

Shepherds and Computers

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Variations on Literature and Fractals

We stopped in Soria. I was a boy. We went to see the church of Santo Domingo in Soria. But my father didn't go in. He stayed outside the church, talking to a man sitting in the porch. My father always used to say that rather than the churches themselves, he got more out of meeting the people who came to the church door. My mother, my brothers and I went in and when we came out, the two men were still talking. I found it strange to see my father in conversation with a man like that: I couldn't help wondering what a fisherman and that old man who had only seen seas of wheat could find to talk about.

Eladio was a small man. Small body, small head, small beret. You could only see his eyes, intense blue eyes, with that really diffuse colour that blue eyes take on in old age, like the colour of the sea in September. He told us he was a shepherd. Every year he led his flock from Soria to Extremadura. As we were leaving, the old man said something I'll never forget: "When you you're going to stop on the road, take a look at the names of the towns". We were utterly taken aback. "The name of any town says something about its nature. I should know. By all means stop in places like Villabuena or Montehermoso but if you come across a town called something like Villaseco or Malpartida*, keep going on to the next village. The name makes the town".

I've never got over that old man's words from twenty years back. And it strikes me that perhaps those town names which no longer mean anything to us today, once signified something. For some people the names probably contained a memory, handed down from generation to generation. For that old shepherd, the meaning of the name Villabuena was clear. It told him it was a good place. Someone born in Villabuena, though, wouldn't have given the name of his birthplace a second thought. He might relate "Villabuena" with some narrow street, some dark house, and a difficult adolescence. And he might remember that one day he left that narrow street for ever to go to the city.

The Russian poet Anna Akhmatova was banished to a *gulag* and all her books were banned. Ten prisoners from her block, however, learnt her best-known collection, *Requiem*, by heart. They memorised the whole work, poem by poem, verse by verse. They didn't want the book to be lost. They knew there was a chance that not all of the ten would die; that one of them might survive that hell and the work would eventually be assigned to

* Although various interpretations are possible, the names Villabuena, Montehermoso, Villaseco and Malpartida might be translated as "Good Village", "Beautiful Hill", "Dry Village" and "Badly Split" respectively.

print. But for a time, the book of poetry did not exist as such; it was a virtual book, and so it lived on in the memory of those ten prisoners.

Villabuena. The refuge where even the traditional songs have their memory. They have changed over time, depending on the individual or the tradition, but they come to life again whenever they are sung.

<i>Villabuena, Villabuena, qué se cuenta por España La vida del rey don Juan, que está malito en la cama. Cuatro médicos le curan de los mejores de España, unos le curan con vino, otros le curan con agua.</i>	Villabuena, Villabuena, They tell the tale all over Spain The life of King John, Who is sick in his bed. Four doctors cure him The best in Spain, Some cure him with wine, Others cure him with water.
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Digna Prieta learnt that old ballad when she was a little girl. Years later, she moved to Barakaldo, in Bizkaia, in search of a new life. Not far from Barakaldo, Lucía Estankona learnt this other ballad at her home in Zornotza:

<i>Izar ederra argi egiten dau zeru altuan bakarrik. Ezta bakarrik, lagunak ditu Jaun Zerukoak emonik. Zazpi aingeru aldean ditu, zortzigarrena gaixorik; zazpi mediku ekarri deutsez India-Madriletatik</i>	A fair star shines Alone aloft in heaven. Not alone, but with companions Given by the Lord of Heaven. At his side are seven angels, The eighth is ill; Seven doctors have brought him From the Indies and Madrid.
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The two songs tell the same story: the death of Prince John. But they are sung differently on the lips of Digna and Lucía. It's the law of life. Songs survive when they are transmitted from mouth to mouth, they survive with continuous changes. At the end of the day, they are variations and a variation is not good on its own. They are all good.

They say Bach's *Goldberg Variations* is probably his best-known work. There's an aria in the piece which is repeated and everything else is variation on the same theme. That's how Bach wrote. They say the greatest of all sins is to repeat a childhood journey when you're an adult. They say it loses its charm for ever. They say your childhood memories are contaminated when you see them through the eyes of an adult, and you end up killing them.

I went back to Soria twenty years later. The first thing I did was to go to the church of Santo Domingo. The surrounding area has been renovated and the church has been cleaned up. I didn't meet anyone at the church door. Suddenly, I saw an old woman approaching. I thought I might ask her about Eladio. I wanted to know if he was still alive. I wanted to sit down with that woman and talk to her about this and that, the way my father had done all those years ago. The woman went into the porch and I was about to talk to her, but I didn't dare.

I got into my car and set out for home. In the fields the farmers had just gathered in the wheat. I turned on the radio. Bach. They say nature works like Bach, creating variations. They say each branch of a tree tries to repeat the shape of the trunk; if the trunk has three branches, then the branch will have three knots. They say the clouds and the waves are born in the same way; they have a base and the variation on that base causes those special shapes, one after another.

And the same is true of computers. Computers work using the sequences in a single base. But each one's memory is unique, like a cloud, a wave or a tree. ❧

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