

To Die and Never Know Why

The Family of Pascual Duarte, by Camilo José Cela, translated by Anthony Kerrigan (Atlantic-Little, Brown. 166 pp. \$4.50), catalogues the mindless violence, the suffering and ferocity perpetrated and endured by the protagonist, a Castillian peasant. Emile Capouya, whose own forebears came from Spain, is a literary critic and essayist.

By EMILE CAPOUYA

IN THE introduction to his English version of *The Family of Pascual Duarte*, Mr. Anthony Kerrigan describes Camilo José Cela as "the finest writer of fiction remaining in Spain." He then goes on to acknowledge handsomely "the great Spaniards of the Spanish Exodus"—i.e., those writers who left the country after the Civil War—while declining to make comparisons between them and Cela. That refusal is understandable. All such comparisons would involve extra-literary considerations that are remote from Mr. Kerrigan's immediate purpose, which is of course to present his author sympathetically to the English-speaking world. From our point of view, however, it is worth remarking that Spain has been forcibly exporting talented elements of its population for a millennium; the expulsion of the Arabs, then of the Jews, and in our own time of the artists and scholars opposed to fascism, represent only the most notorious examples of the endless attempt to purify the nation of its intellectual and moral vitality. And this historical observation is relevant in two ways to our appreciating *The Family of Pascual Duarte*. First, it helps to explain the fact that in post-Christian Western Europe, Spain is a stronghold of pre-Christian attitudes and values. Secondly, it provides the immediate context for the desperate apathy and desperate violence that are the substance of Cela's novel.

Pascual Duarte is a Castillian peasant writing the story of his life while awaiting execution for murder. He is going to the garrotte because of the one murder he does not recount in his memoirs. He has, at various times, shot his dog because it stared at him too intently, knifed a fellow-villager for an ambiguous remark about his bride, killed his sister's pimp for having been too long in-



Camilo José Cela—"portentous."

vulnerable, and hacked his own mother to death because she was the author of his troubles. These offenses, which appear capital to the penitent Pascual Duarte, the state has regarded as venial, punishing them with prison sentences only. But his killing of the local squire, a matter he considers with some justice as relatively marginal, moves the government to invoke its ultimate sanction, and end his life in the Spanish manner by tightening a wooden collar around his windpipe.

Pascual Duarte speaks of suffering and ferocity so appalling as to be almost beyond the reach of our sympathy. They stun even more than they horrify—and that, incidentally, is the ground for differing with the common judgment that Camilo José Cela's novel is a literary classic. Powerful it is without a doubt. Archetypically portentous it seems to be, but what meaning can be attached to Pascual Duarte's mindless violence and mindless repentance eludes our power of conception. It is as if he incarnated, on the personal scale, a catastrophe as overwhelming as the Nazi horrors, that with their mixture of idealism and automatism sicken the imagination. The sociological or psychological explanation can never fill the void that the Third Reich created in the landscape of the soul; one could offer sociological or psychological accounts of Pascual Duarte's life that would be ade-

quate on their own terms, but those terms are not really relevant to the abasement and prostration he represents. As children of the Enlightenment, we are quite firm about wanting to change the conditions that produce a Pascual Duarte. But there is that in him that suggests a condition anterior to all "conditions," and evokes in us a superstitious terror that the humanization of man may be unrealizable.

Mr. Kerrigan's translation strikes the reader at first as forceful but unidiomatic and too penetrated with the original language. But after a while we grow accustomed to his dialect or are caught up in the narrative; in any case, his English version comes to seem quite adequate. His introduction to the novel is informative and provocatively wrong-headed, particularly in its attempt to associate Cela with Malaparte and Céline, Pascual Duarte with Camus's *Stranger* and the man who shot President Kennedy. Such comparisons assume that we know very little about the authors of *My Prisons* and *Journey to the End of the Night*, and a great deal about the motives of real and fictional murderers. But, these reservations apart, it seems to me that Mr. Kerrigan has more than done his duty by a book that may or may not be a classic but is certainly a most important novel.

Lost in Illusion: Alex Austin's *The Blue Guitar* (Frederick Fell, \$3.95) has had an odd publishing history. Written in English by an American, it was first published in France in a French translation. Now it has come home.

It seems appropriate that its birth pains should differ from those of so many other novels. The story it tells, and the telling, are different. The setting is a strip of beach, its houses shuttered for the winter save for the boarding house of Mrs. Orlovski. The novel is focused on three people: Jean Orlovski, who is blind; his sister, Sygen, with whom he is incestuously involved, and a boarder, Miss Smith, the legendary film beauty who seeks her lost glamour in Jean's blind eyes.

Where another writer, given this trio, might have profitably concentrated on sexual reportage, Alex Austin has bypassed the temptingly obvious and in its place fashioned a mood piece, always in the best possible taste. His approach is near-poetic as he creates a wintery white world of sand and water, a place seemingly lost in time, where three equally lost people play at private illusion and shatter themselves into reality. In this place where Nature, not man, rules, there are no smearing labels for Jean and his sister. Their crime, and the only one with which Mr. Austin is concerned, is not their love but the denial



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