



Interview: Camilo José Cela

Beardsley; Camilo José Cela; Eva Kronik

Diacritics, Vol. 2, No. 1. (Spring, 1972), pp. 42-45.

Stable URL:

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interview / *Camilo José Cela*

Camilo José Cela, born in Galicia in 1916, published his first novel, *The Family of Pascual Duarte*, in 1942. With this work he revived a genre that for a generation in Spain had ceded primacy to poetry and set the directions that the post-Civil War Spanish novel was to take: commitment to the immediacy of contemporary Spain, an always critical and often despondent view of man's social and existential reality, and a self-conscious manipulation of the novelistic form. A superabundance of writers took up his lead and his style, but among them Cela maintains his preeminence as a novelist and writer of stories, sketches, and travel accounts. His latest novel, *San Camilo, 1936*, a controversial account of the Civil War, was published in 1969. In addition to several short stories, some of his best titles have been translated into English: the novels *The Family of Pascual Duarte* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1964), *Rest Home* (New York: Las Americas, 1961), *The Hive* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953), and *Mrs. Caldwell Speaks to Her Son* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1968), and an account of Cela's wanderings through a part of Castile, *Journey*

to the *Alcarria* (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1964).

Having settled in Mallorca in order to escape from the distractions and obligations of Madrid and to be able to concentrate on his writing and on the literary journal, *Papeles de Son Armadans*, which he edits, Cela rarely consents to interviews. The conversation in which he engaged with Theodore S. Beardsley, Jr., Director of the Hispanic Society of America, was recorded in Spanish at the Society on the occasion of one of Cela's visits to New York.¹ Touching on subjects essential to the understanding of Cela—the so-called “tremendista” movement, the interplay of cruelty and tenderness in his work, his connections with Spanish writers of the past and with North American novelists—the section that follows is at once direct and evasive in typical Cela fashion.

Beardsley—Don Camilo, the reason for your presence here in New York is your participation in the recent international congress of writers at Long Island University. For you personally as a writer, what was the main accomplishment of the congress?

Camilo José Cela—I can repeat to you what I said there in a similar conversation about the advantages and disadvantages, timeliness and untimeliness of such literary congresses. I feel that the most important thing are the personal contacts. That is, the notion that during a writers' congress we are going to straighten out the chronically chaotic condition of the world would be the height of naïveté. However, the very fact that a group of people who willingly devote themselves to the same task in the different languages of various lands in the four corners of the globe—that these people sit down together at the same table strikes me as important in itself. I already pointed this out to some extent when I said that perhaps the Hispanic Society should develop the means to help solve the problems of Hispanic culture in its widest sense—not in too specialized a way, since that is the province of the universities, but from a broader base.

B.—And on the other hand, what do you feel was the congress' most valuable accomplishment for the public, that is, for the teachers, students, and others who came to hear what you had to say?

C.J.C.—Well, they did come to listen, as an audience, but they also came as actors. I think that the greatest benefit that teachers and students of literature derive from these congresses is the conviction that we writers really exist. That is, that we are not abstractions or entelechies but people who wear jackets and trousers, who have wives, children, and everyday problems. Because a writer who turns his back on reality is a pure abstraction. That has been a fact of life for a long time in this world. For me the knowledge that a writer whose work may have been studied carefully and lovingly actually exists as a person who lights up his cigarette and asks for a glass of water has a real humanizing value in rounding out the picture of him that his literature may have left in the readers' minds. I think that the symbiosis literature-persona, literature-person-who-writes has to be absolute. I can't conceive of a split per-

sonality in this profession of mine. If the work does not reflect the author and if the one does not mold the other into the finished product—that is, the poem, the essay, the novel, etc.—then it reeks of falseness.

B.—The impression that you caused a few years ago when you visited one of my classes at the University of Wisconsin was a real revelation: that is, the knowledge that Cela was not a book but a man. Well now, as almost unanimous critical opinion would have it, you are Spain's most important modern novelist . . .

C.J.C.—Now, now, just a moment . . . We writers aren't like football teams which can be rated from one to ten or from one to twenty . . .

B.—But you *have* been rated! In any event, as a very important modern novelist. As you know, the zeal for academic classification has led to the invention of the literary school called *tremendismo* and has placed you among its most important exponents. It is well known that you have expressed some very interesting reactions to this label.

C.J.C.—To classify me as the father of *tremendismo* is to commit a dreadful error in chronology. I am certainly no child, but I am substantially younger than the Archpriest of Talavera, for example, and than most of the Spanish writers of the Middle Ages and the Golden Age. And tell me, didn't Quevedo, in half or more than half of his works, write precisely in that vein? And jumping distance and years to the Generation of 1898, the same is true of a significant portion of Valle-Inclán's work. I believe that this is a Spanish quality as old as Spanish literature itself. *Tremendismo* is a word that has become successful, but it is an expression for people like sextons or . . . I don't even think it makes sense, because *tremendismo* is nothing more than realism insofar as it tries to reflect reality faithfully. If this reality is “tremendous,” well, what can we do about it? We have to come to terms with it exactly as it presents itself to us, exactly as we have found it. The world in which it has fallen to your lot and to mine to live seems to have become a little more peaceful, but it certainly doesn't give us the urge to dip our pen into a rose-colored inkwell.

B.—What would you say has been your particular contribution to the Spanish novel of today?

C.J.C.—Assuming that I have made any . . . not that it's anything new, but I think it's that I've always been honest with myself. I have tried to express my thoughts in times and in circumstances that weren't always very favorable; I have always tried—I don't know to what extent I've succeeded—to avoid betraying my convictions. I think something, then I write it down. Afterwards it turns out that I antagonize certain groups, whoever they may be. But that isn't important. Actually, sometimes I have been more than merely criticized. Whenever critics have insulted me, even violently, I've kept my silence. I was doing my duty, my duty towards myself. One of the most debated issues today among writers is

¹ The present extract is translated from the recorded interview Charla con Camilo José Cela (*Archive of Recorded Voice*, 001); accompanying printed text (*New York*, 1966), pp. 4-14.

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l'engagement, commitment, and one is of course committed by his own conscience from birth.

B.—It seems to be the fate of every important writer to be misunderstood in some way, and we might even say, the more important the writer, the greater the misunderstanding. The question of *tremendismo* aside, what aspect of your work do you feel has been most ignored or most misunderstood by the critics?

C.J.C.—I'm not sure I can say. Criticism frequently builds on previous criticism. It's a kind of mimesis, a contagion passed on by some critics to others. Very often the snatches of humor that add an element of tenderness to my work have been misunderstood, for they appear even on pages that have been branded as cynical. I believe the opposite, that is, it is certainly true that people with physical and even moral, not to say intellectual, flaws appear constantly in my pages. But I would beg the clear-sighted reader to see to what extent the page that was presumed cruel was written with compassion.

In a Puerto Rican journal, I don't know if it is *La Torre* or *Asomante*—I couldn't tell you off-hand—there is a long article written by a North American professor or student, I don't know which, dealing with cruelty in my characters.² Well, it seems to me that it isn't quite accurate to speak about cruelty in such terms. What happens is that the mere representation of a cripple is taken to be by definition cruel.

B.—Perhaps we should speak rather about man's cruelty than about cruelty in your works.

C.J.C.—The fact is that this cruelty is part of man's very condition. And the only way one can salve the violence in the world all around us is by injecting into it a few drops of something—call it charity or sympathy or love or tenderness or whatever you like. Always trying to see to it that the individual is conscious of himself as an individual, that he doesn't end up as a number in a file drawer.

I should add that a goodly number of critics have seen things my way. That is, the negative faction certainly exists, but, after all, there is a positive view also, for which I am very grateful.

B.—There are already several doctoral theses on your work in the United States, I think at least one in France, and surely others . . .

C.J.C.—Yes, there are more.

B.—What impression do you have of these works? Do you think that perhaps these young people have been more fair . . . ?

C.J.C.—Look here, doctoral theses, precisely because they are all written by young people, are brimful of especially good faith. I accord unlimited value to good faith. Yesterday my wife telephoned me from Palma de Mallorca to ask what answer to give a young girl—I think her name is Coriano—who is writing her doctoral thesis about me at a university in Bucharest, Rumania. That this girl should have telephoned from Bucharest to Palma de Mallorca, spending her money for that, a girl from a country not in close contact with the rest of the world, writing on a work of mine, or at least on something pertaining to Spanish culture, strikes me as particularly exciting. Of course, as you know, there are good, bad, and indifferent doctoral theses.

B.—Naturally.

C.J.C.—But that doesn't matter. When people write me asking for information, I send them all the books that have been published, everything. And if I don't send them a bouquet of flowers or a pound of cookies, it's because that isn't done nowadays. This interest of theirs really moves me, and it isn't because of anything they may have to say about me. That's beside the point. A hundred years from now we'll all be pushing up daisies, so what matters is the complete good faith they devote to a page. That cannot be repaid in any way, as far as I'm concerned.

Whether they say afterwards that one is a genius or an idiot is all the same. When you're a pile of dust, you're neither one nor the other. So what difference does it make?

B.—Perhaps we can turn to the future of the novel, not only in Spain, but also in Europe and America. Constantly and ever since I can remember we have been hearing that the novel is in a state of crisis, that all avenues have been explored, and that the source of novelistic inspiration has run dry. I am sure you don't agree with this, but I would like to hear your opinion about the direction that the novel might be taking.

C.J.C.—That's ground on which one has to tread lightly. As you say, one reads every day that the novel is a genre that has died. Well, I feel that it is a genre that has just been born. Many years ago, perhaps twenty-five years or more, I devoted myself to collecting definitions of the novel. I came up with more than three hundred different ones. And I found that none satisfied me, because the definition of the novel which would fit Balzac or Dickens, for example, would not fit Kafka. The one that would fit, say, Galdós or Flaubert wouldn't suit Steinbeck. Name anybody you like, fit him with a definition, and it won't do for the next writer you could mention. And so it goes. How can something be in a state of crisis if we don't even know what it is? I finally arrived at the rather inane definition I proposed in a lecture—facetiously, of course—that the novel is anything in the form of a book which under the heading on its title page says in parentheses, "novel." The day that a thinker or a student of literary esthetics arrives at a definition of the novel that serves us all we'll have a real definition. Now, I believe that the novel is a protean genre into which everything fits. We know more or less what poetry is. We undoubtedly know what the essay is because it is perhaps the most clearly defined of the literary genres. But who would dare to say what the novel is or is not? In the novel there is room for poetry, for tenderness and violence, for description and investigation, for analysis and synthesis; there is room for portrayal of the countryside and of characters and of non-characters. That is, man from within and from without. What happens is that we novelists tend to be too dogmatic, and we admit as a novel only what we believe to be a novel, which may not be the case at all. We have to be flexible and malleable enough to allow that what we write may be a novel

² Reference is to Richard L. Predmore, "La imagen del hombre en las obras de Camilo José Cela," *La Torre*, 9 (1961), 81-102.

but that there is no reason to deny the next fellow his right to call what he has written a novel also. Where is the genre heading? I don't know. It is probably headed in a thousand different directions. There will always be an intellectual novel, full of wisdom and knowledge, with even an underlying philosophy. Why should this be a bad thing? There will also always be the elemental novel, the simple novel, the kind of novel written, for example, in the style of Dickens or Baroja, who seem to me two exceptional novelists, or Balzac or Galdós. And then there is the opposite: the purely intellectual novel, the novel by Joyce or by whomever you may name. Well, and why not? Why should we insist that novels have well-known boundaries, that it is a matter of amassing material or years and that then the road ends like a dead-end street? There is no reason at all to believe this. As I said, I think it is a genre in the process of being born. We simply do not know exactly what it is.

B.—One of the statements made especially in American criticism about the American novel is that with the deaths of Faulkner and Hemingway, the novel has died.

C.J.C.—No!

B.—What is your opinion—that is, European opinion—about the state of the novel in the United States today? I mean, after Faulkner.

C.J.C.—You understand that over there we do not have, or at least I do not have, the very latest information. To be sure, none of us is irreplaceable. Whenever a great writer or scientist dies, there are always cries that his place cannot be filled. There is an old Czech tale with a highly instructive moral. What does it say? That if the children had not always been more intelligent than their parents, humanity would not have progressed. Nevertheless, every time that an outstanding master dies, we think that he is irreplaceable. I think that's nothing but talk. Faulkner, Steinbeck, John Dos Passos, Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis are extraordinary novelists. At least, they were. But the fact that they have died is no reason to believe that the wells have dried up. In Spain, after a long period of decadence and after the really extraordinary flourishing of our Golden Age, there appeared the generation of 1898 in prose and of 1927 in poetry, and they were by no means bad.

And one always thought: ah, now that Unamuno has died, now that Valle-Inclán is dead, or Baroja or Juan Ramón Jiménez or Machado. But other names will appear. I'm referring, of course, to significant literature because para-literature or sub-literature is always the same. Literature is like a torchlight parade, the way knowledge is, in general. One reaches a definite point and then goes forward from that definite point. As a rule, those living in their age do not see this process. But no matter. We writers do not create our work for political reasons but for historical ones. If it is worth something in the end, there it stands. If not, let the winds carry it off.

B.—You're suggesting that this idea of the critics is nothing but nostalgia.

C.J.C.—Of course, that's exactly what I'm saying. People always tend to talk in commonplaces. In order to sing the praises of Hemingway, for example, one doesn't have to say that the novel is dead. I was

honored with the friendship of Hemingway and of Baroja. Hemingway and I both attended Don Pío's funeral, and there is that nice anecdote of how Hemingway didn't want to lower the coffin. He said: "No, that's for you, his Spanish friends, to do." Well, they were two exceptional men, two writers of the first order, two unique novelists. But I think that to do justice to their memory it is not necessary to start from the false premise that today there exists a literary vacuum. Of course, that is what sometimes happens with overprotective parents. The children may be forty years old, but the parents go on believing that they are babes who don't know how to cross the street alone. But that isn't so; it is an extremely dangerous attitude.

B.—To wind things up, would you be kind enough to tell us something about your own future work? Naturally, not exact titles or anything that might obligate you in advance. Rather, I am interested in what directions you expect your work to take.

C.J.C.—Now that I have finally finished my house in Mallorca and gotten my books more or less organized, I would like to try to organize my mind as well. And I would like to follow in my work, for as long as necessary, a system of adding finishing touches rather than laying new cornerstones. In other words, I would like to complete everything that I have started, and that is quite a bit. Among the things that I have started . . . why not give titles? I have a novel on hand entitled *La cesta de agua* (*The Basket of Water*), which is taking me on a rather arduous course, because for me writing is very difficult. I have the obligation towards myself and towards my esteemed friend and master Don Ramón Menéndez Pidal to finish my translation into modern Spanish of the *Poem of the Cid*. I am preparing a vocabulary that I've called *Secret Dictionary* in which I try to put in order, to define—of course, using authoritative sources wherever I could find them, because there is always the chance that one good day someone might turn up and say: "You have forgotten this." "Well, what can one do? I am terribly sorry"—a dictionary that I will call *Secret Dictionary* and in which I would like to include all those expressions that are *non sanctas*, that hold sway in the Spanish language but which the Academies—for reasons that I respect, whatever they may be—are still reluctant to accept. And I have other things pending and a big mess of papers. I think it will be peaceful in my new home, but of course it has been a *tour de force* not to have lost track of everything that I was doing. Moving is something like a cataclysm, an earthquake, a Caribbean hurricane—an experience that had me horrified, but fortunately it seems to be past history at last.³

(Translated by Eva Kronik)

³ The *Basket of Water* has not been published. The first volume of the *Secret Dictionary* appeared in Madrid in 1968 and sections of the *Poem of the Cid* are in the journal *Papeles de Son Armadans*. Recently Cela has also published a slim volume of verse about his trip to the United States; travel books on Barcelona and La Mancha; the novel *San Camilo*, 1936; and the oratorio *Maria Sabina*, which was premièred at Carnegie Hall in New York in April 1970.