



Constellations And Collapses¹

Rosario Castellanos

Cecilia was an only child. At least, as far back as she could remember, because farther back there was an atmosphere of which she retained the dark sensation of mourning for some dead sibling, of longing for some unborn creature. Something of that atmosphere still pervaded her mother's actions—unexpected, brusque, pained—and her words, that used to sort of pause on the parapet of a blinded well.

Cecilia became accustomed to this sensation without looking for adjectives for it, when she was able to reconcile it with her solitude. As a child, she had at

her disposal what parents—in whom scruples and negligence are allies—give their children: toys in such abundance that were deprived of any meaning and luxuries she was incapable of appreciating; exaggerated and variable pampering as well as sudden bouts of severity which never quite developed into punishment, into a precisely formulated reprimand, into the temporary interruption or the permanent suspension of some privilege.

A provincial child, Cecilia had at her mercy small servants over which it was customary to exercise fancy, power and cruelty with all the exaggeration these attributes possess when they are infantile. She inflicted and contemplated the humiliation of others with the same indif-

ference of someone who contemplates an object of ordinary quality and everyday use. Without remorse but also without pleasure. As soon as she had the sense to become a bit her own master, Cecilia decided on that sort of atrophied organ being extirpated from her that other little girls of her class kept until puberty and even until maturity. But she did not substitute for this amputation any involvement of a more equitable kind nor any relationship fairer in its dealings with others. She also stored her toys so they would not get in her way, got rid of the luxuries, avoided parental effusion and frowns and assumed—without any palliative—her condition as a marginal being.

Translated by Francisco Fenton.
Drawings by Lydia Peña.

From this margin her elders would periodically attempt to wrest her, forcing her to amusements that she could no more understand than enjoy. She would endure (her eyes widened in disbelief, in horror, in uneasiness) while the multitudes at the fairs and the churches dragged her through ebb and flow of the tide. Only when a timely elbow signaled did she know it was time to applaud some demonstration of skill by the pianist, who, only after starting three times, had been able to play the whole thing without making a single mistake; by the soprano who only barely reached the high note in the score; by the ballerina who defied the laws of equilibrium and gravity; by the trapeze artist and the bullfighter who risked their lives as if they did not matter. She applauded, then, with discipline, and she stopped applauding at the same time as the others. But it was obvious—and her mother remarked upon it with thinly veiled bitterness and irritated disappointment—that she had not gotten any joy from the show. On the way home she would be shouted at, branded an ingrate because she did not appreciate the efforts made by the others to entertain her, and to make her, somehow, occupy a place in society.

Cecilia bore this venting of rage, almost always maternal, with the same indifferent calm with which she had borne the outing. When she dared reply that everyone would be more contented if en masse they gave up making those efforts which she neither requested nor thanked because they were superfluous, she got a smack across the face as punishment for her impertinence. She kept quiet and dropped her eyes to stop the tears. But, ever since then, they started to

leave her more and more to herself, to her likings, to her isolation, from which even school did not save her because her father had wanted to personally take on her education himself.

Cecilia would watch him while he lost himself in dissertations on inefficient lessons, not listening to the words, not understanding, getting drowsy with the sound, following the sinuous line of the wrinkles furrowing that face of a man growing old, thinking about that strange species—to which she did not belong because of her age, her circumstances—but to which she forever refused to belong, that of older people.

Older people had always appeared to her surrounded by a halo of reserve. They avoided, at least in public (and Cecilia could not imagine them acting differently in private) the touching of their bodies. They would sit at a prudent distance; they barely brushed each other's hands when greeting, firmly pushing the children away, who would always try to hang onto their skirts, pull themselves up by their pants, smear the well made-up face with honey or saliva, in a caress; communicate that animal warmth that emanates from childhood, that palpitation of playfulness that beats in every puppy artery, that imminence of mischief that appears briefly and is halted, only just, at the tips of childish fingers.

But reserve was not only an attitude. It was also a language. Words which flew so high that they were unreachable for Cecilia at her present height. Words whose meaning was comprehended but could be undone instantly with a wink, a glance, a half-smile. What were they talking about that created such close ties of complicity, that they erected with

each phrase an impenetrable wall of secrecy? Cecilia would have liked to know, although she balked a little at the idea that the matter would be filthy, bloody perhaps, repulsive.

Sometimes this motionless scene, made up of ladies sitting on sofas, reclining lazily upon hammocks in the corridor, kneeling at the prie-dieu in church; and the gentlemen presiding the great family dinners, taking a fat watch out of a vest pocket to check the time whose only relevance was to coincide with the clock at City Hall; pacing thoughtfully, hands behind their backs, glancing furtively at the reckoning the hacienda manager was rendering. This scene, perfected by routine, broke up into a thousand incoherent figures when a large gust of passion or catastrophe blew. Then all those faces reappeared flayed by anger, by avarice, by hatred, by jealousy, by anguish.

Suddenly the doors would open with a great racket to let in women with hair flying and clothing in disarray, howling, they came through parting the atmosphere—just as swimmers part resistant water—who were contained, incited and held up by some sort of chorus divided into peacemakers and instigators, who maintained the temperature of tragedy for a period determined by an esoteric ritual only the well-versed knew and practiced, a ritual handed down jealously for generations.

And then, as if the one possessed had been abandoned by her spirits, she would lie there, prostrate on the floor. The chorus would help her, erase with a rag the rictus of the howling, close her mouth like a cadaver's, wipe her tears, comb her hair back, button up her breast, to return her to her original image of a beach after

the immense bursting of the ocean, without a scar, amnesic, knitting ably and with containment the daily, unimportant facts, sheared of that aura of the protagonist which had ennobled her but moments before.

Why, Cecilia asked herself, did they not cling to this grand gesture? Why did they not become eternal statues? Because they have the consistency of sand, because they are easily discouraged by fatigue, by boredom; because they surrender—without resistance—to weariness, to minor sentiments like sadness, joy, conformity, routine. Because those stricken by tragedy are consoled with a cup of tea, with a toy, with a lie. Because the choleric are placated with an endlessly rehearsed apology and a place is made in their souls for benevolence; because the avaricious tire of counting and open their hands so pillage can take its fill; and the rancorous one day happen upon him who had inflicted harm and take him in their arms because they no longer see in him an enemy, because they cannot decipher with their touch the name of the wound; and the jealous, how can they still feel jealousy if they no longer love? And the anguished have let themselves be anointed with balsam and bandaged with fine linen.

Oh, Cecilia refused to turn into one of those frail creatures, so unpredictable, arbitrary and evasive; that cast off their skins, like the snake; that could be poured from one recipient to another painlessly, and accommodate to the new shape without longing for the previous one, with no loyalty to the present form and no premonition of the next; that could be found under a name like a bird sits on a branch, with the intention of aban-



doning it; that betrayed themselves, time after time, as if they had no more purpose than to practice for that last and greatest betrayal that is death.

And in the same way that Cecilia felt the stuff of which the others were made and found it harsh, coarse to the touch, senseless to the eyes, incomprehensible, so she perceived that what she was made of was seen by others as repulsive, dangerous, different. Was it because her mere presence (What was it like? The mirror never answered these questions.) brought on a prolonged state of alarm, of surprise, an uneasiness, an irrational impulse to flee or an obstinate resistance, a hypocritical or honest hostility, an irritation that could find no outlet but harsh criticism, but gestures of rejection, but icy silences.

Cecilia circled in vain that small, intermittent fire that is human sympathy, until she was defeated by the certainty that it was forever denied her. When this certainty lacked new nourishment with which to grow and threatened to decline, pride or laziness or scorn took its watchman's post to keep Cecilia from making

false starts—such as with Enrique, for instance—or disorderly retreats.

But just as during the time in which the pain of heartbreak was the greatest she never stopped thinking it was worth it, so during the time their alliance was established she could never consider it either licit or permanent. And the final outcome reaffirmed her intention of never making another effort to be like other people or pretend to be like them.

But what choice was left to her? The conversations with her father made a more solid, consistent, perhaps more livable level of reality available to her: that of historical figures.

When the two of them bent to examine a document which told of the deeds of a lifetime, they got them without all the failed attempts, all the forgotten plans, all the imposed withdrawals, all the useless actions, all the evil adherences, and saw only the lineal continuity of one will, the consecutive steps, exact, precise, in a fulfillment that in the end shone represented in the gesture of a statue or made into an epitaph.



Don José María would show Cecilia the figures adorning his museum and those figures would execute a finite theory of actions—specific, not random nor gratuitous, important, gravid with consequences and always identical. The rapacious talon of conquest would raise itself and fall upon its prey with mechanical infallibility. The unarmed hand of the missionary opened to spill its gifts; the matron offered up her maternity and the nun hid herself behind her modesty. And, if they had had voices, every ancestor would have repeated his name, enumerated his titles, retold his adventures. Always with the same words, always brought together within the same linking of the words, always with the same recitative intonation, unwavering in a single syllable nor rising in any other than what had already been foreseen and sanctioned.

Just as primitive peoples delight in psalmody, so Cecilia was entertained long years in the contemplation of these figures, a contemplation from which surprise was excluded, as well as any possibility of involvement. Because the dis-

tance between spectator and spectacle always remained undisturbed.

At first, when Cecilia was still unaware of this law and its infallibility, she had wanted to get inside, to enter somehow, the glass displays. But she could not take a step without tearing some cobweb, she could not advance but in the midst of a hullabaloo of broken fragilities. And her steps, as careful as they might be, had another rhythm to them, another weight; they did not conform to accepted standards, they awoke multiple echoes that did not meld melodiously, but alternated in a capricious counterpoint that made silence flee from those unviolated chambers. And, after all of this, the distance remained undisturbed.

On another note, Cecilia was aware that the never-changing quality those historical figures had did not make them any easier to emulate. Because history lies when it brags that repetition is its norm, and Cecilia still stood before an infinite forking of possibilities to which the tiniest variation, the finest detail, a degree more or less in perspective could

change events radically. And on new ground it was necessary to operate with no more aid than what could be improvised on the run, with no more resources than those of inventiveness, with no more quarter than unrehearsed behavior and a gift of sudden inspiration. It was, all in all, the kingdom of freedom, to whose threshold Cecilia would arrive like a vigorous horse that stops at the bank of river, wide-eyed with horror and gasping from anxiety with angry muscles that will not advance into that strange and mortal element.

Because the historical figure was a trap. It showed itself as a finished statue, as time that has frozen completely; as movement coagulated into rigidity.

But there was nothing in the deed consummated by it that could fill up Cecilia's present, and even less, something that could conjure up her future. A future that was still open, waiting for Cecilia, precisely Cecilia and no one else (because the historical figure had done with its task and now rested for all eternity) to give it the form that it still lacked.

And Cecilia had to find that form and flesh it out and no one could take her place in the search or the discovery or the fulfillment. She felt irreplaceable but she also knew herself impotent and both poles exercised their pull over her reducing her to a state of paralysis or, when she was able to evade that magnetic field, it was to throw herself into an unknown action with which she found herself obscurely committed and to which, in some manner she did not quite understand, she was always betraying. And she didn't know any other attitude than willingness, than being alert and so being able to respond to a summons that could come someday, from

who knows where, who knows when, but fatally.

The labor of an insomniac. While she carried it out Cecilia went over her resources. Who was she? The last, unfounded, deceiving hope of a father unable to take hold with his hands of anything other than failure and old age; the sore of an unhappy and disenchanted mother; the irritating splinter of a godmother too scrupulous about her spiritual obligations. And nothing more. Because Cecilia, in an instinctive act of self-preservation, refused to see herself as what she had been to Enrique, as what she could be to any man: the prize surrendered to their pride or a regret in their pusillanimous conscience. The only place appropriate for her was oblivion. Erased, dead, non-existent, where, before, the least amorous concession would have been enough to inflame her image to incandescence, to transform her limbo into a zenith.

She would not be rescued by a heroic destiny from this limbo. Her path was not one which led to suffering nor to glorification with that paroxysmic intensity that she admired and envied in those paradigms which had been presented to her ever since childhood. Her catastrophes would never be greater than a run in a nylon, a ruined date, a shred of an idea wasted for lack of opportunity. There would be one solemn instant only: death. But death, besides its vulgarity—who doesn't die?—would come, in her particular case, punctually and at its proper time. First, to take her parents, for whom Cecilia had prepared sensible mourning. Then her. But she would die from illness, not from shame; from asphyxia, not from tedium; from consumption, not from anxiety.

As for the unforeseen, Cecilia had not noticed, in the great wall erected by her habits and those of her elders, any crack through which it could filter more than a drop at a time and so imperceptibly that it would be diluted without dying with its color the matter it would become part of.

And she did not have the consolation of inertia either. Of all the phrases that she had heard the one that had gotten to her very center was one that others used frequently, as if they ignored its power: "At your age I'd already had a wedding dress on..." "At your age my cousin had already taken her vows..." "At your age..."

Yes, it was true that Cecilia was as old as her papers said she was and that she had not taken any precaution whatsoever to veil it or hide it. But her years, despite their succeeding each other with the same slowness or speed with which the years succeeded themselves outside, had not allowed her to discover, as had the others, her own way. Overwhelmed by the tense expectations of her family, she once tried to make a decision, and did she ever regret it. Enrique. Cecilia wanted to stop being the stray and exhibit her master's brand. And she found herself, suddenly, spinning in a whirlpool of pain, of humiliation, abandoned. The culmination of it all was ridiculous: that of the maddened waters that never lie still in their riverbed and overflow onto the floor—not just uselessly but also causing upheaval and irritation.

Her failure only made the urgency of the others worse. They pricked her with many and contradictory stings. Hurry! Hurry! And she wanted only what the seed wants: the warmth of the earth to germinate in. Even there those who

picked at her found her: hurry! hurry! What's that, at home reading? What do you mean you want to go to school? Excuses. Deferrals. You have to do something, because life is over quick and youth even quicker. Cecilia was distressed as much by her mother's exasperated sermons as by Don Jose María's melancholic silences, but neither one ever forced her into action. She continued to stay home, shut up in the library, reading. And since her encounter with Sergio, she read nothing but novels.

What an amazing discovery, this world inhabited by imaginary beings!

Necessary beings ever since the day they were created. In the beginning, they had been chosen, among all possible beings, by their maker. And this preference for them was maintained—focusing the efforts of the imagination, the labor of crystallization of language—for as long as was needed to reach the category of being evident, visible, understandable. Ever since they were made, from the beginning, they had been chosen to serve as the flawless receptacle for a substance only fulfilled and culminated when poured into it.

But Cecilia's need was rooted in what had become an unstoppable longing for the company of a sibling.

She, too, was born of desire, of hope, of the urgent, undeferrable, tenacious invocation of another will that made her come all the way through from the sphere of possibility to the limits of action; and in this she was no more than passive, docile stuff. At the call of paternal love, Cecilia abandoned that limbo of the unborn and came to inhabit a body and occupy space and was made in the image and likeness of her creator. Later she was

held up as she took her first steps, cheered on as she first started to babble, a thousand times made and unmade by demanding hands, loving, and, oh, so unwieldy. She grew to obedience and did not insist on remaining in any of those provisional molds that she was —she knew— provisionally deposited in.

With a gesture issuing from nameless springs, Cecilia clung to this protection as the ivy clings to the tree that is its mainstay. She could have stayed that way forever if her father had not let the years eat away at him nor been disheartened by who knows what unknown set-backs of which Cecilia had not been cause, witness nor accomplice, and which, therefore she did not know how to forgive.

She then had to start letting go of her handholds, painfully, one by one. She sought around her, in the uncertain manner of plants, the solidity, the verticality that were essential to her. She found Enrique, a branch that without supporting her at all, gasped in asphyxia. From that point on she had no alternative but to change her species.

It was a transformation that went no further than the biological. Cecilia did not yet know what definition she should adhere to nor what conduct she would submit to in order to expand legitimately, to define herself by her similarity to or difference from the creatures around her, to assert or deny herself with regard to a conscience that tended to grow more and more, at the expense of the other organs, vital and of cognition.

And now, in reading these books, Cecilia discovered that her mutation had made her belong to that genre of people who were real, and that, like all of them, she had been haphazardly thrown into

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the world by an anonymous gesture and that on her —body, name, destiny— would never fall an all-comprehending gaze, even if it were disapproving, even if it were incredibly brief. That no one was ever going to stop her on the threshold of apparitions to straighten her clothes or to help her memorize her lines or to rehearse the appropriate reverence or to prevent that common error. She walked, as did the others, erratically, tripping on obstacles whose mediocrity was insufficient to make them clumsy; she joined the others, like when you play blindman's bluff, and she separated from them with anguish. Eventually, she would come, as she had seen those who went before her do, into ignoble old age, into a solitude without wisdom, and into death with a gut terror that no amount of introspection could hope to minimize.

But if from this vantage point the novel-reading —and the revelation that she was substantially nothing but what she had so much hated and feared becoming— excited in Cecilia rebellion against the elements she was made from or the laws that sharply checked her, on the other hand, this habit exercised upon

her a calming effect, placating the real source of her anguish: the urgency, which could not be postponed, of making a choice.

Rebellious, irresponsible, Cecilia shook her shoulders to cast far away from her that burden that they would impose upon her from outside and give herself respite and pact, temporarily, with herself. Yes, of course, she would end up giving in to the others' demands.

But meanwhile she was her own master. This taking charge had been possible thanks to the novels. With one in her lap, like a talisman, she could remain in her room for days on end without anyone daring, for some reason, to accuse her of indolence, to confront her with idleness. And, more importantly, without the equilibrium of the universe being upset by the lack of cooperation of one of its parts, even if that part were as insignificant as she was. Because as long as Cecilia abstained, "another" would take that place of privilege —and also of punishment— (in any case, of reality) where the action takes place.

To that "other" Cecilia delegated all the hopes she would never dare to harbor; the fears that would not give in to exorcism; the desires that went beyond her; the abysses that call to us and admit no entreaty; in all, the life that only then ceased jumping into the emptiness of extinction, like an unstoppable, irreversible cataract, to maintain itself as a visible whole, the same as the host upon the altar, in a perpetual present. ■■■

NOTES

¹Chapter 5 of Rosario Castellanos' *Rito de Iniciación* (Initiation Rite) (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1997). Reprinted and translated by permission of Alfaguara Publishing House.

Rosario Castellanos

Novelist, short story writer and poet Rosario Castellanos (born, Mexico City, 1925; died Tel Aviv, 1974) is considered by most critics and specialists in Mexican literature one of this century's most important Mexican writers and without a doubt, the greatest woman writer. And this gender distinction is not gratuitous since feminism is precisely one of Castellanos' most constant concerns. The theme of the submissive or subjected woman is masterfully dealt with in two books of short stories *Los convidados de agosto* (The Guests in August) (1964) and *Album de familia* (Family Album) (1971). Her incisive, often ironic, and sometimes hurtful narrative seems to be a profound game in which men and women lose and reencounter each other as enemies or as accomplices.

She delves deeply into the topic, given her ability to distance herself as a writer and the bitterness caused by her own condition as a woman in a sexist society; this profundity also makes itself felt in the story "El eterno femenino" (The Eternal Feminine Being) and in the majority of her poetry. This is particularly the case in the volume of poems *Poesía no eres tú* (You Are Not Poetry), which includes among other books *Trayectoria de polvo* (Trail of Dust) (1948), *De la vigilia estéril* (On Sterile Watchfulness) (1950) and *El rescate del mundo* (The Rescue of the World) (1952).

Castellanos' other great contribution to Mexican literature is her participation in the "indigenist" current with works like the volume of short stories *Ciudad Real* (1960) and the novels *Balún Canán* and *Oficio de tinieblas* (Sinister Craft), in which she transcends folk literature and the denunciation of social ills to penetrate indigenous life particularly in her native state of Chiapas, with a new attitude and a sharp critical sense, not disdaining denunciation but going beyond it. She shares kudos in this current with other Latin American writers: Alejo Carpentier, José Revueltas, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez.

Rosario Castellanos was given several important literary prizes, among them the Chiapas Prize (1958), the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Prize (1962), the Carlos Trouyet Award in Letters (1967) and the Elías Sourasky Award in Letters (1972). She was a professor of literature at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and general director of the UNAM press office. From 1971 to 1974, Castellanos was Mexico's ambassador to Israel in Tel Aviv, where she died August 7, 1974.