

Cela's «San Camilo, 1936» as Anti-History

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In the prologue to his autobiographical *La rosa*, Camilo José Cela declared in 1950 that his future memoirs «no han de llegar más acá del día de San Camilo de 1936... Sobre la guerra civil escribiré mi novela, si Dios me da vida, dentro de quince o veinte años»¹. Cela made good his word with the publication in 1969 of *Vísperas, festividad y octava de San Camilo del año 1936 en Madrid*, a work that has sharply divided critics. Some, including Fernando Uriarte and Gemma Roberts, praise the novel's rejection of history and «ideocracia» in favor of an *intrahistoria* that reflects individual experience². Others, like Madeleine de Gogorza Fletcher and, more virulently, Paul Ilie, have condemned Cela for sacrificing global perspective and refusing to clarify badly needed «lessons of history»³. Such widely divergent views suggest that it may be useful to look in some detail at how Cela deals with history, why he deals with it as he does, and how *San Camilo* is related to some of its author's other works.

1. Camilo José Cela, *La rosa*, Buenos Aires, Destino, 1979, p. 20.

2. Fernando Uriarte, «Apuntes sobre *San Camilo, 1936*», *Papeles de Son Armadans*, 59 (1970), 328 (see also pp. 324, 326, 334); Gemma Roberts, «La culpa y la búsqueda de la autenticidad en *San Camilo, 1936*», *Journal of Spanish Studies: Twentieth Century*, 3 (1975), 82; Angelines Echave, «Historia e intrahistoria en *San Camilo, 1936* de Camilo José Cela», *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 41 (1980), 272-4.

3. Madeleine de Gogorza Fletcher, *The Spanish Historical Novel 1870-1970*, London, Tamesis, 1974, pp. 147-149, 152; Paul Ilie, «The Politics of Obscenity in *San Camilo, 1936*», *Anales de la Novela de Posguerra*, 1 (1976), passim, but especially pp. 28, 33, 34, 51. All future referencEs to Ilie will be to this article unless otherwise specified.

The subject of *San Camilo* seems to be an historical event, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War; yet we shall do better to think of it as dealing with the personal experience of that event as distinguished from the event itself. The two are not the same thing. Our knowledge of our experiences is immediate and unique, regardless of the accuracy with which our impressions may reflect objective realities. Experience is, in other words, life itself as each of us lives it for himself. The concept of an historical event, on the other hand, is an ordering and classification of countless individual actions and experiences, most, if not all, of which are inevitably not experienced directly by the orderer and classifier. It is not life, but an abstraction from life.

This distinction is related to the essence of narration. A novelist is faced by infinite possibilities in terms of characters, action, and descriptive details; yet even the most prolix descriptive artist necessarily rejects most of these possibilities and selects others, imposing on them an order he may consider necessary but that is, clearly, of his invention. This selection and ordering of narrative materials seems always to have concerned Cela, whose experimentation with narrative technique can be interpreted as an attempt to see how closely fiction, within the constraints of its unavoidable artificiality, can approach the form and immediacy of life. In a preliminary note to *La colmena*, Cela describes that novel as «un trozo de vida narrado paso a paso, sin reticencias, sin extrañas tragedias, sin caridad, como la vida discurre, exactamente como la vida discurre»⁴. His narration, he is telling us, develops in an open-ended time with a minimum of authorial structuring. The inescapable paradox is, of course, that only careful structuring can give the impression of formlessness; and Cela recognizes this when he declares, only a few lines farther on, that the book's «arquitectura es compleja, a mí me costó mucho trabajo hacerla». Eleven years later, in the prefatory note to the fourth editon of *La colmena*, the author returns to this topic: «y éste es un libro de historia, no una novela» (p. 111). He suggests that his narrative is, as far as possible, an uncontrived and unordered reflection of (chaotic) life.

History and life, in these comments of Cela's, mean much the same thing, because history is here used in the sense of the history that one makes by living: «La historia es como la circulación de la sangre o como la digestión de los alimentos»⁵. *History*, in other

4. Camilo José Cela, *La colmena*, ed. Raquel Asún, Madrid, Castalia, 1984, p. 105.

5. *Ibíd.*, «Nota a la tercera edición», p. 108.

words, is something like Unamuno's *intrahistoria*, the minute, biological flow of many individual existences⁶. *History* can also have another meaning, however: the history that one writes or reads. While making history requires only the existence of living beings who go about their activities, writing history requires an historian, who, like the author of a novel, must select and order characters and events from among the countless ones existing at any time⁷. He judges their importance, exposes the causal connections among them, and observes the operation of principles. He identifies a government, a people, or a state as protagonist, making something like a fictional character out of an abstraction; and even if he speaks of historical individuals, he necessarily focuses, as does a novelist with his creations, on only some of their actions and experiences. In his attempt to make sense of the apparent chaos of experience, the historian must abstract from immediate life, destroy the vividness of experience, and, in a sense, dehumanize events, which are no longer envisaged in and for themselves, but as part of a larger pattern.

Historians, as is their business, have sought to make sense of the events of the 18th. of July, and so have such novelists as Foxá, Aub, Sender, García Serrano, and Gironella. In *San Camilo*, however, Cela gives us not a bird's-eye view of those events but rather a worm's-eye view. His novel tries to convey the unstructured and unmediated *experience* of those July days, not the historical event as abstracted from experience by historians⁸. Structure is unavoidable,

6. See Echave, cited in n. 2 above.

7. My attention was drawn to this fact by Hayden White in a lecture delivered at Berkeley on May 6, 1980. For a fuller development of this point, see White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, especially «Introduction: The Poetics of History», pp. 1-38. On history's attempts to structure «the temporal flux» and on the reification, even deification, of history, see also Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1968, pp. 96-98.

8. See Roberts, p. 24. Janet W. Díaz, «Techniques of Alienation in Recent Spanish Novels», *JSST:TC*, 3 (1975), 6-7, places Cela's approach in the context of a trend in the contemporary novel. Gogorza Fletcher notes that «Cela chooses to sink the major events history has already sorted out for us back into the undifferentiated mass of trivia from which they first emerged, to give the raw material of history, the unprocessed daily events, in the way they appeared at the time» (p. 149). This critic, allowance made for her faith in history, clearly defines Cela's purpose but condemns it because it does not agree with her view of what an «historical novel» should be. For a stimulating discussion of essentially the same problem with respect to an earlier time, see Stephen Gilman, «A Generation of *Conversos*», *Romance Philology*, 33 (1979), 87-101.

but its aim here is to render less the meaning than the feeling of the event. Perhaps because our minds necessarily seek meaning, the paradoxical outcome of this process is to suggest that the feeling is the meaning, of at least the most important meaning, because, being non-abstract, it is the only one we can know directly. This conclusion is an extension of what Ilie has identified with respect to the temporal structure of *La colmena*, Cela's «voluntad de mantenerse en el único aspecto de un cosmos cambiante del que se posee plena aprehensión: el momento mismo. *Sólo el ahora es conocido, tangible*; la conciencia humana trata más efectivamente con el presente, porque cualquier momento pasado es una idealización, una entidad inconcreta dependiente de un incierto recuerdo»⁹. Significantly, *San Camilo* is written mainly in the present tense¹⁰.

The author's problem in *San Camilo* is how to render the immediacy of experience. The mirror before which the narrator so often finds himself is emblematic of this problem and of the relationship between experience and objective reality¹¹. The mirror is reflection, in various senses: in that of meditation, as the narrator takes stock of his life and his feelings, in that of the reproduction of reality through our experience or impressions of it, and in that of narration, the mirror, as Stendhal would have it, held to life's road. In all of these senses, the mirror is problematical, as is suggested by the opening lines of the novel:

Uno se ve en el espejo y se tutea incluso con confianza, el espejo no tiene marco, ni comienza ni acaba, o sí, sí tiene un marco primoroso dorado con paciencia y panes de oro pero la luna no es de buena calidad y la imagen que devuelve enseña las facciones amargas y desencajadas, pálidas y como de haber dormido mal, a lo mejor lo que sucede es que devuelve la atónita faz de un muerto todavía enmascarada con la careta del miedo a la muerte, es probable que tú estés muerto y no lo sepas, los muertos también ignoran que lo están, ignoran absolutamente todo¹².

9. Paul Ilie, *La novelística de Camilo José Cela*, Madrid, Gredos, 1963, p. 130, emphasis added.
10. Pierre L. Ullman, «Sobre la recitificación surrealista del espejo emblemático en *San Camilo*, 1936 de C.J. Cela», *Neophilologus*, 66 (1982), 377.
11. On the mirror, see the article by Ullman, and Janet Pérez, «Historical Circumstance and Thematic Motifs in *San Camilo*, 1936», *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 4, N.º 3 (Fall 1984), 72-75.
12. Camilo José Cela, *Vísperas, festividad y octava de San Camilo del año 1936 en Madrid*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial and Ediciones Alfaguara, 1979, p. 13.

A proper frame would separate the world within the mirror from the world without, the world of subjective experience from that of objective reality, the world of the narration from the limitless possibilities beyond that world. In *San Camilo*, however, both frame and mirror are problematical. The frame may not exist («el espejo no tiene marco»), and the narrator may therefore be unable to distinguish between one world and another; or, conversely, the frame may be all too apparent, carefully elaborated by the craftsman whose job it is to make this separation (the narrator or historian), while the glass may be incapable of accurately reflecting reality. Near the end of *San Camilo*, the narrator questions not only the reliability but even the authenticity of his reflection –i.e., experience–, as he tells himself that he never had a mirror and has always had to use someone else’s (pp. 321-22). Perhaps, the narrator seems to suggest, even what he has taken to be his experience has been manufactured for him by others.

The mirror also serves to double the narrator into the implied speaking *yo* and the spoken-to *tú*. In the mirror the narrator sees «ese otro que es él y no es él al mismo tiempo» (Roberts, p. 75), an image that has the same features as he, but arranged in diametrically opposite order. This play of images is particularly appropriate to a subject related to the Civil War: *tú* is *yo*, just as, on a national scale, *they* are *we*, people of the same race and language. This interplay and ultimate identity of the self and the other is made clear on page 118:

Aquí no vale cerrar los ojos eso es en la cuaresma y esto otro es un carnaval de sangre en el que todos llevamos puesta una máscara con salpicaduras de sangre propia o ajena, bien mirado es lo mismo, lo malo es la sangre que se derrama fuera de sus cauces y va perdiendo su color y su velocidad, yo soy un asesino o un asesinado, poco importa, lo malo es el plural, nosotros somos unos asesinos o unos asesinados vosotros sois unos asesinos o unos asesinados ellos son unos asesinos o unos asesinados...

The carnival is not here simply «pretense and play» (Ilie, p. 39), but an orgiastic ritual that the author presents as a threat, as he does other rituals. Cela suggests that shedding another man’s blood is equivalent to shedding one’s own when *yo* and *tú*, *we* and *they*, are ultimately the same. Far from being an «irresponsible» metaphor (*Ibid.*), this passage captures the terrible poignancy of civil war, when men kill those like most them, indeed, in a sense, themselves.

The narrator (*yo* and *tú*) may be one thing but could as well be another. This indecisiveness and ambiguity, which is at the same

time an inclusiveness, in seen in the narrator's musings about the assault on the Montaña barracks:

¿Tú estás en la plaza de España durante el asalto al cuartel?, dilo, no tengas miedo, tú estás a la parte de fuera vestido con el mono de las milicias y con el fusil dispuesto pero sin dotación de bombas de mano, tampoco tienes municiones en abundancia ni entusiasmo ni demasiada alegría, no temas confesar la verdad, tú estás dentro de los muros del cuartel vestido de soldado aunque sin insignias y con el fusil dispuesto, no tienes bombas de mano y la munición te escasea, no tienes un desmedido entusiasmo ni demasiada alegría, no temas confesar la verdad... (p. 235).

The repetitive style, of which Cela is so fond, here suggests the mirror-like similarity of the opposing sides, as they are reflected, at least potentially, in the protean narrator.

Such imprecision leads Ilie to declare that «since narrative perceptions impose themselves on the reader as reliable data, some assurance would be desirable that the mind which narrates them so audaciously is not obsessed or excessively neurotic» (p. 49). In a more neatly packaged novel, a pseudo-historian could order and interpret events for us; but Cela's narrator is both obsessed (by his own sexuality) and neurotic (because of the siren calls of heroism and his fear of and incapacity for action). The only thing reliable about his perceptions is that he perceives them; through the symbolism of the mirror, the novel repeatedly suggests that the observer and the medium of his observation are hopelessly distorted and distorting. The narrator exists not to give «reliable data» but to convey his fallible and distorting perceptions, which for him, as is the case for each of us, are the only immediately accessible knowledge.

The narration that issues from Cela's narrator is a typographically undifferentiated mixture of heterogeneous materials, characterized by long sentences whose loose colloquial structure allows repeated and abrupt shifts of topic. Developments that are important from the historian's point of view remain imbedded in their kaleidoscopic context. Thus Don Roque Barcia learns of the kidnaping of Calvo Sotelo from a café waiter, yet nothing distinguishes this intelligence from the apparently irrelevant information that surrounds it (Don Roque's taste in cigarettes, the summer vacations of Joaquín and Serafín Álvarez Quintero) (p. 8). The news of the military uprising in Morocco is first heard, or rather, not heard, on the radio:

Don León no escucha la radio, acaba de enterarse de que su mujer ha muerto como un pajarito, pero la radio funciona, vaya si funciona,

Unión Radio emite su primer diario hablado *La Palabra* a las ocho mientras casi todo el mundo duerme, se ha frustrado un nuevo intento criminal contra la república... Una parte del ejército de Marruecos se ha levantado en armas... (p. 140, ellipses in the text).

As no one listens to the radio, its message falls into a void, though then rumor takes over and communicates the news (pp. 141-48). An historical event thus has no reality here except as experience; what counts is not what has happened in Morocco, but what each character hears or fails to hear, believes or fails to believe about it.

Similarly, the murder of Lt. Castillo is presented not with the hindsight of the historian but as experienced by its contemporaries. A witness mixes his story of the shooting with details of how he lost his glasses¹³. According to one account, Castillo was killed near the Calle de Fuencarral; according to another, on Fuencarral (pp. 70, 71). Different theories about who did it surface in the discord of unidentified voices:

Al teniente Castillo lo mataron los falangistas, dicen que él había matado a Andrés Sáenz de Heredia, el primo de José Antonio, en el entierro del teniente de la guardia civil al que mataron los guardias de asalto en la Castellana durante el desfile conmemorativo de los cinco años de república, en aquel entierro murieron diez o doce personas más, no señor, al teniente Castillo lo mataron los comunistas para echarle la culpa a los falangistas, están ustedes equivocados, al teniente Castillo no lo mataron ni los unos ni los otros, fue un crimen pasional, tampoco, fue un crimen de maricones, oiga, ¿no lo habré matado un taxi al cruzar la calle?, no, a lo mejor murió de enfermedad y no lo quieren decir... (p. 85).

The first explanation offered here is the generally accepted one¹⁴; from there on the hypotheses become increasingly absurd. The same process occurs with the murder of Calvo Sotelo: «A Calvo Sotelo lo mataron los guardias de asalto para vengar la muerte del teniente», which is historical truth; but then come other, more or less improbable, conjectures (pp. 85-86). Cela is not hiding established facts, but showing how the individual who lives immersed in events, experiencing them directly without the benefit (and distortion) of the or-

13. Page 70. This witness is one Sr. Fernán Cruz, according to *El Sol*, July 14, 1936, p. 12.

14. See Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, New York, Harper & Row, 1963, pp. 104, 120-21.

dering bird's-eye view of the historian, gets his news in specific ways and often as a jumble of conflicting reports.

As if to reinforce this subjectivization of objective events, Cela also presents the same process in reverse, so that absurd notions and purely subjective fancies are cloaked in the language of scientific pronouncements: «Nadie lo sabe pero el primer rey que hubo en el mundo nació de un monstruoso huevo de golondrina» (p. 203); «Si a una mujer la preña su hermano el hijo sale tonto pero si la preña su padre, no» (p. 224); «El carácter de las mujeres puede conocerse estudiándoles la forma del ombligo» (p. 301). This pseudoscientific discourse is to be found in several of Cela's novels and reaches its culmination in *Oficio de tinieblas 5*; in *San Camilo* it is a further indication of the unreliability of the narrator and of the precariousness of all knowledge.

«No perdamos la perspectiva, yo ya estoy harta de decirlo, es lo único importante», says Doña Rosa at the beginning of *La colmena*; but in *San Camilo*, «lo que pasa es que estamos demasiado cerca y carecemos de perspectiva» (p. 166). An unidentified voice, presumably the narrator's, explains that «la historia vista desde cerca confunde a todos, a los actores y a los espectadores, y es siempre muy minúscula y estremecedora, también muy difícil de interpretar» (p. 78). *San Camilo* has, of course, a structure; but it is one that imitates the unstructured chaos of life (*pace* the believers in a teleology, be it deistic or historical-materialist).

Why this rejection of history? Because it is not life but only one more narrative genre. After a random account of more or less important news followed by the text of some brief advertisements, Cela's narrator declares that «el periódico no da para más, la verdad es que por quince céntimos tampoco se pueden pedir los *Episodios Nacionales*» (p. 22). The reference to Galdós's novels, rather than to the works of established historians, suggests the essential similarity between history and fiction. It also reminds us that the *Episodios*, with their introduction of fictional participant-observers into historical contexts, try, in effect, to give the reader the experience of historical events, though perhaps with less attention to the problematic nature of such an attempt than we find in *San Camilo*. The newspaper is yet another narrative, history shot on the wing, so to speak; but the difference between it and Galdós's books is less one of kind than one of price and, one supposes, of aesthetic quality. Both are abstractions

from reality **made with words**; and words lend themselves to manipulation by leaders and to the spawning of violence: «es fácil fabricar asesinos basta con vaciarles la cabeza de recuerdos y llenársela de aire ilusionado, de aire histórico» (p. 76). To understand this assertion in the context of Cela's novelistic *corpus*, we must recall the preliminary note to the third edition of *La colmena* (1957):

Está todavía lejano el tiempo en que se sepa que *el apóstol y el iluminado son carne de manicomio*, insomne y temblorosa flor de debilidad. La historia, la indefectible historia, va a contrapelo de las ideas. O al margen de ellas. Para *hacer la historia* se precisa no tener ideas... La historia es como la circulación de la sangre o como la digestión de los alimentos... Las ideas son un atavismo..., jamás una cultura y menos una tradición. La cultura y la tradición del hombre, como la cultura y la tradición de la hiena o de la hormiga, pudieran orientarse sobre una rosa de tres solos vientos: comer, reproducirse y destruirse. La cultura y la tradición no son jamás ideológicas y sí, siempre, instintivas (p. 108, emphasis added).

One may disagree with this unflattering view that places man on the level of the ant and the hyena, but its reasonable consequence is that ideas and ideologies should seem unnatural. In *San Camilo, recuerdos* suggests individual memory of individual experiences, the real past of the real man. *Aire ilusionado*, on the other hand, is synonymous with *aire histórico*, that is, with the past structured and therefore deformed by the historian¹⁵. It is *ilusionado* because it tempts one to ignore the immediate world of his experiences and to sacrifice himself (and others) for messianic goals. The fascination (*ilusión*) of history is the point, not its accuracy. *Aire* suggests insubstantiality, a past made of words rather than experience; and words are rejected: «Escupe de tu boca las palabras, lávate de palabras, que todas quieren decir lo mismo, sangre y estupidez, insomnio, odio y hastío...» (p. 83). This distinction between the theoretical knowledge of science and the concrete knowledge of experience is crucial in *San Camilo*.

What Cela's narrator is saying, then, is that men become violent when they concern themselves with ideological abstractions rather than with their flesh-and-blood existence, and that crimes are committed in the name of history, in obedience to what ideologues consider the dictates or «lessons» of history. Symbols, myths, and rituals,

15. Cf. Jean Onimus, «L'Expression du temps dans le roman contemporain», *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 28 (1954), 315: «L'histoire met en forme le passé, le stylise une fois pour toutes et le range définitivement dans ses archives: cela s'est passé ainsi, c'est définitif, n'en parlons plus. La mémoire au contrit ire est un retour vivant de l'être entier vers son passé, ou vers la légende d'un plus lointain passé».

the spawn of a history abstracted from experience, are dangerous: «El mundo no se arregla porque a la gente le gusta desfilar con su insignia o con su banderita en la solapa... lo único que cambian son las insignias y las banderitas» (p. 130)¹⁶. In the mind of Engracia, who dies in the assault on the Montaña barracks, slogans and ritual words have crowded out fiancé, work, and family; and similar slogans come from the other side (p. 230). The point is made most clearly in the description of the parallel funerals of Castillo and Calvo Sotelo. The casket of the former is draped in a red flag and greeted with clenched fists as an orator proclaims: «Juro ante la historia y por mi honor que este crimen no quedará sin venganza» (p. 120). Calvo Sotelo's casket is greeted with the Roman salute and the proclamation: «Juro ante Dios y por España que este crimen no quedará sin venganza» (p. 125).

History and honor, God and Spain, are placed on the same level, that of ritual words leading to violence; and later references to the notions of *limpieza de sangre* and knightly heroism (pp. 294, 297) suggest that the deadly fascination with words and concepts is itself historic in Spain. Cela's narrator feels the attraction of messianism and, occasionally, the wish to partake of its intoxication; but he also knows that the appearance of heroism may mask the biological reality of mutilation or death: «A un héroe de cualquier guerra si le dan un tiro en el espinazo lo dejan paralítico para siempre pero se defiende vendiendo tabaco» (p. 195). The modest cheerfulness («se defiende») of the final clause is clearly ironic.

Fear of the messianic lure of history leads the narrator's Tío Jerónimo to advise him: «A tus veinte años basta con defender el corazón del hielo, esfuérzate por creer en algo que no sea la historia, esa gran falacia, cree en las virtudes teologales y en el amor, en la vida y en la muerte, ya ves que no te pido demasiado...» (p. 329). Although one might object that the theological virtues are also abstractions, the rejection of history here means an affirmation of biological life as more valuable than abstractions and historical mission. It also questions the possibility of reading «lessons» in history, since «la sangre no es tinta indeleble sino manchadiza, las páginas que se escriben con sangre pronto son de muy difícil lectura, en cuanto caen las primeras lluvias se hacen de muy difícil lectura...» (p. 298).

For Cela, any meaning of the Civil War and, indeed, of history

16. For an example, see Rafael Alberti, *Teatro*, II, Buenos Aires, Losada, 1964, 103.

must be sought at the level of individual experience. Hence a long and crucial passage from which I shall quote only the central part:

En la calle de Toledo un camión aplasta a un borracho que estaba vomitando tan tranquilo y sin meterse con nadie en medio de la calzada, en la calle de Mesón de Paredes aborta una criada a la que habían preñado en su pueblo, en la glorietta de Bilbao agoniza un niño con garrotillo, en un reservado de la calle de Arlabán se canta por lo grande hasta que de repente, ¡zas!, un señor se muere de un infarto de miocardio, en la casa de socorro de la calle de la Encomienda curan a dos que se pegaron en la vía pública, en la calle de Velázquez secuestran a un diputado al que van a asesinar, en la calle de Tudescos matan a una puta a navajazos, le dan lo menos veinte navajazos, esto de la puta tiene menos importancia, putas hay muchas y además los crímenes pasionales no cuentan o cuentan poco, a la gente suelen gustarles [sic] pero por lo común son muy monótonos, reiterativos y vulgares, Chinchicida Ducal, infalible, frasco 1.55, la historia vista desde cerca confunde a todos, a los actores y a los espectadores, y es siempre muy minúscula y estremecedora, también muy difícil de interpretar (pp. 77-78).

To complain, as does Ilie, that this passage fails to note the «quality and moral implications» of different deaths, to clarify their «physiological, social, or economic causes», and thus reduces violence to «banal monotony» (p. 36), is to miss the point: Cela's characters share a space, a time, a common humanity, and a fate, death; and his ironic commentary on the murder of the prostitute rejects the categorization of deaths by their «quality and moral implications». Every death is significant, not from the point of view of the historian, compelled to abstract, but from that of the real individual human beings who kill and are killed. The deliberately monotonous recital of violence reflects the experience of that terrible state of things in which this truth is forgotten and the death of individuals is dehumanized and trivialized.

For Cela, then, the physical or physiological is paramount over the abstract or ideological; and *San Camilo's* principal «explanation» of the Civil War, the explosion of sexual repression into ideologically motivated fratricidal violence¹⁷, is the most striking example of this primacy. The connection between violence and sex pervades the entire narration. The urge to kill is a physiological phenomenon, an itch in the mouth (pp. 56, 92, 103 *et passim*). Murder provides «unos instantes deleitosos» (p. 47), and the thought of it is related to an erection (p. 56). Sexually tinged and often grotesque violence abounds

17. See especially p. 242.

(e.g., pp. 66, 257), as it does in the author's other novels¹⁸. In this one, the sexual explanation of historical events is made psychologically verisimilar by being presented within the context of the sexual obsessions of a twenty-year old and the peculiar sexual morality of his uncle. It is thus a functioning part of the world of this novel, though we need not accept it as an interpretation of the world in which we ourselves live, any more than we need accept Dostoyevsky's Slavophile and Orthodox messianism when granting it its role in his fiction.

The biological explanation of the War fits with Cela's consistent stress, over the years, on the physiological basis of being, the primacy

cal. We have already noted the author's declaration that the parameters of human culture are physiological: «comer, reproducirse y destruirse.» For Cela, man has no cosmic significance; hence the conclusion of *Pabellón de reposo*, after its accounts of individual sufferings: «El mundo, impasible a la congoja, sigue dando vueltas por el espacio obediente a las complicadas leyes de la mecánica celeste». Man has no valid role as hero, martyr, or messiah. He is, in colloquial terms, *un piernas*, that is, «hombre insignificante, sin posición social ni económica»¹⁹. Just as Martín Marco says of himself, «y yo hecho un piernas» (*La colmena*, p. 280), so the narrator of *San Camilo* tells his reflection in the mirror:

Tú no eres Napoleón Bonaparte, tampoco eres el rey Cirilo de Inglaterra a quien asesinaron sus cortesanos metiéndole plomo derretido por el trasero igual que a un mono maricón, tú eres un piernas, un pobre hombre con la sesera llena de ideas gregarias, de ideas redentoras y que no conducen a lado alguno... (p. 13).

Through many repetitions and variations of this theme, the narrator depicts himself as the plaything of forces beyond his control. He is one of many, everyman, not outstanding either as hero or as victim. Nonetheless, each individual, in the ultimate reality of his body, is unique; as Tío Jerónimo says, «el mundo está lleno de desconocidos pero son todos diferentes, te aseguro que son todos diferentes, cada uno tiene su dolor y su gozo, a veces minúsculo, y cuando

18. See, for instance, Pascual's knifing of his mare at the end of Chapter 9 of *La familia de Pascual Duarte*: «El animalito no dijo ni pío; se limitaba a respirar más hondo y más deprisa, como cuando la echaban al macho».

19. Jaime Martín Martín, *Diccionario de expresiones malsonantes del español: Léxico descriptivo*, Madrid, Istmo, 1974, p. 200.

nace o se muere no pasa nada, eso es cierto, pero nace o se muere una esperanza y una decepción...» (p. 332).

Contempt and pity are mixed in this view of man, along with a grudging love, not for the abstractions of class or race or the abstracción «mankind», but for the individual man²⁰. *San Camilo* is designed to show the experiences and feelings of such men as they are caught in events not of their making. We may not share Cela's view of man, but the relevant question for literary criticism is not the accuracy of his view or whether Cela should have written a different kind of novel, but whether Cela's view is coherent with the structure and style of his work. In the case of *San Camilo* it is: structure and style of the novel resist hierarchical ordering and blend apparently unmediated human experiences on the same plane, suggesting that human reality consists ultimately of individual experience, not of abstractions from events. Cela's novel rejects history because history, by hiding this truth, leads men to sacrifice the physical, including life itself, to the abstract.

Finally, does Cela's rejection of history and ideology in *San Camilo* itself constitute an ideological position? As the product of beliefs that have informed the whole varied course of the author's productions, clearly it does. Unlike the ideological systems that underlie modern totalitarianisms, however, it is also a defense of the individual, pitifully limited as he is, against those who would turn him into grist for their ideological mills.

20. Cf. Unamuno's opening paragraph in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida...: «Porque el adjetivo *humanus* me es tan sospechoso como su sustantivo abstracto *humanitas*, la *humanidad*. Ni lo humano ni la humanidad, ni el adjetivo simple, ni el adjetivo sustantivado, sino el sustantivo concreto: el hombre. El hombre de carne y hueso, el que *nace, sufre y muere*—sobre todo muere...»*