

FROM CORNWALL TO SPAIN:
A REVIEW OF CAMILO JOSÉ CELA'S NOVEL
MADERA DE BOJ

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Whether or not one is fortunate enough to listen to Cela's voice reading the first segment of his novel by way of the compact disc that accompanies the 3,000 numbered and signed special editions¹, *Madera de boj* poses a challenge for even the most well-versed Cela enthusiast. When asked in an interview why this eagerly awaited work took him ten years to write, Cela intimated that the pressure of having won the Nobel Prize in 1989 was so overwhelming that he threw away everything he had written for the novel, only to take up the task again in March of 1998, at which point he worked tirelessly for one year to bring the work to fruition². Being that it completes the trilogy of novels written in homage to Galicia³, *Madera de boj* brings to life the *Costa de la Muerte* which batters the shores of *Finisterre* (or *Fisterra*, as it is used in the novel) and that part of Galicia which is but a short distance from Cela's place of birth. In a manner similar to that of its anonymous, protean narrator who is left to keep watch over

¹ The novel was published in September 1999, with a second as well as the special edition to follow in October (all published in Madrid by Espasa Calpe). All editions come with a Galician-Castilian vocabulary prepared by María F. Pascual, with the special edition including a photocopy of the first page of Cela's handwritten manuscript of the novel.

² Jesús Ruiz Mantilla, «Con el Nobel cogí miedo a 'Madera de boj'», *El país* 28 septiembre 1999: n.p.

³ The other two are *Mazurca para dos muertos* (1983) and *La cruz de San Andrés* (1994).

the sea instead of being invited by his uncle Knut Skien to hunt the great Marco Polo ram, the reader likewise feels isolated in experiencing the sweeping and staggering narrative perspective of events, characters, beliefs, traditions, and customs which transcend time and space, and whose primary point of reference is anchored in a precise topography of that craggy portion of the coast that has been witness to hundreds of shipwrecks.

Despite the numerous linguistic, cultural, and onomastic intertexts which, like the fluid fictive space of the novel itself, congeal into a virtual sea of verbal utterances that defy conventional syntax (sentences go on for pages and Galician syntax abounds), devotees of such earlier works as *Mrs. Caldwell habla con su hijo* (1953), *San Camilo, 1936* (1969), *oficio de tinieblas 5* (1973), *Cristo versus Arizona* (1988), and *El asesinato del perdedor* (1994), adapt to the signature Celian narrative pastiche that circumscribes this hermetically enclosed world of death and the sea, and, by extension Galician myth and folklore. Careful attention to the persistent Galician lexicon, as is manifested, for example, in such characters' names, nicknames, and aliases as *Arneirón* and *Cornecho*, in turn leads to a codified subtext which supports the notion that the implied narrative voices are in fact reincarnated forms of sea fauna⁴, thereby explaining an oddly pervasive and eerily pitched narrative tone. As if to affirm Hayden White's assertion that narrative is the only mode of discourse suitable for the rendering of historical fact⁵, there is really nothing else but narration in this novel of purported shipwrecks and drownings. Even though the accounts of the events in this small corner of the world somehow blend together, they simply do not fit the expected patterns of narrative logic. Perhaps the most outstanding example of the peculiar inner workings of *Madera* is its four chapter titles: 1. *El carnero de Marco Polo; Cuando dejamos de jugar al rugby*; 2. *Annelie y el jorobado; Cuando dejamos de jugar al tenis*; 3. *Doña Onofre la zurda; Cuando dejamos de pescar con artes prohibidas*; and 4. *Las llaves de Cíbola; Cuando dejamos de jugar al cricket*. Suffice it to say that the same dissonance that is evoked by such

⁴ About halfway into the novel, it is revealed that *arneirón* is the Galician name for a type of crustacean called the *bálano*, and that *cornecho* stands for a small snail that Galicians call the *bígaro*, *caramuxo* and *mincha* (149).

⁵ See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

bizarre combinations of people, (fantastic) places (*Cíbola*), and sporting events, is also the cardinal point on the work's figurative narrative compass (repeated throughout the novel as *el magnetismo que hace bailar la brújula*, 127). In gauging our reading, it subtly provides us access to Cela's basic premise about life, namely, that it all ends up in death. And since Cela envisions the novel as a reflection of life, it is no wonder that the world of *Madera de boj* is an illusive odyssey through death. Notwithstanding the integral part of the British tradition that the sports in question bring to mind, their function is emblematic of life. The boundaries that fuse together the names, concepts, and sporting activities of the chapter titles, as well as the maritime connection between Great Britain and Spain, are strengthened through the aphorism that *cada cual debe conocer deportivamente sus limitaciones* (158, emphasis added). In other words, those who engage in these sports stop playing them over time because with age their physical stamina no longer allows it. As a response to being unable to maintain the vigor that is required for these bat and ball games is the noticeable transgression of reality into more fantastic quests and feats, all of which are carried on by characters, such as, for example, some of the narrator's relatives whose lifetime wish it was to build a house out of boxwood (*madera de boj*), or others who spoke of finding the keys to the lost city of *Cíbola*, while individuals like Knut Skien and his nephews James E. and Hans E. Allen ceaselessly hunted the mythical ram named after Marco Polo. Be that as it may, it is the boxwood [*boj*] refrain which signals both a thematic of desire and frustration as well as a maritime linguistic register which gives way to a poetic subtext of otherwise silenced associations and interpretations (*bojeo*, for example, referring to «the action of navigating along or surrounding a coastal area»⁶).

Together in dissonance, these litaniesque motifs complete the indicators on the compass that charts the course of the narrator's siren-like tale. His prose bears a strong resemblance to the ebb and flow of the sea with long sentences punctuated by commas, sporadic question marks, and strategically interspersed short, dialogic interchanges between mostly unidentified voices (except for the few which are directed at Cam). As such, his chant-like

⁶ *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, 19 ed. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1970) 190.

recitation is held together by an unfailing recurrence of disconnected storylines, people, places, facts, and dates which form a pattern reminiscent of the nostalgically cited delicate lace work of the *palilleiras* [lace makers] of Camariñas (18). To speak, then, in concrete about the narrator is virtually impossible. We know only the names of some of his family members, such as his distant relatives Cam, Sem, and Jafet (all characters in Cela's 1968 play, *El carro de heno o el inventor de la guillotina*), his seventh son Paulo, brother-in-law Estanis Candíns (who also played basketball), the previously mentioned uncle, Knut Skien, and a cousin by the name of Vitiño Leis, etc. And, while it seems as though much of what he speaks of has been culled from many other sources, the information never attains any meaningful narratorial cohesion. In addition, curiosity is aroused concerning the hundreds of ships and their crews (of all types and from different countries) that went down off the coast of Corcubiión and Fisterra. There are also countless intelligently stated, yet wholly decontextualized, aphorisms about life as well as haunting echoes of stories about spirits and devils, and various elements of Galician folklore, recipes, and potions to cure all types of maladies.

As these things begin to coalesce into recognizable narrative markers, the logical connections between them are left to the reader either to figure out or simply accept as part of the flora and fauna of this novel. Cela also makes use of the manuscript motif from time to time, holding out for the reader the possibility of providing some plausible explanation for a narration that, as characters such as the shepherd Floro Cedeira constantly bring to mind, imitates the rhythmic *zas, zás, zas, zás, zas, zás* of the wind and the sea. The unmarked dialogic interchanges also provide tongue-in-cheek subtexts for the well orchestrated chaos that the novel has become, as one voice complains about the confusion, while the other responds that there is a perfect, if not obsessive, order to all of it. Not to be overlooked either is Edgar Allan Poe's presence by way of individuals like James E. Allen, Knut Skien, Cam, and Farriquiño Quintáns, who love to recite his poetry in Galician and English.

Ironically (pressed between commentaries about the life patterns of whales and the mystery of the Holy Trinity), one hears it said that *esto no es fácil de entender* (201). More to the point, however, is the lack of significance that any of this has because it

all comes down to one simple explanation, as provided at the end of the novel by the narrator:

...la vida no tiene argumento, cuando creemos que vamos a un sitio a hacer determinadas heroicidades la brújula empieza a girar enloquecidamente y nos lleva cubiertos de mierda a donde le da la gana, a la catequesis, al prostíbulo, al cuarto o directamente al camposanto, también la muerte empieza a bailar su danza desorientadora y confusa... ¿por qué en mi familia no hemos sido capaces de levantar una casa con las vigas de madera de boj, esto no lo sabe nadie, yo tampoco lo sé... esta es la farsa de los muertos... esto es como la purga del corazón y del sentimiento (294-5).

Cast against the backdrop of Cela's homeland, the maritime perspective reinforces the impression that everything audible (even references to Pascual Duarte, *La colmena*, and Camilo José Cela and the awarding of the Nobel) emanates from sea rather than from land itself *donde termina el mundo y comienza el país de los muertos* (26). In this fictive space of words awash in an unrelenting recurrence of recognizable Celian topics, the timely post-structuralist emphasis on the «violent hierarchies» between written and spoken language, themselves products of an inherent Western, logocentric approach to literature, rise to the surface as one attempts to establish a critical dialogue with *Madera de boj*. And yet one is also reminded of numerous short works of Cela's early fiction which also seem to hold another seminal key to the bizarre unfolding of this novel. To be specific, these include stories from an early collection, *Baraja de invenciones* [Pack of Tales, 1953], which includes such pieces as, for example, «El Garamillas de la Ramalleira, pastequeiro de pro», «María D'A Portela, la sabia del lombriguero», «La verdadera historia de Cobiño, rapaz padronés que casó con sirena de la mar», «Un cuento a la antigua usanza. Margarita sin sol, la mesonera de El mirlo de Loza», «La horca», «Cuando todavía no era pescador», and «Un niño como una amapola». All of these tales are replete with characters and myths of Galician extraction. They defy traditional logic, and, as such, herald the region's ever-present Celtic spirit which is brought to life by the narrator to whom these «strange stories» were told by *un viejo narrador celta y cornwallés*⁷.

⁷ «Un cuento a la antigua usanza...», *Obra completa de C.J.C.*, II (Barcelona: Destino, 1962) 439.

With the three promontories of Brittany, Cornwall, and Fisterra as the coordinates for the discourse which is the narrative fabric of the novel, we are told that the only outlet for life is death, that is, the netherworld of which we are reminded at the close of each of the four chapters: *por Cornualles, Bretaña y Galicia pasa un camino sembrado de cruces y de pepitas de oro que termina en el cielo de los marineros muertos en la mar* (303). It seems as though Cela, in his eighty-third year of life and six decades as a controversial public persona, sought this as a fitting repository for much of his Celtic and Spanish ancestry, life, and work. Or to cite that portion of Poe's «Ulalume» which Cela chose as the port of entry to *Madera de boj's* mythical seascape:

*The skies they were ashen and sober:
The leaves they were crisped and sere,
The leaves they were withering and sere.*

.....
*Then my heart it grew ashen and sober
As the leaves that were crisped and sere,
As the leaves that were withering and sere. (7)*