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## BOOKS IN REVIEW

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### THE CRUCIFIED NICARAGUA OF PEDRO JOAQUÍN CHAMORRO

*JESÚS MARCHENA* By PEDRO JOAQUÍN CHAMORRO. (Managua: Ediciones El Pez y la Serpiente, 1975. Pp. 106.)

*RICHTER 7*. By PEDRO JOAQUÍN CHAMORRO. (Managua: Ediciones El Pez y la Serpiente, 1976. Pp. 156.)

It is perhaps inevitable, that, in their quest to understand a region comprised of over twenty independent countries, Latin Americanists often pay little attention to such "minor" states as Nicaragua. This neglect is sad because Nicaragua is not just a dictatorially controlled banana republic. True, she has an unenviable political history, having suffered from civil war and frequent foreign intervention in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and having endured a "Porfirian peace" imposed during the last four decades by Anastasio Somoza García and his sons. Yet, for those who know her, she is also a land of open and friendly people with a distinct cultural heritage, a rich sense of humor, and an ample dose of human nobility. The homeland of Rubén Darío and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, she has also been blessed with a small but surprisingly productive literary and intellectual elite which has flourished in spite of the squalid and parasitic dictatorships that have ruled the country.

Freedom of expression never has been taken for granted in Nicaragua. However, the Somozas, in order to please their North American protectors and maintain a respectable international corporate image, have often during the last forty years found it convenient to drop censorship and overt repression for long periods of time. For this reason the opposition daily, *La Prensa*, owned and edited by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, attained the largest circulation of any paper in Nicaragua and for a long time prided itself on its frank exposés of the various sins and corruptions of the Somoza regimes.

In the 1970s, however, Anastasio Somoza Debayle strayed from the family tradition of relative moderation and restraint. First, he turned national disaster to personal profit in the use of international relief funds following the devastating

Christmas earthquake of 1972. Though much of what he and his associates did to augment their personal fortunes at that time was technically legal according to the letter of Nicaraguan (Somoza) law, little of it was particularly ethical or morally uplifting. Less than two years later, in another demonstration of poor judgment, Somoza responded to a spectacularly successful kidnap-ransom operation by sending his National Guard into the countryside to engage in wholesale and indiscriminate counterterror against peasants living in regions in which guerrillas had been active.<sup>1</sup>

These excesses inevitably made it inconvenient for the regime to allow freedom of the press. In 1974 strict press censorship was imposed and Pedro Joaquín Chamorro was harassed through the puppet judiciary and ultimately convicted on trumped-up charges of slander. It is true that in September of 1977—in response to the Carter administration's campaign for human rights—the dictatorship allowed *La Prensa* once again to publish freely. However, as it turned out, Chamorro himself was only able to enjoy this respite from repression for less than four months. On 10 January 1978, he was assassinated by several hired killers who apparently were working for right-wing elements with close business connections to the dictator himself. Thus ended the life of a prolific intellectual who, just three months earlier, had received the Maria Moors Cabot Prize for "Distinguished Journalistic Contribution to the Advancement of Inter-American Understanding," awarded by Columbia University.

It is interesting to note that, during his last bout with press censorship (1974–77), Chamorro had turned his intellectual energies to a new form of expression, literary fiction. *Jesús Marchena* and *Richter 7*, two small novels firmly rooted in Nicaraguan history, culture, folklore, and sociopolitical experience, reveal the extraordinary talents of the now-martyred Chamorro. Both works may be classified as novels in the broadest application of the term, resembling with greater accuracy "essay novels" or "novelized essays."

It is no accident that Chamorro's books are concerned with two subjects of immense current political and social controversy in Nicaragua: the lot of the peasant and the aftermath of the earthquake. *Jesús Marchena* is a testimonial to the author's lifelong interest in the Nicaraguan peasant, the "pueblo"—his folklore, language, mode of life—whereas *Richter 7*'s point of departure is the devastating earthquake of 1972 that ripped apart the capital city of Managua, unleashing physical and emotional destruction. The books differ essentially in theme but converge in style and in the author's vision of Nicaragua as a society where exploitation, frustration, despair, loss of identity, absurdity, and chaos prevail.

*Jesús Marchena* takes place in the province of Rivas and the protagonist of the title—"bajo, recio, pelo parado, boca grande con diente de oro ostensible y una sonrisa cuajada de burlas" (p. 10)—is, in addition, a "baquiano," "tigreiro," and "curandero." In spite of his slyness of character and well-meaning "joie de vivre," Jesús runs afoul of the law and ends up fleeing to Costa Rica seeking employment at a banana plantation, still with his "cara llena de burlas," but now "sucio, rotos los pantalones, más flaco que nunca, el pelo parado, lleno de tierra, arruinado, las patas inflamadas, jodido, penqueado, sin tierra, sin mujer, sin perros, más que el Duque," who, as the animal counterpart, mirrors Jesús

Marchena's existence, "sin casa, exilado, envejecido, sin entender ni mierda los rótulos que estaban en todas partes" (pp. 104–5).

Although the figure of Jesús Marchena lends a tenuous unity to the novel, attention is focused rather on a variety of campesinos riveños, who gravitate around the protagonist, relating stories, personal and second hand, humorous and pathetic, poignant and cruel, about life in the provinces. Contributing to the collage are stories of tiger hunts, hold-ups in Managua, police brutality, snake bite remedies, how to get rid of locusts in the cornfields, travel on the Gran Lago by steamship, gunrunning, contrabanding, and how Marchena carelessly blew off two fingers of his hand with blasting caps. Occasional vignettes of oral history permeate the narratives, all captured in "el habla popular," the inimitable dialect of the Nicaraguan native, a mixture of slang, Nicaraguan idioms, vulgarity, and graphic images. Notwithstanding the exuberance of such characters as la Lola, Mincho Malacate, la Medarda, la Gregoria Colindres, and Manuel Salvador, all live precarious lives in make-shift homes where hunger abounds, the military is an enemy, and the government does nothing to control rising prices. Most end up physically and spiritually destroyed, as does Jesús in the final chapter. Jesús may be seen as a symbolic figure, a representation of all Nicaraguans, tortured and crucified by an insensitive government.

*Richter 7* was conceived in the tragedy of 22 December 1972; the title an obvious reference to the intensity of the seismic shock as "Judgment Day" was delivered to every home in Managua. Widespread was the attendant suffering, confusion, and economic distress. Later began the international relief operations followed by the clean up and rebuilding, all detailed to some degree by the author. However, Chamorro's overwhelming interest lies not in sharply detailing these scenes of destruction and suffering (Managua was wrecked before, in 1931), but in the reconstruction of the city on the outskirts of town and what it portends. Loss of contact with the age-old city on the edge of the lake, with its tarred streets, colonial houses, small patches of green lawn, will lead inexorably to a loss of personal and cultural identity and, in the final analysis, oblivion. The new city, relocated away from the old one, is pathetically devoid of any intimacy or identity of its own, not unlike an American city of suburban shopping centers and bypasses and acres of concrete. In a way, the quake has served to accelerate the plasticization and Americanization of Nicaraguan culture that, unfortunately, was already underway. To change the city is to falsify the culture, to change the very soul of the people.

Chamorro does not delight in the old city and the old way of life simply for nostalgia. For him the old—and this is revealed in both novels—was more meaningful, worthier, more Nicaraguan. In the bygone days morality was better, even wedding parties were celebrated with more zest; people were more resourceful. Today man is consuming himself with the new merchandizing; he is an easy prey for exploiters.

The themes of chaos and oblivion are graphically represented by a face at the beginning of each chapter that progressively loses a wedge until at the end of the novel it appears completely blank. This idea also has its symbolic representation. In an early chapter we meet a young, unnamed couple on a motor-

cycle who travel around the city while the man serves as narrator. To a certain degree this character could represent the author. In the final chapter the two are struck by a speeding taxi whose driver flees the scene. When the ambulance attendants turn over the dead cyclists, they are astonished to find blank faces, just two opaque bubbles where eyes should be.

Though the focal point is the earthquake, the supporting events are timeless, the symbols float without concretion, the allusions remain unanchored. Thus, the author speaks of the first earthquake, the civil wars, when times were better, but events are never dated. Tragedy is viewed in a cyclical manner. Frequent reference is made to Pompeii, the first earthquake, and the present catastrophe as the author moves back and forth. This timeless cycle will continue with a seaquake in the near future and a conflagration of unheard of proportions at the end of the century. Just as Pliny recorded the impending disaster at Pompeii, the next disaster is now being written.

Structurally, *Richter 7* possesses a dual or bilevel focus. On the one hand, Chamorro presents a graphic, albeit depressing, picture of the earthquake and its aftermath. On the other, there is a sociopolitical thrust, deliberately veiled to evade the red line of the censors. After the earthquake, for instance, a black limousine, surrounded by ominous looking military tanks, cautiously appears to view the disaster relief operations. Later, homage is paid to the limousine in an absurd celebration, featuring windy speeches full of encomiums. The black limousine, a recurring symbol and an obvious reference to the Somozas, appears after every catastrophe.

Rebuilding is a bungled affair as the grossly inept planning commission commits costly and embarrassing blunders in relocation projects. A drainage system is overlooked and only becomes evident when a deluge inundates the new city. New merchandising techniques imported from the United States are forced upon an unwitting populace. The military is forever present and permits no more than three people to congregate at a time.

Chamorro's message has universal overtones and is clearly stated. The city should not be relocated. A traditional affinity with land and water (the edge of the lake), the principal elements of life, is indispensable in maintaining our identity. When we succumb to twentieth century lifestyle, international investors, new zoning regulations, shopping centers and the like, our identity is lost and we become less of ourselves with the inevitable move toward oblivion.<sup>2</sup> Our resourceful ancestors always rebuilt on the same spot of a disaster, as the phoenix rising from its own ashes, and thus maintained their identity, integrity, and heritage. Loss of identity is further accelerated by loss of the "word." We have already stopped talking among ourselves; but more detrimental is the loss of the "word," interpreted as censorship, particularly under repressive regimes:

La letra está muerta, o herida de muerte, de manera que está muriendo el hombre también, porque ella es la expresión más perfecta del hombre como ha dicho siempre el poeta, y es que para escribir se necesita hacer un acto de reflexión, detenerte, esforzar todos los sentidos y también para leer, lo cual es completamente

distinto de oír, como escribir es diferente de hablar; porque la letra es una especie de secreto, de clave misteriosa, indescifrable al ojo, como los criptogramas, de manera que cuando muere como ahora, cuando está suprimida, tachada, manchada, erradicada como dicen de la malaria, el hombre mismo muere o agoniza incomunicado en la raíz de su inteligencia y no es casualidad que estos procesos comiencen con la muerte de la letra (p. 145).

Chamorro likens the catastrophe to the crumbling of the walls of Jericho, which would not have occurred if the trumpets had been sounded. In all likelihood, that is Chamorro's intention in *Richter 7*, to sound a warning, give an alarm, lest we be caught unaware.

Chamorro displays genuine concern for the poor, the disenfranchised, a seemingly paradoxical interest given his life style as a member of the Nicaraguan aristocracy. His tenet is "No work of progress is good if it is not for the progress of the poor."<sup>3</sup> There must be concern and communication among all segments of society.

Though the writer is basically pessimistic, reiterating the themes of hate and political insensitivity, he still offers some hope. The death of the unnamed couple in the novel may be interpreted as a casualty of the loss of the word, for they die alienated and anonymous beings, and just shortly thereafter, all the inhabitants lose their faces. But, at the same time, the couple's love for each other seems to symbolize an authentic force that will neutralize social and moral disintegration. Love can and must replace the atmosphere of hate and suspicion that pervades our societies.

In both books political criticism is a salient feature. Nonetheless, both have literary merit. In *Jesús Marchena* the author's purpose is to depict the people of Rivas, a province of sturdy individuals that has produced famed fishermen and presidents as well as illiterate engineers and cattle breeders. Both books are innovative in style and narrative technique: short chapters, little dialogue, and alternating narrative points of view. There is no character development in *Richter 7*. Storytelling is the technique in *Jesús Marchena*, while *Richter 7* approaches the essay. Nevertheless, Chamorro's expression is clear, flavored with subtle irony. He refers, for instance, to the Ministerio de Esperanzas, which botches its projects and plunges the people further into despair.

Both novels are significant contributions to Nicaraguan national literature. *Richter 7*'s theme, however, has the additional dimension of particularity and universality. Chamorro's commitment to awaken a people who seem dormant, unwilling or unable to shake off their lethargy and redefine their own destiny, is not circumscribed exclusively to Nicaragua. Chamorro depicts the disintegration of Nicaraguan cultural existence and his style projects an impatience in finding solutions. But in finding the solution the Nicaraguan must first release the forces of his spirit and lift himself by screaming one word: No!

Ironically, Chamorro's assassination itself has served to stimulate Nicaraguans to raise precisely that type of cry. After burning many Somoza-owned buildings, the people, with the active cooperation and backing of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, mounted an unprecedented general strike that para-

lyzed the country for seventeen days and, for the first time in decades, put the Somoza dictatorship in serious jeopardy.

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NOTES

1. For information regarding these human rights violations see the testimony on Nicaragua in United States House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on International Organizations, *Human Rights in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador: Implications for U.S. Policy*, Second Session, 8 and 9 June (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office 1976).
2. Chamorro also stressed this theme in an interview with Thomas Walker in Managua on 7 December 1977.
3. This quote of Chamorro was mentioned in an interview with Rosario Murillo and recorded in *La Prensa Literaria* sometime in 1976 (unfortunately the clipping we have fails to give exact page or date.)