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BECOMING AN “OLD CASTILIAN” IN
MICHAEL PATERNITI’S “THE TELLING ROOM:
A TALE OF LOVE, BETRAYAL, REVENGE AND
THE WORLD’S GREATEST PIECE OF CHEESE”

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Synopsis:

US author Paterniti travels to a Spanish village in search of a special cheese and its maker who represents the “Old Castilian”- a descriptive term for a lifestyle the author struggles to understand but will later emulate. We will see how a book presumably about cheese explores language and culture leading to discussions of universal themes.

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Exploring the Spanish “Old Castilian” Lifestyle in Paterniti’s *The Telling Room: A Tale of Love, Betrayal, Revenge and the World’s Greatest Piece of Cheese*

In *The Telling Room: A Tale of Love, Betrayal, Revenge and the World’s Greatest Piece of Cheese* (July 2013), Michael Paterniti, also the author of *Driving Mr. Albert: A Trip Across America with Einstein’s Brain* and numerous articles for national magazines, travels from the US to Spain in search of an award-winning cheese and the story behind its maker, Ambrosio Molinos de las Heras. What he discovers is not just a story about food but a whole life philosophy embodied by the “Old Castilian” cheesemaker. Paterniti becomes so enamored with this lifestyle in Spain that it will actually make it difficult for him to finish his research and the book because doing so would mean that he would no longer need to spend time there and would be drawn back to his modern and more fast-paced lifestyle back in the US.

In *The Telling Room*, “Old Castilian” refers to a way of living passed on from one generation to the other as Ambrosio’s father taught his son, the eventual cheesemaker (also named Ambrosio), “. . . how to listen to the earth, how to speak to the animals, how to love and look after your kind with ferocity” (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 24). The famous cheese that Ambrosio, the son, will make is a product of the love he has both for his father and the Old Castilian lifestyle that his father represents.

In this paper we will examine what it means to be “Old Castilian” by looking at relevant examples from Spanish art and literature as they relate to Paterniti’s understanding of the concept. Specifically, by analyzing references to Castilla and the people who live there as portrayed in literary works by Miguel de Cervantes and Mariano José de Larra, the historical and

legendary figure of El Cid, and paintings by Francisco Goya we can come to a better understanding of *The Telling Room* and the concept of what it means to be an “Old Castilian.”

Sold by the name “Páramo de Guzmán,” the cheese was carefully crafted from the milk of Churra sheep that grazed on pasture near Ambrosio’s home (*The Telling Room* 57) and the wheels were aged in his cave (62). It was dipped in olive oil and stored for a year before being put in small oval-shaped tins that sold for \$22 per pound in 1991 dollars (11).

Paterniti first heard about the cheese while working as the editor for the newsletter written by the owner of Zingerman’s deli, Ari Weinzweig in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1991. Paterniti describes the newsletter as, “. . . part foodie bible, part travelogue, in which Ari brought to stirring life his global search for goodies as he played out the thrilling Indiana Jones lead” (*The Telling Room* 7). Years later, he finds himself traveling around the globe writing for magazines like *GQ* and interviewing prominent figures such as President Clinton and Fidel Castro. When Paterniti has the opportunity to travel to Spain and interview Ferrán Adrià, the chef who would be selected as the best chef in the world, he takes a side trip to Guzmán to see if he can find the maker of that cheese he had read about in the newsletter so many years ago (34).

To research and write his book, the author will travel repeatedly to the central area of Spain known as Castile or ‘Castilla’ in Spanish¹. It is divided into two autonomous communities: Castilla y León to the northwest (the location of Guzmán) and Castilla-La Mancha to the southeast with the Spanish capital city of Madrid in between the two. Describing his first visit to Guzmán, the author later wrote in an article for *The New York Times*, “I was certain this town

¹ Spanish or “español” is also known as the Castilian language or “castellano” because it originated in the region of Castilla—an area whose name makes reference to the number of castles still found there. In English people refer to the “Castilian accent” meaning that one speaks Spanish like those who live in this region. This can be a reference to specific vocabulary or differences in pronunciation that contrast with other areas of Spain or the Spanish spoken in Latin America.

had secrets to tell—and that maybe my best self was there to be found” (“An American Man's Quest”).

Over an extended period, Paterniti visits Guzmán repeatedly and takes the reader along as he wrestles with the investigative process of understanding and then narrating the rise and eventual demise of Ambrosio’s world-famous cheese in the main text of *The Telling Room*. Meanwhile, the many footnotes throughout this book add additional detail and illuminate the personal and professional struggles of the author. The footnotes are also intended to mimic the digressive style of storytelling that Paterniti encounters in Spain especially by the cheesemaker Ambrosio. As he stated in an interview conducted in 2013 by Ari Weinzwieg, owner of Zingerman’s Deli and the newsletter author who originally wrote about the cheese 22 years earlier:

Castilian storytelling is a wild business, full of digressions and asides, historical footnotes and factoids. Often, it’s what gets said in the marginalia, or that excursion away from the story itself, that reflects the truth of the story being told. . . . I’ve sat in Ambrosio’s telling room for an [sic] entire days, listening to him tell a story so full of digressions that even by midnight, he still might not be done. So I wanted the book to reflect the spirit not just of Slow Food but Slow Storytelling, the way it’s practiced in Guzmán. (4)

To interact with the Spaniards he meets, Paterniti is reliant on translators and the reader goes on this journey with him of both self-discovery and of learning the Spanish language and culture. We will notice the process as Paterniti slowly begins to incorporate Spanish words into his vocabulary and expressions that are culturally specific and especially appropriate for the

narrative. *Hasta luego* (“see you later”) is shortened to just “ta’lo” (83);² he soon begins to refer to his friends as his “majos” (231); and, adjectives as well as expletives are inserted into his narrative just as he heard them being used in the storytelling and conversation taking place all around him.

The reader of *The Telling Room*, will learn about dairy products but that is primarily the motive that brings the author in contact with the people. In Spanish, the “telling room” is “el contador” which means a place for counting or a person who counts (as in accountant) coming from the verb “contar” but there is a play on words here because this verb also means “to tell.” A “telling room” or “contador” is a combination of both meanings—it is an entrance to a cave or underground cellar used for processing and storing wine and cheese that needs to be counted and it is place where locals gather to tell stories and pass the time (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 17).

In this special place, the author will engage the Other who, for him, are the people of Spain but this is a diverse country and he develops a characterization throughout the book of a specific type of Spaniard. “Old Castilian” or ‘Castellano Viejo’ is a descriptive term that in Spain has taken on different connotations depending on the sensibilities and concerns of the time as well as the intentions of the person using it. It has meant someone whose family’s roots in the area of Castile date back many generations and, therefore, presumably one need not question their allegiance both to the King and the Church. According to *The New York Times* article written by Paterniti the “contador” or telling room was connected directly to this Old Castilian lifestyle:

² Regarding pronunciation, the most notable difference in Castilian Spanish is the distinction made between the “s” (like an English “s”) and “ci”, “ce” and “z” which are pronounced like “th” as in “thin” or “they.”

In explaining the cave's former function as a storehouse, Ambrosio had conjured "the Old Castilian," the mythic figure in this land who planted . . . wheat by hand, who endured hailstorms that, in a blink, might viciously erase a year's work in the vineyards. The Old Castilian was guided by a chivalrous code long past, never buckling under the failures heaped upon him by nature or relenting in the face of the enemy. He carried those heavy casks of wine up to the caves on his shoulders, singing a *jota*, where they were counted by the man in the telling room. (Paterniti "An American Man's Quest")

This becomes a recurrent theme as the author struggles to understand, accept, appreciate, and eventually even emulate the lifestyle of an "Old Castilian" personified by Ambrosio, the cheesemaker. The author will even refer to himself as "Ambrosio's mini-me" (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 175) and think of himself as ". . . in training to become an Old Castilian" (204). He writes:

So perhaps I envied a man like Ambrosio, whose strength seemed to derive from the pulse of the earth in this place, from being an Old Castilian who accepted the violence and vicissitudes of nature. And yet he'd found the key to his universe in the multitudes contained by a piece of cheese, by its absolute grandeur. (*The Telling Room* 88)

In the famous Castilian work of literature, *El Quijote*, written by Miguel de Cervantes in 1605, the two principal characters Don Quijote and Sancho Panza become more and more like each as the work develops. As Salvador de Madariaga in *Guía del lector del Quijote* explains, this process is referred to as "quijotización"—by which the squire evolves into a figure with the attributes of Don Quijote (137-45) and "sanchificación"—as Don Quijote becomes more like

Sancho Panza (147-59). An example of *quijotización* that Madariaga uses from *El Quijote* is when Sancho Panza returns home temporarily and explains to his wife why he needs to leave again and return to his adventures as Don Quijote's squire (137).

Likewise, Paterniti will express repeatedly throughout *The Telling Room*, his admiration for Ambrosio and will demonstrate his desire to speak, act, eat and even think like him. Paterniti has a similar experience like that of Sancho Panza when he returns home and explains to his wife his need to return to Guzmán to have more adventures with Ambrosio. He even convinces her to pack up the home and kids to go with him there as he wishes for his family to experience the Old Castilian lifestyle for themselves (135-36).

Interestingly, the opposite never seems to happen in Paterniti's experience: in *The Telling Room* we have a "quijotización" of Paterniti without the "sanchificación" of Ambrosio. Ambrosio cannot become like Paterniti (as Don Quijote became like Sancho Panza) because that would be incongruous with his Old Castilian lifestyle. Eventually Ambrosio does make a business trip to New York and Paterniti meets him for dinner at a steak restaurant and for some sightseeing. The author comments on the disappointing experience, "The problem was that the spell was broken. In Manhattan Ambrosio didn't seem to have the energy to talk about Guzmán, for it didn't seem pertinent or resonant here, dwarfed and bewildered as he was by the city. . . ." (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 314).

At times, in Spain, the idea of being an "Old Castilian" is criticized and satirized for example in the well-known work by Mariano José de Larra from his essay "El castellano viejo" ("The Old Castilian") written in 1832. Larra's narrator refers to one of the central characters, Braulio, as "mi castellano viejo." Through use of the possessive pronoun, he is presumably

referring to a specific friend but that individual represents those Castilians in general who live or are perceived to live according to this lifestyle.

According to Leonard Perry in his article, “La mesa española en el Madrid de Larra,” Larra is addressing a prototype of the 1800’s—a Spaniard who is an “hombre crudo en extremo e ignorante de las reglas más elementales de la urbanidad” ‘extremely crude man and ignorant of the most elementary rules of civility’ (58). In this respect, Ambrosio, in *The Telling Room*, is quite different from the Old Castilian of Larra’s writings as the cheesemaker is knowledgeable about the ways of the world and even ends up traveling quite a bit outside of Spain but he chooses to adhere as much as possible to his traditional lifestyle as a philosophical decision based on his values and his interpretation of what it means to be Old Castilian. Ambrosio lives in his traditional manners not out of ignorance but because he is knowledgeable about other lifestyles and feels the Old Castilian way is better. It represents his “grandísima filosofía” or ‘great philosophy’ that Paterniti summarizes as “. . . anything representing an antidote to the shrink-wrapped, digital mess of the modern world . . .” (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 171).

An important part of the Old Castilian lifestyle for both Larra and Paterniti is the food and that remains markedly consistent even though their writings are separated by more than 180 years! Larra describes a birthday banquet in 1832 that includes fish, various types of poultry, olives, among many other dishes, and a stew that contained garbanzo beans, ham, bacon and other ingredients that are still central to Castilian cuisine.

For Ambrosio, in *The Telling Room*, food is an integral part of his *grandísima filosofía* regarding life and his preferred Old Castilian lifestyle. His famous cheese, needs to be made in small batches, with “love and care” (122) from locally-produced ingredients of the highest quality. The “Old Castilian” in *The Telling Room* drinks red wine from a local vineyard

(preferably his own) and Paterniti details the typical cuisine eaten at Ambrosio's wooden table in the telling room, "Chorizo, lomo ("loin"), stews, olives, fish, wine, nuts . . . lamb, fresh lettuce, bread, cheeses, flan, paella, tomatoes, peaches..." (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 195-96). This food exemplifies the life philosophy of Ambrosio and the contrasts between old traditions and new—with new being seen as unhealthy and tasteless and old as good because it implies traditional techniques of raising and preparing food that is locally produced, healthier, and better tasting.

Ambrosio's cheese is the perfect example of these contrasts between old, traditional ways and modern, new ones. Some even believed that it could transport them mentally and emotionally back to the past and to memories of what is perceived to be a better way of life. We are reminded of the sensation that Marcel Proust described in *In Search of Lost Time* when the narrator dipped the shell-shaped madeleine cookie in his Linden tea and became overwhelmed by memories and emotions from the past. Proust writes:

. . . the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (vol. 1 "Swann's Way")

Paterniti writes about Ambrosio, "All of his expectations had been met the day his father had slipped the queso in his mouth and momentarily become a boy again" (*The Telling Room* 73). Others in Guzmán felt the same effect of being transported back in time to their youth by this cheese as Paterniti wrote later in *The New York Times*, "Working closely with his mother, he claimed to have recovered the old family recipe . . . and when the villagers first tried that Molinos cheese, they found it so good that they were transported back to their own mothers'

kitchens” (Paterniti "An American Man's Quest"). When Paterniti finally has the opportunity to try the cheese for himself, he writes: “I now understood, if vaguely, how the cheese must have created a conduit to the past, for its concentration was a force, an energy, a momentum, the psychic drill bit boring a wormhole in this Castilian space-time continuum” (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 242).

Larra writes in “El castellano viejo” about receiving an invitation for a birthday dinner from a friend named Braulio who says about himself, “. . . ya sabes que yo soy franco y castellano viejo: el pan pan y el vino vino . . . ” ‘you already know that I am frank and an old Castilian: I call the bread bread and the wine wine’. One characteristic that Larra’s Old Castilian holds in common with Paterniti’s is that both Braulio and Ambrosio are men who speak frankly and directly. The narrator in Larra’s “El viejo castellano” is not at all pleased about having to go to the Castilian’s home for the birthday celebration but he believes that in order to maintain friendships it is necessary to put up with gifts saying, “. . . en este mundo, para conservar amigos es preciso tener el valor de aguantar sus obsequios” ‘in this world, in order to stay friends with someone it is necessary to have the valor to be able to put up with their presents’. Paterniti, at times, finds himself needing to graciously accept the well-intentioned hospitality of the Spaniards even though he is put in awkward situations or forced to eat food to which he is unaccustomed. This is especially evident in the episode in *The Telling Room* in which he is served fried goats’ ears (237-38).

Most of the Castilian food Paterniti enjoys but the episode in *The Telling Room* with the deep-fried sheeps’ ears serves as a comical yet poignant reminder that Paterniti remains a product of his own culture and is not accustomed to eating all parts of the sheep. When presented with a plate full of deep-fried sheeps’ ears he writes “. . . outwardly I showed no fear, affected an

expression of joy and anticipation. Venga! Dame! I was trying hard to prove I'd passed my summer audition, that I was one of them" (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 237). Later he will add "So what if back home animal ears were used as dog chews? The Old Castilian recognized a delicacy when it was laid out before him" (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 238).

The second part of the title of *The Telling Room* referring to "love, betrayal, and revenge" is the summary of the cheesemaker's relationship with his best friend Julián Mateos who shares with Ambrosio the bond of being Old Castilians. Paterniti writes, "They spoke in the same low register . . . burst out with the same ribald laughter, made the same gestures. Most of all, they were, and would always be, connected by the same principles: the decency and honesty of that ideal embodied in the figure of the Old Castilian" (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 69).

When Ambrosio believes that Julián has betrayed him through mismanagement that led to financial ruin and his loss of ownership of the cheese factory it is a violation not just against Ambrosio and their friendship but against their very way of life. The combination of Ambrosio's personality and his adherence to his belief in a code of conduct for Old Castilians will make impossible any rapprochement between the two. Ambrosio will disown his friend Julián as no longer an Old Castilian and, according to Paterniti's account, be disdainfully referred to as a "new" one, "It was a tale of two men who had loved each other like brothers, the one who trusted and the other who cheated. It pitted purity against greed, creation against destruction, heart against spleen, the Old Castilian against the new" (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 160).

As Paterniti holds Ambrosio as the ideal Old Castilian, the figure who Ambrosio esteems is Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar known as El Cid—the Castilian eleventh-century knight of both historical and mythical proportions. Born in Burgos (not far from Guzmán) as Paterniti writes of

El Cid, “his Castilianness becomes one of his greatest virtues, or rather, he becomes Castile itself, the two interchangeable”. Of Ambrosio’s explanation of El Cid, Paterniti explains:

. . . it was the way he told the legend: its immediacy (as if it had taken place yesterday); the emphasis he put on El Cid’s devotion to an ageless code (which was Ambrosio’s code) . . . [and] his allegiance to Castile above all things (for no land in the world was more worthy of such allegiance). Then there was the heartache felt by El Cid at having lost his friend, the former king Sancho—and finally the terrible betrayal by Alfonso that turned him out. (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 200)

Paterniti is clearly making a comparison between Ambrosio and El Cid. Ambrosio’s loss of his relationship with his best friend Julián and his former way of life as a Castilian cheesemaker is compared to El Cid’s tragic banishment from Castile and forced estrangement from his beloved family. When Paterniti attempts to convince Ambrosio that he needs to meet with Julián to discuss their differences and perhaps come to peace with each other, he refers to El Cid hoping he can convince Ambrosio to show the same forgiveness toward Julián that El Cid showed for his king. He writes:

“I’ve been thinking a lot about El Cid—” I said, and then I regurgitated his story, unraveling it slowly, describing El Cid’s loyalty for his friend the king. . . . This is also the legend of what it means to be Castilian,” I said. Ambrosio sat and listened. He considered deeply. (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 312)

Paterniti will use similar analogies and comparisons to Spanish cultural references when he describes his visits to the Museum of the Prado in Madrid. He makes a comparison between the mystery of the Black Paintings by Goya and the demise of Ambrosio’s cheese noting that

people want to believe a story even it is not firmly based in the facts. The Goya paintings seem to reflect the conflicts that he has observed in Guzmán. He contemplates the paintings, the conflict between Ambrosio and Julián, and his role of writer who reports the information that seems to be evolving into a negotiator or even participator in the story:

What if I could find a way to mend their friendship? We might repaint Goya's *Duel with Cudgels* (for if one were to erase the cudgels, the two men appeared on the verge of falling into exhausted embrace). . . . Yes, this was all about cheese. And now by resolving it, we could begin on the road to world peace. (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 311)

The author explores the connections between food and art with an analogy between the making of cheese that requires three main ingredients or steps and an artist who begins with the three primary colors of red, green and yellow but ends with works as different as Goya or Picasso (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 60). The Páramo de Guzmán cheese is Ambrosio's great work of art and Paterniti would like to see the story that he is writing as his own artistic masterpiece. As he stated, "Ambrosio had told me that he longed for the cheese he'd once made; I longed for something to make, too. Out of words, on a page" (*The Telling Room* 136). In addition he makes specific comments on some of the more famous artistic works that speak to his inner struggle as a writer and the writer's block that prevents him from finishing his manuscript.

Ultimately, for Paterniti, finishing the book means he no longer needs to visit the village of Guzmán in Castilla y León. He reflects on this concern, "Somehow the one thing I hadn't considered was that when this story was fully told, then the trip would be over—and I would render myself locked out" (Paterniti "An American Man's Quest"). Woven throughout the book,

Paterniti gives us insight into the craft of writing, in general, and specific challenges in writing nonfiction. As the author becomes more and more involved in the lives of people he meets in Guzmán, he realizes his own concerns regarding objectivity as the subject has captured his emotions over the 13 years he spends visiting and living there while doing the research for his book.

He is also concerned that the story will not end as he desires with justice for Ambrosio's loss of ownership of the cheese factory and a peaceful settlement with the former best friend Julián. Paterniti is worried that his further investigation into the book's great mystery could destroy the idealized vision he has of the cheesemaker and the Old Castilian lifestyle he represents. Throughout the book he is looking for the fairy tale ending so he can say that everyone lived happily ever after. He wonders, "Would it be possible to tell a tale so powerful, so fantastic and true, so ridiculous and redemptive, that it would in one fell swoop resurrect the cheese . . . and memorialize a waning way of life, all the while giving someone like me an excuse for sinking deeper into the soil of Guzmán. . ." (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 136-37).

However, he realizes the difficulty in finding the happy ending and ending the story at that point, "The happy ending relies on patience—but not too much. Add even more time, and the story curdles: desire momentarily sated, the boy becomes insufferable; the king is made a fool of. Someone calls for everyone's head. Real life intervenes, and makes its mess of things." (Paterniti *The Telling Room* 82) As Paterniti stated, ". . . in order to finish the book, my greatest struggle was forcing myself to try to see him as a man, a person with flaws like all of us, but who as you say had this 'mythical proportion,' and life philosophy, that I really needed to believe in." (Weinzweig)

In this paper we have seen that the Old Castilian lifestyle as conceptualized by Ambrosio's *grandísima filosofía* is key to Paterniti's nonfiction work *The Telling Room*. Specifically, by analyzing references to Castilla and the people who live there as well as literary works by Spanish authors Cervantes and Larra, the historical and legendary figure of El Cid, and paintings by Goya we come to a more complete understanding of *The Telling Room* and the concept of what it means to be an "Old Castilian." The author engages otherness by going somewhere unknown to him, learning the language and becoming knowledgeable about the culture. He then undergoes an interior struggle to complete the writing process and his book—in part, because he wants, like Sancho Panza, to continue his adventures in Spain and, in part, because he does not want to discredit the cheesemaker who is the embodiment for Paterniti of what it means to be an Old Castilian. In conclusion we have seen that a book presumably about cheese becomes an exploration of language, culture, history, literature, and art, leading to discussions of universal themes of relationships and life.

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