

El viaje de Ulises es el paradigma del retorno. La vuelta a casa. Un retorno implica la existencia de, por lo menos, dos elementos. Un territorio adónde volver, y alguien que espera. – Esther Andradi, *Babel y sus jardines: la escritura en tránsito*

Y yo que me creía tan desligada me he dado cuenta de cómo extraño todo, hasta las hojas de los árboles tiradas en el suelo, ahora en otoño. Y de Chiapas, tal vez más todavía, y del rancho. A veces me entra una nostalgia pero de esas buenas, casi ya como asfixia, con opresión real, física, de no poder respirar. – Rosario Castellanos, *Cartas a Ricardo*

### **The History of the Trip**

In the fall of 1950, Rosario Castellanos travelled with her friend, Dolores Castro, to Spain on the S.S. Argentina, a ship under an Italian flag. The two women traveled third class and they both travelled with their portable typewriters. They had graduated from the UNAM, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, earlier that year and Castellanos had been awarded a postdoctoral fellowship by the Institute of Spanish Culture. In Spain, Castellanos and Castro studied art history, philosophy, and poetry at the Complutense University in Madrid. Included in Castellanos' collection of letters, *Cartas a Ricardo [Letters to Ricardo]* (1994), are some forty letters that Castellanos wrote from aboard the S.S. Argentina, from Spain and France, Italy, and Austria to Ricardo Guerra Tejada in Mexico.

Once in Madrid, Castellanos and Castro boarded at a women's residence and in their year in Europe, the two women travelled extensively. They visited cities relatively near to Madrid such as Salamanca, Toledo, and Segovia; they visited León and the region of Castile; they went to Valladolid and Ávila where Castellanos wrote that they saw “los sitios donde [Santa Teresa] tuvo sus éxtasis” (110) and they travelled by train to Andalusia – the traditional tourist route – stopping at Córdoba, Seville, and Granada. On the break from classes at Christmas, they went by train to Paris, stopping off at San Sebastian.

### **Writing from the Ship**

The S.S. Argentina left from the Mexican port city of Veracruz. The trip took approximately three weeks. Before crossing the Atlantic, the ship made three stops: the first in Cartagena, Colombia; the second the at the island of Curacao and the third in El Guairá, Venezuela. After crossing the Atlantic, the ship stopped at Tenerife before arriving at Barcelona where Castro and Castellanos disembarked. At each of these ports, Castellanos mailed letters to Ricardo Guerra. In her first letter, sent from Cartagena, she included a portrait of herself.<sup>1</sup>

Mary Favret in *Romantic Correspondence: Women, politics and the fiction of letters* when writing of Jane Austen's letters, speaks of the emphasis on the appearance of the letter. "The letters themselves are witness ... to the expectations of the age...We might infer that the letter-writer revealed as much in the appearance as in the contents of a missive – and perhaps more" (135). I wish to emphasize the regularity with which Castellanos wrote Ricardo Guerra when she travelled to Europe and the lack of casualness which she brought to the act of mailing her letters. In the letters that Castellanos wrote to Ricardo Guerra from the ship, she often opens with the logistics of where she can mail him her letters and the details of each port where she meets with greater or lesser restrictions. For instance, this in a letter dated October 9, 1950: "¿Ha recogido usted mis cartas anteriores? Le puse una en Cartagena (mejor dicho, dos), y otra en La Guaira y una tarjeta postal de allí mismo" (*Cartas* 51).

In the consistency with which Castellanos writes and mails her letters and the focus she places on their delivery, she creates a trail of objects, a line of documents that repeatedly state her alliance to Guerra, publicly. Castellanos posts a letter, and it travels to Guerra's residence in Mexico City. Just as the "I" in the letters no longer remains a private person once the letter is

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<sup>1</sup> S.S. Argentina, October 3, 1950: "Desde Cartagena le envié dos cartas y sendos retratos, ¿los recibió usted?" (*Cartas* 44).

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sent out, so, too, does the letter as a document no longer remain private once it enters into circulation through various international postal systems (Favret 132).

### **Travel and the fluidity of Identity**

Y creo que ahora nunca sabré estarme quieta en mi casa, que siempre querrá estar caminando, yéndose a algún parte, y en analizando esto me doy cuenta de que lo que busco al través de esto no es tanto aprender cosas ni miro gentes y paisajes nuevos, sino olvidar que existo. (*Cartas* 100)

An image that reappears several times in Castellanos's letters is one of being looked at under a microscope. She uses this image in her first letter to Ricardo from the S.S. Argentina: "Pero no me siento, bajo tu mirada, como bajo la mirada de los demás, como un insecto bajo un microscopio..." (38). When traveling, *no estarme quieta en mi casa*, Castellanos frees herself from *la mirada de los demás*. She exists in an in-between place. As Parra Pazcano posits when writing of Castellanos's later time in Israel: "se encuentran en un estadio intermediario; es decir, no pertenecen o no se encuentran en un solo sitio" (784). Travelling brings with it the opportunity to escape a fixed identity. In Castellanos's case, travel enables her to escape a world where she would be of the age where she should be married with as she calls it in *Rito de iniciación*, the title of señora.

Castellanos proposes to Ricardo that with him she does not feel like how she does with others, as if she were under a microscope, but also by leaving him, she avoids further scrutiny. She becomes the subject, not the object. In so doing, she can write a place for herself, outside of masculine autobiography. And the people who are scrutinizing her are left on the shore.

In the beginning of Castellanos's third novel, *Rito de iniciación*, Castellanos employs an image of adults examining and judging the young protagonist, Cecilia Rojas, making calculations on where she should be, that is to say she should be at the place where she leaves behind the faces of her childhood to choose a definitive face of adulthood.

As Barbara Johnson posits in her essay on Mary Shelley: "The monstrousness of selfhood is intimately embedded with the question of female autobiography." (190) In her letters from Spain, Castellanos often refers to herself as a monster. In a letter from Madrid, she tells Ricardo that she has returned to her play, *Tablero de damas*: "Estoy completamente obsesionada en esto. No puedo pensar en otra cosa, no entiendo nada de lo que me dicen, me siento incómoda en todas partes y sólo quisiera escribir. Si pudiera, sería feliz. Pero soy *monstrua*. No puedo." (*Cartas* 143) Like Johnson says, the monster appears in female autobiography with the impossibility for the female autobiographer "in conforming to a female ideal, which is largely a fantasy of the masculine, not the feminine imagination." (190)

Elena Poniatowska states in the prologue to *Cartas a Ricardo* that: "Monstruo es una palabra frecuente en sus cartas, las más de las veces atribuida a sí misma. ¿Sería una palabra de la época, así como el "grrrrrr" de las tiras cómicas para señalar su enojo? Monstruo, monstrua, monstruitos." (14).

Castellanos alternatively uses the masculine and feminine form of the word "monster." When she is talking about herself and her writing, she is a monster. In the woman obsessed by her play, she is not fully human, nor she is fully feminine. "Monstrua" is not a word of the times but, as Barbara Johnson argues, the image of the monster is fundamental to women's autobiography. How does Castellanos escape but through travel, by not, as she says, "quedarme quieta en mi casa?" By not staying quietly at home.

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Being in two places at once: Europe and America.

*Todo viaje es, en principio, dislocación, exilio, desplazamiento” (La viajera 9)*

*Hemos estado viendo la costa de Africa, muy lejos” (Cartas 62).*

Castellanos’s family owned lands in Chiapas, lands, which on the death of her parents, as the only heir, she inherited. Castellanos’s life, before she reached the age of 24, the age she would have been when leaving for Spain, was marked by displacement and death. The death of her only brother, Marío Benjamín at age seven, and both of her parents when she was twenty-three. With the family’s migration in Mexico from the periphery, in the very southernmost region of the country, to the urban center, Castellanos’s life was also marked by cultural and linguistic displacement: from Comitán, to one of her family’s estates where the Indigenous people were descendants of Mayans who spoke Tzotzil and Tzeltal, to Mexico City.

In a letter to Ricardo dated January 18, 1951 from Madrid, Castellanos tells Ricardo about her recent trip to Paris:

Fuimos al Museo del Hombre y yo quería llorar toda feliz y triste porque en una de sus vitrinas de arte precolombino había lanzas y vestidos de los lacandones y chamulas<sup>2</sup> y retratos de sus chozas. Fíjese, ya no era siquiera México cuyo recuerdo me es más o menos soportable. Sino Chiapas, como quien dice *la mera entraña de uno*. (Cartas 97)

Travel creates the condition of a double life: the life that one has left behind and the new one. Some forty years earlier another young Latin American woman, who “lleva[ba] el viaje en su sangre” (*La viajera*, 11) the Argentinean Victoria Ocampo (1890 – 1979) in a letter to Delfina Bunge<sup>3</sup> dated December 8, 1908, also wrote from Paris of her emotional ties to her own region in Latin America:

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<sup>2</sup> Lacandones y Chamulas: Indigenous people of Mayan descent who generally live in Southern Chiapas

<sup>3</sup> Delfina Bunge (1881 – 1952) Argentinean poet and essayist.

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Ahora extraño el sol, el cielo de mi tierra. Por primera vez comprendo que la tierra donde hemos nacido nos tiene atados. Quiero a América. Cuando pienso en el jardín de San Isidro, en sus flores (que están floreciendo en este mes), ¡qué nostalgia!

Me gusta París. Pero te escribo para hablarte de mis nostalgias de Buenos Aires...pues parecería que no quiero las cosas sino después de haberlas perdido. He pasado mi vida maldiciendo el presente y acariciando el pasado y el porvenir. (Ocampo 53)

### **The departure**

After their classes at the university have ended and the women's residence has closed, Castro and Castellanos rented a room in a pension in Madrid. They were waiting for news from Ricardo to tell them if he was going to come to Europe. When Castellanos learned Ricardo would not be coming, the two women continued with their plans. Included in these plans was to visit Gabriela Mistral in Italy. Before leaving Madrid, Castellanos arranged to send her typewriter back to Mexico: "Ésta es, creo yo, la última carta que le escribo en mi máquina. Porque mañana vendrán por ella los hombre de la Agencia Cook y la enviarán a México, adonde llegará antes que yo."  
“(*Cartas* 161)

After leaving Madrid, Castro and Castellanos travelled to Barcelona by train, from Barcelona to Ventimiglia on the French border; they travelled across France to Italy; in Italy they visited Genova, Rapallo, Pisa, Roma, spending a week in Naples at the residence of Gabriela Mistral. They travelled by car to Siena. From Naples, they travelled to Pompey, Capri, Roma, Sienna – from Sienna to Florence, Perugia, Assis, Rimini, Ravenna, Venice, Salzburg, and Vienna, to Germany and Holland. On October 5th, 1951, they took a boat leaving from the port of Rotterdam to New York, where they spent five days and then sailed to Mexico to arrive

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approximately October 25th, 1951. Castellanos sent the last letter from Madrid, with the information about her typewriter, followed by five more letters from Naples and Rome. The last letter she wrote from Europe is dated September 26, 1951 from Vienna, Austria. In this letter, Castellanos after telling Guerra that they have bought two return tickets, says: “Ya le contaré todo a nuestra llegada.” And she follows with a brief summary of their trip: “Nos han pasado miles de cosas. Hemos conocido gente muy suave y muy buena. Hemos pasado muchos aprietos, hemos visto muchas cosas y nos hemos convencido que somos unas mensas y no sabemos nada” (169). As the arc of a narrative, the story has come to an end. The next letter in *Cartas a Ricardo* dated December 15, 1951 is from Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas. Missing are any letters from the remainder of Castellanos’s trip in Europe, crossing the Atlantic, her stay in New York and the return by ship to Mexico. When Castellanos writes of sending her typewriter back to Mexico stating it will probably arrive before she does, she has divided her two selves with the typewriter representing one self. The grounds for relinquishing the typewriter would be material ones, the difficulty of travelling around Europe with a manual typewriter, but when she relinquishes the typewriter, she relinquishes her writerly self. The narrative can only be sustained on the way out. The writing inspired by the departure is no longer sustainable with the creation of the “I” which the departure permitted. The story ends.

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