mexico’s literary figure closest to national poet. Velarde’s highly evocative poems and essays are a paean to Mexico’s provincial life. Jerez, López Velarde’s birthplace—a backwater in the Northern state of Zacatecas—was his very own personal Eden, albeit one caught in the crossfire of the warring factions. In 1910, Jerez, Zacatecas, stood as a symbol of senseless bloodshed and indiscriminate violence. Once more, but one hundred years later, this remote corner of the Mexican geography stands out as one of the most violent zones in the whole country. This article analyses Velarde’s Women in Exile and The Maleficent Return, together with some other theme-related texts dedicated to the conflict, while discussing its new violent avatar, a century later.

Keywords: López Velarde; The Maleficent Return; Mexican Revolution; Internal Displacement.

November 20th is one of the most important dates in the civil calendar in Mexico. The day marks the beginning, in 1910, of a widespread unrest that soon turned into a full-fledged civil war that laid to waste vast swaths of the country. This bloodbath lasted for seven years and left a death toll of more than a million
in its wake. Mexican school textbooks call this conflict the ‘Mexican Revolution’. This war has also been the subject of a vast literary output encompassing both oral and written genres, the former in grassroots ballads, popularly known as ‘corridos’. However, it is in what critics call ‘Novela de la revolución’ that the armed conflict takes pride of place in modern Mexican letters, as the subject matter of numerous novels and short stories. This armed conflict also found its way into the essays and poems of Ramón López Velarde, Mexico’s literary figure closest to national poet.

In his evocative texts, López Velarde sings the praises of an unabashedly idyllic rural Mexico. Thematically, much of his poetry and prose constitute a paean to Mexico’s provincial life. Jerez, López Velarde’s birthplace — a God-forsaken village in the Northern state of Zacatecas — was his very own personal Eden, one that was caught in the relentless fusillade.

In 1910, Jerez stood as a symbol of senseless bloodshed and violence; one hundred years hence, only a handful of cities can be considered safe by any standard. This, obviously, excludes Zacatecas. The state is a hotbed of massacres in Mexico, or anywhere else for that matter. According to the 2022 Peace Index for Mexico, published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, a Sydney-based think tank with branches operating in Mexico City, the country is still prey to violence and its dire consequences. The numbers are devastating: the rate of homicides has seen a 76.3% increase since 2015. During the 2018–2022 period, the country recorded a staggering 34,000 murders each year. Mexico’s rate of homicides, 26.6 per 100,000 people, is the eighth highest in the world. If we stop to consider that this period comprises the Covid-19 lockdown — when most Mexicans had no choice but stay at home — the rate is nothing short of appalling.

Horrendous as these numbers are, Mexico’s rate is lower than those of Venezuela, El Salvador and Honduras. Nevertheless, this cannot hide the magnitude of the crisis: the thousands caught in the turf wars of criminal organisations that now control vast expanses of the country.

While it is true that nature plays a key role in forcing people to abandon their homes, as a direct consequence of earthquakes, floods or other weather-related disasters, all recurring events in Mexico, the internal displacement resulting from violence accounts for even more dismal figures. According to last year’s data issued by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, natural disasters accounted for 19,000 movements in 2021, while violence triggered 29,000, the latter being a three-fold increase on the 2020 figure. This violence,
resulting from powerful drug cartels, ruthless gangs of fuel smugglers, and human traffickers—all operating with utmost impunity—has forced thousands of Mexicans to flee and abandon their homes. This is particularly true of present-day Jerez, where, according to press reports, in March of last year, almost 500 families from 16 small villages located in the mountainous areas close to the village had to abandon their homes, livestock, and farmland. The other option was death, extortion and kidnapping.

This is present-day Mexico. Obviously, the Mexican drug cartels did not unleash the 1910 political uprising. Yet, between past and present, there is not much of a difference in terms of human suffering. This paper analyses “Women in Exile” and “The Maleficent Return”, two of Velarde’s most celebrated poems, dedicated to the conflict, together with other short passages of other various poems. This centres the discussion on the 1910 conflict while discussing its new, and more vicious, edition a century later.

Before discussing the texts, a few facts about Ramón López Velarde. RLV was a lawyer and a staunch supporter of the liberal forces that wanted to put an end to the thirty-year-plus regime of Porfirio Díaz, which resulted in bloodshed and utter destruction. The poet was a stalwart supporter of the Madero, who became president after the demise of the dictator (Arreola 60-1). For his unflagging loyalty, Madero rewarded Ramón with a post as an actuary; the job consisted of carrying out the evictions of poor families. For obvious reasons, he handed in his notice after a couple of months.

López Velarde penned some of the most famous verse in early 20th Mexican letters. His essays and verse are characterised by his hallmark dualism and ardent Catholicism, his obsession with the female anatomy, but also by his outrageously original use of adjectives, pleonasm and obscure metaphors, which contributes to the musicality of his most celebrated texts. His poetic idiom and personal style, however, do not lend themselves to translation, which explains his being virtually unknown outside the Spanish-speaking world. A further difficulty lies in López Velarde’s peculiar use of images and metaphor. José Emilio Pacheco, one of Mexico’s most important authors, claims that, in order to understand many of López Velarde’s images, some grounding of the country’s iconography of the years 1914-1921 is of the essence (354). Given the prominence of RLV for Mexican letters, we can only join Gabriel Zaid in his complaint that Enciclopedia de México, that repository of all things Mexican, dedicates almost two pages to the likes of Sor Juana and López Velarde, while nine are spent on the
In view of all the difficulties listed above, we can only be grateful to M. W. Jacobs for his translations of some of López Velarde’s poems into English. In the introduction to his volume of translations, Jacobs has this to say about the challenge posed by the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the Mexican poet:

The difficult imagery, obscure references, invented words, conservatism, religiosity, and romanticism, the emotional rawness, these might explain why RLV is not better known ... The same list of reasons why RLV is no better known probably also explains the dearth of English translations. (Jacobs, n.p.)

In our discussion and analysis of López Velarde’s texts, we use our own translation. Painfully aware as we are of the afore-mentioned difficulty, we believe that our familiarity with the Spanish original will go some way to compensating the inevitable shortcomings. Admittedly, RLV can be quite obscure at times.

RLV is difficult even for Mexicans. If you ask a random Mexican about RLV you will usually get a sour grimace. As the national poet, he’s the guy they had to memorize in school, and those who might have explored further would have run into that wall of inscrutability. (Jacobs, n.p.)

With this mind, we now turn to López Velarde’s texts. In “Bad Reprobates, Worse Righteous” (1916), one of his essays of Gift of February and Other Chronicles (1909-1917), López Velarde summarises the plight of Mexico during the Revolution, or —to be more precise— the plight of Mexican women:

Pestilence, Famine and War... In the Trisagion, words of supplication; in the province, the catastrophe that orphans my female friends. Bad news has been coming in relentlessly and tragically, like the fall of leaves in the last week of September. (DON 346)

In 1916, the revolution was in full swing. The consequences were more
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particularly evident in Mexico City, where thousands found a haven to escape the war. This is what López Velarde sees in the first poem, “Women in Exile”, collected in Zozobra\(^29\) (1919), a “central” book in López Velarde poetry (Paz 69). Here, López Velarde describes the fate of countless exiled women forced to escape the unremitting bloodshed. In this snapshot of the dire conditions prevailing in Mexico, now and then, López Velarde bemoans and sympathises with the fate of many of his decidedly upper-middle class female compatriots. This is the opening stanza:

Now, the entire province  
Congregates its wholesome daughters on the haggard  
Avenues, while Ruth and Rebecca proclaim  
The bucolic novelty of their napes. (ZOZ 137)

In this first stanza, we find some of RLV’s signature imagery. In his poetic universe, the Mexican province is a paragon of the pristine, immaculate and pure. To López Velarde, the Mexican heartland “means urgency, postponement, while the city means precipitation, a fall into time, into bodies, into death” (Mier 22-3).

In contrast to the sinful nature of women from the city, those from small towns are exemplary in their purity and wholesomeness. Ruth and Rebecca are another metaphoric element present throughout Velarde’s work, where numerous references to the Bible epitomise Catholic values, such as chastity, kindness and faithfulness.

The poor exiles  
From Morelia and Toluca, Durango and San Luis  
Perfume the Metropolis like aniseeds. (ZOZ 137)

In striking contrast to the sinful decadence of the big city, these women are indeed fragrant and angelic. To López Velarde, the capital is nothing but the sum of excesses that include excruciating pain and unabashed hedonism: ‘millionaire in pain and pleasure’ (MIN, 262).

\(^{29}\) Zozobra, literally, translates as capsizing. This Spanish word also conjures up images of angst, disquiet and uncertainty.
He was 25; halfway between the lost Eden and the disgraceful city..., his days in the desert culminate in the temptation of a siren he cannot help listening to: Mexico City and her gales of threats, enticements and promises. (Sheridan 104)

This temptress takes under her sinful wing the flock of women’, battered and distressed:

The flock of
Battered larks falls here:
Fragrant drops shaken
From a shrub by the north wind. (ZOZ 137)

Also, in “Bad Reprobates, Worse Righteous”, López Velarde equates women —the ones from the provinces— with a flock of immaculate birds: “I abandon myself to the mournful flock that, on its wings of virginity and torture, repatriates me to a landscape of innocence” (DON, 426). The north wind is a symbol RLV has on occasion used in opposition to sultry sexual prowess—as in “Ants”, one of his poems collected in Zozobra.

In “Women in Exile”, the wind stands for the ravages of the war. The poem contains several olfactory metaphors: aniseeds, perfume, fragrant. These images, found in many of his texts, are central to his universe. His poetry, to put it simply, is essentially aromatic (Padilla 48-9).

In the next stanza, the exiles make do with whatever form of shelter they find, while the estimate the magnitude of their loss.

Under makeshift tents,
They appraise, with plaintive quadrants,
Their peace and property in ruins. (ZOZ 137)

The women find themselves destitute in the immensity of a ruthless city. Having lost their dreams and the spaciousness of their homes, they now have to endure hardship and discomfort.

These women, who once dreamt
Lost in vast bedchambers,
Now sleep in miserly lodgings. (ZOZ 137)

Their riches gone, the women must quickly adapt to their new
surroundings. The remote provincial life, a veritable cornucopia, stands in stark contrast to the niggardly life on this inhospitable shore.

These proprietresses of orchards and bountiful gardens,
Now haggle over fruits and roses. (ZOZ 137)

These affluent women, uprooted and replanted in alien soil, are incapable of blending in. Everything about them stands out: their attire, their jewels, their looks. Possessed of firm moral standing, the women have no trouble averting their eyes to the temptation of the capital:

Clad in heavy fashions,
Bejewelled with long earrings
And their indifferent glance,
Are now immune to the glitter
Of a jeweller’s shop window (ZOZ 137).

The fright these women experience in the big city is evident. This López Velarde remembers in one of his chronicles “Avenida Madero” (1917). The name refers to one of Mexico City’s most famous streets, where girls from the remote corners of the country face the daunting task of crossing the (now pedestrianised) street: “These young girls, who join hands to cross the street, thus forming a timid chain (‘one, two, three’), have every reason to fear cars” (DON, 440). These exiles remind the poet of another, albeit much less graceful flock:

Later on, they remind one
Of a silly troop of turkeys
Descending from a hill
In their obvious fright... . (ZOZ 138)

The stanza that follows makes the poet reminisce about all that has been lost in the conflict. He waxes lyrical about peaceful siestas, and other such pleasures, part and parcel of the sweet old days before the war.

Oh coddled siestas!
Fussiness before a chocolate cup, piping hot.
A fainting fit caused by the sudden outburst of a drove
That knocks down the flowerpots in brown stately houses,
Nuts on a lotto card,
And Don Juan shooting arrows
At the venerable shutter of the grilles of yore. (ZOZ 138)

As it is often the case with López Velarde, women are the symbolic element that connects him to his childhood and Jerez. He never fails to see beyond the shabbiness and grime that are these women’s lot. In so doing, he makes his the exiles’ suffering:

I pass near these slow fugitives, unaware,
In their airy ungainliness and active quietism,
Of the molten and pure
Compensation that their ostracism
Has on my chest, lavishly hospitable,
Apprehensive and munificent. (ZOZ 138)

In the last stanza, López Velarde explains he welcomes the exiles because they are the epitome of sensuous joys:

Anonymous and slow exiles, I embrace you.
As though a lucid family of faeries
Came to me, because you are redolent
Of a sumptuous destination
And of the indomitable power
Of pumpkin sweets,
Shimmer of Advent on
A recondite and idle cornice. (ZOZ 138)

The city provides a safe haven for the exiles. However, in the presence of these heralds of the proverbial heartland, the poet also finds a respite from his daily toils. RLV experiences something similar in one his first poems, “Travelling Lady” (1912), where the casual encounter with a woman from Jerez, of all places, makes him fear the dangers that await the traveller at every turn. The woman is a delicate creature, blissfully unaware of her surroundings in a city fraught with danger:

Poor friend of yore, poor flower from the province
Strolling down the raucous streets of the metropolis . . .
Return to your village, lest your clothes are soiled
With the mud of impure cities. (PP 41)

Now we turn our attention to “El Retorno Maléfico” (The Maleficient Return), also collected in Zozobra (1919). This poem is a drama, of which Ramón is also the main character. Gabriel Zaid, arguably one the most knowledgeable authorities in Mexican literature, has this to say about the poet and this text:

We are before the work of a great artist who displays his talents, takes risks, and lets his self-critical imagination create the experience of the revolutionary prodigal son. He might have harboured dreams of making things better, now he is afraid of coming back. (784)

Unavoidably perhaps, he turns this poem —about the utter devastation that his hometown has suffered— into a love poem. Ramón is the deftest transformer of the epic into the lyric: “His epic poetry is nothing more than his daily existence, with the country being the house where one lives” (Valdivia 16).

This most confessional of poems, consists of three distinct sections. In the first one, Ramón simultaneously discusses and rejects the possibility of a trip back to his birthplace. In the second part, he finds himself in Jerez in the dead of the night, with a quick description of the old house and the eerie atmosphere of the village. The poem ends on a sombre, yet highly personal, note that has become synonymous with his attitude to his life and times.

Like in many of his texts, López Velarde talks of his unremitting obsession with love and the purity of a provincial Mexico, one that perhaps only exists in the deepest recesses of his imagination. Jerez, Zacatecas is the phantom embodiment of Mexico: “Jerez is a ghost”, says one of his critics, the place where intimacy and distance merge, where nothing ever happens anymore and announces the subversion of Eden. In coming back to his village, López Velarde retraces the steps of his own exile (Paredes 222). Before making up his mind, he must face the fact that his village is now a desolate ghost town:

It will be better not to return to the village,
To that subverted Eden silenced
By the mutilation of shrapnel.
As far away as the crippled ash-trees
—those portly-domed dignitaries—
The wailing of the belfry will reach,
While in the first part Ramón seems to be utterly undecided about his prospective visit to Jerez, in the second he is already describing the destruction that surrounds him. The devastation reaches as far as the outer limits of the Jerez, dotted by ash-trees. This section displays an interesting pun that connects the leafiness (fronda) of the wind-shaken trees with the de fronde, les vents de fronde, the series of civil wars in 17th century France.

Up to this point in the film, the camera keeps focusing on an actor that is not the poet himself, as though the scene were shot in the third person. Once in the village, the visitor cannot but see the destruction left by the warring factions:

Rifles have left on all the whitewashed walls
Of this spectral village blacks and ominous
Maps, for the prodigal son to read,
On his return to his threshold,
One accursed nightfall,
By the light of an oil lamp,
His hopes forlorn. (ZOZ 153)

We are now at the gate of the old house. Gracing the façade are two plaster faces, perplexed at the presence of this late-night visitor.

When the coarse mouldy key
Turns the creaky lock
On the old gate
The two demure plaster medallions,
Their eyelids opening slightly,
Will look at each other and say:
“What is that?” (ZOZ 153)

The form of the verbs keeps shifting between, past, present, future and the subjunctive. These changes seem to blur the lines that separate the crudeness of facts and the figments of Ramón’s imagination. Another crucial shift is the change from an action recounted as a thing simply imagined by the poet to an actual experience. There is a change from the initial third-person at the onset of the poem to first-person narrative, from minor to major as it were.

In the stanza that follows, we see Ramón crossing the threshold to step
into the family house. This might be his home, but it does not feel very welcoming, hence the use of *adventitious*, suggesting that the visitor is a trespasser, someone who, having left the village, has forfeited his right to enter the old family house.

I will reach with adventitious feet  
The foreboding courtyard,  
With the self-absorbed well  
And its leather bucket  
Dripping a categorical drop  
Like a plaintive chant. (ZOZ 153)

Ramón often uses this ‘self-absorbed well’ as a metaphor of his own life, his ancestry, and his self. Unfortunately, the lovely alliteration in the original Spanish, used in the description of the leather bucket, is irretrievable: *goteando su gota categorica*.

The next stanza consists of a series of conditional clauses leading up to the only resolution that Ramón can envisage: his unquenchable thirst for love, which appears throughout his poetry, even at his most epic and most dramatic.

If the sun, jolly, unremitting, and restoring,  
Boils the fonts where my recurring dreams bathed;  
If the ant toils;  
If roofs resound with the plodding call  
Of turtledoves, their gizzards buzzing and buzzing amidst cobwebs,  
My thirst for love will be like an iron ring  
Embedded in a grave slab. (ZOZ 154)

After this pledge of never-ending love, Ramón writes what must be one of the most beautiful descriptions of renewal and rebirth in the Spanish language. It is a firework display of López Velarde’s most idiosyncratic use of adjectives and pleonasm. The descriptions include several instances of alliteration, which we have attempted to reproduce in English.

New sparrows renewing early nests  
With novel potter’s beaks,  
Under the illustrious opalescence  
Of monastic evenings;
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Suckling calves crying for
The bountiful forbidden udder
Of a cow, ruminant and pharaonic,
Which children fear;
The novel timbre of a belfry;
Renovated altars;
The loving love of
Coupled couples;
Courtships of girls,
Fresh and humble, humble cabbages
That offer their hand through window shutters
In the light of dramatic lampposts;
An unmarried woman
Singing some old air to the piano;
A whistling gendarme... (ZOZ 154)

We are yet to read the very last line of the poem, the one that has become a byword for the whole of López Velarde’s literary output. Here, despite his unflagging support for the revolutionary forces that would usher in a new era — despite his hopes of renewal and rebirth after the cataclysm —, he bemoans the senseless destruction inflicted upon this, his ‘subverted Eden’. The poem ends like this:

...And a deep reactionary sorrow. (ZOZ 154)

It takes a healthy dose of courage and self-knowledge to admit that. Bright as the future of the country may one day be, the poet misses the village, as it existed before the war. This attitude runs counter to the political correctness of the day. He might have supported Madero and the revolution, López Velarde must be faithful to himself. López Velarde, “as if he were a seismograph, dutifully records every single movement of his inner life, to the slightest tremor” (Noyola 73).

101 years after his death, what remains of Velarde’s Jerez? Well, the sparrows are still there, by the thousands, together with the belfry, the children and the cows; the leather bucket in the patio is still dripping, categorically. The bloodshed and the brutality, Ramón might have seen. What he never foresaw, however, was that Mexico in the 21st century will still have thousands of exiles both within and beyond its borders. We hope he never imagined the sheer helplessness of his people before the callous indifference of decades of
governments corrupt, ineffectual and uncaring.

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