

‘‘Hemos ido a redimir al redentor’’: The Old ‘Paleta’ As Mentor in Miguel Delibes’ *El disputado voto del Señor Cayo* (1978)

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ABSTRACT:

El disputado voto del Señor Cayo, a 1978 novel written by Miguel Delibes, is constructed around a road trip, in which a candidate for a political party in the 1977 Spanish elections and two younger militants travel to a remote Castilian village in order to gain Mr. Cayo’s vote. In this essay I do a reading of the candidate’s journey into ‘deep Spain’ as an example of the ‘Hero’s Journey’ monomyth, and focus on the character of the old ‘paleta’, a naturally ‘wise old man’ whom the politicians try to ‘redeem’, only to find that they are the ones to be redeemed.

KEY WORDS:

El disputado voto del Señor Cayo, Miguel Delibes, myth criticism, masculinities, age and literature.

1. Introduction: Miguel Delibes, politics, and rural Spain

The year 1977 is very important in the recent history of Spain. The first free and democratic general election held in Spain since 1936, after almost four decades of Franco’s dictatorship, was held on June 15th of that year, to elect the Spanish Parliament of the Kingdom of Spain. Its aim was to elect a Constituent Parliament that was to draft a new constitution, which would lead to the culmination of the country’s peaceful transition from Franco’s dictatorship to a democracy (the ensuing years are known as ‘la Transición’). During the weeks and days prior to the elections, Spain lived, surprised and bewildered, the development of an electoral campaign: citizens attended multiple celebrations of rallies in which the candidates of each political party presented their propaganda; something which was totally new for many generations but, of course, not for the elderly, who had lived in a Republican Spain prior to the Civil war (1936-1939).

This is the historical and political background of *El disputado voto del Señor Cayo*,¹ a 1978 novel written by Spanish writer Miguel Delibes, which was adapted as a film with the same title, directed by Antonio Giménez-Rico.² The novel is constructed around a road trip, in which a candidate for the (supposedly) Socialist party and two younger militants travel to a remote Castilian village in order to convince its Mayor (there are only three inhabitants) to vote for their party in the upcoming elections.

Given its political context and its Castilian setting, the much-acclaimed novel has always been analyzed in political terms or, alternatively, in sociological terms, insofar as it raises the problem of the two Spains: peasant or rural Spain vs. urban and modern Spain. Indeed, these two elements that many studies have dwelt on are absolutely present in Delibes' novel. I do not intend to present a "state of the art" on the novel, but I will briefly mention a few scholarly essays, as examples to illustrate my point. To begin with the latter analytical tendency (socio-geographic approach), as Plaza Gutiérrez³ highlights, Delibes' coordinates are very concrete: Castile's rural world, its problems and the people of its villages. Thus, he focuses on the geographical dimension of *El disputado voto*,⁴ and emphasizes the most outstanding elements of its spatial characterization, as well as the diversity and richness of terminology provided by Delibes. Along the same lines, in her book-length study on Delibes, De la Puente states that Delibes' vision of the ruralscape is an agricultural or hunting vision in which Delibes does not write about the landscape, but from the landscape.⁵ As for the political approach, Raquel Fernández Cobo (2012) has written on how *El disputado voto* demystifies that period known as the Spanish Transition, on the grounds that the newly-forged politicians did not elaborate their programmes based on

¹ Miguel Delibes, *El disputado voto del Señor Cayo* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 2010 [1st ed. 1978]).

² Antonio Giménez-Rico, *El disputado voto del Señor Cayo* (1986).

³ See Juan Ignacio Plaza Gutiérrez, 'Espacio rural y paisaje en la narrativa de Miguel Delibes: el ejemplo de la novela *El disputado voto del señor Cayo*', *Ería: Revista cuatrimestral de geografía*, 39. 3 (2019), 265-283.

⁴ In the interest of economy, and to avoid confusions between the novel title and the main character, Mr. Cayo, I will henceforward refer to Delibes' novel as *El disputado voto*.

⁵ See Pilar De la Puente Samaniego, *Castilla en Miguel Delibes* (Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1986), 17.

moral principles but from deception and appearances.⁶ In a similar vein, Manuel Redero bases his analysis of the (filmed version of) the novel in how *El disputado voto* shows the post-Franco political change in Spain.⁷ Finally, Carmen Peña analyzes, from a feminist perspective, the patriarchal shadow of Franco's regime in this novel on the Spanish transition and its new democracy.⁸ Finally, one of the few exceptions to these two types of approaches to the novel is provided by Sheryl Lynn Postman, when she establishes parallelisms between *El disputado voto* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.⁹

In sum, most of the critical appreciations of *El disputado voto* place as the main protagonist of the novel either the Castilian landscape, or the political situation in Spain, somehow overlooking the crucial importance of Mr. Cayo, the main protagonist—an 83-year-old man—and his capacity to dismantle the existential grounding of the main “antagonist”; the 37-year-old political candidate, named Víctor Velasco. In this paper, however, I will do a reading of the candidate's journey into “deep Spain” as an example of Campbell's monomyth, and will focus on the figure of Mr. Cayo, a naturally wise old man—a sage, in spite of his rural background and his sociocultural condition—whom the younger visitors try to ‘redeem’, only to find that they are the ones who are redeemed by the primitive but honest wisdom of the old man.¹⁰ It is my aim to give full protagonism to the character of the old man to, somehow, counterbalance what Armengol has expressed when he says that, while age studies have concentrated on the very young (a reflection of Western culture's obsession with youth), gerontology and aging studies have recurrently

⁶ See Raquel Fernández Cobo, ‘La visión desmitificadora de la transición a través de *El disputado voto del señor Cayo*: un problema de lenguaje y ética’, *Tonos digital: Revista de estudios filológicos* 23 (2012), 1-18.

⁷ See Manuel Redero San Román, ‘El cambio político postfranquista en el cine de su tiempo: El disputado voto del señor Cayo’, in *La historia a través del cine: transición y consolidación democrática en España*, ed. Rafael Ruzafa Ortega (Universidad del País Vasco, Servicio Editorial, 2004), 23-50.

⁸ See Carmen Peña Ardid, ‘El (menospreciado) voto del Señor Cayo: la sombra patriarcal del franquismo en *El disputado voto del señor Cayo*, una novela de la Transición y un film de la democracia’, in *El relato de la Transición: la Transición como relato*, eds. José Luis Calvo Carilla, Peña Ardid, Naval López, Ara Torralba, Anson Anadón (Zaragoza: Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2013), 81-118.

⁹ See Sheryl Lynn Postman, ‘El domino del orbe de Caín en la contemporaneidad de *El disputado voto del Señor Cayo* de Miguel Delibes’, *Castilla* 28-29 (2003-2004), 219-240.

¹⁰ October 17, 2020 marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of Miguel Delibes. Let this essay be a further contribution to the dissemination of Delibes' work beyond national borders, especially important in the centenary of his birth.

overlooked analyses of older men, concentrating instead on older women, and failing to study the specificities of ‘older men as men’.¹¹

2. *El disputado voto del Señor Cayo* and Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth

As stated above, I will ground my analysis of Delibes’ novel, neither on its “local color” elements, nor on its geographical, political, or lexical regionalism, but on its transnational universalism. Francisco Umbral has written along these lines in his appreciation of the Castilian writer when he reminds us that literature, which has the capacity of revealing everything, has to display this by overcoming the limitation of a cultural dialect, of a national, concrete, restricted language, and many writers reach universality through localism. According to Umbral, ‘Miguel Delibes is a writer who oscillates between localism and universalism’ (n.p.).¹² In other words, he has often portrayed localism, but he has forced that limited code of the popular language of Castile to say universally valid things.

From this universalist view of Delibes, which I totally share, I propose a reading of *El disputado voto* applying the approaches of myth criticism, for I deem it a totally convincing way of approaching it in so far as myth criticism is committed to the investigation of enduring human needs and responses, as those presented by Delibes’ novel, as we shall see. However, while myth criticism often focuses on the young heroes or gods, in our present case, my focus will be placed on an often neglected figure in this type of framework; namely, the archetype of the “Wise Old Man”, as Jung calls it (elsewhere called the ‘Senex archetype’),¹³ as personified in Mr. Cayo. Jung did not formulate a specific stage theory of the human life cycle, but he did give us insights into the chronological features of the human life span. In his 1931 essay entitled ‘The Stages of Life,’ Jung used the metaphor of the sun sweeping across the horizon to characterize the life span,

¹¹ Josep M. Armengol, ‘Aging as Emasculation? Rethinking Aging Masculinities in Contemporary U.S. Fiction’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59.3 (2018), 1-12 (p. 1).

¹² Francisco Umbral, *Miguel Delibes* (Titivillus E-pub versión, 1970), n.p.

¹³ See Judith Hubback, ‘The Archetypal Senex’, *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 1996, 41, 3-18.

and the season of life when the sun starts to sink toward the horizon (what he called ‘the afternoon of life’), would be that of old age. He wrote:

A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life’s morning [...] In primitive tribes we observe that the old people are almost always *the guardians of the mysteries and the laws*, and it is in these that the cultural heritage of the tribe is expressed.¹⁴

As analyzed from this perspective, we shall read Mr. Cayo as ‘the figure of a healer or teacher of mankind’, as ‘the archetype of the Wise Old Man, the helper and *redeemer*’ for, as Jung put it, ‘when people go astray they feel the need of a guide or teacher.’¹⁵ Moreover, agreeing with Morgado and Pérez in that ‘it is not possible to be completely self-sufficient, to live outside the *polis*, only a god or a beast, as Aristotle said, would be capable of such a thing,’¹⁶ then Mr. Cayo, the old man who lives in total isolation in his Edenic, *a-political*, natural “kingdom” over which only he reigns (an “impossibility”, in realistic terms), is totally fit to be interpreted in symbolic and mythological terms. As such, the relationship Wise Old Man/Mentor – Hero/pupil will constitute the core of my analysis.

El disputado voto has a circular structure, divided in ten chapters, which can be structured into three sequences: departure from a provincial town (Chapters 1-2), journey to the small village of Cureña (Chapters 3-8), and return (chapters 9-10). In the last sequence, the scene returns to the beginning, the provincial town, thus closing the circle. An overview of the main events that take place in the three sequences will help us introduce our mythic analysis of the novel.

¹⁴ Carl Jung, ‘The Stages of Life’, in *The Collected Works, Complete digital edition*, eds. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler (Princeton UP, 1983 [first printing: 1957]), VIII, 2000-2011 (p. 2006).

¹⁵ Carl Jung, ‘Psychology and Literature’, in *The Collected Works, Complete digital edition*, eds. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler (Princeton U.P., 1983 [first printing: 1957]), XV, 4695-4702 (p. 4702).

¹⁶ Nuria Morgado and Rolando Pérez, ‘The Complicated ‘Colonization’ of Mr. Cayo: or Delibes’ Poetics of Critique and Irony for a (post)Modern Age’, in *Agorapoetics: Poetics after Postmodernism*, ed. Rolando Pérez (Aurora, CO: The Davis Group, Publishers, 2016), 141-165 (p. 156).

1) Departure: this first sequence constitutes the preparation. The setting is the headquarters of a political party in a provincial Spanish town, and the author uses it to introduce us not only to Víctor Velasco, the candidate to the elections (whom we shall consider the mythical ‘hero’ henceforward), but also to prominent members of the party, grassroots militants, and the electoral environment. This first part shows that the characters that populate the headquarters, from the last militant to Dani, the boss, are members of a hierarchical scale, and, therefore, they are flat characters whose individuality is almost annulled –in contrast with the absolute independence and individuality of old Mr. Cayo.¹⁷

2) Journey: the second sequence –the longest in the novel, which occupies the six central chapters–, is the journey of Víctor and two younger militants (Rafa and Laly) into what for them is an unknown world, represented by the remote village of Cureña, where they meet Mr. Cayo. At the same time, we get to understand how mistaken the political militants’ idea of rural environment is. Their encounter with Mr. Cayo will prove that the political message to be transmitted by the politicians holds no interest whatsoever in that environment, and that Mr. Cayo, on the contrary, without intending it, will give them ‘a lesson of life, of survival, of self-sufficiency, of individuality’ (García Velasco n.p.).

3) Return: after Víctor and Rafa get drunk at a canteen during the return trip, the leftist politicians return late at night to the party headquarters which they had left in the morning of the same day. In a state of ‘lucid drunkenness’ (Delibes 165)¹⁸ Víctor will understand that, after his encounter with Mr. Cayo, he will never be the same person.

So, the novel’s story –and the journey– thread through a time-span of barely twelve hours of an odd day prior to June 15 of 1977, but those hours become a life-changing experience for the hero (Víctor), for they encapsulate most of the structural elements found universally in myths,

¹⁷ See Antonio García Velasco, ‘*El disputado voto del señor Cayo: técnica narrativa, lenguaje y contemporaneidad*’, in Miguel Delibes. *El escritor, la obra y el lector*, eds. Enrique Baena Peña, Cristóbal Cuevas García (1992), n.p.; available at <https://www.homonosapiens.es/monografico-delibes-el-disputado-voto-del-senor-cayo-tecnica-narrativa-lenguaje-y-contemporaneidad/> (accessed 1 April 2021).

¹⁸ In some cases, short in-text citations from Delibes’ novel will appear in (my) translation, in the interest of a more fluid discourse.

dreams, novels and movies. They are known collectively as “The Hero's Journey”, and they were presented by American comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell in his best known book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). In narratology and comparative mythology, the Hero's Journey, or monomyth, is the common template of stories that involve a hero who goes on an adventure, is victorious (notice the name, “Victor”) in a decisive crisis, and comes home changed or transformed. Given that *El disputado voto* is constructed around a journey of discovery, I assume my critical choice is aptly justified. However, as stated above, it is my aim not to focus only on the young Hero's Journey in my application of the monomyth, but more particularly on the figure of the old man. I will not dwell on the specificities of Campbell's *Monomyth*, but will use as the methodological frame for my analysis Christopher Vogler's adaptation of Campbell's theory of the Journey of the archetypal Hero, as presented in his book *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*.¹⁹ To Vogler's adaptation, I will provide my own adaptation –and simplification– to fit the structure of Delibes' novel. After all, as Vogler states, ‘every storyteller bends the mythic pattern to his or her own purpose or the needs of a particular culture. That's why the hero has a thousand faces’ (7).

3. The “Hero's Journey” in *El disputado voto*

3.1. First Sequence: the Ordinary World, the Call to Adventure and Departure

Many stories take the hero out of the ordinary, mundane world and into a ‘Special World’, new and alien. Delibes presents the ‘Ordinary World’ as the urban headquarters of a political party, in which the hero, Victor, develops his profession. In the first part of the novel, in which the trip to the villages of the Castilian highlands is being prepared, the party's militants discuss ideas about the rural world that they consider dogmas. As it is a question of persuading the potential voters, they must consider that in Castile the peasants are suspicious and, as small landholders, conservative. They are anticipated as primitive and ignorant, and thus, winning their vote is

¹⁹ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Michigan, McNaughton & Gunn, Inc., 2007 [1st ed. 1998]). This book-length study dwells on twelve stages of the Hero's Journey, which I have necessarily compressed into three sequences, each of which includes various stages.

thought to be an easy task –‘a estos *paletos* con decirles que les vas a subir las pensiones y doblarles el precio del trigo, te los metes en el bolsillo’ (55, my italics). These rural folks do not deserve, in their view, the effort they will have to exert in traveling to their villages to convince or ‘redeem’ (162) them. However, the ideas that the urban politicians hold about those whom they call “paletos” could not be poorer.

According to Vogler’s template, many heroes are ‘wounded’: sometimes a hero may seem to be well-adjusted and in control, but that control masks a deep psychic wound (Vogler 92-94). In the case of Víctor, we learn that he lives in a world devoid of love and, most importantly, that he was a political prisoner for seven years, during Franco’s regime. His emotional wounds will be perceived as soon as the car trip starts, and he asks Rafa to play music in the tape-recorder. Tellingly, the song he chooses is a traditional zarzuela entitled ‘La del manojito de rosas’ that reminds him of his youth, and puts Víctor in a nostalgic mood, as preparation for his next stage.

After the presentation of the Ordinary World follows the ‘Call to Adventure’, when the hero is presented with a problem, challenge, or adventure to undertake. Vogler explains that the call to adventure may come in the form of a message or a messenger (99-106). In *El Disputado Voto* the “messenger” is Dani, the campaign organizer, who receives orders from above that every spot in the region must be approached, and every possible vote must be secured. We here perceive a first glimpse of ageism, as Dani warns them that ‘son pueblos de una emigración tan fuerte que apenas quedan en ellos niños y *viejos*’ (38, my italics). To this remark, Víctor replies: ‘pero los viejos también votan’ (38). And so, we learn that the hero will travel with Rafa, an imprudent 23-year-old student of Law; and Laly, an attractive young woman, divorced, and mother of two children. The designed itinerary will constitute a journey full of reflections and revelations when they come across the ancestral wisdom of the “wise old man”, Mr. Cayo, in the upcoming sequence.

3.2. Second sequence: Crossing the Threshold to the Special World, Encounter with the Mentor, Tests, the Inmost Cave, the Ordeal.

Now the hero finally commits to the adventure and fully enters the Special World of the story for the first time by crossing the ‘Threshold’ (Vogler 127-186). In *El Disputado Voto*, the first Threshold appears as the three militants leave the city behind and start approaching the Special World of rural Castile. They marvel at the beauty of the natural landscape which, only some fifty miles from their urban life, appears to them as a foreign and an idyllic realm that resembles the Red Canyon:

La carretera se rizaba como un tirabuzón. [...] A la derecha, el terreno, encendido asimismo por las flores de las escobas, se desplomaba sobre el río, flanqueado de saúcos y madre selvas y, una vez salvado, volvía a remontarse en un pliegue casi vertical, exornado, en las cumbres, por extrañas siluetas de piedra erosionada que resaltaban contra la creciente luminosidad del día:

—¡Joder! El Cañón del Colorado —exclamó Rafa (75).

Such is the excitement they feel under the magic spell of this newly discovered world that they get out of the car to admire the river, and Rafa and Víctor play, like children, throwing stones into the water. That is, upon crossing the threshold to the Special World, the two men become “children”, and learn to see the magic in every “leaf of grass”, with a Whitmanesque intensity.

Still under the spell of the discovery, our three voyagers finally meet Mr. Cayo. We have reached the stage that Vogler calls ‘Encounter with the Mentor’ (117-126). The relationship between hero and Mentor is one of the most common themes in mythology, and one of the richest in its symbolic value. It stands for the bond between parent and child, teacher and student, god and man. And indeed, the figure of the old man Mr. Cayo is presented by Delibes as a father, a teacher, and even a god. The “wise old man” is often seen to be in some way “foreign”, that is, from a different culture, nation, or occasionally, even a different time, from those he advises. In extreme cases, he may be a liminal being, such as Merlin, who was only half human.²⁰ In some

²⁰ See Analytical Psychology, ‘The Wise Old Man: Archetype Anatomy’ (June 2019), available at <https://www.envisionyourevolution.com/analytical-psychology/the-wise-old-man-archetype-anatomy/1795/> (accessed 15 April 2021).

respects, this is the outworldly image that the three visitors perceive the first time they see the old “paleta” who greets them. Before describing Mr. Cayo, let us go back to Francisco Umbral, and to how he describes Delibes’ “paletos”. The word has difficult translation into English, besides “peasant”, “yokel”, or “bumpkin”; but none of these words captures the full meaning of a “paleta” as Delibes portrays this human type in some of his novels, with full respect and admiration. After his first “paleta” in *El Camino* (1950), Delibes developed and refined the image of this rural peasant in subsequent novels (*Las Ratas* -1962- stands out) until the concept of the yokel became gradually enriched. A Delibeian “paleta” is not only the picturesque outline of a rural man: he is a full human being: ‘the human protagonist, all too human, of every true novelist’ (Umbral, n. p.).

Chapter five marks the entrance of the “Mentor”; who is a “paleta” as much as he is an old man. We learn that Mr. Cayo is married, and that he has two children who left the village long time ago in search for a better life in Bilbao (here, the problem of migration from rural to urban spaces, and the beginning of what today is known as “la España vaciada” are tackled by Delibes).²¹ He is a man of few but pertinent words, who shows an innate politeness in his demeanor. He introduces himself as the village Mayor (thus, the authority status of the Mentor is self-evident) and shows his hospitality at once, inviting his visitors to follow him around the village, and to partake of his daily activities. The hero and his companions marvel at how Mr. Cayo relates to the bees, as if they were his equals in the Natural world they share, and Víctor ‘possessed by a childlike joy’ (94) becomes the young pupil, willing to learn from Mr. Cayo’s calm voice, which ‘took on a noble, *professorial* accent’ (90, my italics). Once across the First Threshold, Vogler explains (135-143), the hero naturally encounters new challenges and tests, and begins to learn the rules of the Special World. The first challenge appears when Víctor tries to communicate his worn-out political propaganda, and begins to understand the uselessness of such empty messages for this old “Merlin”:

²¹ On this issue, see, for example, Fernando Collantes and Vicente Pinilla’s document ‘La verdadera historia de la despoblación de la España rural y cómo puede ayudarnos a mejorar nuestras políticas’ (DT-AEHE 2001, January 2020), available at <https://www.aehe.es/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/dt-aehe-2001.pdf> (accessed 30 March 2021).

[...] las elecciones del día quince, son fundamentales para el país.

—Ya —dijo lacónicamente el viejo.

—O sea, que es una oportunidad, casi le diría “la” oportunidad, y si la desaprovechamos nos hundiremos sin remedio, esta vez para siempre.

El rostro del viejo se ensombreció. Parpadeó por dos veces. Se tomó un poco de tiempo antes de preguntar:

—Y *¿dónde vamos a hundirnos*, si no es mala pregunta? (85-86, my italics).

After Mr. Cayo’s simple and spontaneous reply ‘where are we going to sink?’ the trained and eloquent political spokesman becomes speechless. This will only be the first time in which, without ever pronouncing any explicit sentence in that direction, the old man indirectly and tactfully expresses his lack of credibility in politicians, and in their grand but hollow words and promises only aimed at gaining a vote. When Mr. Cayo directs his visitors to another part of the village, Laly discovers a flower on the way. She plucks the wild flower, and when she asks what type of flower it is, the old man says: ‘el saúco es, la flor del saúco. Con el agua de cocer esas flores, sanan las pupas de los ojos’ (88). Mr. Cayo’s shaman-like, ancestral medical knowledge silences Laly, who gazes at her friends and can only utter: ‘¿Te das cuenta?’ (88). The elderberry flower, we will later understand, becomes one of the many symbols that will represent and transmit the old man’s “credos” that will change Víctor’s understanding of the world.

‘The new rules of the Special World must be learned quickly by the hero’, continues Vogler (139). So, having learned that political chit-chat is “out worldly” in the Mentor’s world, the politicians next learn, again through another flower, that everything in Nature exists for a reason. This time, they encounter a mallow:

—¿Son malvas?

—Malvas son, claro. [...] La flor ésta es buena para aligerar el vientre.

Dijo Rafa burlonamente:

—¡Joder! En este pueblo *todo sirve para algo*.

—Natural —replicó el señor Cayo reanudando la marcha—: *Todo lo que está, sirve*. Para eso está, ¿no? (112, my italics).

But there are yet more lessons to learn from the old Master. In their wandering around every corner of the small village, Mr. Cayo will narrate past events and anecdotes from the village (which once had as many as 47 inhabitants!) and the villagers and, when Rafa asks the old man what will become of him when he is ill, Mr. Cayo respond with another of his *sententiae*, which seems to have been taken from Locke's theory on Natural Law:

—Y, ¿qué pasa si usted enferma mañana?

—¡To! Ella me cuidará.

—Y, ¿si es ella la que enferma?

—Mire, para eso están los hijos [...] *¿Es de ley, no?* —apuntó tímidamente—: Si uno miró por ellos cuando no podían valerse, justo es que miren por uno cuando uno se quede de más (107, my italics).

The afternoon is running out and the younger companions tell Víctor that they should head back to the party's headquarters before it gets dark. Víctor, awed at what he is seeing and experiencing, is reluctant to leave Mr. Cayo's company, and observes him while he takes a hoe and begins to dig small holes in the ridges of the hills. He works at a leisurely but active and regular pace. Víctor addresses the Mentor:

—Usted nunca tuvo prisa, ¿no es cierto, señor Cayo?

—¡To! Y ¿a cuento de qué iba a tener prisa? (104).

What Víctor understands now is that time, as we know it, does not exist in the Special World; that life only exists to be lived; that hard work is not necessarily a punishment, but an occasion for joy and fulfilment. The narrative approaches the next stage: 'the most dangerous spot in the Special World, the Inmost Cave' (Vogler 143-155). Heroes, having made the adjustment

to the Special World, now go on to seek its heart: ‘this is the Approach to the Inmost Cave, where soon they will encounter supreme wonder and sometimes terror’ (Vogler 143). Translating the myth to our novel, it seems more than a coincidence that Delibes has Mr. Cayo take his visitors to an actual cave:

Rebasada la angostura de la boca, el antro se ensanchaba en una *caverna* espaciosa, suelo y techo de roca viva, rezumante de humedad. [...] Al fondo, se divisaban las sombras torturadas de las estalactitas y, en las oquedades del suelo, huellas de fuego y, en torno a ellas, diseminados, troncos de roble a medio quemar, pucheros desportillados, latas vacías y unas trébedes herrumbrosas (113, my italics).

It is in the cave that the younger politicians come to understand the horrors of the Spanish civil war that culminated with the establishment of the Franco regime, for, as Mr. Cayo recalls, the neighbors would seek refuge in this natural hideout from the attacks of the militia, and would gather there for over two weeks, to keep themselves safe from the shootings and bombarding. Mr. Cayo recounts how the two fighting factions had killed some neighbors, and this revelation chills Laly in particular, who ‘se cogió los hombros, cruzando los brazos sobre el pecho, como si sintiese frío’ (115).

‘Emerging from a cave is another hazardous passage, climaxed with the feeling of relief upon emerging into sunlight and open space once again’, Vogler explains (343). So, after the trio is confronted with death and the horror of war in the cave, they come out to the surface in need of some sense of spirituality. Mr. Cayo will take them to the millenarian village church, but before entering the architectural prodigy, Víctor must confront yet another self-discovery, again incited by an element in nature, a cuckoo (‘cuclillo’) that Mr. Cayo defines as a ‘bad bird’ because it lays its eggs in some other smaller bird’s nest, so that its chicks be nourished. The conversation between the old Mentor and his pupil continues thus, after Víctor creates a simile between the cuckoo and ‘some men’:

—Los amos y los jefes.

—Eso.

—Pero usted es jefe, ¿no?

—¿Yo? De ninguna manera, señor Cayo.

—Pero va para jefe, ¿no?

Víctor se turbó: —No... no es exactamente eso [...] Añadió Víctor: En realidad yo voy para Diputado.

El señor Cayo se rascó el cogote:

—Y éstos, ¿no son jefes?

Víctor bajó la voz, como si intentara hurtar sus palabras a los oídos de sus compañeros.

Dijo:

—En cierto modo, entiéndame, un diputado es un hombre elegido por el pueblo para representar al pueblo.

—*Ya* —dijo el señor (127-128, my italics).

We clearly perceive in this dialogue how Mr. Cayo's brief, ironic response, 'Ya' contains an uncontested truth that Víctor begins to comprehend: for the wise old man, politicians are just 'jefes'; cuckoos who lay their eggs in their voters' nest, with the intention of 'feeding' themselves for free. Víctor's belief in his political world begins to crumble down.

The hero must still undergo another test before facing the final 'Ordeal'. That test takes place at Mr. Cayo's house, where they spend some time talking about life, while eating home-made cheese and pastry, and drinking wine. This meeting around the "last supper" brings another discovery for the urban group: Mr. Cayo does not have a TV; not even a radio. The militants express their astonishment:

—¿Y radio? ¿Tampoco tienen radio?

—Tampoco, no señor. ¿Para qué?

Rafa se alteró todo:

—¡Joder, para qué! Para saber en qué mundo viven.

Sonrió socarronamente el señor Cayo:

—¿Es que se piensa usted que *el señor Cayo no sabe en qué mundo vive?* (137, my italics).

Always referring to himself in the third person, this old wise man who always knows ‘the world he inhabits’ teaches them another lesson, this time about the uselessness of technological advances in the Special World, which remains uncontaminated by the petty interests of modern urban life. The culmination of the Mentor’s lessons comes when the political aim that had taken them there is finally introduced by Rafa, when he asks Mr. Cayo who he intends to vote for. Mr. Cayo keeps silent, and Rafa initiates his campaigning, explaining the old man that their political party represents ‘al campesino. Mis amigos son los candidatos de una opción, la opción del pueblo, la opción de los pobres, así de fácil’ (143). The scene is concluded with Mr. Cayo’s perplexing remark, ‘—Pero yo *no soy pobre*’ (143, my italics).

This epiphanic moment, marked again by one of Cayo’s *sententiae*, ‘but I am not poor’, leaves Víctor convinced that his “victory” will not be gaining a vote (by now, he has given up on mentioning any further political issues), but having gained an understanding of what really counts in life: simplicity, self-reliance, strong ethical beliefs, and a communion with Nature and what it has to offer; the lessons he has learned from the wise old man. The reader has also come to understand the universalism of Delibes’ localism, in that the old man is a ‘transcendental self,’ in the Emersonian sense. If one refers to the seminal essays written by the American Transcendentalist philosopher *Nature* or ‘Self Reliance,’ the applications flow endlessly. As known, ‘Self-Reliance’ (1841) contains the most thorough statement of one of Emerson’s recurrent themes: the need for each individual to avoid conformity, and follow his own instincts and ideas, rather than adhering to public norms and societal progress. Anyone is capable of achieving happiness, simply if they change their mindset, Emerson defends. ‘Nothing is at last

sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have *the suffrage* of the world.’²² Emerson’s use of the word “suffrage” could not be more pertinent in our electoral context. After all, the Mentor is teaching his pupil that the only “suffrage” he should be interested in is that of “absolving” himself, and not gaining votes for a political party that could be as deceitful as any other. Moreover, Delibes presents the old Mentor Mr. Cayo as spontaneous, free, independent, with an intimidating confidence, wild, “raw” but judicious, indifferent to conventions; naturalness alive, always disregarding decorum. In other words, Mr. Cayo would be an Emersonian “Child of Nature”, turned into an “Old Man of Nature”, but who sees the world around him with the eyes of a child. He does not suffer, like the city dwellers, from ‘ophtalmia’, but has a ‘transparent eyeball’, an eye that takes in all that nature has to offer (Emerson intends that the individual become one with nature, and the transparent eyeball is a tool to achieve that).²³ Likewise, we could say that Mr. Cayo’s Cureña is the Castilian equivalent to Henry David Thoreau’s Walden Pond, where the other American Transcendentalist thinker lived a life of total self-sustenance for over a year, to prove to his fellow citizens that total communion with Nature was not only possible, but a gift for human beings, away from the ‘lives of quiet desperation’ that the ‘mass of men’ suffer in the city.²⁴

So, transformed by Mr. Cayo’s philosophy of life, Víctor is now ready for the Return phase, but he must first confront the ‘Ordeal’ (Vogler 155-174). The ‘Ordeal’ in *El disputado voto* happens just before the three militants leave Cayo’s world. The desired vote is more “disputed” than ever when a group of three militants of the rival party (Falange; an extreme right-wing party) come into the village, reclaiming the same “trophy”. Mauricio, the leader, and his gang intimidatingly confront Mr. Cayo and say: ‘arreglaremos esto’ (149). The old man now

²² Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self Reliance’, *American Transcendentalism* web, 1841, n. p.; available at <https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/selfreliance.html> (accessed 31 March 2021).

²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, *American Transcendentalism* web, 1836, n.p.; available at <https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/nature.html> (accessed 31 March 2021).

²⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, *The Project Gutenberg eBook of Walden, by HD Thoreau*, 1854, n. p.; available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm> (accessed 31 March 2021).

produces another of his mantra-like categorical responses: ‘Roto no está’ (149); which increases the tension to a point in which the youngest *falangista* becomes insolently disrespectful in his address to Mr. Cayo, and Víctor comes in his defense:

—¿Oíste, Goyo? Al candidato le desagradan nuestros modales, va por el voto del viejo —se encaró con Víctor y su voz fue subiendo de tono—. Pero para conseguir el voto del viejo debes decirle *toda la verdad*. O sea, que al día siguiente de ganar las elecciones le prenderéis fuego a la iglesia del pueblo y le pegaréis cuatro tiros junto a la tapia del cementerio. Eso es lo primero que debes decirle al viejo (150, my italics).

The “sage” is always a seeker of truth and, having revealed his dogmas to the hero, Víctor’s ‘whole truth’ is now of a totally different nature, so he is determined to protect his now humiliated and belittled Mentor from the enemy. The ‘battle’ in which the hero ‘faces the possibility of death’ (Vogler 15) follows:

El muchacho alto se volvió a Víctor con el otro engomado y se lo restregó repetidamente por la cara al tiempo que le propinaba un rodillazo en los testículos. Todo fue como un relámpago. En la mano, casi invisible, de Goyo, apareció una cadena, la levantó y *fustigó por dos veces, duramente, el cuerpo caído de Víctor* [...] Le temblaban las manos, y los muslos se plegaban sobre el bajo vientre, como protegiéndolo. Su rostro estaba lívido (152, my italics).

This display of unnecessary and brutal bellicosity that was so often practiced by the extreme right militants in the 1970’s in Spain is a clear case of ‘the connection of hegemonic masculinity with militarism and violence.’²⁵ As explained by Connell, ‘hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various *subordinated* masculinities as well as in relation to women’ (182, my italics) so, it comes as no surprise that three robust young men try to attack a weaker old man (and ‘subordinated’ from a classist and ageist point of view, since Mr. Cayo is, after all, only an old “paleto” in their eyes), and end up whipping his defender, to prove their

²⁵ Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 155.

superior masculinity. The now physically wounded hero must return to the Ordinary World. But, as Vogler puts it, heroes don't just visit death and come home. No one can go through an experience at the edge of death without being changed in some way. After crossing this zone, which is often the borderland of death, 'the hero is metaphorically reborn and nothing will ever be the same' (Vogler 159). A reborn Victor is now ready for the last sequence: the Return.

3.3. Third sequence: Return with the Elixir, Ordinary World.

Before departing, the wounded hero addresses his old Mentor with the words 'Volveré a verle' (154). He is now ready to return to the Ordinary World, but the journey is meaningless unless, in Vogler's words,

[The hero] brings back some Elixir, treasure, or lesson from the Special World [...] It may be a great treasure like the Grail that magically heals the wounded land, or it simply might be knowledge or experience that could be useful to the community someday (Vogler 18).

The metaphoric 'Elixir' for Víctor is encapsulated in a sentence that now becomes his mantra, and that he will repeat various times in the next two chapters: 'hemos ido a redimir al *redentor*' (162, 167, 171, 172, my italics). In the Christian tradition, God sent his incarnate son, Jesus Christ, to "redeem" the world by dying in the cross. And, so, Delibes' biblical allusion illuminates the mythical richness of his apparently simple story. The old man is a God-like figure, a *redeemer*, who now sends his "son" to the world. In order to carry out his Mission, the son must be "crucified". As a matter of fact, the likening of Mr. Cayo to God is explicitly expressed by Víctor twice, when he says upon their return to the headquarters:

— Ese tío, coño, *es como Dios*, de la nada saca cosas (156, my italics)

[...]

- *Él es como Dios, sabe hacerlo todo, así de fácil. Y ¿qué le hemos ido a ofrecer nosotros?*
[...] Palabras, palabras y palabras... Es... es lo único que sabemos producir (173, my italics)

In this context, the “last supper” scene before the return, at Mr. Cayo’s humble home (mentioned above), regains resonance. Still, we readers are left in a conundrum about Víctor’s “crucifixion” to redeem the world in the name of the Father, even if the description of Víctor’s wounds points in that symbolic direction. When the three militants arrive at the party’s headquarters, Lily proposes to take Víctor to her place, for he is severely drunk (they had stopped at a canteen on the way back, and Víctor and Rafa had drunk too many shots of brandy), lest some journalists may see the candidate in such a compromising condition on the day prior to the elections. In the presence of the boss, during a scene in which Dani and the younger militants are gathered around a wounded Víctor lying on the bed, Delibes provides this totally open ending to the novel:

[Víctor] tiró violentamente de las puntas de la camisa, saltaron dos botones y dejó al descubierto su pecho *cruzado por dos costurones sanguinolentos*. Alzó sus ojos melancólicos y añadió:

—Esto no tiene remedio, Dani, es como una maldición (185, my italics).

It must be said at this point that both worlds -the Ordinary and the Special Worlds- are flawed vis-à-vis women. As said, when Laly is introduced in the first part of the novel, we learn that she is a feminist activist, divorced from a Senator and mother of two, who holds a degree in Math. Still, she is ‘called to adventure’ because she is ‘lo más decorativo de que disponemos, y muy inteligente; lo único que tiene que hacer es dejar, por una vez, su feminismo a un lado’ (40). In fact, younger Rafa constantly displays his machoist testosterone in the way he talks to and about Laly, infantilizing her with comments of the type ‘esta niña [...] cada día está más buena’ (27); and even the boss disrespects her stature as a woman, and considers her an object of desire: ‘¿Te has fijado cómo está esta criatura? Tiene unas nalgas que son un reto para el futuro’ (31).

Moreover, Dani advises her to leave her feminism aside, since ‘hablar de movimientos de liberación en la montaña resultaría grotesco’ (40). So, in the city scape not only are we facing a wounded hero, but also a wounded society, for which women are just ‘decorative things’. Morgado and Pérez argue that Laly ‘shares a space with men that would have been incomprehensible and difficult, if not impossible, to achieve during the culturally “medievalist” years of Franco’s dictatorship’ (152). That assertion is only partly true, for the fact of the matter is that the space that the two men and the woman share displays everything, but equality. Not only is she the one who brings coffee to the men while in the party’s headquarters (26), but once the journey gets started, when the three militants are distributing the topics they should tackle in their campaigning, Laly says she wants to defend equality for women, but is immediately dissuaded by Victor, and encouraged to talk about ‘el derecho a la cultura’ (55); that is, a “minor” issue, in his manly mentality.

If Laly’s feminism is systematically silenced in the Ordinary World, Mr. Cayo’s wife, the only female inhabitant of the Special World, neither hears nor speaks. Her invisibility is the only visible aspect of the old rural woman, who is not even invited to join them at the supper table in her own home, to eat the food she has cooked: ‘la vieja, que se había sentado en una sillita de paja, *un poco apartada*, orilla de la alacena, les observaba, inmóvil’ (135, my italics). She is a muted ghost whose only role is that of the nurturer or the care provider for the Mentor and the hero. As Simone de Beauvoir would put it when talking about the *othering* of the female subject, the man is considered essential, absolute, and transcendent; the woman is inessential, incomplete, and *mutilated*.²⁶ Besides the “mutilated” Mrs. Cayo, the role of the “other” is also performed by the modern, intelligent, urban woman, who acts as the two men’s caretaker when they get drunk on the journey back, and who becomes Víctor’s nurse, in her own house, when the hero is wounded. Strongly masculinist, there is no room for women in the “Hero’s Journey”, outside their traditional nurturing roles (De Beauvoir’s ‘nurturing, self-sacrificing female’, 105). One can only

²⁶ Simone De Beauvoir, *El Segundo Sexo: Los hechos y los mitos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1987 [1st. ed. 1949]), 140.

agree with Dana Heller when she states that in Campbell's view, 'women are accessories for the male's heroic adventure', and that,

As the male hero of Campbell's monomyth undergoes trials and moves toward the center of knowledge, woman may *assist* or hinder his progress; she appears as the mother whose admonitions the hero must ignore, *the wife who remains silently steadfast and heedful*, or the maiden who becomes a bride and a trophy for the hero.²⁷

In similar lines, if translated to the real world, Matthew Gutmann has argued that,

Even a cursory review of cross-cultural studies of men and masculinities could result in the depressing conclusion that men are dominant in most if not all societal spheres in most societies today and historically, and therefore that there must be something essentially human (and even more fundamentally, something biological) about unequal gender relations if there is such a common pattern.²⁸

In 1977, and in spite of the move to a democracy, Delibes implies, Spanish society is very far from being egalitarian.

Returning to the last scene in the novel with a wounded Víctor showing his bloody scars, whether he is wounded to death or not is not so important. What is crucial is that the hero has returned back to the Ordinary World with the 'Elixir' from the Special World, 'something to share with others, or something with the power to heal a *wounded land*' (Vogler 215, my italics). As said, the Elixir in *El disputado voto* is, of course, metaphoric. But it is also real, if we take into account that the brandy (an elixir, after all) that Víctor consumes before arriving home causes in him a 'lúcida borrachera' (165) that will prompt him to voice, in front of the insensitive politicians who inhabit the "wounded land" of the Ordinary World two uncontestable truths. On the one

²⁷ Dana A. Heller, *The Feminization of Quest-Romance* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990), 2 (my italics).

²⁸ Matthew Gutmann, 'Alternative Cultures of Masculinity: An Anthropological Approach', in *Alternative Masculinities for a Changing World*, eds. Angels Carabí and Josep M. Armengol (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 51-62 (p. 51).

hand, his lucidness makes Víctor imagine a hypothetical apocalyptic situation in which one day the Americans drop a bomb that kills everyone but Mr. Cayo and himself. Here is how Víctor envisions such a futuristic situation:

Pues bien, si eso ocurriera, yo tendría que ir corriendo a Cureña, *arrodillarme ante el señor Cayo* y suplicarle que me diera de comer, ¿comprendes? —casi sollozaba—: El señor Cayo podría vivir sin Víctor, pero Víctor no podría vivir sin el señor Cayo. (175, my italics).

The old man, for the now transformed hero, is a God he has to kneel before in reverence and in need. This thought is strengthened by his second “lucid” discovery, which takes us back to one of the previous epiphanic moments that occurred in Mr. Cayo’s village, when Víctor discovered the shaman in the Mentor. The elderflower reappears as a powerful metaphoric vehicle, to transmit the necessity of having Mr. Cayos in the world, and of learning from them, as Víctor’s remarks to Laly imply:

—¿De... de veras te parece más importante recitar Althusser que conocer las propiedades de *la flor del saúco*? (164, my italics).

— [...] Y ¿qué va a ocurrir aquí, Laly, me lo puedes decir, el día en que en todo este podrido mundo no quede un solo tío que sepa para qué sirve *la flor del saúco*? (165, my italics).

The Hero -and the reader- have come to understand the symbolic essence of the Old Man Cayo: he may not be a wise philosopher in the literal sense of the term, but only he knows the usefulness of the flor de saúco; he is the old Jungian ‘guardian of the mysteries and the laws’; he is a mythic Healer.

And so, the Hero's Journey ends, but the journey of life never really ends. The hero and the readers bring back the “Elixir” from the current adventure, but the quest to integrate the lessons goes on. It is for each of us to say what the Elixir is: wisdom, experience, love, respect for Nature and the elderly, living in peace with oneself. ‘But a good story, like a good journey,

leaves us with an Elixir that changes us, makes us more aware, more alive, more human, more whole, more a part of everything that is' (Vogler 227). That is exactly the feeling this reader had upon closing the pages of Delibes' novel. The circle of the Hero's Journey is complete.

Or not quite: let us recall that, before departing from Mr. Cayo's village, Víctor promises his Mentor that he would come back to see him again ('Volveré a verle', 154). That never happens in the novel, but it does happen in its filmed adaptation, in which the screenwriters Manuel Matji and Antonio Giménez-Rico take up Víctor's gauntlet and invent a temporal frame to the story that happens in the novel. The filmed version shows the evolution of those young politicians who had met Mr. Cayo in 1977, by placing them in Madrid some ten years later. The frame story, filmed in black and white to distinguish it from the novel's story –which is presented as a flashback in colour– opens with the news that Víctor Velasco has just died, and with Rafa –now a Congressman– at the Cemetery in Madrid, to be present at the burial of his friend, who had abandoned the party and left political life as soon as he had obtained the parliamentary seat in the 1977 elections. So, Víctor, the idealistic Socialist who had been imprisoned under Franco and who campaigned during the Transition, is literally and allegorically dead. Rafa meets Laly at the cemetery and, after the ceremony, they go to a restaurant where they recall with immense nostalgia the trip they made to Cureña to gain Mr. Cayo's disputed vote. After the meal, Laly asks Rafa to return to Cureña to give Mr. Cayo the deceased Víctor's lighter as a memento (something that Víctor had always wanted to do, but never did). Rafa agrees and, when he arrives at the village, he finds the now nonagenarian old man totally alone and very ill –his wife had died– and he calls an ambulance to take him to a city hospital. Only Mr. Cayo's old dog remains, howling, in a totally deserted and ghostly village. The Special World, the audience understands, has vanished with the old Mentor's disappearance.

This intelligent filmic twist reveals several things that the novel's open ending had left unsaid, but that the screen-writers add: that Víctor did not die because of the wound, but his political self did, for he abandoned the political arena after his encounter with the old Mentor had transformed him; that the present life of the politicians is a 'black-and-white' world, as opposed

to the colourful reality they discovered in the Special World (usually, when playing with colours, film-makers tend to do the opposite, that is, they stage the present in colour, and the past in black-and white); and, most importantly, that old Mr. Cayo would remain self-reliant until the very last day of his life; in other words, that he never let either his dwelling or his mind be ‘colonized’ (see Morgado and Pérez).

4 Conclusion

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye also mentions the archetype of the wise old man, when he says that ‘in the analogy of innocence the divine or spiritual figures are usually parental, wise old men with magical powers like Prospero, or friendly guardian spirits like Raphael before Adam’s fall’²⁹ (151). Moreover, imprinting a paternal role on the wise old man, Frye says that ‘the true father is sometimes represented by a wise old man or teacher: this is the relation of Prospero to Ferdinand, as well as of Chiron the centaur to Achilles.’ (Frye 199) To this list of the everlasting and universal old mentors as wise men, teachers, guardians and parental and spiritual figures, we could add that of Mr. Cayo as portrayed in *El disputado voto*, as has been shown. Furthermore, by constructing a novel around the figure of an old “paleta”, whose negative social and political connotations are turned upside down, Delibes gives us a lesson against classism and ageism. If we understand ageism as ‘a set of social relations that discriminate against older people and set them apart as being different by defining and understanding them in an oversimplified, generalized way,’³⁰ we must conclude that in the ageless Special World, as presented by Delibes, ageist stereotypes cannot exist, but only humane values and universal truths, as those Mr. Cayo embodies.

At the present time (2021), when “ethics and politics” is an oxymoron, and when it seems that in Spain –as in other countries– politics has become a game of thrones, perhaps reading books like *El disputado voto*, which impels us to learn from the lessons of our elders and our mentors,

²⁹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of criticism: Four essays* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1973 [first ed. 1957]), 151.

³⁰ Victor Minichiello, John Browne and Hald Kending, ‘Pereceptions and Consequences of Ageism: Views of Older People’, *Ageing and Society*, 20 (May 2000), 253-278 (p. 253).

and invites us to a return to the principles and values of our “lost paradises”, may be the only solution to *redeem* ourselves. Delibes’ “localist” 1978 novel has proved to be as timeless and as universal as only good literature can be.