

OBITUARY

Camilo José Cela: Literary witness to Spain's time of war and dictatorship

Normally in Cela's books, women deceive, men are pigs, everyone lies and poses, writes Michael Eade

CAMILO José Cela, who has died in hospital of heart disease aged 85, was one of five Spanish writers to win the Nobel prize for literature, but the only novelist. He published about 70 books in all: poetry, stories, articles and travel books, as well as 12 full-length novels.

He was born in Iria Flavia, Galicia, the oldest of nine children of an upper middle-class family: "My childhood was so happy it was hard to grow up," he once said. His mother was English, and his father a part-time writer and avid reader.

Cela spent a year of his adolescence in a TB sanatorium, experience used in his second novel, *Pabellón de Reposo* (Convalescence Wing, 1944). His law studies in Madrid University were interrupted, in 1936, by the outbreak of the civil war. Fighting as a corporal on Franco's side, he was seriously wounded, and became a censor. After the war, he continued his law studies and two other degree courses, but completed none - a sign of his uncommon energy and multiple interests.

His life changed with the publication of *The Life Of Pascual Duarte* (1942). This harsh, realistic novel of a brutish peasant awaiting execution fell like a bomb onto cowed, post-civil war Spain. Cela's framing of Pascual's story as a morality tale warning the public against bad



Camilo José Cela: 1916-2002

conduct - deceived few, as, clearly, the illiterate murderer was a victim of backwardness and poverty. Cela

probably only escaped imprisonment through his close association with the Falange. So successful was

Pascual Duarte that its fourth edition was banned - a true case of the censor censored.

Cela's famous account of a journey on foot round a remote valley in Guadalajara province, *The Voyage To The Alcarria* (1948), set a trend for travel writing, a relatively safe genre under a dictatorship. For Cela, despite the poverty and melancholy he found on his walk, the country brought out a more lyrical vein and a kindlier tone.

Normally in Cela's books, women deceive, men are pigs, everyone lies and poses. This was the bitter, scathing flavour of his most famous novel, *La colmena* (The Hive), which took him five years to write, was banned in Spain, and published first in Buenos Aires in 1951. It describes three freezing winter days in 1943 Madrid - in a revolutionary style of hundreds of short cinematic scenes and more than 200 characters. It produced numerous imitators, contributing to what became known as the school of Madrid realist writers. "La colmena," wrote Cela, "is just a slice of life, a pale reflection of daily, bitter, loveable, painful reality. Those who want to disguise life with the mad mask of literature are liars."

His fame rests on these early books, and *San Camilo* 1936, published in 1969. *San Camilo* uses baroque language and complex syntax in a violent, near-

pornographic, monologue set at the outbreak of the civil war. Always an experimental writer, Cela's later books became increasingly obscure, with unpunctuated stories, a non-temporal anti-novel with no plot or character development, and multiple unreliable narrators. "What's the point of repeating what has already been done?" he replied when challenged.

In 1954, he left Madrid to settle in Mallorca, where he founded a literary magazine, *Papeles de Son Armadans*, which ran from 1956 to 1979, and, by featuring exiled writers, became a focus for internal political opposition. In 1991, he set up, in Iria Flavia, his foundation, one of the best-endowed writers' museums in the world. Here, all his manuscripts, editions and notes - even his *Alcarria* rucksack - are stored.

Cela's later career was full of honours. He was elected to the Royal Academy in 1957 (he was the oldest member at his death), appointed a Spanish senator from 1977-79, awarded the national literature prize in 1984 (for *Mazurka For Two Dead Men*), the Prince of Asturias prize in 1987 (for his life's work), the Planeta prize in 1994, and the Nobel prize for literature in 1989. He was ennobled, in 1996, as Marquis of Iria Flavia.

Asked what he wanted on his epitaph, in characteristic provocation, he replied: "Here lies a man

Principal works of Camilo Jose Cela

Poetry: *Pisando la dudosa luz del día* (1956; 1st ed. 1945).

Novels: *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942), *Pabellón de reposo* (1943), *Nuevas andanzas y desventuras de Lazarillo de Tormes* (1944), *La colmena* (1951), *Mrs. Caldwell habla con su hijo* (1952), *La catira* (1955), *Tobogán de hambrientos* (1962), *San Camilo* 1936 (1969), *Oficio de tinieblas* 5 (1973), *Mazurka para dos muertos* (1983), *Cristo versus Arizona* (1988).

Novellettes: *Timoteo, el incomprendido* (1952), *Santa Balbina, 37 gas en cada piso* (1952), *Café de artistas* (1953), *El molino de viento* (1956), *La familia del héroe* (1965), *El ciudadano Iscariote Reclus* (1965).

Collections of short stories, fables, sketches, and miscellaneous writings: *El gallego y su cuadrilla* (1949), *Nuevo ratob de Don Cristobita* (1957), *Los viejos amigos* (1960), *Galilla de fabulas sin amor* (1962), *El solitario y los sueños de Quesada* (1963), *Toro de salon* (1963), *Once cuentos de futbol* (1963), *Izas, rabizas y*

colipoterrus (1964), *Nuevas escenas matritenses* (seven series, 1965 and 1966), *Rol de cornudos* (1976).

Travel books: *Viaje a la Alcarria* (1948), *Del Mino al Bidasoa* (1952), *Judios, moros y cristianos* (1956), *Primer viaje andaluz* (1959), *Viaje al Pirineo de Lérida* (1965), *Nuevo viaje a la Alcarria* (1986).

Collections of articles: *Mesa revuelta* (1945), *Cajón de sastrero* (1957), *Cuatro figuras del 98* (1959), *Garito de hospicianos* (1963), *Las compañías convenientes* (1963), *Al servicio de algo* (1969), *Los sueños vanos, los ángeles curiosos* (1979), *Los vasos comunicantes* (1981), *Vuelta de hoja* (1981), *El juego de los tres madroños* (1983), *El asno de Buridán* (1986).

Plays: *María Sabina* (1967), *El carro de heno o el inventor de la guillotina* (1969).

Lexicographic works: *Diccionario secreto* (I, 1968; II, 1971).

Collected works: *Obras completas*. 25 vols. (1989-1990).

who flocked up his fellow-men as little as possible." Many of his victims might disagree, for Cela was renowned for his quarrels. Not for nothing did he write *A Secret Dictio-*

nary (1972) of taboo words and phrases, for he used crude language freely in the vigorous, and frequent, public rows (even with his son) he enjoyed. There was a scorn-

ful side to these attacks, and a vein of sexism and homophobia.

After the Nobel, Cela became a celebrity. He enjoyed touring Spain in his Rolls Royce, appearing with his young, second wife at fashionable restaurants and reminiscing a b o u t P i o Baroja, whose pallbearer he had been, or Ernest Hemingway, with whom he attended bullfights.

His Rolls, rows and outrageous remarks were part of a public persona. In private, he was, above all, a novelist, working with pencil and paper every morning at his desk. Last Monday, he was writing, before entering hospital in the afternoon. The most famous Spanish novelist of the second part of the 20th century, he wrote in a Spanish realist tradition, which dates back to the picaresque 17th-century novels of hunger, revived in modern times by Galdós and Cela's master Baroja.

Updating this tradition, Cela found a way of describing the epoch and dictatorship of his own epoch. His low view of humanity, told often with phantasmagoric language, brings to mind another dissident rightwinger, Céline.

Cela was married twice: first, in 1944, to Rosario Conde; then, in 1991, to Marina Castaño. She survives him, as does his son by his first wife.

Source: The Guardian

NOBEL LECTURE

Eulogy to the Fable

A work of literature can only be subject to the ethical commitment of the person, the author, to his own idea of freedom. Of course no-one, not even the cleverest and most balanced literary author, can ever (or rather cannot always) overcome his humanity; anyone can have a blind spot and freedom is a sufficiently ambiguous concept and many blinding errors can be committed in its name, says Camilo José Cela in his 1989 Nobel Lecture. Excerpts:

THE fable and scientific truth are not forms of thought. They are rather heterogeneous entities which cannot possibly be compared with one another since they are subject to completely different rules and techniques. Consequently, it is not appropriate to brandish the standard of literature in the struggle to free men's minds. Literature should rather be regarded as a counterweight to the newfound slavish submission to science. I would go further and say that I believe that a prudent and careful distinction must be drawn between those forms of science and literature which join together to confine man within rigid limits which deny all ideas of freedom, and that we must be daring and offset those forms by other scientific and literary experiences aimed at engendering hope. By unreservedly trusting in the superiority of human freedom and dignity, rather than suspect truths which dissolve in a sea of presumption, would be an indication that we have progressed. However in itself it is not enough. If we have learned anything it is that science is incapable of justifying aspirations to freedom and that on the contrary it rests on crutches that tilt it in exactly the opposite direction. Science should be based solely on the most profound exigencies of human freedom and will. That is the only means of enabling science to break away from utilitarianism which cannot withstand the pitfalls of quantity and

measurement. This leads us to the need to recognise that literature and science although heterogeneous cannot remain isolated in a prophylactic endeavour to define areas of influence and this for two reasons, namely the status of language (that basic instrument of thought) as well as the need to define the limits of and distinguish between that which is commendable and laudable and that which must be denounced by all committed individuals.

I believe that literature as an instrument for creating fables is founded on two basic pillars which provide it with strength to ensure that literary endeavour is worthwhile. Firstly aesthetics, which impose a requirement on an essay, poem, drama or comedy to maintain certain minimum standards which distinguish it from the sub-literary world in which creativity cannot keep pace with the readers' emotions. From socialist reality to the innumerable inconsistencies of would-be experimentalists, wherever aesthetic talent is lacking the resulting sub-literature becomes a monotonous litany of words incapable of creating a genuine worthwhile fable.

The second pillar on which literary endeavour rests is ethics which complements aesthetics and which has a lot to do with all that has been said up to now regarding thought and freedom. Of course ethics and aesthetics are in no way synonymous nor do they have the

same value. Literature can balance itself precariously on aesthetics alone - art for art's sake - and it could be that aesthetics in the long run may be a more comprehensive concept than ethical commitment. We can still appreciate Homer's verses and medieval epic canticles although we may have forgotten or at least no longer automatically link them with ethical behaviour in ancient Greek cities or in feudal Europe. However art for art's sake is by definition an extremely difficult undertaking and one which always runs the risk of being used for purposes which distort its real meaning.

I do believe that ethical principle is the element which makes a work of literature worthy of playing the noble role of creating a fable. But I must explain clearly what I mean because the literary fable as a means of expressing the links between man's capacity to think and the perhaps Utopian idea of being free cannot be based on just any kind of ethical commitment. My understanding is that a work of literature can only be subject to the ethical commitment of the person, the author, to his own idea of freedom. Of course no-one, not even the cleverest and most balanced literary author, can ever (or rather cannot always) overcome his humanity; anyone can have a blind spot and freedom is a sufficiently ambiguous concept and many blinding errors can be committed in its name. Nor can an aesthetic

sense be acquired from a textbook. Thus, the literary fable must be based on both a sense of ethics and a commitment to aesthetics. That is the only way it can acquire a significance that will transcend ephemeral fashions or confused appreciation that can quickly change. The history of man is changing and tortuous. Consequently, it is difficult to anticipate ethical or aesthetic sensibilities. There are writers who are so tuned in to the feeling of their time that they become magnificent exponents of the prevailing collective trend and whose work is a conditional reflex. Others take on the thankless and not sufficiently applauded task of carrying freedom and human creativity further along the road, even if in the end that too may lead nowhere.

This is the only way in which literature can fulfil its role of closely identifying its commitment to the human status and, if we wish to be absolutely precise in this thesis, the only endeavour that can unreservedly be called true literature. However, human society cannot be linked to geniuses, saints and heroes alone.

In this task of seeking out freedom, the fable has the benefit of the wellknown characteristic of the intrinsic malleability of the literary story. The fable does not need to subject itself to anything that might restrict its scope, novelty and element of surprise. Thus, unlike any other form of thought it can wave the

Utopian banner high. Perhaps that is why the most avid authors of treatises of political philosophy have opted to use the literary story to convey Utopian propositions that would not have found ready acceptance outside the realms of fiction at the time they were written. There are no limits to the Utopianism that the fable can express since by its very nature the fable itself is based on Utopianism.

However, the advantages of literary expression are not confined to the ease with which it can convey Utopian propositions. The intrinsic plasticity of the story, the malleability of the situations, personalities and events it creates provide a superb foundry from which one can, without undue risk, set up an entire factory, or, to put it another way, a laboratory in which men conduct experiments on human behaviour in optimum conditions. But the fable does not restrict itself to expressing the Utopian. It can also analyse carefully what it means and what its consequences are in the myriad different alternative situations ranging from learned prediction to the absurd that creative thought can produce.

The role of literature as an experimental laboratory has been often highlighted in science fiction; speculation about the future that has subsequently been realised. Critics have heaped praise on novelists who have a talent for predicting in their fables the basic coordinates

which subsequently have been substantiated. But the real usefulness of the fable as a test-tube lies not in its anecdotal capacity for accurately predicting something technical but as a means of conveying in a timely, direct or negative fashion all possible facets of a world that may be possible now or in the future. It is the search for human commitment, for tragic experiences, that can shed light on the ambiguity of blindly choosing options in the face of the demands placed upon us by our world, now or in the future, that turns the fresco of literature into an experimental laboratory. The value of literature as a means of carrying out experiments on behaviour has little to do with prediction since human behaviour only has a past, present and future in a very specific, narrow sense. There are, however, basic aspects of our nature which have an impressive permanency about them and which cause us to be deeply moved by an emotional story from a completely different age to the one we live in. It is this "universal man" that is the most prized figure in literary fable, an experimental workshop in which there are no frontiers and no ages. It is the Quixotes, the Othellos, the Don Juans that illustrate to us that the fable is a game of chess played over and over again, a thousand times with whatever pieces destiny throws up at any given time.

In absolute terms it might appear that this detracts from the so-called

freedom I am advocating and indeed that would be the case if one did not take account of the role of that imperfect, voluble and confused personality, the author, the man. The magic of Shylock would never have emerged without the genius of Bard, whose unreliable memory was of course far more inconsistent than that of the characters to whom he gave life and to whom in the end he denied death. And what of those anonymous scholars and jugglers whom we remember only for the result produced by their talents. There is undoubtedly something that must be remembered over whatever sociology or history tries to impose upon us and that is that thus far and insofar we can conceive of the future of mankind, works of literature are very much subject to the needs of the author; that is to say to a single source of those ethical and aesthetic insights I referred to earlier, an author who acts as a filter for the current which undoubtedly emanates from the whole surrounding society. It is perhaps this link between Man and Society that best expresses the very paradox of being a human being proud of his individuality, and at the same time tied to the community that surrounds him and from which he cannot disengage himself without risking madness. There is a moral here; the limitations of literature are precisely those of human nature and they show us that there is another status, identical in

other ways, which is that of gods and demons. Our mind can imagine demiurges and the ease with which human beings invent religions clearly demonstrates that this is so. Our capacity to create fables provides a useful literary means of illustrating those demiurges, as indeed we have done constantly since Homer wrote his verses. But even that cannot lead us to mistake our nature or put out once and for all the tenuous flame of freedom that burns in the innermost being of the slave who can be forced to obey but not to love, to suffer and die but not to change his most profound thoughts.

When the proud, blind rationalist renewed in enlightened minds the biblical temptation, the last maxim of which promised "You will be as gods" he did not take account of the fact that Man had already gone much further down that road. The misery and the pride that for centuries had marked Man's efforts to be like the gods had already taught Man a better reason; that through effort and imagination they could become Men. For my part, I must say proudly that in this latter task, much of which still remains to be accomplished, the literary fable has always been, and in all circumstances proved to be, a decisive tool; a weapon that can cleave the way forward in the endless march to freedom.

Source: Official web site of the Nobel Foundation

Two worlds-II

I have always moved by intuition alone. I have no system, literary or political. I have no guiding political idea. I think that probably lies with my ancestry. The Indian writer R K Narayan, who died this year, had no political idea. My father, who wrote his stories in a very dark time, and for no reward, had no political idea. Perhaps it is because we have been far from authority for many centuries. It gives us a special point of view. I feel we are more inclined to see the humour and pity of things, says Sir VS Naipaul in his Nobel lecture

WHEN I became a writer those areas of darkness around me as a child became my subjects. The land; the aborigines; the New World; the colony; the history; India; the Muslim world; to which I also felt myself related; Africa; and then England, where I was doing my writing. That was what I meant when I said that my books stand one on the other, and that I am the sum of my books. That was what I meant when I said that my background, the source and prompting of my work, was at once exceedingly simple and exceedingly complicated. You will have seen how simple it was in the country town of Chaguanas. And I think you will understand how complicated it was for me as a writer. Especially in the beginning, when the literary models I had - the models given me by what I can only call my false learning - dealt with entirely different societies. But perhaps you might feel that the material was so rich it would have been no trouble at all to get started and to go on. What I have said about the background, however, comes from the knowledge I acquired with my writing. And you must believe me when I tell you that the pattern in my work has only become clear in the last two months or so. Passages from old books were read to me, and I saw the connections. Until then the greatest trouble for me was to describe my writing to people, to say

what I had done. I said I was an intuitive writer. That was so, and that remains so now, when I am nearly at the end. I never had a plan. I followed no system. I worked intuitively. My aim every time was to do a book, to create something that would be easy and interesting to read. At every stage I could only work within my knowledge and sensibility and talent and world-view. Those things developed book by book. And I had to do the books I did because there were no books about those subjects to give me what I wanted. I had to clear up my world, elucidate it, for myself.

I had to go to the documents in the British Museum and elsewhere, to get the true feel of the history of the colony. I had to travel to India because there was no one to tell me what the India my grandparents had come from was like. There was the writing of Nehru and Gandhi; and strangely it was Gandhi, with his South African experience, who gave me more, but not enough. There was Kipling; there were British-Indian writers like John Masters (going very strong in the 1950s, with an announced plan, later abandoned, I fear, for 35 connected novels about British India); there were romances by women writers. The few Indian writers who had come up at that time were middle-class people, town-dwellers; they didn't know the India we had come from.

And when that Indian need was satisfied, others became apparent: Africa, South America, the Muslim world. The aim has always been to fill out my world picture, and the purpose comes from my childhood: to make me more at ease with myself. Kind people have sometimes written asking me to go and write about Germany, say, or China. But there is much good writing already about those places; I am willing to depend there on the writing that exists. And those subjects are for other people. Those were not the areas of darkness I felt about me as a child. So, just as there is a development in my work, a development in narrative skill and knowledge and sensibility, so there is a kind of unity, a focus, though I might appear to be going in many directions.

When I began I had no idea of the way ahead. I wished only to do a book. I was trying to write in England, where I stayed on after my years at the university, and it seemed to me that my experience was very thin, was not truly of the stuff of books. I could find in no book anything that came near my background. The young French or English person who wished to write would have found any number of models to set him on his way. I had none. My father's stories about our Indian community belonged to the past. My world was quite different. It was more urban, more mixed. The

simple physical details of the chaotic life of our extended family - sleeping rooms or sleeping spaces, eating times, the sheer number of people - seemed impossible to handle. There was too much to be explained, both about my home life and about the world outside. And at the same time there was also too much about us - like our own ancestry and history - that I didn't know.

At last one day there came to me the idea of starting with the Port of Spain street to which we had moved from Chaguanas. There was no big corrugated-iron gate shutting out the world there. The life of the street was open to me. It was an intense pleasure for me to observe it from the verandah. This street life was what I began to write about. I wished to write fast, to avoid too much self-questioning, and so I simplified. I suppressed the child-narrator's background. I ignored the racial and social complexities of the street. I explained nothing. I stayed at ground level, so to speak. I presented people only as they appeared on the street. I wrote a story a day. The first stories were very short. I was worried about the material lasting long enough. But then the writing did its magic. The material began to present itself to me from many sources. The stories became longer; they couldn't be written in a day. And then the inspiration, which at one stage had seemed

very easy, rolling me along, came to an end. But a book had been written, and I had in my own mind become a writer.

The distance between the writer and his material grew with the two later books; the vision was wider. And then intuition led me to a large book about our family life. During this book my writing ambition grew. But when it was over I felt I had done all that I could do with my island material. No matter how much I meditated on it, no further fiction would come.

Accident, then, rescued me. I became a traveller. I travelled in the Caribbean region and understood much more about the colonial set-up of which I had been part. I went to India, my ancestral land, for a year; it was a journey that broke my life in two. The books that I wrote about these two journeys took me to new realms of emotion, gave me a world-view I had never had, extended me technically. I was able in the fiction that then came to me to take in England as well as the Caribbean - and how hard that was to do. I was able also to take in all the racial groups of the island, which I had never before been able to do.

This new fiction was about colonial shame and fantasy, a book, in fact, about how the powerless lie about themselves, and lie to themselves, since it is their only resource. The book was called *The Mimic*

Men. And it was not about mimics. It was about colonial men mimicking the condition of manhood, men who had grown to distrust everything about themselves. Some pages of this book were read to me the other day - I hadn't looked at it for more than 30 years - and it occurred to me that I had been writing about colonial schizophrenia. But I hadn't thought of it like that. I had never used abstract words to describe any writing purpose of mine. If I had, I would never have been able to do the book. The book was done intuitively, and only out of close observation.

I have done this little survey of the early part of my career to try to show the stages by which, in just 10 years, my birthplace had altered or developed in my writing; from the comedy of street life to a study of a kind of widespread schizophrenia. What was simple had become complicated.

Both fiction and the travel-book form have given me my way of looking; and you will understand why for me all literary forms are equally valuable. It came to me, for instance, when I set out to write my third book about India - 26 years after the first - that what was most important about a travel book were the people the writer travelled among. The people had to define themselves. A simple enough idea, but it required a new kind of book; it

called for a new way of travelling. And it was the very method I used later when I went, for the second time, into the Muslim world.

I have always moved by intuition alone. I have no system, literary or political. I think that probably lies with my ancestry. The Indian writer R K Narayan, who died this year, had no political idea. My father, who wrote his stories in a very dark time, and for no reward, had no political idea. Perhaps it is because we have been far from authority for many centuries. It gives us a special point of view. I feel we are more inclined to see the humour and pity of things.

Nearly 30 years ago I went to Argentina. It was at the time of the guerrilla crisis. People were waiting for the old dictator Perón to come back from exile. The country was full of hate. Peronists were waiting to settle old scores. One such man said to me, "There is good torture and bad torture." Good torture was what you did to the enemies of the people. Bad torture was what the enemies of the people did to you. People on the other side were saying the same thing. There was no true debate about anything. There was only passion and the borrowed political jargon of Europe. I wrote, "Where jargon turns living issues into abstractions, and where jargon ends by competing with jargon, people don't have causes.

They only have enemies."

And the passions of Argentina are still working themselves out, still defeating reason and consuming lives. No resolution is in sight.

I am near the end of my work now. I am glad to have done what I have done, glad creatively to have pushed myself as far as I could go. Because of the intuitive way in which I have written, and also because of the baffling nature of my material, every book has come as a blessing. Every book has amazed me; up to the moment of writing I never knew it was there. But the greatest miracle for me was getting started. I feel - and the anxiety is still vivid to me - that I might easily have failed before I began.

I will end as I began, with one of the marvellous little essays of Proust in *Against Sainte-Beuve*. "The beautiful things we shall write if we have talent," Proust says, "are inside us, indistinct, like the memory of a melody which delights us though we are unable to recapture its outline. Those who are obsessed by this blurred memory of truths they have never known are the men who are gifted... Talent is like a sort of memory which will enable them finally to bring this indistinct music closer to them, to hear it clearly, to note it down..."

Talent, Proust says. I would say luck, and much labour.