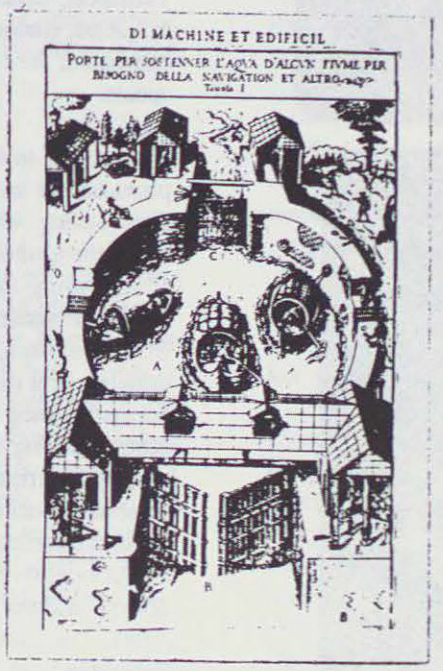

six reminders
For travellers


DI MACHINE ET EDIFICII
PORTE PER SOSTENNER L'AQVA D'ALCVNI FIVMI PER
BISOGNO DELLA NAVIGATION ET ALTRO

SIX REMINDERS FOR TRAVELLERS.

I

Canals, Spanish canals, particularly the Canal de Castilla.

Spain is engraved with canals.

Transport, (exchange of goods, displacement of people) and irrigation, (movement or dispersion of water) are, separately or combined, the two main driving forces for the construction of canals.

A variety of minor works and utopian projects were begun and promoted as early as the first part of the sixteenth century, a time during which Spain began its political consolidation under the Catholic Kings. A few years later, between 1548 and 1550, during the reign of Maximillian of Austria interest in fluvial navigation in Spain became a renewed imperative. It is from this time, for instance, that the first Spanish extant drawing of a revolving lock which closed with the aid of the current, comes to us[1]. But it is only in the mid- eighteenth century, during the reign of Ferdinand VI, that the first major navigable–irrigation waterworks, the Canal de Castilla and the Imperial Canal of Aragón, were built. Both canals, among the most extraordinary hydraulic monuments of Spain, form part of the extensive series of public works including roads, dams, docks, bridges, silos, hospitals, schools and even bullfight rings, initiated and promoted during the Spanish Enlightenment (La Ilustración Española). They would play a more significant role during the nineteenth century.

The Canal de Castilla is a powerful piece of landscape engineering, architecture and hydraulics. Running South to North and covering 207 kilometres, the canal includes 49 locks, mills, numerous bridges, several aqueducts, four basins and a series of storage and milling facilities.[2] The course of the canal comprises three sections. The first begins at the town of Medina de Rioseco on the southwest, the second, on the southeast, at Valladolid, ancient capital of Spain. Both cities are located in the province of Valladolid. Roughly 60 kilometres to the north the two branches come together at a fork called El Serron in the province of Palencia. From here

[1] Nicols García Tapia, "Ingeniería Hidraulica del Canal de Castilla" in Juan Helguera Quijada, et al., El Canal de Castilla (Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, 1988), pp. 163–195.

[2] José A. Fernandez Ordoñez, Catlogo de treinta Canales Españoles anteriores a 1900 (Madrid: CEHOPU, 1986), pp. 182–83.

the Canal reaches North to Alar del Rey in the province of Burgos. The Canal travels the heart of the Old Castile, a fertile flat region which is considered the breadbasket of Spain. Today the waterworks is relegated to irrigating this vast zone. It could theoretically, if deemed necessary, be refitted for navigation which was suppressed in the early 1950's. An interesting feature of the Canal de Castilla is the series of locks designed and built according to the illustrations of sixteenth and seventeenth century hydraulic treatises such as those of Belidor[3] and Zonca.[4] These treatises played a decisive role in the construction of French Canals, particularly the Languedoc Canal (1665–1692). The Canal de Castilla, as conceived during the time of Ferdinand VI, represented a utopian project directed to link the Spanish breadbasket with the port of Santander on the Cantabric coast, one of the main centres of commerce with the Spanish colonies overseas at the time.

II

Castile, old and new.

In October of 1989, always accompanied by the perennial burnt dust and the soft mid–autumn Castilian light, I had the chance to travel along the entire length of the Canal de Castilla. This was part of a sabbatical project in which a long standing preoccupation with the relation of water and architecture had finally become a reality. The terrain was familiar. I had criss–crossed its width and length on various occasions, as a teenager during my high–school days which I had spent partially in Spain and later, years later, on Quixotic visits, closer to pilgrimages, to this land of my first infatuation where I discovered water transformed into snow and had my first photographic epiphany.

I was 11 when I was given my first camera. It was a 126 Agfa with bellows, two prism viewfinders, set aperture at f:11 and a built–in yellow filter (I found this out many years later). It was a versatile camera which gave me many years of candid visual rewards, the belief that I was a great photographer and a myriad of under and over exposed negatives. The first photographs that I ever took were of the Monasterio de Piedra, a marvelous monastic complex in southeast Spain where water has played with architecture since medieval times. Unfortunately these images remained in my mind since they never made it back from the corner drugstore. I believe that I first discovered photography at the Monasterio de Piedra. I eventually discovered architecture and became fascinated with the uses of water as a symbolic element in architecture.

I spent days photographing the Canal in its various moods under the changing Castilian light. But the Canal was more than this apparent stream of water. I came to consider it as a continuous building etched into the landscape along hundreds of endless panoramas where water, earth and sky converged, there... very far, ahead of me. Travelling along the Canal, many dormant things awoke to acquire new presence and meaning.

I distinctly remember finding the Pantheon in the cylindrical mud–forms of the Valladolid dove–cotes which dot this landscape, a sort of territorial reminder to the traveller. They appeared to me as Pigeon–Pantheons. They always reminded me that I was in Castilla La Vieja, the Old Castile and more specifically in the province of Valladolid.

Always within sight of the Canal, whose presence I felt marked by the green lines of trees emerging from this brown earth, after days of roaming the land, intoxicated by the openness of this landscape, I believed I was able to grasp better the full meaning of serendipity.

III

La Fuente Grande, a photograph.

One day I drove my rented SEAT—automated version of a modern Rocinante[5] and the Spanish equivalent of a FIAT—beyond the southern border of Old Castile. I left the Canal behind because I wanted to see and record other examples of civic hydraulic architecture. New Castile, to the South, the region–theatre of Don Quixote's most exciting adventures—think of his mythical battle with the windmill at Campo de Criptana—presented itself as the ideal place to investigate. I had decided to change the geographical context, choosing to go from the basin of the Duero River in which the Canal de Castilla lies to that of the Tajo River which embraces such memorable places as Aranjuez and Toledo.

I had seen a photograph of a place which intrigued me. It was supposed to be a fountain but it looked much more like a neo–classical plaza. The caption read: J. de Herrera. Fuente Grande de Ocaña.[6] Plazas, hydraulic works and the oeuvre of the renown renaissance Spanish architect Juan de Herrera were part of my thematic research preoccupations. So I drove to Ocaña, an ancient headquarters of the "comendador" or great master of the medieval militant order of Saint James.

[3] M. Belidor, Architecture Hydraulique, 3 vols. (Paris, 1737).

[4] Cited by Nicols García Tapia, "Ingeniería Hidraulica del Canal de Castilla" in Juan Helguera Quijada, et al., El Canal de Castilla (Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, 1988), p. 175.

[5] Rocinante was Don Quixote de la Mancha's horse.

[6] The photograph appeared in Jose Ignacio Linazasoro, El proyecto clasico en arquitectura (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, S.A., 1981.), p. 145.

IV

Epiphany

James Joyce, through Stephen Daedalus, tells us:

> "--now for the third quality. For a long time I couldn't make out what Aquinas meant. He uses a figurative word (a very unusual thing for him) but I have solved it. Claritas is Quidditas. After the analysis which discovers the second quality the mind makes the only logically possible synthesis and discovers the third quality. This is the moment which I call epiphany. First we recognize that the object is one integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized composite, a thing in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is that thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.
>
> Having finished his argument Stephen walked in silence..."[7]

V

Fountains and displacements

Fuente Grande or Fuente Nueva (new and big fountain) to differentiate it from the older and smaller fountain located some 500 meters down the road was the name given to Ocaña's monumental complex which used to welcome the visitor coming from Aranjuez and Toledo, to the East. Here for the first time in the second half of the sixteenth-century the monumental displaced the modest.

[7] James Joyce Stephen Hero (London: Grafton Books, 1977), p. 190.

La Fuente Grande de Ocaña is a magic place. It is also an ingenious piece of hydraulic engineering and landscape architecture. La Fuente Grande is more than a fountain. It was a gathering place, a sort of rural Plaza Mayor antedating the elegant and formal one which was carved in the middle of Ocaña two centuries later. The fountain is composed of water spouts, canals, two drinking reservoirs for the animals and a monumental "lavadero" (laundry basin) which could accommodate 300 people at a time. The design of this hydraulic complex has been attributed to Juan Herrera, the official "aposentador"—the room maker— of Philip II, and the architect of El Escorial.

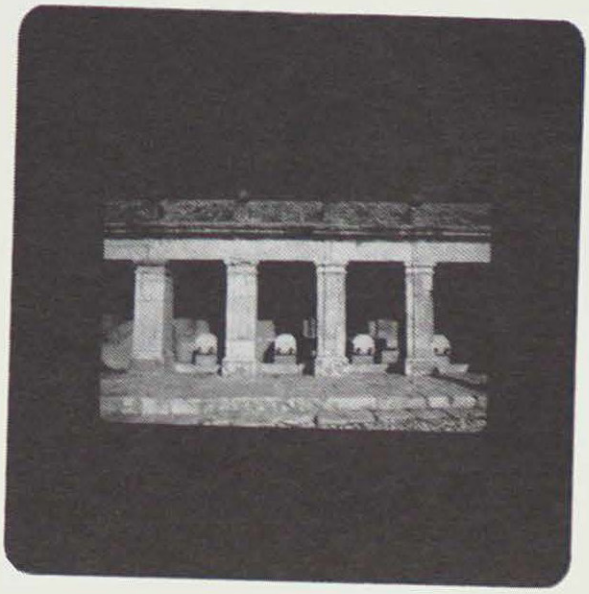
A third displacement is very recent and ubiquitous in the Spanish landscape as the network of modern freeways has replaced the ancient Rutas Nacionales, all converging at the Plaza del Sol in Madrid—a fact that speaks eloquently of the centralism which characterized the history of the country for long periods. From the highway, driving at 120 km/hr Ocaña seems like an urban accident that had to be displaced by progress. Maybe this has been a blessing to the old city of religious-militant Orders. The town and its public monumental complexes have been spared the spade of developers and the devastation by carloads of tourists. In Ocaña it is still possible to eat a wonderful picnic of Manchego cheese "emparedados" (sandwiches) washed down with Valdepeñas wine without being bothered by a soul. At the Fuente Grande one can still be the ruler of one's epiphanic solitude.

VI

Centering

The last time I sat on the steps leading to the great open quadrangle of the fountain I could hear Lawrence Durrell's thoughts on Greece, and particularly on Delphi, gently roaming through my mind and speaking of a new reality to me.

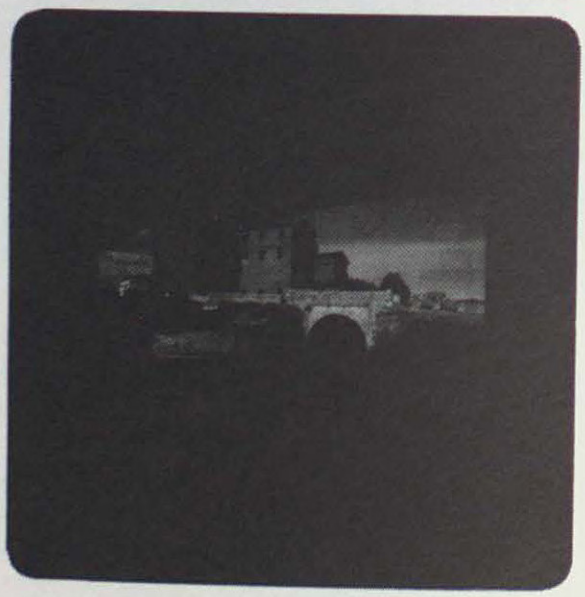
> "...Most travellers hurry too much. But try just for a moment sitting on the great stone omphalos, the navel of the ancient Greek world, at Delphi. Don't ask mental questions, but just relax and empty your mind. It lies, this strange amphora-shaped object, in an overgrown field above the temple. Everything is blue and smells of sage. The marbles dazzle down below you. There are two eagles moving softly on the sky,



like distant boats rowing across an immense violet lake.

Ten minutes of this quiet inner identification will give you the notion of the Greek landscape which you could not get in twenty years of studying Greek texts...."[8]

Although the omphalos tone was not at Ocaña I smelled the sage, saw the blue sky and the dazzling stones around me. There were also birds in the sky. I was able to leave silently...longing to return to this magical place once again.



NOTES

I would like to recognize here Mohamed Talaat and Anna Mainella's critical comments and editorial suggestions.

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[8] Lawrence Durrell, Spirit of Place: Letters and Essays on Travel (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1971), p. 158.