



Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

DIRECCION DE CURSOS TEMPORALES

**EL LENGUAJE, MEDIO DE LIBERACION
EN LA OBRA DE ROSARIO CASTELLANOS.**

**(ENSAYO SEGUIDO DE LA TRADUCCION
AL INGLES DE "EL VIUDO ROMAN")**

TESIS PROFESIONAL

QUE PARA OBTENER EL TITULO DE:

**Maestría en Lengua Española y
Literatura Hispanoamericana**

P R E S E N T A :

Ruth Winterbottom Diggle



México, D. F.

1 9 7 3

**BIBLIOTECA SIMON BOLIVAR
CENTRO DE ENSEÑANZA
PARA EXTRANJEROS**



Universidad Nacional
Autónoma de México



UNAM – Dirección General de Bibliotecas
Tesis Digitales
Restricciones de uso

DERECHOS RESERVADOS ©
PROHIBIDA SU REPRODUCCIÓN TOTAL O PARCIAL

Todo el material contenido en esta tesis esta protegido por la Ley Federal del Derecho de Autor (LFDA) de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos (México).

El uso de imágenes, fragmentos de videos, y demás material que sea objeto de protección de los derechos de autor, será exclusivamente para fines educativos e informativos y deberá citar la fuente donde la obtuvo mencionando el autor o autores. Cualquier uso distinto como el lucro, reproducción, edición o modificación, será perseguido y sancionado por el respectivo titular de los Derechos de Autor.



BIBLIOTECA SIMON BOLIVAR
CENTRO DE ENSEÑANZA
PARA EXTRANJEROS

XN73

D5

ej.2



UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTÓNOMA
DE MÉXICO
DIRECCIÓN DE CORROS TEMPORALES

A Von E. Peacock

"un hombre,
en el mejor sentido de la palabra, bueno."
Antonio Machado

A Kim A. Peacock

"de la semilla nace el árbol. . ."
Miquel de Unamuno

I N D I C E

Prólogo.	I
<u>Llagas, lenguaje y liberación.</u>	1
<u>The Widower Román.</u>	42
Bibliografía	122

Prólogo

La sección más importante de esta tesis, la traducción de la novela corta, "El viudo Román", nació sin darme cuenta durante una clase de Traducción de Textos Literarios, al sugerir el maestro, Licenciado Raúl Ortiz y Ortiz, la traducción como una tarea común de la clase con la posibilidad de publicarla si los resultados la justificaban. Entusiasmados, los integrantes de la clase empezaron la traducción pero pronto nos dimos cuenta de que era una labor a largo plazo, lo que imposibilitaba la participación de los demás alumnos que estudiaban en México sólo durante una estancia breve.

Al querer continuar la traducción para mi tesis, el Licenciado Ortiz, muy generoso con su tiempo personal, aceptó seguir dirigiendo el trabajo. Estoy sumamente agradecida por haber tenido esta oportunidad de trabajar bajo su dirección porque su conocimiento extenso de la literatura y del lenguaje ha enriquecido mi propia vida. A la vez mi dominio del lenguaje, tanto español como inglés, ha mejorado y mi conocimiento del mundo mexicano se ha profundizado porque al traducir "El viudo Román" tuve necesidad de entender bien el significado de cada palabra y su contexto cultural para darle una interpretación inteligible. Espero haber logrado este fin.

Para completar la traducción y para cumplir con el requisito de la Maestría—una tesis escrita en español—presento un ensayo titulado Llagas, lenguaje y liberación, reflexiones más sobre el lenguaje como instrumento de cambio

N-0485



UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTÓNOMA
DE MÉXICO
DIRECCIÓN DE CUROS TEMPORALES

en la obra literaria y vida personal de Rosario Castellanos. Aunque el ensayo no se relaciona estrechamente con la traducción, sin embargo, al ir traduciendo "El viudo Román", se iba haciendo más consciente en mí, la preocupación de la autora respecto al lenguaje porque observé que las mujeres en la obra, personajes sin poder, no dominan el lenguaje, mientras que el protagonista masculino une a su poder un dominio hábil del lenguaje.

De esta observación al estudiar la obra literaria de Rosario Castellanos me pregunté ¿qué relación existe entre el sufrimiento de los personajes, su manejo del lenguaje y la mitigación de su dolor o liberación. Espero que el ensayo conteste esta pregunta.

Llagas, Lenguaje y Liberación

El trasfondo de la obra literaria de Rosario Castellanos consiste en la problemática suscitada por el lenguaje como instrumento de dominio con implicaciones tanto positivas como negativas. Positivas respecto a nuestro posible dominio propio de lenguaje por el cual podemos convertir el caos de la condición humana en un cosmos comprensible y ordenado. Y crear un mundo equilibrado es ahinco constante del hombre, afirma la autora al decir: "el caos es un estado del que, desde el momento de su creación, el mundo ha tratado de salir. Lo amorfo es lo opuesto a la forma que el artista da a su obra".¹

Sin embargo, hay implicaciones negativas en cuanto a hechos históricos y políticos en vista de que el lenguaje ha sido utilizado para dominar ciertos grupos humanos vencidos en conflictos nacionales e internacionales, grupos cuyos propios idiomas fueron rechazados y sustituidos por los de sus conquistadores. Así, desheredados del idioma propio, los vencidos encontraban más difícil ordenar el mundo con un lenguaje ajeno y tal enajenación los mantenía más fácilmente en este estado avasallado por un tiempo prolongado.

¹Roberto Venegas, "Con Rosario Castellanos", Diorama de la Cultura, 17 de diciembre de 1967, p. 3.

Al reemplazar oficialmente los idiomas nativos de México durante la Conquista y Colonialización, el castellano les impuso desventajas a los indígenas. A pesar del esfuerzo español de aborrecer los idiomas mexicanos, todavía hoy viven muchos mexicanos que ignoran español. Y los que han adquirido esta lengua sobrepuesta encuentran ciertas dificultades a veces, debido a que "el castellano es un idioma creado por un pueblo profundamente diferente al nuestro, con otros antecedentes históricos, otros temperamentos, otras circunstancias, otros proyectos, otras necesidades expresivas".² Por eso, dice Rosario Castellanos que "el idioma no solo es problemática cuando funciona en tanto que escrito sino cuando existe en tanto que mexicana".³ Así plantea la dualidad del problema. Si la escritora tiene que crear un lenguaje propio al ambiente mexicano para aclarar la realidad nacional, a la vez tiene que actuar dentro de este ambiente respecto a su propia vida. Ha de encontrar una correspondencia entre la civilización y la cultura, entre el hacer y el ser.

Porque durante casi cuatro siglos el castellano era un objeto de ornamento en vez de vehículo de comunicación, "la 'fermosa cobertura' con que se apacigua el horror al vacío",⁴ nuestra autora cree que ahora "hay que crear otro lenguaje, hay que partir desde otro punto, buscar la perla dentro de cada concha, la almendra en el interior de la corteza. Porque la palabra es la encarnación de la verdad, porque el lenguaje tiene significado".⁵ En vez de ornamento, el lenguaje debe ser el modo mismo para pesquisar la esencia de cada objeto,

²Rosario Castellanos, "Divagación sobre el idioma: otra vuelta en torno a la noria", Excelsior, 28 de junio de 1969, p.6.

³Ibid., p.6.

⁴Rosario Castellanos, "Notas al margen: el lenguaje como instrumento de dominio", Mujer que sabe latín. . . (México: SepSetentas, Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1973, p. 199.

⁵Ibid.. p.200

de cada hombre. Un instrumento tanto para poetas como para albañiles para que sea posible la comunicación entre todos los seres humanos igualmente. Esto es el propósito verdadero del lenguaje, afirma Rosario Castellanos al decir: "El sentido de la palabra es su destinatario: el otro que escucha, que entiende y que, cuando responde, convierte a su interlocutor en el que escucha y el que entiende, estableciendo así la relación del diálogo que sólo es posible entre quienes se consideran y se tratan como iguales y que sólo es fructífero entre quienes se quieren libres".⁶

Un lenguaje superado y empleado por el hombre para conseguir su liberación propia y no para encautivar a sus semejantes.

Ahora bien, con esta introducción sobre el lenguaje considerado como tela de fondo, intentaremos explorar el significado específico del lenguaje como instrumento de dominio y ver cómo se matiza en la vida personal y en el trato social no solamente de la autora sino también en los de sus personajes.

Al enfrentarnos a la problemática del vivir, hemos de aprender a satisfacer nuestras necesidades y deseos desde el primer respiro hasta la muerte. Búsqueda constante que exige gran esfuerzo individual; en el cómo de la pesquisa se halla el camino personal de cada sujeto, su destino, no tanto dado cuanto elegido.

Las sendas y destinos que aquí nos interesan son los de Rosario Castellanos, los de sus compatriotas y los de los protagonistas que crea en su ficción. Son vidas penetradas por el dolor, un dolor a veces tan profundo que pareciera no sólo llagarles al cuerpo sino también al alma. El otro factor que comparten como común denominador es el lenguaje, que

⁶Rosario Castellanos, "Notas al margen: el lenguaje como instrumento de dominio", p. 202.

se relaciona estrechamente con su dolor y sus destinos.

En general, Rosario Castellanos considera que con un hábil manejo del lenguaje, podemos, en parte, modificar y hasta sanar las llagas que nos hieren; a veces, afirma que el lenguaje alivia el dolor que estas llagas producen. En la medida en que ocurre este proceso curativo, el hombre encuentra su liberación. Sin embargo, hay una excepción notable dentro de la obra literaria que analizamos. Nos referimos a Pedro González Winiktón, protagonista de Oficio de tinieblas. Sin embargo, en su oportunidad examinaremos este caso especial. Por ahora primeramente analicemos qué importancia tiene el lenguaje en la vida personal de la autora.

Cuando en la capital mexicana nació Rosario Castellanos el 15 de junio de 1925, apareció una niña que sufría las llagas de los seres sensibles y extremadamente inteligentes. Por ello, desde pequeña fue consciente de lo sobrecogedora e incomprensible que puede ser la vida; sentíase perturbada y muchas veces herida ante un mundo externo tan caótico y lleno de injusticias y paradojas, que le resultaban difíciles de comprender. Pero también temprano descubrió que podía impedir o cambiar esta dolorosa confusión con un antídoto eficaz: el escribir como proceso catártico para aliviar el dolor al verbalizarlo.

Obviamente dotada de un talento que desde muy joven manifestó, Rosario Castellanos decidió consagrar su vida a la creación literaria puesto que al escribir no solamente podía reducir el caos a las dimensiones de un cosmos personal, sino también disminuir su propio dolor al elevarlo a un nivel objetivo y universal. En varias ocasiones expresó su necesidad de escribir para clarificar y poner en orden el mundo desorganizado que la rodeaba. Así durante una entrevista concedida a Clara Passafari de Argentina le dijo:

"Escribo para entender. A mí me importa mucho esclarecer los objetos que están a mi alrededor y no los entiendo sino cuando los formulo en palabras. La primera imagen del mundo que tengo clara es la escritura".⁷

Pero Rosario Castellanos aplica este mismo proceso no sólo a su vida personal sino, además lo expande para comprender el mundo de los personajes que formula en su creación literaria. Si encuentra una situación sin pies ni cabeza que la aturde, la ataca con su pluma. Poco a poco despoja los elementos extrínsecos para entender realmente la esencia fundamental del fenómeno. Explicó nuestra autora la creación de los personajes de Oficio de tinieblas así: "Escribir ha sido, más que nada, explicarme a mí misma las cosas que no entiendo. Cosas que, a primera vista, son confusas o difícilmente comprensibles. Como los personajes indígenas eran, de acuerdo con los datos históricos, enigmáticos, traté de conocerlos en profundidad. Me pregunto por qué actuaban de esa manera, qué circunstancias los condujeron a ser de ese modo. Así, comencé a desentrañarlos y a elaborarlos. Un acto me llevaba al inmediato anterior y, por ese método, llegué a conocerlos íntegramente".⁸

Al escribir sobre los indios, forzosamente llegó a comprenderlos a la vez que sublimó la propia angustia que le producían los indios desheredados. Rosario Castellanos explica esta sublimación en su ensayo, "Escrituras tempranas": "El narrador—por mero hecho de haber escrito ese papel—siente que disminuye la tensión en la que se debatía, como si la escritura hubiera operado sobre él (no sobre las circunstancias exteriores) a la manera de un bálsamo. Algo misterioso ha ocurrido: una modificación liberadora".⁹

⁷ Clara Passafari, "Los cambios en la concepción y estructura de la narrativa mexicana desde 1947", Disertación Universidad de Litoral (Argentina), 1968, p. 173.

⁸ Emmanuel Carballo, Diecinueve protagonistas de la literatura mexicana del siglo xx, (México: Empresas Editoriales, S.A., 1965), p. 422.

⁹ Castellanos, "Escrituras tempranas", Mujer que sabe latín..., p.215.

La autora expuso pormenorizadamente su postura a Luis Adolfo Domínguez en una entrevista publicada en la Revista de Bellas Artes en 1969. En vista de que su literatura es de tipo social con extraordinaria vigencia en México, el Sr. Domínguez le preguntó si al escribir pensaba ella en un grupo, una clase que debe leer sus libros. Rosario Castellanos repuso: "Tal vez, de una manera posterior, cuando reflexiono sobre la literatura y demás, puedo pensarlo; pero de pronto es algo meramente instintivo el escribir. De momento yo necesito escribir, y ése es un tipo de vivencia no estrictamente intelectual...

...Recuerdo por ejemplo una frase de Mallarmé: 'Yo escribo para un joven secreto'...un joven que estaba oculto quién sabe dónde. Yo no creo que existiera ese joven secreto ni que esté oculto. Me parece que, si de pronto aparece el lector, es como un hecho milagroso! Es un hecho con el que yo no contaba...

...Ahora que, por supuesto, quiero que lo que escribo sea leído, pero por lo pronto quiero que sea leído por mí. En la medida en que a mí se me haga claro lo que antes estaba confuso, es posible que aquello pueda transitar a otras sensibilidades, a otra mentalidad...a otra persona,,pero nunca pienso en mis amigos. Mi literatura de combate, o como se quiera llamar, no está hecha para las manos y los ojos de alguien que vaya a resolver la situación. Yo simplemente quiero que se haga conciencia... por lo menos hacerme yo conciencia, respecto de un tipo de fenómenos".¹⁰

En su poema, "Lívida Luz", Rosario Castellanos da evidencia del proceso purificador del escribir. Dice:

¹⁰ Luis Adolfo Domínguez, "Entrevista con Rosario Castellanos", Revista de Bellas Artes, número 25, enero-febrero de 1969, p.19.

No puedo hablar sino de lo que sé.

Como Tomás tengo la mano hundida
en una llaga. Y duele en el otro y en mí.

¡Ah, qué sudor helado de agonía!
¡Qué convulsión de asco!

No, no quiero consuelo, ni olvido, ni esperanza.

Quiero valor para permanecer,
para no traicionar lo nuestro: el día
presente y esta luz con que se mira entero.¹¹

Si el proceso de escribir ha clarificado el mundo (una parte, por lo menos) para Rosario Castellanos, asimismo ha producido obras literarias de mérito y ha hecho surgir a una persona "concientizada" en cuanto a su papel como escritora, intelectual y mujer. Porque a lo largo de su vida, ha podido sumirse en la vida y extraerle su misma esencia, que después transmuta en obra de arte—sea poema, cuento, ensayo o novela. Aunque ser escritora entraña responsabilidades y dificultades, no es el suyo un destino desafortunado como hablando sobre sí lo afirmaba Borges durante una conferencia en Madrid, en mayo de 1973, cuando dijo: "De todos los destinos del hombre—quizá el más afortunado es el del artista. La vida es generosa en desdichas para todos. El privilegio de los poetas es que pueden transmutar esas desgracias en algo de belleza".¹²

Si bien Rosario Castellanos escribe para librarse del dolor innato a la vida, nos parece, sin embargo, que debemos aclarar que, aunque este dolor deriva a veces de experiencias

¹¹ Rosario Castellanos, "Lívida Luz", Poesía no eres tú, (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), p. 181.

¹² "He escrito miles de páginas para conseguir quizá dos o tres párrafos que pueden quedar: El gran poeta argentino abarrotó el salón de cultura hispánica", El Día, 25 de mayo de 1973, p.12.

personales, no siempre proviene de estas fuentes. Porque con frecuencia el dolor se origina de hechos que la autora observa en torno suyo. Hechos externos que la han afectado de una manera mediata. Entonces sus llagas, sus propias heridas internas pertenecen a una persona sensible al dolor propio y al padecer de los demás. Dolor de no saber por qué hay tanta miseria y sufrimiento en el mundo.

Ahora bien, examinemos cómo sublima este dolor propio con el lenguaje, al través de la literatura.

Respecto al dolor personal, cuando niña, Rosario Castellanos sufrió terriblemente a causa de la muerte de su hermano, el predilecto de la familia. Cuando alguien muy cercano a ella le preguntó ¿por qué no fuiste tú la que murió?, se sintió doblemente culpable: por la muerte de su hermano por una parte y por no haber muerto en vez de él. Entonces, agobiada por este acontecimiento trágico, tuvo que sublimar su herida en la novela, Balún Canán. Expresando lo que había sentido como niña (con las modificaciones, claro está, que entraña toda recreación literaria de un incidente) adulta, descubre ahora que se trataba de un sentido injusto de la culpa basada en fantasías infantiles y parientes crueles e incompresivos. Escrito esto, la llaga se atenúa.

Vemos en Balún Canán que la madre prefiere sacrificar a su hija en vez del hijo al decir, "Si Dios quiere cebarse en mis hijos... ¡Pero no en el varón! ¡No en el varón!"¹³

De la misma manera "Lamentación de Dido" nace también de una experiencia personal de la autora. Así explica la creación del poema a Emmanuel Carballo: "En este poema quise

¹³Rosario Castellanos, Balún Canán, Colección Popular #92, 3ra. ed., (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1968), p. 250.

rescatar una experiencia, pero no me atreví a expresarla sino al través de una imagen dada en lo eterno, en la tradición: la imagen de Dido. La desgracia amorosa, el abandono, la soledad después del amor, me parecieron tan válidos y absolutos en Dido que los aproveché para expresar, referidos a mí, esos mismos sentimientos. Al través de ellos pude contar mi propia historia, que era, desde luego, bastante más pobre".¹⁴

Para entender mejor la manera en que la autora templa su propio dolor, examinemos con más detalle su interpretación del abandono sufrido por Dido.

¿Quién era Dido? Recordemos que, según el Libro Cuarto de la Eneida (fuente del poema de Rosario Castellanos), Dido, hermosa viuda, fundadora de Cartago, recibió hospitalaria al náufrago Eneas cuando desembarcó éste en el litoral africano después de haber sorteado una tempestad en la cual las olas eran tan altas que las crestas lamían las estrellas, y las simas en medio eran tan hondas que se veía el fondo del mar.

Enamorados, Dido y Eneas se aman felizmente por un tiempo hasta que Eneas, predestinado por los dioses, ha de partir. Al salir del puerto, Eneas contempla a Cartago en llamas, ignorante de que el incendio proviene de la pira de Dido, quien, abandonada por el amante sin razón aparente, se suicida.

Dido, en el poema de Rosario Castellanos, representa el arquetipo de la mujer abandonada. Toda mujer lleva en sí una Dido, y la autora llega a comprender su propia Dido al percatarse de que el abandono es el destino de toda mujer. Descubre que el amor es imposible entre dos extremos opuestos, el hombre y la mujer. ¿Cómo logra la autora expresar este conflicto en términos poéticos?

En la primera estrofa de "Lamentación de Dido", recapitula la leyenda de Virgilio en términos abstractos; además predice, en tono grave, un desastre. Después nos lleva de la mano hasta el mundo interior de Dido, que relata su historia, su revelación gradual de la catástrofe inevitable, inherente

en el amor entre mujer y hombre por ser tan distinta la naturaleza de ambos. Lo explica Jaime Labastida de este modo: "Rosario traslada el drama, de Eneas a Dido: se identifica con su amor y, lejos de plantear la relación amorosa quebrada por voluntad de los dioses, hace descansar la causa de la catástrofe en la naturaleza incompatible de Eneas, viento, y Dido, sauce que a la orilla del río es incapaz de detener su vuelo".¹⁵ Lord Byron expresa una concepción semejante del amor en su poema largo, Don Juan al escribir:

Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence; man may range
The court, camp, church, the vessel, and the mart;
Sword, gown, gain, glory, offer in exchange
Pride, fame, ambition, to fill up his heart,
And few there are whome these cannot estrange;
Men have all these resources, we but one,
To love again, and be again undone.¹⁶

La mujer sufre porque al amar se convierte en antorcha que queda permanentemente incendiada; en cambio, el amor en el hombre es transitorio. Todo esfuerzo de la mujer por detener al hombre resulta vano.

¹⁵ Jaime Labastida, El amor, el sueño y la muerte en la poesía mexicana, (México: Instituto Politécnico Nacional, Departamento de Difusión Cultural, 1969), p. 26.

¹⁶ Lord Byron, Don Juan en The Best of Byron, editor Richard Ashley Rice (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1942), p. 493.

La mujer es la que permanece; rama de sauce
que llora en las orillas de los ríos.

Y convertida en antorcha yo no supe iluminar
más que el desastre.

Pero el hombre está sujeto durante un plazo menor
a la embriaguez.

Lúcido nuevamente, apenas salpicado por la sangre
Eneas partió.

Nada detiene al viento. ¿Cómo iba a detenerlo la
rama de sauce que llora en las orillas de
los ríos! 17

Lo sorprendente de la emoción de Dido es que en su tratamiento personal de la tragedia, la autora no nos deja entrever sino hasta la estrofa final, que Dido no va a suicidarse. Quedamos maravillados al darnos cuenta cuán profundo es este abandono, un dolor de tal naturaleza, que ni la muerte (que sí puede calmar angustias físicas) puede disminuirlo. Nos dice:

Ah, sería preferible morir. Pero yo sé que para
mí no hay muerte.

Porque el dolor—¿y qué otra cosa soy mas que dolor?—
me ha hecho eterna.¹⁸

Resulta inútil la inmolación del cuerpo, en tanto que no alivia al dolor—único aspecto eterno del amor. Insostenido por el varón, el amor mismo no puede ser. Pero lo que sí existe para siempre son las cenizas de un encuentro brevemente encendido. Una experiencia más bien trágica, sobre todo para la mujer.

¹⁷Rosario Castellanos, "Lamentación de Dido", Poesía no eres tú, pp. 96,97.

¹⁸Ibid., p,98

Si en "Lamentación de Dido", Rosario Castellanos superó un abandono personal, igualmente logró una correspondencia perfecta entre pensamiento y sentido en su recreación de la imagen de Dido—una unión sintética por la cual no solamente aprehendemos conceptualmente la tragedia de Dido sino también la sentimos como una experiencia vivida. En nuestra opinión "Lamentación de Dido" representa la cumbre poética de Rosario Castellanos, que ilustra claramente cómo ha podido ella curar sus propias llagas a través del lenguaje.

Por más que en la vida personal de Rosario Castellanos el lenguaje haya sido liberador, examinando las obras en que aborda temas indígenas, vemos que para los indios la introducción de un nuevo lenguaje causó su enajenación a la vez que sirvió a los españoles como un instrumento de dominación.

"Castilla", el idioma traído e implantado por los españoles durante la Conquista, llega a ser símbolo de dominación en Ciudad Real, Balún Canán y Oficio de tinieblas. Con la llegada de los conquistadores, todo el aprendizaje anterior de los indios, su sabiduría acumulada por siglos, no servía; porque los españoles, al implantar el "castilla", negaban todo valor a los idiomas indígenas. Sin idioma "legal", los indios desposeídos no tenían dónde ni cómo recuperar su tesoro saqueado. Este despojo y la represión de la lengua nativa—primera injusticia cometida por los españoles contra los indios—anticipa y refleja todos los actos violentos que les sucederán. Despojados de su propia concepción del mundo, la grandeza indígena se desintegra en la confusión. Sólo aflicciones agudas y sordas surgen en su lugar.

Con esta imagen de dominación como trasfondo, Balún Canán, publicada en 1957, empieza con una india que explica la llegada de los españoles a una niña cuyos padres son hacendados y cuyos antepasados eran de estirpe española.

" . . . Y entonces, coléricos, nos desposeyeron, nos arrebataron lo que habíamos atesorado: la palabra, que es el arca de la memoria. Desde aquellos días arden y se consumen con el leño en la hoguera. Sube el humo en el viento y se deshace. Queda la ceniza sin rostro. Para que puedas venir tú y el que es menor que tú y les baste un soplo, solamente un soplo . . ." ¹⁹ Fue un soplo, emisión del aire que pasa de otro modo las cuerdas vocales del hombre lo que provocó la conflagración entre dos culturas.

Después en Ciudad Real—nombre antiguo de San Cristóbal de las Casas y volumen de cuentos publicado en 1960—los indios salen descalabrados en la pugna contra los españoles, cuyos ferrosos armamentos introducen una nueva técnica de lucha, método desconocido por los indios.

Si las armaduras en este libro van a la vanguardia de la invasión española, poco atrás sigue la "palabra" en forma más firme, "escrita". Y así, sirve como fuerza aún más tenaz y durable en contra del indio, que ignora el arte de argüir. Y todavía peor: ¿cómo borrar estas palabras fijadas en papel? Pues las palabras escritas se convierten en las llagas de la existencia misma del indígena, en vista de que son testigo de una verdad fabricada, por supuesto, tomando en cuenta los intereses de los conquistadores, como lo vemos en los siguientes párrafos:

"Los Bolometric vieron que se aproximaba la amenaza y no corrieron, como antes, a aprestar un arma que ya no tenían el coraje de esgrimir. Se agruparon, temblorosos de miedo, a examinar su conducta, como si estuvieran a punto de comparecer ante un tribunal exigente y sin apelación. No iban a defenderse, ¿cómo si habían olvidado el arte de guerrear y no habían aprendido el de argüir? Iban a humillarse. Pero

¹⁹Castellanos, Balún Canán, p. 9.

el corazón del hombre blanco, del ladino, está hecho de una materia que no se ablanda con las súplicas. Y la clemencia luce bien como el morrión que adorna un yelmo de capitán, no como la arenilla que mancha los escritos del amanuense. . ."

"En este papel que habla se consigna la verdad. Y la verdad es que todo este rumbo, con sus laderas buenas para sembrar trigo, con sus pinares que han de talarse para abastecimiento de leña y carbón, con sus ríos que moverán molinos, es propiedad de don Diego Mijanos y Orantes, quien probó su descendencia directa de aquel otro don Diego Mijanos, conquistador, y de los Mijanos que sobrevinieron después, encomenderos".²⁰

Los españoles al ver que el pillaje de la tierra les era así permitido, legitimado, ahora sólo requerían la bendición para sus actos de violencia. Y en Oficio de tinieblas, novela cumbre de Rosario Castellanos, este saqueo terrible, tanto de idioma como de la tierra, ahora investido de ropaje religioso, se ve santificado. Aquí la nueva intrusión, "el cristianismo", se injerta en la vida indígena y otra vez los indios quedan perplejos ante la transformación repentina que introduce este nuevo elemento. Hasta que sus ovejas blancas se convierten en piedras, piedras imprescindibles para construir la iglesia. Y si están confundidos por esta metamorfosis, no importa, pronto se la interpretarán los emisarios del nuevo orden, de la nueva religión. Dice Rosario Castellanos: "Y para que no hubiera de faltar con qué construir su iglesia y para que su iglesia fuera blanca, San Juan transformó en piedras a todas las ovejas blancas de los rebaños que pacían en aquel paraje".

"El promontorio—sin balido, inmóvil—quedó allí como la señal de una voluntad. Pero las tribus pobladoras del

²⁰ Rosario Castellanos, Ciudad real: cuentos, (Xalapa [México] Universidad Veracruzana, p. 16.

del valle de Chamula, los hombres tzotziles o murciélagos, no supieron interpretar aquel prodigio. Ni los ancianos de mucha edad, ni los varones de consejo, acertaron a dar opinión que valiera. Todo les fue balbuceo confuso, párpados abatidos, brazos desmayados en temeroso ademán. Por eso fue necesario que más tarde vinieran otros hombres. Y estos hombres vinieron como de otro mundo. Llevaban el sol en la cara y hablaban lengua altiva, lengua que sobrecoge el corazón de quien escucha. Idioma, no como el tzotzil que se dice también en sueños, sino férreo instrumento de señorío, arma de conquista, punta del látigo de la ley. Porque ¿cómo, sino en castilla, se pronuncia la orden y se declara la sentencia? ¿Y cómo amonestar y cómo premiar sino en castilla?"²¹

Si las ovejas blancas, el sustento mismo de su vida carnal, es primer diezmo exigido a los indios, otros más duros, han de serles requeridos. Ahora los indios, sin tierra, sin idioma ni religión--todo aquello que les explicaba el significado de su mundo--se precipitan, en línea recta, en el abismo de la existencia. Sólo les queda el "oficio de tinieblas", extinción gradual de toda luz, de toda esperanza de vida. Esto es exactamente lo que ocurre en Oficio de tinieblas que termina: "faltaba mucho para que amaneciera".²²

¿Cómo se relaciona el lenguaje con este derrumbe de los indios?

En Oficio de tinieblas, Rosario Castellanos crea dos protagonistas, Pedro y Catalina González, cuya vida y destino están estrechamente relacionados con "la palabra". El es juez y ella sacerdotisa; ambos son, pues, indios "principales"

²¹ Rosario Castellanos, Oficio de tinieblas, 2da. edición, (México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, S.A., 1968), p.9.

²² Ibid., p. 368.

de su comunidad, y como personas distinguidas en el marco de su cultura, es interesante observar sus distintas reacciones respecto a la llegada de los caxlanes, o sea los descendientes de los conquistadores. Primero examinemos la trayectoria de Catalina.

Al principio del relato, Catalina, sacerdotisa o "ilol" de los tzotziles, cuida la plena sabiduría de su raza. A pesar de su propia incapacidad para tener hijos, Catalina, voz de su pueblo, es oráculo cuyas revelaciones muestran el camino indicado para que sigan los chamulas (tzotziles) procreándose y sobreviviendo como seres vitales frente a las nefastas amenazas de los caxlanes. Cuando éstos llegan, en vez de advertir la necesidad de adaptación, Catalina se hunde en sus raíces y va a su cueva a buscar el significado de esta intrusión. Y allí en la cueva está guardado "el arca de la memoria de su raza", su historia y pronóstico. Es una presciencia del mal augurio que predice la llegada de los extranjeros que llevan el sol en la cara. ¿Qué hacer cuando los dioses mismos de los tzotziles han anunciado los tiempos de adversidad? Tal pronóstico aparece en El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam. Estos textos sagrados de los maya (los tzotziles forman parte de este grupo) dicen: "al venir otra palabra, otro poder por el norte y por el poniente, . . . Asolarán el país soles excesivos y muertes súbitas, días de sed, días de hambre. Faltará el agua, se secarán los manantiales y las venas de la tierra. Ensangrentados quedarán los caminos, ensangrentados quedarán los descansaderos, gritará la gente a la puerta de sus pueblos. . ."²³ Dada esta preparación cultural, los indios, viendo en Catalina a un guía, no resisten efectivamente sino que sólo irrumpen en actos violentos que

²³El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam, Alfredo Barrera Vásquez y Silvia Rendón traductores, Colección Popular #42 (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), p. 116.

emanan de un estado de confusión. Una violencia, no dirigida hacia el enemigo, sino contra sí mismos.

La destrucción de la comunidad indígena corre paralela a la caída de Catalina, cuyas facultades de predicción van debilitándose. Vemos que sus poderes disminuyen en la medida en que la invasión de los caxlanes va avicinándose inexorablemente. La lenta reducción que de su poder sufre la sacerdotisa se refleja en su paulatina pérdida de las palabras.

¿Hasta qué punto puede conceptualizar Catalina el nuevo mundo traído por los caxlanes? ¿Qué significan a ella los caxlanes? Al principio de la novela cuando una india—Marcela—es raptada por un caxlan, Catalina dice a su marido, Pedro: "Un caxlán abusó de ella". Al decir estas palabras posteriormente reacciona así: "Repitió mentalmente la frase, saboreándola: 'un caxlán abusó de ella!' Esto era lo que había sucedido. Algo que podía decirse, que los demás podían escuchar y entender. No el vértigo, no la locura. Suspiró aliviada".²⁴

Obviamente, en este momento, Catalina atribuye a las palabras el poder de dar comprensión y alivio. Si bien Catalina puede expresar o formular en palabras una injusticia cometida contra su gente, no trata de liquidarla; al contrario, la abraza y acepta. Ella misma dirige el parto de este niño, Domingo, bastardo del estupro y ofensa a la propia raza. Aunque hay eclipse de sol cuando nace este niño que representa toda la injusticia infligida por los caxlanes, Catalina lo adopta y al adoptar a Domingo, los poderes de la "ilol" están sentenciados a desaparecer porque ya inconscientemente ha dado el primer paso encaminado a la

²⁴Rosario Castellanos, Oficio de tinieblas, p. 29.

aceptación de la nueva estirpe. Sin embargo, en el nivel consciente, Catalina sigue inmutablemente fiel a sus raíces y, a causa de esta dicotomía de su ser, surge un conflicto dentro de ella. Es un conflicto que desembocará en su interior una confusión creciente, precipitada en los esfuerzos por detener a los caxlanes a toda costa, al ver que la lucha es en vano. A la vez que aumenta la confusión de la protagonista, disminuye su poder y su voz va tornándose más inaudible y menos inteligible. Pero también sus seguidoras están perplejas. ¿Qué está ocurriendo en su derredor? ¿Qué está pasando a su "ilol", la que siempre les explicaba el significado de los acontecimientos? Cada vez es más difícil entenderla. Esta transformación de Catalina se ve en las siguientes citas:

"Nadie de los que rodeaban a la ilol pudo comprender ni su evocación ni su profecía. Pero todos estaban contagiados de un júbilo salvaje que les pedía manos para convertirse en acción. ¡Por fin! ¡Por fin! Ha terminado ya el plazo del silencio, de la inercia, de la sumisión. ¡Vamos a renacer, igual que nuestros dioses!"²⁵

Aunque no entienden a la "ilol", siguen creyendo, no obstante, en su eficacia.

"Pero más tarde, Catalina se detuvo ante el altar y se inclinó en actitud reverente. Luego alzó la voz, una voz ronca de sufrimiento; no modulaba sílabas, no construía palabras. Era un gemido simple, un estertor animal o sobrehumano. . .

. . . Ahora la voz de Catalina alcanzaba un registro casi imperceptible por su gravedad y era semejante al murmullo de un manantial remoto y soterrado. . .

²⁵Ibid., p.212.

. . .Sólo que Catalina no era capaz aún de expresar sus visiones. Balbuceaba, gesticulaba, se golpeaba la cabeza con los puños crispados. O repetía palabras sin hilación, sonidos de un idioma inventado, que llenaban de maravilla y estupor a quienes la escuchaban".²⁶

Catalina se precipita en abismos de silencio como los búfalos que al ser perseguidos por las flechas mortales de las tribus indígenas durante el siglo pasado en los llanos norteamericanos se veían forzados a acercarse continuamente a las orillas de un precipicio escarpado hasta que, enloquecidos, se arrojaban al abismo, víctimas de sus perseguidores.

"Catalina es ya como el animal marcado por un hierro: el de los dioses. Delante de ella el gran estupor del desconocido. Detrás la masa de su pueblo. El pueblo que reza, que implora, que amenaza tal vez. Palabras, murmullos, confesiones. Y de repente, todo se desmorona, se hunde en el silencio. . .

. . .El silencio es la boca hambrienta del abismo. Hay que aplacarla arrojando a su fondo lo que ha de saciar su hambre: una víctima".²⁷

Esta caída abismal de Catalina coincide con Semana Santa, tiempo en que los tzotziles imploran a los dioses para que proporcionen el agua que riegue las cosechas del año próximo. Tanto para propiciar el renacimiento de la tierra, (rito de fertilidad llevado al cabo por siglos entre los tzotziles) cuanto para apaciguar a los dioses hostiles y salvarguardar a su pueblo poniéndolo bajo los auspicios de su propio "cristo", Catalina, lacerada por el sufrimiento de su gente, ofrece al niño, su única posesión restante y más cara,

²⁶Ibid., p. 219.

²⁷Ibid., p. 317.

como víctima propiciatoria. Pero el sacrificio es en vano.

Porque Domingo, sacrificado, no puede renovar la antigua cultura ni propiciar buenas cosechas, como tampoco al morir, puede concebir claramente cuanto ocurre en torno suyo. Su único esfuerzo para detener la destrucción se traduce en desgarrador grito. Un grito y nada más, porque su llaga es tan profunda que no existe alivio alguno para ella. Rosario Castellanos describe este sufrimiento así: "El sufrimiento es una palabra que se mide y tiene un peso determinado y para pronunciarla es bastante la voz. Y Domingo ha ido más allá de toda voz, de toda medida".²⁸

Contrario a la frenética esperanza de renovación que abraza Catalina opuesto a un renacimiento de palabras comprensibles, la crucifixión de Domingo "aplasta a la multitud un silencio como de plomo." Ahora el pueblo mismo se da cuenta de que Catalina, como voz de la comunidad, no funciona, es inoperante. Y aunque ella trata de dar sentido a la muerte del niño en un breve momento durante el cual su voz le es restituida, la muchedumbre rechaza escucharla. En consecuencia, Catalina retorna a la cueva con algunas mujeres a la zaga, y que representan el elemento más conservador y pasivo dentro de la cultura indígena.

"En el centro de la cueva, en el centro del círculo que forman los congregados, reposa el arca. . . . Porque en el arca está depositada la palabra divina. Allí se guarda el testamento de los que se fueron y la profecía de los que vendrán. Allí consta lo que dictaron las potencias oscuras a sus siervos. Allí resplande la promesa que confronta en los días de la incertidumbre de la adversidad. Allí está la sustancia que come el alma para vivir. El pacto".²⁹

²⁸Ibid., p. 323.

²⁹Ibid., p. 363.

Pero al abrir el arca descubre Catalina Ordenanzas Militares de los caxlanes sobre la manera en que será destruida la cultura chamula. El hallazgo constituye un sacrilegio para las indias, que ven sus antiguos papeles sagrados sustituidos por símbolos destructivos que atentan contra su supervivencia. Y con esta broma cruel y macabra, la aniquilación de Catalina está sellada.

"El nombre de esa ilol, que todos pronunciaron alguna vez con reverencia y con esperanza, ha sido proscrito. Y el que se siente punzado por la tentación de pronunciarlo es cupe y la saliva ayuda a borrar su imagen, a borrar su memoria".³⁰

Con la caída de Catalina, la destrucción de la cultura indígena se completa--o casi. Porque si sobreviven algunos vestigios de aquella cultura, nuevas leyes dirigen su existencia.

Al contrario de Catalina que huye de los caxlanes, Pedro, su marido, trata de dar con ellos. Lacerado por el rapto de la mujer chamula por un caxlán, se pregunta ¿por qué suceden tales vilezas?

"Pedro, al mirar la sangre que manaba (lenta, espesa, negra) gritó con un alarido salvaje y golpeó furiosamente la tierra. A espaldas suyas, entre los murmullos desaprobatorios, se desenvainó un relámpago: la palabra justicia. ¿Quién la pronunció? Su fuego no había sollamado ninguna de las bocas impasibles. Pedro interrogaba, uno por uno, a los varones del consejo, a los ancianos de mucha edad. Nadie respondía. Si los antiguos poseyeron esta noción no lo legaron a sus descendientes. Winiktón no pudo entonces sopesar el valor del término. Sin embargo, cada vez que su raza padecía bajo la arbitrariedad de los ladinos, las sílabas de la palabra

³⁰Ibid., p. 368.

justicia resonaban en su interior, como el cencerro de la oveja madrina. Y él iba detrás, a ciegas, por veredas abruptas y riesgosas, sin alcanzarla nunca".³¹

Sin poder averiguar en qué consiste la justicia de los sabios de su tribu, lleno de furia, Pedro va en busca de su significado. Para hacerlo aprovecha al máximo sus experiencias cuando, enganchado, trabaja en una finca de la costa cerca de Tapachula. Sin embargo, nunca somete su alma a los caxlanes en tanto que: "Cuando le preguntaron como se llamaba dijo nada más Pedro González. Calló el nombre de su chulel, salvaguardó su alma del poder de los extranjeros. Dejó al margen de este trato lo más profundo y verdadero de su ser".³² Vemos cómo Pedro atribuye un poder positivo a una palabra. Pero muy pronto después de haber llegado a la costa, aprende que otra palabra, "indio", desata fuerzas nefastas en algunas personas y la llaga que lleva dentro de sí se vuelve más dolorosa aún.

"Indio. La palabra se la habían lanzado muchas veces al rostro como insulto. Pero ahora, pronunciada por uno que era de la misma raza de Pedro, servía para establecer una distancia, para apartar a los que estaban unidos desde la raíz. Fue ésta la primera experiencia que de la soledad tuvo Winiktón y no pudo sufrirla sin remordimiento",³³

Aunque enajenado, Pedro sigue buscando el significado de justicia. Aprende a hablar español y aprovecha las clases de alfabetización proveídas por el finquero y conoce por primera vez lo que es leer. "¡Qué emoción descubrir los nombres de los objetos y pronunciarlos y escribirlos y apoderarse así del mundo! ¡Qué asombro cuando escuchó, por vez primera, 'hablar el papel'!"³⁴

³¹Ibid., p. 30

³²Ibid., p. 51

³³Ibid., p. 53

³⁴Ibid., p. 58

Entonces con esta nueva dominación del mundo, Pedro está preparado para entender las palabras del gran despertador de conciencias, Lázaro Cárdenas, el presidente mexicano en aquel entonces, cuando habla durante una visita presidencial a tierra chiapaneca.

"A Pedro se le escaparon muchas ideas y otras las recibió desfiguradas. Pero le impresionó vivamente oír en los labios presidenciales una palabra que despertaba en él tantas resonancias: la palabra justicia. Incapaz de representársela en abstracto, Pedro la ligó desde entonces indisolublemente con un hecho del que tenía una experiencia íntima e inmediata: el de la posesión de la tierra. Esto era lo que el ajwalil había venido a anunciarles. Y en el apretón de manos con que el Presidente se despidió de cada uno de los congregados, Pedro vio el sello de un pacto".³⁵

Al regresar a su tierra natal, Pedro habla con los "principales" sobre lo que ha aprendido en Tapachula. Su testimonio de lo que dice el gran "ajwalil", el presidente Cárdenas, es negado por el pueblo porque: "Decir justicia en Chamula era matar al patrón, arrasar la hacienda, vendar a los fiscales, resistir los abusos de los comerciantes, denunciar los manejos del enganchador, vengarse del que maltrata a los niños y viola a las mujeres. Decir justicia en Chamula era velar, día y noche, sostenido por la promesa de un hombre remoto cuya buena fe ninguna había probado aún. Era preferible callar".³⁶

Esta apatía de su pueblo crea una frustración tremenda en Pedro. Aunque ha aprendido a hablar español y ha descifrado qué es la justicia, no ha podido enseñar efectivamente la importancia del concepto a su gente.

³⁵Ibid., p. 61.

³⁶Ibid., p. 63.

Otra idea asimilada por Pedro (pero no por su pueblo), es la importancia de relacionarse con funcionarios del gobierno, hombres con la ley en la mano y en pro del agrarismo. Por más que él lo confirme, aquello queda "invisible todavía para los otros". Cree él que, con la reforma agraria, "será la primera palabra del dios que se haya cumplido".³⁷

Tal es la esperanza de Pedro para su gente; jamás puede realizarla. Cuando termina la novela aún lacerado, Pedro sigue con su misión de despertar a su pueblo, ahora convertido en sombras. Su misión fracasa.

Y aún en la muerte siguen Catalina y Pedro con los mismos oficios en vista de que cuando "hablan las bocas sofocadas de tierra. . . Catalina repite una salmodia sin sentido. . . Winiktón arenga a un ejército de sombras".³⁸ Son reacciones semejantes a las descritas por Octavio Paz respecto a la soledad y enajenación que sufre el mexicano. "La realidad, esto es, el mundo que nos rodea, existe por sí misma, tiene vida propia y no ha sido inventada, como en los Estados Unidos, por el hombre. El mexicano se siente arrancado del seno de la realidad, a un tiempo creadora y destructora, Madre y Tumba. Ha olvidado el nombre, la palabra que lo liga a todas esas fuerzas en que se manifiesta la vida. Por eso grita o calla, apuñala o reza, se echa a dormir cien años".³⁹

Después de haber observado cómo se desarrollan las vidas de Catalina y Pedro y cómo maneja cada cual el lenguaje, es fácil ver la razón de la derrota de Catalina. Al ir perdiendo el dominio aún de su propio idioma, sin jamás tratar

³⁷Ibid., p. 63

³⁸Ibid., p. 215

³⁹Octavio Paz, El laberinto de la soledad, Colección Popular #107 (1950;reimpresión. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973), p.18.

de aprender español, no hay salida para ella, salvo la esclavitud. Pero Pedro tampoco encuentra en el lenguaje el instrumento que le dé libertad para convertirlo en agente positivo de su cultura y de sí mismo.

A pesar de sus esfuerzos de mejorar su condición indígena a través de la "palabra", Pedro no puede. Y su tragedia personal se comparte con la de muchos indios mexicanos que no pertenecen realmente ni a la cultura de sus antepasados ni al mundo mestizo porque éste exige que arranquen de raíz todos los vestigios de su cultura aborigen. Amén de no ser posible, tal negación de su cultura tampoco sería sana.

Con la creación de Pedro González Winiktón, Rosario Castellanos pone en evidencia el dilema del indio en México. Es un dilema que también recibe la atención de Carlos Fuentes en su libro de ensayos, Tiempo mexicano, donde dice: "La existencia misma de ese mundo frágil y profundo del indio mexicano, nos propone una pregunta que solemos evadir o condenar: Vamos a arrebatarse a toda esa gente maravillosa su comunidad y su cultura reales, una cultura que no está en los museos, sino en los cuerpos, en la manera de caminar, en la manera de saludar, de bailar, de imaginar, para imponerles los fetiches del racionalismo y el progreso que nos vienen del siglo XVIII? Artaud, durante su viaje a México, escribió que una cultura que concibe el cuerpo separado del espíritu es una cultura sin ligas colectivas; entre los indios mexicanos, en cambio, espíritu y materia son lo concreto, y lo concreto, añade Artaud, jamás se cansa de obrar, de extraer algo de nada: la mejor prueba de ello es que estas comunidades han logrado sobrevivir culturalmente a la conquista, al despojo, al asesinato y a la injusticia de cuatro siglos. 'Es en sus órganos, y en todos sus sentidos donde los mexicanos...aprendieron a llevar su cultura... El más alejado campesino indígena lleva en sí su cultura como un atavismo'. (Artaud, *Ecrits au Mexique*)...

La única manera de que estos cuatro o cinco millones de mexicanos sean libres consiste en que obtengan la justicia sin el sacrificio de la cultura".⁴⁰

Lo que ha aprendido Pedro son "puras palabras" como "justicia" que no se manifiesta en la realidad indígena, y hasta que haya alguna correlación entre su vida concreta y abstracta o sea: hasta que el significado abstracto de una palabra realmente refleje un hecho semejante dentro de la comunidad indígena, no habrá liberación para Pedro.

En términos generales, nos parece que la preocupación fundamental en Oficio de tinieblas consiste en examinar la correlación existente entre lenguaje y poder. Sabemos al fin de la novela que "palabras entendibles" son sinónimos de poder, sea como que sea, la habilidad de procrearse, de renacer o dominar a otro. En cambio, las palabras confusas o calladas significan esterilidad, estancamiento y derrumbe. Dentro de este marco hila su relato la autora.

Semejante a la condición inferior e impotente de los indios es la de la mujer mexicana. En Oficio de tinieblas, hemos visto que, si bien Catalina no puede dar con la realidad de que la cultura indígena y ella misma han de transformarse para acatar al mundo de los caxlanes, su actitud rígida no se antoja excepcional entre las mujeres mexicanas, y especialmente entre aquellas que existen en la ficción de Rosario Castellanos.

Examinando el destino de la protagonista que aparece en "El viudo Román"—novela corta, incluida en el volumen, Los convidados de agosto, publicado en 1964—llegamos a entender cómo su estado agobiado se eslabona con el lenguaje.

⁴⁰ Carlos Fuentes, Tiempo mexicano, Cuadernos de Joaquín Mortiz (México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, S.A., 1971), p. 37.

Abnegadas, las mujeres sufren; no obstante, la mayoría de ellas no entiende que sus llagas se deben a su estado de ser abnegadas. Faltando una comprensión de su propia naturaleza, no tratan de mejorar su condición. Al contrario, perpetúan su papel de víctimas y de pertenencia del hombre. Hay que darnos cuenta que existe un tipo de privilegio (de valor dubitativo, pensamos) en esta condición abnegada; porque las mujeres, dos pasos atrás del hombre, no tienen que tomar decisiones, ni ser responsables, ni forjar sus propios destinos. En consecuencia, las mujeres no pueden dar con la realidad porque entre ellas y la realidad siempre han puesto un muro: el hombre. Son las mujeres casadas las que se protegen con mayor destreza tras la fortificación. Dejando a un lado el distinguido nombre de sus padres, las casadas construyen monumentos de indiscutible grandeza en su posición de "señora de fulano de tal."

Romelia Orantes, la protagonista y novia en "El viudo Román" anticipa, en el momento que está casándose, su próxima posición asegurada de "señora". "Con los ojos bajos Romelia se las ingeniaba para dar rápidos vistazos a su alrededor. Sí, en las bancas más próximas estaban sus amigas a las que mañana (y quizá siempre) les seguirían diciendo señoritas. Las que no se escudarían en la figura del marido para evitarse las molestias de las pequeñas decisiones y las responsabilidades de las decisiones importantes; las que no usarían el nombre del marido para negar un favor y rechazar una hospitalidad; las que no estarían respaldadas por el crédito del marido para contraer una deuda; las que no podrían invocar la autoridad del marido para despedir a una criada o castigar a un hijo".

⁴¹Rosario Castellanos, "El viudo Román", Los convidados de agosto, 2da edición (México: Ediciones Era, 1968), p. 165.

"De hoy en adelante Romelia ingresaría en el gremio de las mujeres que nunca dicen 'yo quiero' o 'yo no quiero' sino que siempre dan un rodeo, alrededor de un hombre, para llegar al fin de sus propósitos. Y ese rodeo se ciñe a una frase: el señor dispone. . . el señor prefiere. . . el señor ordena . . . no hay que contrariar al señor. . . ante todo es preciso complacer al señor. . . necesito consultar antes con el señor. . . El señor que la exaltaría al rango de señora ante los ojos de todos y que, en la intimidad, le daría una imagen exacta del cuerpo que, al fin, habría alcanzado la plenitud de saber, de sentir, de realizar las funciones para las cuales había sido creada".⁴²

En Oficio de tinieblas, Catalina, por lo menos, tenía voz. Pero en los párrafos que acabamos de citar, Romelia no tiene ni quiere tener voz. Pues cree que su único propósito en la tierra es biológico. Es una creencia fomentada y apoyada por su cultura; sin embargo, pronto se entera de los riesgos que entraña el hecho de que todo su valor como mujer depende de si ella es virgen o no, al casarse.

En consecuencia, su sueño de ser una señora, rápidamente se convierte en una pesadilla lacerante cuando su marido le acusa injustamente de haber sido mancillada antes de casarse--imputación falsa de la cual ella no puede defenderse. Sin derechos, Romelia, víctima de macabra venganza, ha de volver a la casa de sus padres porque "La verdad está aquí. Ahora. Y la dice un hombre para que nadie desconfíe de su testimonio".⁴³ Víctima y perpetradora del mito que el honor del hombre está más allá de toda duda, Romelia no tiene nada excepto sus llagas.

⁴²Ibid., p. 166.

⁴³Ibid., p. 181.

Si Romelia emplea el lenguaje sólo para soñar, no es culpa suya, porque se requirió "un momento de lucidez" para que los padres de Romelia advirtieran que tenía ella doce años y "que ignoraba hasta los rudimentos de la lectura".⁴⁴ Con tal descuido familiar y retraso académico Romelia nunca logrará un dominio adecuado del lenguaje por su edad y podemos comprender por qué rechaza el lenguaje (o aprendizaje) en favor del cuerpo.

Entre una colección extensa de personajes femeninos en "El viudo Román", sólo Elvira Figueroa maneja el lenguaje con destreza. "Se sabe de memoria las capitales de Europa, es capaz de resolver el más intrincado crucigrama".⁴⁵ No obstante, en vista de que tiene "bigote" o, por lo menos, una "ligera sombra de bozo", no podemos garantizar su sexo. Pero sabemos que Leonila Rovelo, "un magnífico ejemplar de vaca suiza [que] podría amamantar al pueblo entero [es] incapaz de hilvanar dos palabras juntas".⁴⁶

Así mismo Amalia Suasnávar no interviene "en las conversaciones más que para decir disparates. ¿No era acaso la misma que se había hecho célebre en el novenario de su difunta madre, al quejarse ante la concurrencia de padecer un insomnio incoercible y de cuando, por una especie de milagro, lograba momentáneamente conciliar el sueño éste era reparador, tanto que despertaba de inmediato y llena de angustia? Cuando se aclaró lo que la señorita Suasnáver quiso decir con lo de reparador se supo que tenía la más firme convicción de que lo único capaz de reparar en el mundo era un potro".⁴⁷

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 151.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 140

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 139

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 137

Y Doña Ernestina, madre de Romelia, puede expresarse únicamente con "estrepitosas carcajadas" o "a gritos". Herida al meollo de su ser por la muerte de su hijo, Doña Ernestina trata de invocar la presencia de este hijo ausente "a gritos, a oscuras". Como Domingo en Oficio de tinieblas, no es capaz de verbalizar su dolor que es demasiado profundo. Es por esta falta de manejo del lenguaje que Doña Ernestina y las demás mujeres antes mencionadas se guarden a sí mismas en cadenas, cadenas que producen llagas.

Sin embargo, en este mismo relato, Blanca Orantes y Cholita Armendáriz representan otro tipo de mujer. Al tratar de elevar sus propias posiciones utilizan el lenguaje para denunciar a sus hermanas y para destruirlas. Este uso destructivo del lenguaje y su consecuencia los examinaremos, con más detalle, al discutir "Album de familia".

En términos generales, en "El viudo Román", es evidente que el hombre domina a la mujer y la puede seguir dominando hasta que ella aprenda a manejar el lenguaje igual que él. Y mientras, lacerada, la mujer seguirá viviendo encadenada sin derechos propios.

Al extremo opuesto de la callada, dócil, Romelia Orantes están las verbosas, agresivas, protagonistas de "Lección de cocina" y "Album de familia", cuentos de la colección titulada como este último. En estos cuentos, el lenguaje mismo, por ser, especialmente en "Album de familia", auto-destructivo, es la llaga.

En "Lección de cocina", Rosario Castellanos describe en un monólogo interior el estado de una recién-casada que se enfrenta por vez primera a la preparación de una comida para el marido, descrito como mutación de un señor caviloso y dragón voraz. Todas las posibilidades de la protagonista—su valor humano, femenino e intelectual—están en juego.

Mientras cocina, la mujer proporciona un estado mental tan rebelde como la carne asada que prepara. Al transformarse poco a poco la carne, de un estado helado a uno quemado, estos cambios externos reflejan los pensamientos de la protagonista en cuanto a la condición de su propia carne (cuerpo).

En la universidad la protagonista aprendió a expresarse verbalmente. A pesar de esto, su lugar sigue siendo "Küche, Kinde, Kirche". Como resultado sufre un conflicto irresuelto al no ser reconocida su capacidad intelectual. Y el lenguaje, ahora raspante como en el caso de Pedro Winiktón, la ha hecho más consciente de su llaga, en este caso, un dolor agudo.

En "Album de familia", un grupo de mujeres intelectuales exponen ideas filosóficas acerca de la literatura y la condición de las autoras latinoamericanas. Por su verbosidad y carencia de acción concreta, es difícil distinguir a una escritora de otra y sus ideas respectivas. La lectura del cuento nos deja la impresión de que nos hemos encontrado con un monstruo de siete cabezas que, por tiempo infinito, ha venido sosteniendo una arenga vituperable consigo mismo. Nos quedamos indiferentes como "el ejercito de sombras" al cual arenga Pedro sin éxito en Oficio de tinieblas. Sin embargo, aunque el mensaje de Pedro cae en oídos sordos, él utiliza el lenguaje para comunicar, para compartir sus ideas, ideas que pueden ayudar a su gente.

Tal no es el caso con las mujeres de "Album de familia". En vez de juntar fuerzas para mejorar su condición inferior dentro de la sociedad, cada mujer trata de devorar a sus colegas. Toda la represión y odio escondidos tras el lenguaje se lanzan a las otras mujeres presentes en la reunión. Como el alacrán que pica la espalda propia con su cola, las escritoras, convirtiéndose en atormentadoras propias, se destrozan a través del lenguaje, ahora un instrumento mortal.

Así la mujer nunca encontrará su liberación.

Aunque las mujeres de "Album de familia" manejan bien el lenguaje, no actúan dentro de un marco concientizado. Al faltar una conciencia o espíritu bondadoso respecto a sus semejantes, destruyen, en vez de engendrar, la vida humana. Por esta destrucción se esclavizan y no alcanzan el nivel de liberación lograda por Pedro Winiktón quien sí cumple con su fuero interno. "¿Y para qué quieren libertad si no saben ser libres? La libertad no es gracia que se recibe ni derecho que se conquista. La libertad es un estado del espíritu. Cuando se ha creado, entonces se es libre aunque se carezca de libertad. Los hierros y las cárceles no impiden que un hombre sea libre, al contrario: hacen que sea más en la entraña de su ser. La libertad del hombre no es como la libertad de los pájaros. La libertad de los pájaros se satisface en el vaivén de una rama; la libertad del hombre se cumple en su conciencia".⁴⁸

Después de escribir estos cuentos tan violentos, agresivos, Rosario Castellanos ha cambiado las "lagrimas verbosas" de estas mujeres por las risas y carcajadas de algunas de las mujeres en su obra más reciente, El eterno femenino, una farsa dramática.

Evidentemente la autora ha tomado en serio su propios consejos elaborados en su ensayo, "La participación de la mujer en la educación formal", en el cual dice: "Pero aún queda el rabo por desollar: lo más inerte, lo más inhumano, lo que se erige como depositario de valores eternos e invariables, lo sacralizado: las costumbres. La costumbre de que el hombre tenga que ser muy macho y la mujer muy abnegada. La vieja complicidad entre el verdugo y la víctima, tan vieja que hace ya imposible distinguir quién es quién.

Ante esto yo sugeriría una campaña; no arremeter contra las costumbres con la espada flamígera de la indignación

⁴⁸ Ermilo Abreu Gómez, Canek: Historia y leyenda de un héroe maya, 25a edición, (México: Ediciones Oasis, S.A., 1972), p. 102.

ni con el trémolo lamentable del llanto sino poner en evidencia lo que tienen de ridículas, de obsoletas, de cursis y de imbéciles. Les aseguro que tenemos un material inagotable para la risa. ¡Y necesitamos tanto reír porque la risa es la forma más inmediata de la liberación de lo que nos oprime, del distanciamiento de lo que nos aprisiona!"⁴⁹

En el segundo acto de El eterno femenino, Rosario Castellanos toma todos los mitos femeninos sacralizados de la cultura mexicana por los cuernos, al dejar a los personajes—la Malinche, Sor Juana, doña Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, la Emperatriz Carlota, Rosario de la Peña y la Adelita—contar un momento culminante de su vida. Por supuesto, Sor Juana es la que dice que "va a ser difícil. Porque nos hicieron pasar bajo las horcas caudinas de una versión estereotipada y oficial. Y ahora vamos a presentarnos como lo que fuimos. O, por lo menos, como lo que creemos que fuimos".⁵⁰

Por más escandalosas que sean las versiones narradas, oídas por Lupita, la mujer guadalupana o toda mujer mexicana de la obra, y por más pavorosas y mediocres sean las otras vidas femeninas que observa Lupita, al final de la farsa, puede decir ella: "¿Mi problema? ¿Mi problema? ¡Chin!"⁵¹ Al decir esta "chin", parece que las llagas de la mujer mexicana están curándose.

Aunque Lupita manifiesta su emoción con una expresión que se presta a interpretaciones ambiguas, a la vez puede aceptar lo que ha visto—la condición de mujer mexicana—sin desatar fuerzas nefastas. Al contrario, creemos que esta observación, en lo sucesivo, provocará una acción consciente,

⁴⁹Rosario Castellanos, "La participación de la mujer en la educación formal", Mujer que sabe latín. . ., pp. 41-42.

⁵⁰Rosario Castellanos, El eterno femenino, obra inédita, 1973, p.54.

⁵¹Ibid., p.137.

positiva y deliberada de su parte.

Recientemente apareció Mujer que sabe latín. . ., colección de treinta y siete ensayos, la mayoría de los cuales versan sobre mujeres que escriben o existen como personajes dentro de la literatura. El título, Mujer que sabe latín. . ., viene del refrán español que dice "mujer que sabe latín/ ni tiene marido ni tiene buen fin".

Hemos visto que en sus relatos Rosario Castellanos nos hace conscientes de la pésima condición que padece la mujer mexicana, ya sea en la provincia o en la ciudad. En Mujer que sabe latín. . ., la autora está pescando soluciones a esta problemática examinando las vidas de mujeres de otras nacionalidades. Mujeres que sí han tenido dificultades mayores; no obstante, en una manera u otra han podido superarlas. En general, su medio de vencer contrariedades y de identificarse como seres humanos con derechos propios, ha sido a través del lenguaje. Es claro que la mujer mexicana tiene que estar más preparada y aprender, si no latín, sí, por lo menos, un español que no derive de las telenovelas. Un español que la hará consciente, no solamente de las necesidades inmediatas de la familia, sino también de las de la sociedad, nación y mundo enteros.

Aunque Rosario Castellanos está lacerada por las injusticias que sufre la mujer mexicana, ella, igualmente lacerada, no encuentra consuelo en permanecer muda ante tal condición. Por lo contrario, escribe para hacer consciente a la mujer de tal marasmo, al mostrarle en sus relatos la mediocridad de su vida abnegada y, en ensayos, su liberación posible por el lenguaje, ahora sinónimo de entendimiento.

Rosario Castellanos no pretende que toda mujer mexicana se convierta en escritora (¡que Dios nos guarde de tal hecho!) sino que trata de interpretar mejor los sucesos en su derredor

y actuar de manera más vigorosa y responsable. Como periodista explica que: "Sor Juana fue la primera en dar el ejemplo de cómo, plegándose a las circunstancias, será posible después operar sobre ellas y que quien gasta su pólvora en los infiernos del desafío a las costumbres, del desplante rebelde y de la lucha frontal contra una tradición ve disminuidas sus energías, que han de conservarse íntegras para el cumplimiento de la obra que es la que hace válido el desafío, confiere un sentido al desplante y a la lucha".⁵²

Asimismo, en una entrevista con José Valderrama señaló que: "el hombre se disminuye en la medida en que disminuye a la mujer. En la proporción que ella alcance la calidad de ser humano, él la alcanzará también. . . Sin embargo, recalco que no es culpa de ellos, sino de ellas: 'Ellas no han querido ocupar el lugar que les corresponde, la calidad que deben tener, por no perder su prestigio de abnegadas, de víctimas. . . Hay que romper con los mitos que han sostenido la idea de la femineidad".⁵³

Respecto a su propia persona, la autora, al escribir Mujer que sabe latín. . ., clarifica y confirma las responsabilidades que forman parte de su oficio de escritora por haber estudiado las ideas y obras de otras escritoras y por haberlas cotejado con las suyas. Mientras refuerza su propia posición en compañía de la suprema inteligencia de Simone de Beauvoir para quien "la palabra es también prosa, es decir, signo para apuntar hacia la realidad, instrumento para orientarse en el mundo, paréntesis para aislar un objeto de todos los demás que lo circundan y reducirlo a sus motas esenciales",⁵⁴ Rosario Castellanos comparte la esencia de tal

⁵²Rosario Castellanos, "Actividad y participación: Cosas de mujeres", Excelsior, 15 de marzo de 1969, p.6.

⁵³José Valderrama, "Faltan estímulos a la mujer mexicana afirma la novelista Rosario Castellanos", Excelsior, 21 de marzo de 1969, p. 17A.

⁵⁴Rosario Castellanos, "La mujer ante el espejo: cinco autobiografías", Mujer que sabe latín. . ., p. 47.

conocimiento y sus propias convicciones por medio de sus artículos en el periódico, Excelsior, y en conferencias y entrevistas. Así pone en claro en un nivel alcanzable a mucha gente sus creencias y observaciones. No queremos, con esto, decir que Rosario Castellanos escriba o hable de manera condescendiente para lectores u oyentes "simples". Al contrario, disimulando su aguda inteligencia con un gracioso disfraz, jala invisiblemente la cuerda que ata a su público que, poco a poco, se va acercando a ella y a un nivel más elevado de entendimiento. Una vez allá, suelta la cuerda dejando que su público disfrute de su nueva "iluminación".

Además ve muy claro su responsabilidad como intelectual mexicana cuando dice: "El papel del intelectual debe ser no sólo de testigo, sino un papel activo, de persona que comprende más o menos lo que ocurre y que lo interpreta con armas intelectuales y que compara lo deseable con lo no deseable".⁵⁵ El intelectual sirve una función sumamente importante según Jean Paul Sartre quien "sostiene que nombrar es cambiar, que basta con nombrar un objeto para que nuestra relación con él sea distinta, que no es casual que Sartre haya escogido la literatura como medio de expresión porque parte de su deseo de comunicarse con el gran público, toda vez que la filosofía es una disciplina reservada para reducido sectores".⁵⁶

Reitera Rosario Castellanos esta obligación del escritor con: "El hombre, aunque sea, escritor or artista, no puede negar nunca una circunstancia de convivencia con los demás que se llama política".⁵⁷ En cuanto a su actual cargo diplomático, ha escrito ella que "Mientras la sociedad mexicana no

55 "Rosario Castellanos pide crítica abierta: Habla de Fuentes, Monsivais y Emma Godoy", Excelsior, 15 de abril de 1972, p. 23.

56 "Sartre o el cambio de la realidad por la palabra, según dijo Rosario Castellanos", Excelsior, 9 de diciembre, 1969, p. 32A.

57 "Rosario Castellanos pide crítica abierta: Habla de Fuentes, Monsivais y Emma Godoy", p. 23.

alcance su pleno desarrollo, será necesario que los intelectuales ocupen cargos públicos, pues la experiencia ha demostrado que dicha actividad no ha disminuído su capacidad de escritores o su capacidad de hombres públicos, . . . sería más completo un artista que fuera solamente espectador, porque así podría ser mejor crítico. Pero. . . todavía no podemos darnos esos lujos".⁵⁸ Es una visión que va más allá de sí misma mostrando su propia buena voluntad y carácter optimista porque está implícita su fe en que México, ahora con muchas llagas de tipo económico y social, puede encontrarse, mejorarse, librarse de sus invasores del siglo veinte y de sus creontes nacionales.

No es una evidencia fácil de llevar al cabo en vista de lo que Rosario Castellanos ha expuesto en su excelente ensayo, "Juan Ruiz de Alarcón: Una mentalidad moderna", que: "Enfrentarse con uno mismo—cuando no se está asistido por la gracia divina ni 'sostenido con flores', como los místicos—es la más audaz, la más desgarradora, la más desesperada de las empresas. . . Formula lo que se ha aprendido, lo que se ha comprendido, lo que se ha sorprendido, es la cristalización última del proceso. Otra vez el caos ha sido sometido al orden del cosmos gracias a la operación de una inteligencia humana; otra vez la inmundicia ha sido limpiada por una voluntad recta, y el mundo resplandece de nuevo en su pristinidad como una joya. . . Porque éste es, en última instancia, el sentido de la literatura. Una 'peregrinación a las fuentes' y un retorno feliz de la memoria vivificada en el contacto con los primeros principios. Y toda esa superabundancia de bienes se derrama a través de las palabras,

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 23

que son hermosas porque son exactas".⁵⁹

De todos los personajes creados por Rosario Castellanos creemos que el protagonista del cuento, "Arthur Smith salva a su alma", incluido en su primera colección de cuentos, Ciudad Real, publicado en 1960, da la mayor evidencia de esta depuración. Arthur Smith, un norteamericano aburrido de todas las comodidades de que disfruta la clase media de su país, las deja tras sí al aprender tzotzil para trabajar entre los indios que hablan aquel idioma en Chiapas. Empero, cuando llega al campamento donde viven los misioneros, exponentes de su misma religión, encuentra que los motivos de los misioneros (educar y mejorar las vidas de la población indígena) eran exclusivamente de membrete. Llenos de miedo, desconfiados y atados a su lengua natal, los misioneros norteamericanos se apartan lo más posible de los malditos indios. Arthur Smith, en cambio, realmente intenta acercarse a los indios y a convertirse en su hermano.

Resulta que Arthur Smith es burlado por los demás y al fin retirado a la fuerza del campamento sin posesión alguna, excepto su alma. Si está en un estado completo de penuria respecto a posesiones materiales, también está librado de los dioses falsos—"religión, patria y dinero". ¿Qué hacer? Buscar posada en el jacal de unos indios desconocidos. Tal cosa no desmaya a Arthur Smith. ¿Por qué debiera hacerlo? Los indios también son seres humanos, hermanos del mundo. En consecuencia, Arthur Smith anticipa su próxima convivencia pensando, "Será cuestión de ponerse de acuerdo. Por lo menos, estos hombres y yo hablamos el mismo idioma".⁶⁰ Al poder comunicarse y vivir también, Arthur Smith es un hombre

⁵⁹ Rosario Castellanos, "Juan Ruiz de Alarcón: Una mentalidad moderna", Anuario de Letras (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1970), pp. 153-154.

⁶⁰ Rosario Castellanos, "Arthur Smith salva su alma", Ciudad Real: Cuentos, p. 194.

libre, "un hombre/en el mejor sentido de la palabra/ bueno".⁶¹ Es bueno porque al llegar a sus convicciones filosóficas, Arthur Smith está dispuesto a llevarlas a cabo. Además tiene éxito. Por eso, logra una correspondencia armoniosa entre su mundo interior y exterior.

Diferente al fracaso de Pedro Winiktón, creemos que el éxito de Arthur Smith se deriva, en gran medida, de la buena suerte de haber nacido en circunstancias donde una educación universitaria y una carrera son fácilmente adquiridas por una persona de su estirpe ("ASP--blanco, anglosajón y protestante). Por eso, antes de ser una persona "concientizada", fue Arthur Smith ya muy capacitado profesionalmente. Pedro Winiktón, en cambio, llega a ser "concientizado" sin haber adquirido un oficio que entraña autoridad en el mundo ladino. Así por tener mayores estorbos culturales y sin la preparación educacional necesaria, Winiktón fracasa en el mundo externo. Sin embargo, él, como Arthur Smith, vive sus convicciones.

"Es en este filo [de Arthur Smith], equidistante entre la obediencia y la propia determinación, entre el acatamiento a lo eternamente válido y el ejercicio del albedrío, entre lo forzado y lo espontáneo, donde el hombre conquista su categoría de humano. Es así, concluye Ruíz de Alarcón. . . como el hombre se convierte en árbitro de su vida, en arquitecto de sí mismo, en 'dueño de las estrellas'".⁶²

En sumo, para encontrar la liberación a través del lenguaje, el hombre tiene que dominarlo, comprenderlo como símbolo de hechos concretos, reales y utilizarlo de una manera concientizada. Y aunque un hombre puede lograr cierta libertad

⁶¹Antonio Machado, "Campos de Castilla (1907-1917)", Poesías completas, Colección Austral, 18a edición, (Madrid:Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1969), p. 77. También epígrafe del cuento.

⁶²Castellanos, "Juan Ruíz de Alarcón: Una mentalidad moderna", p. 171.

personal cuando actúa de esta manera comprometida hacia sus semejantes, básicamente creemos que el hombre no se libera excepto en compañía de sus coterráneos. Esto, nos parece, es el tema constante en la obra literaria de Rosario Castellanos. Que la liberación de la mujer, del indio va de la mano con la del varón, del caxlán. Que el ser humano se eslabona tan estrechamente con sus semejantes que fundamentalmente no hay liberación para nadie mientras que alguien se queda en cadenas.

Tal vez la protagonista más importante en la obra de Rosario Castellanos, como en la de Sartre, es la libertad humana. "Una libertad situada, que se asume al través de las decisiones que se toman, de las acciones que se dan; una libertad que se enmascara y se oculta en la mala fe, en los gestos, en los símbolos. . . [Sartre] ha acorralado a sus personajes hasta los límites de la desesperación, no para que muestren su impotencia, sino para que inventen la salida del callejón".⁶³

¿No era éste el propósito de todas las injusticias delineadas en la obra de Rosario Castellanos? Que se despertara el hombre para que tomara las riendas de su destino en manos propias. Para que América Latina "el continente al que todos aspiramos, escritores o no, simplemente personas humanas, sea un continente más habitable. Donde las desigualdades entre los grupos no sean abismales; la miseria no alcance niveles casi geológicos; la inestabilidad política no nos tenga en vilo; la tiranía no sea una sombra siempre en acecho; la cultura sea un bien común; la naturaleza no sea el

⁶³ Rosario Castellanos, "Cuando Sartre hace literatura", Revista de la Universidad de México, 28, núm. 8 (1973), U24.

enemigo sino un aliado; la técnica esté al servicio de la comunidad. ¿Lo llama una utopía? Es una lista de nuestras necesidades más urgentes".⁶⁴

Y en la medida en que cada hombre fuera "dueño de las estrellas", existiría tal libertad para el mundo entero. Una mañana mejor con seres humanos libres.

⁶⁴ Günter W. Lorenz, Diálogo con Latinoamérica: Panorama de una literatura del futuro, Lora Weidnaas de la Vega, traductora del alemán, (Barcelona: Editorial Pomaire, 1972), p. 210.

Quien se mueve entre los idiomas descubre un mundo enteramente nebuloso habitado por traductores, interpretes, transgresores de fronteras, un mundo de realidades frecuentemente dudosas, una especie de limbo que se estremece dentro de la relatividad de las lenguas. Al conocer más de una lengua, nos percatamos que las palabras que asignamos al mundo visible son totalmente arbitrarias; un vasto abismo se abre entre estas palabras y lo que se encuentra tras de ellas. Esto tiene como efecto la liberación de estas mismas palabras, haciendonos más conscientes de su naturaleza peculiar, a estar más dispuestos a jugar y correr riesgos con ellas. Creo que también incrementa nuestro asombro tanto sobre el acto de decir como sobre lo indecible.

Alistair Reid

Rosario Castellanos

THE WIDOWER ROMAN

Doña Cástula always served Don Carlos Román the last coffee of the evening in the room her master called his study, originally furnished as a doctor's office. But the unused examination and operating tables and the cabinets for surgical instruments had gradually been removed, leaving behind only a faded framed diploma, a now illegible Hippocratic oath and a small reproduction of that famous picture of a doctor who, in surgical attire, struggles with a skeleton for the possession of a young woman's body bearing no visible sign of disease.

Though the study was the part of the house where Don Carlos spent most of his time, it still had that impersonal atmosphere characteristic of hotel rooms. Not because it lacked concessions to luxury, not to mention comfort, but because the furniture (reduced to a leather chair and one mahogany desk with three drawers, only one of which contained papers and was always kept locked) bore none of those marks man gradually leaves on objects in daily use. Not even a charred spot appeared on the wood for Don Carlos did not smoke nor was there a scratch from sharpening a pencil with a blade or an inkspot since Don Carlos never wrote. Perhaps the only visible trace was a chair slightly misshapened from the weight of his body; or the toleration (yes, toleration it was, not choice) of some bookshelves containing volumes never opened.

Doña Cástula placed the tray with the coffeepot and cup on the desk. For some time now Don Carlos had denied himself sugar, claiming that no precaution was too great at his age. While her master savored the first hot aromatic sips, she took the list of the day's expenditures from her apron pocket to submit for his approval.

Don Carlos examined it carefully, pausing at times to give ear to her comments about a detail, ready to reproach a needless extravagance or utter an exasperated comment about the increased cost of an item. Finally, mumbling, he added the figures and with a gesture of resignation stored the paper in the customary folder. Doña Cástula waited for this last gesture, which concluded the ritual, before withdrawing. This evening, however, to her respectful, "Good night," Don Carlos did not respond with his usual patronizing, "Good night"; instead he made a casual remark about the weather.

"Bit chilly out, isn't it?"

"Would you like me to light the brazier, sir?"

"No, it's not that cold. Besides, it makes me feel good. What about you? Don't you like it?"

Disconcerted, Doña Cástula shrugged her shoulders. It had never occurred to her that the weather was a question of likes and dislikes, let alone hers.

"Perhaps because the hacienda where you grew up is towards the hot country."

"Yes, sir. But now I don't even remember. They took me away when I was still a tiny thing. And I have always worked in Comitán."

"You mean always in my house. Why, you started as my nanny."

"The whippings your blessed mother, may she rest in peace, used to give me with a leather strap when she found us talking

familiarly. 'Uppity,' she used to say, 'you'll be a bad influence on him.' And then, so that you'd become refined, they sent you to roam the world."

"Meanwhile, you took your chance and had yourself a fling, didn't you?"

With her apron Doña Cástula covered her blushing face.

"Oh, master, that comes from being stubborn and from having bad inclinations. Everyone kept nagging me: 'That man will be the death of you.' But talking to me was like talking to a stone wall. When he said, 'Let's go,' I didn't pretend to beat around the bush or stop to demand a priest or judge. I just tied up my suitcase and at the crack of dawn slipped away with him.

"To the plantations on the coast."

"Where else can the poor go, master? There they had offered him happiness a dream come true, but when the time came, the poor fellow ended up in jail because they accused him of I don't know what crimes."

"And you?"

"Me? I went to the hospital. I had caught the chills and was on my last leg and on top of all that, I had a miscarriage and lost my baby. Oh, how I cursed then. There I was stretched out on the floor. I wasn't even entitled to a cot, and there was no one to bring me a glass of water, and I was as flat as a flounder. When they took me from the hospital because it no longer had room for so many sick folk, I looked like I had consumption. People ran from me in fright. They tossed me coins from a distance so that no harm would come to them."

"And your husband?"

"No, he wasn't my husband, Don Carlos. He was just a man. Being a fast-talker, he was soon released from jail; he then went to seek his fortune at the border. There he met some of my kin and they asked him for news about me. 'She's already dead,' he told them. 'There's a cross with her name on it right in the cemetery of Tapachula. I bought it for her myself,' said the big shot. They swallowed it whole. Then out of the blue I turned up in Comitán. 'It's a ghost!' shouted the Indians and the women made the sign of the cross at me; even the men shrank back in fear."

The housekeeper chuckled as she recalled these scenes. She couldn't go on.

"Could you forgive all that, Cástula?"

"They were simple folk, master. How were they to know? Not until they reached out and touched me were they convinced that I wasn't a soul from the other world."

"I'm not referring to the people," Don Carlos explained with a tinge of impatience in his voice, "but to the man who ran out on you."

Doña Cástula became serious and made an effort to consider the matter from the viewpoint called for by Don Carlos. After reflecting momentarily, she said, "I wasn't his legal wife, master. I ran off with him asking for no one's consent; my own nanny cursed me."

"But surely he must have promised you, must have sworn. . ."

"Ay, master, since when don't birds fly! I, like a fool, believed him. You know how it is with a young girl."

The woman sighed, excusing herself for her folly, sorrowful perhaps, yet longing for the man.

"God knows where he's wandering now and the hard times he's been through. I came to take shelter with you again, and since then you have not forsaken me."

Doña Cástula would have liked to recount how she had gradually risen by her own merits from parlor maid, to cook, then to housekeeper, and finally to the rank of her mistress' confidante. And when Don Carlos' mother died, Doña Cástula inherited her position--in matters of authority, of course, not in appearances. Yet with guile and tact Doña Cástula permitted no one else to take the reins of the house. When Don Carlos married, his wife could have been a rival, but. . .

"What would you do if you saw him again?"

"If I saw him again. . ."

The truth is that if Doña Cástula had suddenly met him, she would not have recognized him. His features had faded from her memory many years ago. His name meant no more than any other man's. She did not dare confess as much, however, to a gentleman who from the moment he became a widower had never put off mourning.

Don Carlos refilled his coffee cup and stared at it hard as if concentration would help him word his question.

"If you could get your hands on him and punish him to get even, what would you do, Cástula?"

Frightened, the housekeeper drew back.

"Master, I'm a woman. Questions of revenge belong to men, not to me."

"But it was you he mistreated, not your relatives, who aren't going to lift a finger to wipe out the affront. Don't you realize, you idiot, what that man did to you? Not only did he dump you in the hospital for you to manage on your own with

only God to help you, but he declared you dead so others would not worry about you. And there you are, happy as you please, with no hard feelings towards him. . ."

Doña Cástula knew she deserved the reproach but did not know how to answer. Hard feelings—when in the world could she have felt them? From morning to night there was nothing but work. "Cástula, sweep the corridor. Cástula, water the plants. Cástula, go to the market early so you can pick out the choice meat. Cástula, you didn't mend the clothes. Cástula, be on the watch for the man who sells charcoal; it's getting low. Cástula. . . . Cástula. . . . Cástula." At night she collapsed exhausted when there was nobody sick to watch over.

But were these reasons enough to excuse her? To Don Carlos at least, her behavior proved nothing but the lowliness of her condition. For him a gentleman educated abroad who had returned with a degree, the ritual of his widowhood was a serious matter. To observe it properly he had not needed to become an idler. He oversaw the management of his ranches better than most other owners. For him it was not enough to go only during branding and harvesting, but he also went for the seasons of births and deaths, dog days and downpours, marketing and warehousing. And he never permitted his foremen to abuse their power in representing him, or to render bad accounts. In Comitán, where he also owned lots and houses, he did not use intermediaries to deal with his tenants. He had the reputation of being just; he did not fleece his renters, but neither did he ever forgive a debt.

True immediately after Estela's death, Don Carlos abandoned the practice of his profession, but that, according to Doña Cástula, lacked importance. For a rich person a title (of doctor

or whatever) served only as an ornament to be worn. So there it was, hanging on the wall; yet who was going to admire it? For Don Carlos—and this confirmed the depth and tenderness of his feelings—no longer socialized. He deliberately refused to receive anyone, even his mother-in-law, who called on him from time to time. He went to no gatherings, entertainments or parties. And he secluded himself longer and longer in his study. Some days he even refused to leave it for his meals.

Though he was clearly a gentleman, and a gentleman who knew how to bear his grief gracefully, Doña Cástula thought he was beginning to show signs of fatigue. He kept her near him under any pretext. Examining the accounts provided an easy one; he lingered over them and asked about vegetables in season, for he would sometimes have a special whim. Or he insisted that the merchants had overcharged her, thus giving her the opportunity to describe at length her haggling with the vendors. Gradually the sort of people with whom she chatted became more varied, so that once more Don Carlos caught up on the goings-on in town, thanks to his housekeeper.

Their conversations thus became more leisurely, and their familiarity often erased the boundaries that usually separate master and servant. From the very beginning, however, they tacitly agreed never to make the vaguest reference to anything concerning the past, which was extremely painful for Don Carlos. What words sufficed to describe Estela's beauty, the groom's love, the pageantry and gaiety of the wedding? How to recall the sudden nameless misfortune which struck like lightning their very first night together. Then the disconsolate, hopeless months of Estela's agony. And the final outcome to which no one could ever be resigned. Yet now Don Carlos, for no apparent

reason, broke the barriers he himself had set up and ventured questions so vehement as if something vital depended upon their answers.

"So you harbor no hard feelings," he concluded. "Well, the angels will reward you for that. Surely they're already rewarding you by allowing you a deep, long, undisturbed, good night's sleep. Am I right?"

Embarrassed, Cástula, who at times had heard her sleepless master roaming the corridors at ungodly hours of the night, hung her head and replied: "The cock crows early for me, master."

"And here I am delaying you with all this nonsense. Go on, get some sleep."

But before she crossed the threshold, Don Carlos detained her with one final order. "Tell the man who comes by the week to clean out the stable thoroughly and stock it with fodder and corn. Tomorrow they are going to bring a horse I just bought. It's a fine one and must get good care."

That night Doña Cástula could not enjoy her long, deep, undisturbed sleep. Time and again the figure of Don Carlos appeared to her being thrown by a fiery, indomitable stallion-- he who on his visits to his plantations always used only sure footed mules. Or she saw him galloping away from the house, his refuge for so many years, to meet rich men who on a wild drunken spree lit their cigars with one-hundred peso bills or gambled away on one card, one dice, their wives or daughters after they had already lost whatever else they owned.

Doña Cástula awoke perturbed. Why would Don Carlos insist on getting involved in such dangers? He was not a man like the others who spend their time in cantinas and whorehouses. He

was a doctor, even if nobody now seemed to remember it. He had studied abroad and polished his manners and should frequent the casino, where the young ladies and gentlemen played forfeits while mothers chaperoned and fathers discussed business and politics. Perhaps the presence of someone who had kept aloof for so long would astonish them at first. When Don Carlos walked along the streets of Comitán, the shut-ins quickly parted the window curtains to catch a glimpse of that face and bearing. The passers-by yielded him the right of way on the sidewalk as he deserved, though they did not greet him, for they were no longer apt to recognize him. Who was going to shake his hand when he had not one single friend? His friends before his trip to Europe had taken different paths and were unable to hold a conversation with one so learned as he. Those he met upon his return. . . well, upon his return Don Carlos had eyes for no one but Estela and time only to woo her and hasten the preparations for the wedding. And then. . .

With the tolling of the first bell for early mass, Doña Cástula automatically got up. Urgent chores detached her from all other preoccupations.

Though quiet, having been broken by harsh discipline, the horse turned out to be a noble animal with well-rounded haunches. The stable boy saddled him very early for the master's limited exercise, which, according to his own prescription, was indispensable if he was to do justice to the breakfast which had been prepared with such careful attention.

On his ride Don Carlos soon detoured from the main streets, crowded at that hour with Indians down from the hills selling vegetables and clay cooking ware, by servants carrying pots of

nixtamal to the mill, and by sanctimonious spinsters muffling their piety and decrepitude in black woolen shawls; instead he took a road to the outskirts. He rode at a trot in front of the shingled shacks, following the capricious meandering of the paths where grasses awaited the moment of their sprouting to engulf the track recently left. Usually his final destination on these excursions was a slight rise from which one could take in the entire town of Comitán at a glance.

While the horse, loosely tied to a bush, browsed among the branch tops around him, Don Carlos leaned against a tree trunk, abandoning himself to the contemplation of the uniform roof-tops darkened by rain and time. His pensive eyes lingered upon the smooth, unpretentious, unevenly whitewashed walls, upon the tightly closed doors and upon the windows which exposed only shattered hopes.

During this distant contemplation, which did not dare penetrate beyond the surface of what he saw, from the depths of his memory Don Carlos resurrected the so-called innocence, eagerness, perhaps happiness of his childhood spent in that town, the nostalgia of his youthful years abroad, the fervor of his return, and the catastrophe and sorrow of his mature years.

Gradually, however, in a way even Don Carlos was unaware of, his grief began to subside. Perhaps the break started with the first superfluous word he directed to Doña Cástula. Then the venting of his anguish became less concentrated and more moderate; his lament abated. His imagination strove to free itself from certain images which had formerly obsessed him and to admit others, and eventually all others.

This was a sort of apprenticeship: to become once more acquainted through his senses with objects from which he had long been estranged. By careful observation he discovered in the thick, lofty foliage of a tree an infinite range of greens. He discovered a stone fallen by chance with rough defiant edges. He discovered a rolling contour of land where one might detect nature's willingness to show its benevolence and hospitality to man. Don Carlos became more and more aware of his gradual recovery. Not only were objects no longer hostile to him, they were not even strange. They had become friendly, cordial presences. He encountered them with anticipated pleasure and enjoyed them fully.

But the most difficult part of the transition was still to come: that which would lead him again into the world of human beings. He began by trying to choose his routes without considering the risk of meeting an old acquaintance. The alternative of stopping to greet him or riding by without turning his head no longer tormented him. If the other were communicative and amiable, why should Don Carlos not respond to the friendliness? And if he were not, why try to breach others' diffidence when it was much less rigid than his own.

After so many years of being vulnerable, the widower relished his new self-mastery. Isolation had been his solution to problems that had seemed intolerable. Proximity to others aroused in him a restlessness no logic could suppress. He feared their compassion as much as he disdained their curiosity, but he could not have pardoned their indifference. He was disgusted by the knowing wink with which men let him realize they were in on the secret of his pretenses at insuring himself to

solitude. For it was inconceivable that Don Carlos, a man in the prime of life and virility, should remain continent when even priests, champing at the bit of a religion in which he did not believe, were not always chaste. He was annoyed by this gauche solicitude of matrons eager to put an end to his unorthodox state by offering him what nature requires and God's law commands: a female companion. They called attention to the spinster, like a spider, transfixed in the center of her web, the daughter, the niece, the kinswoman taken in, all embellished with every ornament, the sum total of all virtues, whose only mission in this life consisted in making Don Carlos happy, his home hospitable, and his progeny numerous.

But lo and behold, suddenly Don Carlos ceased to fear the encounters and to flee the snares. There was no reason why others' feelings should determine his moods. If others made plans involving him, that was their problem. Don Carlos was free, master of his fate.

Though now ready for sociability, Don Carlos was not in so great a need of it as to go in search of it. As he had learned throughout his years of solitude and meditation, time is what brings things to maturity. It winds up useless, tiring, and self-defeating to rush headlong, plunge into events barely germinating, whose development cannot be hastened and may miscarry.

His contact with others turned out very different, however, from what he had imagined or maybe planned. It so happened that one morning his meditations were suddenly interrupted by the appearance of a group of children, the eldest among them not even twelve. They came running, shouting and pushing. The presence of an older person paralyzed them momentarily. But the condescending manner of Don Carlos, on one hand, and the

children's numerical superiority, on the other, threw them again into a kind of collective frenzy surely dictated by some secret rule no outsider could fathom.

They were all barefooted and wore filthy rags. They shouted out lewd curses and made obscene noises. Purposeless at first, they gradually concentrated all their activity upon one child, the smallest, weakest and poorest, who presently became the enemy incarnate. He had a nickname, of course, and during the clamor of the fight others were improvised. Each invention was greeted with uproarious laughter which fired the group, egging it on to new boldness and further terrified the little one.

As he observed the scene, a brief spark of interest flickered in Don Carlos' eyes. With their amoral spontaneity the children's actions and reactions reminded him too much of those he witnessed in animals for which he had no love. But an element of danger one could smell in the air kept him alert to the game's progress, in which insults only foreshadowed more violent action, namely, throwing things--orange peels, peach stones, and rocks. Assailed on all sides, the target turned this way and that and tried to protect himself by covering his face with his forearm, until a rock struck him in the temple and he fell bleeding to the ground.

Stunned, the children stared at him for a moment. One of them even sneered as if the beaten child had broken the rules of the game. But as soon as they fully realized that something completely beyond their understanding had happened, they scattered in all directions.

Seeing them flee, Don Carlos made no attempt to stop them

or shout any insult in reproach. Unhurriedly, calmly, he stood up and went to the wounded child with a kind of automatic professionalism that resurfaced, intact, after so many years of having ceased to function.

A careful look at the wound revealed that it was not serious, though painful. With his handkerchief, Don Carlos improvised a bandage to stop the bleeding. The child submitted to treatment with the same big frightened eyes with which he had previously submitted to aggression.

Don Carlos regretted not having a piece of candy, something sweet to console the little one. Nor did he know how to get close to him to gain his confidence. He made an effort to give his voice a touch of tenderness and asked:

"Do you live far from here?"

The child pointed to the nearest cluster of houses. At the same time he made motions of leaving, but Don Carlos held him back.

"No, I'll go with you to explain to your mother what has happened. Because if she sees you arrive like this, she'll be frightened.

"She hits me too."

Filled with determination to get revenge in the future, the child's words reflected only the helplessness he was reduced to at the moment. As soon as he grew up. . .

Don Carlos took him by the hand, and together they arrived at a patio of trampled earth where a woman sitting on a straw mat, surrounded by children of various ages, combed wool.

Seeing the newcomers, she abandoned her work and simultaneously cried out. The neighbors emerged immediately whisper-

ing among themselves, airing the most unlikely versions of what had happened. From so many accounts, only one fact remained clear: that Don Carlos was kind and skilled, though his skill was not an unmixed virtue. He was a trained doctor who could cure not only a boy's slight scratch but also internal ailments that suddenly crop up, like that of poor Enrique Liévano, who for months now had been stretched out on his bed, unable to move. Wouldn't the good doctor be kind enough to see him—just a quick look? What's more, Enrique was an orphan, cared for by his sister, who earned her living ironing for others and would not be able to pay him for the consultation. But since he was already so close and Enrique lived only a few houses away, what difference did that make? Come in, for the sake of the soul he held most dear.

Don Carlos did not know how to ward off these collective pleas, faltering yet vehement. How was he to explain to them that it had been ages since he had scanned a medical text, that he had forgotten even the most rudimentary techniques of listening to the heart and of diagnosis, and that he had not brought with him an instrument that could help? Nevertheless he nodded and let them escort him.

As he crossed the threshold of an extremely small room, feebly lit by one window and poorly protected from the weather by sparse shingles, what first repulsed Don Carlos was the odor—the stench of a motionless body, of bodily functions, of stale ointments and poultices, of rapid inhalations, breaths never fresh, free of the reek.

Don Carlos would have liked to retreat, to breathe again the uncontaminated country air, but onlookers blocked the door of the novel. When he tried to leave, he felt a hand firmly

grasp his arm to prevent his escape and to lead him to the sick bed; it was the hand of one of those women whose misfortunes congeal hideously on their faces.

The patient lay upon a cot, a skeleton wrapped in a worn-out, dirty wool blanket, his head resting upon a bundle of clothes serving as a pillow. His cheeks were flushed from fever, and in his sunken eyes shone that glimmer which bonfires emit before flickering out.

The stranger's presence and the intrusion of so many neighbors upset the patient. He wanted to do something—to sit up, perhaps hide, but his movement turned into a coughing attack, that useless tubercular cough, feeble from repetition, without relief.

Don Carlos was not afraid of being contaminated, and as for the others, who had until then been around Enrique without taking precautions, it seemed useless for them to do so now. The weakest would have succumbed months ago, and the others evidently knew how to protect themselves.

Enrique's sister, Carmen, whose hand had until then gripped Don Carlos' arm, now released him in order to draw up a chair from which the doctor could observe the patient, take his pulse, listen to his breathing, perform, in short, all the ritual without which no cure is deemed possible.

Don Carlos asked her to make the intruders leave and to withdraw herself but only to a distance from which she could remain on call.

Left alone facing Enrique, Don Carlos did not quite know how to begin his questions. He had learned how to formulate

them precisely in medical school but from lack of practice had forgotten, and today his memory went blank in this emergency, perhaps paralyzed by his conviction that any effort would be futile.

What could Enrique say that Don Carlos could not assume? Judging from the advanced stage of the illness, the first revealing symptoms should have appeared months ago. The causes were not difficult to guess: hunger, exhausting work, and malaria. As for treatment, why even consider it? Neither of the two hospitals in Comitán (one run by the government, the other by nuns) had a ward for contagious diseases. There remained, of course, the possibility of moving him to Mexico City. But who would pay for the move? Don Carlos, in a burst of generosity, could offer to, but such a trip would only serve to hasten the end.

Don Carlos and Enrique talked at length, for nothing thrills a patient so much as describing his sensations, the more so when the listener is informed and apt to understand what the healthy do not know and can not even imagine. So Enrique hurriedly amassed details, ventured suppositions, and wanted to make his listener the depository of his secret so that Don Carlos would give him health in return.

Don Carlos did not just listen passively to a story with so many old familiar symptoms of his students days appearing: euphoria, the forerunner and inseparable companion of the first stages of the illness; the unpredictable yet persistent fever; the night sweats like those suffered when one awakens from a nightmare. And the cough. Compulsive at first, racking. Later diminished but obstinately serving to remind the patient constantly of his condition, that he is not to get excited, that he should be more careful when swallowing,

and that air is a rare gift that could be snatched away from him at any moment.

Don Carlos gave these descriptions (which, because they were so vivid, were less awkward than what might be expected from a person of Enrique's simplicity) technical names as if lassoing a wild young bull, subduing and branding it with its owner's iron. Gaping, Enrique took in this performance and repeated the magic words which lent an aura of importance to his ailment over which the ignorant would do well to pause and meditate.

Don Carlos could not say good-bye without promising to return the following day. This time he would come provided with instruments and medicines, unlike today, when he had come unexpectedly and without his paraphernalia.

Carmen helped the doctor onto his horse, holding the stirrup without asking a single question or demanding the least reassurance. She would have liked to know only how much longer--when would it all end. She was tired of always watching a face that each day became more wan and emaciated. Her invalid tied the steps of the healthy just as a piece of string restrains the flight of a bird. What was she to do with her life, her life that was running away like water through her fingers, her life that found outlets in neither marriage nor religious exercises, in working as a servant, in travel to Mexico City, or as a last resort in becoming a whore, because first and foremost she had to fulfill her duties as a sister.

Without a word, even the customary show of gratitude, Carmen watched Don Carlos leave and envied his being the one to depart at a brisk pace from that hopeless case, from that miserable shack. She watched him leave with the additional

certainly that if Don Carlos was a clever man—he should be, for gentlemen always are—he would never come back.

She was wrong. He did return the following day and the next and the next. In his bag which by now had become part of his person, he brought along some potions that relieved Enrique's pain, fatigue and choking spells. To prevent him from talking, from wasting his breath, which steadily became more labored, Don Carlos undertook to carry on the conversation all by himself. He recounted his trips abroad, his student adventures, his burning zeal to master his lessons; his first unforgettable amazement when he watched truths from the textbooks become reality in the world of facts; the passion, like a hunter's, with which he tracked down the cause of malfunction in that most complex and perfect of mechanisms, the body; the cold detachment with which, once the cause was discovered, he chose the quickest and most efficient means to eliminate his enemy; the pride he felt in a victory which he would have preferred to attribute to justice rather than to science.

At times, carried away by his eloquent discourse, the doctor failed to notice that Enrique was unable to follow him and to understand. He also realized belatedly that the patient's interest waned along with his strength. From then on, Don Carlos' visits were silent. Under the pretense that he was taking the dying man's pulse, he held one of his hands between his own as if he wanted to show his empathy through the light pressure of his fingers. For perhaps of all Don Carlos had learned as a doctor, the only lesson he would never forget was that the dying long for help from those who surround them, those from whom they are separated more and more by an

inexorably widening gulf, and that they dread this final severance more than their entrance into the valley of the shadows.

During Enrique's final moments, Don Evaristo, a priest from the Templo Mayor, came differentially to assist. He heard Enrique's confession, absolved him from his sins and anointed his feet with the holy oils. While this solemn ceremony that required privacy was being performed, Carmen gave way to her despair by wailing in the patio. Solicitous neighbors offered her tin cups full of steaming water and linden infusions which, by waving her arms, she spilled on the ground in her refusal to let them reach her lips. Thanks to the sedative with which Don Carlos injected her, she sank into a profound sleep. Consequently, all the negotiations to obtain the coffin, including, needless to say, payment for it, and the supervision of the wake and burial were presided over by the doctor, the only man respected among that motley crew of onlookers, some of whom--the men-- seized the respectable pretext to get drunk, while others--the women--unleashed their hysteria and the children ran wild.

Bouquets of common flowers picked upon passing blooming shrubs and holy water sprinkled by Don Evaristo rested upon the moist grave newly tamped down.

When the mourners departed, Dr. Romón shook the priest's hand to indicate pleasure at having met him, gratitude for his help in lightening the burden of the recent ordeals, and finally as a sign of farewell. But while Don Evaristo acknowledged the gesture, he refused to grant its parting implication.

"Are you heading home, Doctor? We can walk together part of the way. I live just a few blocks from here. That is, if you don't mind my joining you."

"On the contrary. If I didn't suggest it first, it's only because I've become so unused to people that. . ."

"No one would have thought so seeing you behave with such aplomb when faced with emergencies."

"That's my specialty, Father. If you remember something that occurred long ago, though there was no particular reason why it should have impressed you—I'm referring to my wife's death—you'll recall that I didn't do such a bad job."

They stopped. Don Evaristo was disconcerted by the tasteless, unnecessary remark. Don Carlos stared down as he pensively poked the ground with the metal tip of his cane. All the while his head was bent, he endeavored to make his face expressionless.

"Forgive the poor taste of my joke. One who has grown used to talking to oneself, says things that shock others."

They started walking again.

"What kind of things do you suppose I hear in the confessionals? Precisely those that people say to themselves and conceal from others. I too am a specialist, if I may use the term. Many have compared our respective trades, Don Carlos."

"To my knowledge, I practice none."

"Then what do you call what you did for Enrique?"

"It all depends. If we are to judge by the results, I wrought no cure."

"What more could be done for a man already on the brink of death? Yet you're wrong, Don Carlos; there was a cure: yours. At long last you've been rescued from isolation and misanthropy. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, the humble people from this neighborhood, all who have closely observed your

selflessness and charity, will never again abandon you."

Don Carlos shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "That's what I'm afraid of: the entrance to my house packed day and night, crowded with worm-infested children, pregnant women, rheumatic old men. . ."

"And since they have nothing to pay you with—the same as in my case—they are bound to arrive with a little something for your cooking pot."

"I'll refuse to accept it."

"I did the same at first. Until I understood that their feelings get hurt. Now the problem is my cook's who is at a loss for new ways of preparing chicken so I can continue to put up with it."

"Mine, Doña Cástula, who has been around and knows her P's and q's, has a number of recipes that might provide some variety. Why don't you take a chance and come for dinner tomorrow evening?"

And so in this casual manner Don Evaristo received and accepted his first invitation to visit Don Carlos' house—an invitation followed by so many others that habit made them unnecessary. Now Don Carlos' house, no longer forlorn, was moreover besieged constantly by the needy who dirtied it, made a show of their sores and took advantage of the least opportunity to steal. Doña Cástula would have resigned had she not seen the priest's sacred presence pass through the same door admitting the others.

His pastoral duties had given Don Evaristo enough experience not to be misled by first impressions. He had often wondered about Don Carlos Román and inwardly ventured explanations for that strange temperament. But in contrast to the other townsfolk chance drew him sufficiently close to the object of his curiosity to allow detailed observation.

Until now Don Evaristo had known only one trait of Dr. Román: that which he had revealed in his relationship with Enrique Liévano and the attitude he adopted toward those who now resorted to him in search of aid. He was generous with his time, skill, and money; yet something within Father Trejo prevented him from considering Don Carlos truly generous. Was it that his actions did not stem from a Christian motive or did an almost daily visit disclose characteristics in Don Carlos' behavior which, if they did not contradict what is commonly recognized as generosity, were at least ambiguous? Certain biting expressions and cruel jokes forced the priest to withhold judgment, a judgment that in any event, nothing pressed him to pronounce.

One evening, after a supper Doña Cástula had prepared with special care, subtly combining food and wine, and produced the antique gold-monogrammed china, a set of goblets of the finest crystal, and a tablecloth of the whitest linen, Father Trejo could not help commenting: "Had someone told me you're a bon vivant, Don Carlos, I wouldn't have believed him, not even under oath. But now I must yield before the evidence. You certainly know how to enjoy the finer things life offers us. And really I don't blame you. They are so few."

"But you're wrong, Don Evaristo. It's not that I'm an expert wine-taster, let alone a candidate for the fires of hell for having indulged in the deadly sin of gluttony. I can give up what the masses call the pleasures of the table (and the pleasures of other household furnishings as well, to be more explicit) without--well--let's not say a sacrifice,

but without the slight effort."

"And so?"

"The clue lies elsewhere. I'm a man ruled strictly by logic. If you are to understand the effects, we must go back to the causes. Add to your remarks that some changes have been made in the dining room."

True. The wallpaper had been redone and the ceiling embellished with fine wood panelling. In one corner a brisk, cheerful fire blazed.

"Excuse me, Don Carlos, but first of all 'Im astonished by how miraculously fast the work was finished. I'm familiar with the workmen in Comitán, and they're no more industrious than those in the Biblical vineyard."

"It's easy to explain. I offered to raise their salary proportionately to the speed with which they finished the job. What's more, Doña Cástula never took her eyes off them for a second. Consequently, while you were on one of your parish rounds, the surprise was readied."

"And you can explain the second miracle as easily?"

"I see no other miracle."

"Your decision to undertake the work."

"Oh, that you'll understand easily. It concerns Doña Cástula. My recent come-back as a doctor has annoyed her. She has overwhelmed me with reproaches, all of them so logical that, as wisdom counsels, I have completely ignored them. But once she began to complain of not feeling well, thinking that a sojourn at the thermal baths of Uninajab would do her good, and opining that the time had come for her to retire and live with her family, etc., I understood

that danger was imminent. She was threatening me with nothing less than leaving. On the other hand, I couldn't acknowledge her threats, let alone plead with her to stay on. To offer a raise in salary would have been unforgivably tactless. Obligated to proceed with much more subtlety, many nights I lay awake thinking about what would give Doña Cástula a really deep and, above all, lasting satisfaction. After wracking my brains, I realized that the house, which in the long run is more hers than mine, ought again be what it once was in the good old days. It should be renovated and resplendent again with the choicest treasures gradually collected by my ancestors one by one and handed on from generation to generation--treasures which I added nothing to and which I didn't even grant to be of use. Finally Doña Cástula would be able to show off her talents as a hostess."

The priest smiled gently at Don Carlos' lengthy explanation of his motives adroitly summed up with:

"The only prerogative I have fully retained is the selection of my guest: namely, you. To your health, Don Evaristo!"

They raised their glasses and drank. Father Trejo was now laughing heartily.

"Left to my imagination, I'd have attributed all these changes to--how should I word it?--more lofty motives. Such as the one I assumed in Enrique Liévano's case. I then thought you were trying to draw near to God through charitable works."

Don Carlos' tone, while grave, remained nonetheless cordial.

"We have always been very frank about religion, Father. You're not unaware that I respect and admire God, and should our paths ever cross, I won't fail to greet Him with all the

consideration due His high rank. Meanwhile, however, I prefer not to meddle in His business, bound to be so much more important and complicated than my own."

"Which boils down to remaining in good standing with your housekeeper. In my ingenuousness, I would have sworn that behind all the recent transformations you and your house have undergone there was a woman."

"Dona Cástula is a woman, Father, even though her age and station prevent you from conceding the title Mother Nature bestowed upon her."

"Let's not joke about it, Doctor. In mentioning a woman, I meant someone your heart might have fancied."

"Fancied?"

Deep in thought, Don Evaristo held his glass between his cupped hands as if uncertain whether to go on. Finally he said abruptly, "To be united in the Holy Sacrament."

Don Carlos made a gesture to stop him.

"Come now, Father, forget the jargon, for a doctor's is far more exact and blunt. Let's use everyday terms. Did you really think I was willing to marry again?"

"Why not? The Scriptures say that it is not good for a man to be alone."

"Vox populi, which after all is vox Dei, affirms that it is better to be alone than in bad company, and I stick to the popular saying rather than to the Scripture."

"Must the company necessarily be bad? Why, the virtue of the women of Comitán is proverbial."

"And you, Father, who know them deep down, since the screen of the confessional is the sieve through which all secrets filter,

would you put your hand in the fire for them?"

His answer was a categorical: "Yes."

"Well then, let's have a toast that such virtue still persists, and may those who cherish it live forever and a day."

"You don't count yourself among them, do you?"

"I'm no expert in the matter. As far as women are concerned, you could say I've been out of the fray for many years."

Faced with a comment which Don Evaristo interpreted as alluding to a wound still requiring some care, the priest thought it tactful to keep silent. Yet Don Carlos' tone allowed other implications, difficult to define, to shine through. Don Carlos himself explained:

"At my age. . . and with my reputation of being an ogre. . . no, really, there are things one no longer has the right to think about. . ."

Don Evaristo considered it premature to contradict Don Carlos right away. Had he done so, he would only have strengthened the position Don Carlos adopted, or claimed to have adopted. Eventually he would find out during future conversations.

Of course Don Evaristo did not bring up the subject. By remaining passive however, he forced Don Carlos to refer to his widowhood once more, and Don Carlos did so as if he were dealing with a state worth mentioning only because of the extreme loneliness and long isolation it had led him to.

"I'll be frank with you, Father. What paralyzed me all those years, to the point of secluding myself and seeing no one, wasn't sorrow. At least, not sorrow alone, though that was part, a large part, of it too. But there was something my mind ran up against day and night: the absurdity of it all. For if you examine it closely, my story has neither rhyme nor reason.

I love someone, and at the very moment I'm about to attain that love (what, for you, though you might consider it blasphemous, would be tantamount to getting to heaven) I lose that love forever. Why, just why? For if the love was so deep, it should have been possible. And if it wasn't possible. . . all these years I haven't remained alone merely to weep to my heart's content, rend my garments and sprinkle ashes over my head, as many have believed. All I've tried to do is understand."

"That's your mistake. The ways of Providence are not ours to understand."

"Enough of that! Remember, Don Evaristo, I'm a man of limited vision and simple motivations. Remember my decorating the dining room. In order to understand my misfortune, I didn't intend to go back to the original causes. No, not at all. I was going to reconstruct all the elements involved in my predicament. I was going to arrange and rearrange them until each fitted into its proper place, like the pieces of a puzzle, until all became coherent and meaningful before my eyes. As I have already told you more than once, Father, my main passion is logic."

"Did it help you at all in this case? Did it at least comfort you?"

"More than that. I nevertheless don't owe everything to logic, but to persistence and patience as well. I ended up freeing myself from an obsession in which time was meaningless. Now that the obsession has vanished, I must admit it's too late."

"Just how old are you?"

"Thirty-nine. And in excellent physical health. But age and health don't count when you consider the inner turmoil I

have suffered. As a result of it, I'm finished."

"That's not the impression you give. Your obvious concern for those who come to consult you can be explained only as a result of affection. . .or vanity."

"For some months now, I've been suffering from a thyroid condition which compels me to keep on the move."

"Morality, physiology, who cares? This appetite for activity, manifested as a kind of sympathy, can also be applied to relationships other than those between doctor and patient."

"And what about our friendship, Father?"

"It's not very satisfactory, first, because of its exclusiveness, and then I'm not a worldly man. Besides, there's a higher level of spiritual and physical communion."

"I suppose you are referring to love."

"Marriage, to use a term embracing both the moral and physiological. I want to corner you."

"I give up. But please, a truce. The idea, the very idea of. . . it still seems so unbearable, so hard to swallow."

Because marriage was an abstract idea, Don Evaristo knew that the best way to overcome his friend's resistance was not to argue but to put before his eyes names, figures, living embodiments, as it were, of such a possibility.

From his childhood as an orphan, when he had been entrusted to the Seminary's impersonal care, Don Evaristo, whom Divine Grace had until the preserved from the sins of a concupiscent eye without any great effort deserving it on his part, had confined his feminine ideal to the Virgen Mary under the adoration of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Her purity, resplendent in its beauty, was enhanced by her inaccessibility. It was easy to be moved to tears by merely contemplating her perfections.

It was easy to remain faithful, above all if one considered that Don Evaristo was not surrounded by women of flesh and blood apart from his more or less close relatives, more or less impertinent with their whimsical notions, or his more or less assiduous parishioners, or his more or less sincere penitents. On the other side of the fence—that side where to avoid endangering his everlasting salvation he would never dare trespass—ranged the serpent's disciples, Satan's allies, the repositories of all evil secrets.

As a result of his set ways and limitations, had someone suddenly asked Don Evaristo to describe the features of one of his flock, to match a name with a body, to indicate the traits of a personality, he would have been at a loss. Thanks to his resolution to find Don Carlos Román a wife, Father Trejo began paying attention to the eligible girls' features; he noticed their words, clothes, and attitudes and remembered peoples' comments about them. Thus he became aware, with no less surprise than compassion, of the desperate fight maidens put up from the very moment of their becoming eligible against their years counted inexorably by others; in secrecy he heard disclosures about every family's shortcomings; he discreetly inquired into the size of fortunes and dowries. After a most careful winnowing, he finally decided to show Don Carlos his trumps.

The session was not held in the dining room or study, for neither the masons nor the carpenters had finished their work, but in the parlor, where the furniture had been stripped of its protective coverings and where the mirrors, relieved of the mourning crepe that had shadowed them for many years, reflected

ornaments of porcelain, gold, and ivory, the meticulous detail of the woodcarving, and the austere chiaroscuro of pictures from which peered the faces of stern men, prim ladies, and circumspect children, all surveying the present, from whose bustle they had been removed.

The first candidate Don Evaristo offered Don Carlos was Amalia Suasnávar. She made up for her lack of lineage and meagre wealth with the unselfishness of a character tempered by adversity. Her behavior during her mother's long, painful illness showed how patiently, sweetly, and cheerfully a person whose moral conscience fully reigns over human selfishness can bear a cross.

Don Carlos paid the expected tribute of admiration to Miss Suasnávar but expressed certain objections, unimportant ones, needless to say. Why should someone who may choose total perfection be content with what is only half satisfactory? Miss Suasnávar, if Don Carlos had not been misinformed, had carried her humility to the extent of allowing her brothers, who showed up only at the moment of the distribution of their mother's estate, to snatch away her inheritance. Miss Suasnávar carried her modesty to the point of dressing freakishly and her shyness to the extreme of not entering conversations except to blunder. Wasn't she the girl who became notorious during her late mother's novela for complaining before the mourners of a persistent insomnia from which, when she managed by some kind of miracle to induce a moment's sleep, she had bucked about so that she immediately awoke in moral anguish. When people found out what Miss Suasnávar meant by "bucking about", they realized she had supposed that the only creature given to bucking about was a colt.

Unable to counter this, Don Evaristo moved on to candidate number two, Soledad Armendárez, called Cholita by everyone because of the warmth she inspired so spontaneously and immediately among those privileged to know her. She was very young, of course, almost a child, but for Don Carlos this meant being able to mold and shape her according to his taste. Her innate goodness became evident when her beauty, justly praised by acquaintances and strangers alike, not only did not swell her with pride, but she did not even try to enhance it with cosmetics or show it off at outings and parties. Far from it, she tried not to attract attention, so that if she sinned from overdoing anything, it was in the modesty of her attire and attitudes. So much so, that those closest to her came even to suspect some mystical bent which, as experience proves, is a very good ingredient in happy marriages.

"Cholita Armendárez. . . Cholita Armendárez. . ." Don Carlos drummed the arm of his chair with his fingertips as if trying to recall something. Until at last he arose with a triumphant gesture. "Why, of course! Wasn't she the one who played the angel at all the gatherings and who, suffering from tonsillitis, was once to be replaced in the role by her sister in order not to cancel the performance. Faced with such a prospect, Cholita, driven by religious zeal that surpassed her sisterly affection, saw the perfect opportunity to reveal her sister's unworthiness to wear garments made sacred by what they represented, to cover a body that had abandoned itself to the lowest passions. Cholita mentioned with surprising accuracy the accomplices' names, the places, times and number of acts, of which she had kept a careful record. The parish soiree did not take place, of course, but the inhabitants of Comitán savored a juicy scandal instead.

The sister was banished to one of her father's ranches, and Cholita enhanced the attractiveness of her own appearance with the virtue of an implacable, fiery finger ready to point at corruption wherever it might be, even among those she cherished most."

Like his fellow townspeople, Don Carlos applauded this quality, though it was preferable to contemplate it from afar rather than run the risk of some time becoming the object of Cholita's accusation. For the flesh is weak, the righteous falls seventy times a day, and no one is free from temptation.

Candidate three, Leonila Rovelo, was rich and aristocratic and enjoyed excellent health. . .

"Please, Don Evaristo, don't go on. I know her and I think she's a splendid example of a Swiss cow. While she might be good for nursing the entire town, she is incapable of stringing two words together. Do you know why she broke off with Ramiro Albores, the suitor she was about to marry?"

Don Evaristo had to admit he did not.

"Well, it so happened that, with the wedding imminent, Leonila's relatives looked the other way to let the couple talk alone for a few moments. The setting could not have been better: a bench in the park surrounded by jasmine trees whose aroma, as the poets say, scented the air. From the bandstand the marimba emitted its sweetest melodies, and the moon shone softly in the sky. It was one of those opportunities one doesn't enjoy twice. Ramiro, though certainly no poet, summoned up enough eloquence, however, to speak of his love, his hopes, the happiness they would achieve together. Leonila listened to him enraptured, but when it was time for her to say something, she began to tie knots in her handkerchief. Ramiro insisted, politely at first, then

more firmly, but always tenderly. He finally dared to take her hand, but she remained speechless. When at long last she decided to speak, it was to say, 'What time is it?'

"She must have had something urgent to do."

"No, nothing urgent, and besides, right in front of her loomed the enormous town clock with all its numbers so that, if she had to, in the last resort she could have glance at it. But no, she only tried to say one short everyday sentence that she herself could understand."

Don Evaristo was not deterred by Don Carlos' victory.

"You should have said so before! What you really want is a brain. Well, then, there's Elvira Figueroa: she invents acrostics to Saint Caralampio, the patron of her neighborhood and performer of countless miracles. . ."

"Not including the marriage of that young maiden."

"Men fear her and run from her because they don't dare compete with her. She knows by heart the names of the capitals of Europe and can solve even the most complicated crossword puzzles."

"And meanwhile the house comes tumbling down."

"No, you're not going to catch me on that point. Home economics holds no secrets for her. And as for her culinary talents, suffice it to say that even the nuns of the Convent of the Merced ask for her recipes and advice when they want to show off every time they entertain the Bishop."

"I doubt that she can beat Doña Cástula."

"In other areas as well, she's a most consummate artist. She embroiders, does charming woodburnings, embosses velvet, paints in water colors. . ."

"And plays the piano."

"With such bravura that no man could possibly match her."

"So that explains the moustache!"

"Doctor what you have just said is indelicate, to say the least. One never mentions that kind of shortcoming in a young lady. Even if she does shave."

"Mea culpa, Don Evaristo. Let's proceed."

"I can't think of anyone else."

"How come? Could you possibly have failed to notice your neighbors across the street?"

"Whom do you mean? The Orantes girls?"

"That's right. For unless I've offended you by what I just said about Miss Figueroa's moustache—I take it all back and from now on, I shall refer to it as a downy shadow—I can't really fathom why you haven't put one of the three on your list. From among the three of them, any taste is apt to be pleased."

"Not yours, which is so demanding. The eldest, Blanca, is a lady of the Sacred Heart of Mary and warden of the Holy Sacrament."

"As far as I know, she's never had a suitor."

"No, and unfortunately she doesn't have the calling of a nun either. Hence she has to content herself with the lukewarmness of spinsterhood."

"What about the next one?"

"Yolanda? She's scared that if she even goes near the church her sister's fate will fall upon her. And so she lives only for a good time and has made a play for every man in Comitán. Except you—she's too smart to bark up the wrong tree. At this stage, after having tried her hand with every man, only traveling salesmen remain available. She attracts them, but as soon as they find out what the score is, they either try to take advantage of her or pull up stakes. That's what life is like for her. Now

take the youngest, Romelia, who thinks she's the cat's meow though she has barely put on an evening dress for her first ball; and now, no day passes when two or three young whipper snappers don't swarm like gnats to her balcony or a night when they don't serenade her."

"Is she very pretty or merely flirtatious?"

"How do I know? How do you expect me to look at her after the marimba her suitors serenade her with keeps me awake all night long and I have to get up at the crack of dawn for my first Mass?"

"It'd be worth taking a look, Father, even with sleepy, bloodshot eyes. I saw her once. And she impressed me as a person with a thirst for life. Not with a thirst that debases, no, but rather with a longing that exalts. What shines on her face is not hunger but an urge for fulfilment."

"Aha! So we've been playin dirty, have we? While I was painstakingly scrutinizing souls, you've had an ace up your sleeve."

"Father, I've seen her only from a distance and that's all. Just once. I know nothing about her and haven't wanted to inquire."

"And yet, you know all about the others. Thanks to Doña Cástula, I suppose."

"Doña Cástula is no longer my only contact with the world. I now have my patients, Father. And you know people can talk, I mean really talk, with only their priest or doctor."

"So it's the patients. For some time now I've noticed that mainly the well-to-do have stayed on. There are no longer so many poor ones in the hall, and instead you've had to spruce up the waiting room with comfortable armchairs, flower vases, and

tables with magazines on them. . . No, this isn't a reproach. Merely the observation of a natural law. Water seeks its own level."

"Yes, I've become popular among the well-to-do. They come to see a queer duck at close hand."

"And what about you? How do you treat them?"

"I give them their due."

"Well, then, they're going to keep coming. Have you managed any cures?"

"Spectacular ones. As if by incantation I've made imaginary ailments disappear, though of course I've never promised a permanent cure. The rich need a hobby, and it's not right to deprive them of their whims."

"Hm. Not a bad tactic. By now you've become famous. One of these days, Don Rafael Orantes, the father of the girl who has caught your eye, will end up coming to see you. He is somewhat advanced in age and suffers certain discomforts. His family worries. What's to become of them all when they are no longer sustained by the respect now paid to the man of the family? Who's to administer the money Don Rafael has made driving herds of cattle to Guatemala to sell?"

"But he has a son. I remember him well; we were schoolmates. He was called Rafael after his father."

"He died a while back."

"How strange I never knew. It must have happened when I was away from Comitán."

"No. It was about the same time your wife died. A few days later."

"Oh that explains it then. I lost touch with everything but my misfortune. But what did he die of?"

"A hunting accident. His gun went off and blew his brains out."

"Rafael must have been quite young, well, as young as I thought I was. Twenty-eight more or less."

"Yes, more or less."

"Was he single or married?"

"He gave his parents many a headache. He liked to run around and chase girls. He'd go, sampling here and there. But he never really went steady with any girl."

Don Carlos smacked his thigh sharply like one who has just remembered something.

"Why, yes, it's true. Estela herself told me something about his having courted her."

"Why should she be the exception?"

"The affair became somewhat complicated because Estela's mother objected to the relationship and forbade them, in no un certain terms, to see each other or to write. In short, her mother behaved as if marriage was really what she was after. No mention was ever made of it. Not even of an engagement."

Don Carlos capriciously changed the subject.

"So for lack of a male heir, Don Rafael Orantes leaves three women behind. Oh, Don Evaristo, it's in cases like these I regret not being a Muslim."

"That sacrilegious as well as hypocritical. You've already given one girl the eye. And the other two might just as well be erased from the face of the earth."

Don Carlos assumed a grave expression before answering.

"Now remember, Don Evaristo, I know nothing about Romelia. And now, thanks to you, I'm anxious to find out all

N-0485



GOBIERNO NACIONAL AUTÓNOMO
DE MÉXICO
DIRECCIÓN DE CURSOS TEMPORALES

Hardly against his will, Don Carlos had, however, another continual source of reliable information: none other than Doña Cástula, who from her vantage point, perceived details that, though trivial and simple-minded, revealed much more than the vague generalities Don Evaristo used in trying to define Romelia's personality. Doña Cástula grew wary as she noticed that her master was up to something, that her sway over a steadily growing domain was being endangered. For now some of the farm hands who worked by the week were turning the earth in the garden to plant new seeds, old trees were being pruned, corridors were being filled with rare orchids, and imported vines were growing around the pillars.

That Don Carlos should be in a mild quandary concerning women would have seem natural and completely reasonable to Doña Cástula, whereas the contrary would have seemed altogether abnormal. But that he should remarry she considered untimely, risky, and even slightly ridiculous. The more so when one considered that the favorable winds were blowing in the direction of the youngest Orantes daughter, a member of a family whose servants never stayed on, who lived in a house whose service one entered out of curiosity and left with enough material to entertain all the other Comitecan ladies during their idle hours.

From all she heard about Romelia, Doña Cástula gathered that her birth was a miracle performed by Saint Anne since it occurred long after her parents had given up hope of more offspring. For this very reason, and on account of the great age difference between her and her older brother and sisters, Romelia became the pet. She was cuddled in the arms of one person after another, and they quarreled over who was to lull her to sleep, amuse her, and give her sweets. The affection of the family was so pervasive

that Romelia quite naturally came to regard herself as the center of the universe. Since no one needed to be persuaded of this fact, she did not have to resort to tantrums, stubbornness, or imaginary illnesses because no one ever forgot who Romelia was and her importance.

Under such propitious circumstances her character therefore became pleasant, even lively and outgoing. She knew herself to be the bestower of happiness and was herself happy in being able to give it to others.

She was not expelled from this childhood paradise by school discipline, for year after year the adults postponed her registration, nor by the indifference of those surrounding her, nor by the disloyalty of someone engrossed in more urgent matters or more demanding affections. It was death that finally destroyed Romelia's world. Unable to understand death, she could not face it.

Death not only snatched away her brother, Rafael, perhaps the most devoted of her worshippers, at least the one who came up with the nicest surprises, most varied diversions, and most exciting excursions; it also changed those who had previously loved her into profoundly strange, inscrutable, and hostile beings.

Full of rancor, she still remembered that on the day the Indians brought Rafael's body on a litter from the ranch, no one looked her way or made a move to shield her from the horrible sight. Nor did anyone during the preparations for the burial notice whether Romelia ate or not. During the nights of the novena Romelia, her teeth chattering with fright, shut herself up in her bedroom where not even sleep kept her company. She lost track of the number of times fever came and went with no

loving hand to touch her forehead or offer some remedy to her lips. Why should she cry if there were no witnesses? To whom could she turn? In a wide-eyed stupor Romelia watched what was happening around her.

Hysterical, her mother, Doña Ernestina, wandered unkempt and dirty about the house. Neither her husband's authority nor her daughters' pleas sufficed to bring her to her senses. When she agreed to stay in her room, she conjured up, screaming in the dark, the presence of her departed son. She took advantage of the slightest negligence of those guarding her to summon fortune tellers, soothsayers, and women suspected of witchcraft. She even dared to defy Don Rafael's anger as well as public opinion by attending a séance from which she was thrown out for having violently tried to force the medium to produce her dead son.

Don Rafael bore the tragedy differently. He kept on tending to his business with great care. He did not stop seeing his friends, and he continued to preside at the family table where the places of Rafael and Doña Ernestina were now vacant. But no one remembers seeing him laugh, let down his reserve, or relax the conscious control over his own actions which might otherwise have gotten out of hand. When alone he broke down and wept over his life suddenly uprooted and left in ruins--a life he no longer cared to preserve. As a consequence, he readily surrendered to the first indications of sickness and decrepitude, though not to the point of changing habits he had managed with such heroic effort to keep intact.

As for Rafael's sisters, their youthful energy and hope for the future tempered their suffering. But disconcerted by their mother's clamorous, irrational grief, they suspected that this

death, though death after all was natural and borne matter-of-factly with resignation by many of their friends, veiled a mystery that their feminine nature prevented them from understanding. And they could not imagine any reason not involving themselves directly.

Blanca vaguely suspected some sin--suicide?--which she felt obliged to expiate. Yolanda, ashamed of Doña Ernestina's eccentricities, accepted them as a challenge to which she responded by exaggerating her efforts to please. Thus one sister became devout, the other coquettish. And to realize their desires, both were counting on an inheritance which had suddenly taken on a magnitude that their minds could not conceive.

As for Romelia, at first she tried to show her intense grief in every possible way to attract the others' wavering attention. She fainted in public and was melancholy in private. But her mother was a genuine competitor; besides, she was much too expert so that Romelia was forced to retreat. She chose persistence rather than rashness. She not only refused to come out of mourning long after the prescribed period was over but even to relieve it with a swatch of color. She always wore a locket where she kept neatly folded the only note her brother ever wrote her. He had written it on the occasion of the first peach crop at the ranch. The note said simply, "I hope you enjoy them."

Though in the eyes of the Comitecans Romelia's displays turned her into a legendary figure, they did not succeed in drawing her parents and sisters out of their self-absorption. In desperation she sought out a substituting affection to compensate for all she had lost in the catastrophe. She clung to the maids' skirts, to the seamstress who came to mend the family's clothes, to the chocolate-grinder.

The help paid attention to her because after all as the master's daughter she was bound to deserve it. But each inhabited a world apart in which Romelia did not fit.

When she began school--for in a lucid moment her parents noticed that Romelia was twelve years old and did not even know the rudiments of reading--she painfully discovered that being named Romelia Orantes meant nothing and that though her family name was good there were others equal or better with which she had to compete. If she wanted to win her teachers' and classmates' approval, she had to be deserving. She could succeed by applying herself to her studies, acquiring skill in games, and being loyal under difficult circumstances.

Romelia's first reaction to school showed both pride and rejection. She refused to accept the rules and wanted to return to her childhood omnipotence and invulnerability. But her will came into conflict with her father's and was crushed under his final orders, which forced her to keep attending classes with extreme punctuality.

Humiliated, Romelia strove to adjust to her new circumstances; she did so somewhat ineptly and with little success. She earned the tepid sympathy of this or that nun, but never the exclusive, impassioned favoritism enjoyed by others whose behavior was more exemplary than her own. She managed to have one or two conversations with girls whom, given the choice, she would have repudiated. She never shared a secret, swore an oath of friendship like those the others exchanged, or received an invitation to see someone outside the classroom.

Living in such an unsatisfactory present, Romelia turned to the past to idealize the image of her dead brother, the only faithful one, and to preserve a ritual that his family, becoming

indifferent and oblivious with time, was beginning to abandon. The symbol of that ritual was the locket always shining upon her breast even on the most insignificant occasions and to the exclusion of all other jewelry.

Meanwhile, Romelia was contriving plans for future revenge. Some time, in a manner still vague to her, she was going to recover her privileged position. She was going to be raised to heights inaccessible to others; in sublime exaltation she was going to be proclaimed the favorite.

The instrument to achieve these ends began to become apparent to her with the dawning of puberty. It was to be her body. Beneath the school girl's dark, severe uniform, men divined contours that promised to be magnificent.

Romelia, far from being embarrassed by lascivious stares, once more felt the electrified atmosphere of her childhood. But now she knew something she had previously ignored: that power is always fragile; since any circumstance can destroy it, you must take advantage of it while you have it in your hands, and use it intelligently to get what really counts.

What really counted for her was love, a form of love that would fill her emptiness and not need to be reciprocated, though of course she was not so naïve as to be unwilling to make necessary concessions for the sake of appearance.

Next came position. For love must descend towards the chosen like light from a distant, powerful star, not rise like a cloud of incense. Romelia would exchange Orantes only for a

better name.

Then came fortune. Though used to the security wealth offered, she needed to develop to the point of enjoying luxury. She was endowed not with the gross instinct bound to prefer the gaudiest, but with the perceptiveness to discern the most expensive.

While Romelia was arriving at the final stage of her ambition, she had to be content with such minor triumphs as being selected Queen of the National Holidays and appearing in all the ceremonies escorted by a representative of the governor himself, receiving daily homage from some admirer to whom she would not deign to show the slightest gesture of kindness, discovering her friends' envy and watching it closely, so closely that she exasperated her sisters, especially Yolanda.

These episodes satisfied Romelia for a day, a while. At times, for reasons she could not fathom, she felt at peace for months. But the other, the real, the definite was slow in jelling.

When it did jell, it exceeded all her expectations, even the wildest and most ambitious. A man like Don Carlos met the required conditions to the utmost perfection and added to them one more trait, that of having been considered unconquerable.

How many girls had tried to lure and attract him but had been forced to abandon the venture as impossible! Then suddenly a girl not only uninterested in Don Carlos but even unaware of his existence unhinges him, forcing him to seek her out, pursue

her, frequent places previously scorned, and adopt attitudes lowering him in everyone's eyes in order to woo her with all the guile of the art.

Don Carlos, who had not set foot in church since the day of his wedding, now attended early Mass daily just to wait for Romelia's arrival, observe her from afar during the ceremony, and follow her at a distance as she returned home.

She felt his stare, which made her tremble, with a feeling of triumph. Some time that man, so strong and complete, so much a master of himself yet intimidated by her mere presence, was going to dare to approach her, speak to her, tell her that he loved her, beg that she condescend to be his fiancée and wife. She would feign bewilderment, surprise and would sweeten the prescribed initial rejection with false modesty. How could a distinguished person of Don Carlos' cultivation and experience (no, she would not allude to his age; he might be offended) possibly have come to notice a girl as insignificant as herself? Of course it was possible he had let himself be dazzled by appearances.

But how long does a pretty face last? And what is it good for if virtue and sobriety are not also present? Romelia, who to say the least was frank and open to everyone, should confess her defects, some of them serious and others merely annoying. The man who wanted her would have to accept her just as God made her. And since this would not be easy, nothing less than love, true love, was imperative.

Though this confession had all the appearance of a rejection, it would be so cunningly worded that Don Carlos, no matter how obtuse he might be, would finally detect in it some hope

encouraging him to prove his love to be as true as the love she required.

Once set within this framework, Romelia would gradually concede that at her age no character is definitely formed and that under able direction and wise counseling she could mend her ways. For like all young girls, Romelia delighted in parties and enjoyed flattery and relished them whenever they were to be had; though naturally she relished them within the limits of decency so that no one could accuse her of indiscretion, slips, or folly. Her purity, already tested occasionally, had proved to her that some kinds of temptation are not so easily resisted. But Romelia was not going to cling to these habits because she understood that what attracted her to promenades and parties was nothing more than what a married woman finds abundantly in her own home: namely, company, support, protection and love. Having these, one feels calm and peaceful, and the world outside seems less appealing.

Though her frivolous side seemed to make light of such a state, Romelia had never dreamed of more than a tranquil, secure affection. She distrusted the passions, feared adventures and longed for nothing more than to find a worthy man to whom she could dedicate herself unconditionally and faithfully. Unfortunately, Romelia was one of those women who keep their word, single-mindedly pursue one fate.

Her imaginary confession so moved her that it brought abundant tears to her eyes. With the fingers of her right hand she convulsively clutched the locket, symbol of her steadfast affections.

From the way Don Carlos endured his widowhood Romelia sensed

that he above all would know how to appreciate what her keeping the locket meant. Veneration due the dead might become their first mutual interest; later they might discover astonishing affinities of tastes based on the present as well as the past. Romelia was willing to be instructed and initiated into his interests, whatever they might be, or to show contempt for people who waste their time in trivialities in case Don Carlos had no interests.

Romelia decided to respect Don Carlos' past as sacred and not refer to it without previous authorization; and when she did, she would speak of it in the tone of someone who understands that the reality she confronts exceeds her own merits.

For example, she had heard that Don Carlos had turned one of the main rooms of his house into a sort of museum where he kept Estela's belongings intact, scrupulously looked after and clean. Well, then, Estela's successor would serve as the most zealous guardian of the veneration that this—not museum, but altar—deserved. Until Don Carlos himself would beg her not to overdo it, and she would obediently let cobwebs grow, mildew spread, and mold multiply. No one would again remember the closed room when so many open ones would require careful attention and care. Time would breed inevitable complications, pregnancies and births, for instance. The moment would come when there would not be sufficient room for herself and the newborn. Could Don Carlos oppose storing the useless objects in a trunk and converting the room into a nursery? Then afterwards, she could put it to other uses, for the sewing room she had always dreamed of and had planned exactly how to decorate.

According to rumor, Don Carlos was melancholy; so Romelia

would adjust to his mood at first. But gradually, solicitous for her husband's welfare, she would try to gather a select circle of friends around them both. They would organize parties, trips to the country and maybe. . . maybe even balls.

What place would Don Evaristo, now Don Carlos' only friend, find in this circle? Probably none because it would comprise primarily young married couples, and the presence of a bachelor, a priest moreover, is always awkward, inhibits others, and kills the liveliness and spontaneity. They would reserve special days, farther and farther apart, for receiving Don Evaristo until he and Don Carlos would understand simultaneously that their worlds had drifted apart and try to avoid agonizing visits during which no topic of conversation flourishes, no interest is shared, and no statement meets with approval.

Romelia was sure that Doña Cástula, considering herself lady and mistress of the house, would certainly put up a fight, not surrendering readily to being dethroned by a newcomer; the newcomer must therefore treat the indispensable Doña Cástula carefully, for Romelia wanted to unload all the tedious routines of housewife and mother upon her. Combined with extreme benevolence and acts of absolute confidence Romelia's tactics would involve a kind of reeling in and letting out, generous concessions and arbitrary refusals, and strict vigilance to keep Dona Cástula from overstepping her bounds and forgetting her inferior station.

In general terms, this could be an effective line of action. But here, as in everything else, Romelia was prepared to improvise along the way, change her attitudes according to circumstances, and even revise them altogether if necessary.

For example, in the case of the engagement. Her calculations

proved useless from the moment Don Carlos failed to discuss this matter with her directly but instead, under the pretext that he would be unable to bear a refusal, sent Father Trejo as his emissary to the Orantes family.

Thus the arrangements were carried out on a level where one's presence, Romelia's at least, did not count. Before consulting her, her parents weighed the pros and cons of such a match, and Don Rafael had the foresight to call on Doña Clara Domínguez, Estela's mother, to ask for references concerning the man who had been her son-in-law.

Though Doña Clara could never forgive Don Carlos for not inviting her as a widow, also alone, to stay in his house, where she had attended her daughter when sick and her wake when dead, and to remain there permanently as his housekeeper but had preferred to place his trust in a servant, she had to admit that as a husband he was flawless.

From the very beginning he recognized the seriousness of Estela's illness and did what he could to cure her. He spared no expense and had famous specialists come from Mexico City; he also let the humblest local healers give opinions. The means were not important to him. What mattered was Estela's life. And he fought at first to save it, then to prolong it, never betraying a sign of impatience or weariness until nothing more was possible. For God determines a man's last breath and man takes not another; Estela's fate was sealed.

Encouraged by these disclosures, Don Rafael felt inclined to consent to the wedding. Accordingly he transmitted to Romelia through Doña Ernestina not a recommendation but an order which the girl obeyed with the docility of a model child, the only role which at this moment she was allowed to assume.

During the brief engagement Don Carlos and Romelia were

systematically prevented from seeing each other alone, for such is the custom. But when, by tacit agreement, the chaperons should grow negligent for a moment, she would lower her eyes and blush, waiting for the romantic phrase she had read in a novel, the languid look like the one issuing from the eyes of a picture postcard model, and the brutal, clumsy attempt to get close that she would heroically resist.

But Don Carlos seemed not to notice the opportunity presented to him and wasted the fleeting moments talking of clothes ordered from Mexico City, of the carpenters' delay in delivering the furniture, of the need to get the certificate of baptism.

How was Romelia to interpret her fiancé's behavior? He did not act out of clumsiness, needless to say, for he was a man of the world; nor from lack of love because when a man does not love a woman he does not marry her, and this man seemed to be devoured by a feverish anxiety that the event be consummated. Therefore he must be acting out of tact. That was all. She should feel flattered and grateful.

At long last the wedding ceremony, a solemn mass sung by three priests with Don Evaristo Trejo as the chief officiate, was celebrated in the main church. The nave, resplendently lit, was decorated with flowers supplied by every possible vendor in Comitán.

In the background the organ and children's choir struck up the moment the bridal party entered. Dressed in antique brocade, with no jewelry save the famous locket, the bride, at her father's side, advanced along a red carpet with deliberately slow steps so that her beauty could be observed down to the smallest detail of her attire. Her expression reflected the seriousness appropriate to the act whereby she was commit

ting her life, her blush seemed essential to the nature of that act, and her budding smile foreshadowed happiness.

Next came the groom escorting Doña Ernestina, wondrously lucid. She walked with a sprightly step, proud of her tasteful, elegant attire, bejeweled as always on grand occasions with diamonds inherited from her great-grandparents as if in all the years since Rafael's death she had done nothing except appear in society.

Romelia's sisters, the bridesmaids, had in no way been able to agree on the colors and style of their dresses. Blanca chose a dark gray fabric with a severe nun-like cut. Yolanda had to give into the entreaties of her future brother-in-law and adapt a dress that had captured her fancy--a bright red silk with an unduly low neckline and sleeves much too short. To keep the peace she had to compromise by reducing its intense color to a moderate shade with an inoffensive opaque tier which softened the brightness of the fabric. A veil concealed the plunging neckline, and long gloves almost came up to the sleeves.

The guests paid little attention to the men. Don Rafael's bearing was that of an old man who by the force of his will stands steadfast but upon whom life has already turned its back. Don Carlos, still youthful and robust, with a jaw that openly hinted at stubbornness and a frown revealing remoteness, expressed nothing but the poise, self-assurance, and self-control of one who has passed through hardships and thanks to his courage emerged victorious to reach at long last a safe harbor.

When the protagonists knelt on the priedieu, music flooded every recess of the church with the chords of Gounod's Ave María. At the reading of the Gospel silence prevailed, and the guests,

standing, listened to the words with which the priest pronounced them man and wife.

Don Evaristo spoke easily and enthusiastically of the perfection of Christian matrimony, the earthly symbol of the mystical union of the Church and Christ, of the duties their new status imposed upon the wedded couple, and of their obligation to form a family based solidly on faith and obedience to the Divine Commandments.

Through lowered eyes Romelia managed to glance about quickly. Yes, there in the closest pews were her friends who tomorrow and perhaps always would still be called señoritas; who were not to be initiated, as she was to be this evening, into the mysteries of life; who would not attend outings, social gatherings, and burials supported by a man's strong arm; who would not hide themselves behind their husband's person to avoid the annoyance of petty decisions and the responsibility of important ones; who would not use their husband's name to deny a favor and refuse hospitality; who would not incur debts backed by their husband's credit; who would be unable to invoke their husband's authority to dismiss a maid or punish a child.

From today on Romelia would join the company of women who never say, "I want" or "I don't want", but who always dodge issues by deferring to the man of the house to achieve their aims. This side-stepping may be reduced to a single phrase: "the master wishes. . . the master prefers. . . the master orders. . . one mustn't contradict the master. . . above all one must please the master. . . first I must consult the master" —the master who would exalt her above all to the rank of wife, and intimately give her a true image of her body that would

finally reach the fullness of knowing, feeling, and performing the functions for which it had been created.

The musicians burst forth in a Gloria in which the thousand different sounds of a crowd preparing to disperse soon joined. Bumping into each other, smiling, mutually yielding the way, the guests, up to the brim with their impatience to comment on the events, began to whisper in short, abrupt phrases. Behind perfumed handkerchiefs they concealed their smiles but allowed amusement, derision, and envy to show in their eyes. Considering the newlyweds' destiny, they shrugged their shoulders with a skepticism which seemed unfounded, for everything, love, youth, and wealth, favored the alliance. And yet. . .

The reception was held in the evening at the house of the bride's parents. The only incident worth mentioning apart, of course, from the abundant, exquisite food, plentiful wines, and attentions lavished upon the guest was that at the very moment when the bride and groom posed for the traditional photograph, a black butterfly came flying in through an open window and lit upon the train of the wedding dress. Before anyone had time to chase it away, a whisper had already passed through the crowd:

"It's the soul of Estela!"

Romelia turned pale with humiliation, anger, and fear. Her heartbeat so quickened that her locket slipped from its center position to the side opposite her heart. The bride cast a pleading look at the man beside her, now her husband whose duty it was to protect her. She expected him to rescue her from this predicament and define her rightful place before everyone's eyes. Don Carlos responded with a quick, decisive movement that brushed the butterfly away, while others, following his example, finally chased it out of the room.

Romelia sighed with relief and half closed her eyes to prevent others from detecting a gleam of triumph that might

dazzle them. Until then she had been uncertain of what place she held in Don Carlos' affections. Her vanity bristled at the very thought of playing second fiddle, though common sense convinced her that Estela would retain first place at least during the initial days of the marriage. But now Romelia knew that she was walking on conquered territory and that her rival had no more substance than a ghost.

This revelation climaxed a day during which, in one unique, privileged, miraculous instant, her childhood paradise converged with the overflowing present. This moment, which realized her dream, not only of happiness but also of restitution and justice, led her through the doorway to the wide-open path of maturity as much as it returned her to her remotest origins and roots.

Even so, when she bade her family farewell to follow her husband, she wept and clung to her mother. The two men, the one who had watched over her maidenhood and the one who was going to shelter her unto death, had to persuade her tenderly to leave the embrace custom prescribes and without which parents would feel offended by their daughter's ingratitude and ease in leaving them and the husband would distrust the apparently loose character of the woman in whose hands he had just placed his honor.

Meanwhile all was ready in Don Carlos' house to receive him and his new wife. The bride's belongings, sent beforehand, were now put away in wardrobes, chests, dressing tables, and jewelry boxes. Her bridal nightgown was spread upon the bed, and the dim lamps were but a prelude to darkness.

With these preparations over and a cold supper and some uncorked bottles of champagne set on the table, Doña Cástula,

annoyed by it all, discretely withdrew to her bedroom, now at the back of the house.

Romelia crossed the threshold gently supported by Don Carlos. He courteously inquired whether she wanted to see what, from that moment, was to belong to her forever. To demonstrate her disinterest, she replied that she was exhausted from the commotion and excitement of the day. Don Carlos upbraided himself aloud for not having grasped such an obvious fact and led her straight to the bedroom. After showing her where she could find things she might need, he left her alone to move about freely.

Romelia explored a bit, pondered the value of objects, and then quickly and adeptly took off her wedding dress and its accessories. Before slipping into her nightgown, she briefly studied herself in the mirror and smiled approvingly at her nakedness. She hesitated over which side of the bed should be hers and decided on the one closest to the dressing table. She made herself comfortable, gracefully spread her hair over the pillow, and waited for Don Carlos to arrive. He did not make her wait long and, in the same motion with which he leaned over to kiss her, turned off the light.

Romelia woke up upon hearing someone brusquely draw the window curtains. Closing her eyes tightly to protect them against the violent intrusion of morning light, she muttered a protest.

For a few moments she continued to be seemingly confused, unable to decide where she was or recognize her surroundings. Then Doña Cástula's respectful but not servile voice made her suddenly realize her location. Instinctively she covered herself with the sheets—a useless gesture since the housekeeper

had not deigned to look at her but went about performing other, more practical duties. Setting the breakfast tray down near Romelia, Doña Cástula went to the wardrobe and as she opened it asked what clothes Madam was going to wear.

Romelia was puzzled by this awakening, so different from what she had anticipated, next to a tender, solicitous man in love. Unhappy with herself for giving the family she had just joined a first impression of laziness and irresponsibility or at least of ignorance or lack of respect for the household customs, she answered one question with another.

"Did the master get up a long time ago?"

"At six, as usual. He went riding."

"What time will he get back?"

Doña Cástula shrugged her shoulders to indicate that she did not know.

"Because I could wait so that we could have breakfast together."

"As you please, Ma'm. But before departing, Don Carlos asked me to inform you that he wanted to find you dressed ready to go out, for you're going to pay a visit."

"A visit?"

Romelia began to feel alarmed. She expected to encounter peculiar, eccentric habits in her husband, but not so soon nor one of such a humiliating nature. By now, all the time she had been sleeping on, the entire town knew she was alone while her husband rose about to prove to everyone that whatever had occurred the night before was neither exhausting nor worth continuing the next morning. With what pity would they comment that poor Romelia, even as a novelty, had been unable to keep him at her side.

True, her caresses had been clumsy. But isn't clumsiness natural to virgins? Any response other than resistance or fear, any surrender not apparently forced, would have aroused a husband's doubts about his wife's purity, suspicious about the authenticity of her innocence. But Romelia thought that she had found the perfect balance to keep her reputation untainted and satisfy her husband as well. Now, however, she did not know what to think. On the one hand, Don Carlos had not been very expressive; on the other, she had been so obsessed with herself, her fear, and the ritualistic gestures expected of her that she could not study him, or even see him. During those moments they had been two characters acting their respective parts. To her Don Carlos had existed merely as the antagonist, judge, owner, and male, but had had no face and she had not heard his voice.

Was it then possible that to offend her he had abandoned her at dawn to appear alone in the streets of Comitán as he had done when he was a bachelor? And now he wanted to plunge the sword deeper by forcing her to accompany him on a visit.

For a visit would display to the public the aching gait of a freshly deflowered virgin; the circles under her eyes would betray her fatigue and the difficulty and discomfort with which she assumed her new wifely condition; and everything would lend itself to crude jokes. That is why it was the custom for Comitancan newlyweds to remain cloistered during the first few days until people became used to thinking of them as just another couple, and until the newlyweds acquired the habit of being together and behaving with the matter-of-factness of those who have shared a common existence for many years.

But what did Don Carlos know of such refinements? Spiteful tears filled Romelia's eyes, but she nevertheless forced

herself to conceal her vexation in front of the imperturbable Doña Cástula still waiting for an answer.

"Which dress should I get ready, Ma'm?"

Making sure that her voice would not tremble, Romelia emptied her cup of humiliation to the very dregs.

"Didn't the master explain what kind of call? A formal one with nice people, or with his friends from the outskirts?"

Irony and contempt pervaded the question so that the maid should learn that her new mistress was proud and know that even if she obeyed her husband, this was the last time she would tolerate orders conveyed through inferiors.

"I don't know, Madam. Don Carlos told me nothing."

"Then get out the white piqué dress."

When Doña Cástula did not budge, Romelia had to add:

"It's cool today, and since it's not very fancy it can also be used for. . ."

"It's white, Madam."

Only then did Romelia realize how inappropriate her choice had been. Why, this was just the detail needed for the Comitecans to cook up some juicy gossip at the expense of Don Carlos' virility. Impatient, she conceded, "Then whatever's there. It's all the same to me."

Doña Cástula persisted with the serenity of someone who is right. A choice must be made. And it's the mistress not the servant who always chooses."

"Thanks for the lesson, Cástula. I'll have the chance to reciprocate. Then I'll wear the peach-colored crepe. I had that special collar made to show off my locket."

With a mechanical gesture repeated thousands and thousands of times since childhood, Romelia raised her hand to her breast and immediately shrieked, "My locket! Where is it?"

It amounted to an accusation of theft, a petty revenge on someone who had witnessed Romelia, unsure of herself, blunder and ridiculously flounder about. But Doña Cástula ignored the implication.

"It's there on the dresser, Ma'm. Isn't this it?"

She handed the locket to Romelia, who recognized her un-called-for alarm as one more blunder. As she fastened it around her neck again, she tried to remember the moment when she had taken it off. True, the night before she had been bewildered and nervous, maybe even giddy from the toasts. At any rate, what did it matter that she had taken it off when now it was back in its place and stood out attractively on the collar of her peach dress?

When Don Carlos returned, he found no reason to be upset. His wife had followed his instructions to the letter and was now ready to go out with him. Moreover, she had managed to calm down, forget her displeasure, conceal her curiosity, and received him with smiles and without questions.

Don Carlos, walking over to her, ceremoniously kissed her hand.

"Did you sleep well, Madam?"

They continued to address each other formally. Romelia nodded and wanted to justify herself.

"I must have been exhausted, for I didn't wake up until Doña Cástula came in to give me your message."

"Then may we go now?"

"Yes."

Like a perfect wife, she began to walk behind her husband not knowing where she was headed. Just yesterday at this very hour she had sworn to follow him to the end of the earth if need

be with no comforting right to ask where or to demur. Yet Don Carlos, a civilized man, did not abuse his power and condescended to reveal his intentions.

"We're going to your parents' house."

Romelia's face lit up with happiness. But she did not want to add any further sign to the one that had burst forth freely and spontaneously. Affection for her kith and kin ought by now to have yielded to her new duties as wife.

At the Orantes' house the newlyweds were received with vague apprehension masked by an exaggerated show of courtesy and joyful outbursts.

As there had not yet been time to clear away the remains of the celebration and the drawing-room was being tidied up and cleaned by a horde of servants, the visitors were received in the sewing room. Were they not, after all, intimates? Why, more than that, they were part of the family.

They were offered refreshments, sweets, a drink. Politely but firmly Don Carlos refused each offer, and Romelia dared not differ from her husband, who now said, "It's not worth going to all the trouble. I'll be here only a few minutes, just long enough to communicate to you, Don Rafael, and to you, Doña Ernestina, a matter of utmost importance."

Uneasy, the parents looked at each other. Blanca and Yolanda stood up in order to withdraw. Romelia turned pale.

"Should I go too?"

"No, Madam, for the matter concerns you as much as us."

When they were left alone, the silence became agonizingly intense and prolonged. No one knew how to break it. Finally Don Rafael understood that his age and position as father obliged him to take the initiative, so he cleared his throat and said,

"Well, Don Carlos, we're ready to listen."

"What I have to say, believe me upon my honor, is more painful to me than to anyone else. But there is no other way. I have come to return to this house a woman unworthy of living under my roof."

Stunned, Romelia gaped, unable to grasp the meaning of this man's words. Don Rafael clenched his jaw, and Doña Ernestina fastened the pin of her ribbon.

"Do you realize the enormity of what you're saying, Don Carlos?"

"I swear that it's as serious for me as it is for you. The step I am taking means dishonor for us all."

Romelia stiffened; her eyes flashed and her cheeks turned purple with rage.

"Dishonor—why?"

Don Carlos looked impassively at her, and when he addressed her his tone was almost benevolent.

"Don't make me go into details which as a physician are easy for me to express but as a deceived husband are painful to acknowledge. If you have any decency left, Madam, don't subject your parents to the humiliation of hearing in the crudest, ugliest words how the confidence they place in your chastity was betrayed.

The last phrases were almost drowned by uncontrolled outbursts of laughter from Doña Ernestina, whereupon Romelia had to shout, "How, when and with whom could I have committed such a sin? Someone always watched over me; no man ever came near me, and I was never alone with anyone before you."

"I don't care how, when, or with whom. The fact is that I found you were not a virgin."

"It's a lie, Father, tell him to shut up. He's lying. I have proof."

Don Carlos answered before Don Rafael could reply.

"What proof?"

Romelia's voice faltered. She found it difficult to pronounce a word always repulsive to her.

"The blood. . . the sheet was stained with blood. Father you shall see it. I'll show it to you."

Doña Ernestina, speechless, pulled herself together and now contemplated the scene from such a distance that she showed no perceptible sign of deep interest.

"Don Rafael, I'm not so naïve as to suggest that you take my word only. After all, I'm merely a stranger and Romelia's your daughter. But I'll gladly repeat what I've said and prove it on any grounds you demand."

"Is this a challenge to a duel, Rafael?" asked Doña Ernestina with a show of interest prompted by good manners.

Without addressing anyone in particular, Don Rafael admitted, "Don Carlos has given his word of honor and he is a man of honor. Therefore I must believe him."

"And what about me?, Romelia broke in passionately. "Aren't you even going to take the trouble to inspect the sheets?"

Don Rafael shook his head.

Romelia, kneeling before her father, her head hard upon his chest, repeated, "Remember, Father, how we've lived, how you've reared us, always pent up, with a sharp eye on us."

Don Rafael looked around, then glared incriminatingly at his wife. She did not notice. She was absent-mindedly analyzing the lace pattern on her handkerchief.

"Tell me with whom, Father, with whom could I have committed the sin you all accuse me of!"

While Don Rafael was hesitating between compassion for his

daughter's helplessness and obedience to a code of honor that made him, as a man, join forces with Don Carlos, the sewing room opened noiselessly to reveal, on the threshold, the silhouettes of Blanca and Yolanda, momentarily frozen.

Obviously both had been eavesdropping. Shaking violently, Blanca stepped forward. Though she made an effort to speak, only confused, strangled sounds issued from her throat. But her movements were sure, bold, and precise. She went straight to where Romelia was still kneeling before her father and with one shove pushed her away and sent her rolling on the floor. Still panting, Blanca finally was able to get some words out.

"And the hussy dares to ask with whom! Don't you remember your own brother, Rafael? Have you forgotten that you used to sleep in the same bed with him? Or did you think we were all so blind and deaf around here as not to realize what was going on?"

"For God's sake, Blanca. You're insane," said her father. When Rafael died, Romelia was a mere child."

"Yes, a child he had defiled. I used to lurk around, day and night, to catch them red-handed. . . I couldn't sleep from imagining. . . ridden with remorse for thinking about them. . . and then I had to go to confession and do penance the priest imposed on me, only to fall again into temptation because they never let me rest."

Romelia had gotten up and faced her sister.

"You're jealous. You never forgave him for loving me most of all, and now you take revenge by debasing the memory of one no longer able to defend himself. Why, if you were more than suspicious, if you were so sure, why didn't you expose us? Because you prefer to wallow in your obscene fantasies than to know the truth."

"The truth is here, right now, and since a man asserts it, his testimony is beyond question."

"No, no, Don Carlos," Yolanda broke in, "Please don't believe it. I too witnessed the whole thing and both were innocent. God has already judged Rafael, but Romelia. . . have mercy on her. Think of what life here with us will be like for her--with Blanca around repeating the same words to torture her constantly--with me, unable to forgive her ever, since because of her no man will ever look at me without a sneer, without contempt, and I'll never marry, have children or be able to leave this God-forsaken house because I'm the sister of a prostitute."

Violently seizing Yolanda's arm, Don Rafael ordered, "Shut up."

Meanwhile Blanca had emerged from a profound meditation, now fully aware of a sudden insight: "I was never able to understand why he killed himself. But now I know, I'm sure; Rafael killed himself out of shame and remorse. As if he had been the only guilty one!"

With a smile, Doña Ernestina took Blanca's hand between hers and patiently, as one explains the most obvious things to a child or imbecile, said to her, "But Rafael didn't kill himself, child; we all know it was an accident. How could he deliberately hurt us like that? He was so good! Don't you agree, Don Carlos?"

Instead of answering, Don Carlos prepared to leave. "Not only am I not entitled to voice an opinion, Madam, but I really don't care to hear all this talk."

"Absurdities," cried Don Rafael with surprising energy. "That's enough, girls; your mother doesn't feel well. You must take her to her room and look after her."

"Me too, Father?" Romelia wanted to know with one last glimmer of hope.

"You too. Don Carlos and I are about to discuss men's affairs."

The women gone, Don Carlos proceeded to clarify the only matter pending, Romelia's belongings, which, he went on, would be scrupulously returned as promptly as possible. He rose. At Don Rafael's insistence, however, Don Carlos, unable to disregard someone whose sole persuasive force was age, sat down again.

"Don't worry, Don Carlos. I'm not going to ask anything that might affront your dignity, for I esteem my own rather highly and want to keep it above and beyond all this catastrophe. Women, as you have just seen, plead, swear they are innocent, and are quite capable of resorting to any means to avoid the consequences of their actions. What else can be expected from the sex whose nature is weak, hypocritical, and cowardly? But as long as there is a man in this house, that man will answer for them and pay the price. I personally assume full responsibility for what, without my knowledge, let alone my consent, I can assure you, has happened. Your good faith has been duped and you have suffered an irreparable moral damage. However, to give you the public satisfaction you demand I am willing to do whatever you consider proper.

As Don Carlos stood up, he reached out to shake the old man's hand. "Had the other man been endowed with your integrity, this disaster would have been avoided." And turning on his heel, Don Carlos left.

At that time of the afternoon when matrons doze in hammocks as a young servant, much too young to perform a more difficult or complicated chore, massages the soles of their feet or brushes

their hair; when the school girl dallies over her notebooks without deciding to begin her homework; when the lonely adolescent gropes for the pornographic book under his mattress and locks himself in so as not to be discovered while he reads it; when the embroiderer pauses an instant, her needle dangling, hears footsteps outside, and waits with bated breath for someone she expects to come to her in her loneliness; when the kitchen servants banter amidst the rattle of half-washed dishes; when the tailor, leaning on a wooden yardstick as if it were a cane, stops in the middle of the sidewalk in front of his workshop; when the shopkeeper unbars the doors of his store getting ready to handle customers slow in coming; when the candy vendor declares a truce in her fight against flies; when hunger born of idleness demands prey to devour--the belonging of Romelia Orantes were conveyed from Don Carlos Román's house to her parents'.

The entire town watched the procession of porters carrying trunks full of clothes, jewel cases, trinket boxes and crates full of items whose use created much speculation.

The woman who discreetly refrained from opening her windows nevertheless peered out through the blinds; one man interrupted his billiard game, while another left a piece of half-measured fabric on the counter in order to take in such an unusual spectacle.

Almost immediately whispers swelled into comments outloud. From balcony to balcony, from sidewalk to sidewalk, questions put directly to the carriers somehow elicited answers that seemed to be vague. Then the most prominent people started making assumptions that were at times daring, insolent, or pitying, but invariably humorous. Ridicule hovered like a halo over the protagonists of the affair. Who was Carlos Román? A deceived

groom? An impotent husband? What about Romelia? Was she a loose woman? A victim? As for the Orantes, had they deliberately foisted off on their son-in-law a fake instead of the genuine article? Or had an apparently sound apple deceived them too by harboring a worm inside? There were those who swore up and down that the heart of the matter lay in the dowry, a dowry which, once the marriage was consummated, Don Rafael refused to make good. Plenty of people stated that the late Estela's spirit had appeared to the newlyweds and haunted them all night long, driving them nearly out of their minds with fright. And that they were able to appease the ghost only by promising they would part forever.

The flood of words surged, then subsided, mixed with ancient legends, and reached even to the retreat of Don Evaristo Trejo, who at first refused to believe his ears. But later confronted with the evidence of his own eyes, he had no alternative but to rush to the house of his friend Don Carlos.

Doña Cástula welcomed him like a breath of spring air. She had spent the entire morning packing what yesterday she had scarcely finished storing in chests. Since her household status denied her the right to question any order, unable to understand what had happened except that it must be due to something very grave, she feared for her master's health, even for his life. Since his return from the Orantes house, after leaving orders that Romelia's belongings be returned he had shut himself up in his study, forbade anyone to enter, and refused to eat.

"Prohibitions just don't apply to me," Don Evaristo said. Having thus absolved Doña Cástula beforehand of the sinful disobedience which she was about to commit, Father Trejo headed toward the room where, he assumed, he could enter only by forcing the doors. At his first knock, though, Don Carlos' calm, even voice answered, "Come in."

Studying him, the newcomer saw no alarming sign in his expression. So Don Evaristo made himself comfortable in his customary armchair while Don Carlos locked the door. As he was doing so, he said, "I was waiting for you, Father. I was beginning to worry about your delay."

"I just found out. What is this atrocity they tell me? Is it true Romelia's no longer here. . . that she has gone back to her parents' house?"

"Yes, I took her there myself this morning."

"You say it as if you had taken her out for a stroll. I still don't know your reasons. But regardless of who is at fault, you have, between the two of you, broken an oath taken only yesterday. Do you realize that? Only yesterday, before God."

"And to think you vouched for us."

"What does that matter?"

"What really matters is that for us to be forced to commit such a . . . does one call it sacrilege?. . . you ought to consider that very powerful causes and insurmountable obstacles existed."

"Of course man's haughtiness and pride are shattered by the first little thing."

"Is it a little thing to discover that one's wife has made use of her body before matrimony?"

"No. But nothing, not even that, justifies your monstrous lack of charity. Oh, don't imagine I'm so dense as to believe that you're inclined to be charitable to her; rather you'll be so only to yourself. What great grist for the scandal mill you have given the people! And not only at the expense of that poor woman, whose life has been ruined, but also at your own. Everything concerning you, even your virility, has become the talk of the town. But that doesn't worry you. You didn't hesitate before making such a decision, did you?"

Don Carlos calmly listened to the excited speech of Don Evaristo, and when he responded, he did so almost reproachfully.

"Why, Father, I thought you knew me better than to believe me capable of acting rashly, driven by impulses to the point of destroying myself. Oh, no, Father, I always plan ahead, think, and can wait as long as I must. What has just happened is only the denouement of a long story, so long I don't know whether you have either the patience or desire to hear it."

"For God's sake!"

"As it is, I don't care to impose upon you as a friend, so I appeal to the priest. I'm going to ask you to hear my confession, Father."

"Confession? When I asked you to confess before the wedding, you flatly refused."

"The time wasn't ripe then. Now it is."

For the first time Don Evaristo looked at him warily. He suspected a joke, maybe a blasphemy. Don Carlos, aware of the other's scruples, smiled.

"You have no right to deny me what you allow any pious spinster just because what for her is nothing more than a mechanical habit long since devoid of meaning is for me a free, spontaneous act of the will."

Don Evaristo put on the stole he always carried with him and, head between his hands, murmured the opening prayers that the penitent, who had been ordered to kneel before him, couldn't follow. Finally he looked up and said: "Confess your sins. Without omitting or minimizing anything. In the name of the One and Only Who can absolve you, I want the truth."

Instead of obeying, Don Carlos insisted until he was certain: "What I may say now falls under what you call the secret of the confessional? That inviolable secret priests must keep even at the cost of their lives?"

"Certainly."

Don Carlos stood up and drew a deep breath of relief. The tone of his voice and attitude changed. He was no longer concerned about feigning a reverence he did not feel or maintaining a needless reserve. Pacing back and forth across the room, he began to speak.

"No, you can't imagine--how can you if you've never fallen in love--what it means to fall head over heels in love. How you anxiously wait for the moment when the loved one is going to be yours and belong to you forever. I swear when I opened the door to let my new wife enter, I trembled with happiness, with fear. For to be alone the very first time with the person you love is not easy. There is, urging and paralyzing, a desire to possess and at the same time a need to worship."

"Save the rhetoric," Don Evaristo curtly interrupted.

"From my readings of the Mystics, I'm quite familiar with all that."

"Very well. When we entered, she asked to be excused for a moment. She needed to change clothes, comb her hair, do some of the things with which women like to remind us that sublimity is not their forte and that to love them just as they are and want to be loved, one must stoop to their level."

"Again we digress."

"You're right. At any rate, she went where she said she was going--that's if, after all this, I can still believe some of what she said--and I decided to wait for her here, right where we are now, in the study. I was in a very strange mood, nervous, impatient, ill at ease, when Doña Cástula came in carrying a package in her hand. She said a stranger had just given it to her and had urged her to deliver it to me immediately. That it was a gift of some sort and that the only thing that mattered, besides its intent, was the timeliness of its arrival. I remained alone with the package, and since my bride took more time, I mechanically, almost unconsciously began to open it. It was letters. These letters. Read them."

With these last sentences, Don Carlos went to the desk, opened the only drawer he always kept locked, and took out a bundle of yellowing papers, handled thousands of times, with ink faded by the years. The words on the surface were still quite legible, however. The handwriting was regular, clear, impersonal, obviously learned and practiced from longhand models of a convent. The spelling was capricious, the style simple, direct, naïve and passionate.

The letters were not addressed to a specific name; instead they contained affectionate nicknames with some jesting and much tenderness commingled. Then followed long paragraphs typical of lovers avowing their constancy and musing upon the intensity of their feelings; where they cry out jealousies, lament absences, clear up suspicions, and promise and promise.

Nor were the letters dated, but a lapse of time was indicated by the increasing intimacy tinging them. Physical

intimacy, references to embraces in which all restraint surrendered slowly but inevitably to passion. And later the unavoidable. The languorous surrender, pangs of remorse, alarm over possible consequences, threatening fear of their secret's being found out, the first glints of distrust, complaints of the lover's desertion, the discovery of the frailty of their promises, and the horror of seeing in the eyes of the beloved, not only one's image vilified but, on occasion, even emptiness.

Suddenly there appeared a name: Dr. Don Carlos Román. At first mentioned with a hint of petulance. But what woman is not flattered at being loved and does not use the love she arouses in another against the lover who begins to tire of her? Don Carlos was useful as a spur, as a rival. Gradually he acquired another role, a concrete role her family bestowed on him in agreeing unanimously that he was the best match the girl could aspire to; and if his intentions were serious, as everything seemed to indicate, on no account should the opportunity be wasted. Perhaps the girl sometimes dared to disagree with others' opinions, but she was so severely scolded and punished that there was left her no other course than to feign submission. Unless her correspondent prevented it, she was doomed to marry Dr. Don Carlos Román.

Oh, what fits of despair; what sarcasm in portraying this man whose power (money, profession, name) crushed her. How ruthlessly she judged his shortcomings, how cannily she spotted his quirks, how blind she was to his good qualities, how cruelly she mocked his feelings, how implacably critical she was describing his visits, his conversations, how contemptuous of his gifts. She summed up all her hatred and helplessness in one phrase: the

brute. She never again referred to Don Carlos by any other name.

She mentioned it only to seek help from the other, the disdainful one, who from the context of the letters encouraged the marriage of convenience, not as a sacrifice of his pleasures but rather as the prerequisite to continued enjoyment of them freely and safely.

There the correspondence ended. Why? Did the authoress of the letters react to cynicism with silence? Or did she agree to the pact in some secret rendezvous? On the last page a man's hand had written a phrase: "I hope you enjoy them."

Don Evaristo looked up astonished. He had read the signature thirty, fifty times and still could not believe his eyes: "But these letters are Estela's."

"How careless of her, don't you think? He suppressed all the evidence except what pointed to her. Oh, for God's sake, Don Evaristo, take that shocked look off your face; otherwise I'll have to laugh. My expression when I first held these papers in my hands must have been worse. I mean, when Estela came into the room and saw me, she stood there petrified. Full of fear. But when she saw the letters, her expression changed. I swear I have never seen such a pained look on anyone's face. Yet it wasn't distress for me, you must understand; she didn't care a fig for my contempt, which could never match her own. Her initial fear turned to joy; and I caught in her eyes her wish to die right there by my hand. I believed that what hurt her most was the other's betrayal. But there too I was mistaken. The other, even though she had yielded to his demands to the extent of marrying me, had gradually become more irascible, more elusive, to the point of not going to the meetings and

returning her letters unopened. She assumed that he no longer loved her, and it so happened that suddenly she had before her eyes undeniable proof of his spitefulness, to which she had clung desperately as a sign of love. No, she couldn't stay here a minute longer. She tried to dash out into the street to find him, perhaps to thank him for the vile deed he had just committed--who knows? The fact is I didn't let her go. I stopped her forcibly, and we spent the entire night fighting. I talked like a madman; I swore, I pled, I promised. She didn't stop crying; she shivered from cold, from fever, and cowered before my blows, yet she would not utter his name, that name which she never wrote and which I was subsequently never to get out of her because from that moment on she was never again able to talk."

"With her silence she was defending his life, and maybe even your own as well, Don Carlos, because in your frenzy, you would have been capable of murder."

"No, it wasn't like that. I loved Estela with exactly the same lack of pride with which she loved him. I would have forgiven her. . ."

"That's what you say now."

"I swore so then. I proposed that we burn the letters, that we forget the nightmare we had lived that night; I promised never again to question her. But she wouldn't even listen to me. She just wanted to die."

"Poor child."

"Yes, in the midst of my own suffering, I felt sorry for her too. But she would have nothing to do with me, least of all with my pity. Since she didn't allow me to go near her, not even to take care of her, because by then she had become very

ill, I had to depend on her mother, on outsiders. We watched over her day and night. I did everything humanly possible to save her. But it was useless. Estela refused to eat, to take medicine, to follow directions. Whenever we turned our backs, she pulled out the needles with which we tried to keep her alive and the tubes we used to feed her. I was always by her bedside, hoping that during an unconscious moment, in her delirium, she would call for him. But she didn't. When I offered to bring him so that she could see him for the last time, she shook her head so vehemently that she exhausted the energy she had left. Thus she died as she had once proposed to do: for his sake."

Pausing, Don Carlos took a deep breath so as to continue.

"I was left alone; I refused my mother-in-law's company and avoided my friends' solicitousness. I needed to think. Who could he have been, that man for whom Estela had sacrificed her self? Anyone, in principle. Perhaps the friend who came to offer me his sympathy, to express regrets. But when, only a few days after my wife's burial I learned of Rafael Orantes' death, I began to see clearly."

"Why? It could have been a simple coincidence."

"Because Rafael did not die in a hunting accident as we were led to believe; full of shame and remorse, he committed suicide. And I'm not making that up. Blanca, his sister, vouches for it."

"That woman is out of her wits. She finds guilt where none exists."

"Then what can the poor soul do if she's missing the basic facts? But I who have always had them here at hand tied up the loose ends bit by bit. Why should I hurry now that Rafael had

deprived me of every possible revenge plus proof that my suspicions were true."

"What were they based on?"

"On the fact that Rafael and Estela had been sweethearts. The relationship seemed unimportant; it didn't even lead to engagement. He was fickle, and she obeyed her mother's prohibition; but they continued to see each other on the sly. Judging from the letters, they didn't just see each other. Without realizing it, my mother-in-law furnished many clues in seemingly trivial conversations. But I needed the last, definitive, unique fact that could serve as irrefutable proof. Then I found out about Romelia's locket."

Don Evaristo had by now covered his face with his hands. "Oh, my God!"

"No, Father, it'll do you no good to shut your eyes to the matter. Here is the paper. Look at it, compare what this man wrote to his sister with what he wrote to me: the same sentence, the same handwriting!"

Don Evaristo, now violently urged on by Don Carlos, was endeavoring to find the similarity apparently so obvious to his friend. But the characters had been effaced by time, defigured by folds in the paper.

"No, this evidence is insufficient."

"How do you mean? It's perfectly clear, beyond any doubt. Only he who does not want to see it, won't. And you don't want to."

"You do, and you see only what you want."

Don Carlos' face glowed with fury. Gesticulating wildly, he brandished the two sheets of paper and compared one hand-

writing with another until Father Trejo gave up.

"But even if you're right and Rafael didn't die in an accident but committed suicide. . ."

"As his own sister asserts."

"Even supposing this to be true, didn't his blood suffice to atone for his guilt? Why did an innocent girl have to pay too?"

"What innocent girl?"

"The victim of this entire plot: Romelia."

"Oh, yes, poor Romelia. Well, one cannot safely be an assassin's pet, possess evidence of a murder, and not run some risks. Remember the locket was hers and under no circumstance would she take it off."

"And to get hold of it, you set up this infamous stratagem?"

"Are you talking about the wedding?"

"I'm talking about everything. About our accidental meeting at the bedside of Enrique Suasnávar! About your hospitality when you received me at home. About your cunning in directing our conversations toward marriage. I recommended it, of course. You were so lonely! I strove to guide you. But my suggestions were always rejected for one reason or another. It's obvious; by then you had already drawn up your plan."

"You overestimate my ability, Father."

"Rather I'm acutely aware of my own obtuseness. Though ability isn't the word for what you have done."

"If you want to get it out of your system by calling me names, go ahead. I promise I won't be affronted."

"That's the limit. Nothing can spoil your smugness over your success. Not even the memory of that innocent girl whose life you have ruined."

"What makes you so certain of Romelia's innocence?"

Because she doesn't write letters? Or if she does write them, her correspondent is discrete? No, Don Evaristo. You can have the wool pulled over your eyes once but not twice."

"And to justify yourself, you accused her of not being a virgin."

"What does it matter whether she was a virgin or not? For a layman virginity is a guarantee of virtue, but not for a physician. There are second hand, third hand, nth hand virginities. In my profession there are those who specialize in patching up maidenheads."

"Your tone and words are not those a confessor can listen to, but before you finish just tell me this: what would you have done if you had found the locket empty or the handwriting different?"

Don Carlos was startled by the question, but he reacted quickly.

"It so happens the locket did contain the paper and the handwriting was the same. I had no other alternative."

"And for me, there's no alternative except to deny you absolution unless you repent what you have done and restore to the Orantes the honor you have wrenched from them."

"What I have done, Father, is merely restitution. Don't forget that someone in that family dishonored me first."

Don Evaristo started to remove his stole. "I don't understand such a vindictive compulsion."

"We no longer need to understand each other, Father, inasmuch as we shall not be speaking any more."

"I haven't withdraw my friendship, Don Carlos."

"Really. I know that trap, and I'm not about to fall into it. Your apostolic zeal will force you to come, night after night, to talk with the stray lamb. To soften him up until he repents and gives his victims complete and public satisfaction. But I fear, Don Evaristo, our plans don't coincide. After having struggled so many years, I think I deserve a rest. As of today, I've therefore already cancelled my consultations, and your visit will be the last I receive."

"Are you going to immerse yourself once more with the fine company of those papers?" By now Don Carlos had begun to straighten out the letters with a deftness acquired only through practice. Then he placed on top of them, as if crowning them, the slip of paper Romelia had kept in her locket for so long. Who knows whether one day she was destined to discover its disappearance?

B I B L I O G R A F I A

- Abreu Gómez, Ermilo. Canek: Historia y leyenda de un héroe maya. 25a. ed. México: Ediciones Oasis, S.A., 1972.
- Alvarez, Federico, et. al. "Los libros al día". La cultura en México, suplemento dominical de Siempre 138, 7 octubre 1964, p.xviii.
- Benedetti, Mario. Letras del continente mestizo. 2da ed., Montevideo: Arca, 1967.
- Campbell, Joseph. El héroe de las mil caras--Psicoanálisis del mito. Luisa Josefina Hernández traductora. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1959.
- Campos, Julieta. Función de la novela. Serie de Volador. México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, S.A., 1973.
- Carballo, Emmanuel. Diecinueve protagonistas de la literatura mexicana del siglo xx. México: Impresas Editoriales, S.A., 1965.
- Castellanos, Rosario. "Actividad y participación: Cosas de mujeres". Excelsior, 15 marzo 1969.
- _____. Album de familia. Serie del Volador. Mexico: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, S.A. 1971.
- _____. Balún-Canán. Colección Popular. 3a edición. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1968.
- _____. "Bandera femenina: La liberación del amor". Excelsior, 20 julio 1972, pp. 6,8.
- _____. Ciudad Real: Cuentos. Kalapa [México] : Universidad Veracruzana, 1960.
- _____. "Concordia, no intolerancia: Los judíos inocentes". Excelsior, 12 junio 1973, pp. 6,8.
- _____. "Cuando Sartre hace literatura", Revista de la Universidad de México, 28, núm. 8 (1973), U19-U24.
- _____. "Curarnos en salud: Femenismo 1970". Excelsior, 29 noviembre 1969, pp. 6,8.

- _____ . "Divagación sobre el idioma: Otra vuelta en torno a la noria". Excelsior, 28 junio 1969, pp.6,8.
- _____ . "El alba de los pueblos: como se pasa la vida". Excelsior, 3 enero 1970, pp.6,8.
- _____ . "El estéril estallido emocional: Mi odio ni histeria". Excelsior, 18 septiembre 1972, pp. 6,8.
- _____ . El eterno femenino. Obra inédita, 1973.
- _____ . "En torno a una página en blanco". Excelsior, 10 enero 1970, pp. 6,8.
- _____ . "Esplendor y miseria del Sur". Excelsior, 7 febrero 1970, pp. 6,8.
- _____ . "Frente a la caja idiota: Las delicias del hogar". Excelsior, 31 enero 1970, pp. 6,8.
- _____ . "Fundamento de la democracia: El diálogo". Excelsior, 18 marzo 1972, pp. 6,8.
- _____ . "Juan Ruiz de Alarcón: Una mentalidad moderna". Anuario de Letras. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1970. pp. 147-171.
- _____ . Juicios sumarios. Cuadernos de la Facultad de Filosofía, Letras y Ciencias #35. Xalapa [México]: Universidad Veracruzana, 1966.
- _____ . "La abnegación, una virtud loca". Diorama de la cultura, 21 febrero 1960, p. 14.
- _____ . "La palabra como instrumento". Excelsior, 1 enero 1970, pp. 6,8.
- _____ . "La palabra como instrumento de la magia a la razón". Excelsior. 17 de enero de 1970. p.6.
- _____ . Los convidados de agosto. 2da edición. México: Ediciones Bra. S.A., 1968.

- _____ . "Muera la pornografía y viva lo demás". Excelsior, 21 febrero 1970, pp. 6, 8.
- _____ . Mujer que sabe latín. . . SepSetentas. México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1973.
- _____ . Oficio de tinieblas. 2da. edición. México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, S.A., 1968.
- _____ . Poesía no eres tú: Obra poética 1948-1971. Letras Mexicanas. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972.
- _____ . "Sobre cultura femenina", Disertación Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México 1950.
- _____ . "Una mayoría discriminada: los padres". Excelsior. 14 febrero 1970, pp. 6, 8.
- _____ , "Un árbol crece en Tel Aviv: No basta ser madre". Excelsior, 4 marzo 1972, pp. 6, 8.
- Castro Leal, Antonio. "Dos Poemas Dramáticos: Poesía no eres tú". La vida literaria. México: Órgano de la Asociación de Escritores de México, A.C., 3, núm. 30 (1972), pp. 5-6
- Castro, Carlo Antonio, Los hombres verdaderos. Xalapa [México]: Universidad Veracruzana, 1959.
- Diccionario de sinónimos. Tercera edición. Barcelona: Editorial Teide, S.A., 1969.
- Domínguez, Luis Adolfo. "Entrevista con Rosario Castellanos". Revista de Bellas Artes, núm. 25 enero-febrero 1969, pp. 17-21.
- _____ . "La mujer en la obra de Rosario Castellanos". Revista de la Universidad de México, 25, 6 febrero 1971, pp. 36-38.
- Dybvig, Rhoda, "Rosario Castellanos--Premiada y odiada", Disertación Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México 1965.
- El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam. Alfredo Barrera Vázquez y Silvia Rendón traductores. Colección Popular #42. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972.
- Franco, Jean. La cultura moderna en América Latina. México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1971.

- Fuentes, Carlos. Tiempo mexicano. Cuadernos de Joaquín Mortiz. México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, S.A., 1971.
- Hanffstengel, Renate von, "El México de hoy en la novela y el cuento", Disertación Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México 1966.
- "He escrito miles de páginas para conseguir quizá dos o tres párrafos que pueden quedar: El gran poeta argentino abarrotó el salón de cultura hispánica". El Día. 25 de mayo de 1973. p. 12.
- Guillén, Pedro. "Rosario la de Chiapas". La vida literaria. México: Órgano de la Asociación de Escritores de México, A.C., 3, núm. 30 (1972) pp. 14-15.
- Jung, Carl. editor. Man and His Symbols. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971.
- Kolko, Bernice. Rostros de México: Fotografías de Bernice Kolko. Prólogo de Rosario Castellanos. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1966.
- Labastida, Jaime. El amor, el sueño y la muerte en la poesía mexicana. México: Instituto Politécnico Nacional, Departamento de Difusión Cultural, 1969.
- López y Fuentes, Gregorio. El indio. México: Ediciones Dotas, 1945.
- Lorenz, Günter W. Diálogo con Latinoamérica: Panorama de una literatura del futuro. Dora Weidhaas de la Vega traductora del alemán. Barcelona: Editorial Pomaire, 1972.
- Machado, Antonio. Poesías Completas. Colección Austral. 18a edición. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1969.
- Mann, Thomas. Death in Venice; Tristan; Tonio Kröger. H.T. Lowe-Forster, traductor del alemán. 1928; reimpresión. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1968.
- Millán, Marco Antonio. "En torno a la poesía moderna". América: Revista antológica, #58 (1958), pp. 236-240.
- Millán, María del Carmen. "En torno a 'Oficio de tinieblas'". Anuario de Letras. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1970. pp. 147-171.

- Miller, Joann, "Un análisis de los personajes femeninos en la prosa de Rosario Castellanos", Disertación Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México 1972.
- Moiron A., Sara. "Es la propia mujer la que debe conquistar una posición de igualdad frente al hombre: habla Rosario Castellanos". El Día. 23 de enero de 1970. p. 13.
- Morley, Sylvanus Griswold. The Ancient Maya. Revisión por George W. Brainerd. 3ra. edición. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956.
- Muñiz, Angelina. "Reseña de Los convidados de agosto". Diorama de la cultura, 8 noviembre 1964, p.4.
- Ocampo Alfaro, Aurora Maura, "Literatura mexicana contemporánea", Disertación Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México 1965.
- O'Connor, Flannery. "The Fiction Writer and His Country", Mystery and Manners. Editores Sally y Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969.
- Pacheco, José Emilio. "Rosario Castellanos o la rotunda austeridad de la poesía". La vida literaria. México: Organó de la Asociación de Escritores de México, A.C., 3, núm. 30 (1972), pp. 9-11.
- Passafari, Clara, "Los cambios en la concepción y estructura de la narrativa mexicana desde 1947", Disertación Universidad del Litoral (Rosario, Argentina) 1968.
- Paz, Octavio. El laberinto de la soledad. Colección Popular #107. 1950; reimpresión. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973.
- Paz, Octavio. Traducción: literatura y literalidad. Barcelona: Tusquets Editor, 1971.
- Pérez Maldonado, Luis, "Virginia Woolf y la novela femenina", Disertación Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México 1963.
- Fozas A., Ricardo. Juan Pérez Jolote: Biografía de un tzotzil. Colección Popular #4. 1952; reimpresión. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973.
- Proetz, Victor. The Astonishment of Words. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1971.

- Raine, Kathleen. Defending Ancient Springs. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Ramírez Paulin González, Ma Dolores A. "La prosa narrativa femenina contemporánea en México", Disertación Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México 1963.
- Reyes Nevares, Salvador. "Los convidados de agosto cierran el ciclo de las obras provincianas de Rosario Castellanos". La cultura en México, suplemento dominical de Siempre 138, 7 octubre 1964, p. xix.
- Roget's International Thesaurus 1911; tercera edición. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962.
- Rojas Gonzalez, Francisco. El diosero. Colección Pópular #16. 5ta edición. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966.
- "Rosario Castellanos pide crítica abierta: Habla de Fuentes, Monsivais y Emma Godoy". Entrevista. Excelsior, 5 abril 1972, p. 23.
- "Sartre o el cambio de la realidad por la palabra, según dijo Rosario Castellanos". Excelsior, 9 diciembre 1969, pp. 32A.
- Sommers, Joseph. "Changing View of the Indian in Mexican Literature", Hispania, 47, núm. 1 (1964), 47-55.
- _____. "El ciclo de Chiapas: nueva corriente literaria", Cuaderno americano, 133, núm. 2 (1964), 246-261.
- _____. "Rosario Castellanos: Nuevo enfoque del indio mexicano", La Palabra y el Hombre (Segunda época), núm. 29 (1964), 83-88.
- Sophocles, Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus; Antigone. The Complete Greek Tragedies, Editores David Green y Richard Lattimore, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- Tillyard, E.M.W. Some Mythical Elements in English Literature: Being the Clark Lectures 1959-60. Chatto & Windus, 1961.
- The Random House Dictionary of the English Language. Jess Stein y Laurence Urdang editores. New York: Random House, Inc., 1966.

- Unamuno, Miguel de. Ensayos: Tomo I. Prólogo de Bernardo G. de Candamo. Madrid: Aguilar, S.A., de Ediciones, 1951.
- Valderrama, José. "Faltan estímulos a la mujer mexicana, afirma la novelista Rosario Castellanos". Excelsior, 21 marzo 1969, p. 17A.
- Velázquez de la Cadena, Mariano y Edward Gray y Juan L. Iribias. New Revised Velázquez Spanish and English Dictionary. Revisión de Ida Navarro Hinojosa. New York: Follet Publishing Company, 1962.
- Venegas, Roberto. "Con Rosario Castellanos". Entrevista. Diorama de la Cultura. 17 diciembre 1967, p. 3.
- Woolf, Virginia. "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown", British Literature: Blake to the Present Day. Editor H. Spencer et. al. Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1952.
- _____. The Common Reader: First Series. 10th ed., London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1962.
- _____. Three Guineas. London: The Hogarth Press, 1943.
- Zuckermann, Lydia. La mujer que sabía latín. México: Federación Editorial Mexicana, 1973



UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTÓNOMA
DE MÉXICO
DIRECCIÓN DE CURSOS TEMPORALES



BIBLIOTECA SIMON BOLIVAR
CENTRO DE ENSEÑANZA
PARA EXTRANJEROS