

Reviews

Rito de iniciación

(Initiation Rite)

Rosario Castellanos

Alfaguara, Mexico City, 1997, 383 pp.

*But Matilde begins by going beyond any bounds
of good or evil thanks to a little detail: sex.*

An intellectual woman is a contradiction in terms.

Therefore there is no such thing.

ROSARIO CASTELLANOS



To the image we had of the life and work of Rosario Castellanos (born, Mexico City, 1925; died, Tel-Aviv, 1974), a new, perturbing element has been added that could change our opinion. Alfaguara's felicitous decision to publish *Rito de iniciación*, a novel that went unpublished for almost 30 years, once again allows us to get close to a writer who in life

was already beginning to be a legend. Reading it, however, will not confirm what for so long we supposed was the definitive portrait of one of the central figures in Mexican culture in the second half of the twentieth century.

We should say it once and for all: reading *Rito de iniciación* only revs up the myth about its author—and that is what myths are for, for unleashing whatever was fixed in the imagination by custom or sloth.

But, the new “possible image” that we may create of Rosario Castellanos will belong only to the sphere of literature and fiction. Thinking anything else would be a betrayal of an aspect of her biography which is, indeed, unquestionable: her intimate relationship with the craft of writing.

The figure of Castellanos is partially analogous to that of two other Mexican women who also created and recreated their own personalities as they confronted the challenges of their craft. None of the three, neither Frida Kahlo nor Nahuí Ollín, both painters, nor Castellanos, was lucky enough to live in a Mexico where women interested in looking at the world “outside their homes” did not immediately become suspect as possibly committing irreverent acts against their own femininity; women were applauded more for moral reasons than for their contributions to culture or the quality of their work.

From a woman born into a conservative family, who spent her childhood and first youth in a small, provincial town (Comitán, Chiapas), the best that could be expected was literature spanning limited topics or confined to the circumference of nostalgia, longing always for that “subverted Eden” that Ramón López Velarde, Mexico's first real modern poet, speaks of. However, the universe that this native of Chiapas managed to create in her prose is truly vast. We should remember that in the 1960s, Latin American literature had already given signs of a new outlook and a sharp critical sense. In Mexico, specifically, Juan Rulfo and Juan José Arreola were outstanding examples of the new writer, and would be looked up to as masters a decade later. So, when Castellanos dared to touch on the problem of indigenous people in Chiapas in, for example, *Balún Canán* and *Oficio de Tinieblas* (Sinister Craft), she perceives it not only as the fatal result of the 500 years of oppression since the conquest, but is also able to expand her interests to include the religious, economic, political and

sexual spheres, and with all these elements sparks a dialogue of unprecedented intensity.

In this very same way, the first few pages of *Rito de iniciación* reveal to us a Cecilia, the main character of the novel, whose talents as a polemicist begin with the desire to decipher some "family papers," of more of a personal than historical interest to her. All in all, her curiosity provides her with a lesson on the history of one of the regions of Mexico where the presence of criollos and their relationship with the first settlers of those lands are more complex and painful, just as her relationship with those of her forebears who will not restore to her a clear, tranquil image of herself will be complicated and painful.

When you read *Rito de iniciación* you cannot help but think of what the English poet W.H. Auden said about novelists: they must jealously accumulate, if they are able, all the errors of Man. This recognition has implications both for the psychological characterization of Cecilia and other characters in the novel and for the many-edged or "cubist" structure that Castellanos picks for constructing a story, with multiple foci, with the center everywhere and nowhere.

If, before leaving her small provincial city, in moments of sleepless introspection, Cecilia was already implacable to the point of cruelty, her lucidity grew in Mexico City upon coming into contact with her fellow students at the School of Philosophy and Letters, some of whom were avidly seeking political prestige, others laurels as writers and still others simply to shock the new members of a circle of friends. The young student goes to live with her aunt Beatriz, whose spiritual ambiguity troubles the younger woman; she participates in social evenings with the poet Manuel Solís, the pride of the nation with a distrustful disposition; later she witnesses the erratic behavior of the tortured poet Matilde Casanova. In a word, Cecilia is a pole of attraction, the being absorbed in thought who hears fragments of conversation, agile verbal fencing matches, boasting of genius or humiliations that damage her erotic experience. We, together with her, come to contemplate a series of images drawn from myriad perspectives, but we also see, thanks to the intense use of irony in Rosario Castellanos' prose, the constant destruction of the images displayed.

Cecilia calls herself "nobody" and, like "nobody," she represents the sum total of all the errors of which Auden spoke, and which, of course, make possible the emergence of a new, more intense, more profound look at the drama that is the condition of women who are trying to find themselves. In this way, one by one, the suppositions, the most dearly held convictions crumble before a look which contemplates everything under the sign of sensitivity and intelligence, or what Mexican poet José Gorostiza called "solitude in flames."

One of the chapters of the novel, "Family Album," is representative of Rosario Castellanos' narrative technique: her ability to make the image of Matilde Casanova disappear and to question the outlook that her followers had on marriage, maternity, fame and the writer's craft. But the chapter also offers up to us the most fertile obsessions that Castellanos developed through that handful of characters during the period she spent writing. For that reason, it is not at all clear as Eduardo Mejía says it is—he was who rescued the book from obscurity and wrote an essay published as an appendix to the first edition—that the novelist intended to simply mock Matilde Casanova. Quite the contrary: the portrait that emerges from these pages is moving in its psychological depth and the expressive strength of the character, in the compassion with which the author draws her defining traits, even though they are contradictory. And this is because the novelist herself was also plagued by many, very contradictory demons.

Mauricio Grobet Vallarta
Mexican writer and editor

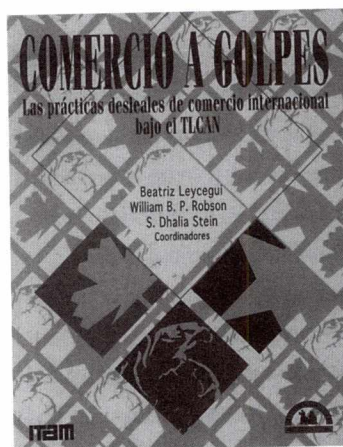
Comercio a golpes

Las prácticas desleales de comercio internacional bajo el TLCAN

(Cutthroat Trade. Disloyal International Trade Practices Under NAFTA)

Beatriz Leycegui, William B.P. Robson, S. Dhalia Stein, compilers

ITAM-Miguel Angel Porrúa, Mexico City, 1997, 295 pp.



Competition in international trade is often distorted by what are called unfair trade practices, among them, dumping and subsidies. Through dumping, exporters often try to win markets by lowering their prices below those on their domestic markets to displace suppliers or place production surpluses. Govern-

ment subsidies, on the other hand, artificially lower the price of exports and are sometimes granted to increase competitiveness in foreign trade. Of course, both practices are prejudicial for domestic producers in the target country, which suddenly finds its natural market invaded by very low-priced products, not because they are manufac-