Cartucho: Nellie Campobello on History through the Eyes of a Child

Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho*—first published in 1931, then in a much-expanded new edition in 1940—is somewhere between novel, short story collection, anthropology, history, autobiography, memoir. In it, she combines her own memories of the Mexican Revolution as she saw it, growing up during the 1910s, with stories she heard or collected from her mother and others. They are presented as a series of brief vignettes, few of which are more than a page or two long, that provide snapshots of heroes and villains, bravery and betrayal, shoot-outs and executions from one of the bloodiest periods of the uprising in and around her hometown of Parral in the northern state of Chihuahua. Parral was continually fought over by different factions within the revolutionary forces, who turned on each other, settling scores with former allies and seeking to shape the nature of the regime that would emerge from the carnage. Campobello is an unabashed partisan of the losers in that struggle: Francisco "Pancho" Villa and his "Northern Division," who had broken with Venustiano Carranza, President of Mexico from 1917 to 1920, when he in turn was turfed out of office and then assassinated. As the narrative of the revolution began to solidify in the 1920s and 1930s, Villa and his troops were often dismissed as little more than bloodthirsty bandits.

Campobello's aim is to offer what in the book's epigraph she calls "true stories" of Villa, his men, and the fighting in Northern Mexico, to offset the "legends" that merely repeat the victors' claims and dull the Mexican people's senses (4). But these are still stories, as Campobello validates tales told by those at the margins of official discourse, including women and even small children. They may not amount to a unified overall narrative, but they puncture pretensions to totality, the notion that we already know everything we need to know. Moreover, framing the Revolution through the eyes of a child, Campobello restores the notion that there was something at stake in violence that could seem to be no more than a meaningless game. Perhaps, she suggests, at stake was the right to play.

1. Fragmentation and the End of History

Campobello's text never aspires to unity or totality. Its fragmentary style ensures that there are no fixed beginnings. Instead, we are always in the thick of things, from the opening lines in which we are told that "Cartucho didn't say his name. He didn't know how to sew or replace buttons. One day his shirts were brought to our house" (6). Where

Cartucho came from, we do not know. At other times, we are told someone's hometown—"Bustillos had been born in San Pablo de Balleza" (9)—but not what mobilized them, what led them to be passing through Parral, in Villa's forces, or wherever. Most often, a vignette opens with everything already set or in motion: "They were on the corner of the second street" (20); "Tomás Ornelas was on his way from Juárez to Chihuahua" (46); "Parral was under siege" (61); "Nobody knew how they apprehended him" (62). The reader and the narrator alike have to make sense of or respond to a situation not of their own making.

Moreover, the connection between the different episodes is often unclear, and they frequently show signs that they are told out of order. For instance, a soldier named "el 'Kirilí,'" crops up often—"El Kirilí and others were the one who were at the corner of Tita Alley," for instance, "'having at it' with some Carranzistas" (28)—and yet his death has already been reported, many pages earlier: "They arrived and killed him right there, in the river" (8). It is as though the narrative looped round and about, or oscillated back and forth, following a logic dictated by memory, rather than history. What counts is what sticks in the mind: "I'll never forget as long as I live the fright that evil man gave me" (25); "I've never been able to forget the sound of the rifles as they made ready to fire" (62); "The people who saw [Villa's troops] still remember the way it was" (86). The memories are visceral imprints and scars that overlay each other, rather than obeying a precise order of context and causality. Similarly, one story leads to another via resonance, digression, or sheer circumstance: "He tells the story at the drop of a hat," it is said of a tale told by the narrator's uncle, which features Pancho Villa himself, in which the hardened caudillo shows a sentimental side when he has tears in his eyes: "I know my uncle was surprised [. . .], and that's why he'll never forget the General's words, and neither will he forget his tears" (72). These stories tell of moments of intensity, flashes of affect (fear, surprise, amazement, joy) that shape or distort bodies and persist long beyond their immediate cause and effect.

It is not that temporal markers are entirely absent, it is just that they do not pin the episodes down to any linear chronology, any overall narrative arc: "It was ten o'clock at night" (51); "It was the fourth of September, but of what year?" (84). At any one moment Pancho Villa's forces may be in town; but soon enough we will find ourselves among Carranzistas, before the Villistas sweep back in again. In part, this simply reflects the

historical experience of a town where the struggle for territorial control was especially hard-fought: as the critic Max Parra notes, “Few towns during the revolution saw events as bloody as those that occurred in Hidalgo del Parral [. . .]. In the course of ten years, Parral suffered the violence of being taken no fewer than twelve times by contending revolutionary forces” (*Writing Pancho Villa’s Revolution* 48). But it is perhaps precisely for this reason that broader historical narratives come to seem irrelevant, beside the point. This is not an experience that can easily be tidied up, whose events can be set in sequence and justified. In life as in memory, what stands out are moments, details, that may be luminous or dark, tragic or even humorous, whose significance is lost in their subsequent transcription into novelistic plots that have beginnings, middles, and ends.

There are, however, endings, of course. Men die. Over and over, men die. But often enough the narrator does not enquire why, and when we are given reasons they are as disparate and disordered as the ebb-and-flow of troops and weapons: “He died for a kiss the officer gallantly awarded him” (25); “He just had the face of a man lulled by fate” (55); “he was dying for a cause different from the revolution” (18). Even cause and effect are apparently inverted, as when one soldier is said to have “embraced the bullets and held on to them” (66), as though bodies drew bullets from guns.

If there is any conclusion to the book as a whole, it is a counter-factual fantasy or wish. The final vignette portrays a Villista victory, the successful defence of regional autonomy: “The people of our land had beaten the savages. [. . .] / Our street would be joyful once more” (89). Yet in fact, of course, Villa was defeated, his men overpowered by the technological superiority of Carranza’s forces. As Lucas Izquierdo notes of the Battle of Celaya (which took place in 1915): “predictably, Villa’s Northern Division was mown down by defensive machine gun and artillery fire. With tragic consequences for the attacking soldiers, the newly emergent, dehumanized discourse of defense through mechanized firepower clashed with the epic personal heroism of attack.” Izquierdo goes on to observe that this transformation of warfare though the “evolution of high repetition weaponry [that] fragmented the battlefield and produced a sensatory atmosphere new in its intensity” (346) echoes or even anticipates the emergence of a similarly brutal form of war many thousands of miles away, in the trenches of Ypres and on the Somme or elsewhere along the Western Front of World War I. Campobello’s prose both mimics that fragmentation and at the same time rescues something of what she saw as the heroic

bravery, and disdainfulness towards death, evidenced by Villa's forces. Hence, though she mentions the "retreat from Celaya" and the internal divisions it provokes among Villa's dispirited generals (13), she ends the book nonetheless with a sense of victory and accomplishment that subsequent defeat will never quite erase from memory.

In part, then, Campobello rewrites history, to recreate and pay homage to those whom the Revolution vanquished, who then had the subsequent indignity of being portrayed as no more than bloodthirsty bandits by the Revolution's own chroniclers. In part, she goes against history, to suggest other ways of thinking about or recollecting the past, faithful more to memory and affect than to a narrative logic of cause and effect. Either way, her intent is underlined and reinforced by what is perhaps the most striking aspect of her account: the fact that the stories of Revolution are here voiced or channeled through a child narrator, a young girl who is (because of her age and her gender) doubly displaced from any rationale that the violence that surrounds her might obey. My question, then, is to ask what are the effects of adopting this point of view? How do we see the Revolution differently when we see it through the eyes of a child, of a young girl who is apparently more interested in dolls than in ideology, who has barely graduated from her mother's knee? Pause the video, and note down your reaction to and thoughts about this child persona. While you do that, I'll have a glass of sotol, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Sotol

Sotol is a spirit distilled from a type of desert asparagus that has been consumed for millennia across a broad swathe of northern Mexico and parts of the USA. Unlike tequila, however, it has yet to make many inroads in the global marketplace. Interviewed by *Esquire* magazine, one contemporary "sotol entrepreneur" says that "Sotol isn't for everyone. It's rough sometimes, it's for the outlaws, it's for the ones that live free, the ones who travel to unknown places" (Janowitz, "Get to Know Sotol"). But in 2002, the Mexican government lent the drink legitimation and legal protection by granting it a designation of "denomination of origin": in Mexican law, and in the eyes of the World Intellectual Property Organization, the spirit can only be labelled "sotol" if it is produced in the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, or Durango. This designation is not recognized by the United States, where it is contested by Texan producers: yet another point of friction on the US/Mexico border ("Sotol"). Such tensions are hardly new. During the Mexican

Revolution, Pancho Villa smuggled sotol into Texas, maintaining a "stash house" near El Paso. US Customs raided this Texan hideout in 1915, seizing over half a million dollars in cash, gold, and jewelry. This was one factor in the rising antagonism that led to Villa's famous cross-border raid on Columbus, New Mexico, in March, 1916, the last time the continental USA has been invaded by foreign troops.

Whatever its effects, the adoption of a child narrative (or anti-narrative) voice is a conscious strategy, rather than simply the result of circumstance or biography. There is some dispute about Campobello's date of birth—she often put it as somewhere between 1909 and 1913, as though she had been born with the Revolution itself—but records point to it being 1900 or 1901 (Faverón-Patriau, "La rebelión de la memoria" 68), which would make her a teenager, between fifteen and nineteen years old, at the time that she witnessed the events she describes. She therefore displaces her memories to a still younger version of herself, or to an idealized construction of a self for whom the events of the Revolution would be among her very first lasting psychic impressions, a sort of screen memory for which everything that came before was just a blank. As Jorge Aguilar Mora notes, in *Cartucho* Campobello inhabits those memories and that childlike perspective: rather than adopting the stance of an "adult who remembered her childhood impressions and judged the characters and events of her past from a position of maturity[,] Campobello's language [is] that of a child who has remained faithful to her memory, who pores over her memory as though she were poring over the present." Observing that the violence offered up corpses as what could seem like dolls to a child's eyes, Aguilar Mora then suggests that Campobello's choice to displace the perspective from which the past was experienced does not do that past an injustice: "It did not destroy, or falsify, the way in which the dead were taken up as a child's toys. On the contrary, it gave it a vital, internal, and more profound legitimacy" ("El silencio de Nellie Campobello" 65). If anything, Campobello suggests that only a child could see things as they really were, stripped of the moralizing or politicizing judgements that accompanied and over-wrote the events themselves. Only a child could see (or see through) the games that the adults are playing.

2. Play and the Revolution as Game

The language of play and games is everywhere in *Cartucho.* Sometimes what is referenced are literally children's games, reminding us of the narrator's position and perspective. At the very outset, for instance, we find her "playing under a table" while the soldier, Cartucho, who gives his name to the book, comes to thank her mother for repairing his shirts. From this marginal position, neither fully part of the scene nor entirely absent from it, she ventures a comment that links money, memory, and laughter: "Money sometimes makes people forget to laugh." It is not clear how the adults respond to what is something of a non sequitur—even at this early stage of the book, connections and continuities are shaky or absent, in favor of discontinuities and overlapping fragments—but perhaps it helps to remind the soldier of the importance of play and affect. The next thing we know, Cartucho is tearfully singing a love song ("He said he was a *cartucho* because of a woman") and playing with the narrator's little sister, Gloria: "He used to [. . .] give her horseback rides. Up and down the street." Perhaps Gloria, on the back of her soldier who is playing at being a horse, is playing at being a soldier. Playing at war shades seamlessly into war itself, as Cartucho is still carrying Gloria when a firefight breaks out: "He had already fired several volleys when they took her away from him" (6). The bullets fly, but the children are still children, sometimes overlooked in the heat of the moment, sometimes catching the grown-ups' attention and allowing them to indulge their own childish fantasies, a little free play in the midst of such violence. Before long, it is clear that it is not just the children who are playing games!

So in the very next vignette, we are told of one "Elías Acosta" that "when he wanted to have fun, he practiced target shooting at the hats of men who walked by on the street. He never killed anybody. He was just playing, and no one got angry with him." This seems to suggest an opposition between "hav[ing] fun" or "just playing" and the more serious business of fighting and killing. Yet this distinction is almost immediately undone, as we hear that "he'd laugh when he fought" and "he went [off] singing" on the "day he had hit his target." To celebrate, happy and drunk, he draws pictures of monkeys for the young girls and also "gave each of us a bullet from his pistol" (7). Similarly, at almost the end of the book but also what must have been the very outset of the Revolution—"back when it all began"; Campobello does not provide the year, but it was November 1910 that Guillermo Baca led the first attack on government-held Parral—when the rebels come

through town, "with the revolutionary cry and the tricolor flag, [. . .] firing shots through all the cracks where there were rural police," their actions are indistinguishable from some kind of game. "They seemed to be playing on horseback," we are told, "riding across the plazas, up to the hills, shouting and laughing. Those who witnessed the uprising say it didn't look like one" (81). The Revolution opens as play, accompanied by laughter, an exercise in freedom, in finding and aiming at the cracks or fissures in the edifice of the state.

Mexican child dressed as Adelita in celebration of agrarian reform

At times, the ways in which the narrator sees fighting as spectacle, grisly details as objects of curiosity, and even bodies or body parts as potential toys, can seem macabre and unsettling. "I thought it was wonderful to see so many soldiers" (25), the narrator tells us early on. Another time, during a skirmish, "We girls were eager to see the men fall. [. . .] my sister and I climbed up to peer out of a window, our eyes wide in anticipation. Looking around, we didn't see a single body, which we really regretted" (28). Or in the

vignette entitled "General Sobarzo's Guts," the narrator and her siblings or friends ask some soldiers "'Hey, what's that pretty thing you're carrying?' From up the street we had been able to see that there was something pretty and red in the basin" (35). What attracts them turns out to be the viscera of a dead combatant, organs without a body. The soldiers taking these bloody innards to the cemetery expect the children to be shocked when they realize their mistake, that the "pretty and red" thing comes from an eviscerated corpse. But instead, the kids crowd "up close to see them. They were all rolled together, as if they had no end. 'Guts! How nice! Whose are they?' we said, our curiosity showing in our eyes" (35). In "From a Window," the girls do manage to see a man killed, and his remains are left to rot in the street: "Since he lay there for three nights, I became accustomed to seeing the scrawl of his body [. . .] sleeping there, next to me. That dead man seemed mine. [. . .] I liked to look at him because I thought he was very afraid." When, finally, the corpse is removed ("Someone had stolen the timid dead man"), the narrator tells us that "I went to sleep dreaming they would shoot someone else and hoping it would be next to my house" (37). This childlike wonder does not preclude affects such as fear or grief (and indeed, it is a form of affect itself), but nor does it shrink from the horror all around. Matter-of-factly, Campobello itemizes and examines the elements that compose the events and situations around her, to evaluate their uses, marvel at their splendors, and consider the rules that govern their often surprising disposition.

Critic Kristin Vanden Berghe goes to some lengths both to bring out the theme of play in Campobello's text, and to explore the notion of warfare as play in line with Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's influential treatise, *Homo Ludens,* from 1938 (contemporaneous with *Cartucho*). For Vanden Berge, Campobello's vision of the Revolution as game captures "its archaic aspects [. . .]. In Huizinga's framework, unlike modern wars—which are inhuman and cause massive devastation—primitive war is a part of civilization and can be considered in terms of its cultural function. This can explain the fact that the Revolution in Campobello's texts is presented as a war that is profoundly human" ("Alegría en la revolución" 167-68). In Campobello's later work, Vanden Berghe continues, there is also "an alternative imaginary of the Revolution, represented as a failed attempt to change for the better the rules of the social and political game in Mexico" (169). None of this is to say, then, that for Campobello the Revolution was trivial or unserious. On the contrary, she restores dignity to its fallen combatants, especially the

Villistas who embody an ideal of combat as an integral part of culture and its defence, rather than as its antithesis and annihilation. *And she restores the idea that something was truly at stake in a conflict that can otherwise appear so chaotic and disorderly: at its best, it was fought for the right to play, to laugh, to feel, to be free from constraint.*

Not that Campobello's child narrator ever says such things directly. Her memories are more immediate and tangible, clinging to the sensory impressions (sight, sound, smell, touch) of life in wartime, rather than to the justifications that surround them: "I'm telling what impressed me most, no longer recalling any of the strange words or names I didn't understand" (42). Overwhelmingly, however, there is also the sense that in a revolution, it is not just bodies that are felled, but with them a set of discourses that can simply no longer be spoken or heard. One man, before he is shot, cries out that "A man who's going to die has a right to speak!" But moments later "everyone turned their backs on the grey form left lying there, pressing into the ground the words they never let him say" (52). Campobello's narrator, driven by curiosity and wonder, constantly returns to such "grey form[s]," not so much to give them voice as to register at least that the men they once were had lived, had struggled, and had died, had persisted in their being until they could do so no more.

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Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Reparto_Agrario.jpg

Song: "Corrido del General Francisco Villa" (Los Tremendos Gavilanes)