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*Rural space and landscape in the narrative of Miguel Delibes:  
the example of the novel El disputado voto del señor Cayo  
(The disputed vote of mr Cayo)*

This article focuses on the presence of two conceptual references of importance to Geography, namely, space (particularly rural space) and landscape, within the narrative of Miguel Delibes, one of Spain's foremost writers and the author of a major literary output. The study is based on one of his novels, published towards the end of the 1970s, *El Disputado voto del señor Cayo* (*The Disputed Vote of Mr Cayo*). The novel's geographical setting is an area that was much loved by the author and very familiar to him: the north and north-west of the Spanish province of Burgos.

I. GEOGRAPHY, LITERATURE AND LANDSCAPE:  
A NECESSARY CONTEXT

The chapter penned by Professor Ortega Cantero in the *Atlas de los Paisajes de España* (2003: 30-52) cites a number of significant references to major historical milestones, which provide the context for explaining the relationships between space, the landscape and literature. For example, mention is made of Alexander Humboldt and his mid-19<sup>th</sup> century work *Cosmos*, referring to the possible interest from a geographical viewpoint of considering the images of nature and the landscape provided in literature and painting. There is also the contribution made by Professor López Ontiveros (1991), who highlighted the same arguments; or the one made by Lévy (2006), exploring the close ties between Geography and Literature. Olcina and Valero (2016) edited the publication of several musings on Geography and landscape in

Spanish and Latin-American literature; Valle Buenestado (2015) wrote about literary geographies and uncharted landscapes, and Carreras (1998) delved into the functions inherent to the use of literary texts in Geography. Ortega Valcárcel (2000: 293 and ss.) already highlighted that link between the style of Regional Geography and literature, referring to the geography of place as a narrative.

There are myriad examples than can be used as a reference to support these extremely close ties. The aforementioned study by Ortega Cantero provides a magnificent overview. It highlights, on the one hand, certain depictions of the landscapes through tales and travel books on Spain, such as the texts by Théophile Gautier (*Un Voyage en Espagne*, 1845), Víctor Hugo (*Voyage vers les Pyrénées*, 1843), Richard Ford (*A Handbook for Travellers in Spain*, 1845), and Charles Davillier and Gustavo Doré (*Voyage en Espagne* —two volumes—, 1862-1873). On the other hand, and together with these, Ortega Cantero likewise refers to other writers related to different movements and tendencies. Romantic authors, such as Gil y Carrasco on the landscape of El Bierzo in his novel *El Señor de Bembibre* (1844), and Rosalía de Castro and Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century); more “realistic” late-19<sup>th</sup> century authors, such as José María de Pereda, Emilia Pardo Bazán, and Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, and the images and portrayals of the landscape of Castile by Azorín, Machado, and Unamuno, continued in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Ramón Pérez de Ayala and José Ortega y Gasset. As regards the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, special note should be made of Miguel Delibes and Camilo José Cela. Yet besides these there are others

that also excelled in the narrative of the landscape and the unique nature of certain lands and districts: Ramón Carnicer (*Donde las Hurdes se llaman Cabrera*, 1964; *Gracias y desgracias de Castilla la Vieja*, 1978), Julio Llamazares (*El río del olvido*; *La lluvia amarilla*); José Jiménez Lozano (*Guía espiritual de Castilla*); Jesús Torbado (*Tierra mal bautizada: un viaje por Tierra de Campos*); Luis Mateo Díez (*Relato de Babia*); and Luciano González Egido (*Los túneles del paraíso*).

In recent years, Spanish geography has pursued a research stream focusing on authors and works that study the close ties between literature and landscape: Ortega Cantero (1992; 2003; 2007); Gómez Mendoza (2006); López Ontiveros and Naranjo Ramírez (2000; 2001); Tort i Donada (2007) and Carreras i Verdaguer (1995) turn their attention to the landscapes of Catalonia and the city of Barcelona; Suárez Japón (2002) to the travel writings of the poet Caballero Bonald; and Pillet Capdepón has focused on the landscape's literary image (2014; 2017), with his core reference being Don Quixote and La Mancha (2015).

## II. DELIBES AND HIS OWN PERSONAL AND LITERARY LINKS TO THE CASTILIAN LANDSCAPE AND COUNTRYSIDE

Miguel Delibes Setién (17-10-1920/12-3-2010) was Chair of Commercial Law at Valladolid University's Business School, a journalist (he worked for the newspaper *El Norte de Castilla*) and writer, bringing up the rear of the so-called "Generation of '36". He was a member of Spain's Royal Academy of the Language - *Real Academia Española de la Lengua*.

Delibes produced a very large body of work, and he was awarded numerous prizes during his lifetime. These included the Nadal Prize, in 1949; Spain's National Literature Award (1955); the Prince of Asturias Award for Letters (1982, ex aequo with Gonzalo Torrente Ballester); the Prize for Letters of the Regional Government, the Junta, of Castilla y León in its first edition (1984); the National Award for Spanish Letters (1991); the Cervantes Prize (1993); and the Nacional Narrative Award (1999).

Delibes's interest in the landscape was informed by several reasons and influences. On the one hand, his communion with nature and the countryside; he enjoyed hunting and the outdoors. This contact with the landscape and nature harked back to his youth. This reinforced his close ties with the landscape. Delibes spent several summers in Sedano, in the north-west of the province of Bur-

gos, in the area of Las Loras and the gorges of the Ebro and Rudrón rivers. This relationship with nature is likewise reflected in his knowledge of birds and plants that features on so many pages of his novels. It also comes from his contact with the culture of the rural world and his understanding of it. He was a person deeply rooted to his land, which he enjoyed and knew intimately, describing it with an extremely keen eye.

Delibes wrote in a highly emotive manner and used a very broad array of specific terminology. His coordinates are most specific: the world he lives, feels, knows and perceives at first hand. These coordinates are Castile, the countryside, the specific problems facing the region and the people living there; the Castilian landscape, its diversity, its people, its reality, and its towns and villages. He has and reveals a profound understanding of the land. He composes, describes and conveys his writings from the very heart of the landscape itself.

One of his books that best reflects the main features of this Castilian landscape as he understood it is *Castilla, lo castellano y los castellanos* (Castile, Castilian and the Castilians). This work is an ideological literary compendium of Delibes's thought process, in which he emphasises the more salient features of a sweeping profile of Castile: the landscape, the agrarian economy, religious fervour, submission, the countryside's architectural heritage, the void between the city and the peasantry, the mockery, the love of the land, the humanisation of animals, individualism, hard labour, feuds, hunters and fishermen, distrust and hospitality, fatalism, the Spanish sense of roguishness referred to as the picaresque, dances and songs, nicknames and special days, the rural exodus and, in short, the Castilian way of dealing with the world as it turns.

## III. GEOGRAPHY IN DELIBES'S NOVEL *EL DISPUTADO VOTO DEL SEÑOR CAYO*

### 1. THE NOVEL, THE IMAGE OF CASTILE AND ITS COMPONENT FEATURES

Delibes's novel *El disputado voto del Señor Cayo* was published by Ediciones Destino in Barcelona in November 1978. It is set in the first years of Spain's transition from the Franco dictatorship to democracy. It is the time of Spain's first free elections and, in fact, the specific year, 1977, is actually mentioned in the text itself. It was subsequently made into a film directed by Antonio Giménez Rico and first shown in 1986. All the film's locations were centred around the Sedano Valley: Cor-

tiguera —Cureña in the novel—, Mozuelos de Sedano, Orbaneja del Castillo, Huidobro, Poza de la Sal, and other nearby places in what is now the Hoces del Alto Ebro y Rudrón National Park. Some scenes were also shot in the city of Burgos itself. Delibes understands and defines the Castile described and portrayed in this novel as “*la Castilla adusta y mineral, la Castilla de transición entre la humedad norteña y la aridez de las tierras de pan y vino*”.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of the novel’s geographical side highlights those aspects and features of the landscape that appear reflected in it: ecological, aesthetic, ethnographic and historical, among others.

Three of the novel’s main characters constitute a group of activists belonging to a specific, progressive political party. They are clearly urbanites who as part of the election campaign have travelled to a sparsely populated rural area that is far from where they live. Once there, they meet the other main character, Señor Cayo, one of only three people living in the small village they visit. The novel passes through a series of different settings. It starts off in the city, in the head-offices of the political party the three individuals belong to, and it involves an initial contact, via a map, with the area they are going to visit; this is described at the end of chapter 2 in the novel. This is followed by their actual journey, which is described in detail in chapter 3 and part of chapter 4. The ensuing description covers their arrival and initial contact with the area in which the novel is set —continuation of chapter 4—. The following chapters (from 5 to 9), almost half of the novel, deal with the little village where the visit takes place and the conversation between the young activists and the old man, Mr Cayo, as well as with the surrounding landscape (characters, society, rural culture, etc.). In the final chapter, 10, the setting returns to where the novel began, the provincial capital.

## 2. GEOGRAPHICAL READING OF THE NOVEL.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE LANDSCAPE’S MAIN FEATURES AND VALUES AND DEFINITION OF THE SPACE IN WHICH THEY ARE REFLECTED

Over and above the trajectory this novel follows, its reading provides a very rich and diverse array of references, concepts, ideas and values concerning the rural world and the landscape throughout its narrative development.

<sup>1</sup> “The harsh, mineral Castile, the Castile that transitions from the damp north to the barren lands of bread and wine”.

### A) *About the territorial units and divisions of organisation*

The map indicating the places that have already been canvassed by politicians during the polling campaign provides the first terms describing the area and its structure: district capitals and administrative areas. The presence of these administrative and spatial units is accompanied, furthermore, by brief but significant descriptions of the settlement and dynamism of local communities.

### B) *Remoteness, emigration, abandon, ageing and rural decay*

Specific note should be taken of highly specific sociological features and references. The novel does so by relating these to a worrying dynamic: the rural exodus and shrinking population, as a reality that emerges several times in the novel. This problem has plunged the countryside into crisis, squeezing the life out of villages as they gradually empty, their collapse as models of a cultural system and way of life, the population drain and its ageing, as well as the suffering due to conditions of alienation and remoteness. This is the notion and image of an empty Castilian landscape that is disappearing. This situation prompts a profound sense of silence and solitude.

### C) *Pensions and gender issues*

The novel is set in 1977. A demographic backdrop such as the one described above naturally brings up the subject of pensions and Spain’s public welfare system, the *Seguridad Social*. Even in those days, politicians had already realised that pensions were clearly a vote-winner. Furthermore, tackling the gender issue was also considered a progressive step. Delibes includes it in the social background against which the novel takes place. It arises when the three political activists share out (and the subject is brought up by the woman in the group) the points on the electoral agenda that each one of them is going to speak about. The girl proposes talking about women’s equality, launching into a passionate speech that focuses on the struggle against the patriarchal social mindsets and structures that still persist in rural areas.

### D) *Knowledge of the rural milieu: placement, habitat, farming landscape*

Reading this book by Delibes, as with many others by him, provides a sound exercise in the revision of rural

geography. The novel *El disputado voto del señor Cayo* provides accurate and detailed descriptions of the way in which the countryside and the landscape are organised, including such classical and basic aspects as the location itself and the characteristics of the habitat. This understanding of the rural world at which Delibes excels also extends to his descriptions of the farming landscape and in particular to some of its features and manifestations. They provide a summary of agricultural systems and landscapes, with traditional terms and concepts that are widely used among farmers. Also present throughout the novel are agricultural small-holdings and morphology.

*E) The description of forms of relief and natural features in the landscape*

This constitutes another of the outstanding features and contents that are explicitly described in some of the magnificent passages the novel contains, conveying, at the same time as it does so, the feelings of some of the protagonists when they discover some of these natural values or those in the terrain. Delibes once again deploys a descriptive wealth and specific nuances in which the reader can picture the landscapes in their mind as they read the text. It contains, furthermore, a crucial reality, as is the actual terrain of these areas in the north-west of the province of Burgos: the high moorlands of Sedano and the deep gorges of the Ebro and Rudrón rivers. The sunken water courses and steep, imposing cliffs that flank them like towering walls of sheer verticality. This is the raw material that has been skilfully transformed by Delibes's style and language. The shape of the terrain and a powerful geomorphology.

*F) A diverse and changing landscape*

The sequences and alterations affecting the landscape traversed by the characters in the novel as they make their way from the capital into the north of the province (different landscape, changing vegetation, other colours and other ways of occupying the land) are masterfully reflected in the text. There is a perfect description of the transition from a landscape of plains and the river basin toward the intermediate foothills that end kilometres further on in a more mountainous terrain: landscapes of transition. Delibes uses them, what's more, to emphasise that there is an erroneous view of Castile as a single, uniform landscape, an important message contained in part of the novel.

### 3. A RICH VOCABULARY AND A UNIQUE LANGUAGE

Finally, one of the novel's most distinctive, albeit not exclusive, traits that other studies have already highlighted (Urdiales Yuste, 2012) refers to the terminology used. It consists of a vocabulary with a broad variety and wealth of terms. It is a veritable legacy that Delibes has bequeathed to us in all his writings. A further highlight is the actual expression of adjectives, precisely and carefully chosen to qualify places and objects. This is a narrative that penetrates the landscape and its people, dissecting and describing it through a masterful and expressive use of language. The novel has nearly 40 terms or words associated with different categories of the rural world and/or landscape, activities and trades, as well as geographical references,

## IV. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

This study's main purpose has been to provide a geographical reading of Miguel Delibes's narrative through a novel written towards the end of the 1970s: *El disputado voto del señor Cayo*. The aim has thus been to identify and highlight the values of Geography that appear over the course of its pages. There are also other references: the main reasons that prompt the author to focus on the landscape, the space, its forms, its component features, its typical problems, the changes it is undergoing, and the situation that rural areas are experiencing, such as the one described in this novel. A further aim has been to highlight the intimate relationship linking the author to the Castilian landscape and, in short, shed light on the very close ties existing between geography and literature, between literature and landscape. Delibes achieves this through his novel by describing a Castile that is much more diverse than the one appearing in standard, one-dimensional and reductionist images.

Delibes has contributed greatly and well to the dissemination and understanding of landscapes, to a concern for them, to the raising of awareness about rural areas and about the issues that define and characterise them. Hence the reason it may be said, with no exaggeration, that readings his works is truly a practical exercise in geography that merges different agents, aspects and dimensions. There is no doubt whatsoever that this is helped by the author's use of language, which is appropriate and expressive, unique, and most specific.