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**VOICES, SILENCES  
AND ECHOES**

**A THEORY OF THE ESSAY  
AND THE CRITICAL RECEPTION  
OF NATURALISM IN SPAIN**

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## INTRODUCTION

The essay as a genre has received little recent critical attention. While our understanding of the novel, poetry, drama, and to a lesser extent, the short story, has been considerably enriched through the application of various philosophies and contemporary literary theories such as phenomenology, reception theory, structuralism, semiotics, post-structuralism etc., the essay is still largely defined in formalist and New Critical terms. Notwithstanding the obvious pragmatic aspect of essayistic discourse, critics and theoreticians tend to stress its "literary" nature. In the preface of *Literary Nonfiction* (1989), Chris Anderson describes the essay as "reflective and exploratory and essentially personal. Its purpose is not to convey information, although it may do that as well, but rather to tell the story of the author's thinking and experience" (x). Without denying the literary qualities of many essays, I suggest that our emphasis on this aspect has been excessive and has limited our understanding of individual essays and of the essay as a genre.

Recent literary and cultural theory provide the impetus and the means for broadening our approach. The New Critical insistence on isolating the literary from other areas of human activity has given way to a variety of movements or schools of thought which reinscribe the social and the political in the literary. Reader-response criticism stresses the reception of the text and as Hans Robert Jauss points out, the reader is always inserted in the historical world (38ff). Feminist, Marxist, and New Historicist approaches to literature all insist on opening the literary text to the socio-historical world that lies beyond (and within) its borders. Deconstructive criticism, with its emphasis on undermining hierarchical oppositions (Derrida; Culler) also breaks down divisions between literature and other areas of human activity. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of language and literature contributes similarly to a broadening of our field of vision. "Literature is an inseparable part of culture and it cannot be understood outside the total context of the entire culture of a given epoch" (*Speech Genres* 2). For Bakhtin, language is "ideologically saturated" (*Dialogical Imagination* 271) and always expresses a world view. In seeking to establish certain fundamental laws of human communication, speech-act theory and pragmatics also argue against a separation of literary and other forms of discourse.

The current emphasis on "text in context" necessitates that studies of essays and of the essay as a form pay particular attention to the cultural milieu of a given text or series of texts as well as to the interrelations of the text(s) and the social, political, historical circumstances in which they are produced. In this study, I will focus on one particular period of modern Spanish history and will analyze a series of essays with the purpose of better understanding the nature of essayistic discourse and the period in question. I have located the study in late nineteenth-century Spain,

and in particular, in the polemic surrounding the introduction of naturalism in Spain, for a number of reasons. During these years the essay is cultivated extensively and acquires greater generic identity. Furthermore, as I will attempt to clarify in the course of this study, the polemic surrounding the reception of naturalism functions as a vehicle for the expression of the social and political tensions that mark late nineteenth-century Spain. Previous literary studies of the period have largely silenced any consideration of social and political factors. Influenced by New Critical definitions of literature and of the essay, they have focused primarily on the literary aspect of naturalism and have considered the texts involved in the polemic as mere vehicles for the expression of late nineteenth-century views on literature. This approach not only divorces the literary from other cultural phenomena, but it also fails to consider the complex interplay between ideology and the linguistic forms that express it. Language, discursive modes, and genres are no longer seen simply as vehicles for the expression of ideas. Sapir and Whorf first pointed out how language can and does condition the form and substance that these ideas take and contemporary literary theories continue to investigate how discourse both reflects and produces ideology.

The literary debates that occur in late nineteenth-century Spain are especially fruitful for a study of the interplay between literature and other expressions of culture as well as for an examination of the interrelations of discourse and ideology. The period marks a critical juncture in Spanish cultural evolution and represents the definitive entry of the modern period in Spain. Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michel Foucault all write of the transition from the classical age to the modern and link the ideological change with the appearance of new and varied forms of discourse. All three writers identify this moment at approximately the end of the eighteenth century or the beginning of the nineteenth. In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes identifies classical writing with "class" writing in that the producers of the texts are members of the group that is closest to those in power. Following the French Revolution, popular and "bohemian" linguistic forms start to intrude on the established "classical" language and by the 1850s, French modes of writing begin to multiply (57-80). Bakhtin defines classical language as monologic, single-voiced, stripped of its association with a speaking person and a historical, cultural context. In contrast, romanticism introduces authorial personality and language as shot-through with a multiplicity of resonances (*Problems of Dostoevsky* 200-01). Foucault's discussion of the shift from the classical to the modern period stresses a dramatic change in the view of humanity and of language. Whereas in the classical period the human subject seeks to elucidate an external order that is created by God, in the modern period, the human subject becomes the object of his/her own examination. This shift accompanies the changing view of language from the classical belief in the correspondence of the word, or "name" as Foucault designates it, and the essence of the thing named (*Order* 120), to a discovery of the very problematic nature of language. "Man now appears limited by his involvement in a language which is no longer a transparent medium but a dense web with its own inscrutable history" (Dreyfus 28).

In Spain, as in other European countries, local historical circumstances intersect with the changing vision of the human subject and of language to accelerate, retard,

shape and modify the new discursive practices. Since the Counter Reformation, there had been an attempt to impose a homogeneous character on the nation. With the entry of the Bourbon monarchy in the eighteenth century, Spain moved into the classical period, as defined by Barthes, Bakhtin, and Foucault. During this period, power continued to be concentrated in a few clearly identifiable institutions: the monarch, the Catholic church, and the nobility. In that the clergy were largely drawn from the upper classes, the interests of the church and the landed gentry were often indistinguishable. Most books were still written by nobles and *hidalgos* and were addressed to members of these same groups (Glendinning 11). When Benito Jerónimo Feijoo wrote his *Teatro crítico universal* (1727–1739), he generally addressed his fellow churchmen and the educated elite and when some members of these groups attacked him, it was King Ferdinand VI who intervened to protect him and silence his critics. In the face of a still very centralized power, writers masked any criticism of the existing institutions and sought to create a sense of identity between their word and that of the authorities. Feijoo frequently evoked the authority of the church, alluding to his own ecclesiastical status (“La cuaresma salutifera”, “Verdadera y falsa urbanidad – Apéndice”) or citing Biblical and other religious texts (“Astrología judiciaria y almanaques”, “Honra y provecho de la agricultura”) and he prefaced his criticisms of present-day Spain with declarations of patriotism or respect, attempting to minimize his distance from his reading public (“Fábulas gacetales”, “Honra y provecho de la agricultura”). The power of the king, of his favorite (“privado”) and of the upper classes continued throughout the century, as is evident in the writing of Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos. His “Memorias” and “Informes” were addressed primarily to the king or to such select bodies as the Supreme Council of Castile. Furthermore, Jovellanos’s fortunes and access to speech were largely dependent on royal favor, which was dramatically illustrated when he was banished to Gijón under Carlos IV, returned briefly to power as Minister under Godoy, and subsequently imprisoned in Palma de Mallorca.

The nineteenth century represents a critical moment in the struggle between a hermetic and an open Spain, and the struggle corresponds roughly to the transition from the classical to the modern age described by Barthes, Bakhtin, and Foucault. In all realms of Spanish culture, new ideas and forms took root and challenged the hegemony of established authorities, traditional modes of existence and attitudes toward life. Attempts to resist the emergence of new and diverse voices, notably under Ferdinand VII (1814–1833) and the early years of the Restoration (1874–1881), succeeded only temporarily. Politically, absolutism gave way to representative government in the form of a constitutional monarchy and briefly, a republic (1873–1874). Alongside the traditional Monarchists and reactionary Carlists, other groups such as the Liberals, Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, Marxists and Anarchists made their appearance. Catholic control over Spanish thought progressively lost strength over the course of the century. The abolition of the Inquisition, the disentanglement of church lands, the increasing – although still far from total – secularization of education, the growing calls for religious tolerance and separation of church and state, the intellectual prestige of the liberal Krausist movement as well as the religious indifference of the urban working class reflect a

breakdown of religious unity. Traditional Catholic thought persisted in differing degrees and expression in Jaime Balmes, Juan Donoso Cortés, Juan Manuel Ortí y Lara, Ramón Nocedal and Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, but it was actively debated and lost ground to various forms of German idealism (Krausism, neo-Kantism, Hegelianism) and later positivism.

Although many of these new currents of thought had their roots in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, their full impact was not felt until the second half of the 1800s. As in other European countries, the romantic movement introduced new forms of discourse and new voices, but a number of factors impeded or delayed their development. The absolutist reign of Ferdinand VII, the reimposition of censorship – the Inquisition was reestablished from 1814 to 1820 –, and the economic devastation during the war against Napoleon are some of the more obvious causes. In this and in the following period, significant transformation occurred. Increasing urbanization, the growth of the bourgeoisie, the greater importance of journalism, and the gradual entry of the middle class into the political process – among other factors – signalled a major shift in Spanish social and cultural structures.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, authority had become notably more diffuse. The old ideas, attitudes, and voices had not disappeared; however, they now faced other, increasingly diverse competitors for public space. Large sectors of the middle and lower classes joined in the call for change, some groups voicing the need for moderation while others grew increasingly strident. In the 1860s, 70s and 80s, a variety of parties argued and at times fought for political and ideological control. In the years following the Revolution of 1868, previously marginal and oppositional groups moved into positions of authority. The overthrow of Isabel II, the selection of Amadeo of Savoy as king and his subsequent abdication, the declaration of the First Spanish Republic, the Carlist revolt in the North and the cantonalist movement in the East and the South – with the surfacing of Anarchist challenges in some areas – all represent a clear breakdown of a central authority. Individuals seeking to introduce new ideas and attitudes no longer limited their appeal to the king or the elite. In the 1850s and 60s, Julián Sanz del Río formed his own group of dedicated, middle-class intellectuals who utilized the newspaper, the *Ateneo*<sup>1</sup>, the university podium, conferences and regular group discussions (“*tertulias*”) in an effort to introduce the Krausist philosophy and thus, challenge traditional Catholic thought. The founding of the privately funded *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*<sup>2</sup> in 1876 further indicated a belief in the ability to change society from within. Under the direction of Francisco Giner de los Ríos, the ILE worked assiduously and through a variety of channels to influence public opinion. In addition to the establishment of a progressive, secular primary and secondary

<sup>1</sup> The *Ateneo* was a literary and political club established in Madrid in 1835. It organized frequent lectures on contemporary literary, social, and political topics. A number of debates on idealism, realism, and naturalism took place in the club in the 1860s, 70s, and 80s.

<sup>2</sup> The *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* was originally founded in 1875 as a private University but was soon converted to a private primary and secondary school. It was a major liberalizing influence in Restoration Spain and pioneered many pedagogical reforms.