

The Protagonist of 98 in Carlos Casares' *Ilustrísima*

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Published in 1980, Carlos Casares' novel *Ilustrísima* breaks from the trends followed by the "New Galician Narrative" authors in the sixties and seventies and recovers the distinctiveness of the transition work that marked the period of the beginning of the 20th century in Spanish literature, especially the works written by Pío Baroja, Azorín and Unamuno. The historical circumstances in which Casares' novel was written and those in which the *fin-de siècle* authors wrote were certainly different. Nevertheless, the fact that the story of *Ilustrísima* was situated in the 1900s and that the author went back to using a linear discourse and a third person narrator while inviting deeper participation from the reader connects the two and allows for a reexamination of some of the topics of that period.

One of the most perplexing issues of this novel is the development of a protagonist, a bishop in a Galician city, who dedicates his life and position to fight against backwardness and conservatism at end of the century. His personality, the challenges he has to face and his own role as bishop resemble the trials of many of the characters in the novels of the Spanish Modernism. As the individuals in many of these Spanish novels fight to find a purpose in life, Casares' character is lost within a society that is missing its purpose and in many instances, one may say, its domains. If the disaster of 98 made many revalue their identity and often feel the absurdity of their existence, in the case of Casares, he shows the bishop to be an accident of destiny, trying to change circumstances around him but following a very personal logic that results in his failure. This essay analyzes three concepts essential in the study of the protagonists of these Spanish and Galician novels. First is the concept of Spain, or in Casares' case, Galicia. The examination of the country and region where the characters live challenges those societies and the social, economic and cultural values that they promote. The concept of country or nation and the fact that traditionalism and progress will oppose each other at every instant mark the development of the novel.

Considering the country and its construction process, another very important factor is that all the protagonists, including the bishop, suffer from a lack of initiative, of strong determination that may help them to face and pursue to the end the changes they want to accomplish. It was what the writers of 98 would call *abulia*, which in Casares manifests itself in the incapacity of the bishop to reject the impositions made by his assistants and to follow through on the transformations he envisions for the city. This inability to make decisions is examined as well by Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* and developed by Robert Spire's *Transparent Simulacra. Spanish Fiction 1902-1926*. They analyze a literary practice referred to as "double voicing" and "posited author" in which first, the narrator is going to speak to the reader through the dialogue developed by his/ her characters inside the novel, and second, that dialogue and narrator are going to be a direct reflection of the voice of the posited author, making the novel a way to convey the thoughts and different kinds of messages of the author himself. Taking this into consideration in examining Casares' novel, one may find that techniques such as the appearance of different voices, extradiegetic speakers, the role of the protagonist and the *protagonization* of the author are used to reveal the past in the present events

Galicia goes through in the 1890s and 1980s. These techniques provide the readers with an eye on the past, while firmly and intentional stepping into the present.

Carlos Casares (Ginzo de Limia, Orense, 1941 - Vigo, 2002) was one of the most well-known and versatile Galician writers of the twentieth century. College professor, representative of the socialist party in the Galician Parliament in the '80s, head of the Galician publishing house Galaxia and member of the Royal Academy of the Galician Language, he was, according to Dolores Vilavedra, one of the main representatives of the political transition in Galicia and he fought to restore the Galician political parties from the time of the Spanish Republic (306). The Spain of the 1890s and the Galicia of 1980s are at a crossroads. On one hand, they in many instances were what Azorín would call the land of ignorance, self-interest, political corruption and harmful censorship. For Unamuno, that ignorance was going beyond the unimaginable, having as a consequence the definitive backwardness of the country, which would bring upon it shame and more defeat: “No hay corrientes vivas internas en nuestra vida intelectual y moral; esto es un pantano de agua estancada, no corriente de manantial...no hay frescura, ni espontaneidad, no hay juventud” (348).

It is similar for Galicia a country in which, according to Xelís de Toro, that feeling was true in the 19th century and also in 1980. For de Toro, Galicia at the end of the 20th century was not on the verge of revolution as much as on the verge of recovering the past and its tradition, an objective that would accomplish, showing once more the bagpipe as the musical instrument traditionally and historically linked with Galician identity. In the same spirit of continuation, Jesús de Juana López also testifies how in spite of all the effort to change Galician politics and culture after Franco's death, the nationalists parties failed to organize a common front and allowed Manuel Fraga's party of Alianza Popular get the first government of the autonomic community. Manuel Fraga had been a relevant minister under Franco and a supporter of his regime, which means that Galicians really did not transition towards democracy when they voted for his party to govern the region. In the 19th century the region was characterized according to Ramón Villares and Xosé Ramón Barreiro by the incapacity to get out the path of economic and social backwardness. The political establishment, and above all the newly restores Bourbon monarchy, did not help in this situation.

This ideological and social stagnation is the central point of the novel, observed in many instances but above all, when the bishop from the beginning of the novel criticizes the games and the manipulation his subordinates are trying to play on him and the rest of society. The novel explores the constant power struggle between the protagonist and his subordinates. The protagonist wants to modernize and educate the population, keeping it from all the superstitions and ignorance that the Catholic church has imposed on it. He wants to open the door to the modernity and new technology that is sweeping Europe and leaves Galicia at the end of the wagon, without any capacity to improve their chances for the future. On the other hand, his subordinates want to preserve the usual state of things. This may be observed in several instances with the character of Don Xenaro, the bishop's assistant, described as a two-faced, hypocritical man who pretends to help the bishop in all the events around the diocese but who betrays him in the end. Don Xenaro represents the old Spain and the conflict between tradition and progress on several levels. First, he is against the installation of a cinematographer, an issue that permeates the whole novel and drives the bishop to his end: “Desde que ó italiano Pietro Barbagelatta se lle

ocorrera instalarse cun cinematógrafo na cidade, Ilustrísima non tiña acougo” (12). (“Since the Italian Pietro Barbagelatta had the idea of installing a cinematographer, his Eminence could not rest”).

There are several reasons for his opposition to the machine; nevertheless, what seems to be the most prevalent feeling is this opposition to innovation or progress of any kind: “Os seus escasos dotes de tipo intelectual e unha fidelidade escrupulosa a unha conciencia atormentada polo temor, facían del unha presa ideal para os que conducían entre bastidores a oposición á política diocesana de Ilustrísima” (16). (“His scarce intellectual qualities and scrupulous fidelity to a conscience tortured with fear made him the ideal prey for those who were conducting the political opposition to the bishop behind doors”).

Nevertheless it is not Don Xenaro who is the most fastidious for the bishop but Don Telesforo, the prebendary, and Don Narciso, the legal canon of the cathedral, whose campaign to oust the bishop from his position has been in vain but has not yet finished. They criticize his studies in seminary and repudiate his political alliances above all the one with José Canalejas, the president of the government and leader of the Liberal party from 1910 to 1912: “Se Don Telesforo estivera no despacho do lado, no de Don Narciso, o tema da conversa había ser outro...A política relixiosa de Canalejas, o mamón liberal, como él lle chamaba púñao tódolos días nada mais erguerse da cama ó bored do pecado” (25). (“If Don Telesforo were in the next office, Don Narciso’s office, the topic of conversation would be another...Canalejas’ religious politics, the liberal idiot, as he would call him, would put him every day, as soon as he would get up, at the edge of sin”).

It is clear then how the bishop’s assistants and the church in general are outraged by the opening of the movie theater in town and the use of the cinematographer to, according to them, basically corrupt the spirit of the population and of the church. That is why they want to demonstrate the lack of morality allegedly brought by the machine, and more than anything they want to disguise that allegation with pseudo scientific reasons against the invention, among others: the possibility of harm being made to the viewer’s sight; the low quality of the work done by its own inventors, the material losses caused by the use of cameras in other cities, and above all, fires; finally, they claim that moral harm is done when one attends this type of spectacle (55-57).

This fight for tradition is opposed by the bishop. He, without paying any attention to the claims of his subordinates, decides to check out the new show on his own and one night leaves the Episcopal palace to go and see a movie. He wants to prove that the fears of the others are just prejudices against the new. The new may be a machine, an outlet for people to entertain themselves and become more educated, or the new may be the family of foreigners living in town and running the new invention. Through this example, one can see how the fight between the old and the new in Spain, and in Galicia, the opposition of traditionalists and liberals, marks not only the period of 98 but the period of transition from dictatorship to democracy in the ‘80s. Now, this dichotomy also refers to the problem of the “Spains” or “las Españas.”

Since the 19th century, intellectuals have referred to Spain in the plural to signify the varied meanings that the country may convey as well as distinct political positions. Eberhard

Geisler and Angela Rieger, in parallel papers on the issue of the “Spains” and their significance, both conclude that the binary opposition between tradition and modernity is something of the past. At the end of the 20th century, the two Spains disappeared and gave place to a third Spain that Rieger describes as Postmodern: “De los antiguos valores, ya sean aquellos de la izquierda o de la derecha, de los pensadores libres o católicos, ya no queda nada en absoluto. Lo único que cuenta para los representantes de esta nueva sociedad es el dinero y el poder, que les ayuda a conseguirlo” (47). Nevertheless, in some instances it is valid to affirm that the two Spains are still alive and well. In this regard, Ulrich Winter examines the concept of the third Spain only in relation with the period of transition and democracy. For him, historians such as Cesar Vidal and Paul Preston confirm the existence of a third Spain but only “legitimadora sobre todo con respecto a la España definida por la Constitución de 1978... la transición a la democracia es la piedra angular de la ‘tercera España’” (24). From this point of view, the bishop and his mentor could be considered the only ones representing progress and rationalism while the rest of the characters stand for tradition and the maintenance of institutionalized customs. Galicia, as it happens with Spain at the beginning of the century, is fighting between a wish to preserve tradition, not letting go of the past, getting stuck in tradition and imperial glory on one hand and on the other, letting go of the colonial realm and turning its expectations to the present in a town and a country that are changing and opening their doors to modernity.

That struggle between the old and the new is not seen only in the antagonism between the bishop and the rest of the church powers but interestingly enough within the bishop himself. The readers, through the use of an all-knowing narrator, have access to the most intimate thoughts and points of view of this character. Through these views they can understand how, although the highest authority in the diocese, *Ilustrísima* is unable to change the circumstances and the climate of contempt and hatred that many people in the city are experiencing, in the end the bishop has to give in to the demands of his subordinates. This preservation of tradition is one of the causes for psychological state called *abulia*, a condition that may be observed in this novel as well.

It was Miguel de Unamuno and Angel Ganivet who took upon themselves the task of defining and giving solution to such an arduous problem that was tormenting Spaniards in general and the nation in particular. For Ganivet, *abulia* was a disease whose symptoms were: “extinción o debilitación grave de la voluntad... la cual se muestra al exterior en la repugnancia de la voluntad a ejecutar actos libres” (286-287) and whose solutions were, according to Jurkevich, a deep psychological crisis along with a re-acquaintance with his folk traditions and national character: “Necesita... nuestro pueblo una crisis que produzca lo que en psicología patológica se llama cambio de personalidad, un derrumbarse el viejo ‘yo’ para que se alce el ‘yo’ nuevo, sobre la base de continuidad de las funciones sociales meramente fisiológicas” (985-6).

In *Ilustrísima*, *abulia* is represented mainly by the parishioners who, ignorant of the struggle that is going on, submit themselves to the power and decision of their priests and spiritual guides and believe in the truth and good intentions of their decisions, giving up their freedom and their rights for knowledge, experience and education. There is an example of this when Don Telesforo is celebrating mass and announces the arrival of the cinematographer using: “...palabras apocalípticas sobre aquella espantosa traxedia e acabou establecendo unha interesada e oportuna relación de parentesco entre o braseiro parisino e o lume do inferno” (23-4) (“... apocalyptic words about that tremendous tragedy and he ended up establishing an opportunistic

connection between the Parisian fire-starter and the fire from hell”). Here Don Telesforo was talking about a fire experienced a week before in Paris when one of the cinematographers caught on fire, the flames quickly extending throughout the whole room and one hundred and thirty people dead as a consequence. Nevertheless, the relation given by Telesforo between the machine and the fire from hell does not refer so much to the fact that the machine could be dangerous for the physical well being of humans as much as for their moral well being, disregarding somewhat the true value of human life. This brainwashing done at church, however, is not comparable with the danger that the bishop sees in the falseness of Sor Sabina’s miracles.

Sabina is a nun who lives in a convent adjacent to the bishop’s palace. She has been the butt of rumors regarding levitations, faints and other unusual events that the church establishment was smart enough to use in order to draw in more people. Although the bishop is completely skeptical of such happenings and is bothered by Sor Sabina’s insistence that she can perform miracles, it is not detrimental for other church authorities to take advantage of miracles for their own interests. It is in these moments when the *abulia*, this debilitation of mind and will, kicks in and churchgoers remain convinced of the truth in the words of their priests. This is what happens, for instance, when the bishop is celebrating mass and the nun appears in the hall of the church to be seen by everybody: “Cando se volveu á comunidade para dicer o primeiro *Dominus vobiscum*, atopouse cunha monxa que camiñaba case a rastro polo paseo central...Pálida e desmaiada, a boca medio aberta, os ollos velados por unha nube acuosa, a sor semellaba a viva reprodución dunha piedade” (21) (“When he turned to face the community to say the first *Dominus vobiscum*, he found a nun dragging herself along the central hall...Pale and unconscious, her mouth half open, tearful eyes, the nun looked exactly like the perfect reproduction of [Michelangelo’s] Pietà”).

All the community is fascinated by her appearance. In fact, Xenaro is determined to relate to the bishop every single supposed miracle that the nun performs every day so much so that when Ilustrísima admonishes him for comparing the nun with Santa Teresa de Jesús, his assistant retorts: “Sor Sabina estará algun día (nos altares)” (“Sor Sabina will someday be put on an altar”). This blind faith in miracles and all class of superstitions is seen more specifically at the end of the novel when several parishioners testify how the nun helped them with their problems. This is the case with *Devota* who promises to walk on her knees from her house to the convent as repayment for the favor of being cured when she prayed to the nun or *Arrepentido*, who prayed to Sor Sabina to recover his sight after having seen an indecent show.

The majority of characters in the story seem to be attracted to a type of religion submissive by tradition and superstition that does not contribute to the betterment of their lives, only making them feel better psychologically. The repercussions of *abulia* in these instances do not have to be so much a weakening of the human will as much as the determinations to find a quick solution to problems that have very deep and serious roots in society. According to Ribot, *abulia* has to do with a constant struggle between a will and the incapacity to act upon it. Also Unamuno and Ganivet understand the psychology of Spain at the end of the century as one that is disassociated, that inside the individual coexist contradictory forces that do not help him move forward in his life or in the life of his community. Sometimes even this *abulia* is identified with indifference and this is in some ways what we have in *Ilustrísima*: a battle between a spirit of

change that searches for new hope and answers, and at the same time, an understanding of a society that will reject it.

One of the most striking observations about the use of this *abulia* disease by Carlos Casares is that one way or the other, the bishop himself seems in some moments to be affected by it. In all the exchanges with his subordinates, Ilustrísima establishes his ideas very clearly as the complete opposite to which they are advising. When Xenaro tells the bishop about the nun, he affirms that she is not a saint and is not performing miracles. When Don Xenaro, Don Telesforo and Don Narciso challenge him to take some measures against the family who had installed the movie theater in town, he pushes them away and shows them as careless, ignorant fools who take refuge in myths and superstitions instead of fulfilling their mission of helping and providing true relief to parishioners. When Don Narciso and Don Telesforo defy him in his political ideas, putting down the liberals and exalting conservatives, he shows them how beyond all political enterprise their task does not change. Nevertheless, it is very soon in the novel that Ilustrísima starts being described as mentally disturbed: “Tanta calma empezou un día a afectar a Ilustrísima pola parte dos seus nervios” (29) (“So much calmness started to affect Ilustrísima’s nerves”).

The bishop suffers from this distension between his will and his actions as much as everyone else, and this connection can be observed more clearly through the analysis of what Bakhtin and Robert Spire described as “double voicing and posited author.” According to Spire, what Bakhtin means when he talks about dialogue produced between a work of literature and its predecessors does not only refer to the works produced before the one written and the possible exchanges among them. More deeply, this dialogue has to do with the fact that through the characters of a particular work, the narrator and beyond him, the posited author, will try to speak with the narratees and readers of the novel, respectively, establishing a connection with the past but particularly with the present circumstances and ideologies. A dialogue is not only a means of communication between characters but a way to transmit philosophies and ideas from the author to the reader and from the narrator to the narratee. In *Ilustrísima*, it is through this technique that the author not only exposes his own ideology and convictions but also plays with the will of the protagonist, stripping him of some of his power of decision and using him to demonstrate how pervasive these traditional beliefs are that even the stronger felt defeated before them.

That happens in very definite instances in the novel and particularly at the end. There are two elements that signal this change in composure and these are the food eaten and obviously the bishop’s emotional state. In many moments throughout the novel, the bishop is seen as the decisive, fearless protagonist who is going to save his diocese from the narrow-mindedness of many of the people in the church. He defies the advice of his counselors, he mocks the meek and childless behavior of the nun and his assistant, he makes fun of the simplemindedness of his canon-priest; nevertheless, from the beginning of the story, although it is very subtle, one may find instances in which he behaves also as weak, vacillating and powerless. For instance, at the beginning of the story, when the bishop is waiting for his assistant to enter the room and assumes that Don Xenaro is nervous because he is going to talk to him again about the cinematographer, the narrator contradicts these expectations, putting the bishop’s wrong thinking into evidence. In this way, he asserts: “Pero equivocábase. O nerviosismo deste non era propio de quen ven

impoñer algo, senón o de quen vai a pedir” (13) (“But he was wrong. His nervousness was not distinctive of a person who comes to impose something but of somebody who comes to ask for a favor”). Also from the beginning, it seems that the bishop is unable to be strong on his own about the decisions he makes, depending very much on the opinion of his mentor and friend, the vicar: “A enfermidade do amigo resultaba unha dura proba... Ilustrísima sentíase como abandonado, perdido...” (27). (“The illness of the friend was a hard trial... Eminence would feel abandoned, lost...”). It is also very striking how the author/narrator uses food to expose the nervousness and his uncontrollable fretfulness. For instance, it is revealed that the protagonist likes to eat well and a variety of dishes; however, it is also revealed how very soon he started to suffer a “cagalera nocturna” (“the night runs”) that were increased and evident when he could not finish some mussels prepared with mushroom and béchamel sauce or a codfish marinated with raisins.

The food and his problems eating show his emotional problems but also contradiction between his intentions for the diocese and his true behavior. Time and again he is shown as almost an ascetic living on his philosophies and ideas but never putting them into practice. He has the vision but misses the desire to fulfill it and that is what is going to lead him to stop being the conscience of the diocese. The ultimate proof of that *abulia* comes when the bishop, defeated, gives up his intentions to reform the diocese and his parishioners and succumbs to the power of his subordinates to close the movie theater and make the Italian family and his supporters run away from the town. This happens in a very cowardly way. While the bishop had used the press of the liberal newspaper in town to defend the right of the people to go to the movie theater and the right of the Italian family who owned it to make a living, his admonitions were taken wrongly and after burning down the theaters, a furious mob went to the house of the newspaper editor and beat him and his family up until the doctor arrived, warned by their six-year-old son.

The reasons for the bishop’s incongruent behavior then, although varied, may be found first in the objective on the part of the author to show us that nobody is perfect or strong enough to accomplish the change of a consciousness or culture on his own, and more importantly, the bishop and the rest of the characters, as many of the protagonists of 98, are victims of circumstances and subjected to more comprehensive powers that determine how they are going to behave and what their destiny is going to be. The use of double voicing and a posited author then, come to reinforce the events that occurred in the past. More concretely, they refer to other pieces of literature and history. They show how history repeats itself, how there are two sides to every conflict and how at the end of each of these conflicts, these two sides still exist and there still exist fruitless attempts to make life better.

It is odd to read a story about life at the end of the century when the readers are living in a complete different time; nevertheless, the creativity of Carlos Casares helps us to make a connection between those two eras. The fact that he wrote in 1980 about the life of a Galician bishop in the 1900s has as an objective to reflect on the fear and the backwardness of both periods. In both years, Galicia is fighting for its identity, and going through a transition period. In both periods, Galician society and economy are going to be redefined. What was an insignificant region in the times of Franco is going to become an autonomic community with its own constitution and the right to recover its language, culture and define its own destiny. After forty years of dictatorship, though, many of the protagonists of that transition and the vast majority of

the Galician people are living still in the fear and indifference, so it seems that no matter how hard they work, nothing will change. Galicia, as well as the city of Ourense in the novel, seems to still exist in the back of history, repeating the traditions from the past and keeping myths and legends as its functioning base. The use of multiple voices and of an ideologically charged author helps, but at the end, changes have to come by everyone's decision.

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