

Moral Structures: the Value of Place in Contemporary Basque Poetry (I)

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Estructuras morales: el valor del lugar en la poesía vasca contemporánea (I)

ABSTRACT: This paper introduces an inquiry launched in 2014 in the Basque Country. The research question concerns the value attached to landscape, understood broadly as a territorial configuration that can be experienced in everyday life and art. Action-research is used to capture some ethically relevant themes in selected contemporary poems written in Basque and selected by a participatory procedure. The paper describes the theoretical background and methodology; the results will be fully discussed in a forthcoming publication.

RESUMEN: Este artículo presenta un estudio iniciado en 2014 en el País Vasco con el objetivo de discernir los valores asociados al paisaje, entendido como una configuración territorial susceptible de ser experimentada en el arte y la vida cotidiana. La investigación-acción persigue capturar algunos temas éticamente relevantes en poemas contemporáneos escritos en euskera y seleccionados mediante un proceso participativo. El artículo describe el marco teórico y la metodología; los resultados serán analizados en una publicación posterior.

KEYWORDS: landscape, Basque poetry, literature, geopoethics, applied ethics

PALABRAS-CLAVE: paisaje, poesía vasca, literatura, geopoética, ética aplicada

*I had my existence. I was there.
Me in place and the place in me.*

Seamus Heaney (2010)

it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.

Henry David Thoreau (1854)

Background

In the last 5 years I have been increasingly drawn towards action-research, understood as a way of enacting ethics through focused efforts by shareholders to change the performance and moral quality of a human community ("to affect the quality of the day", as Thoreau put it). Of course, I have not been the



Received: 24/04/2014
Accepted: 01/05/2014



only one: applied ethics has experimented a *narrative-social turn* towards inquiries that are descriptive and context dependent, but nevertheless able to engage communities and have some normative force. During the last few decades, the methodology of applied ethics has shifted from a predominant use of normative-philosophical analyses to an increasing involvement of empirical methods; this shift is especially visible in medical ethics (Salloch et al. 2012), but it is not restricted to it. The *applied-empirical turn* was anticipated by Michele Moody-Adams when she urged that moral philosophy gave up its authoritative role in ethics and get closer to anthropology. Indeed, and to paraphrase and often quoted sentence, ethics is too important to be left in the hands of philosophers only:

"I urge that moral philosophy, if it is to take moral disagreement seriously, may itself need to undertake fieldwork in familiar places. Although there is perhaps a place for continued philosophical debate about the structure of moral theories, there is often more to be learned from what Walzer calls the 'workmanlike' moral inquiries of everyday agents and inquirers than from the disengaged speculation so common in contemporary moral philosophy. Any human being who seeks to understand and pursue a life worth living contributes to that ongoing moral inquiry of which moral philosophy is only a small part. Of course, this approach to moral philosophy requires relinquishing the notion that philosophy is in any way authoritative in moral inquiry."

(Moody-Adams 1997:13)

However, the notion that philosophers have some kind of privileged standpoint for moral inquiry is still prevalent in many domains. In my experience, perceptions of ethics as external or added to everyday interactions are very common between professionals, who tend to think of the ethicist as either the "good guy" (they think ethics will solve their problems) or the "bad guy" (they think ethics will make their job more difficult, by attempting to scrutinise and control their activity). Ethics does give you trouble; there is no way of going round that. But instead of looking at applied ethics mainly as a battleground for moral judgement in which philosophers hold the high ground, I like to look at the ethical field as the (interactive, complex, messy) domain of deliberation and choice, in which everyday communicative interaction is riddled with conflict, but also with the responsible co-creation of the future (Barden 1990). Indeed, all applied ethics could also be seen as a ground in

which phenomena of “moral entrepreneurship” (Fuller 2013) arise, reconceptualising crisis and damages as new opportunities to assert what really matters.

If there is something that matters to human beings, that is the place they live in. Despite increased mobility, we are still a very territorial species and “landscape” or “place” are concepts used on a everyday basis. Still, they are often taken for granted as a purely objective and material reality, exterior to the subjective self, or they are over-interpreted by a corpus of cultural critique that melts landscape into the air of social construction. I accept that both elements are important: landscapes are at the same time volatile and solid, they are both culturally and materially grounded. According to landscape scholars such as Lund and Benediktsson (2010: 1), landscape implies a “more-than-human materiality”, meaning “a constellation of natural forms that are independent of humans, yet part and parcel of the processes by which human beings make their living and understand their own placing in the world”.

Landscapes are territorial configurations susceptible of being experienced in everyday life and art. The ethical and aesthetical appreciation of landscapes is not a recent phenomenon. It had an important precedent in the 19th century, most notably in the life and works of the American naturalist and writer Henry David Thoreau. In a representative journal entry dated May 10, 1853, he wrote the following:

“From the hill I look westward over the landscape [...] As you ascend the near & low hills sink & flatten into the earth--no sky is seen behind them--the distant *mts* [mountains] rise--The truly great are distinguished. [...] You see not the domes only but the body, the facade of, these terrene temples-- You see that the foundation answers to the superstructure. Moral structures. (The sweet fern leaves among odors now) [...] The value of the *mts* in the horizon--would not that be a good theme for a lecture? The text for a discourse on real values--& permanent. A sermon on the mount They are stepping stones to heaven, as the rider has a horse-block at his gate--by which to mount when he would commence his pilgrimage to heaven. By which we gradually take our departure from earth from the time when our youthful eyes first rested on them, from this bare actual earth. which has so little of the hue of heaven They make it easier to die & easier to live. They let us off-- [...] Whether any picture by a human master hung on our western wall could supply their place--”

(Thoreau 1853: 109-110).

As the last sentence suggests, Thoreau is not considering the value of landscape paintings, but the real value of real mountains, of the visible earth, for human beings. In a language saturated with Christian imagery, Thoreau sees mountains as temples, and landscapes as the "moral structures" that helps us live (and die). Much art has emerged from this appreciation that landscapes are moral phenomena as much as natural ones. Another Icelandic scholar, philosopher Mikael Karlsson, clarifies thus the tension between landscape-as-art and landscape-as-place:

"Even a highly realistic landscape painting of an actual scene presents a 'vision' which is not, like a mirror image, a recreation of nature. A painting is an independent symbolic reality. Art is artifice: A landscape painting is not a landscape. Natural landscapes can be fantastic, beautiful, peaceful, disturbing, terrifying, exhilarating, intimidating, ugly or monotonous. But whatever their qualities, they do not have a *point*; whereas a work of pictorial art, through the vision it presents, always has a point, or more than one. We may fail to get the point; and the artist himself may be at a loss to grasp the point of his own works. The point of a painting may not be expressible in words. It may be a stupid point; it may be banal. It may be debatable and subject to interpretation; indeed, it usually is. It may not be definitive. But there always *is* a point (a painting with no point is not a work of art). That is one reasons why it is not absurd for the farmer at Kalmanstunga to have a painting of the Eiríksjökull glacier hanging on his wall, although he can look out the window more or less whenever he wants and see the real thing."

(Karlsson 2006: 60)

Of course, painting is not the only art with landscape as one of its possible subject matters. If we substitute the word "painting" with "poem", I think the previous quote helps understand what a "landscape poem" is and is not. Landscape poems are not a recreation of nature, but works of linguistic art creating an independent reality with an open point, or more than one. They are moral structures or narratives upon which we find some ethics, "a complex image in which the listener or reader discerns value" (Barden 1990: 3).

Methodology

Let us recapitulate: place matters; landscapes are territorial configurations with built-in moral phenomena; every piece of landscape art (including both paintings and poetry) has a point. Of course, this can only be tested with actual landscape poems, so in early 2014 I set up a little action-research project to explore those hypothesis in the context of contemporary Basque poetry. My goal was to discern the value of place in contemporary Basque poetry. To achieve it, I had to ask questions about the point of selected poems: How is the landscape portrayed in Basque poems today? What kind of value is associated to it? To answer those questions, my strategy was simple: ask the people who wrote them, and socialise our joint interpretation looking for some feedback. Basque poetry is thriving, but its community is small enough so as to be easily accessible, and I was confident I could gather data without much difficulty.

Besides, I had a precedent. In summer 2013, I had been impressed by *A poet's guide to Britain*, a book and BBC series in which a young Welsh writer, Owen Sheers, introduced six British landscapes by discussing six poems. The series premise is succinctly expressed in this poem by Sheers himself (2010: xxiii):

There are places that speak,
telling the stories of us and them.

A village asleep, loaded with dream,
an ocean, flicking its pages over the sand.

Eventually we reply, a conversation
of place and page over time,

inscribing the map so that each,
in turn, might hold the line.

I spoke about this to Jose Luis Padron, a writer who runs *Lizardiren baratza* [Lizardi's garden] a weekly show about poetry in Euskadi Irratia, the only public radio station broadcasting in Basque. He kindly agreed that once every month I could use some air time to speak about landscape poetics, and thus the action-research was launched. I would not get paid, but I could mention the radio show when approaching the

poets. So, from January to June 2014, I would pick a contemporary poem originally written in Basque, and comment on its relationship about the landscape. Then I would ask its author to select another landscape poem by another Basque poet, to comment on it, or declare why he or she thinks it is valuable. With those two poems as raw material I would write a 10-15 minute script for the radio show, which Jose Luis would edit before recording it.

I selected six poems by Iñigo Astiz, Kirmen Uribe, Jon Gerediaga, Miren Agur Meabe, Koldo Izagirre, and Aurelia Arkotxa. Some of those poets I knew personally, others not. The criteria for inclusion was that each author was alive (so that he or she could answer my request), and that each poem had a strong relationship with landscape, sometimes from a specific place from the Basque Country, sometimes a more generic one. With one exception (a poem suggested by Xabier Mendiguren, the main editor at Elkar, the biggest Basque publishing company), they were poems that I had read for quite some time, and were well known and loved by many other people. I tried to keep some balance in my initial choice: both men and women, from both sides of the border dividing the Basque Country, from different literary generations. The chosen poems covered a wide range of landscapes: the earth, the sea, the woods, the garden, the coastal village and the inland town.

Preliminary results

The authors answered my e-mail request with diligence and generosity. They were keen to identify their chosen poem, and some of them provided detailed explanations about the reasons behind the choice. Six sessions on *Paisaiaren poetikak* [Landscape poetics] were recorded and aired in Euskadi Irratia from January and June 2014, and the associated scripts were published in my blog at *Argia*, a well-known Basque magazine (www.argia.com/blogak/antonio-casado-da-rocha/category/paisaiak/).

The table below summarises the content of the twelve poems selected via the procedure explained above, which incorporates suggestions from eight people. As the table shows, the poems combine specific elements of the Basque landscape with others more universal; the presence of the mountains and the sea is specially

visible in several poems, as well as the *Hortus Conclusus* classical image of an enclosed, domesticated garden. But these landscapes are not pastoral, but urban, and medium-sized cities such as Bilbao, Baiona (Basque name for Bayonne), and Iruñea-Pamplona are explicitly mentioned.

Looking at those landscapes as “moral structures”, the table also provides a suggestion of the specific values evoked by each poem, their main “point”. The most prominent values are landscape as source of a pleasurable feeling or contemplative delight, as a repository of memories that are both personal and collective, and the solidarity or interconnectedness elicited by all this. A sense of balance in precariousness, simplicity, hospitality, fearlessness, forgiveness, and truthfulness also appear in those poems, which show some closeness to nature (small animals are mentioned in three poems), but a humanised one. Those are deeply human landscapes. Some poems explicitly emphasise the contribution of ordinary people to each place (Izagirre 1997, Etxezaharreta 2012), with special emphasis on outcasts (prostitutes appear in Atxaga 1983 and centrally in Rekalde 2011).

My interpretation might be subjective, but the choice of poems as a whole is not. It is an intersubjective, collective result, which performatively shows some of the affinities and influences between members of a small number of Basque writers. Iñigo Astiz chose a poem by Joseba Sarrionandia; Kirmen Uribe one by Bernardo Atxaga; Jon Gerediaga one by Rikardo Arregi Diaz de Heredia; Miren Agur Meabe one by Paddy Rekalde; Koldo Izagirre one by Lucien Etxezaharreta; and, surprisingly, Aurelia Arkotxa one by Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian poet and filmmaker. We decided to keep her choice as a reminder that Basque landscapes and literature are not essentially different or separated from other landscapes or literatures.

These poems show how landscapes are experienced in everyday life and art. It remains to be discussed the different ways in which, by doing so, they affect its ethical quality. This has to do with the role Basque literature is playing nowadays in configuring and debating Basque identity. In action-research such as this, there is not a strict separation in time between the processes of data gathering and analysis, design and diffusion; all of them are simultaneously done in an open way using

several media formats: radio, blogging, personal communication through e-mail, etc. A detailed discussion of the results of this action-research will be published in a forthcoming paper. Right now I must finish acknowledging my debt to everyone who contributed or otherwise helped launching this little project: Jose Luis Padron, Elizabeth Macklin, Iñigo Astiz, Kirmen Uribe, Jon Gerediaga, Miren Agur Meabe, Xabier Mendiguren, Koldo Izagirre, and Aurelia Arkotxa. Many thanks [*eskerrik asko*] to all of them.

1st poem	Places	Values	2nd poem	Places	Values
Esperimentu geofagoa I(ab) orategian (Astiz 2012)	garden	fearlessness, delight	Martin Larralde (Sarrionandia 2013)	inland village, country roads	truthfulness facing death, forgiveness
Ez eman hautatzeko (Uribe 2003)	coastal village, sea	balance in precariousness	Herdoilarena (Atxaga 1983)	city (Bilbao), river	solidarity
Basoan bildutakoa (Gerediaga 2007)	woods	simplicity, memory	Zeruaren kartografia (Arregi 1998)	sky	harmony
Baratzeko deia (Meabe 2011)	garden	hospitality	Erletxeta fucktory (Rekalde 2011)	motorway	solidarity
Umea zegoen eta (Izagirre 1997)	industrial port, sea	memory	Pontrique (Etxezaharreta 2012)	city (Bayonne)	memory
Otsail (Arkotxa 1993)	city (Iruñea-Pamplona), mountains	contemplation, delight in small things	"Autocarri che accelerano inquieti..." (Pasolini 1954)	mountains, sea,	contemplation, delight in sublime views

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