

VOICES OF AUTHORITY AND LINGUISTIC AUTONOMY IN *NIEBLA*

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Miguel de Unamuno's novels, plays and poetry have often been studied as expressions of his philosophy, psychology, and life experience. This was not surprising in the early and even middle part of this century, given the emphasis on a biographical, philosophical, or psychological approach to literature. Starting with New Criticism, however, and continuing on to the present, literary theory has eschewed approaches that foreground the author, preferring to focus primarily on the text or the reader. While it is true that the text is always in some way a revelation of the author's self, it is also inevitably a creation of an "other." The "otherness" of the text is of a richness hitherto unimagined, as evidenced by the multitude of literary theories that have surfaced in recent years in an attempt to explain and explore its many facets. Limiting myself to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel, I propose to analyze one of Unamuno's most frequently studied works, his novel *Niebla*, to illustrate how the application of new theories can enrich our reading of the text.

In his essay "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin argues that the novel is characterized by speech diversity, by "heteroglossia," which the novelist welcomes and exploits and which enters into a dialogic relationship with his or her own voice.¹ Consequently, the novel should not be viewed as having a single style, as expressing a single voice, but as a dynamic interaction between a variety of incorporated languages. The authorial voice is only one among many and it is constantly challenged, muted, reshaped, or "refracted" in Bakhtin's terms, as it enters into contact with the other languages that are present in the text: "Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (Bakhtin, p. 324). Among the many types of discourse that can be

incorporated into the novel is that which Bakhtin calls "authoritative discourse" (Bakhtin, p. 342 ff.). The authoritative word is the canon, the language of the predominant ideology, the religious, social, political or even aesthetic dogma of the day. It is by definition single voiced, allowing for no dialogue. It is the language of treatises, some kinds of essays, proclamations of various types, but not of the novel. However, it enters into the novel in the sense that it is constantly being challenged either by the author, who struggles against official discourse to create his or her own language, or by the characters—especially those of the *Bildungsroman*. As Bakhtin points out, in the process of maturation the character passes through a series of ideological phases, each of which is characterized by the interaction of the character's language and the language of authority (Bakhtin, p. 348).

Unamuno's *Niebla* is the story of Augusto Pérez and his evolution. Critics have hitherto seen this evolution in terms of an existentialist search for self, through which Unamuno expresses his own ideas concerning the problems of personality and immortality.² Augusto is thus seen as an extension of the Unamunan self, and his language is dismissed as authorial discourse. However, if we utilize Bakhtin's ideas to scrutinize Augusto's language we discover an entirely different, and considerably more complex, novelistic construct. In the initial chapters Augusto rambles aimlessly through the streets, in an effort to give some direction to his life. With no real goals, he pursues whatever happens to catch his eye, now a dog, now an attractive young woman. His physical aimlessness is expressed linguistically in a series of monologues in which he rambles on in typical stream of consciousness fashion about disparate topics. The importance of Augusto's language as a key to his character is affirmed by the organization of the initial chapters: first, the reader is immersed in his monologues and occasional dialogues, and then in chapter V, the biographical information is provided. The composite picture reveals an overly protected only son whose life has been organized for him by his mother and the other authority figures with which he has come into contact: the church, the educational system, the literary establishment, and the Spanish bourgeoisie. Augusto has no identity of his own, and consequently he has no authentic voice, no personalized language. In the initial chapters, Augusto speaks to himself as if he were another person, utilizing the language of others, the discourse of the authorities that have formed him. Unamuno's

blending of diverse authoritative voices does not facilitate the identification of the different strains that are interwoven in Augusto's speech. However, certain voices are clearly distinguishable. The gentle, feminine expression of Augusto's mother emerges in the following phrases:

Here, in this wretched life, we think only about putting God to use. . . .

[Aquí, en esta pobre vida, no nos cuidamos de servirnos de Dios. . . .]³

There now, the inevitable automobile with its noise and dust! What do we get out of shortening distance in this fashion? (p. 23)

[¡Vaya, ya tenemos el inevitable automóvil, ruido y polvo! ¿Y qué se adelanta con suprimir así distancias? (p. 110)]

When Augusto addresses Margarita, the *portera*, as "good woman" (p. 24), and when he bumps into a man on the street and apologizes with "forgive me, brother" (p. 23), he is echoing his mother's language and her values: gentle courtesy, deferential treatment of others, nostalgia for the past, humility before God.

Other expressions can be traced to Augusto's professors. When Augusto determines to write down the name of the woman he has just followed home and with whom he believes he is in love, he cites the advice of a certain Don Leoncio, who was undoubtedly a professor in the Instituto. Not only does Augusto follow Leoncio's counsel always to carry a notebook in his pocket, he continues to quote Leoncio's very words: "The art of mnemonics consists in carrying a note-book in your pocket. That was what my ever-memorable Don Leoncio used to say: never put into your head what you can carry in your pocket" (p. 26). In Chapter IV Augusto cites his theology instructor, el P. Zaramillo (pp. 43-44), and on numerous other occasions he reverts to Latin to express his feelings. Augusto's monologic style is, in fact, replete with devices frequently used in pedagogical rhetoric. He often begins with a rhetorical question or an affirmation followed by a rhetorical question and continues with a series of statements or questions that reiterate the same basic idea. In some of Augusto's monologues we can almost hear the philosophy or theology professor declaiming in the front of a silent classroom:

“And why shouldn’t one be distracted in playing a game?” said Augusto to himself. “Is life a game or is it not? And why can’t we take a play back? That’s where the logic comes in. Perhaps by this time Eugenia has received the letter. *Alea jacta est*, the die is cast. What’s done is done! And tomorrow? Tomorrow is in the hands of God. But yesterday—to whom does that belong? Whose was yesterday? Ah, yesterday, the treasure of the strong! Blessed yesterday, substance and support of the mist of day-by-day!” (p. 39)

Other authoritative voices that emerge in Augusto’s speech in the early chapters of the novel are those of the Romantic and post-Romantic poets. In his dealings with Eugenia, Augusto bases both his actions and his words on models taken from literature. It is clearly his reading and not his own experience that has educated Augusto in the ways of courtship. Consequently, when he finds himself in front of Eugenia’s home with the portress staring curiously at him, he realizes that she expects him to proceed as would any literary hero in the same circumstances. Augusto’s reference to the portress as a modern Cerberus (in this case a Cerbera [p. 24]) emphasizes the literary origins of his conduct, as does the mention of “obras” (works), a term that is used here in the sense of actions, but also alludes to the world of literature. Augusto’s musings about Eugenia contain numerous echoes of his poetic readings, both in his choice of words and in the rhythm of his phrases. His references to “sweet Eugenia” (p. 27) [“la dulce Eugenia” (p. 112)] and “wild phantasy” [“loca fantasía” (p. 113)] are much abused poetic images. His rhetorical question “¿dónde me llevas, loca fantasía?” (p. 113) [“This crazy brain of mine, where is it taking me?” (p. 27)] is a perfect hendecasyllable, Augusto’s preferred verse form as evidenced by the unfinished poem in his notepad and the poem he ultimately writes for Eugenia. The letter Augusto writes to Eugenia in Chapter II continues the same poetic style, as manifested in the following expressions: “beneath the gentle rain from heaven” [“bajo la dulce llovizna del cielo”]; “chance apparition” [“aparición fortuita”]; “your eyes, twin refulgent stars in the nebula of my world” (p. 33) [“sus ojos, que son refulgentes estrellas en la nebulosa de mi mundo” (p. 116)]. It is significant that Augusto closes the first paragraph of the letter confessing that he lives through poetry: “I live in a perpetual infinitesimal lyricism” (p. 33) [“Yo vivo en perpetua lírica infinitesimal” (p. 116)].

Augusto's inauthenticity and his inability to act have been pointed out by numerous commentators.⁴ No mention has been made however of his inability to speak with his own language nor his dependence on the language of authority in spite of the fact that his subsequent evolution toward authenticity is effected primarily through dialogue with others and the gradual shedding of others' languages. Augusto's first steps toward the creation of his own voice follow on the heels of his meeting with Eugenia. For the first time, he is speechless; no models adequately provide him with a voice to express his feelings. As early as Chapter VIII, in a conversation with his maid Liduvina, Augusto feels embarrassment at discussing his feelings for Eugenia, and reverts to silence rather than attempt to pursue the conversation (p. 85). In his first meeting with Eugenia in her home, he initially says nothing, allowing Eugenia's aunt to ramble on while he contemplates the young woman (pp. 77 ff.). Again, in their second meeting, Augusto loses his verbal facility, limiting his conversation to occasional reiterations of her name (pp. 102-04). For the moment, he can only express his true emotions through silence, and as soon as he reverts to verbal communication he returns to the voices of authority that have formed him. His first words to Eugenia in Chapter VII refer to her great love of art, an echo of his Romantic readings that portray women as lovers of music. The contrast between Augusto's authorities and Eugenia's reality is dramatically illustrated when she responds that she hates the piano, and only gives lessons to make a living.

It is Eugenia's declaration of independence and her authentic language that impress Augusto and initiate his search for his own authentic voice. Not surprisingly, in his early attempts Augusto merely trades in old authoritative voices for new ones. In his dealings with Eugenia, he is first the hopeful new lover, and then—as it becomes clear that Eugenia is in love with someone else—Augusto takes on the role of the suffering, rejected suitor and finally of magnanimous also-ran. Eugenia recognizes the adoption of these new voices at once, scoffing that these are the kinds of things one reads in books (p. 104), and that he is taking on the role of the heroic victim, of martyr (pp. 119-20). In fact, Augusto's declaration that he would be content merely to visit occasionally and "bathe his soul in the glances of these eyes" (p. 104) and his declamatory offer to sacrifice himself for Eugenia's happiness strike the reader as trite imitations of literary poses.

Augusto's capacity to assimilate the voices of others is demonstrated time after time in the novel. Incapable of establishing his own authentic voice in any given conversation, he tends to mimic the tone and lexical patterns of those with whom he is speaking. The conversation with Victor in Chapter XIV provides a typical example. In the early part of the dialogue, Augusto intervenes five times, three of which consist of rephrased questions based on Victor's narration. When Victor states, "You know, Augusto, that I was obliged to marry when I was very young—," Augusto responds, "Obliged to marry?"; and again later, Victor remarks, "But it turned out to be a false alarm—" and Augusto queries, "What turned out to be a false alarm?" (p. 127). With Eugenia, the same pattern of echo and paraphrase appears:

—But surely we have talked to each other, Eugenia!

—Don't pay any attention to what I said to you. The past is past!

—Yes, the past is always past. It can't very well be anything else.

—But you understand me. And what I now wish is that you shall not attribute to my acceptance of your generous gift any other meaning than what it has.

—Just as I wish, señorita, that you shall not attribute to my gift any other meaning than what it has.

—Just so. Loyalty for loyalty; each of us expects the other to be true to himself. And so, since we must talk frankly, it is my duty to tell you that, after all has passed, and after what I said to you, I could not, even if I wished, think of repaying you for this generous gift otherwise than by the purest gratitude. Just as, on your part, I believe—

—You are right, señorita. After what has passed, and after what you said to me in our last interview, after what the señora, your aunt, said to me, and after what I surmise, I could not, on my part even though I desired to do so, think of putting a price on my generosity—

—We are in agreement, then?

—In perfect agreement, señorita.

—And so, will it be possible for us again to be friends, good friends, true friends?

—It will. (pp. 190-91)

Eugenia's initial rejection of Augusto's roles forces him to seek his true self and his own voice. The remainder of the novel relates this journey, in which Augusto gradually discards the voices of authority and acquires his own authentic language. His first inclination is to return to the language of his childhood. Consequently, he enters a church and gives himself up to reminiscences of his life with his mother. The refuge is short-lived, for as Augusto realizes, he has lost his mother and the conquest of self cannot be achieved by a return to his past (p. 124). He is not yet aware, however, that self-knowledge is always a personal process and he attempts to utilize others' experiences as a guide to his own search. In the process, he adopts various theories evolved by his fellow characters and his language assimilates their language as new voices of authority. Augusto's conversation with don Avito Carrascal incorporates a variety of terms that don Avito himself had utilized in his theory of human development. And later, speaking with Víctor, Augusto echoes Avito's idea that through marriage, a man regains his mother (p. 135). Following a conversation with Víctor, Augusto ponders the question of existence in the same terms that Víctor had used to expound his theory of the *nivola* and the relationship between truth and fiction (p. 166). Probably the clearest example of Augusto's assimilation of a fellow character's voice occurs in his exchange with Antolín S. Paparrigópulos. By the end of his visit to the scholar, Augusto has adopted Paparrigópulos's theory about women and his terminology as well:

—And therefore, friend Pérez, it makes no difference whether you study one woman or several. The point is to go deeply into the study of the woman you select.

—But would it not be better to select two or more, so as to make it a comparative study? For you know that comparative studies are very much the thing just now—

—Very true, Science is indeed a method of comparison. But in the study of women comparison is unnecessary. He who knows one of them, and knows her well, knows them all; he knows Woman. Moreover, you know that whatever is gained in extension is lost in intensiveness.

—Of course. And I wish to devote myself to the intensive cultivation of women, and not to the extensive. But to at least two, I should say—at least two—

—No, not to two! On no account! If you cannot be content to

study one—which seems to me the better plan, and certainly enough of a task—then you must study at least three. Duality is inconclusive.

—Duality inconclusive? how is that?

—It's very simple. Two lines cannot enclose an area of space. The simplest polygon is a triangle. And so, at least three.

—But the triangle is without volume. The simplest polyhedron is a tetrahedron; and that means at least four.

—But not two! Never! If more than one, then at least three. But I advise you to go deeply into the study of one.

—That is my intention. (pp. 235-36)

Augusto's plan to experiment and his use of the language of experimentation lasts only as long as it remains theoretical. Once in the presence of Rosario or Eugenia, the actual experience calls for another language, a language that Augusto still has not developed. There are occasions, however, in which Augusto speaks briefly with his own voice. In moments of anger and of passion, his capacity for authentic expression surfaces amidst the other voices that threaten to overpower his own. With Rosario, Augusto states his need to see himself reflected in her eyes so that he can learn to know himself. The fact that Rosario thinks Augusto is crazy to say such a thing proves that he is no longer playing roles nor aping literary styles. She recoils because such actions and words are unique, personal, authentic, and she doesn't have any experience that enables her to deal with them. The final meetings with Eugenia, in which Augusto proposes marriage and is accepted, also provide examples of authentic speech, with only occasional regression to the languages of authority of the early chapters. The poem that Augusto writes during the period of his engagement to Eugenia reveals a remarkable change in his ability to generate a personalized language. Aside from the "sweet Eugenia" that Eugenia herself identifies as trite, the poem contains none of the conventional images and metaphors that mark Augusto's initial language. Eugenia's letter and the announcement that she has fled with Mauricio on the eve of her marriage precipitate a crisis in Augusto that marks the final stages of his search for authentic being and authentic language. Significantly, he responds to the shock with silence: "He threw himself upon the bed and stuffed the pillow between his teeth. There was nothing he could say to himself; he could

not form a single clear idea. His monologue had gone mute. He felt as if his soul had withered. He burst into tears. He wept and wept and wept; and in the silent weeping his thought was gradually dissolved" (pp. 279-80).

The focus on the progression towards a personalized language sheds new light on the much commented encounter between Augusto and Unamuno in Chapter XXXI. Augusto has shed all of the other languages of authority but there remains the final authority, his creator. Unamuno's preoccupation with the problem of the autonomy of literary characters has been the focus of numerous studies but the question of linguistic autonomy has not been mentioned.⁵ Obviously, Unamuno's voice is present in both Unamuno the character and Augusto Pérez the character, but, as Bakhtin has shown us, it is refracted. In the confrontation between author and character in *Niebla* we see a dramatic illustration of this phenomenon. Augusto both echoes and refutes Unamuno, ridicules and paraphrases him. Augusto's linguistic autonomy is verified when he mocks Unamuno's speech pattern, pointing out that the expression "It doesn't really suit me" (p. 297) ["No me da la real gana" (p. 280)] is unbecoming to him, and when he reprimands him for the language he is about to use in reference to another of his characters.⁶ It is important to note that this is one of the only dialogues in the novel in which Augusto speaks more than his interlocutor. Furthermore, it is the only occasion in which Augusto utilizes the command form with any frequency, a form previously utilized primarily by Eugenia.

The issue of the development of autonomous language surfaces on various occasions in *Niebla*. In discussions of Victor's theory of the novel, Augusto argues that authorial voice and character voice are not the same. Clearly anticipating his own process, he insists that the character becomes independent of his creator and speaks for himself (p. 165). The existence of two prologues relates to the same question. Victor, the character, opens the novel with an ironic discussion of Unamuno's theories of literature, humor, pornography, etc. Although he states that he is not free *not* to do what Unamuno commands, he refers to Augusto's death as suicide, in direct contradiction to Unamuno's contention in the post-prologue. Unamuno's language in the post-prologue differs greatly from that of Victor. He adopts a combative tone, quibbling with Victor's choice of words and with the content of his assertions.

The importance of linguistic autonomy is addressed in passing in

a conversation between Víctor and Augusto. According to Víctor, people do not recognize their own voices and not knowing one's own voice or one's own face is synonymous with not knowing oneself (p. 215). *Niebla* presents the evolution of Augusto Pérez and his gradual appropriation of his own voice. Previous studies of the novel have discussed Unamuno's insistence on the development of an authentic self; none have noted the importance of the development of an authentic language. Applying Bakhtin's theory to *Niebla* allows us to view Unamuno's novelistic art not as a reflection of Unamuno's own agonistic self but as a creation of an other, with a unique linguistic identity that not only overlaps but also exceeds the authorial voice.

NOTES

1. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422.
2. See among others Ricardo Gullón, *Autobiografías de Unamuno* (Madrid: Gredos, 1964) or Carlos Paris, *Unamuno: Estructura de su mundo intelectual* (Barcelona: Península, 1968).
3. The English edition cited is Miguel de Unamuno, *Mist*, trans. Warner Fite (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 22. The Spanish edition cited is Miguel de Unamuno, *Niebla*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Madrid: Cátedra, 1983), p. 109. Subsequent citations will be indicated parenthetically in the text.
4. See Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, "Unamuno's *Niebla*: Existence and the Game of Fiction," *Modern Language Notes*, 79 (1964), pp. 188-205 or Gullón, *Autobiografías*, among others.
5. See Geoffrey Ribbans, *Niebla y soledad: Aspectos de Unamuno y Machado* (Madrid: Gredos, 1971); or Fernando de Toro, "Personaje autónomo, lector y autor en Miguel de Unamuno," *Hispania*, 64 (1981), 360-66.
6. The English translation for this passage does not reflect the original version's emphasis on speech. In the Spanish version (p. 280), Augusto stops Unamuno from uttering derogatory comments about some of his characters from a previous work (another twist in the search for linguistic and existential autonomy). In the English version, Augusto's command is translated as a softened "You shouldn't make fun of them" (p. 297).