

NICARAGUA IN REVOLUTION: The Poets Speak A Bilingual Collage

Edited by Bridget Aldaraca, et al.

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POETS OF NICARAGUA: A Bilingual Anthology 1918-1979

Selected and translated by Steven F. White

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Reviewed by Richard Elman

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION Nicaraguan poets were said to be colorful, and highly individualistic: If Ruben Dario was a nationalist, it was also true he hardly ever went back to Nicaragua, the place he was born—except in his dreams; and his dreams were sometimes pretty bloody-minded: "I would like a tempest of blood for the hour of social justice to be founded." Dario's follower, Solomon De La Selva, used to boast of seducing pubescent girls. The late Katherine Anne Porter told one interviewer that De La Selva was the most evil man she'd ever met; it's not clear if that was because of the little girls, or because he seduced Katherine Anne too.

The founder of the Somoza Dynasty, Tacho I, was killed at a banquet by a poet from Leon (Ruben Dario's birthplace), Rigoberto Lopez Perez, who was then turned into mincemeat by the machine pistols of the dead ruler's bodyguard. Some of Rigoberto's poetry appears in *Nicaragua in Revolution*, a highly ideologized collection, presented as the transitional stage in the dialectic of history that leads—we are told—inevitably to the ascendancy of Sandinism which is represented by an agricultural sort of poem by Junta boss, Daniel Ortega. Poems about winnowing and harvesting are not trite to believers in their own use of force. Alas, Daniel Ortega is not much of a poet-allegorist; and it is also unclear if "the seed of Sandino's blood," depicted by Rigoberto, would be quite at home in a country where it is now considered unpatriotic to mention the name of that other great Nicaraguan hero, Eden Pastora (Commandante Cero), who doesn't seem to write poems and doesn't get to sit among juntas either.

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treasury of the poetry of "a Nation of poets." I found here many poems I had read earlier and anonymously in broadsides and contraband collections under Tacho Somoza II, and they were works by Gutierrez and even Cardenal. There are also some enormously powerful pieces I've never seen elsewhere by Cardenal's witty friend, Lionel Rugama, who recently left the diplomatic service of the "Sandies" (or so I'm told) to reside in Mexico.

"The Revolution is a book and a free man," writes Mario Cajina Vega, a fine writer of poetry and prose who is barely represented here, and how much less grandiose than the adolescent, pseudo-Whitmanesque visions of Gioconda Belli, another former putative insurgent against the Somozas, and winner of the Casa de Las Americas prize, who would have us believe these tired tropes as her



sincerity of patriotic feeling: "Rivers run through me,/ mountains bore into my body,/ and the geography of this country/ begins forming in me/ turning me into lakes, chasms, ravines." Unfortunately in this geographic anatomy, Gioconda Belli fails to mention certain other features of the Nicaraguan landscape and ecology, such as its active volcanos and a huge lake full of sweetwater sharks. She writes, "I want to explode with love, and finish off my oppressors with my guts."

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Nicaragua in Revolution is bits and pieces of things of unequal value slapped together and called collage. The translations are good enough and most of Cardenal's great patriotic ode, "Zero Hour," is here. The central motivation of the collage-making, from what I can tell, is to prove the historical inevitability of Sandanism, meaning rule by the Ortega brothers and a few others; and when the poetry doesn't seem to be doing the job robustly enough, there are historical essays interjected: "The people learn about, recognize, and begin to accept the Sandinista National Liberation front as their vanguard." "In the years to come the unity of arms and letters will become an essential fact of national life."

Whatever its limitations and distortions, *Nicaragua in Revolution* is a useful

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Some of the strongest poetry written in Somoza's time consisted of insults and hyperboles. Ernesto Mejia Sanchez said the Dictator nourished himself with the menstruation of a virgin and the genital saliva of a priest. And in a powerful short poem, Cardenal has Tacho II looking at a statue he is erecting to himself which he builds, he tells us, because he knows the people will hate it. Not every Nicaraguan poet-patriot was, at every moment, anti-Somoza. A Nicaraguan friend who writes poems swears to me he is, perhaps, the only poet, including Cardenal, who never wrote an adulatory poem to the Somozas. Needless to say, my friend is not very popular with the present government.

In Somoza's time poets were murdered, or slammed into the madhouse on one pretext or another (or sent abroad, if well-to-do, for a bribe). Presently they are given the silent treatment when they write in ways deemed to be unfriendly to the regime. If they don't happen to work for Depep (Department of Agitprop) which is under the partial stewardship of poet Margaret Randall, of New York and Cuba, and some others, they may not get their poems published under any circumstances. Snooping and censorship are rife in Nicaragua. Executions have been at a minimum. Jail is reserved for serious crimes. But poets can be accused of being alarmist and silenced.

A poem that used to be printed as of anonymous origins in Nicaraguan revolutionary pamphlets (and is identified in *Nicaragua in Revolution* as a Cardenal) described civic life under the Somozas as follows:

... Nobody knows anything.
Some shots in the night have been
heard.
That's all.

On more nights than one I experienced the sound of those shots in Managua even after the Revolution. Nobody knew anything. Later, though, the *Times* printed an admission by Interior Minister Tomas Borge that there'd been a fairly large number of firing squad executions.

Ernesto Cardenal once called the revolutionist Sandino a poet turned soldier by necessity. He did speak in parables, such as "death comes to him who is most afraid"; and he was fierce, but never gratuitously barbaric. In a pre-Sandinista National Liberation Front poem, Mario Cajina Vega has described Sandino as not permitting himself compassion. "All died," he wrote, "beneath his light, his terror, his army." Cajina Vega is not so much criticizing Sandino as depicting some of his actions prior to that U.S.-arranged assassination which Cardenal

Michele Nachlis also served as an official literary censor. Nachlis is a fine and careful poet, and as a censor she has been as hard on her political enemies as she was on her literary friends.

"Poets are good for nothing," wrote Jose Coronel Urtecho, who is one of the major figures of Nicaraguan poetry in the years prior to the Revolution. His work is given ample display in Steven White's "Poets of Nicaragua," which is the first reasonably thorough survey of the national treasure between De La Selva (who sometimes wrote in English) and the generation of Guitierrez and Nachlis and Ilce.

Coronel Urtecho's poetry is a desperate struggle to remain, at once, Nicaraguan, anti-provincial and thoroughly modern:

You sit at the table, alone in the room,
watching five red roses in the vase
there,
arranging them better with tidy care,
and sweetly inhaling all their perfume.

You are going to sigh, but you do not
sigh.
You see that it says, when you have
it nearby,
Made in U.S.A. You push it away.

The singsong rhythms are, of course, more subtle in Spanish, and it is in the strange clash of the details, I think, that his modernism comes through most clearly—roses and an ash tray. It's like certain French paintings of the period. Coronel Urtecho was educated in the U.S.A. and he is still living on his finca in Nicaragua, I'm told. His poems are often very sophisticated and a little mechanical and monotonous. The true discovery for me, in White's collection, is Alfonso Cortés ("El Poeta Loco") who lived in the same house in Leon where Ruben Dario had lived as a boy; in fact, they are buried side by side in Leon Cathedral. White tells us with care and charm that to enter the City of Nicaraguan poetry one must first pass the landmark that guards the gates, Ruben Dario himself—and then, perhaps, I would add, one must stare up at the uncanny blue of a Nicaraguan sky as depicted by mad Cortés with the "violins of ether pulsing their clarity."

Cortés is extraordinarily faithful to his feelings. His poems are full of wonder. And that is why I love this White anthology: It does not neglect politics, but somehow stays with poetry, with care, and awe, with the plenitude to be found in this small country—since Dario.

Nicaraguans write as much bad poetry as good; it's what you do when you're courting a girl, or celebrating a marriage, or mourning a death. This sometimes alarming juggling of clichés is more acceptable there than here, but it also means, I think, that some Nicaraguan readers are uniquely susceptible to lan-

has depicted in "Zero Hour." Both these poets share a powerful love of country and landscape; in fact the only recent Nicaraguan poem of an intensity equal to Cardenal's "Zero Hour" is Mario Cajina Vega's map poem of Nicaragua called "The Old Poet" and it's not in either of these collections: Nicaragua's... "delta is a sex that the manatee and the javeline pig sniff even as the tribes' canoes penetrate the loins of the jungle.

"Sandino, I say to myself, guards the Segovias and seeks for Jinotega under a crown of eagles . . .

"I am an old poet asking for a fatherland in my ancestor's country and embracing the never forgotten one because poetry is the intended one of the people." (literal translation by R.E.)

A long-standing opponent of the Somozas, Mario Cajina Vega found himself fighting in Masaya at the end of the struggle along with the Sandinistas; he remains an editor of the middle-of-the-road *Prensa Literaria*. But postrevolutionary Nicaragua has turned poets against each other, whereas Somoza's vicious tyranny sometimes seemed to unify them. Until fairly recently, for example, the fervent Sandinista poet

guage when it is used freshly (even if it's Spanglais), and to the vividness of perceptions through language:

The rottonness of a fruit.

The weak glow of fog on stones

The sweat of vice which is also sweet

And the freezing hide of a snake

All has her wetness

(Mario Cajina Vega,
translated by R.E.)

Nicaraguan poetry can be astonishing as well as shocking, and that is why you must have both these collections to know what it is—and what some think it should be.

Richard Elman is the author of *Cocktails at Somoza's* (Applewood Press) and a few other books.