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Julieta Campos

Celina or the Cats

Trans. by Leland H. Chambers

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Reviewed by Dexter J. Noel

Julieta Campos, born in Cuba, is one of Latin America's growing number of women writers who are striving to create a new poetics independent of the traditional canon. Campos, a professor of literature, has published novels, reviews and a book on literary criticism. *Celina or the Cats*, originally published in Spanish (*Celina o los gatos*, 1968), is a collection of five short stories divided into two sections; the first contains three stories and the second, two. The stories are preceded by an introduction, intended to serve, in part, as an exegesis for the stories. In this introduction, Campos reviews the historical relationships between cats and humans and provides the underpinnings for the symbolism of cats, "our contact with all that is imaginary, indecipherable, unfathomable, inaccessible" (16). Cats, for Campos, "evoke worlds that belong not only to a beyond that is divine or satanic ... but also to the lost paradise of childhood..." (24).

The title story, *Celina or the Cats*, tells about the relationship between Carlos Manuel and his wife Celina. Although the story centers around the wife, it is told in the first person by the husband as he attempts to analyze the events that led to the marriage breakup and Celina's subsequent suicide. Carlos Manuel traces the stages of the relationship and tries to decide whether or not he was victim or culprit. Celina first seeks to express her personality through her husband's world; then, she moves away from this world and creates her own. Next, she tires of this and acquires some cats, becomes engrossed in them, and, finally, commits suicide. All of this is foreshadowed by Celina's obsession with her nails, her mirror, and her preening.

The second story, *The Baptism*, chronicles the events surrounding the baptism of Natalia's doll, Michel, and is the backdrop for Natalia's struggle with growing up. The tension is illustrated by the fact that Natalia wants the security of the known stage while, at the same time, she wants to seek out the new and unusual. In order to maintain control over her situation, Natalia returns to her favorite spot in the garden where she can be alone with her thoughts. Her loss of innocence is signaled when she finds Luis and Marisa in each other's arms in her garden, and when she finally discovers a change in the color of the sky.

The implicit desire to preserve an arrested temporality is also one of the themes in *All the Roses*. Aurelia, the protagonist, of this story seeks the “prolongation of an interminable present that blends memory and oblivion” (85). The death of the roses and her sister Alda’s madness could both be ended if only she could remove the fateful date—August 20, 1933, to which she ascribes all her ills—from the calendar. Apart from this, routine and avoidance of change are the keys to her peace and tranquility. Consequently, Aurelia retreats to her “safe place.” Her inaction, though, causes the unattended garden to invade the house and destroy it along with its inhabitants.

This theme of nature overrunning an apparent sanctuary recurs in *The House* (trans. by Kathleen Ross), in which the house is taken over by the sea. Routine and repetition are the themes of this story about the lives of the family of Consuelo and Jim (a couple who do not communicate), their daughters Consuelo and Albertina, and their dogs. Time passes but not many changes occur; names and events are repeated, and everything seems blurred. In one particular scene Consuelo, the mother, and Consuelo, the daughter, are both looking out to sea, which invokes similar memories and a temporal clash, since “everything is happening now, in an unlimited now, where what was the past and what would have been the future vanish” (16), thus providing permanence and peace.

The City, the final story, also belongs to that segment of the corpus of Campos’s work which critics, such as Martha Martínez, classify as the constant interiorization of Cuban memories (“Julieta Campos o la interiorización de lo cubano,” *Revista Iberoamericana* 132-33 [1985] 797). In this story, the duality of the city (presumably Havana) is examined, its glorious past and its decaying present juxtaposed. There is no harmony between the past, a rejected memory, and the present. This is a city “without a before or an after” (127), a city which encroaches upon and destroys the vestiges of the past.

The stories in this collection share some common themes: arrested time, the comforting effect of memories, and the need for sanctuary. In all of them, the characters are generally as introverted, enigmatic, and incomprehensible as cats. Further, throughout the collection, Campos interweaves another element of her poetics: the power of words. In *Celina or the Cats*, Carlos Manuel tries to invoke the power of words in his attempt to decipher his wife’s actions and their relationship; in *The House*, the communicative power of words is the missing factor that could save the relationship for Jim and Consuelo; in *The Baptism*, *All the Roses*, and *The City* words are the essential medium for preserving memories, which, in turn, provide the stability and permanence sought by the characters.

Celina or the Cats is an excellent sample of, and a good introduction for the English-speaking public to, Julieta Campos’s work. It is a fitting illustration of this writer’s ongoing quest for a suitable vehicle to express a female voice in the literatures of Latin America.