FEIJOO ON MARS:
A BRIEF NOTE ON THE
LITERARY GODFATHER
OF SPANISH SCIENCE FICTION

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There is no late-modern Spanish thinker who better embodies the spirit and potential of scientific-literary intersections than the Benedictine monk Benito Jerónimo Feijoo y Montenegro (1676–1764). It is well known that, as a dedicated writer and persistent critical voice, Feijoo notoriously dabbled in all manner of scientific thought pertinent to the context of Enlightenment Spain—not only philosophy but also anatomy, biology, medicine, mathematics, geography, history, pedagogy and perhaps even, as this essay explores, in matters of science fiction, as well. This article returns to an underappreciated essay by Feijoo titled “Si hay otros mundos,” in particular, as a way of highlighting the free-thinking Benedictine monk’s early engagement what we today would recognize as a standard theme of contemporary science-fiction—the possibility of life on the planet Mars. While his essay itself is certainly not a science-fiction story, Feijoo’s attention to scientific discourse, his emphasis on freeing thought from all prejudices and ultimately his willingness to break away from all accepted dogma to consider new ideas surely warrant that we give him a new title—‘Literary Godfather of Spanish Sci-Fi.’

That Feijoo should be a literary godfather of subsequent science fiction—rather than a scientific godfather or a practitioner of sf—is consistent with prevailing views on his accomplishments. First and foremost, it is important to underscore that Feijoo was much more of a literary figure than a
scientific one (Vila Selma 5). His flair for essayistic writing was evident during his own time and, of course, is still compelling today. In her canonical work on Feijoo published as part of the Twayne series, I. L. McClelland writes that

Where learned journals are academically insistent, Feijoo is dramatic; where they persuade, he cajoles; where they indulge in collegiate sarcasm, he is unequivocally jocular; where they sophisticatedly insinuate, he unveils motives, where they are restrained he is expressive; where they exemplify, he is anecdotal; where they are academic, he is literary. (38)

McClelland goes on to say definitively that “Feijoo’s intellectual self-exposure is that of an artist [...] his whole mentality was creative” (42; see also 132-41 on literary aspects of his writings). As scholar Arturo Ardao suggests, the 118 discourses, the 163 letters and other writings penned by Feijoo must be understood as literature —“en todos los casos se trata de verdaderos ensayos, por su estructura, por la fluencia de las ideas, por el estilo” (16). If some have refused to categorize his thought as literature, as one contemporary scholar notes, this may be due to unfairly applying previous (Golden Age) and subsequent (19th-century) conceptions of literature to his work (Pérez-Rioja 38).

It is relatively safe to say that Feijoo was a literary essayist who dealt with scientific themes, but who was not, in fact, a practicing scientist. In fact, his distance from science per se only links him more closely with later (literary) traditions of Spanish science-fiction—which have tended much more toward the social (and cultural) sf tradition instead of the more technologically scientific strain known as “hard sf.” In an essay published in the journal Science Fiction Studies (“Science Fiction in Spain: A Sociological Perspective”), Pablo Santoro Domingo emphasizes the social character of Spanish sf as a whole—which he characterizes as “a site where some of the cultural and social processes of contemporary society can be read” (313). Perhaps more importantly—in light of Feijoo’s literary approach to science—the critic notes that “In the Spanish sf field, the scientific dimension of the genre is not widespread and, in any case, sf’s potential for social extrapolation is more likely to be valued than its strictly scientific or technical potential” (327). Building on Santoro Domingo’s work, another recent essay makes the assertion that nineteenth-century costumbrist author Mariano José de Larra influenced later, specifically social, 20th-century strains

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1 Pérez-Rioja argues that Feijoo’s work is more appropriately categorized as literature as evidenced by its “europeísmo” and its “criticismo” (39)—mentioning its “nueva dimensión social” (39) and also Feijoo’s drive to “modernizar el estilo, haciéndolo más leve, y más claro” (42).
of Spanish science-fiction. In the end, however, Feijoo is a much more appropriate choice for a literary godfather of Spanish sf given his extensive engagement with scientific themes. Moreover, in writing specifically on the possible existence of life of Mars, he anticipated a theme of much contemporary sf (both Spanish and otherwise).

In essence, the present essay clearly advances not a traditional, canonical vision of Feijoo’s significance, but rather a novel perspective that appeals to the Benedictine monk’s own modernizing spirit. Although it places his arguments in their original context, it also reconciles his progressive ideas with today’s interdisciplinary scholarly landscape. As such, it also effectively sidesteps what may very well be an important contemporary polemic that continues to inflect our reception of his work. As part of her recent essay on Feijoo titled “De la crisis del pensamiento liberal al pensamiento poético: Subirats, Zambrano y la figura del padre Feijoo en la modernidad española,” scholar Carmen Pereira Muro clearly delineates two divergent critical understandings of the Enlightenment thinker. On one hand, there are those who underscore that Feijoo’s intellectual work is “ni crítico, ni tampoco filosófico” (Subirats, La ilustración insuficiente 109; qtd. in Pereira Muro 318), that his thought is “un pensamiento de apariencias, gesto, ademán sin sustancia” (Pereira Muro’s wording 319) or “un pensamiento retórico […] y no lógico” (Pereira Muro’s appropriation of a distinction made by Paul de Man, 320).

Such perspectives end, argues Pereira Muro, by attributing to Feijoo a support

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2 These include, e.g. Eduardo Mendoza’s Sin Noticias de Gurb and Álex de la Iglesia’s series Plutón BRB Nero. That essay’s thesis reads: “Cabe advertirle al lector poco familiarizado con su producción literaria y ensayística que Larra no escribió nunca nada que se pudiera calificar de ciencia-ficción. Pero só existen varios puntos de contacto entre sus artículos decimonónicos y algunas muestras de la ciencia-ficción española contemporánea—semejanzas que el presente ensayo elaborará a continuación y que se relacionan no sólo con sus temas y críticas sociales sino también con su espíritu contestatario y enajenado” (Fraser 48).

3 Travel to Mars is now a staple of science-fiction the world over. Although this essay is focused on Feijoo’s eighteenth-century milieu, it bears emphasizing that later Spanish authors in particular wrote stories about beings living on the planet Mars. One such author was late nineteenth-century writer Nilo María Fabra (1843-1903), whom one online critic has called “precursor de la ciencia ficción española” (León).

4 This is also the view held by Francisco Eguiagaray Bohigas, who diminishes the philosophical originality of Feijoo’s writings in his 1964 book El padre Feijoo y la filosofía e la cultura de su época (66).
for the power of the Church and for the authority of the intellectual against a pluralist and egalitarian conception of knowledge.\textsuperscript{5}

On the other hand there are those who underscore Feijoo’s own emphasis on a non-authoritarian conception of knowledge: his assertion that the “proceso del conocimiento no debe ser sistemático, ni totalizador, sino ante todo, vital” (Pereira Muro 329).\textsuperscript{6} From this perspective, it is Feijoo’s engagement with a Spanish thought possessing a “carácter más pragmático que teórico” (Américo Castro’s view; qtd. in Pereira Muro 330)—a tradition of Spanish thought that is incapable of contributing to “sistemas totalitarios de pensamiento” (Zambrano’s view; qtd. in Pereira Muro 331) that is his real strength. Both of these views of Feijoo may exist simultaneously, of course, as the scholar notes.\textsuperscript{7} Moreover, for the purposes of the present argument, it matters little whether one accepts the notion of “un Feijoo reaccionario y cómplice del poder (de la Iglesia y el Estado)” (Pereira Muro 332) or the idea, of “Feijoo introductor de la moderna cultura europea y democratizador de la cultura” (Pereira Muro 332-33). What is most significant is Feijoo’s undeniable (creative and artistic—in the end, literary) engagement of the themes and forward-thinking spirit of science.\textsuperscript{8}

Above all else, Feijoo’s work supports the formation, not of a dogmatic scientific cannon, but of a broadly-defined scientific perspective, or rather an open-mindedness to developing areas of scientific thought (cf. Fernández González 23-24). Although he has been taken for a “precursor” of specific developments in Spanish science (Pérez-Rioja 14), the purpose of the present essay is not to catalogue Feijoo’s specific achievements and lasting resonance but merely to portray him as an implicit source of inspiration for future literary-scientific collisions in general terms. Working at the intersection of literature and scientific discourse, as both a skeptic

\textsuperscript{5} Pereira Muro quotes McClelland (who writes that Feijoo is only an “ilustrado a medias”) and elaborates on that perspective emphasizing his goal “de conciliar el pasado y el futuro, España y Europa, fe y razón, religión y ciencia” (Pereira Muro 321).

\textsuperscript{6} See also Ardao, who discusses Feijoo’s “reacción contra el dogmático sistematismo moderno” (107).

\textsuperscript{7} Pereira Muro writes that “su obra, su figura, es susceptible de convertirse en icono, capaz, en su carácter ambiguo y resbaladizo, de apoyar posturas intelectuales e interpretaciones radicalmente opuestas del pensamiento español de la modernidad” (332).

\textsuperscript{8} It is interesting to note, as does Marañón, that Feijoo wrote a number of poems, which the critic says serve as good preparation for writing about science (86).
and a believer, Feijoo embodied the principles so essential for contemporary science fiction.

This is most observable in the understudied essay “Si hay otros mundos,” which should be seen in the context of Feijoo’s other writings on scientific topics. The wide range of the Benedictine’s scientific thought is in line with the eighteenth-century model of knowledge, which allowed him to become as familiar with history as with mathematics, biology, language and more. José Antonio Pérez-Rioja writes that “Dentro de España, y en los últimos treinta años, ha interesado la obra de Feijoo en muy diversos aspectos: el pedagógico […], el filológico-literario […], el científico y médico […], las ideas políticas […]” (Pérez-Rioja 21-22). It is clear that these perspectives have already been addressed by current criticism. Scholars, for example, have pointed out that Feijoo may have himself been a frustrated doctor (Pérez-Rioja 221-22; Marañón 73; cf. Feijoo “Medicina,” and “Desubrimiento de la circulación,” also Ardao 108, McClelland 6, 58-59, 61-77, 108, 165). Nor is it surprising, given his far-reaching grasp of science, that Feijoo possessed a microscope—as Gregorio Marañon has written, quite possibly one of the first microscopes to have entered Spain (Marañón 61; also McClelland 35). But Feijoo’s interest in the very small had as its complement in his certain curiosity about matters of a larger scale—matters that we might even characterize as being of a planetary nature.

“Si hay otros mundos” is, perhaps, one of the most neglected of Feijoo’s essays. Therein, he speculates on the possibility of the existence of other worlds and comes to underscore the possibility of life on Mars in particular. It is well known, of course, that the Benedictine monk wrote against numerous superstitions—which only makes his support for the possibility of life on other worlds all the more interesting from today’s perspective. Many of Feijoo’s essays explored and ultimately questioned superstitions such as “La magia, la astrología, la quiromancia, los oráculos, las profecías, el exorcismo y el curanderismo,” for example (Pérez-Rioja 9).

Feijoo’s scientific interests certainly ranged far and wide (see Fernández González 35) including even interest in the Art of teaching the deaf to speak (Feijoo, “Sobre la invención,” “Primera adición,” “Segunda adición”).

10 On Feijoo’s interest in math see his Paradoxas matemáticas (discussed briefly in Pérez-Rioja 219). Also, Feijoo himself remarks: “Así como es deuda vindicar nuestra nación en los puntos en que nos agravian los extranjeros, es también justo condescender con ellos en lo que tuvieron razón. En esta consideración es preciso confesar que la Física y Matemáticas son casi extranjeras en España. Por lo que mira a la Física, nos hemos contentado con aquello, poco o mucho, bueno o malo, que dejó escrito Aristóteles. De Matemáticas, aunque han salido algunos escritos muy buenos en España de algún tiempo a esta parte, no puede negarse que todo o casi todo es copiado de los autores extranjeros” (Teatro Crítico, qtd. in Ardao 26; also Pérez-Rioja 219).
But his belief in the possibility of life on other worlds is perhaps not as much a superstition as it is an expression of his commitment to the questioning of all manner of mistaken beliefs that persisted during his time.

In this regard, it is significant that descriptions of Feijoo’s early years tend to point out that he possessed scientific curiosity even as a child. In “Si hay otros mundos” Feijoo once again engages in his characteristic questioning of existing beliefs while subjecting the debate on other worlds to a careful and even historical scrutiny. In the process, he mobilizes a skeptical perspective regarding both the historical and contemporary formations of knowledge—perhaps also coming to question the very notion of the Pope’s infallibility. Ultimately, Feijoo’s provocative assertion regarding life on Mars develops naturally out of his sustained engagement with a very real, historical and human drama.

At the center of Feijoo’s underappreciated essay (included in Tome II as Letter 26 of Cartas eruditas) there is polemic that pulls three historical figures into its orbit: the Archbishop San Bonifacio, the Pope Zacarías, and the Priest Virgilio. “Entrando, pues, en materia” (76), as Feijoo often wrote, the central problem is this:

El caso pasó de este modo: Habiendo llegado a noticia de San Bonifacio, estando este santo ocupado en ministerio apostólico de la conversión de los infieles de Alemania, que el sacerdote Virgilio, el cual, al mismo tiempo ejercía el mismo ministerio en distinto país de la misma región, había publicado cierta doctrina en orden a los hombres habitadores de un mundo distinto del que nosotros habitamos, la cual pareció errónea a San Bonifacio, delató éste la doctrina y al autor al Papa Zacarías, quien, respondiendo al santo, condenó la doctrina como inicua y perversa,

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11 Marañón—who in fact begins his book by discussing Feijoo’s remarks on superstition (13-15)— also draws attention to this: “En aquellos días, corrían por España, creídas a pies juntillas, historias fabulosas de hombres trasladados por el aire instantáneamente, desde un límite a otro de la Península; de mujeres paridas por una vaca; de moribundos curados por arte mágica; de monjas visionarias; de luces prodigiosas que erraban por la noche en la campiña” (66; see also 71-72).

12 As McClelland notes, Feijoo “remembered the first signs of what we should now call scientific curiosity and how it prompted him to use his own experience in order to test the truth of certain domestic sayings. When told that it was dangerous to eat immediately after drinking chocolate, or to fall asleep immediately after taking a purgative, he risked the consequences of eating and sleeping under these dangerous conditions to see what really would happen to him. And having survived his experiments and having found that fact failed to fit theory, he thereafter became predisposed to distrust any assertion about the natural world which had not been or could not be checked” (2). McClelland draws from Feijoo TCU, V, 5. Marañón makes a similar reference to this aptitude of Feijoo the child on pp. 48-49 of his Las ideas biológicas del Padre Feijoo.
añadiéndole que si se certificase de que Virgilio enseñaba aquel error, le expeliese de la Iglesia, privado del honor del sacerdocio. (76)

It should be noted that the distance between Feijoo’s own time and the human drama he discusses (18th vs. 8th century) is much greater than that between our own time and Feijoo’s (21st vs. 18th century). Moreover, the unavoidable reality that we are revisiting the essay “Si hay otros mundos” with our own contemporary agenda and assumptions in mind in fact reproduces the very activity in which the Benedictine was engaged—he was quite aware of the bias inherent in applying contemporary knowledge to visions and interpretations of the past. Returning to the matter at hand, Feijoo relates that at a certain point in time, the 8th-century priest Virgilio is accused of going against Church teachings as reflected in his acceptance of an erroneous “doctrine”—a doctrine that is apparently so iniquitous and even perverse that San Bonifacio saw no other option than to denounce him to Pope Zacarías, who in turn ordered Virgilio against teaching it to others. Feijoo’s essay seeks to reconstruct the precise nature of this doctrine by considering a necessarily incomplete historical record (“La carta en que Bonifacio delataba la doctrina de Virgilio, no sé que hoy subsista, ni impresa ni manuscrita” 77). He faces the additional difficulty of having to read a thousand-year old history from his own eighteenth-century (post-imperial / colonial) historical context.

The Benedictine monk devotes a great deal of attention to the expression “hombres habitadores de un mundo distinto” (76, above, emphasis added). Feijoo does not take the meaning of this phrase for granted, but instead explores divergent and competing interpretations, subjecting it to the process of logical reasoning that today stands as his trademark scientific method. The monk notes that for more than two centuries there has been a polemic surrounding the Pope’s decision to prohibit Virgilio from teaching his “doctrine” (76). It was previously claimed, he goes on to explain, that the doctrine condemned by Zacarías pointed to the existence of “antípodas, esto es, habitadores de otro continente opuesto al nuestro” (76). Feijoo elaborates on this possibility, but finally concludes—along with learned figures of the past—that Virgilio was not, in fact, talking about antípodas.13 Clearly the most important point of reference for making sense of this matter in Feijoo’s time is the “discovery” and the subsequent Spanish Conquest of the “new world”—a point to which he is attentive in his essay: he writes that “Es verdad que vulgarmente se llama a veces el nuevo mundo la América; pero es expresión impropííusima, la cual, por consiguiente, es increíble tenga esa significación en la epístola doctrinal de un Papa y en el directo asunto de ella” (77). It will be Feijoo’s conclusion that Virgilio was

13 “Responden bien nuestros doctores, que no se trataba de antípodas en aquella cuestión” (“Si hay otros mundos” 76-77).
not writing of the as-yet-undiscovered new world (or other such continent) but rather of beings from outer space — beings from a planetary body far beyond the limits of our own Earth. Through Feijoo’s rewriting of the human drama that lies at the heart of his essay, an idea that had once been considered “inicua y perversa” is recontextualized from an Enlightenment perspective that is at once logical, rational, even reasonable.

Given that the letter in which Bonifacio denounced Virgilio has been lost, in fact it is the Pope’s written judgment on the matter to which Feijoo turns for insight into the past conflict. That judgment, intercalated in the text of “Si hay otros mundos,” reads: “De perversa qutem, et iniqua doctrina ejus, qui contra Deum et animam suam locutus est, si clarificatum fuerit, ita eum confiteri, quod ALIUS MUNDUS et alií homines sub terra sint, seu sol, et luna, hunc, habito consilio, ab Eclesia pelle, sacerdotii honore privatum” (qtd. in Feijoo’s essay 77; original emphasis). Feijoo’s reading of the Pope’s judgment hinges upon the inclusion of a single phrase: “la adición seu sol et luna, cuyas voces, cayendo también, como no deja dudas el contexto, debajo del adjetivo ahí, manifiestan que el Papa entendió la doctrina de Virgilio de hombres habitadores de otro globo, donde eran alumbrados de otro sol y otra luna” (77-78; original emphasis). Thus, concludes Feijoo, the Pope must have found Virgilio’s doctrine to be blasphemous because he saw it as positing the existence of an entirely different world from our own (one that, in the Pope’s view, nonetheless must have been inhabited, presumably, by human beings).

Feijoo seems to be siding with Virgilio. In the process of doing so, however, he takes the time to underscore the possibility of a papal misunderstanding. Rather than directly challenge the notion of the infallibility of the Pope (which he mentions on p. 79), Feijoo merely suggests that Zacarías’s error stems from the mistaken beliefs of his pre-Conquest society. This in itself, of course, has the discursive potential of suggesting that the Pope’s knowledge is historically bound to a place and time — thus as limited rather than unquestionable knowledge. However — perhaps as a way of saving himself from such a potentially blasphemous statement — Feijoo’s argument on the existence of another world (“otro globo”

14 “Este es puntualmente el caso en que estamos. Conque, aunque el papa Zacarías errase, […] nada obsta esto a la infalibilidad pontificia que reconocemos los católicos; siendo fácil decir que no habló ex catedra, sino profiriendo su juicio como doctor particular y siguiendo la opinión dominante en su siglo, como también en los anteriores y en algunos de los posteriores, pues hasta que en el décimoquinto se descubrió la América, apenas, especialmente entre los cristianos, había quien asintiese a la existencia de habitadores de otro continente; porque considerando imposible la transmigración del nuestro a aquél, juzgaban que de admitir antípodas se seguía la existencia de individuos de nuestra misma especie no descendientes de Adán, lo que es contrario a la Escritura. Todos saben que San Agustín, no por otra razón, negó que hubiese antípodas.” (79)
79) is understandably and characteristically more nuanced. The prevailing Church view held that there could be no human beings living elsewhere who had not descended from Adam (see 79). The loophole explored by Feijoo involves suggesting that Virgilio’s doctrine “ni habló de los antípodas, ni de los individuos de nuestra especie habitadores de otro globo, sino de individuos de otra u otras especies, bien que intelectuales, constituidos en otro u otros mundos” (80). Ultimately, Feijoo posits not merely the existence of life on other planets, but moreover life on other planets that is intelligent and also decidedly not human. Because this life is not human life, specifically, he suggests, there should be no conflict with Church teachings in asserting the existence of life on other planets that has not descended from Adam’s lineage.

Nevertheless, Feijoo is not content to merely have found —through logical reasoning— a way to save the pious Virgilio’s reputation from being tarnished by the undeserved critical attention it received by representatives of the Church. Whereas the eighteenth-century scholar devotes the first half of his essay (75-80) to the very real, historical and human, conflict involving notable Church figures (Virgilio, Bonifacio and Zacarías), the second half of the essay “Si hay otros mundos” (80-85) finds the Benedictine scholar engaged in more conjectural activity as he speculates on the dimensions of life on other planets —pursuing the topic with what is, for a thinker of his time, a high degree of detail and a certain flourish of imagination. As Feijoo recounts, modern thinkers regarded other planetary bodies as habitable, and by logical extension, inhabited— this being a position that, for many, did not run contrary to religious belief: “Inútilmente, dicen, los haría Dios habitables para no hacerlos habitados” (80). With the Earth being “de mucho menor grandeza que cualquiera de los cuatro planetas superiores” (81), Feijoo writes, “No es creíble que Dios sólo haya querido dar habitadores a este pequeño palacio, dejando aquéllos para que sólo sirvan de objeto para nuestra vista” (81).

Feijoo continues the discussion —once again affirming the religious dogma that prohibits the existence of other human beings who have not descended from Adam, but side-stepping this issue entirely (81)— by spending a moment imagining that the existence of other worlds makes possible the existence of other beings who are not human: “porque aunque nosotros no conozcamos otras criaturas compuestas de cuerpo y espíritu que las de la especie humana, no se puede sin temeridad pensar que en los senos de la posibilidad no los haya, o lo que es lo mismo, que Dios no pueda producirlas” (81-82). Both religion and philosophy, writes Feijoo, coincide in asserting “que los pobladores de estos mundos no pueden ser de nuestra especie, sino de otras diversas” (82). But he supports this idea with reasoning of a more or less scientific tenor as well, as when he writes that “hay señas claras de que todos los cuerpos planetarios son de distinta constitución y temperie que el globo terráqueo; por consiguiente, en ninguno de ellos podría vivir cuerpo animado alguno de la misma especia
que los que sustenta nuestro globo” (82-83). In addition, he continues, just as beings of other planets might differ from human life on our own globe, so too do the beings on other planets (which also differ from one another) differ among themselves (“recíprocamente entre sí mismos” 83).

As might be expected, Feijoo singles out the planet of Mars for consideration. Whereas the sun —being so different from our own planet— is the orb on which life would be most different from the human life existing on earth, Mars seems to present planetary conditions that are most similar to our own. He reflects

que cuanto los cuerpos planetarios sean más o menos diversos de nuestra tierra, sean también los habitadores de cada uno más o menos diversos de nosotros. Pongo por ejemplo: el planeta Marte es, como he dicho en el citado discurso, el que más simboliza con nuestro globo. De ahí es razón conjeturar que sus habitadores sean menos diversos de nosotros que los que moran en los demás planetas. (84)

There is in Feijoo’s reasoning in “Si hay otros mundos” a clear scientific temperament —respect for logic, facts and currently existing knowledge. Yet there is also a creative (speculative, conjectural) aspect to his thought that pushes gradually toward imagining what life would be like (must be like) on the other planets, planets that have necessarily been created by God. In this context, the way in which he emphasizes “la diversísima constitución, naturaleza y temperie de aquellos globos” (84) in his writing —attributing to them a certain autonomy beyond our knowledge and thought— is clearly an important touchstone for subsequent written (science-fiction) accounts of (non-human) life on other planets. In “Si hay otros mundos,” Feijoo’s scientific reasoning and logical perspective is definitively applied within a speculative, forward-thinking frame —such that the legacy of this essay in particular is to underscore that the spirit of scientific thought is always tied to the unfettered exercise of the creative imagination. Feijoo’s willingness to question the limits of human knowledge, perhaps even going beyond the human itself, all the while dialoguing with the historical record and the known world —in the end, this is the very thought process constituting the base of subsequent Spanish (social) science fiction.

Since Feijoo mentions Mars specifically —and in order not to stray too far from his original 18th-century context— I will mention only one example of how Feijoo’s initial description of life on other planets appears to have resonated with a later Spanish author. Late nineteenth-century science fiction author Nilo María Fabra penned a short story titled “En el planeta Marte” (1895) that seems to spring from Feijoo’s trepidatious

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15 This assertion by Feijoo follows logically, he writes, from what he has argued in his discourse on “la Corruptibilidad de los cielos” (82; see Teatro crítico t. VIII, disc. VII).
description of life on Mars. There is no plot per se in that story, but merely a description of the activities, social values and successes of the planet’s native organisms, which Fabra calls martícolas as opposed to terrícolas (earthlings). Fabra’s 1895 text —clearly forming part of the essayistic tradition popularized in Spain by Feijoo— mentions that the inhabitants of Mars are so technologically advanced that “el arte de leer y escribir está en desuso” (162), but —unsurprisingly given Feijoo’s premise— they have much in common with earthly life. To wit: they have newspapers which read themselves aloud to listeners (161), moving platforms in lieu of roads (162), electrically powered boats (162), a rich language (162), one religion and a State (163) and so on. The latter part of Fabra’s story intercalates a recent newspaper article in the Martian press (163-70) reflecting on their recent discovery of our own planet, which they call Azul (163). While it is significant that Fabra’s vision of Earth (whose practices and current state are described in detail) is far from flattering, ultimately the short story reads much like an eighteenth-century essay—in fact providing a description of life on Mars that appears to follow-up on Feijoo’s original text. As if answering the implicit question that constitutes the title of “Si hay otros mundos,” Fabra’s story seems to suggest that sí, hay otros mundos—and as is so often the case in sf, these other worlds, whether more or less imaginary, necessarily serve as points of encounter with our own.

By way of conclusion, I draw attention to the fact that one critic of Feijoo’s work notes that “la razón en Feijoo tiene sus límites. Es instrumento para conocer, no fuente de conocimientos” (Vila Selma 15). While Feijoo may have asked for the creation of an Academia de Ciencias in Spain (Pérez-Rioja 219) and not a science-fiction tradition per se—throughout his works he focused on both the urgency of moving Spain forward and also the need to recognize its underappreciated accomplishments. In that sense, this essay thus serves as a fitting tribute to his legacy. Critic Pérez-Rioja writes of “El P. Feijoo, cuya intuición le ha hecho aparecer como precursor o adelantado de tantas cosas” (14). As this essay has argued, the notion of his being a “precursor” is also relevant to science fiction. That is, if Feijoo was “el más egregio promotor de la ciencia española” (Marañón 45), he might also be seen as the precursor of Spain’s literary and social strain of sf. In the final analysis, his underappreciated essay provides contemporary readers with a glimpse of Feijoo’s characteristic freethinking spirit and scientific method of doubt at the same time that it testifies to his ability to dream big and move beyond the limits

16 Fernández González writes: “Feijoo no fue el fraile benedictino —que los hay— viajero, inmerso en el acontecer humano, dinámico a ultranza. […] Tampoco fue el contemplador sentimental ocioso, sino el meditador de hechos y estados con intencionalidad última referida a la posibilidad de actuar y modificar el mundo en torno” (23; see also 24).
of our own planet Earth—and also the limits of our earthly thinking. “Si hay otros mundos” stands today as an obligatory point of reference for research into the development of Spanish science fiction.

WORKS CITED


