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THEMATIC REITERATION AND LINGUISTIC PREOCCUPATION IN  
DELIBES' LATEST NOVEL

-- Janet W. Díaz

Perhaps the most respected of all Spain's living novelists, Miguel Delibes is not a prolific author nor has he ventured too frequently into other genres. With a scant two dozen volumes to his credit, he has written primarily novels, travel and journalistic essays, and treatises on hunting. El disputado voto del señor Cayo (Barcelona: Destino, 1978) is his fourteenth novel, in addition to which Delibes has published two collections of brief narratives and a number of short stories still not collected in volume form. His total contribution to the genre is thus not exceptional in terms of quantity; it is in terms of quality that it must be appreciated. And Delibes's outstanding qualities--humor, satire, unsurpassed use of the language, the peculiar and uncompromising portrayal of Castile which is his hallmark--abound in this latest novel.

Published in November of 1978, Delibes's first fully post-Franco narrative treats Spanish politics more directly than any of his writing heretofore. Such openness may reflect to some extent the abolishing of censorship in December of the previous year; however, it is likely that most artistic gestation, perhaps even most of the drafting, preceded the censorship's demise. The question is ultimately moot, for Delibes's latest novel stands at

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FUNDACIÓN  
MIGUEL  
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For a complete list of works  
see the Miguel Delibes  
bibliography, New Orleans  
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considerable remove from the pornopolitical fad of Spain's last three years, differing in tone and intent from the plethora of titles exploiting long-repressed appetites for the erotic, the controversial and politically divergent. Not only is such commercialism foreign to Delibes, but his profound and lasting concerns transcend the ideological vogues of the moment.

Loosely constructed, in the fashion of his earlier novels of village ambient, El camino and Las ratas, and resembling especially the structural and temporal disposition of El príncipe destronado (wherein the day's activities provide a framing, a logical beginning and end for the essentially plotless narrative), El disputado voto del señor Cayo portrays essentially the events of one day's campaigning in a precise locale and a specific moment in time, some two weeks before Spain's general elections in June of 1977. Yet closer examination reveals that the novel deals only superficially with the elections themselves. The novelist's underlying preoccupation is the same as that in numerous other writings of the past two decades, the deleterious effects of short-sighted and misunderstood "progress" at the expense of rural areas and their human and natural resources.

As suggested by the title, politics is the ostensible but not exclusive theme of El disputado voto del señor Cayo. The spectacle of Spain's first electoral campaigns in four decades provides the background for a subtle new statement of Delibes's long-time concerns. Satirizing his compatriots' lack of political sophistication resulting in the circus atmosphere surrounding the elections of '77, the novelist offers a tongue-in-cheek

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portrait of the proliferating parties, blurred ideologies, election graffiti and plethora of local autonomy movements:

Poco más allá, la misma mano [anónima] había escrito con caracteres análogos, "Curiel, autonomía." Preguntó Víctor:

--¿No es Curiel el pueblecito ese de las salchichas?

El de la iglesia mozárabe?

--Ese--dijo Laly (pp. 44-45).

The specialized jargon of party headquarters and the campaign trail, liberally laced with obscenities, the brooding menace of violence between contending and hostile political organizations, and the highly visible presence of alcohol contribute to an ambience not found in this novelist's previous production.

The differences are more apparent than real, however. As implicit in observations heretofore, the elections constitute a point of departure, not an exclusive preoccupation, functioning rather as a new perspective from which to view problems and issues present in varying degree in Delibes's writing for nearly a quarter century. In El señor Cayo, the novelist echoes themes, environments and concerns of Las ratas, Viejas historias de Castilla la Vieja and Las guerras de nuestros antepasados, among his longer works of fiction, and the essay collections Vivir al día and S.O.S. Delibes's solicitude for the massive internal migration from backward and officially forgotten rural areas, the city-country polarity, the death throes of peasant culture and existence is, like politics, more visible in this latest novel, but tangibly present in all the earlier titles cited, as well as



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figuring to a lesser degree in some of the works on hunting, in the novelette, Los nogales, and by implication in those sections of La hoja roja narrated by Desi. Crucial preoccupations thus reflect Delibes's long-term engrossment with the plight of Castile's forgotten farms and towns, languishing economy and dwindling population. His vision of Castilla differs radically from both the writers of the Generation of 1898 and the government propagandists in the Ministerio de Información y Turismo.

Aspects of Las ratas are echoed in Cayo's marginal mountain village, an island bypassed by progress, some fifty kilometers from the main roads and further still from centers of population or culture. Not only did the central government cut off such towns when constructing railroads and other arteries of transportation; it frequently failed to provide electricity and communications. In order to reach Refico, the nearest town not largely abandoned, Cayo rides a burro, although

. . . hasta el 53, mientras hubo aquí personal, los martes bajaba una furgoneta de Palacios. Y, antes, hace qué sé yo los años, estuvo la posta. . .

- -Y ahora, ¿quién le trae el correo?

--¿Qué correo?

--Las cartas.

El hombre rompió a reír. --¿Qué cosas!--dijo. Y ¿quién cree usted que le va a escribir al señor Cayo? (p. 141).

Such services of state and local government as schools, water and sewer systems, paved streets and recreational facilities are likewise lacking. The nearest doctor is some fifty kilometers distant; as Cayo observes, "de uvas a brevas, si me da un mal me muero aquí como un perro" (p. 140). Accustomed to priva-





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tion, the old peasant laconically takes such neglect for granted; uncomplaining and resigned, he is unswayed by campaigners' claims that their party is "la opción del pueblo, la opción de los pobres" (p. 144). Disconcerted, wounded in his self-sufficiency, Cayo protests: --Pero yo no soy pobre.

Rafa se desconcertó. --¡Ah! --dijo--entonces usted, ¿no necesita nada?

--¡Hombre!, como necesitar, mire, que pare de llover y apriete la calor (p. 145).

The half-abandoned village of Las ratas, like the twin hamlets of Human and Otero in Las guerras de nuestros antepasados and the deserted towns of the present novel (Cayo's home, Cureña, Quintanabad, Martos) are aspects of a single reality, alluded to ("lo de siempre) in Víctor's campaign speech: "abandono secular, estructuras medievales" (p. 50). Located in "la zona de Corcuenda" (p. 35), they are "pueblos serranos, pueblos pobres, de costumbres ancestrales, que malviven de pequeñas hazas de cereal, frutales y miel" (p. 36). Their abandonment--Quintanabad is totally depopulated, Martos has four inhabitants and Cureña three--the result of prolonged internal migration, constitutes the single most important thematic nucleus of el señor Cayo, the major link between this novel and other writings where Delibes decries the desertion of rural areas and consequent disappearance of a once-sturdy folk culture.<sup>1</sup> A corresponding concern, the other side of the coin, is the city-dweller's ignorance of the facts of life beyond the urban confines.<sup>2</sup> Both are constants of Delibes since the days of his editorial crusades in El norte de Castilla in the late fifties and early sixties. The mass exodus from the countryside to the urban centers of Bilbao, Barcelona and Madrid, producing the 75-80% depopulation



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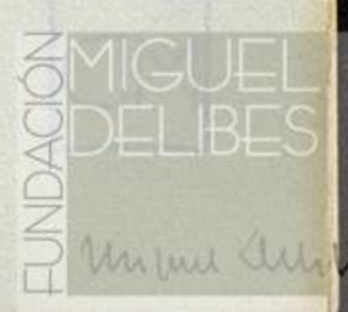
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of many comarcas, filled these cities with unskilled and unschooled migrants, totally unprepared for life in the twentieth century, "squatter" inhabitants of shanty towns such as that portrayed by Martín-Santos in Tiempo de silencio. Although his essays amply attest to his concern for these displaced people, Delibes has not thus far portrayed them novelistically in the urban setting.

As in Las ratas where many villagers purchased rodents from el tío Ratero in order to add meat to their diets, certain things eaten in Cayo's village are calculated to turn the delicate stomach: ". . . en esa casa, vivió la señora Laureana, la Saludadora. Nos quitaba las lombrices a los chiquitos partiendo una por la mitad y haciéndonosla comer frita, media antes del almuerzo y otra media a la hora de la cena" (p. 117). The squeamish may take heart in that the eating of fried tapeworms was strictly therapeutic.

Other anecdotes told by Cayo will likewise remind Delibes's devotees of Las ratas. In that novel, el Nini's family tree was complicated by his two grandfathers having cohabitated with the same woman, while his own father and mother were the offspring of this triangle. In Cureña, where the declining population reduced the options, there occurs the case of a widower who married his dead wife's mother, thus becoming, one supposes, his own father-in-law, and thereafter, upon siring a child by his former suegra, the brother-in-law of his son (p. 109). The priest's invention of tradition, "bajar la Virgen [de la ermita] la noche del Viernes Santo para que no se quedase sola" (p. 121) echoes the ingenuous credulity of the local population in Viejas historias de Castilla la Vieja, and recalls priestly interventions in El camino and Las ratas. Cayo's conversation is laced with anecdotes of the type

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abounding in these novels of village ambient and the conversation of Pacífico Pérez in Las guerras..., one of the most colorful having to do with the death of el Paulino, supposed seer who foretold his own death by reading what was in the cards for a date some seven years in the future. His certainty provoked a bet with el Bernardo, the tavernkeeper who was to pay for the funeral if Paulino won. On the evening of the day foretold, Paulino committed suicide (p. 122).

Lacking a closely-knit plot, the novel portrays one day in the campaign activities of a small group of party stalwarts--organizers and a pair of candidates. The party, probably left-leaning, is purposely not identified by name, and its ideology remains vague ("una alternativa progresista," p. 46), with relevant details limited to dissension with the Falange and the observation that Víctor, the party's candidate for diputado, has been a political prisoner ("encerrado siete de los últimos quince años" p. 47). With significant action reducible to the trip to Cayo's village, the visit there and return to the city, the novel's bulk is dialogue revelatory of the campaigners' psychology. Actually, there are two halves or distinct parts to the novel, although the novelist himself does not make the division. Of its 188 pages, the first 78 portray the environment of party headquarters and the trek to the village; the remainder, portraying the village and the anticlimactic return to the point of origin, offer an ironic mirror, with one "world" reflected in the other. The result cannot accurately be termed an esperpento, for no distortion is involved. Delibes simply juxtaposes two extreme variants of Spanish culture, its supposedly up-to-the-minute amateur politicians and almost medieval peasantry, with the outcome suggesting that the former



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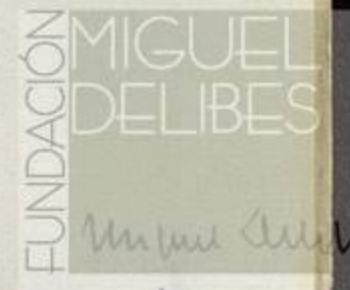


is a grotesque deterioration of the latter.

Whether deliberately or unavoidably constrained by his material, Delibes repeatedly assumes the role of costumbrista. The following is an excellent example, as Cayo describes the fiesta of the Octava de Pentecostés:

. . . bajamos todos a Refico en carros o en borricos, donde se tercié. Y a la puerta de la iglesia se subastan los roscos y los mojicones. Y lo que se saca, para la Virgen. . . De regreso de una de estas romerías, el año que llevé el pendón, o sea el 23, que ya ha llovido, nos comprometimos. Yo la aupé a ella al borrico y la dije, "Sube." Y ya se sabía, que así era la costumbre, si ella subía era que sí y si ella no subía era que no. Pero ella subió y para diciembre nos casamos (p. 137).

Cayo Fernández, "el señor Cayo" by his own styling, is one of three surviving residents in a little rural town which attained a modest importance in the seventeenth century, and boasts two churches and a 1000-year-old Romanesque hermitage, "de cuando los moros" (p. 99). The two remaining villagers are Cayo's wife --identified only by the pronoun, "She" is mute--and another man with whom Cayo is feuding. Several such small towns were described journalistically by Delibes in newspaper articles of the early sixties, some collected in Vivir al día, and one totally deserted village (Prádanos) appears in Las guerras... as the scene of Pacifico's erotic romps in the buff with Candi. Presumably, then, no invention or exaggeration was required in this case. Cayo introduces himself as the mayor of Cureña, but is everything from beekeeper to gravedigger, portero, cheesemaker, farmer and jack-of-all-trades. An anomaly in the twentieth century, he is a





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totally self-sufficient individual. He and his wife produce and process everything they use, without electricity, radio, television, newspapers, telephone, car or machinery, almost without contact with the world beyond (once a month he hikes to another isolated and languishing hamlet to chat with a peddler making a monthly trek to civilization.)

Cayo's independence of the mass media makes for some of the novel's best lines, for his only source of news is the monthly chat with Manolo on the 15th:

--Pues, usted me dirá, Franco murió el 20 de noviembre, de forma que se tiró usted cuatro semanas en la inopia.

--Y ¿qué prisa corría? .....

--De todos modos, al comunicárselo Manolo, algo pensaría Vd.

--¿De lo de Franco?

--Claro.

--Mire, como pensar, que le habrían dado tierra. Ahí sí que somos todos iguales (pp. 142-143).

The prevailing silence, given that Cayo's wife is mute and he and the other villager not on speaking terms, suggests profound philosophical implications, challenging the existential requirement of communication. Despite his laconicism, resignation and seeming self-sufficiency, however, Cayo is not totally indifferent or insensitive to his isolation. Were this the case, he would be considerably less sympathetic as a character, but Delibes manages with a **single detail** to suggest a world of nostalgia and solitude beneath Cayo's hermetic exterior. That detail concerns the clock on the steeple of the church in the deserted village square which Víctor notes with amazement is still running:



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--Y qué más cosas?

--De todos modos, si comunicáramos Manolo, algo vendría ya.

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That was the last time they spoke.

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--A ver, yo le doy cuerda.

--¿Para qué?

El señor Cayo se encogió de hombros. Sonrió:

--Llena,--dijo (p. 120).

While not idealized, eighty-three-year-old Cayo embodies the wisdom of experience, the vigor and health of frugal living, the virtues of hard work, self-reliance and simple integrity. His impact on the senatorial candidate (whose name, Víctor, may be ironic) is shattering, provoking a soul-searching which culminates in the question whether the "redeeming" representatives of the symbolic party--all parties--have anything worthwhile to offer Cayo and others like him. Imagin<sup>ing</sup> an eventual nuclear holocaust which would destroy more "advanced" forms of living, Víctor intuitively feels that those who survived would have to have the skills and self-sufficiency of the peasant: "El señor Cayo podría vivir sin Víctor, pero Víctor no podría vivir sin el señor Cayo. Entonces, ¿en virtud de qué razones le pido yo el voto a un tipo así. . .?" (p. 178)

Occasionally interesting as a linguistic document, the novel continues Delibes's preoccupation with the lexicon and syntax of rural Castile present in Diario de un cazador and further indulged in Las ratas and Las guerras. The sub-language of a specific group (in this case, semi-professional or amateur politicians) constitutes another linguistic focus: a concentration of references to the mass media in all its forms, surveys and polls, the nicknames and acronyms for dozens of political parties, slang and obscenities, the neologisms and jargon generated by the country's political fever. More interesting, more durable and more characteristic of the novelist are the expressions of señor Cayo<sup>3</sup> and

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--A ver, yo le voy a escribir.  
 --¿Para qué?  
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Delibes' own descriptions of Castilian flora and fauna,<sup>4</sup> often incorporating words taken from the rural dialect, in an admixture of more learned vocabulary with an accumulation of nouns of strictly local usage. The first view of the village offers several examples: ". . . el pueblo se apiñaba al abrigo de la roca, entre la fronda de las hayas, emergiendo del sotobosque de zarzamoras, hierbabuena y ortigas. La vaguada se remataba allí, en una abrupta escarpadura cuyas crestas hendían el cielo anubarrado y, en torno a las cuales, revoloteaban las chovas, graznando destempladamente" (p. 79). Hornillera, escriña, chiribitas, greñura, saúco, dujos, humeón, picorrelincho, cardancho, and perezosa are among the words or objects of daily use by Cayo which cause perplexity among the city visitors; similarly, Cayo's language includes verbs not found in the dictionary ("malrotaron," p. 97) or used differently than in the city:

--A esta azada hay que mangarla.

--Mangar, ¿es poner mango?

--Natural.

--En la ciudad, mangar es robar.

El viejo no se dio por aludido:

--Para mangarla, ¿sabe usted?, no vale un palo, ha de ser un enterizo.

--Un enterizo?

--El palo con su raíz, solo no sujeta (pp. 100-101).

Differences of greater magnitude than the linguistic separate Cayo and his visitors, however, and when Laly observes indignantly that it is intolerable that a man his age should have to work from dawn to dusk, his reaction suggests the gulf between the peasantry and politicians: --Ande--dijo al fin, en tono de soterrada protes-



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 --Mangar, ¿es poner mango?  
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 --En la ciudad, mangar es robar.  
 El viejo no se dio por aludido.  
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 va en enterico.  
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 --El pavo con su cola, solo no sujeta (pp. 100-101).

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ta--¿es que también va usted ahora a quitarme de trabajar? (p. 105). Unsatisfied by suggestions that a just society should support its senior citizens, Cayo notes that if he does not work, he has absolutely nothing to do with his time. It is not questions of dialect which lead him to observe, "Me parece a mí que no vamos a entendernos" (p. 107). Without mentioning the phrase, Delibes endows the epithet las dos Españas with new meaning.

Lacking the experimentalism of Cinco horas con Mario and Parábola del naufrago, Delibes's most recent narrative is in many respects a return to forms and concerns of earlier years, although the political motifs offer a highly visible updating and timeliness. Concentrating upon the political jargon and contemporary slang found most abundantly in the first four chapters, some early reviewers have perceived the novel as a largely unsuccessful foray into linguistic documentation and satire. This is to overlook the title's function as indicator of the emphasis intended by the novelist, and fails to appreciate Cayo himself, one of the most unforgettable characters Delibes has created. Deceptively simple in its brevity and minimum of rhetorical devices, El disputado voto del señor Cayo opposes two mentalities, the depersonalized urban and integral peasant, two aspects of Spanish reality which seem farther than ever from meeting.

--Janet W. Díaz

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Lacking the experimentalism of Cinco horas con Mario and Parábola del náufrago, Delibes's most recent narrative is in many respects a return to forms and concerns of earlier years, although the political motifs offer a highly visible updating and itself near. Concentrating upon the political jargon and contemporary slang found most abundantly in the first four chapters, some early reviewers have regarded the novel as a literary unsuccess. It is into linguistic documentation and satire. This is to overlook the title's function as indicator of the emphasis intended by the novelist, and fails to appreciate Delibes himself, one of the most successful narrative characters Delibes has created. Deceptively simple in its brevity and minimum of rhetorical devices, El disuado when el señor Cayo opposes two mentalities, the depersonalized urban and interior peasant, two aspects of Spanish reality which seem farther than ever from meeting.

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## NOTES &amp; REFERENCES

1. The reaction of the senatorial candidate upon first exposure to the deserted villages is "No hay derecho. . . a que hayamos dejado morir una cultura sin mover un dedo" (p. 159).

2. Peasant self-sufficiency and inventiveness astounds Víctor:

--Ese tío, (el señor Cayo) coño, es como Dios, de la nada saca cosas. (. . .)

Rafa volvió a reír.

--Estás traumatizado, macho. No es para tanto, joder. ¿Es que es la primera vez que ves a un paleta de cerca?

--Sí--reconoció Víctor: La primera (p. 158).

3. A particularly interesting example of Cayo's syntax: "Aquí contra menos somos, peor avenidos estamos" (p. 83).

4. Especially pp. 126 ff. Other excellent examples are found in the description of Cayo's home (133 ff.)

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NOTES & REFERENCES

1. The reaction of the senatorial candidate upon first exposure to the deserted village is "No hay detechno. . . a que ha- yano de jado morir sus cultivos sin mover un dedo" (p. 159).

2. Peasant self-sufficiency and inventiveness at work

--Ese tio, (el señor Cayo) coño, es como Dios, de la nada

... cosas. (. . .)

Esto volvió a salir.

--Ese tramitador, macho. No es para tanto, joder. ¿Ese

que es la primera vez que ves a un palato de cerca?

--Ese tramitador Víctor, la primera (p. 158)

3. A particularly interesting example of Cayo's syntax

"Real contra menos somos, por avandio estamos" (p. 63).

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