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Celestina as *Terra Nostra*

One of the more striking features of the opening pages of *Terra Nostra* is the unexplained appearance, in the role of the archetypal Woman associated with an influx of new life, of a character named Celestina. For the reader who is at all familiar with Spanish literature this constitutes an anomaly of the first magnitude, simply because the Celestina created by Fernando de Rojas in 1499 is generally thought of as a promoter, not of life, but of sterility, for she not only engages in the merchandising of sexual pleasure and the attendant avoidance of procreation, but practices witchcraft and deals with the dead. Yet if there is any well established point in the criticism of *La Celestina* it is that the work is fraught with ambiguity. One simply does not know what attitude toward his central character Rojas *means* to convey, if indeed that point is of any importance, since this powerful woman quickly took possession of the book that its author had named *La comedia de Calixto y Melibea*, permanently affixing her own name to the title page in place of those of the characters Rojas considered the central ones.

Rojas clearly opened up Pandora's Box, and the first item to emerge was the Earth Mother, who, like everything else from the box, is out of the control of the one opening it. For one thing, as Earth Mother she simply cannot be portrayed in totally negative terms; she is the goddess of fertility, from whom all life springs. The problem is that all life forms return to her in death as well, and she, like the closely-related moon, is capricious and can be dominated by her negative aspect. Carlos Fuentes, for his part, has simply set aside the traditional Christian viewpoint on the Rojas character and accepted her as having been a fundamentally positive figure in her youth, whose old age has left her fearful, embittered and cynical. Although her profession has nothing directly to do with the *procreation* of life, Fuentes views it, as practiced in her youth, as involving the *exaltation* of life, as she promotes the free and guiltless practice of love. Later on, unable to enjoy it herself except vicariously, she immerses herself increasingly in the negative aspects of life, her actions leading ultimately to a series of gruesome deaths, her own being the first of them. Presumably the crux of the problem is the lack of any possibility of her return to her youth and a positive influence in the world.

It is at this point that Fuentes begins the construction of his Celestina, basing her on the theory that since the Earth Mother archetype is always with us, so is there always one incarnation or another of it in action in the historical process. For dramatic effect he has chosen a more or less mechanical means of passing on that identity from an aging Celestina to a young girl, involving the magical transfer of a snake tattoo from the lips of the former to those of the latter. It is stated on various occasions that the tattoos represent memory, so that their recipient comes into

possession of all the experiences of the archetypal Celestina, presumably since the beginning of all things, while the donor forgets it all, to become only an old woman. Thus there is an unbroken chain of individual Celestinas through history, each representing the eternal Celestina for a time, and one of them is able to tell el Señor—himself one of many incarnations of the eternal tyrant, having received that identity from his father and ultimately from Tiberius Caesar—that she is and is not the Celestina he used to know. That is, as archetypal figure she is but as individual she is not. Later he is to deal with the old hag who corresponds to Rojas' character; she too is and is not the Celestina he used to know, for while she is the woman with whom he had dealings, what might be called her cosmic identity has been passed on to the younger person. The old woman is now free to exhibit fully the negative characteristics of the Earth Mother, so that she is perfectly at home in aiding the tyrant in neutralizing the hero.

One question that emerges from this situation is, if Celestina is something of an Earth Mother-figure, how does she relate to the book's title and frequently-expressed motif, *Terra Nostra*? The question gains relevance in the light of the fact that in some mysterious way the earth itself, or the cosmos as a whole, seems to be initiating and guiding the processes leading to final renewal.[1] It should be worthwhile investigating Celestina's role in the novel and her relationship to the earth.

One of the more obvious mythic themes incorporated by Fuentes into the work is that of Penelope's twenty-year wait for Odysseus. When Ludovico departs with the three young boys for a tour of the Mediterranean world, Celestina states that she will meet them at the Cabo de los Desastres after twenty years have passed. She also tells Polo Febo on the bridge in Paris that she has been waiting for him, since they had made a date in another time and place to meet there. Near the end of the text, too, there is seen an Indian woman with Celestina's tattooed lips, who sits weaving and undoing a mask as she waits for a man.[2] The point to note is Fuentes' use of the universal image of a woman waiting at the Center of the cosmos for the returning hero while representing in herself the spiritual essence of that threatened Center, for she and her destiny are inextricably bound up with that of the geographical location.

Through most of the text the threatened Center is located in El Escorial, the site where the tyrant has constructed a palace in the form of St. Lawrence's torture grid on the spot where an eternal spring had been. It is here that Fuentes toys with the Triple Goddess theme, for in addition to Celestina's presence in the palace there are the Dama Loca and La Señora, the first loosely based on the historical Juana la Loca and the second even more loosely on Queen Elizabeth I of England. They share with Celestina an obsession with producing an heir to the throne of *Terra Nostra*, conceived at first as Spain and later broadened to include the New World and finally the world at large. In her desperation the Dama Loca picks up one of the youths who appear on the Cabo de los Desastres and molds his

features to the appearance of the first El Señor of the work. He comes to be known as the Idiot Prince and ends his life in bed with the dwarf Barbarica. The Dama Loca's desire to continue a hopelessly corrupt line, to say nothing of her demented preoccupation with death, results in failure.

La Señora, like Celestina, is inclined to use witchcraft to attain her ends. Believing in the superstition that the proper care of a mandrake growing at a place of execution will produce another man, she buries one in the sand of her room. It has been taken from the ground where El Señor burned Miguel de la Vida, the solar figure who represents Spain's potential salvation in the melding of the strengths of the three "peoples of the Book," Christians, Jews and Muslims. Her attempt has two results: a grotesque homunculus who emerges from the mandrake, probably representing the pitiful remains of the *convivencia* of Alfonso el Sabio's day, and her belief that the hero she seeks is to be found at the Cabo de los Desastres. The one that she brings from there to the palace, ironically, appears to be her own son by the first El Señor. He becomes known as Iohannes Agrippa, and engages in feverish sexual activity with La Señora, as Fuentes' hero of many faces even assumes the mask of Oedipus with his mother the queen for a time.

Eventually, however, Juan departs to play the role of Don Juan in the palace at large, finally escaping El Señor's clutches to travel to the New World and promote his version of sexual liberation there. La Señora is reduced to a pitiful attempt to continue the royal line by assembling a composite ruler from the remains of her husband's ancestors. In the attempt she avails herself of occult practices, for this is Fuentes' way of uniting all things to bring about renewal; even Satan must be brought into the process, and Celestina at one point makes a pact with him. He tells her,

> No llores, mujer. Hay quien se apiade de ti. Ya sabes lo que el mundo te ofrece si obedeces la ley de Dios y en recompensa sufres la crueldad de los hombres. Piensa que en otro tiempo la mujer fue diosa. Lo fue porque era dueña de una sabiduría más profunda. Sabía la antigua sabia que nada es como aparenta ser y que detrás de todas las apariencias hay un secreto que a la vez las niega y las completa. Los hombres no podían dominar al mundo mientras las mujeres supieran estos secretos. Se unieron para despojarlas de dignidad, sacerdocio, privilegio; mutilaron y enmendaron los antiguos textos que reconocían el carácter andrógino de la primera Divinidad, suprimieron la mención de la esposa de Yavé, cambiaron las escrituras para ocultar la verdad: el primer ser creado era a la vez masculino y femenino, hecho a imagen y semejanza de la Divinidad que unía ambos sexos (pp. 531–32).

The alliance is of no effect in La Señora's case, however, and all that she is able to accomplish is an accentuation of the grotesque, macabre element that has contaminated the royal line in the first place, as the composite

ruler is set up in the throne room to be animated only by the voice of the homunculus, screaming, "¡Muerte a la inteligencia!' (p. 747). La Señora eventually departs to become Queen Elizabeth I of England (the "Virgin Queen"!) and combat Spain's policies from there, while the Dama Loca, a quadruple amputee but alive nonetheless, finds her niche in the chapel that her son has dedicated to death, and remains there even when all believe her to be dead.

Nevertheless these two, along with Celestina, have attempted to play the role of the Triple goddess who is so often associated with the birth or resurrection of a savior (even the male-oriented Christian faith having three women as witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, Mark 16.1). Each has instinctively gone to the Cabo de los Desastres and recovered one of the youths who have completed their twenty-year voyage of initiation and returned to the threatened Center. None of them is successful in achieving renewal through the hero at that time. Even Celestina, who rescues the Pilgrim, only manages to set in motion the forces that bring into being a highly imperfect New World. Yet they have at least initiated the process that is to lead to the final renewal at the end of the millennium, in that Don Juan escapes with the liberated nun who is so suspiciously similar to Sor Juana, so that the two of them may begin breaking the stranglehold of death-oriented religion there, and the Pilgrim dies in the sea so that he may emerge from the waters to keep his appointment with Celestina in Paris in 1999.

As the struggle continues, Celestina becomes involved in the myth of Persephone in several of its forms. In the youths' Mediterranean experience they are given advice on a beach by a woman with the usual tattooed lips. As she walks away, one of the youths sees her being followed by a herd of swine (p. 558). The allusion may be general; it may only recall that the moon goddesses of several cultures from ancient Iberia to the South Pacific are associated with pigs on account of the resemblance of their tusks to the crescent moon. Robert Graves even believes that the Spanish word "cerdo" (which is used here) is related to the name Cerdo, Cerridwen or Caerdmon, a goddess of Iberia accompanied by the animal in question.[3] Or this scene may recall the guidance given by Circe to Odysseus after she had changed his men into swine, since the youths are engaged in a twenty-year Mediterranean odyssey. But it is also possible that it specifically recalls an obscure segment of the story of Persephone, which states that as she tumbled into the underworld a herd of swine followed her into the abyss. It is even possible that all these are in view, of course.

The fact is that Celestina and her unnamed counterparts of the tattooed lips are associated in other ways as well with Persephone, the goddess of vegetation who is *in the earth*. As a young girl she fills dolls with grain, which is related to Ceres, Persephone's mother. It is stated in this context that flour is the color of the moon and contains the hidden goddess of all

the ages (p. 532). On one occasion El Señor's lackey Guzmán states, "Si el Señor quiere encontrar en algún lado al demonio, encuéntrelo en la horrenda conjugación de la mujer y el mundo" (p. 325). It would appear, as stated earlier, that this is indeed the case; the real threat to El Señor's reign of death and darkness, his attempt to suppress the exuberant fertility of the earth, is on the part of the Earth Mother, *Terra Nostra*, incarnate in Celestina—the conjugation of Woman and world, for it is stated shortly thereafter that nature and woman are similar (p. 363). Furthermore, when Celestina has brought the Pilgrim into the palace he finds a stalk of wheat growing from the stone.

Celestina by another name—that is, the woman with tattooed lips—is viewed in still another setting reminiscent of Persephone, when the Pilgrim descends to the underworld in Mexico and encounters the Butterfly Lady whom he has previously met in a more positive setting. Here she is the goddess of the underworld, wife of the Lord of the infernal regions, once again the goddess in the earth. In this case her negative aspect is in view, for with her consort she is engaged in blocking the rebirth of the people. Here she must be defeated by the hero, since the Earth Mother cannot be viewed as a wholly life-enhancing figure, and often appears, as does the Indian goddess Kali, as the promoter of death. Her presence, like that of the moon, can portend fertility or doom.

One of the more fascinating discrepancies in the mythologies of the ancient world is that between the Minoan and Hebrew interpretations of the motif of the woman, the tree and the serpent, and illustrates this dual aspect of Woman, each culture essentially having laid hold of one pole. On the island of Crete the woman is the goddess, the tree is the Tree of Life, and the serpent represents the perpetual renewal of life as well. In the early chapters of Genesis, in contrast, the tree is that of the knowledge of (or acquaintance with) good and evil, access to the Tree of Life being dependent upon the avoidance of this one; the serpent is the agent of the *loss* of eternal life; and the woman is about to be duped into becoming mortal and bringing death to her race. Later the Pharisees and then the Christians would present immortality as a resurrection of the body at the conclusion of the linear unfolding of the ages, having rejected the cyclical form implicit in the serpent's ability to shed his skin. It is the latter, however, which is emphasized by Fuentes throughout *Terra Nostra*. One of the oft-repeated themes of the work is that nothing ever really dies, but that everything only reappears in another form in some other time and place. Thus Christ, Agrippa and the slave Clemens fail in Tiberius' time, only to be reborn in that of El Señor to make another attempt as the triple hero, and finally reappear in 1999 as Polo Febo to complete their task and that of all heroes who have struggled to assert the principle of life over that of death. With Celestina the process involves a continuity rather than occasional reappearances, for she is in a sense the bearer of that continuity, while the hero need only reappear from time to time to pour new power aggressively into the system.

Rather than allow the serpent to regain the fundamentally positive value it had in the Minoan civilization while leaving Satan in his role as the totally negative destroyer, Fuentes has chosen to avoid the Judaeo-Christian tradition altogether and treat the devil as the destroyer whose destructiveness can be directed against the structures that promote death rather than life. Thus the young Celestina is able to learn the nature of the cosmos from him, and even make a pact with him, without vitiating the process of exalting life. Placing it in existential terms, one might say that Satan's power is destructive, but that as such it may be turned against the structures of nonbeing so that Being may then be re-established, for destruction is not always the tool of nonbeing. Celestina's action may even be viewed as something of a redemption of Eve, for in her encounter with the serpent Celestina is able to promote life, she does gain the wisdom promised to Eve, and one of her offspring (the Pilgrim) does bruise the heel of the negative, death-dealing image of Satan presented in Genesis. This negative image appears in Tiberius' vision of the tyrant as a serpent devoured by ants, as well as in El Señor's flash of insight to the effect that his palace is a serpent.

One of the revelations of Satan to Celestina is that of the androgynous nature of the first god and the first created being, which again looks back to Genesis (as well as many other creation stories) in its second assertion, and forward to the events of the end of the novel. Adam is depicted in Genesis as an androgynous being before Eve is drawn from his side, and Fuentes brings his Eve-figure and his redeemer-figure (Christ as the Second Adam) back into hermaphroditic form after the decisive battle between life and death. Once again the connection is made between Woman and the earth, for the latter is the meaning of "Adam": red, earth, mankind; and it is from Adam that Eve emerges. Guzmán's fear of the horrible conjunction of woman and the earth is proven to be justified at this point as well.

In this connection Fuentes returns yet once more to Eden in reviving the memory of that hazy and mysterious sixteenth century sect known as the Adamites. They may never have existed, but that is of no importance in his work, for it seems to be the will of the people, as expressed in the word, that confers reality upon an entity. Fuentes conceives his Adamites as struggling for a return to Eden to set things right—to return to the origins of human sexuality in order to free it from the shackles of guilt and conflict. In this case too the return to origins is successful, for those principles are established at the end of the work as well.

According to the ideology of this novel, the devil's power is circular (p. 10); as developed throughout the novel, this means that time constantly returns to the Instant of love (p. 738). The concept is perhaps best expounded by reference to Paul Tillich's oft-reiterated definition of love as the longing for reunion of that which has been separated. All of *Terra Nostra* might be subsumed under that definition, since it consists of a rewriting of the history of two millennia to cause all the events in them to

issue in a climactic reunion of hero and goddess, separated perhaps in Adam and Eve—whose reunion in the act of love was flawed—in order to begin again with a new concept of life and love. As has been stated, the biblical Adam is a hermaphroditic figure, since it is his feminine component which is drawn from him to become Eve. Following this movement from unity to diversity, sexual union is possible and the world may be populated. Fuentes, however, has a slightly different outlook, for his "Third Age of Mankind" begins with a strange sort of sexuality within the androgynous being that Celestina and Polo Febo have become —so great is his desire to avoid the possibility of conflict inherent in a situation where two persons confront one another.

As indicated, Celestina is more of the nature of the Minoan goddess than the first woman of Genesis, who brings death even though her name means "life," and that goddess of Crete is derived from the Middle Eastern goddess Ishtar. For all the railing of the Old Testament prophets against the latter, it appears that the dove that announces salvation and the advent of a new world to Noah is taken from the Mesopotamian story in which Ishtar, whose symbol is the dover, both causes the Great Flood and saves a man from it in her crescent moon boat. Thus as Celestina is engaged in the act of a devouring female in sending Polo Febo off to his death by drowning, a light that resembles a dove descends to her forehead (p. 35), for she, like Ishtar, will also be present—at the Cabo de los Desastres—to rescue him from a boat and initiate the process of building a new world. In fact, in Paris a few months after the drowning incident, she is to witness the total destruction of the old world and take the initiative in rebuilding it.

A moon goddess such as Ishtar always demands human sacrifice in order that she might exercise her powers on human blood to produce new life, since in ancient thought blood *is* life (as witness the desperate attempt of the shades of *The Odyssey* to gain access to the blood of Odysseus' sacrifice). Therefore Celestina, in her identity as the Butterfly Lady in Mexico ("Tierra del ombligo de la luna"), plays this role both in the underworld and on the sacrificial pyramid, even in the same context in which she serves as guide to the Pilgrim who would abolish human sacrifice if he could. One of the symbols present throughout the novel is a certain mask, described on page 470 as "el mapa de ese nuevo mundo." It is made of feathers, but with a center viewed variously as being of spider webs or ants. The feathers recall the identity of Quetzalcóatl, the Plumed Serpent, assumed by the Pilgrim, but the confusion of spiders and ants is more difficult to explain, having to do with the fact that the Mexican goddess with tattooed lips appears here as the Spider-Woman (p. 412). The moon, the spider, woman as weaver, are traditionally held in awe as the fabricators of the web of fate and destiny, and true to form, it is the spider's thread that leads the Pilgrim through the jungle, in the manner of Theseus and Ariadne. The perception of the web as consisting of dead ants involves the memory of Tiberius' dream of a serpent de-

voured by ants, the meaning being that even a large, threatening animal is capable of being overwhelmed by something as insignificant in its individual expression as the ant, provided there are enough of them. Tiberius then inadvertently sets in motion the process of fulfillment as he decrees in a curse that three descendants of his should be born in a time of dispersion and continue multiplying in this way until no one would be Caesar because everyone would be. The curse begins to be fulfilled when the three youths, each bearing the identities of a rebellious slave, Jesus of Nazareth and a pretender to the throne, are born in El Señor's kingdom. Thus the ants are about to overwhelm the death-dealing serpent of Eden and fulfill the destiny indicated by the spider's web. The action of the common people over the centuries *constitutes* destiny, even though millions must die for the cause. Such is the "true map of the New World," not, however, meaning America, for it too is flawed to the end; it is rather the world to emerge at the close of the millennium in Paris, as all mankind dies like so many ants.

Fuentes uses the mask in accordance with the doctrines of Mexican mythology, in which a person assumes the identity of an archetype by wearing such a mask. As Celestina sleeps on the way from the Cabo de los Desastres to El Señor's palace, the Pilgrim places the mask on her, not only because he recognizes her as identical to the goodess he met in the jungle, but because of the role she is about to play in introducing him and his story of a New World to the court. Later, in Polo Febo's apartment in Paris, he and Celestina wear the masks as they unite, for they are not to make love as individual human beings but as incarnations of the male and female cosmic principles—sun and moon, heaven and earth. The masks fall off in the midst of their frenzy, indicating, no doubt, that they have now lost their individual identities in that of the androgyne.

It is fitting that the mask should be produced and bestowed by an Earth Mother-figure, for she represents the soul of the world to be renewed. She is Tezcatlipoca, born of the waters on 3 Crocodile Day, in another appearance of the sacred number three and of the traditional dragon or serpent of chaos often associated with the creation. This is the day when the Pilgrim arrives, the day when all things return to unity in the Earth Mother (pp. 393–94). It is she who creates the gods of various colors and thereby sets in motion the process issuing in the emergence of a succession of suns, the sacrificial system, and perpetual conflict. Therefore, although she is related to the life-giving moon, she has produced what can be called "estas tierras de la luna muerta" (p. 474). Renewal will come, according to the ancient one in the temple, at the time when "nos confundiremos con nuestro contrario, la madre, la mujer, la tierra, que también es una sola y sólo espera que nosotros volvamos a ser uno para volver a recibirnos entre sus brazos" (p. 395). It is apparently for this reason—that the Mexican gods have not yet been capable of resolving their conflicts and returning to unity—that the Pilgrim is unable to unite sexually with the goddess, as she declares that it will not be possible until

their times coincide again. Furthermore, they are caught in their attempt, and the Pilgrim is forced into exile, like Quetzalcóatl in the same circumstances.

Nevertheless, in an earlier passage they have attained a union which results in a unity anticipating the final one of the book's conclusion. In uniting with her the Pilgrim senses that he is one with his total surroundings—that is, that he has achieved that union with the earth prophesied by the ancient one—and that their identities have merged: "Ella era yo" (p. 413). Still, even this is only anticipatory, for it is symbolic only of the European hero's attempt to create a new world by merging his soul with that of America, and he has yet to view what havoc will be wrought in that enterprise by his own shadow side. It is only on that predestined day when the conflicts within man have been resolved that he will be able to fulfill his hero-destiny ("Para conocerla había nacido," p. 413), of a final union with *Terra Nostra*, not in a new geographical location but in a new age of the spirit, for the narrators state a number of times that this New World is to be sought in time rather than in space.

The Middle Eastern goddess upon whom the identity of Athena is based is born of Mummu, the Word, for in the Middle East it is by the agency of the Word that Being asserts itself against nonbeing so that a new world emerges. At one point in our text Celestina, in an act reminiscent of Yahweh's endowment of the still lifeless Adam with his own spirit, finds one of the three youths dead; "La mujer acercó sus labios a los del hombre y le reanimó con su aliento, pasándole la vida de la boca a la boca. Luego dijo: 'Los labios son la vida. La boca es la memoria. La palabra lo creó todo'" (p. 548). Elsewhere it is stated that the end of memory is the end of the world (p. 402), and it is specifically memory that Celestina communicates to Polo Febo as they kiss at the novel's conclusion. The point would seem to be that memory is transmitted by the word, whether oral or written, and it is traditionally the memory of the Paradise that emerged from the act of creation which serves as the impulse to build a great civilization. In this connection it should be remembered that for the primitive every act of founding is a new creation of the world. This was certainly the case on the North American continent, to which untold numbers of settlers came to escape what was viewed as a hopelessly corrupt Europe and restore the lost Eden, the memory of which had been transmitted by their Bible. Athena, whether born of the Word or sprung from the head of Zeus, is the protectress of heroes and guardian of the values of civilization against the tyrant.

So is Celestina in *Terra Nostra*. As an embodiment of the Earth Mother she bears within her the memory of the way things were in the beginning, and transmits that memory to the hero, embodiment of the male principle, in the act of love. It is the Word that regenerates the cosmos. It is significant that Fuentes removes the Logos from its traditional masculine identity to replace it in the feminine sphere, as it was with Mummu.

As indicated earlier, Fernando de Rojas' Celestina is a highly unlikely candidate for the role of Woman in a novel spanning two millennia and ultimately returning even to the primordial Paradise. One has only to remember that that role was played by the Virgin Mary for centuries in Western culture. What Fuentes has perceived, though, is that, just as the aged Celestina is in dire need of rejuvenation, of a restoration to her youthful joy in unrestrained love, so is the earth which she represents in some mysterious way. It was, in fact, the agony of a Jew seven years after his people had been expelled from Spain that produced this pathetic and powerful figure, and Fuentes does a great deal with the Jewish contribution to the Spanish people's seemingly hopeless struggle against the eternal tyrant. So she is redeemed in the novel and made to play the role of the Earth Mother in her desperate attempt to recall the sentient world to its origins. In the end it is in her renewal in union with the solar figure that the cosmos itself is restored.

William L. Siemens
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NOTES

1. Some critics have insisted upon viewing the "cold sun" of the last sentence of the novel in negative terms. It seems clear, rather, that it represents the birthday of the Sun and therefore the advent of a new world. It comes on January 1, 2000, close enough to the traditional December 25 date for the sun's birthday in Mithraism.
2. Carlos Fuentes, *Terra Nostra* (Mexico City: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1975), p. 739. All further references to the novel will appear as page numbers in the text.
3. *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p. 68.