# THE WIDOW'S PEAK/THE WIDOW SPEAKS: CARMEN'S IDLE TALK IN MIGUEL DELIBES'S *CINCO HORAS CON MARIO*

*Teresa Boucher*

A widow's peak is "a point formed by hair growing down in the middle of a forehead: formerly supposed to foretell early widowhood" (*Webster's* 1527). Carmen Sotillo, the protagonist of Miguel Delibes's ninth novel, *Cinco horas con Mario*, was left a widow with five children when her husband unexpectedly died, presumably of a heart attack, at age 49. Carmen is widowed at an early age. Though in the novel there is no mention of widow's peaks, this widow speaks.

Her voice carries us through twenty-seven chapters and some 246 pages of a framed monologue of sorts in which Carmen addresses the corpse of her husband, Mario, as she keeps vigil alone overnight after all the callers have left the wake, having paid their respects to the widow. In *Cinco horas con Mario*, Carmen does indeed spend five hours with her husband Mario, or rather, with Mario's cadaver, and the reader is the proverbial fly on the wall.

The formal identification of Carmen's discourse as monologue, soliloquy, interior monologue or mono-dialogue has been explored elsewhere.[1] The philosophical dimension of Carmen's discourse has not. I would argue that Carmen's discourse consists of what Heidegger terms "idle talk," the language of inauthenticity. In an interview, Delibes has said of Carmen, ". . . me interesó sobre todo el lenguaje de este tipo de mujer; ese lenguaje vacío, hecho de timitos, de vulgarismos y de frases hechas" (165).

Gonzalo Sobejano cites the search for authenticity as Delibes's primary concern in what he sees as a process of "acercamiento al humanismo social a partir de la angustia existencial" (164-165). In reference to this particular novel Sobejano asserts that "Los protagonistas de *Cinco horas con Mario* encarnan el contraste entre la costumbre inauténtica (Carmen Sotillo) y el esfuerzo incesante por la autenticidad (Mario)" (165). Yet, these terms are left undefined, unquestioned beyond a reference to authenticity as "la plena realización de la persona" and inauthenticity as one's "falsificación como persona" (164). What does it mean to be authentic? How is authenticity achieved? How can it be recognized? Sobejano at no time pauses to give further consideration to this notion of authenticity as he perceptively analizes Delibes's first eleven novels. And yet the label "authentic," similarly undefined, has stuck, as a cliché of Delibean criticism.

The twentieth-century philosopher who has most deeply probed the concept of authenticity is Martin Heidegger. In his 1927 opus *Being and Time*, as a preliminary step toward a fundamental ontology using a phenomenological method, Heidegger first studies *Dasein* (literally "being-there," human Being) in its everyday inauthentic mode and then explores the possibility for authentic human Being.

Inauthenticity is the development of one's existence not from its unique mission and identity but governed by what people say or do, by public opinion. According to Heidegger, the real agent and protagonist of everyday life is not I or you; it is "the people," "they." We say or do "what they say and do." Inauthenticity is marked by superficial tranquility, which serves as an escape from the anxiety that accompanies the knowledge of the certainty of our death. The inauthentic mode of being is characterized by idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity.

Idle talk technically in Heidegger's philosophy is the fact that language feeds upon itself without revealing reality or delving into it. It is *idle* because it lacks the background of the reality that is revealed. In a derivative sense, as applied to everyday life, idle talk refers to superficial chatter, small talk, where interlocutors become the "they," (*das Man*) merely Beings-in-the-world with whom one has a relationship of competition. By contrast, in meaningful dialogue, one recognizes one's interlocutor as another human being, another *Dasein* with whom one has a relationship of mutual dependence upon the voice of being. Talking is hearing.

Curiosity refers to a form of alienation in which one manifests a nervous desire to keep abreast of what is new and fashionable, without any attempt at profound understanding. The interest with which one approaches the world is superficial, vague and indifferent in the sense that one moves on nervously from one issue to another, from one fad to another. Curiosity is contrasted with studiousness and the concentration required to understand something in depth. In this inauthentic mode of idle talk and superficial curiosity, ambiguity arises, for one can no longer distinguish "what is disclosed in a genuine understanding and what is not" (Heidegger 217).

The authentic mode of being is characterized by self-awareness and anxiety. Self-awareness is the recognition of the fact of our existence, thrown into the world, as it were, without knowing where we come from, where we are going nor why we are here. Anxiety (as differentiated from specific fears) "discloses finitude" (Macquarrie 29), makes possible an awareness of our eventual, inevitable death.

In *Cinco horas con Mario*, Carmen's discourse is precisely such a case of idle talk, inauthentic chatter. She is far more concerned with public opinion, with the "they," than she is with the human self of her interlocutor, her husband Mario. Carmen rambles on for five hours, oblivious not only to the human self of her interlocutor, but even to the presence of death, the absence of any interlocutor. Unable to empathize with Mario, she can only think of his actions as affecting her social status. Unwilling to recognize Mario's values, Carmen criticizes the superficial effects, the material results of his life's choices. Thus, she is obsessed with silverware, cars and the accumulation of material possessions in the desire to compete with those of her social circle. Ruled by the tyranny of the "they," she remains firmly anchored in an inauthentic mode of being. Consider Carmen as a literary prototype of inauthentic *Dasein*. Zimmerman, in his exegesis of *Being and Time*, puts it this way:

> [B]y concealing his finitude, the inauthentic individual is able to understand himself as an eternal thing (ego). The inauthentic individual seeks security by attempting to manipulate the world. Although the egoist thinks that he is fully individuated, the fact is that his goals, opinions, and desires are largely determined by prevailing social customs and expectations. (xxii-xxiii)

In Heideggerian terms, the stillness of silence offers the potential to hear the voice of conscience which calls one to return from an inauthentic state of "fallenness" to a more authentic mode of being.[2] "Conscience discourses solely and constantly in the mode of keeping silent" (Jones 316). Authenticity is:

> anticipatory resoluteness. . . The authentic individual heeds the call of conscience when it summons him to be what he already is: temporal (finite) openness. By resolving to accept his mortality, the individual stops the egoistical self-objectification which had prevented him from being open for his possibilities. (Zimmerman xxiii)

Carmen desperately fills the silence with scolding, recollections, complaints, reproaches and grievances lest the call of conscience make itself heard. Her constant chatter allows her to avoid facing the reality of Mario's death and the reminder of her own mortality. Her inauthentic idle talk is a wall that she constructs over the course of five

hours in order to protect herself from an authentic self-awareness of her Being and of her own inevitable death.

The silence that Carmen cannot combat, however, is Mario's lack of response. In the course of her night-long monologue, Carmen talks in spirals, moving from one topic to another, but eventually returning time and time again to the issues that are her obsessions. By the end of her vigil, Carmen has confessed, first in bits and pieces, and then in detail, her near-infidelity which remained unconsummated not through her own choice, but only because of the intervention of Paco, her would-be lover. Carmen's tirade ends with her begging Mario to speak to her, to recognize her, to believe her, to give her some sign (Delibes 282-283). What might appear to be an appeal to authentic dialogue is no more than an elaborate self-delusion, an active avoidance of the reality of death, the finitude of human existence. Carmen's crescendo of pleas is interrupted by her eldest son's entrance into the study early in the morning. If there had ever been the possibility of Carmen's accepting the silence necessary for the voice of conscience to make itself heard, calling for a return to a more authentic mode of being, it is certainly no longer possible with the coming of daylight and the return to everyday tasks in preparation for Mario's funeral.

There can be no authentic dialogue between Carmen and Mario, of course, because Mario is dead. Yet, the nature of the monologue would remain unchanged even if he were alive. Carmen gradually reveals the character of their marriage and their lack of communication. In the instance of idle talk, one is not dealing with people as people, in the fullness of their humanity; they may as well be dead. Delibes has ironically presented this stark truth through the presence of Mario's corpse and the absence of Mario's participation in the would-be dialogue. Death is trivialized in Carmen's worldview in much the same way that religion is trivialized. The Bible verses Carmen reads to introduce each chapter stand in ironic contrast to the banal tangents that they inspire in her. Heideggerian ambiguity is at work here. "Ambiguity refers to the intense degree of concealment at work in inauthentic disclosedness" (Zimmerman 66). Carmen misapplies the Biblical quotes Mario has underlined; she is not open to their truths. Better to conceal them under the weight of pages of prattle.[3] The false dialogue established in the novel also serves to parody the traditional gender roles of the talkative woman and the silent man of action. Our hero is indeed silent, but his ability to act has been fatally curtailed.

The reader thus can not determine Mario's authenticity from his own discourse. Our only access to Mario's words is through the filter

of Carmen or as quoted by her. The construction of Mario as an authentic human being is accomplished only indirectly, by juxtaposition to Carmen's elaborated inauthenticity. Mario's authenticity is predicated on his absence. Mario lies in state, "de cuerpo presente." His corpse is present, but Mario the human being is absent. Delibes does not directly paint a portrait of authenticity. Rather, he constructs the binary pole Mario/Carmen, establishes their opposing views, attitudes, beliefs and values. Mario, the absent element, is judged as more authentic only in contrast with Carmen, who is present.

Interior monologue (or a mono-dialogue as Verhoeven would have it, using Unamuno's term) constitutes the formal aspect of idle talk (Verhoeven 61). The psychological aspect of idle talk is revealed in the series of associations which carry Carmen from one topic to another and back again. She gradually reveals more and more to the reader. The intellectual aspect of idle talk conforms to spontaneous expression which lacks irony or any other indication of self-consciousness. From the point of view of idle talk, what is important is the fact that Carmen's associations are chains of commonplaces, "words, words, words" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 2.2.194) that follow each other and unfold from each other and say nothing. They only reveal to the reader the vacuum in Carmen's heart and mind.

Carmen's twenty-seven chapters of monologue are framed by an opening and a closing chapter which go unnumbered. In the opening chapter, though the guests attending the wake have all departed, their voices still ring in Carmen's mind. The social formulas of politeness, the conventional nature of the greetings and interactions typical of paying one's respects at a wake crowd her mind. It is this idle dialogue among the guests of the wake which is transformed in the subsequent twenty-seven chapters into Carmen's idle monologue.[4]

The closing chapter provides Carmen with one last opportunity to engage herself in a more authentic relationship, this time with Mario, her eldest son. Yet, she brushes aside Mario's earnest and eager attempt truly to communicate about the inevitability of death and the need to look inside oneself. The other children awaken; Valentina arrives, and Carmen is grateful to slip into the everyday rhythm of living, more secure and tranquil in the inauthenticity of her life.

The widow speaks and piques the interest of the reader who is afforded the opportunity to peek through this window on her widowhood. Carmen fills the awe-full silence with idle talk lest she hear the voice of conscience calling her back to a more authentic way of being, lest she be drawn to affirm her own mortality with

resoluteness, until she can take up once more the comfortable inauthenticity of her everyday being.[5]

*Boise State University*

## NOTES

[1] For a summary of the treatment of this problem, see Verhoeven 72 note 3.

[2] Heidegger's word choices, such as "fallenness" and "conscience," though perhaps laden with religious connotation, should not be construed in that way.

[3] Smith catalogues chapter and verse of these biblical passages.

[4] See Roberts 267-280 for a detailed exploration of the idle talk of the anonymous voices in the opening frame. Her study, however, does not take the more radical step of considering Carmen's entire discourse as idle talk as I have argued here.

[5] I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Ciriaco Morón Arroyo and Francisco LaRubia Prado for their perceptive comments and valuable suggestions upon reading a draft of this text. Any shortcomings are, of course, entirely my responsibility.

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