'A WOMAN SCHOOLED IN LATIN': ROSARIO CASTELLANOS, AMBASSADOR OF MEXICO AND CHIAPAS

REVIEW OF 'BALÚN CANÁN' (NOVEL EDITED BY DORA SALES SALVADOR: FIRST-EVER EDITION ON THE SPANISH MARKET)

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'Pero el quejido del indio
¿por qué no se escuchará?' -
('Why will no-one hear the Indian's cry?')
Violeta Parra

'Señora del arco iris, moradora en los dominios húmedos,
Señora de la luna, que vierte en la tierra
Las aguas que nutren, Ixchel'.
('Lady of the rainbow, dweller in the wetlands,
Lady of the moon, who pours on to earth
The waters that sustain, Ixchel')
Maya prayer

I

On 7 August 1974, a Mexican woman aged 49 died in Tel Aviv, struck down by an electric shock from a household lamp. Her name was Rosario Castellanos. She was Mexico's ambassador to Israel, but she was also much more than that - she was a writer (a poet, novelist, author of short stories, dramatist and essayist), and she was also another kind of ambassador, child of a family from Chiapas and spokeswoman for all of the marginalised, subordinated and undervalued people of her region. In 1998, no less a figure than José Saramago described her as the 'embajadora de Chiapas' ('ambassador of Chiapas'), a writer who 'supo contar las vicisitudes de los indios y las tropelías de los blancos' ('had it in her to narrate the sufferings of the Indians and the abuses of the whites'): it is equally the case that Castellanos, as an acknowledged pioneer of feminism in Latin America, had it in her too to recount, with a delicacy-tinged bitterness, the desires and misfortunes of the female population of her region and nation, and in this sense she may further be termed the declared ambassador of the womenfolk of Mexico. She was also the author of *Balún Canán* (1957), the novel to whose first-ever edition on the Spanish market the present review is dedicated.

Today, more than three decades since her tragically premature death, Rosario's fame in her native land is established and undeniable. She is even buried, cheek-by-jowl with the 'great men [sic]' of the Republic, in Mexico City's National Pantheon. Personalities as diverse as Carlos Fuentes and Subcommander Marcos have lauded her as the storyteller of her state of Chiapas, where she grew up in the town of Comitán, reading her work as a map - still essential today - for understanding the realities of what is still a deeply conflict-ridden and problematic part of southern Mexico. Despite this, and notwithstanding her posthumous fame at home, until now not a single one of her works had ever appeared under the imprint of a Spanish publisher: readers in the peninsula had had to content themselves exclusively with imported editions. Now and after

all this time, the gap has been filled by Ediciones Cátedra and the scholar Dora Sales Salvador: at last, Rosario is there on the shelves next to Cervantes, Lorca or Neruda, published in one of Spain's most prestigious collections of classic Spanish-language texts. The series in which this volume appears, 'Letras Hispánicas', is known for its exceptionally high quality, and within that tradition Dora Sales has produced a critical edition of *Balún Canán* which combines intellectual rigour and informative richness with a visible commitment, expressed through empathy and engagement, to the text of Rosario Castellanos' novel and its underlying world-view.

II

The reader will immediately ask, 'what do the words "Balún Canán" mean?' In fact, as the novel's text itself explains, the words of the title refer to a place, and mean, in the Maya language, 'The Nine Guardians': the reference is to the nine hills that surround Comitán, and 'Balún Canán' is the old Maya name of the locality. The choice of title thus in itself points to the strong empathy which Castellanos felt for the original inhabitants of Chiapas. The narrative is firmly located in both space and time. The events happen in the town of Comitán and its environs, during the first years of the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (1934-1940), the protagonist of the most radical wing of the PRI (the Party of the Institutional Revolution, at that time still more revolutionary than institutional) and the leading force behind both the great anti-clerical movement and the agrarian reform that the Indians deeply desired and the whites (or 'ladinos') as deeply dreaded. Life in Chiapas as Rosario narrates it, with tenderness and compassion and without lapsing into exotic stereotypes, is harsh, marked by the ever-more explosive antagonism between whites and Indians, and also by the sufferings of another subaltern group, namely women, whatever their ethnicity. Rosario Castellanos, who called herself, not without irony, a 'mujer que sabe latín' ('woman schooled in Latin'), was one of the first Mexican female intellectuals openly to define herself as a feminist: while always aware of her ambivalent position as a subaltern member of a ruling class, she at all moments maintained an ideological stance according to which both women and Indians were to be seen as undervalued and vulnerable elements within a cruel and unequal social order. In this novel, the female gender finds its main representative in a young girl whose name we are never told, the offspring of a family from the 'ladino' bourgeoisie.

The plot narrates the vicissitudes of the Argüello family, who live in Comitán and own land in Chiapas. It is a traditionalist, conservative kinship unit, whose members maintain the attitudes expected of them regarding both relations with Indians and gender matters. César Argüello, the proud, rigid landowner, and his shadowy wife Zoraida have two children: Mario, the ever-privileged male heir, and the unnamed girl. Events force the family into an external crisis, manifested in the looming agrarian reform and the ever more rebellious attitude of the Indians, which eventually mutates into an internal crisis, with the death in the wake of a mysterious illness of the precious heir Mario. Also narrated in parallel are various events involving members of the extended family and other persons from the white community. The life-experience of the book's true protagonist, the young girl, is marked by her very close emotional bond with her Indian nursemaid or 'nana', which is finally severed in a traumatic parting, as well as by her far less equal relationship with her brother, whose death leaves her scarred within by a damaging sense of guilt.

On the narrative plane, we may, in the strategies employed by the author, note a certain experimentalism which, however, in no way impairs the accessibility or readability of the text. The novel is divided into three sections: in the first and last, the narrating voice is that of the young girl, while in the central part an omniscient narrator speaks. Within this basic framework, there are also passages pertaining to other narrative types, such as the epistolary mode and, for several of the characters, the interior monologue. The result is a polyphonic narrative in which

no voice definitively prevails. Throughout, and despite the harshness of the fictional events, a redemptive role is played by language - by the finely-crafted, aesthetically satisfying Spanish deployed at all points by Rosario, the novelist who was, be it not forgotten, a poetess too. There are frequent, indeed abundant Mexicanisms (not to mention regionalisms peculiar to Chiapas), but these do not detract from what we may call the universal, pan-Spanish character of the Castilian of a writer always firmly in control of her native tongue. By way of example, we may cite, among the many fine passages which could be chosen to represent Rosario's narrative prose, the following (from a landscape description communicated through the third-person narrator): 'Agua donde se miró el mecido ramaje de los árboles. Agua, amansadora lenta de la piedra. Agua devoradora de soles. Todas las aguas no son más que una: ésta, con su amargo presentimiento del mar' ('Water where the swaying boughs of the trees gazed on themselves. Water, slowly wearing down stone. All waters are but one: this one, with its bitter presentiment of the sea' - 293); or, again, these words from a prayer put into the mouth of the Indian nursemaid: 'Vengo a entregarme a mi criatura. Te la entrego. Te la encomiendo. Para que todos los días, como se lleva el cántaro al río para llenarlo, lleves su corazón a la presencia que de sus siervos ha recibido. Para que nunca le falte gratitud' ('I have come to hand over my child to you. I give her to you. I place her in your hands. So that every day, as a jar is brought to the river to be filled, you may bring her heart into the presence which she has known from her servants. So that she may always know gratitude' - 183). In moments such as these, the reader comes face to face with a poetess whom we may legitimately compare in her expressiveness, within the Spanish-language tradition, with that of Emilia Pardo Bazán in the field of poetic prose, or, in poetry as such, Gabriela Mistral or even, to appeal to a more popular register, Violeta Parra.

III

The understanding from outside of the realities of Mexico as reflected in Rosario Castellanos' text has been greatly facilitated by the exemplary editorial work of Dora Sales, who provides a critical apparatus comprising a full and multidimensional introduction, a comprehensive bibliography, and copious notes glossing the novel's numerous Mexicanisms. This apparatus has been enriched by the cooperation of a number of experts on Mexican languages and cultures, including specialists in the Maya language and members of the staff of major national institutions in the shape of the UNAM (Universidad Autónoma de México) and the Colegio de México. Particularly significant here is the direct input offered by Gabriel Guerra Castellanos, Rosario's son. It is common today in the world of translation studies to speak of the translator's visibility, a concept famously developed by Lawrence Venuti, and in this context one might wish to extend that notion to propound the editor's visibility too. This would certainly appear relevant in a case such as the present, where the aim is, in a sense, to carry out, through the editor's activity, a form of 'intra-language translation', rendering a Mexican text fully accessible to readers in Spain. The peninsular reader may share a common language with Rosario Castellanos in general terms, but still stands in need of guidance if the goal is a full and accurate understanding of both the many particularities of the Spanish of Mexico and the cultural circumstances that frame them. In this connection, it appears relevant to note that the editor Dora Sales is also a translator who already has to her credit three excellent translations into Spanish of English-medium novels from India, published with success on the peninsular market. We may conclude that those who edit a text like the present one have a major ethical responsibility vis-à-vis the culture behind the work edited, and, on that basis, further argue that this very responsibility justifies an enhanced visibility for the editor. In this sense, the house practice already operated for 'Letras Hispánicas' may be considered a model to be followed, for the volume under review displays Dora Sales' name with all due prominence, on both cover and title-page.

The bibliography occupies ten pages and includes all of Castellanos' works in their Mexican editions, as well as a generous selection of critical studies (publications and theses) in Spanish and English. The footnotes to the novel text are highly informative and fully achieve their goal of heightening Spanish readers' awareness of the linguistic and cultural details of a world which may often be rather more foreign to them than they realise. Flora and fauna, food and drink, folk traditions, terms from the local languages: the notes shed light on all these phenomena in model fashion. Thus, the reader learns that a 'zopilotl' is a 'ave vulturada de cabeza pelada y pico encorvado, que se alimenta de cadáveres' ('vulture-like bird with a bald pate and curved beak which feeds on carcasses' - 228n), and that 'comiteco' is a 'bebida alcohólica típica de Comitán' ('alcoholic beverage typical of Comitán'), which is made 'al pasar por un alambique pulque fermentado' ('by passing fermented "pulque" through a still'), while the mysterious 'pulque' is, in its turn, 'una bebida que se extrae de una clase de ágave' ('a drink extracted from a type of agave' - 163n). Details may be as important as the whole picture if cultures are to understand each other, and here the foreignness of the Mexican text is fully communicated - and illuminated without being denied - by Dora Sales' enormously careful explicative work. At the end and in the cause of intertextuality, the novel is complemented by the text of 'Primera revelación' ('First revelation', 1950), a short story by Rosario which may usefully be read as a prefigurement of some of the main themes of *Balún Canán*.

The critical and biographical introduction ranges very widely, encompassing such varied aspects of the novel as its historical setting, the underlying social structures (Indians vs. whites), the feminism issue, and the polyphonic and formal dimensions of the narrative, while also paying due attention to Rosario's biography (a full chronology is supplied). Concerning the feminist aspect, in particular, we may note that in the arena of theory Dora Sales bases her positions not on US feminism but on that of the Virginia Woolf of *A Room of One's Own* and of exponents of the French school such as Hélène Cixous and Monique Wittig, placing special emphasis on Cixous' axiom: 'Write your self. Your body must be heard' (43). In this context and in the light of Rosario's own feminist essays, she locates the Mexican writer as a member of a greater 'colectivo de mujeres libres' ('collective of free women' - 39), committed to 'la construcción de una cultura femenina posible' ('the construction of a possible female culture' - 36). Regarding the novel's intercultural dimension, the editor points to the 'neoindigenista' currents that have been identified in Latin American literature and suggests that Castellanos may be located in that framework, by the side of such crucial figures as Miguel Ángel Asturias, the Nobel laureate from next-door Guatemala, or, in Peru, José María Arguedas. It may here be stressed that Dora Sales' own doctoral thesis, awarded in Castellón and recently published (2004) in Switzerland, offers, in Spanish, a remarkable analysis of *Los ríos profundos/Deep Rivers*, Arguedas' fictional masterpiece, considered from a comparative viewpoint in relation to the India-born Vikram Chandra's novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. The analogy with Arguedas, who, as a deeply committed defender of the Quechua culture, was not only a novelist but also a distinguished anthropologist, appears of particular relevance if we recall that, as Dora Sales usefully points out, Rosario herself spent several years working with the Instituto Nacional Indigenista in San Cristóbal de las Casas, as well as criss-crossing Chiapas with the Teatro Petul (thus mirroring, too, the travels through the indigenous zones of Chile that marked the career of another combative woman creator, Violeta Parra).

All in all, the introduction provides a multi-faceted and illuminative portrait of a writer who was at all moments committed to the common good, to a better future - who, as Dora Sales eloquently points out, always protested against 'una situación injusta que le viene dada y de la que ella, sin querer, forma parte' ('an unjust state of things which was imposed on her and of which she was a part against her will' - 55). In addition, it seems desirable to stress a particular characteristic of this introduction, namely the especially fine symbiosis created in it between text and commentary, novelist and editor. Dora Sales has successfully absorbed the prose style of

Rosario Castellanos, expressing herself with a fluidity and affectivity that come very close to the aesthetic charm and superb Castilian of the Mexican writer herself. As an example of this laudable synergy, we may quote the expressive words with which the editor concludes her presentation - words which impress, not only through their emotional charge but also through their stylistic power, achieving a resonance and rhythmical harmony that are such that they could have been written by Rosario Castellanos herself. Dora Sales finds in Rosario 'una voz contemporánea que se actualiza de manera asombrosa, que sigue tan vigente hoy como lo estuvo en su momento, ayudando a socavar certezas instauradas por las infinitas redes de poder, manteniendo alerta la capacidad de reflexión crítica y de revisión de patrones establecidos, recordando que la libertad, que para ser auténtica tiene que mostrarse respetuosa con las libertades de los demás, es el derecho humano más precioso' ('a contemporary voice of astonishing relevance to our time, which speaks to us as closely now as it did then, helping undermine certainties installed by the infinite networks of power, keeping alive the capacity to think critically and rewrite established standards, remembering that freedom, which is only truly itself if it respects the freedoms of others, is the most precious of human rights' - 113).

IV

As we have seen, Castellanos' narrative maps out the course of two sets of relationships, both conflictive and all but intractable, namely those between indigenous and white communities, and between women and men. To take the ethnic conflict first, we have to admit that from the pages of this book it is hard to trace a way out of the dilemma. Certainly, from an ethnoliterary vantage point, Rosario offers a number of 'anthropological' details about the Indians' lives, including their courtship and marriage customs. We learn that the fiancé has to work a whole year for his bride-to-be's parents, and that she has to do the same for his family while neither is allowed to set eyes on the other for even the briefest instant. However, in practice intercultural communication seems inevitably to fail. The overwhelming majority of the 'ladino' characters have contempt for Indians in their entrails. César, the landowner, sees the government's demand that he educate his subalterns as a pointless imposition. He therefore gives the position of schoolmaster to his illegitimate son Ernesto, who knows not a word of the local language: the scene in which Ernesto 'teaches' his pupils reading out texts from a popular almanac, in a Spanish which means nothing to them, comes over as the direst parody of education. For her part, Zoraida, despite her own subordinated condition, has totally internalised the ideology of her ethnic group and ruling class, and, despising the Indians quite as viscerally as her husband, believes all they deserve is a sound whipping. Meanwhile, the members of the indigenous community are, on their side, in a state of permanent effervescence from which they are unable to achieve any real change. They fight in vain for a school worthy of the name; they set fire to the fields without managing to get control of the farm; and Juana, the spouse of their stern leader Felipe, seems to have internalised the social and ethnic hierarchies no less deeply than her oppressor Zoraida. With things standing like this, the narrator declares: 'Los demás callaron abatiendo los ojos como para no ver la choza que los amparaba (…) Y cuando el granizo apedrea el techo de paja lo rompe. Porque esto es todo lo que el indio puede hacer cuando la voluntad del blanco no lo respalda' ('The others stayed silent, lowering their eyes as if not to see the hut that was their shelter (…) And when hail batters the straw roof it breaks it. For this is all the Indian can do when the white man will not support him' - 216). The sole glimpse of a possible real transcultural communication between the two opposed groups is vouchsafed by the affective link, of great depth but too utopian to last, that weaves itself between Zoraida's daughter and her native 'nursemaid'. For the rest, today's readers may legitimately sense in the interethnic relations portrayed by Castellanos the early stirrings of the tormented, unresolved conflict that is still rife in the Chiapas of our twenty-first century. The same lack of communication appears in another text by Rosario, the short story 'El don rechazado' ('The Rejected Gift'), in which an indigenous woman refuses to accept the apparent generosity of a naïve anthropologist. Dora Sales sums up the problem with all clarity: 'Las

consecuencias de la incomunicación cultural son devastadoras' ('The consequences of non-communication between cultures are disastrous' - 32).

If the ethnic barriers appear all but insuperable, the gender gap scarcely fares better. As seen above, if Zoraida (of the dominant class and ethnic group) and Juana (of the dominated ethnic group and class) have something in common it is that, as married women both, they find it unthinkable to question their subaltern condition. Both live it, rather, as a fatality: for Juana infertility is an irreparable disaster, while for Zoraida the death of her male child is no less a catastrophe. Meanwhile, Castellanos' acute gaze also fixes on a different segment of the female world, that of the single woman. The plight of the spinster (or old maid) in traditional Mexican society was a theme she explored elsewhere, in a short story such as 'Los convidados de agosto' ('The August Guests') and in various poems, of which we may take as representative 'Jornada de la soltera' ('The Spinster's Day'): 'Da vergüenza estar sola. El día entero / arde un rubor terrible en su mejilla' ('It is shameful to be alone. All day long / a terrible blush burns on her cheek'). *Balún Canán* has a number of spinster characters, and in all cases their lives end up as blind alleys. The neighbour Amalia becomes a religious bigot, the bearer of a sterile and dogmatic Catholicism. The destiny of Aunt Francisca, who runs her own farm, might appear kinder, but she winds up demented; while her sister Matilde, she too unmarried, drifts through an ill-fated episode with the illegitimate son Ernesto into a similar breakdown of her personality, and finally disappears, on the run to an unknown destination. These women, in revolt yet fatally unstable, may recall Sierva María in García Márquez's *Del Amor y Otros Demonios/Of Love and Other Demons*, or the ill-starredly rebellious Reinerie in another of Rosario's stories, 'Vals capricho' ('Capricious Waltz')'. Whatever happens, female insurgency does not appear as a redemptive act in itself, and may even lead to psychological and social obliteration.

If things are so harsh for the women of Mexico, the reader may ask whether some redemptive role will fall in the end to the nameless girl child who is the narrator of the novel's first and third parts. Certainly, she finds almost the only human warmth she encounters in the relationship with the Indian 'nana'; but the ethnic tensions finally lead her mother to dispense with the woman's services. For an emblem of a bond that was as beautiful as it was fragile, there remain the tiny stones that the girl offers as a gift to a nursemaid who, when thrown out of the house, does not stop to take them with her. At the end, after the death of her brother and the irrational sense of guilt it provokes in her, the girl seems all but broken: 'es mi culpa la que se está pudriendo en el fondo de ese cajón' ('rotting at the bottom of that coffin lies my own guilt' - 367). We may here recall a parallel situation in a contemporary novel from India, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande, where the main female character suffers from a similar guilt syndrome in the wake of her brother's death. However, in Deshpande the event is told at the beginning of the book, not the end, and in *Balún Canán* it feels as if there is no way out for those who have had the misfortune, as a pitiless society sees it, to be born female.

V

For all the harshness of the ending, what we know of Rosario Castellanos' life suggests that she must surely have perceived some glimpse of light for the women of her country. We may here wish to ask: what will happen to the girl narrator? Will she become a fighting woman, like her creator and like some of the female characters who populate her poems? One might invoke the woman writer who appears in a poem like 'Autorretrato' ('Self-Portrait'): 'Escribo este poema. Y otro. Y otros. Y otros. / Hablo desde una cátedra' ('I write this poem. And another. And another. And more. / I speak from the chair'); or, indeed, the declared lesbian of 'Kinsey Report', who dares speak of the male gender: 'A los indispensables (como ellos se creen) / los puede usted echar a la basura / como hicimos nosotras' ('As for those who think we can't live without them / you can trash them / as she and I have done'). Models could equally be found in the more remote

Mexican past, from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (another woman quite literally 'schooled in Latin') to Ixchel, the powerful Mayan goddess who presides over pregnancy, childbirth and women's healing skills. Or will the girl end up repeating the fate of her long-suffering mother Zoraida?

If there is anything that creates the hope that it will not be like that, it is, beyond doubt, the advanced capacity for empathy that is always present in Rosario's writing. The novelist lets her characters speak and registers their sufferings - of Indians and of women - without sentimentalisms and without retreating into facile victimology. She shows how the subaltern can internalise their oppression and become accomplices in their own plight; she reaches under the skin of people whose ideas and world-view she does not share. Castellanos' narrative is a remarkable example of literature as dialogue, as empathy; and it is notable in this connection how Dora Sales' outstanding editorial work succeeds, in deeply committed fashion, in communicating the otherness of Mexico to a Spanish readership, creating a symbiotic relationship between author and commentator which greatly facilitates the effort of intercultural dialogue that reading this novel requires. The reader of this edition of *Balún Canán* will certainly gain a heightened awareness of the realities of Mexico, discovering, through this exceptional narrative, the voice of Rosario Castellanos - of that 'woman schooled in Latin' who was the ambassador of Mexico, of Chiapas and of her country's womenfolk.

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Note 1: *Balún Canán* has been translated into English as *The Nine Guardians* (trans. Irene Nicholson, New York: Vanguard Press, 1959); all quotations from the novel translated into English in the present review are, however, my own responsibility. The quotations from Rosario Castellanos' poems are taken from the excellent anthology *Meditación en el umbral* (*Meditation on the Threshold*), edited by Julian Palley with a prologue by Elena Poniatowska (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985); anthologies exist in English, but the extracts translated are, again, my own versions.

Note 2: The text by José Saramago cited (original in Spanish) may be found on Usenet in the newsgroup <misc.activism.progressive> (17 July 1998) - '"Chiapas"': texto de José Saramago leído por Salvador Távora en la rueda de prensa del 4 de junio 1998 en Sevilla presentando la Campaña Urgente "Refugiados de Chiapas"' ('"Chiapas"': text by José Saramago read out by Salvador Távora at the press conference held on 4 June 1998 in Seville introducing the Urgent Campaign for Chiapas Refugees').