

Trees, Woods and Literature – 33

A kilometre or two farther on, at the crossroads which goes to Chillarón del Rey, the traveller unfolds his blanket and lies down to sleep at the edge of the highway, under a hawthorn bush. The night is calm and starry. An owl is hooting from an olive tree and a cricket sings among the thistles. The traveller, who is tired, is soon sleeping quietly, deeply, refreshingly ...

It is still dark when wakes up; he takes a swallow of wine, eats two oranges and a hunk of bread, and starts walking more vigorously than ever, never felling the pack or his legs on the road.

The first faint light of dawn finds him already in site of Pareja, in a region of rich, well-cultivated fields of reddish clay, full of small plots among which he can see an occasional brickyard with the people already hard at work.

Pareja is a big busy town, with new houses beside others in ruins and an inn on the town plaza. The plaza is square and roomy; in the center is a fountain with a number of spouts and a basin all around, and an ancient, heavy-branched patriarchal elm tree, an elm as old perhaps as the oldest building in the town. Standing around the fountain, the women are waiting to fill their pitchers and jars. The women carry their pitchers on their hips and have a hollow reed over their shoulders; they use the reed to guide the water as it falls from the fountain, a couple of yards above the rim of the basin. The women of Pareja show rare skill in hunting down—or rather, in fishing for—the water without spilling a drop.

The traveller enters the inn; he wants to have a hot breakfast, wash up, and then sit down for a little rest. The inn has some tempting rocking chairs and there are two rosy, plump, friendly girls who giggle as the bustle from one place to another carrying crockery, emptying a chamber pot, dusting the furniture, making a bed, scrubbing the floor; all at once, all in glorious confusion, all as merrily as can be. One of the girls is named Elena and the other María. As the traveller watches Elena and María working, he observes that he is being invaded by a lazy, cheerful feeling. The breakfast is really very good. The sparrows are chattering in the old elm on the plaza, opposite the open balcony full of geraniums in pots, and a yellow canary sings in his cage, ruffling his neck feathers. Inside, a cat is sleeping in the sun on the corner on the esparto-grass mat, and a little boy is pissing gloriously, challengingly, off the balcony.

Extract from *Journey to the Alcarria (Viaje a la Alcarria)* by Camilo José Cela, first published in 1948, and in translation by Frances M. López-Morrillas, Granta Books, London. Reproduced here by kind permission of Granta Books.

The reference to a “heavy-branched patriarchal elm tree” seems to be a mistranslation. A colleague, Jesús GarcíaLatorre writes: “The original has: *Olma le llaman porque es redondo, copudo, matriarcal, un olmo tan viejo...*— which translates as: They call it lady elm because it is rounded, full-bodied, matriarchal, a very old elm. The name of the elm tree in Spanish is *olmo* (masculine). *Olma* is a very specific name, only used to refer to veteran trees. The definition of *olma* in the dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language reads: *Olmo muy corpulento y frondoso*—a

very great (*corpulento*: large, great body, from *cuerpo*, body) and densely foliated elm tree. In the Spanish version, Camilo José Cela makes use of both terms. He says that there is an elm tree (*olmo*) and emphasizes that the people in the village refer to it as *olma*, because it has a big crown and is ancient; the *Olma de Pareja* is matriarchal.

“In former times on almost every village plaza there were several ancient elms. It was so also in my own mountain village. But, unfortunately, they have disappeared in the course of time. Furthermore, apart of their presence on plazas I have found coppiced and shredded elms (*Ulmus minor*) in semiarid areas in south-eastern Spain (but with accessible ground water), which is indicative of old management practices.”

Camilo José Cela was born in 1916, in a small village—Iria-Flavia—in Galicia. He fought against the Republican government but later published an anti-fascist magazine, which became a forum for opposition to the Franco dictatorship.

His first, and most famous, novel was *The Family of Pascual Duarte*, probably the most widely-read work of fiction in Spanish since *Don Quixote* (published in the early 1600s). The book marked a departure in theme and style from previous Spanish writing. Cela’s style, which came to be called *tremendismo*, was simple and straightforward, unlike the romantic writing which prevailed prior to his achieving prominence. His originality, and the breadth and quality of his output, were marked by the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1989. After an eventful and colourful life, he died in Madrid in 2002.

Cela’s venerable Lady Elm Tree of Pareja (*La Olma de Pareja*) came under threat from Dutch elm disease in the 1980s, at a time when over 90% of the species had been wiped out in Spain. The inhabitants of the village rose to the challenge however, and after treatment with fungicide the tree was saved. These efforts were rewarded in 2008, when Pareja won a €3,000 prize in a competition organised by a non profit group Forests Without Borders. The contest is designed to raise environmental awareness in Spain, and to protect emblematic trees and forests from developments such as golf courses and flats.

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