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Larra: From Polyphony to Textual Rebellion

Matthieu P. Raillard

“When the double materializes,
when it becomes visible,
it signifies imminent death.”

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

In the first chapter of his seminal *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the multitude of memorable characters in the Russian novelist's works have led to a certain fragmentation of the author's persona, giving the impression that “one is dealing not with a *single* author-artist who wrote novels and stories, but with a number of philosophical statements by *several* author-thinkers.” Similarly, he remarks that scholarly criticism had largely fallen prey to a comparable reading of Dostoevsky's works, privileging individual characters' voices, in the process splintering the author-figure by merging it with each individual character, as if it were “not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual word” (5).

I cannot help but wonder if Bakhtin's remarks do not have similar relevance to Mariano José de Larra, arguably Spain's most celebrated essayist and *costumbrista*. Author of essays, reviews, a novel, and a play, Larra was also a translator, a poet and an aspiring politician. He is undoubtedly best known for his articles and, much like Dostoevsky, for the diversely populated and richly nuanced world inscribed within. His work, when conjugated with his short and tumultuous life that culminated in what Michael Iarocci calls “the most famous suicide in Spanish literary history” (139), has led to the enshrinement of Larra as an archetypal romantic and liberal champion. As a result, much scholarly work has been circumscribed by a blurring of the literary and the biographical, the political and the theatrical, resulting in the elaboration of a multi-faceted authorial figure.

In this essay I will examine Larra's rhetorical authority, and argue that it is derived from a decentralized narrative voice, one which manifests itself due to the author's sustained cultivation of polyphony, namely the inclusion of multiple and often heterodox characters and perspectives. If we are to believe Bakhtin, the fragmentation of Dostoevsky *qua* author arose as a direct consequence of the “plurality of independent and unmerged voices” (*Problems* 6), the multitude of characters which populate his writings. In Larra's case,

however, the nature of his discourse as episodic and journalistic results in a polyphony which goes beyond a novelistic world populated by unique characters (as was the case with Dostoevsky), and comes to include the author, his characters and his readers in a dialogic exercise that would span almost a decade.

While critics have insightfully highlighted Larra's use of pen names and recurrent characters as part of the tradition and expectations of *costumbrismo*, my aim is to evaluate how his varied use of multi-voiced dialogue, pseudonyms, prosopopeia, and epistolary techniques directed the elaboration of his narrative authority. Arguing for a distanced, decentralized authorial voice might seem incongruous in an author known for his strong opinions, but, as I hope to show, it is the narrative thread which unites his journalistic production. Larra's polyphonic style can be divided into three broad categories, which will inform the structure of this essay: dialogue with real interlocutors (readers and editors from other periodicals), with perceived interlocutors (censors and the ineffable reading public), and finally with his textual creations (characters and pen names).

Larra's essays are driven by a diverse catalogue of characters and voices, and come to embody the tension between centripetal and centrifugal narratives. Whereas a centripetal narrative represents a totalizing, normalizing force emblematic of convention or authority (such as official government discourse), centrifugal narrative is multi-perspectivistic, rooted in parody and "aimed sharply and polemically against the official languages of its given time" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 273). It is subversive, sardonic and critical, and cannot be subsumed to any one single authority, be it a fixed ideology or an authorial figure. In other words, in rejecting a unified, centralized brand of authority, Larra tacitly yet unmistakably embraces a polyphonic, decentralized style. As opinionated and satirical as they are, his essays do not rely on a monolithic authorial presence, but rather on the interaction of numerous voices: characters, readers, pen names, authorial alter-egos. By splintering his voice into a literary universe of autonomous characters and constant dialogue, Larra refuses to subscribe to a narrative system founded on the traditional "Magister dixit" form of authority.¹ He instead elaborates a narrative authority emblematic of the centrifugal style, dividing his voice into numerous literary personae, relying on dialogue, epistolarity, subversion, and double meaning (Bakhtin's concept of "hybrid construction"). Beyond allowing him to fulfill the perspectivistic mission of *costumbrismo*, his refusal to embrace a totalizing and singular rhetoric leads to the inclusion of the reader as an active interlocutor and participant. Moreover, as I shall detail later, his narrative strategy also represents a rejection and criticism of government rhetoric and the official language of other publications and interlocutors.

The common denominator in Larra's articles is their unmistakably dialogic quality. Yet, this deceptively elegant result was achieved by a variety of narrative techniques. His recurrent use of apostrophe and real-life epistolary content is the most obvious example and a logical starting point for this study, as it exemplifies a biographically-oriented brand of dialogic narration. Readers of Larra's works are privy to the various polemics engendered by his essays, presented through the cultivation of an epistolary style. As early as 1828, in the pages of his *Duende satírico del día*, Larra would joust with his critics, exhibiting what would become his trademark acerbic wit. In the "Correspondencia del Duende" from May 31, 1828, Larra pens a brutal retort to a pamphleteer who had

criticized him, and, a few months later, begins his sustained feud with the *Correo literario y mercantil*. In the eyes of our author, the *Correo* represented the established order, and his methodical evisceration of its shortcomings is as comical as it is vicious. “No es correo,” he writes, “ni es literario, ni es mercantil. ¿Lo entiende usted?” (“Un periódico del día” 35).

Larra’s desire for reform and progress clearly motivates this article, as he states at the very beginning: “Pero no hay que desanimarse, porque todos conocemos que si bien *El Correo literario* no es bueno, pudiera serlo” (“Un periódico del día” 36). “Un periódico del día” can be read as a delightfully caustic post-mortem of a flawed newspaper, but more importantly, as a metafictional reflection on the nature and purpose of journalism. It is an exercise that Larra would repeatedly undertake, notably in July of 1833 when he lampooned the hegemony of the *Boletín oficial*: “Él reparte la victoria, él da ánimo a los débiles, él deprime a los fuertes, él regula, él modera, él castiga, él premia, él escribe también” (“Variedades críticas” 257). Larra’s uneasy relationship with the quasi-monopolistic periodicals of his time is an indication of his rejection of the aforementioned centripetal discourse, but also of his neoclassical formation. Larra’s thinly veiled preoccupation is with the large-scale dissemination of erroneous, subjective or government-censored information, and betrays his didactic view of journalism.

It is crucial to note that the function of Larra’s exchanges with both real-world periodicals is also essentially a constant elaboration and refinement of his own *ars poetica*. His systematic analyses of *El Correo literario y mercantil* and *El Boletín oficial* provide the reader with a comprehensive list of the qualities Larra believed to be required of a newspaper: accuracy, proper grammar, integrity, but also communication in the form of true dialogue with its readers. If his excoriation of the aforementioned periodicals demonstrates anything, it is his belief in the honest exchange and opposition of ideas. By publicly engaging *El Correo* in a dialogue (the newspaper replied to Larra’s criticism), Larra was involving the readership of both publications in an exchange on the nature of the periodic press and its role in reform.

Moreover, Larra’s elaboration of his own journalistic persona and style is dependent on his early exchanges and run-ins with other publications and pamphleteers. Self-definition by contrast is a technique regularly employed by Larra, for whom literature was “un instrumento de diferenciación” (Carenas 150). Larra chooses a contrastive tone and authorial persona for his exchanges with critics and rivals, and he also cultivates a marginalized textual representation of himself. This is the theatrical, cloak-and-dagger Larra character seen in a great number of his *costumbrismo* essays, who cynically comments on the uneducated public while adjusting his hat and receding into the background.

The “narrador irritado y sin pelos en la lengua” (Espejo-Saavedra 39) was a necessary ploy to engage readers, because its catalytic function depended precisely on reader antagonism or sympathy. Larra’s journalistic mission and rhetorical authority are directly linked to his *difference* and *distance* from his subject matter, both in his auto-representation as a character and in his tone. Larra’s identity is therefore derived from his contrast with the other, “la contrafigura del Larra crítico” (Gullón 1), making his own textual authority

dependent on a constant dialogue with his readers. It is a practice of auto-definition which calls to mind what Bakhtin said briefly before his death:

In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space, and because they are *others*. (Kelly)

In this sense, we may read Larra's sustained cultivation of contrast with others and his own marginalized ego as an antagonizing, critical rhetorical ploy, to be sure, but also as an exploration of his own authorial identity and *modus operandi*.

What happens when the "other" is not so different from the critic? This was the situation in September of 1833, when Larra penned a stern condemnation of Frenchman M. J. Black's travel diary of Spain. Black's cynical tone and caustic observations were quite similar to the social criticism Larra normally produces, leaving the latter to defend and recalibrate his own *costumbrismo* along more empirical, yet nationalistic, lines. When he writes sardonically "¡Bien haya M. Black y estos pícaros de extranjeros tan observadores!" ("Variedades críticas" 285), Larra seems to be conflating both his national pride and his journalistic mission. Larra's tone is reminiscent of the Spanish position during the Masson de Morvilliers affair,² and Black's voice, emblematic of centripetal French discourse, is one that must be publically chastised. This essay is a reminder of the need for perspective, facts, and personal experience in one's writing, yet also implicitly engages his reading public and other authors in a debate on the role of national identity and pride in social commentary and *costumbrismo*.

Larra's literary manipulation of real-world dialogue is perhaps best exemplified by an incident that is both humorous and indicative of his influence on the public. In the summer of 1833, Larra became aware of the impact of his theater reviews when he learned of the great displeasure felt by the actors of Madrid. His response to the situation is an essay entitled "No lo creo," constructed around a fictional dialogue and between himself and a theater aficionado who has come to warn Larra that the actors are coming to kill him in retribution for his comments.³ The absurdity of the situation reveals Spanish theater's intolerance or inexperience with criticism, but it also embodies the clever fashion in which Larra transforms a real-world dialogue (Larra vs. actors) into a fictionalized one, which serves as both an apology of theater criticism and a dissertation on the importance of the arts in an enlightened society.

Larra's acute awareness of the reader's role and importance is the golden thread that is woven throughout all of his articles, for "en ningún momento de su carrera literaria deja de tener en cuenta al lector" (Amell 207). He was keenly aware of the commercial aspect of his literary enterprise, and constantly tweaked his narrative style and authority "para establecer un diálogo metaliterario con el lector acerca de la popularidad de los artículos de costumbres y el deber que siente el autor de encontrar siempre temas nuevos para

presentar al público” (Espejo-Saavedra 39). Indeed, Larra’s preoccupation with his readership constitutes one of the more recurrent motifs in his essays, one which factors greatly into the fashioning of his rhetorical strategies.

On a commercial level, Larra’s concern with his literary enterprise indicates an awareness of the reader’s role and the growing commodification of literature. Espejo-Saavedra maintains that Larra’s narrative strategy (especially his use of pen names) was in large part commercially motivated (42), and Romero Tobar views Larra’s contractual protection of his most celebrated pen-name, Fígaro, as evidence of his awareness of his success (364). For his part, Michael Iarocci argues convincingly that Larra’s “Nochebuena de 1836” can be read as the author’s realization that he had become “a commodity destined for consumption” (44). Professional authorship for Larra proved to be a difficult proposition, one which pitted at times conflicting forces. While the burgeoning literary market and ever-expanding reading public made dissemination of his ideas easier than before, Larra was ever-mindful of the situation described by Iarocci, and the prostitution of his ideas for personal gain. If his lucrative contract with *El español* in 1835 shows his financial acumen, his failure to adhere to that periodical’s conditions (Larra was originally contracted to write only theater reviews) made explicit his inability to curb his journalistic instinct. Moreover, it is all too easy for authors, he argues in “¿Quién es el público?” to use the public and its reading tastes to justify or excuse a work of inferior quality or little didactic merit: “El público es el pretexto, el tapador de los fines particulares de cada uno” (663). Nonetheless, as Haidt has shown in a recent study, Larra was indeed willing to listen to popular tastes, and incorporated various “audience-driven components” into his essays, such as gothic and sublime aesthetics (53).

On a philosophical level, Larra is preoccupied with finding a public that will listen to him, and with sustaining the dialogue necessary to his writings. While his youthful optimism is visible in “El duende y el librero,” where he likens authorship to a military career, it is also tempered by a preoccupation with finding a receptive public: “Pero para venderlo . . .” he asks the bookseller with uncertainty (643). This preoccupation with finding an interlocutor haunted him throughout his life. “¿No se lee en este país porque no se escribe, o no se escribe porque no se lee?” Larra famously asked in 1832, adding sarcastically “¡Maldito Gutenberg! ¿Qué genio maléfico te inspiró tu diabólica invención?” (“Carta a Andrés” 80). Larra’s growing disillusionment with both life and career has been amply discussed by critics, but it is worth noting that much of his despair is centered on the loss of the reader, and the dissolution of the dialogue so essential to his literary work. As Rosenberg asks, “how does the prophet descending from the mountain share his message without becoming alienated from the environment that produced his insight?” (380). How can a Romantic author, who by definition prizes solitude and introspection, communicate with the very masses he or she is marginalized from?

Larra attempts to address this question via metafictional forays into the nature of the reading public, resulting in the essays “¿Quién es el público?” “Todo el mundo es máscaras,” “Horas de invierno,” as well as his fictional correspondence with Andrés Niporesas. All reflect his growing despair at having lost a reading public, or maybe never having had one in the first place. The hopelessness and frustration seen in his later writings, “escribir en Madrid es llorar. [. . .] ¿Quién oye aquí? ¿Son las academias, son los

círculos literarios?” (“Horas de invierno” 602), is present in some form throughout his literary career. If “El Duende y el librero” initiates his career with a note of preoccupation regarding the reception of his works, and his epistolary exchanges with Andrés are centered on the apparent lack of a reading public, it is in “¿Quién es el público?” where Larra tackles the problem explicitly. His inquiry into the nature of the public yields the conclusion that not only is it a protean and indefinite entity, its existence points to a symbiotic relationship with the author: “Yo mismo habré de confesar que escribo para el público, so pena de tener que confesar que escribo para mí” (664). Larra revisits this conundrum in “El mundo todo es máscaras,” where he begins by asking how he can possibly write to “contentar a los necios y a los discretos, a los cuerdos y a los locos” (665).

From these essays it is apparent that dialogism is an inherent component of Larra’s literary endeavor, one which both validates and torments him. He obviously struggled with the economies of discourse inherent to his journalistic enterprise; perhaps he was loath to believe that the social utility of his message was dependent on its reception by an indefinite public that was as mediocre as it was fickle. Yet Larra does maintain a dialogue with his public, in the form of rebuttals to his critics, attacks geared towards social reform, and even “open letters” to his readers, as in “Dos palabras.” The uncertainty of ever truly communicating with his readers is reflected in his essays, even insinuating itself into Larra’s views on language’s ability to convey meaning. “Las palabras,” published in May of 1834, ultimately betrays his loss of faith in the power of words: “Tal es la historia de todos los pueblos, tal la historia del hombre... Palabras todo, ruido, confusión: positivo, nada. ¡Bienaventurados los que no hablan, porque ellos se entienden!” (206).

Larra’s frustration with the public leads to the polyphony that infuses his articles, and is obviously not limited to his explicit literary exchanges with his critics and readers. Many of his articles make use of prosopopeia, or sermocination, in order to maintain a dialogic framework in the absence of real-world interlocutors. If we understand prosopopeia to be a rhetorical trope in which an imaginary or absent character is represented as speaking, then its roots undoubtedly can be traced back to Plato’s *Republic*. It is by way of Socrates and Adeimantus’ conversation in book III (itself an example of prosopopeia) that Plato distinguishes between when Homer speaks as Homer the poet, and when he “tries to make us feel that the words come, not from Homer, but from an aged priest” (81). It was later re-codified by numerous theorists, among them Fray Luis de Granada and Gregorio Mayáns. Fray Luis de Granada labels it “razonamiento fingido,” and writes that “razonamiento fingido es cuando se atribuye el discurso a alguna persona, y se expone con respeto a la dignidad del que habla, en esta forma” (544). At the heart of this rhetorical strategy are the illusion of dialogue and the concept of narrative distance between author and character.

In this situation, Gérard Genette’s theories on narration provide a useful framework by differentiating between various types of speech: narrated, transposed, and reported. These three classes of speech are predicated on the notion of narrative distance between the narrator and the events described. As such, narrated speech is the most distant, with the author merely reporting or summarizing the words of the characters. Transposed speech features less distance, since the narrator presents the reader with an account of the

words uttered by the characters (e.g. “Juan le dijo que tenía que comer”). Larra’s narrative authority is largely derived from his manipulation of the third type of speech/distance: reported speech, in which the author transcribes the exchanges between characters. Reported speech is the most mimetic, for the author *shows*, instead of describes, a dialogue between characters. Larra’s sustained use of reported speech and prosopopeia points to his desire to incorporate polyphony and its concomitant narrative distance within his articles, partly in an attempt to approximate verisimilitude, and partly to avoid creating a centripetal discourse of his own through an overbearing narrator.

It is necessary to differentiate between three degrees of prosopopeia in Larra’s works: those essays in which Larra observes and transcribes a dialogue between two or more discrete characters, those articles in which he himself is a dialogic participant, and finally the essays in which two of Larra’s pseudonyms converse with themselves. The first type of prosopopeia is by far the most common brand of fictional dialogism in Larra’s work, with the author presenting the reader with a conversation that he has implicitly or explicitly observed. This is the driving dialogic device in “El café,” “La junta de Castel-o-Branco,” “La diligencia,” “El último adios,” and many others. “La educación de entonces” provides perhaps the most elegant example of the construction of this particular brand of polyphony, and its integration within the literary mission of our author. Larra begins the essay with a metafictional reflection on his difficult and dubious job as a journalist, in the process establishing a self-deprecating link to the dog-inflating lunatic from *Don Quijote*: “¿tan fácil les parece a vuestas Mercedes hinchar dos columnas de la Revista todos los domingos?” (331). Larra, as he is wont to do in so many essays, begins by rhetorically establishing his marginalized condition, his difference and his distance from the world, and the “mal humor que habitualmente me domina” (331). This essay is constructed around prosopopeia, in this case the reported dialogue between two conservatives that Larra follows around Madrid. Larra’s reinforces his polyphonic intent by ending his essay abruptly due to the characters’ having moved out of range for Larra to follow their conversation.

This brand of polyphony distinguishes itself by its quasi-objective nature, and the author’s attempt at varying degrees of verisimilitude: “no saludo a ningún amigo ni conocido que encuentro, porque esto sería hacer yo también un papel en la comedia de que pretendo ser únicamente espectador, y que sólo para divertirme a mí creo por entonces que representa el mundo entero” (“Varios caracteres” 119). While verisimilitude is an integral component of *costumbrismo*, it would be erroneous to believe that Larra is feverishly attempting to convince the reader of his dialogues’ veracity. In this case, his tongue-in-cheek introduction to the evils of writer’s block, and the fortuitous encounter with the two men are more indicative of the conventions of *costumbrismo* than of anything else. By drawing on literary traditions, Larra is in fact making the reader an accomplice in the crafting of this article, involving him or her as a participant by addressing his public with an apostrophe to begin the essay. The narrator’s commentary which precedes the reported speech is a recurrent type of narrative framing, and functions as a knowing wink to his readers, a form of meta-dialogue complementing his use of prosopopeia.

It is for the second type of prosopopeia that Larra is perhaps best known, for his manipulation and integration of his own author-cum-character within a dialogic

framework that he created. These articles, such as “El castellano viejo,” “La fonda nueva,” “Vuelva Ud. Mañana,” “Yo quiero ser cómico,” “La nochebuena de 1836,” and “Nadie pase sin hablar al portero,” feature Larra’s interactions with various characters that range from the biographical to the archetypal, the common thread being Larra’s relationship to his fictional interlocutors. In all of these, as in the majority of his essays, Larra makes use of the “dialogic other,” a contrastive figure which functions rhetorically to demarcate the various themes and discourses. Moreover, as McClellan explains, “the self, the agent of discourse, is not conceived as a closed-off, monadic entity, but a fluid subject/site who constructs herself and her discourse from the already given utterances of others” (233). Larra’s constant re-evaluation of himself through discourse with his characters is most famously apparent in the oft-anthologized dialogue with his *criado* in “La nochebuena de 1836,” but can also be found in many of his earlier essays.

In “El castellano viejo,” Larra represents himself as a calm, cultured, and educated counterpart to the vulgarity of his acquaintances and surroundings, thus maintaining a dual dialogue with both the characters and the reader: “Ya habrá conocido el lector, siendo tan perspicaz como yo le imagino, que mi amigo Braulio está muy lejos de pertenecer a lo que se llama gran mundo y sociedad de buen tono” (31). Larra’s persona serves to underscore the repulsive conditions of the *fonda* in “La fonda nueva” and the dinner at Braulio’s house, the boorish and indelicate behavior of the average Spaniard. The dialogic other, in this case the recurring character of his friend Braulio, allows for the elaboration of Larra as a discursive character.

The use of reported speech in these essays serves to represent, synecdochically, the alienation felt by Larra, but also the distance between his ideals of social progress and the stark reality of Spain in the first third of the nineteenth century. This opposition is evident in those essays where Larra exposes the reality of Spanish life by engaging himself in dialogue with a foreigner, as in “Vuelva Ud. Mañana,” “La fonda nueva,” “Entre qué gente estamos,” and “Nadie pase sin hablar al portero.” The technique is of course nothing new; travel diaries based on a foreigner’s point of view had become common currency in eighteenth-century Europe. It is also no mystery why Larra so often chooses a French traveler. Sans-Délai and the anonymous French travelers in “Entre qué gente estamos,” “La fonda nueva,” and “Nadie pase sin hablar al portero” are allegorical tropes representative of progress, culture, and civility, and comprise another staple of *costumbrismo*.

Yet while Larra’s dialogues with foreign travelers indeed produce what Enrique Rubio categorized as a “choque de perspectivas” (81), they also serve to highlight the author’s increasing manipulation of rhetorical authority, and eventually come to reveal the protean personalities of their author. Larra’s attitude undergoes a certain evolution, and comes to join the chorus of voices which comprises the polyphony of these articles. His initial reaction to Sans-Délai’s plans is one cynical amusement:

Traté de reprimir una carcajada que me andaba retozando ya hacía un rato en el cuerpo, y si mi educación logró sofocar mi inoportuna jovialidad, no fue bastante a impedir que se asomase a mis labios una

suave sonrisa de asombro y de lástima que sus planes ejecutivos me sacaban al rostro mal de mi grado. (“Vuelva Ud. Mañana” 42)

Larra’s progressive agenda is well-known and his reaction unsurprising, yet his tone is hardly unwavering, as he splinters his narrative persona by introducing doubt and conflicting views. When he himself falls prey to the apathy that he has just denounced, by writing “¡Eh! ¡Mañana lo escribiré!” (46), it becomes clear that Larra’s article can be read as both social criticism and auto-critique. The resultant condition is such that Larra himself has become a recipient of his advice, in essence converting himself into a reader of his own article; he is both accuser and accused. Larra is also able to play both roles of the contrastive equation, slipping from one side of the dialogue to the other. If in “Vuelva Ud. mañana” he greets the ingenuous Sans-Délai with the cynicism that accompanies his experience of Spanish reality, in “La fonda nueva,” the roles are reversed. In a manner reminiscent of Dante’s pilgrim, Larra is now the traveler, and is shepherded into the oft-revolting underworld of the “fonda nueva” by his guide, making explicit the shortcomings and customs of the new inn in a series of vignettes as comical as they are critical.

Larra’s most common use of prosopopeia can therefore be characterized by his dialogic interactions with his characters, a rhetorical practice which decreases the distance between the narrator and the events recounted. His participation as a character within his essays creates a paradoxical coexistence of apparently autonomous voices with the strong mimetic presence of a narrator. This singular incarnation of polyphony nonetheless features a certain amount of narrative distance that is absent in Larra’s third brand of prosopopeia. I am referring to his elaboration of reported dialogues between two of his narratorial alter-egos. His use of pen-names and pseudonyms has been well documented by critics. Penas Varela correctly argues that they go beyond mere techniques employed to hide an author’s identity, and come to constitute “personajes diferentes, a seres que tienen su propia vida y psicología” (228). These fully-formed entities are the quintessential embodiment of Bakhtin’s aforementioned “autonomous carrier of his own individual word” (*Problems* 5).

It is crucial, as Kirpatrick reminds us, to differentiate between Larra’s characters, for example Braulio or his traveler friends, and his alter-egos, such as Fígaro (237). This essential bit of taxonomy can be attributed to a difference in narrative function, allowing for the introspection necessary for effective criticism (Kirpatrick 264). Larra’s stable of alter-egos counts with a number of defined identities: El duende satírico, El pobrecito hablador, Andrés Niporesas, Ramón Arriala, Juan Pérez de Munguía, and, of course, Fígaro. My aim is not to outline personality differences or examine trends between these identities—Gullón, Romero Tobar, and Penas Varela accomplish this—but rather to examine how Larra creates and maintains polyphony when he is, in essence, speaking with himself. As Romero Tobar observes, “de este hecho—un seudónimo dialoga con otro seudónimo del mismo escritor—se puede abrir la interpretación de las voces heterónimas o la polifonía textual de la prosa larriana” (363). This polyphony yields a remarkable, decentralized aspect to Larra’s narrative authority.

When El duende satírico writes to Andrés Niporesas in “Carta a Andrés,” Larra is cleverly connecting the theme of the essay (his frustration regarding the function of the

reader) with its form (Larra is both reader and author). Similarly, in “Donde las dan las toman,” Don Ramón Arriala and El duende satírico further examine the aforementioned polemic between Larra and the *Correo literario y mercantil*, successfully presenting the reader with a meta-commentary grounded in heteroglossia and polyphony. Unsurprisingly, Larra continues to explore the nature of his journalistic profession and the Spanish reading public in the epistolary exchange between two recurring alter-egos, Andrés Niporesas and El Bachiller Juan Pérez de Munguía. By writing a dialogue between two fictional representations of himself, Larra ironically illustrates his principal concern with the state of Spanish letters, namely that: “La mitad de las gentes no lee porque la otra mitad no escribe, y ésta no escribe porque aquella no lee” (“Carta a Andrés” 82). This practice again calls to mind Bakhtin, who writes that “behind the narrator’s story we read a second story, the author’s story” (*Dialogic* 314). In an effort to illustrate the absence of both authors and readers, Larra cynically “solves” this problem of readership and authorship and presents his readers with a dialogue between himself, one that is split into two distinct voices and personalities.

The autonomy of these voices is derived not only from their distinct personalities, but from their role within Larra’s meta-narrative. It is Andrés, the self-described humble interlocutor, who narrates both “Muerte del pobrecito hablador” and “Carta panegírica de Andrés Niporesas.” By presenting the demise of his *Pobrecito hablador* through this literary pseudonym, Larra chooses irony and satire as his vehicle of expression, as evidenced by the epigraph citing Jorge Manrique’s *Coplas por la muerte de su padre*. Moreover, the recurrent use of alter-egos as principal interlocutors and the narrative distance achieved serve to establish a network of self-referentiality which solidifies both Larra’s perspectivist tendencies and his growing use of a centrifugal narrative authority. It is, as mentioned earlier, a practice that would culminate in the delirious “La nochebuena de 1836,” whereby the scission between Larra and his alter-egos would be most pronounced.

If the absence of readers was a recurrent preoccupation for Larra, censorship was a corollary to this condition, a literary hurdle which paradoxically both inhibits and requires multi-voiced narrative strategies. The importance of censorship in Larra’s writings is undeniable, and its presence in his works explicit, most notably in “Carta segunda a Andrés,” “Don Timoteo o el literario,” and, of course, “Lo que no se puede decir, no se debe decir,” and “El siglo en blanco.” While the government-imposed regulation of ideas was an egregious affront to both Larra’s liberal ethos and his commercial endeavor as a journalist, its impact can truly be appreciated by what it accomplishes textually, for as Haidt remarks, “the censor is an irreparable break between language and meaning” (60). Censorship erases and misinforms, but mostly it silences, it prevents dialogue in any form, resulting in a palpable void that Larra indefatigably attempts to fill through a number of rhetorical strategies. Censorship is the triumph of the established order, the crushing centripetal discourse of Martínez de la Rosa that drives Larra to comment cynically that “los escritores, por otra parte, debemos dar el ejemplo de la sumisión” (“Lo que no se puede” 279).

Yet ironically, censorship also foments a polyphonic variant, a hybrid construction which Bakhtin labeled as having a “double-voiced” quality, and which is crafted in an effort to

subvert or circumvent the repression of government censors. The cultivation of a parodic discourse by its very nature harbors within itself a doubling of voices: what is said, graphically and grammatically, and what is meant. In 1835, in “La alabanza, o que me prohiban éste,” Larra renews his investigation into the relationship between an author, his message, and the reading public. As discussed earlier, Larra’s disillusionment with the reality of his readership is explicitly stated in a number of essays, and also made manifest in his tongue-in-cheek dialogues between his pseudonyms-cum-characters Andrés and el Bachiller. What Larra attempts in “La alabanza” is a cynical, double-voiced re-evaluation of his stance. “Los autores han dicho siempre en sus prólogos, y se lo han llegado a creer ellos mismos, que escriben para el público; no sería malo que se desengañasen de este error,” writes, apparently echoing his earlier stance from “¿Quién es el público?” His admission that an author “no escribe más que para el censor” (326) allows Larra to bring in a figure emblematic of centripetal discourse (the censor) and, ironically, incorporate it within his polyphonic universe.

The censor becomes another interlocutor, folded into Larra’s dialogue through double-voiced discourse: “Bien determinado como estoy a no escribir jamás para el censor, he tratado siempre de no escribir sino la verdad, porque al fin, he dicho para mí, ¿qué censor había de prohibir la verdad, y qué gobierno ilustrado, como el nuestro, no la había de querer oír?” (“La alabanza” 327). The double-voiced nature of this sentence means that it contains two distinct utterances, and relies on the author’s marginalized condition as oft-censored social critic and his ironic dialogic relationship with the very figure that prevents dialogue, the censor. Larra’s assertion that he never writes for the censor is only partially true, for he writes at all times conscious of this silent, menacing dialogic partner with the power to cast his essays into oblivion.

In this essay, however, what Larra accomplishes is nothing short of remarkable, for he both circumvents and criticizes censorship while imitating the safe, state-sanctioned discourse of praise. On one hand, Larra mimics the centripetal discourse of the censors by parroting the honest-authors-have-nothing-to-fear rhetoric (“¿qué censor había de prohibir la verdad?”) and by adhering to the safest, least-prone to censorship brand of discourse: “Lo que está permitido es alabar” (327). The word “verdad” above is patently hybrid, for it refers to two antithetical notions of truth; Larra’s critical and oft-censored truth is pitted against the state’s empty definition, which exists in theory (the state claims to encourage truth) yet not in practice (censorship). The repressive condition of censorship thus results in another scission in Larra’s narrative authority, as he attempts to convey his message while employing the rhetoric of the state.

The reality of authorial silence is represented metaphorically as a blank page in “El siglo en blanco,” where Larra details the task faced by the reader in a censored literary world: “lo que hay que leer es un artículo que no está escrito. Leer palabras y más palabras lo hace cualquiera, y toda la dificultad, si puede cifrarse en alguna cosa, se cifra evidentemente en leer un papel blanco.” As detailed above, the core of Larra’s rhetorical authority and narrative strategy rests on the illusion of, and desire for, dialogue. Yet the written word is only a reminder of the temporal disjunction between interlocutors that may or may not exist, an inky vestige conceived to cover artificially the silence that necessarily exists. “Cuanto hemos callado nosotros,” he writes, “mis lectores y yo, en diez

años” (166). With this essay, Larra lays bare the conventions of writing, and cynically outlines the challenges facing an author who must write without words, positing cynically that silence is in itself an effective form of communication. While he mockingly presents the various advantages of such silence, ultimately the disappearance through censorship of the marker that is the word results in an explosion of polysemicity and ambiguity: “un artículo en blanco es un artículo en el sentido de todos los partidos” (166). It is theoretically the ultimate type of polyphony: a cacophonous, not to mention Borgesian, literary construct in which the author says and means everything at once, while the reader understands it as all things possible. Thus, in an effort to condemn censorship, Larra crafts an essay in which he comically and sardonically attempts to find dialogue in perfect silence.

Foucault famously argues that writing “is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears” (116). I hope to have illustrated in the preceding pages the process whereby Mariano José de Larra cultivates a polyphonic brand of narrative authority that functions largely because his condition anticipates Foucault’s words. Larra in many ways “disappears” behind his myriad narrative masks, entrusting his authority to a readership that is tasked with deciphering the multitude of voices featured in his articles. Larra’s essays feature not only a galaxy of seemingly independent characters that interact with each other, but also a complex network of self-referentiality that hinges on an author-function readily engaging its readers, its characters, and even itself in constant dialogue. The “desdoblamiento del yo” practiced by Larra yields nuanced prose well-suited to his journalistic endeavor, since it facilitates narrative distance. The rhetorical mechanism inherent to this polyphony is a transfer of power from a monadic author-function to his textual creations: characters, self-representations (both idealized and contrastive), and literary alter-egos.

These narrative avatars acquired an undeniable level of autonomy due in large part to their public recognition and therefore validation. Fígaro was Larra, yet in many ways Larra *became* Fígaro, that is to say that the author receded and was supplanted by his own *nom de plume* and creation. This is the transformation that frames Kirpatrick’s argument when she argues that Larra suffered greatly from the discrepancy between the ideal that Fígaro had become, and the author’s own imperfect reality (54). Iarocci’s previously-mentioned argument on the commodification of Larra’s word follows a similar tack:

His public persona is not only inextricably linked to his role as the preeminent theater critic of his time, but the very distinction between public and private and the very notion of a discursive “persona” are thematized by the many *dramatis personae* behind the pseudonyms that span Larra’s production. (48)

Indeed, the dissolution of the difference and distance between Larra’s public and private spheres is potentiated by the parceling of his narrative voice into these *dramatis personae*. Haidt similarly argues that Larra’s dilemma was pleasing his audience, while at the same time he “satisfied his own critical—and political—criteria for effective art” (52).

I would like to conclude with a reading of Larra's most celebrated essay, "La nochebuena de 1836," in which the conjugation of polyphony and epistemological uncertainty culminates in what Larra famously termed a "delirio filosófico." While the term delirium is undoubtedly appropriate, this essay is also representative of the consequence of the sustained transfer of rhetorical power from Larra to his characters. Sherman convincingly examines this process as it applies to the 1833 essay "La muerte del pobrecito hablador," where he outlines the transfer of authority from Larra to el Bachiller, to Andrés, "al escribiente, y así sucesivamente" (228). By establishing such narrative distance from his articles and his creations, Larra succeeds in creating the illusion of textual autonomy, fully-formed characters who engage in discourse with each other and their creator.

The logical consequence of Larra's polyphonic rhetoric is analogical to Bakhtin's formulation of "the carnivalesque" in that it features not only a collectivity of textual personages, but also one where traditional hierarchy is subverted, since "All were considered equal during carnival" (*Problems* 123). This equality is present not only in "La muerte del pobrecito hablador," but also in many of Larra's essays, where his character-author recedes or participates on even ground with his other literary creations. Larra explicitly explores this dynamic in "El mundo todo es máscaras. Todo el año es carnaval," published in March of 1833. Larra's overwhelmed reaction to the chaotic, feigned, and polysemic nature of human society leads him to conclude that existence is indeed like carnival. This rhetorical equality is also at the heart of "Vuelva Ud. mañana," in which Larra's avatar, amused at the Frenchman's ingenuous expectations, soon closes the distance between the two, eventually exhibiting the same despair and frustration at the article's close. When he demonstrates his own apathy and writes "¡Eh! ¡Mañana lo escribiré!" (49), Larra is effectively folding himself into the same plane of existence that his characters inhabit, having reduced himself within the space of one article from a frustrated *literato* to a defeated character on par with the rest of society.

Moreover, in his later essays, Larra's rhetorical power as author comes to be usurped, or at the very least shared, with his own *noms de plume*. As he writes in "Fígaro a los redactores del *Mundo*" in late December of 1836, "Fígaro y Mariano José de Larra son tan uña y carne como el diputado Argüelles y la Constitución del año 12" (615). Similarly, in "Fígaro dado al mundo," published two weeks earlier, he wrote that "Juro a Dios, a fé de Fígaro" (592). The resultant condition is a strange hybrid of dissolution and fusion of Larra and his alter-egos. On one hand, Larra *qua* author can be viewed as ceasing to exist for he now swears before God as Fígaro, while on the other, the two can be seen as coexisting on an equal plane, as in his statement to the editors of *El mundo* cited above.

When Larra shouts "¡Silencio, silencio!" to conclude "El día de difuntos de 1836," this plaintive cry is emblematic of his despair, to be sure, but also serves as an uncanny antecedent to "La nochebuena de 1836," where he repeatedly calls for his servant to stop speaking: "silencio, hombre borracho" (610) and "Por piedad, déjame, voz del infierno" (611). In both cases, truth is presented in the form of polyphony, be it in the shape of the decidedly grotesque, carnivalesque and funereal visual dialogue of "Día de difuntos," or from the mouth of one of Larra's textual creations, a character-turned-alter-ego in "La nochebuena de 1836." It's both ironic and perfectly fitting that Larra's sustained use of a

dialogic quality would not only yield the truth he was seeking, but also do so in a fashion that overwhelmed its author.

“La nochebuena de 1836” is the culminating point of the textual rebellion of Larra’s characters and the complete subversion of the author’s narrative authority, but its groundwork was laid out much earlier. Larra begins developing the key figure of the *criado* early in his career, and in “Dos liberales, o lo que es entenderse,” published in November of 1834, he provides his readers with the thematic antecedents to his Christmas-eve confrontation. The description of his relationship with his servant is singular in that Larra strives, with no immediate motive, to emphasize the unstable hierarchy that complicates the usual master-servant structure:

[T]engo un criado montañés que, a fuer de quererme, se toma conmigo raras libertades: lo mismo es ver que he escrito como cosa de un cuarto de hora, que es todo lo más que él me permite, porque blasona de cuidarse mucho de mi bienestar [. . .] «¡Hola!—dice—, oposicioncita, ¿eh? ¡Basta, señor, basta!» y unas veces derribando el tintero sobre el escrito llénamelo de borrones, y otras, que son las más, asiendo de un apagador [. . .]. (252–53)

The economies of power in “Dos liberales” would serve as an explicit starting point in “La nochebuena,” as they are evident from the essay’s very title, “La nochebuena de 1836. Yo y mi criado. Delirio filosófico,” and the corresponding footnote, where Larra explains his unusual syntax, with “yo” preceding the *criado*: “Francamente, creo que valgo más que mi criado; si así no fuese le serviría yo a él” (604).

The dialogue that follows presents precisely such an inversion of roles, with Larra reduced to plaintive *ad hominem*s while his servant mounts an eloquent dissection of his master’s psyche. The tables have been turned; Larra, who once criticized the various projects or conditions of his literary creations, is now on the receiving end. Whereas Larra once actively sought out this polyphony, he now rejects the horrific reality that has emerged from these characters’ voices. When he shouts “¡Silencio, silencio!” at the end of “El día de difuntos de 1836,” he is ironically engaging in dialogue with the dead and the specter of failure. In “La nochebuena de 1836,” Larra’s renewed calls for “silencio” stem from a desire to silence his creations, whose harsh critical eyes, intended to examine Spanish society, have come full circle to include the author himself.

Poststructuralism famously argued for the disintegration of the author as a text is read and re-interpreted by each reader. In Larra’s case, this authorial dissolution is derived from his increasingly fragmented textual authority, which comes to be challenged by the cast of characters and the very polyphony he cultivated throughout his life. The aforementioned commodification of the author in the author-reader transaction has resulted in a blurring of the distinction between Larra and his many textual alter-egos. Larra’s authorial self has been created and re-created multiple times, resulting in a situation whereby the copy has replaced the original, superseding its authenticity and authority in both the reader and author’s mind. It is what Baudrillard famously terms a hyper-real situation, “no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody.

It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (2). The signs of Larra—Fígaro, Andrés, and the rest—have slowly supplanted the original, who is reduced to weakly defending himself in “La nochebuena,” as his Doppelgänger, himself a Baudrillardian clone—methodically delegitimizes the ideals and positions that defined Larra. Besieged by his own personal turmoil and his inability to regain control of his literary creation, Larra thus decides to stare “con delicio y con delicia en una caja amarilla, donde se leía mañana” (611), and eventually silence himself as well.

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Notes

- ¹ The aphorism “magister dixit,” Latin for “what the master said,” dates back to the Pythagorean school. It is emblematic of the adherence to an established, anterior source as the indisputable source of authority. It was a rallying cry for medieval scholasticism, for which the undisputed master was none other than Aristotle.
- ² The Masson de Morvilliers affair centered on the polemical encyclopedia entry on Spain written by Nicolas Masson de Morvilliers in the *Encyclopédie méthodique*, which reached Spain in 1783. In its pages, Morvilliers infamously asked what Europe owed Spain and what had Spain contributed in the preceding centuries.
- ³ For more on this episode, see Gies.

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