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Romanica Silesiana 8/1, 284-291

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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Cela's Men and Woman: Multiple Masculinities versus One Femininity in *Mazurka for Two Dead Men*

ABSTRACT: In *Mazurka For Two Dead Men*, Camilo José Cela creates a world heavily populated with vivid types of men and seemingly only one type of woman. Female characters in the story are primarily sexual (and promiscuous) beings, depicted mostly in the context of erotic encounters deprived of sensuality or tenderness. Easily accessible female bodies serve to present the various kinds of masculinity through the nature and quality of men's interactions with women. Credited with the popularization of the so-called *tremendismo*, a specifically Spanish literary technique related to realism and naturalism, Cela does not shun explicit depictions of phenomena such as violence, deviation, prostitution, deformity, or bestiality. The purpose of the following article is to demonstrate how Cela constructs masculinity and femininity in his novel, and what particular gender roles he assigns to his characters.

KEY WORDS: masculinity, femininity, realism, naturalism, *tremendismo*, Camilo José Cela.

The prose of Camilo José Cela, an acclaimed Spanish writer and a Nobel laureate, falls within the period of postmodernism and exhibits a number of features typical of that particular era. At the same time, it falls into the category of *tremendismo*, a specifically Spanish, realism- and naturalism-related literary technique which was perceived by the critics as a coherent literary movement, and of which Cela is often credited as the "father" since the publication of his *The Family of Pascual Duarte* (GIES 630). As a result of this combination, Cela's narratives are dark, pessimistic and often gruesome, while his literary worlds are heavily populated with deviants, murderers, and other disturbing characters. *Mazurka for Two Dead Men*, published in 1983 (ten years after the novelist's last work, *Oficio de Tinieblas 5* — a very *tremendista* piece) is no exception: the story abounds in violence, death and promiscuity. What is particularly interesting, the author constructs the notions of femininity and masculinity in two

distinct ways, presenting the reader with a few categories of men and only one type of a woman. While Cela's men differ from one another in physical strength, sexual potency, courage or the lack thereof etc., the female characters all seem alike and their two main purposes are to provide men with sexual services and food. The objective of the following article is to demonstrate what constitutes femininity and masculinity in *Mazurka*, and what consequences it has for the gender dynamics in the novel.

According to SOBEJANO-MORÁN, the profusion of depictions of sexuality and eroticism in postmodern Spanish literature can be attributed to a few factors: a reaction against the rigid, conservative morality, the need to propel the development of specific semantic fields which had not been particularly explored, or the ability of an erotically charged text to provoke a reciprocal reaction in the reader (50). When interpreted within the realm of *tremendismo*, sexuality becomes one of the elements whose aim is to shock the audience and is therefore presented as particularly perverse, animalistic, often entirely deprived of tenderness and sensuality. Numerous attempts have been made to define *tremendismo*. For instance, Jerónimo Mallo proposes the following definition:

These are fictional stories concerning people, events and situations which are truly terrible and which, for either the extent or the accumulation of horror, make a “tremendous” impression on the reader. [...] What happens in the contemporary novel and qualifies as *tremendismo*, corresponds without a doubt to a new literary typology, a sensitivity which had not been previously known.

MALLO 49, translation mine

Mallo emphasizes that the difference between *tremendismo* and trends such as realism and naturalism lies not in technical innovations, but in this new sensitivity and in the fact that *tremendismo* is anchored in whatever contemporaneity it describes — *lo tremendo* in the present time will be significantly different from *lo tremendo* in any other given epoch (54—55). Julian Palley is one of those critics who point out to Cela as the person responsible for introducing the phenomenon of *tremendismo* into the Spanish letters and attempts at defining it as follows:

Tremendismo is a kind of emphatic realism that accentuates the sombre aspects of life, with cruelty and violence in the foreground of men's relations, and with an atmosphere of boredom and anguish. “Tremendism” underlines negative aspects of life — cruelty, suffering, death, anguish, nausea, boredom — and neglects the positive values. It differs from naturalism in two aspects: first, naturalism sought social and economic justice, and did not concern itself with man's spiritual anguish; and second, “tremendism” is concerned with the individual rather than the mass.

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Palley does not underline the novelty of the trend, nor does he claim that before Cela's prose various features of what is termed as *tremendismo* did not appear in Spanish literature. In fact, those features can be traced hundreds of years back, as Ortega demonstrates in an article titled "Antecedentes y Naturaleza del Tremendismo en Cela." Ortega mentions classics such as Arcipreste de Talavera, Cervantes, the Baroque creations of the 17th century, Quevedo, the realist and antirealist tendencies in painting, the *esperpento* of Valle-Inclán, or the "macabrist" techniques of Baroja (21—24). As Ortega points out, Cela himself opposed the attribution of "false modernity" to *tremendismo*, saying: "Tremendismo, in my opinion, does not have a father, or at least not a known father. Tremendismo in Spanish literature is as old as the literature itself" (quoted in ORTEGA 21, translation mine). Not only does Cela deny having "fathered" *tremendismo*, but he also undermines the very sense of even distinguishing it as a separate trend:

To classify me as the father of *tremendismo* is to commit a dreadful error in chronology. I am certainly no child, but I am substantially younger than the Archpriest of Talavera, for example, and than most of the Spanish writers of the Middle Ages and the Golden Age. [...] I don't think it even makes sense, because *tremendismo* is nothing more than realism insofar as it tries to reflect reality faithfully. If this reality is "tremendous," well, what can we do about it? We have to come to terms with it exactly as it presents itself to us, exactly as we have found it.

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The "tremendous" reality of *Mazurka for Two Dead Men* is one of deformity, violence and bestiality, told by a multiplicity of voices, with pieces of information deliberately repeated either by the narrator or by various characters who populate this eerie fictional world.¹ Whatever the function and whatever the gender role of a given character, the list of his or her qualities inevitably features some reference to potency and sexual prowess.

One of the divisions that can be made among Cela's male protagonists is able-bodiedness versus physical disability. The men who fall into one of these two categories are usually also labeled, somewhat automatically, as either sexually active or impotent. Already on the very first page of the novel,

¹ It should be noted that while *tremendismo* interpreted as an offshoot of realism or naturalism should, as a consequence, be to a large extent mimetic in relation to reality, at the same time the postmodernist strategy which consists in purposely revealing the author behind the text renders the text less realist. As DURÁN points out, the authorial presence in *Mazurka*, disguised as the first-person omniscient narrator, cannot be overlooked: "We see him at each turn of the action, asking questions and soon afterward answering them, manipulating his readers in a good-humoured way. We realize at last that we are reading literature, not a chronicle of real-life events, and that in literature human beings are always assured of having the last word" (399).

the theme of sex and desire is introduced, as we learn that a character named Lázaro Codesal “knew his stuff when it came to getting girls pregnant, he had a taste for it too”; and he was “treacherously killed by a Moor, killed while jacking off beneath a fig tree” (CELA 1). Another man — Roque, known as the Cleric of Comesaña — is famous for being exceptionally generously endowed by nature: he “boasts an enormous penis, renowned throughout the whole area and talked about even beyond Ponferrada in the kingdom of León” (8). As has already been signaled, bits of information about various characters reappear throughout the story, and this particular feature of Roque is mentioned a couple of times, as if to emphasize its importance to the construction of this character. Roque is willing to expose himself to curious spectators, his penis “is said to be a blessing” (9). Sexual prowess is a very desirable quality in a man and this applies even to clergy, as a woman named Fina says: “They’re very manly altogether and, since they haven’t a care in the world, they go at it great guns, what a treat it is to do it with them!” (67). That very same woman reproaches her husband in the following way: “You’re just like a simpleton, for your information: the Franciscan friar from the Missions has got a far bigger and firmer one than you, at least twice as big. He didn’t know much, that’s for sure, well nobody is born knowing everything, but at least he was able to learn” (68). Marujita Bodelón, married to a Moor, says about her husband: “He’s very good to me and a real Christian in bed, only that my Driss has a prick like the one on St. Facundo’s ass and when it unsheathes, you’d think the world was about to drop out of it” (262). The focus on the vitality of men’s sexual performance entails a very particular image of a woman in the novel — a woman who does not necessarily seek security, love or compassion, but simply satisfaction in sexual relations.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are men who are handicapped, disfigured or castrated. Marcos Albite Muradás has no legs, Gaudencio is blind, Luisono Bocelo was preventively castrated, so was Plastered Pepiño, a pedophile. At some point, the narrator delivers an enumeration of characters with deficiencies:

The list of lads wholly exempted from military service is as follows: Ramón Requeixo Casbolado (Moncho Lazybones) — right leg amputated; José Pousada Coires (Plastered Pepiño) — severe cerebral disorder; Gaudencio Beira Bouzoso — blind; Julián Moisteirón Valmigallo (Hopalong from Maraños) — lame; Roque Borrén Pontellas — mentally deficient; Mamerto Paixón Verdudedo — paraplegic resulting from fracture of the spinal vertebrae; Marcos Albite Muradás — both legs amputated; Benito Marvís Ventela, or Fernández (Shrill) — mentally deficient; Luis Bocelo Cepamondín (Luis the Coot) — castrated and blind, those are the ones that spring to mind for the time being, though there may be one or two others besides.

Singling out this particular group of characters and identifying them additionally by their nicknames (thus revealing that they had already appeared in the story, only not under their given names) makes the reader aware of the existence of a separate category of men, projected against able-bodied characters.² Janet Pérez points out that physical and mental defects are not the only flaws of an outstandingly large group of Cela's characters, since many have yet other problems, be it excessive drinking, sadistic tendencies, being rejected by the society and many others; PÉREZ sums up: "All of these are so numerous that normal, healthy citizens are a distinct minority, and exemplary characters are still harder to find" (85). This peculiar typology is not applicable exclusively to male characters, nevertheless, it is difficult to distinguish a similar variety of groups among female characters, in which case we may at best draw a line between prostitutes and non-prostitutes.

"The bastard" — *hijoputa* — seems to be an entirely separate category. He has nine crucial characteristics, even though they do not have to appear all in one specimen of the kind. "The first sign of a bastard is thin hair," the reader is alerted on page 11, and as the story progresses, the image is completed with further details: "a jutting forehead" (19), "a pallid face" (40), "a patchy beard" (50), hands that are "limp, clammy, and cold" (62), "a furtive look about the eyes" (63), "a reedy little voice" (71), "a measly, flaccid organ" (97) and "avarice" (105). Fabián Minguela serves as the story's exemplary bastard, possessing all nine signs. Six out of nine (seven, if one counts the bastard's voice) are connected with physical appearance and qualities, which makes it possible to recognize the type at the first glance, or through touch or hearing. Sign number eight, the flaccid penis, suggests the bastard's impotence and makes him the object of ridicule, as shown on the example of Minguela: "In Sprat's brothel the whores used to laugh at Fabián Minguela's lollipop" (97). Interestingly enough, this least desirable category of a man is described in the most detailed manner in terms of physicality, so as to warn and prepare the reader for what should be noticed and at all costs avoided. PÉREZ states — disagreeing with Masoliver whom she quotes — that "although the nine signs are thematically important, they are clearly less than a leitmotif, since the enumeration ends approximately one third of the way through the novel" (92). Nevertheless, there is no analogous

² Another important distinction can be drawn on the basis of the nature of various men's ailments: some of them were born disfigured and ill, some of them succumbed to diseases, and yet some of them are veterans and heroes who got injured during the war. PÉREZ also points out to the deaths of the characters, some of which are less heroic than others: "suicide by hanging, drowning, incineration and shooting; old age; sicknesses including whooping cough, anemia, heart attacks, tuberculosis, colic, pneumonia, acute alcoholism and prolonged constipation [...] Others die from crushing by an ox, falling from a tower, or being devoured by the *sacaúntos* — the fate of thirteen victims of the local werewolf. Some are murdered, several assassinated, and some twenty are men in uniform who die during the war" (85—86).

category for women in Cela's world, nor is there a group of women which would be described with an equal attention to detail, which is why distinguishing the bastard as yet another type of man in the novel serves to further enhance the scarcity of types of women.

Female characters in *Mazurka* are primarily sexual beings. Whether they are wives or prostitutes, faithful partners or promiscuous lovers, sane or lunatics, they gravitate towards men and offer them their bodies. Their attitude towards particular men is what may facilitate putting those men into various categories (wanted/unwanted, attractive/unattractive, admired/pitied, loved/despised, skillful lovers/impotent, and so on). The information that is repeated concerning female characters also positions those women as sexually objectified. Benicia is "the woman with nipples like chestnuts" (2 and *passim*) who loves sex. She is "a happy, hearty sinner," "surly and forceful in bed"; "she knows a thing or two about rolling in the hay and she screws skillfully but tyrannically" (25). She is compared to "a heater and a pleasure machine rolled into one," as well as "an obedient sow" who "never says no to anything" (25). Catuxa Bainte is a deranged woman in her early twenties who is often seen bathing naked. Although she is crazy, "once the prick is in the right place she writhes about to great effect" (35). Rosalia Trasulfe is infamous for having sexual encounters with Fabián Minguela, the bastard. There is also a suspicion that Rosalia does not abstain from bestiality, although zoophilic practices are observed in both sexes:

All us women have at some time or another got up to mischief with a dog — that's only normal, when you're young anything goes, or even with a half-wit if there's one handy and it's not too cold, or he starts to blubber; men go for a suckling nanny goat and hold her firmly by the horns for a more satisfying screw, it's all perfectly natural. Well, what the rest of us got up to with dogs, Crazy Goat did with wolves; nobody believes a word of it but it's true — I've seen it with my own two eyes.

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Not only is Rosalia excused for having sex with animals, but another female character, Adegá, claims that such behaviour is perfectly natural. Rosalia is rumored to have been intimate with a wolf (62), a ram (104) and a wild boar (275). Pérez points out to the fact that this particular feature of this woman enhances the repulsive, undesirable quality of the bastard, with whom Rosalia also had sex. "Moucho is dehumanized," PÉREZ writes, "both by animal similes and the conjectures of other characters as to whether Cabuxa Tola, who saves her own skin by becoming his mistress, would accept similar relations with a series of animals" (88). A character named Miss Ramona represents homoerotic desires, as she is described as being intimate with another woman, Rosicler. All these and many other female characters who grace the pages of *Mazurka* are described primarily in terms of their sexuality; the only other easily discernible association

is their role as food providers, as they serve various dishes and drinks, and occasionally cook naked; most women feed the men they sleep with. Some of them are mothers, but their motherhood is merely a biological outcome of sexual intercourse and not an opportunity to depict them as nurturing, caring and tender. "There's no call to create a scene," a character named Pilar Moure comments, "that's what we women are for, after all, bringing children into the world. It's no big deal" (79). Gender roles for women are assigned quite clearly: they are to make themselves available to men, bear their children and cook. All the while, men may either stay at home or go to war where they will fight and kill other men; they may choose from a variety of professions or they can be disabled and nursed by women. Some become priests (and disregard celibacy), others engage in various strange behaviours which are, as if by default, to be tolerated by those around them. The two most prominent examples are uncle Cleto, who vomits when bored and seems to suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder, and Don Venancio, who fetishizes shaving women's heads.

In an attempt to group the characters of the novel, Pérez relies on the grouping suggested by Masoliver Rodenas, which would be:

- (a) characters grouped around Adegá and her brother, the blind Gaudencio; (b) uncles of the narrator(s); (c) characters grouped around Raimundo el de los Casandulfes; (d) characters grouped around the wretched Fabián Minguela; (e) characters grouped around Lázaro Codesal (killed in the war in Melilla) or Afouto; (f) morons; (g) women whose lives revolve around sex; (h) priests.

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While such a typology of protagonists is certainly one viable option, it does not prevent some of the characters from crossing freely from one group to another. Characters grouped around other characters can at the same time be women, morons or priests. Women obsessed with sex constitute the vast majority of female characters in the novel, with only a handful of exceptions to the rule. What is more, it is difficult to ascribe some of them to one group only: for instance, Ramona can be at the same classified as a sexually active bisexual woman, a character grouped around Raimundo el de los Casandulfes (as his cousin and former lover) and a character grouped around the bastard (as the host of the meeting during which the man's fate is decided). Cela's distribution of various distinctive features between his characters results in an arrangement in which women neatly fall into one (and only one) category, while men represent a far larger spectrum of preferences, behaviours, appearances and functions. Such a perspective on women is not surprising when read against the constitutive features of *tremendismo*: their promiscuity and sexual aberrations enhance not only certain equally sombre features of male characters, but also the overall dehumanizing quality of the world depicted in the novel.

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Bio-bibliographical note

Anna Pilińska (b. 1981) is a doctoral student at the University of Wrocław, with M.A. degrees in English and Spanish. She is currently working on her Ph.D. dissertation on the postmodern construction of sexuality in the prose of Vladimir Nabokov, Edmund White, Bobbie Ann Mason and Achy Obejas.