

THE VALUE, SIGNIFICANCE AND IDENTITY OF THE SPANISH COUNTRYSIDE AND OF RURAL LANDSCAPES ACCORDING TO UNAMUNO

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Unamuno cultivated with a very personal style the literary genre dealing with the description and treatment of landscapes. According to García Blanco, at least five of his works belong to this genre, namely: *Paisajes* (1902); *De mi País* (1903); *Por tierras de Portugal y España* (1911); *Andanzas y visiones españolas* (1922) and *Paisajes del Alma* (1944). Furthermore we find a leaning toward landscape description in his poems, some of which were published in a collection very useful for our purposes, entitled *Poemas de los pueblos de España* (1961).

Since Unamuno did not only describe the landscape but also theorized about this issue, his treatment of landscape must be examined within the context of all his production and his philosophy, as D. Csejtei has brilliantly done. As this critic has argued, the Unamunian landscape must be understood as a state of conscience, without an objective existence, and as a metaphor used for the recognition of what is eternal and for the expression of the yearning for immortality, which constitutes at the same time the essence of the rational soul.

But since the landscape of Unamuno is the *existential* landscape par excellence, it is related to the main element of his philosophy, which is the *tragic sense of life*. And it is precisely the Iberian landscape that, as it favours «meditative contemplation,» manages to suspend the dichotomic structure of the distressed subject and reconciles him with peace and serenity, expressions of the eternal. This is Csejtei's conclusion about the relation between philosophy and landscape in Unamuno: «The act of the self of looking up, thus aspiring to personal immortality – and having as ultimate objective the unification with God from the awareness of the universe – is organically complemented with another movement, the act of looking down, which culminates in the existential unification with the landscape.»

There are landscapes that especially propitiate this meditative contemplation, and which are, according to Martínez de Pisón, the desert, the sea, the islands, the mountain, and those towns, villages and cities of medium or small size in which tranquillity and peace reign.

But the landscape of Unamuno can be analyzed from many different perspectives and one especially important is related to *the relation between existential landscape and national*

identity. Recently, Ortega Cantero has brilliantly and successfully dealt with this question. His contribution shows the importance and the patrimonial and symbolic value of the Castilian landscape, a national landscape that denotes the history and collective identity of the Spanish people. The Institución Libre de Enseñanza y Giner de los Ríos have also analyzed this issue, emphasizing that it is precisely the Castilian landscape, both as natural patrimony and as symbolic field, that feeds Spanish national identity and that conveys to its inhabitants features of all kind, certain sentiments, and a common significant behaviour.

Unamuno also fully participates in this important conception of the Castilian landscape and in its relation with national identity, as Ortega has also argued.

As regards the purposes of this study, which inquires into a field of research that is partly already explored and that is related to the birth and image of rural/agrarian landscape in Spain, the focus will be on *the love of the countryside and the aesthetic feeling toward nature*.

There is clearly in Unamuno an intense «love of the countryside», but we must clarify what we understand by this concept and what it entails. It is obviously related to the wider reality of «Nature». But more specifically, the love of the countryside has as its object the mountain and also the plain, and especially, the immense Castilian plain, which must not be seen as reduced to its bleak though graceful plateaus (*páramos*). On the contrary, the love of the countryside covers any pleasant and green spot that is source of tranquillity and inescapably «seat of peace»:

As conclusion we may say that the plain and insignificant countryside allows for the meditative contemplation and the reconciliation of our spirit, generally dichotomic in its feeling and always tending toward the tragic sense.

Another important aspect of this study is related to the *specific signification that the rural/agrarian landscape holds for Unamuno*, that is, the landscape that has been profoundly modified by man for his vital and utilitarian necessities.

Undoubtedly, from a quantitative perspective, and also as regards the profundity of his reflections, Unamuno was much more interested in the theoretical aspects of landscape and also in the consideration, description and reflection about mountain landscape in general, and Iberian mountains in particular. However, with the exception of some particular and justified case, our writer never despised rural/agrarian landscape, and his perception and treatment of it was always affectionate and considerate.

This could not be otherwise, if four basic considerations are taken into account. The first one, already alluded, is that the *rural landscape is also perceived according to the general aesthetic feeling toward nature*. Also even when nature is rugged, rough and desolate, so that it would be generally qualified as ugly, Unamuno claims: «there is no ugly landscape». And if, according to the popular view, some Spanish landscapes are considered to be «awful», our writer never perceives them as ugly, but magnificent and lofty. That is the case of his description of the desert landscape of Fuerteventura, in which he followed the model of Leopardi, as he emphasized its beauty and grandeur.

In this sense it is also important that from his very first writings, Unamuno makes a comparison between the delicate and soft landscape of his native region, País Vasco, and the harsh and monotonous landscape of great part of Castilla.

In the third place, in spite of Unamuno's unequivocal preference for the mountain, he never forgets the *landscape values of the plain*. If this kind of landscape had not been appreciated, Castilla would have been unable to play such a central role in the Iberian landscape. It is also a great innovation, on the part of the Generation of '98, to have valued the plain, and with it, Castilla, as opposed to the Romantic disparaging excesses in relation to both of them. In some of these plains, Unamuno found the essence of the beauty and significance of the agrarian landscape, as it is the case of the plain of Mallorca. In short, for Unamuno, «beautiful, very beautiful, lofty is the mountain, but tell me, my friend, what about the plain, is all of itself not a summit? Do we not also ascend in it to the infinite spaces? This Castilian plain is all of itself a summit».

Last but not least, the rural countryside and landscape are so much appreciated by Unamuno because of the importance of their *physical, ethical and spiritual functions*, summarized, to my mind, in the following statements: «the countryside means liberation» as opposed to «the hateful and hated city of the social flurry»; «I visit it» – the writer says – «to appropriate new landscapes.» In his literary production, there are numerous and continuous texts on this issue, frequently beautiful and evocative of his global conception of landscape. In his creative and imaginative spirit, he even takes the step of approximating country and city: he describes the symbiosis between city and countryside, and characterizes the city as Nature and the countryside as Architecture, posing as example Salamanca.

As related to the previous idea, Unamuno, since his very first novel, *Paz en la Guerra*, is obsessed with the theme of the *landscape that saw our birth*, the landscape of his hometown, Vizcaya, that psychologically shaped him, that provided him with an urban model and with enough mountain landscape for his whole life, that engraved in his soul the agrarian landscape of the País Vasco. After tracing these motifs in his work, both in his poems and essays, we conclude that so much homesickness and melancholy produced in him a peculiar spiritual condition. Thanks to this condition, he created the most beautiful elegies I know about the spaces destroyed by the city, the periurban landscape that urban expansion attacked, modified and industrialized, the rururban landscape that is not a functional complement of the city any more and that cannot be considered immune, but threatened by destruction. Sorrowful and obliged by circumstances, Unamuno tries to understand the richness generated by those processes, but he begs to be allowed to yearn for the disappeared «Romantic landscapes» that accompanied him when he was born and growing up.

