

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

145

Volume 145

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 145

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
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- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Mariano Azuela

1873-1952

Mexican novelist, short story writer, playwright, and essayist.

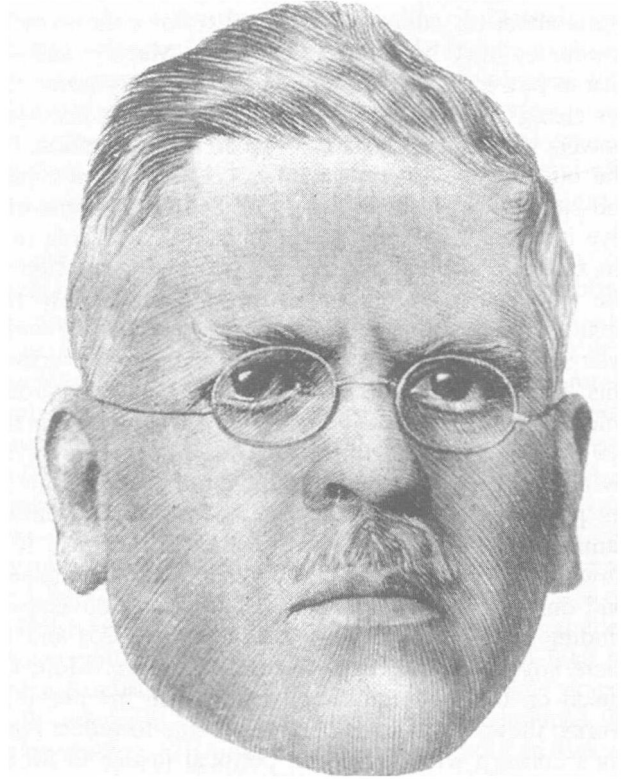
The following entry provides criticism on Azuela's works from 1935 through 2002. For more information on Azuela's life and works, see *TCLC*, Volume 3.

INTRODUCTION

Mariano Azuela was one of the foremost Mexican authors of the twentieth-century and is remembered for his depiction of the Mexican revolution in novels such as *Los de Abajo* (1916; *The Underdogs*), *Las tribulaciones de una familia decente* (1918; *The Trials of a Respectable Family*), and *La luciérnaga* (1932). His best-known work outside Mexico continues to be his first major novel about the Mexican revolution, *The Underdogs*. The work is lauded as a masterpiece of modern Spanish-American fiction for Azuela's realistic and objective portrayal of the trials and tribulations of the revolution, as well as its social and political consequences. This work, along with his later novels, has led critics to place Azuela among the best authors of twentieth-century Mexico, especially in light of his significance to the development of the larger literary landscape in Latin America at the beginning of the twentieth-century.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Azuella was born on January 1, 1873, in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, Mexico. His parents, Evaristo Azuela and Paulina Azuela owned a grocery store in town and led a fairly prosperous, middle-class life. At an early age Azuela became interested in reading, and would often read books at his father's store. Azuela entered the seminary in 1887, but left a few years later to pursue a medical degree in Guadalajara. Azuela pursued his literary interests in addition to his medical education and in 1907, he published his first novel, *María Luisa*, based on the desperate conditions he witnessed while working as a physician in the slums of Mexico City. Azuela's writing became more politicized following the Mexican revolution of 1910, and most of his subsequent works incorporated both the historical events and political and social impact of the revolution. Except for a brief sojourn in Lagos, where he was elected to political office,



and later working as a military physician for the revolutionary leader General Pancho Villa, Azuela spent most of his professional life in Mexico City. He died of a heart attack on March 1, 1952.

MAJOR WORKS

Azuella's early novels, including *María Luisa*, *Los fracasados* (1908), and *Mala Yerba* (1909; *Marcela*) are all concerned with the social inequalities he witnessed while working as a doctor in Mexico City. Praised for his vivid portrayals of social and cultural details, Azuela's writing in these novels was faulted by some for his lack of character and plot development. Following the revolution of 1910, which resulted in the ousting of dictator Porfirio Díaz, Azuela supported General Pancho Villa's claim to govern Mexico. Forced to flee the country with Villa, Azuela was able to return to Mexico City only after the close of the war. His novels during this time, including *The Underdogs*, *Los caciques* (1917;

The Bosses), *Las moscas* (1918; *The Flies*), and *The Trials of a Respectable Family*, all chronicle the affects of the revolution in one way or another. While Azuela deliberately shied away from writing a political history of the revolution, instead focusing on its social and political impact on ordinary Mexicans, his work is lauded for its objective portrayal of the horrors of war and its aftermath. Of these novels, *The Underdogs* is considered his masterpiece, reflecting many of Azuela's concerns about his country. The novel follows the story of a poor country boy named Demetrio Macias, and his rise to power in General Villa's revolutionary army. After rising to power, Macias is corrupted by the very powers he is fighting against—greed and corruption. On the other hand, Azuela's next novel, *The Bosses*, tells the story of a powerful family of Diaz supporters who live in a small Mexican town. Once again, Azuela uses his characters to expose the injustice and corruption of the system that the revolution meant to overthrow. His next major novel, *The Trials of a Respectable Family* was somewhat of a departure from his earlier works—this time Azuela focused on the story of a prosperous, middle-class family as they try to survive during the revolution. Although this work was not well-received by critics at the time of its publication, probably due to its perceived sympathetic tone towards the wealthy families that the revolution intended to displace, it is now acknowledged as one of Azuela's best works, second only to *The Underdogs*. Azuela's later novels, including *La Malhora* (1923), *El desquite* (1925) and *La luciérnaga* are more experimental in nature. More focused on the techniques of writing than his previous works, these works nonetheless continue to reflect Azuela's concern with social and political justice in Mexican society.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Azuela is acknowledged as one of the most influential writers of twentieth-century Mexico. His works are considered remarkable not only because of the subject matter he explored in them but also because of his pioneering place in Spanish literary development. Influenced by many contemporary European writers, Azuela used a mixture of naturalism and modernism in his writing that, critics note, has deeply impacted Mexican writers in later decades. Despite the accolades, however, most critical study on Azuela in English has focused on *The Underdogs*, his novel about the Mexican revolution. The work was originally published in serial form in 1915, at the height of the revolution. However, it did not gain national or critical attention until 1920, when it was published whole, in a revised and expanded edition. Since then, the novel has been translated into numerous languages, with its first English translation being issued by Enrique Manguía, in 1929. Titled *The Underdogs*, it has generated a significant portion of the

literary scholarship on Azuela, including issues surrounding its translation from the original. *The Underdogs* is also studied as a precursor to many of Azuela's later works, and in his review of these, Jefferson Rea Spell remarked that the imagery used in *The Underdogs* is often carried into more detail in Azuela's later works. In addition to his distinctive style, Azuela is also known for his consistent concern with Mexican social issues. This theme is constant in all his works, including his early novels, noted Bernard Dulsey in his survey of Azuela's depiction of the revolution in his works. Dulsey, like many other critics, also lauded Azuela for his honest and unflinching portrayal of both the positives and negatives of the revolution—ultimately, wrote Dulsey, Azuela viewed the revolution as only the beginning of a change that would eventually redeem Mexico. While acknowledging Azuela as one of the premier novelists of the Mexican revolution, Robert E. Luckey also pointed to the author's exploration of the general human condition in his works. Luckey wrote that this concern was especially apparent in Azuela's later works, many of which display a unique literary style that has served to maintain Azuela's place as one of the most influential Mexican novelists of the twentieth century.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- María Luisa* (novel) 1907
- Los fracasados* (novel) 1908
- Mala Yerba: Novela de costumbres nacionales [Marela: A Mexican Love Story]* (novel) 1909
- Andrés Pérez, maderista* (novel) 1911
- Sin amor* (novel) 1912
- Los de Abajo: Novela de la revolucion mexicana [The Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution]* (novel) 1916
- Los caciques [The Bosses]* (novel) 1917
- Las moscas [The Flies]* (novel) 1918
- Las tribulaciones de una familia decente [The Trials of a Respectable Family]* (novel) 1918
- La Malhora* (novel) 1923
- El desquite* (novel) 1925
- La luciérnaga* (novel) 1932
- El camarada Pantoja* (novel) 1937
- San Gabriel de Valdivias, comunidad indigena* (novel) 1938
- Regina Landa* (novel) 1939
- Avanzada* (novel) 1940
- Nueva Burguesia* (novel) 1941
- La marchanta* (novel) 1944
- La mujer domada* (novel) 1944
- Cien anos de novella mexicana* (essays) 1947
- Sendas perididas* (novel) 1949
- La maldicion* (novel) 1955

Esa sangre (novel) 1956

Madero Biografía novelada (novel) 1958-60; published in *Obras Completas*]

CRITICISM

John E. Englekirk (essay date February 1935)

SOURCE: Englekirk, John E. "The 'Discovery' of *Los de Abajo*." *Hispania* 18, no. 1 (February 1935): 53-62.

[In the following essay, Englekirk recounts the literary developments leading up to the publication of Azuela's *Los de Abajo*, calling it a formidable contribution to Spanish-American literature.]

The novel plays a relatively unimportant rôle in the development of Spanish-American letters of the nineteenth century. Patriotic verse and combative prose were the inevitable products of the long struggle for independence, first from Spain and later from local tyranny. Oppression, revolt, and exile—such was the normal stream of life in those turbulent, chaotic days, and few were the literati who found the place and the peace to commune serenely with the muse. With the possible exceptions of Isaac's *María* and Mera's *Cumandá*, both of which borrowed heavily from their European predecessors of over a generation before, the more laudable prose works of the century had been inspired by a passionate zeal to expose and to condemn existing political and social conditions. One need but recall such works as Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento*, Sarmiento's *Facundo*, Blest Gana's *Martín Rivas*, and Marmol's *Amalia* to realize that artistic perfection was the least of the aims of any one of these writers. Patriots, political exiles, essayists, pamphleteers, rather than novelists. With the turn of the century, however, there appeared on the literary horizon young men who were to cultivate and to exalt the novel to the position it now holds in Spanish-American literature. Argentina gave us *La Maestra Normal* of Manuel Gálvez, *Los Caranchos de "La Florida"* of Benito Lynch, and the classic of the Pampa, *Don Segundo Sombra* of Güiraldes. Colombia may well rest content with *La vorágine*—the sole novel of her ill-starred son, José Eustasio Rivera. Venezuela points with righteous pride to *Doña Bárbara* of Gallegos. And Mexico added to this formidable list of truly representative novels, redolent of the Spanish New World spirit and graphically descriptive of the manners and customs of America Hispana, its most powerful story of the Revolution, Azuela's *Los de abajo*.

The spectacular success of *Los de abajo* focused world attention on its author, and great was the general surprise to learn that Mariano Azuela was by profession a

modest doctor practicing in one of the humbler quarters of the Mexican Capital and writing but in his leisure moments, and that he had already published a goodly number of prose works. New editions of his earlier publications were soon in demand; he was discovered to have written several excellent novels of revolution-torn Mexico. His *Mala Yerba*, published in Guadalajara years before, was preferred by many to his more popular *Los de abajo*, and in 1932 was translated into English by Anita Brenner under the title of *Marcela* and shortly after into French by Mathilde Pomés as *Mauvaise graine*. Bewildered, and yet naïvely pleased with the belated glory that has lightened the gathering years, the reticent author is now besieged from every quarter of the globe for further translation rights, for new editions, and for critical information on his life and works.

As one examines the bibliography of *Los de abajo*,¹ he finds that the novel had been published ten years before it commanded sufficient attention to warrant new editions. It is true that there were two printings before this, those of 1917 and 1920, but these were very limited editions and failed to attract any widespread interest. Then suddenly—and wonder of wonders!—*El Universal Ilustrado*, in January of 1925, offers the novel in five installments, which publication was followed by no less than six more in the Spanish-speaking world and by translations in English, French, German, Japanese, and Serbian and by others, soon to appear, in Russian, Yiddish, and Italian. How can one explain the sudden success of a novel that in ten years had been read by but a handful of people and whose author was practically unknown in his own country? What induced the sales-seeking *El Universal Ilustrado* to publish *Los de abajo* in its popular *La Novela Semanal*? Who was responsible, and under what circumstances, for the discovery of Mexico's outstanding novelist of the Revolution? To whom is due, in no small degree, the fame that is crowning Mariano Azuela's later years of writing?

Carleton Beals, in the preface to the English translation by E. Munguía, Jr. (New York, 1929), does not attempt to explain why *Los de abajo* "suddenly attracted the attention of the entire Spanish-speaking world, ten years after it was first published"; but he adds that when it did, "the Mexican literati looked around in surprise." If Mr. Beals may be pardoned the freedom with which he indulges in mathematical calculations in making the statement "ten years after it was first published," his assertion that Mexico's men of letters were entirely ignorant of Azuela and of his novel should not be passed up unchallenged. Mexican literati were not surprised when Azuela's novel took its rightful place among the great prose works of Spanish America. Approximately three years before the date given by Beals, Azuela was recognized overnight as one of Mexico's foremost novelists, and *Los de abajo* was hailed as "*la gran sensación literaria del momento*." To the following interesting oc-

currence may be attributed largely the reputation that Azuela now enjoys.

Toward the close of the year 1924, literary men began to ask themselves what they had accomplished in the realm of poetry, the drama, and the novel that might stand the acid test of time. One of the more prominent issues of the day was thus set forth in the title of an article by José Corral Rigán,² "*La influencia de la revolución en nuestra literatura.*"³ Obviously the writer knew little of Azuela and much less of his works. He makes the following statement: "*Los escritores de la revolución no son los que estuvieron con la revolución.*" And then to substantiate his point, he adds:

La revolución tiene un gran pintor: Diego Rivera. Un gran poeta: Maples Arce. Un futuro gran novelista: Mariano Azuela, cuando escriba la novela de la revolución.⁴

This but two months before *Los de abajo* was to be proclaimed the outstanding literary achievement of the Revolution!

It was not until one month later, however, that the real challenge was issued to the younger generation of writers, and by none other than one of the most promising of that very group. Julio Jiménez Rueda did not mince words in the article he submitted to *El Universal* for December 20, 1924, entitled "*El afeminamiento en la literatura mexicana.*" After pointing out what everyone knows, "*que nuestra vida intelectual ha sido siempre artificial y vana,*" he adds that those writers who came before, however, and who were successively Parnassians, Symbolists, Naturalists, had at least

chispazos de genio, pasiones turbulentas, aciertos indudables y frecuentes y ponían en la obra un no sé qué: gracia, comprensión de la naturaleza circundante, amor, elegancia, pensamiento original que la distinguía del modelo que imitaba . . . Pero hoy . . . hasta el tipo del hombre que piensa ha degenerado. Ya no somos gallardos, altivos, toscos . . . Es que ahora suele encontrarse el éxito, más que en los puntos de la pluma, en las complicadas artes del tocador.

He regrets that in the years to come those who study contemporary Mexican literature will have the feeling that they are face to face with "*un simpático bordado rococo.*" And, he laments, "*eso en tiempos en que la tragedia ha soplado tan de cerca!*" Why does the new Mexico not find expression in the literature of the day? Why do Mexican literati continue to write from their towers of ivory? Why have not they, like the writers of revolutionary Russia, created "*una obra de combate*" in which Mexico may appear "*agitada, revuelta, en plena locura creadora, en acción constante, pueblo de perfiles netos, colorido, brillante y trágico, masculino en toda la acepción de la palabra.*" How strange that in fourteen years of revolutionary strife

no haya aparecido la obra poética, narrativa o trágica que sea compendio y cifra de las agitaciones del pueblo en todo ese período de cruenta guerra civil, apasionada pugna de intereses. . . . El pueblo ha arrastrado su miseria ante nosotros sin merecer tan siquiera un breve instante de contemplación.

It was not to be expected that so stinging an attack and such a pessimistic, disconsolate picture of contemporary literature and writers was to be passed by unheeded. In spite of a very apparent leaning toward the literary past of Spain and of Mexico, Julio Jiménez Rueda could not possibly have entertained such a gloomy outlook of the literature of a decade ago. In all probability he painted the canvas in such drab tones so that it might serve to goad and to stimulate a healthy reaction among the literati themselves and create a lively interest in the general public. If such was his secret wish, then it was realized beyond his fondest hope, for it supplied the tinder for a literary feud that lasted for several months and not the least of whose fruits was the discovery of Azuela and his best-known novel. The spark was administered by a young colleague of Jiménez Rueda, who, patiently biding his time in the hopes that someone would answer the challenge, could finally refrain no longer from stoutly affirming "*ante el público de México y de la América de habla española que existe en la actualidad una literatura mexicana viril que sólo necesita, para ser conocida por todos, de una difusión efectiva.*"⁵

Francisco Monterde G. I. was in accord with Jiménez Rueda "*en que faltan literatos de renombre*"; but, he contended, "*eso se debe, principalmente, a la falta paralela de críticos,*" a statement that drew caustic comments from the pen of Victoriano Salado Alvarez, who wittily interpreted the remark—"*la falta de literatos se debe a la falta de críticos.*"⁶ Monterde ably proved his point, however, by citing the case of Mariano Azuela:

Podría señalar entre los novelistas apenas conocidos—y que merecen serlo—a Mariano Azuela. Quien busque el reflejo fiel de la hoguera de nuestras últimas revoluciones tiene que acudir a sus páginas. Por *Los de abajo* y otras novelas, puede figurar a la cabeza de esos escritores mal conocidos, por deficiencias editoriales—él mismo edita sus obras en imprentas económicas, para obsequiarlas—, que serían populares y renombrados si sus obras se hallaran, bien impresas, en ediciones modernas, en todas las librerías, y convenientemente administradas por agentes, en los Estados. ¿Quién conoce a Mariano Azuela, fuera de unos cuantos literatos amigos suyos? Y sin embargo es el novelista mexicano de la revolución, el que echa de menos Jiménez Rueda, en la primera parte de su artículo.

Thus was the novel *Los de abajo* and the name of Mariano Azuela brought, for the first time, to the attention of an interested Mexican reading public. And the literary quarrel, that soon attracted combatants from every

quarter, served admirably in keeping all eyes focused on "the Mexican novelist of the Revolution."

Victoriano Salado Alvarez now entered the lists for *Excelsior* and came to the defense of Jiménez Rueda, asserting that "*no hay literatura nueva y que la que hay no es mexicana . . . y a veces ni siquiera literatura.*" Far more important, however, is his very definite contribution toward keeping the public interested in *Los de abajo* by declaring that although he has read several of Azuela's short stories he has never read the novel cited by Monterde, which, he adds, "*según parece, es una curiosidad bibliográfica.*" He heaps fuel on the mounting flames by taunting his adversary with the following gibe:

Sostener que no hay literatos porque no hay críticos, sería lo mismo que atribuir el que los niños nazcan sin pies a que no hay zapateros como Herman que calcen con todo primor a los infantes.

To which Monterde replies that when he spoke of the paucity of good critics and the need of vital criticism it was with reference to "*los literatos de renombre—los escritores cuya fama—de existir entre nosotros una crítica positiva y eficiente—sería continental y tal vez mundial,*"* adding that it was due to this very fact—"críticos en receso, críticos apartados de una actividad constante"—that a well-written novel like *Los de abajo*, representative of an epoch and of a social movement, should pass "*inadvertida aun para personas tan ilustradas como don Victoriano Salado Alvarez.*" In another article and in a less pessimistic vein regarding contemporary literature, Julio Jiménez Rueda confesses that he now knows that Azuela "*ha escrito una novela representativa de este lapso de agitación política y que solamente conocen sus familiares y amigos.*"

El Universal Ilustrado, in its own words "*el único Semanario Nacional capaz de preocuparse periódicamente por las más altas cuestiones del momento,*" is quick to capitalize on this interesting *polémica* sustained in the morning papers by three of the Capital's outstanding literary men. In the January 22 and 29 issues it runs, as its leading article, a poll on the question "*¿Existe una literatura mexicana moderna?*" featuring the replies of such well-known figures as Federico Gamboa, Salvador Novo, Enrique González Martínez, José Vasconcelos, and others. And, of course, it expressly contacts the newly discovered novelist for his views on the subject. Azuela's reply could not have been more appropriate, either for the immediate point under discussion or as a comeback to those who had so long overlooked his work. He merely limited his remarks to an article he had published eight or nine years before in answer to a question raised by the Secretary of Education concerning the future of the Mexican novel. He then wrote in part:

Por lo que se refiere al porvenir de la novela mexicana, poco hay que esperar de los literatos de profesión. ¿Qué saben ellos de esas enormes palpitaciones del alma nacional que están sacudiendo en estos mismos instantes a nuestra raza? ¿Acaso no es en los momentos de suprema angustia, cuando el alma del pueblo está empapada en lágrimas y chorreando sangre todavía, cuando nuestras lumbreras literarias escriben libros que se llaman *Senderos ocultos*, *La hora del Ticiano*, *El libro del loco amor*?

Such was the very pointed charge brought against the old school of writers by one who belongs both to the old and to the new. Then, in equally convincing terms—and this was written almost a decade before!—he indirectly invited them to examine his own novels of the Revolution:

En la estepa de la Rusia se irguió al paria de gesto airado y voz de trueno que dijera todas las angustias y todos los dolores de su patria. De la gleba mexicana se alzaría, así lo esperamos, así lo deseamos, el que venga a desgarrar nuestros oídos, con su grito henchido de todas las angustias, de todos los anhelos, de todas las alegrías de nuestra raza. Y entonces, hasta entonces tendremos el libro ansiosamente esperado, el que nos arrebatemos de las manos para sentir el golpe de maza que anonade, el bisturí que abra sin piedad las carnes, el cauterio que las carbonice; el libro que llegue hasta los más recónditos lugares de nuestro suelo como las novelas de Emilio Zola en Francia y las de León Tolstoi en Rusia. Y será nuestro libro: sangre de nuestra sangre y carne de nuestra carne.¹⁰

Not a week had passed after Monterde's memorable article of December 25, 1924, in which he asked how many had ever read Azuela's work, before others were beginning to discover that a truly powerful novel had been gathering dust in oblivion. As a single instance of this growing recognition of Azuela, there is the case of Rafael López, who, in discussing the novel for 1925, comments:

Recuerdo un esfuerzo serio, bien apuntado, pero reducido a doscientos ejemplares para los amigos, por la pobreza de nuestro medio: el de Mariano Azuela en *Los de abajo*, lo más interesante de diez años a la fecha.

So immediate and so widespread was the popular demand for *Los de abajo* that *El Universal Ilustrado* lost no time in availing itself of the golden opportunity for another journalistic coup d'état by publishing the novel in its weekly series. Without previous announcement there suddenly appeared in the January 22 number of the magazine a full-page advertisement proclaiming the publication of *Los de abajo*—"La gran sensación literaria del momento"—in its next issue. The following day *El Universal* takes up the cry on almost every page of its January 23 number. Four days later the announcement reads:

Los de abajo—Una Creación Palpitante de Nuestra Vida—*El Universal Ilustrado* ofrece la Unica Novela de la Revolución.