

# History, Textuality and Revolution

Sergio Ramirez's *TO BURY OUR FATHERS*

EPIFANIO SAN JUAN JR.

... I believe that the contemporary Latin American novel is profoundly committed to its time — this vital moment in the history of our age. Just as Breton said "beauty must be disturbing or it isn't beauty," so we could say that the Latin American novel must be committed or it can't exist.

Alejo Carpentier

ELECTED VICE-PRESIDENT OF Nicaragua in November 1985, Sergio Ramirez is internationally recognized as one of the most intelligent revolutionary intellectuals of Latin America. His apprenticeship began with the rebellious "Autonomy Generation" of university students in the late '50s and was founding editor of the avant-garde literary journal *Ventana*. In the late '70s, he became one of the "Group of 12" intellectual supporters of the Sandinista movement. During his exile in West Berlin in 1973-75, Ramirez wrote *To Bury Our Fathers* (original title: *¿Te dio miedo la sangre?*) and when it was published in 1979, he publicly called for a broad alliance of the masses against the beleaguered Somoza dictatorship. With the victory of the FSLN in July 1979, Ramirez, together with poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal and other artists, emerged as the leading forces in the socialist reconstruction and its defense against continuing US-supported contra attacks.

Apart from its genesis in the fires of combat, his novel can be considered a paradigm of the dialectical interaction of First World and Third World experiences. It offers an intriguing example of how the

whole repertoire of modernist literary technique — time shifts, contrapuntal arrangement of perspective, stream of consciousness notation, internal monologue, and sheer naturalistic surface details — can be subtly deployed to invent a unique kind of fictional world where the cunning of history can be given kaleidoscopic free play.

From the vantage point of 1977, on the eve of the nationwide Sandinista uprising after 16 years of failed attempts, Ramirez tries here to transcribe the *feel* or intuition of historical change in Nicaragua from 1930 to 1961 — from the rise of the Somoza dynasty after Sandino's murder (the first Anastasio Somoza helped trap Sandino during peace talks in 1934) to the defeat of the first guerilla incursions in the context of Fidel Castro's victory in Cuba in January 1959. Traversed by a series of aborted coups and inept conspiracies, this period became alive in the individual tales of four Nicaraguans — Indio Larios, Turco Taleno, Jilguero Rosales, and Catalino Lopez, burdened by their own fathers and by one monolithic patriarch called *el hombre* in the novel. The plot alternates and interlaces six narrative pervaded by violence, agony of loss and torture, impotence and death. At times poignantly tragic and sardonic, but most often wildly ironic and hilarious, this polyphonic text has struck critics as "circular" and "ritualistic," self-consciously literary and derivative. For them, it recalls Carpentier in its baroque richness of vocabulary. Vargas Llosa in its fluid shifts in narra-

five voices and Garcia Marquez in the sheer variety of character specimens. However bizarre the intricacies of time travel or confusing the cinematic montage of disparate images, most reviewers agree that the book radiates a clarity and power that come from its humane chronicling of sympathetic victims caught in a brutal civil war, from its multidimensional, cumulative portrait of a suffering and enduring people:

Even when I [Col. Catalino Lopez of Somoza's National Guard] ordered the head [of Pedron Altamirano, a Sandino general] to be completely severed from the body, and had it put in quicklime in a saddlebag, she refused to be separated from the dead man. She hesitated only for a moment when she saw them carrying the head away, as she made up her mind whether to see where they were taking it or to stay with the body — but when she had chosen the head, she immediately mounted guard by the side of the saddlebag, which had been tied on my horse.

We threw his body down into the stream, and that was the end of our mission, though we searched the surrounding area for any remaining fugitives, without finding any. The woman was the only survivor. Before we pulled out, we set fire to the huts, and through the thick coils of smoke we could see how hundreds of vultures had already swooped down and were fighting with the wild pigs for the best pieces of flesh, ripping open stomachs, flying up to the trees and draping strings of intestines over the branches then flapping down again for more. But they could not get at Pedron Altamirano's head, that was safe in my saddlebag, proof that peace had returned at least to the Segovias.

For mile after mile I put up with the stench from the head bouncing around in the bag, just as I endured the woman's dog-like moaning as she trotted along behind the horse, never flagging behind, never letting up with her lament, struggling to keep up with us even when out of spite we spurred our horses on faster. We never discovered whether she was his wife, his daughter or even perhaps his sister (198-199).

In general, the reviewers congratulate themselves in finding at last a Latin American novel whose claim to being revolutionary art does not reduce it to a polemical tract or propaganda.

How can we account for this baffled and uneasy reaction of the Western audience? I suggest that this kind of critical reflex may be understood as symptomatic of the specific socio-historical conditioning of Western tastes and expectations. It might be useful to remind ourselves that the novel as a European literary genre originated as a secular epic of the individual caught between the disintegration of the feudal cosmos and the convulsive birthpangs of mer-

cantile capitalism in the 15th and 16th centuries. In this prose epic of "a world without god," to use Lukács' definition of this genre, the problematic hero of the novel searches for authentic values in a degraded and fragmented world, deprived of any roots in an organic community now permanently a thing of the past.

In the Third World, however, such a community — less a setting than a milieu of symbolic inscriptions — still exists, although in the era of finance capitalism it becomes transmogrified by the reifying impact of the market, commodity-fetishism, and the logic of exchange-value. The problematic quest then assumes the form of a collective ordeal — in Ramirez' novel, several individuals try to locate themselves in a disrupted world, establishing their network of filiations by need or compulsion, tracing origins and destinations. Generations, families and whole towns, not solitary individuals become the protagonists struggling for survival, for meaningful relationships, for preservation of their humanity. The Third World novelist in depicting these ordeals subverts the generic emphasis on the alienated individual and the moralizing of consciousness — the Cartesian *cogito* — by giving the dynamic conjuncture of lives, social conflicts, and global crises. Alejo Carpentier elucidates this privileged nexus which transcends individual psychology:

While it is true that in some European countries — let's say in England or Scandinavia — literature can exist outside the political context, in Latin America this is absolutely impossible. For better or worse, in tragedy or in great moments of triumph and victory, our lives are so closely linked by politics that we cannot pluck someone out of his environment with tweezers, put him on a table and say: "I am going to study this person." Individuals must be studied in relation to their group, as a function of the praxis and attitudes of the social context. We have to look at where a person is going and what he wants, and only by placing him in this context do we get an epic novel.

Ramirez's novel begins in 1957, shortly after the assassination of the first Somoza by the poet Rigoberto Lopez Perez. The four characters already cited celebrate a grotesque reunion in a broken-down whorehouse outside Guatemala City — a scene that recurrently punctuates the unfolding text. The careers of Turco, Indio, and Jilguero converge in their kidnapping of National Guard Colonel Catalino Lopez who attended the funeral of the CIA-

supported Guatemalan dictator Castillo Armas. They stage the unmasking of the colonel in a quasi-legendary brothel Lasinventura's. Except for Jilguero, whose grandfather and sister typify the victims of the regime's corruption and fraud, all have served in the infamous National Guard, the sole institution sanctioning despotic rule. Both Turco and Indio led revolts, were captured and jailed; both escaped. With Jilguero and Raul, Turco leads a guerrilla column from Honduras to Nicaragua in 1959 to overthrow the oligarchy. Consequently, Turco and Jilguero reap heroic martyrdom. In 1961, Indio Larios — the petty bourgeois dreamer — dies in Guatemala. His body is secured by his son Bolivar (emblematic name of the continent's liberator) and returned to Nicaragua at the insistence of his widow. In that same year, the groundwork for the emergence of the FSLN is laid.

Looking at the complex architectonics of this novel (36 sections divided into three parts and ten chapters, segmented by six narratives), one reviewer suggests that the structure replicates the "fragmentation of resistance" to tyranny in the 30-year period (1930-1961). Before the founding of the FSLN, the history of the Nicaraguan people may be said to coincide with the individualist projects of exiles described in the novel. But it is the trajectory of their return that serves as the figure for the fate of the community — that post-Sandino/pre-FSLN generation of seemingly inept conspirators, quixotic or ineffectual plotters nonetheless settles accounts with their past (their fathers) and achieves a measure of self-respect and dignity.

The text may then be perceived as a counterplot against the domination of imperialist/patriarchal logic. Its avoidance of linear cause-effect sequence, hierarchical ranking of points of view, and definitive closure are tell-tale marks of classic expressive realism. At the start, when we are introduced to the Taleno family in 1932 by a voice from the forest, "General Sandino has been through here," we encounter a foreboding of the future:

At another point on their trek they stumbled upon an aeroplane's ruined fuselage on a hillside. . . . A few steps further on, when the mist has lifted and they can see more clearly, they spot a skeleton dangling from a hawthorn branch, swaying limply in the breeze, green slime obscuring the US Marine uniform, a tuft of withered blond hair still clinging to the skull. Some golden, luminous worms crawl out along

the fleshless limbs and drop off to the ground; the same worms glitter behind the airman's goggles pulled over sightless sockets...<sup>1</sup>

The time is ten years before Guernica, Spain. The U.S. then was already using planes for counter-insurgency operations against Sandino who, in 1928, told a journalist: "We are no more bandits than was George Washington. We are protesting against invasion. The United States has meddled in Nicaragua for many years."<sup>2</sup>

For six years, over 4,000 U.S. Marines failed to catch Sandino. After his death in 1934, President Roosevelt acclaimed Somoza: "He is a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch." When the comic figure of Col. Lopez says, "*El hombre* has been a true father to all of us," he is alluding not just to customary paternalism but to the heavy burden of the past engendered by repeated betrayals and sell-outs. The image of the decaying corpse appears then to herald an eventual catharsis and vindication.

Cast out by *el hombre's* mendacious authoritarianism, the three exiles who kidnap the colonel personify the convergence of dispersed motives, dreams, bitter resentments, frustration, and anger associated with various classes and sectors in Nicaraguan society. One line of development from this is their adventurist guerrilla incursions divorced from grassroots organizing, hence, their betrayal by the schoolteacher Ofelia in a remote village of San Carlos. The survivors, Turco and Jilguero, become fugitives as they cross their homeland to Costa Rica. Two years after their execution, the FSLN is formed inspired by Sandino's example in the 20s, — the circle is complete.

When Ramirez was composing this novel in exile, guerrilla actions accelerated throughout Nicaragua requiring the intervention of U.S. Rangers and its Central American allies in 1973. Like the dissidents, Ramirez was performing a demolition job, exploring the cracks and fissures in what would otherwise be considered a closed totality — the massive accumulation of traditions, usages, and codes from the past. What this novel presents is not a documented slice of life but the process of change itself; heterogeneous confluence of forces and tendencies which Ernst Bloch also discerned in European expressionism previously condemned by mechanical Marx-

ists as reactionary. Bloch's rhetorical questions are presciently applicable to our text: "Are there not dialectical links between growth and decay? Are confusion, immaturity and incomprehensibility always and in every case to be categorized as bourgeois decadence? Might they not equally — in contrast with this simplistic and surely unrevolutionary view — be part of the struggle leading to that transition?"<sup>13</sup>

Of the novel's baroque texture and elaborate "Latin American" style, Carpentier has already provided the most cogent elucidation in an interview published in *New Left Review* (1985). Here I would like to focus on how the sense of prefiguring the people's revolutionary triumph in July 1979 and the subsequent unleashing of repressed impulses.

Interpersed in a seemingly rambling proliferation of anecdotes — somewhat approximating the effect of Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* displayed in Rabelais — the figure of Pedron Altamirano, a general of the Sandino forces, stands out as a metonymic substitute for the rebellious subalterns. In 1930, his troops ambushed the National Guard detachment in a moviehouse. Recovering from the disgrace with the astute advice of Indio, Col. Lopez climbs up the military ladder until he becomes the tyrant's most trusted aide. But all his life, the colonel would be haunted by his cowardice, an ancient demon he would try to exorcise. Not even his brutal massacre of Altamirano's forces five years later would wipe the shameful memory away. (His father's failure and the loss of the family lands would drive him further into *el hombre's* arms.) Altamirano is ominously betrayed by his stepson — a doubling of an earlier betrayal. In the scene where the general's decapitated body is described, the narrative introduces a woman "crying without any hysterics," completely unmindful of the atrocities and havoc:

Even when I ordered the head to be completely severed from the body, and had it put in quicklime in a saddlebag she refused to be separated from the dead man. She hesitated only for a moment when she saw them carrying the head away, as she made up her mind whether to see where they were taking it or to stay with the body — but when she had chosen the head, she immediately mounted guard by the side of the saddlebag, which had been tied on my horse....

For mile after mile I put up with the stench from the head bouncing around in the bag, just as I endured the woman's dog-like moaning as

she trotted along behind the horse, never flagging behind, never letting up with her lament, struggling to keep up with us even when out of spite we spurred our horses on faster. We never discovered whether she was his wife, his daughter or even perhaps his sister. We couldn't tell her age from her appearance, and the stepson who had betrayed his father stayed behind in Quilali to drink away his hundred pesos, without my having had the opportunity to ask him. It was not so much that I forgot, more that I was not really concerned to identify the forlorn woman who was following the dead man's head so faithfully, waiting for us whenever we halted, keeping watch all night outside the gates if we locked the head away in any barracks along the way, never eating or sleeping, always the same pattering of her bare feet, caked in white dust from the many miles she had run.

She lasted all the way to Managua, and in the yard of the Campo del Maret, where I had the head put on show the morning we arrived — she knelt beside it and set to cleaning the lime and blood from his face with a faded black cloth, somehow realising that this yard, in a town she had never seen before, was our final destination. She tried to push his eyes closed with her fingers, but the lids were stuck open, then to smooth back his hair; in the end through she simply placed a candle on a piece of brick in front of the head. Heaven knows where she got it from. When I brought Larios to look at the head, the candle was already burning (198-199).

Not only does the Colonel's confession convict him for the regime's barbaric scorched-earth policy, it also indicts the dehumanized machismo of the Somocistas challenged by the woman's incredible fidelity, the antithesis to the military's nihilistic egotism and the reversal of the stepson's treachery and that of numerous characters. The woman's resistance repudiates the unheroic, often cynical, ambivalence pervading the whole society.

It is precisely to expose and destroy the fetish of the patriarchal ego in the almost mythical *el hombre* that the narrative stages the carnivalesque "orgy" in Lasinventura's. The brothel can be read as a metaphor for all Third World dictatorships: its surface affluence comes from official plunder of the public treasury. When its military patron falls, the people ransack the place. With the help of Turco and Jilguero, Indio Larios coaxes Col. Lopez to the brothel and submits his virility to the test — this incident serves as the epilogue right after the killing of Jilguero and Turco by the National Guard:

Turco had begun pacing up and down the room, and Jilguero was about to say something more to him when the Colonel unexpectedly reappeared. He was shoeless, the flaps of his shirt

hung down over his naked legs, and there were dribbles of vomit on his chin. He staggered into the room, then straightened up as he tried to work out where he was. The schoolgirl came in behind him, carrying his jacket and trousers.

"He couldn't do it," she whispered to Turco, "the pig went and puked in the bed" (231).

The colonel fails the test; the prostitute mocks him. He is no longer worth killing. Addressing Indio who "saved" him before from public disgrace, the colonel apologizes for *el hombre*. But immediately, the claim is undercut by his impotence and helplessness:

"You were against *el hombre* because you didn't know him deep down; he's a good man at heart. He knows how to forgive people, to care for them." At this he broke into sobs, until he brought up more vomit into his mouth, managing to turn away towards the wall before being sick, splashing Indio's legs as he did so. (238)

Earlier, the colonel quoted *el hombre's* jest on his loyalty resembling that of his mistress, attesting to the dictator's power to convert everyone into prostitutes. This gesture recapitulates the arbitrary will of the fathers in the novel, for example, Jose Taleno's repudiation of Turco — a public disowning of an outlaw for rebelling against the dictator.

Only in the case of Indio Larios does this patriarchal ascendancy suffer a displacement. His fraternization with the colonel overcomes their political differences. Whereas Turco rejects his father's wish that he toady up to *el hombre* and deserts the National Guard, Indio settles accounts with his complicity in Sandino's murder by writing self-confessions, especially by memorializing himself in letters to his son Bolivar. But the son, while fulfilling his duty to recover his father's body, throws the letters — including photographs and records of the exiles' meetings — out of the speeding truck. Indio's funeral procession became an occasion to wipe the slate clean and allow the children to start anew.

In exile, Indio makes *piñatas* — clay containers of sweets for birthday party games — that become symbolic of all the hopes and needs locked up in dreams or nightmares, just as the defiant Turco was locked up in a panther's-cage in the dictator's private zoo.

Halfway in the narrative, we are made witnesses to Turco's torture described in the text's dense baroque style which induces a powerful cathartic effect:

Naked, defenceless in this dry, hostile April night, Taleno looks down at the shapes of his bare feet on the wet tiles and suddenly his mind fills with the tranquil homely scent of freshly cut jasmine flowers one afternoon in a courtyard somewhere, a moment's enchantment that is broken when a hand seizes his hair to force his head down. They lift him and carry him bodily over to the well then, holding on to his feet, they plunge him headfirst into the black waters, his fall shattering the bright constellation of stars reflected on its surface. His body thrashes as he tries to push back and up out of the warm, chlorinated water that first streams across his face, then swirls cold around him in choking veils as he writhes to free himself, his bursting lungs beating against his aching, tormented ribs, desperately trying to push with his legs so that he can get his head back up out of the water — but each time he bangs against an iron grille dropped level with the surface, and he is forced down again into the depths, his eardrums splitting from a deafening drilling noise.

Just as he is about to succumb, the whole of his insides seeming to lose their weight and float free within him, the swirling waters of the well brighten, and to the sound of out-of-tune trumpets blaring out on dark street corners a cohort of Roman soldiers lined up four abreast marches past: docile and embarrassed looking, the country militia who have been taken from their barracks and forced to parade like this drag their sandalled feet through the foul-smelling streets round the markets of Managua, the sweat dripping in white streaks from their made-up faces. They trudge along weighed down with their tufted panaches, while behind their standards and spears other groups of conscripts follow, divided according to their costumes: bewigged courtiers, musketeers with their plumed hats, pages in embroidered livery, heralds and flag-bearers, all escorting a carriage that makes its way to the Metropolitan Cathedral in the midst of smoke from the torches carried in the calloused hands of the newest recruits, got up in the red livery of footmen. Inside the cathedral, beneath the cupola of the high altar glittering with lamps, the old archbishop in his decrepit robes totters over to the throne bearing a crown in his raised hands and places it on the brow of a young girl, the same one who appears on the one cordoba note, her head adorned with an Indian princess' feather. The bells peal out, a cannon salutes in the distance, and Taleno's father kneels among the congregation in the side aisle, and forces him down too (152-153).

And here is the description of Indio Larios' room in Guatemala which he shared with his common-law wife and children as seen through the eyes of his son whose quest for identity sublimates in the process the national struggle in the personal/mythical search of the exiled father:

The *piñatas* were hanging from the ceiling rafters, swaying gently to and fro, a boisterous collection dangling lifelessly as the dust from

cracks in the roof sifted down over them, huge shapes of fruit decorated with torn bits of paper; white rabbits in morning coats; witches with black crepe petticoats; a Pinocchio with a smudged smile — his mouth traced with a pencil, then erased and drawn in again; a Donald Duck. The materials for making the piñatas were in a glass cabinet, one of whose panels had been repaired with newspaper: it contained sheets of cardboard and tissue paper, a big pair of scissors, a pot of starch, and one the floor were clay bowls waiting to be decorated. On the whitewashed wall hung a Nicaraguan flag made from the same crepe paper as that used for the piñatas, with the triangular emblem and its chain of volcanoes in the centre of the white stripe made of silver foil from cigarette packets. So making the piñatas and the blue-and-white flag explained how his father's hands had got stained: when he had put the dead man's shirt on, knowing what work he had done in his last years, he had discovered between his fingers streaks of starch still with traces of the bright reds and purples from the decorations (173-174).

Here the exuberance of discordant particulars, the carnivalesque extravagance of imagery and allusions serve as combined funeral-and-victory celebration for the dead man. The son reconstructs the father's past now transformed into a metonymy of all the struggles he had lived through and a metaphor of the cultural dialectics of past and present, native and foreign, religious and secular, residual and emergent stands in the evolving national psyche. Ramirez's textualizing strategy locks the historical flux into a visionary frieze, redeeming the incoherence of reified fragments into a totalizing if metamorphic experience of revolutionary commitment.<sup>4</sup>

The text close with the reminiscences of Chepito, a barber, and Pastorita, the only survivor of a group of musicians called *Los Caballeros*. After seducing Alma Nubia Taleno, Pastorita is denounced by her father. Pastorita never sees his son, and ruminates alone with his memories. This father is left abandoned, even though the epigraph from Aristophanes suggests that a revolution is needed to provide a place for a deprived people to inter their dead, insuring that no one is left abandoned.

"The skylark was born before all beings and before the earth itself. Its father died of illness when the earth did not yet exist. He remained unburied for five days, until the skylark, ingenious of necessity, buried its father in its own head" (from *The Birds*).

Weaving the threads of the recollected past from various characters' perspectives,

the novel then reconstitutes Nicaraguan history as a transitional period where conservative and progressive forces coalesce. The central protagonist involves the generation of sons who learn to reject their fathers' will (the Law of the Symbolic Order in Lacan's term, whose proprietor is *el hombre*) and create their own paths. Turco refuses the seduction of privilege and power. Believing in the people's will, Indio refuses the paternalism of *el hombre*. In effect, the claims of fatherhood are annulled. What the text seeks to bury is the *ancien regime* of the patriarch, law and order bereft of justice and barren of love.

Besides these individual gestures of refusal combined by the satiric debunking of all pretensions and masquerades, the text dramatizes the refusal of "the normal order" embodied in rational, coherent egos conforming to a centralized pattern of events. The plot is disrupted by a montage of unsynchronized scenes and episodes, by doubling of scenes from shifting perspectives, by dense verbalization of atmosphere and setting, and especially by the intertextualization, or the use of diverse idioms (quotations, public notices, letters, obscene jokes, slang and colloquialisms, highfalutin rhetoric, etc.). One also notes the stylized and ironic focus on interiors and the full use of symbolic motifs as counterpoints to detailed catalogues and enumerations. Ramirez's text epitomizes the operations of a Third World sensibility exorcising the father's diktat, the received codes of rationality and virtue originating from what the Salvadorian poet Roque Dalton calls the "two-headed monster" (imperialism and the native oligarchy), striving to construct a subject-position for itself freed from the past, especially from the illusions of aesthetic realism and the horrors of exploitation to hide.

So then, let the dead bury the dead. What more fitting epitaph is there then for what Marx calls the prehistory of humankind than this fiction of revolutionary passage and deliverance of the "wretched of the earth"?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>To *Bury Our Fathers*, tr. Nick Caistor (London, 1984), p. 12. All page references will hereafter be given after the quoted passage.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Nicholas Rankin, "Ramirez's *To Bury Our Fathers*," *Times Literary Supplement* (26 April 1985), p.