

LEONEL RUGAMA: THE POET AND NICARAGUAN LIBERATION

Commentary and translations by Ileana Rodríguez and Marc Zimmerman¹

Biography

His name never appeared
on the old walls of the school john.
When he left the classroom for good
no one noticed his absence.
The sirens of the world held silence,
they never detected the fire of his blood.
The volume of his cries
each time grew more unbearable,
till the noise of his footsteps
embraced the shadow of the mountain.
That untouched land sucked him with mystery
Every breeze cleansed his ideals,
leaving him naked
trembling and newly bathed.
The whole world was deaf
and failed to hear where
the battle began to be born.

(p. 94)

Poet Leonel Rugama was assassinated by the Nicaraguan National Guard because of his committed activities in opposition to the repressive forces controlling his country. Rugama belonged to Nicaragua's revolutionary movement, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional. The youthful vitality and militancy of his poetry can only be grasped by understanding something of the Frente and the oppressive Nicaraguan context which generated and shaped this organization.

1. Nicaragua and the Frente

Oh Nicaragua
the colonels that piss on your walls--
we have to yank them out at the roots,
hang them from a wind-torn tree
filled with the rage of the people.²
(p. 59)

In 1927, the long-existing foreign domination of Nicaragua reached a new level through the direct incursion of U.S. troops into the country. In answer, the Frente Sandinista rose, to wage a six year guerilla war against the invaders, finally expelling them in 1933. During this period Nicaragua, now universally forgotten and declared "an incurable case,"³ was the vanguard country of Latin America, at the forefront in generating and organizing a specifically anti-imperialist resistance.

The founder and leader of the Frente was Augusto Cesar Sandino, best known as "the general of free men." With clear political consciousness and consummate mastery, he conducted a campaign aimed at the legitimate defense of his country in the name of the people's aspirations to recuperate the national territory. Sandino proposed expulsion of the invading forces, national self-determination, economic and political sovereignty, and agrarian restructuring; that is, on the basis of a worker-peasant alliance, he sought to initiate a total renovation of Nicaragua for the benefit of the people. Because such plans countered the wishes of both international and national interest groups, Sandino was assassinated.

The murder was carried out on February 21, 1934, by order of General Anastasio Somoza, after close consultation with American officials. And thus, one year after the expulsion of the Americans, Nicaragua fell into the clutches of the Somoza family, who joined with the U.S. neo-colonialists in establishing one of the most repressive, immiserating and long-lived dictatorships in all of Latin America.

To Sandino's followers and successors fell the task of renewing the movement for national liberation that was to grow more difficult and yet more necessary with each passing year. It took twenty-four years for the popular forces to regroup and generate a new stage of struggle, now against the well-entrenched and powerful Somocista regime. In 1958, the re-emergent Frente Sandinista took up Sandin's call for a revolutionary program aimed at securing national independence, rescuing the basic riches of the country and initiating a process of profound economic reform. In a country so dominated by one family, with a military supplied and trained by-- and the national riches exported to-- the United States through the conduits controlled by this family and its allies, there could be little space for social reform. In fact, given Nicaragua's internal conditions and external relations (including the constant threat of direct U.S. intervention if the revolutionary movement should show real signs of success), the Frente's program could only be achieved by the most organized armed insurrection, in coordination with other movements in Central America.

The initial campaigns of the late 1950's succeeded only to the degree of showing that a determined force of opposition existed and had potential for further growth. By the early 1960's, developmentalist programs such as the Alliance for Progress revealed their inability to extend the centralized socio-economic base in Nicaraguan terrain. A buffer middle class did emerge, but not in sufficient numbers to mediate the violent clash between the oppressors and the oppressed. Somoza required more weaponry, more counter-insurgency and torture training; the Frente increasingly needed to extend its national and international base of fighters and supporters, succeeding in integrating the exploited sectors along with the groups most receptive to their revolutionary goals, the intellectuals and the students. In sum, says Jaime Wheelock, the strug-

gle against exploitation "takes on a political and necessarily insurrec-
tional character.... The revolutionary movement... becomes the vanguard
of the proletariat."⁴ After twenty years of massive torture and repres-
sion, after Terrorist experiments and ideological schisms in the Frente
itself, and after such horrendous ordeals as the earthquake of 1972 and
the intervention of U.S. Rangers, the revolutionary movement shows signs
of maturing into a force able to take decisive blows at the dictatorship
and the exploitation it perpetrates.

2. The Poetry of Rugama

Leonel Rugama

One afternoon Leonel told me
to build myself up with exercises
adding that he didn't mean "spiritual" ones
we talked about the girls
who came or went from work or school
of those who entered or left a shoestore
of another who passed by selling food
and then he read me a poem about
a guerrilla fighter from Vietnam
Now, another afternoon, seeing
a news photo of his body
bullet-torn by the National Guard
I remember Jose Coronel Urtecho saying
that poets are good for nothing.

- Francisco Santos (p. 27)

In Communist society, says Marx, there will be no artists; at most there
will be human beings who, among other things, will dedicate themselves
to art. The matter is different under capitalism because, in this system
art is the paradigm of alienated labor, one of the few activities that
remain mainly human. Successful poetry becomes, then, one of the rich-
est testimonials to the possibilities of creative disalienation. A few
years ago, Jaime Wheelock saw things in this light when, on the occasion
of Rugama's tragic death, he dedicated the fourth issue of his modest
journal, Taller, to the undying memory of the activist-poet.⁵

Rugama dead, it now falls on us, says Wheelock, "to respond to the sus-
pended questions that only such humans as he can leave." Ours is to
write "lucid testimony" without ironies, without doubts and pessimism,
and by so doing, to disseminate his poetry and the revolutionary urgency
it conveys. Because for those of us who seek to take Rugama's revolu-
tionary path, his poetry continues to provide the congruent challenges
to the system that crystallize in the clarity and dedication needed for
the decisive and ultimate struggle.

Subsistence

After I kissed you
long on the mouth
you killed a street dog.
I saw you envied his coat
so much softer
than your lips.

(p. 98)

The generative problematic of Rugama's poetry is centered on the ugly and disagreeable things that manifest the decadent misery and love-negating brutality emanating from Latin American dependency under capitalism. In a broader vein, the young Nicaraguan poet contrasts the stifling terrestrial misery he knows with the space voyages to the moon and infinite space.

The Bowls are Empty

The bowls are empty
waiting for food. LIFE
takes colored pictures of them.
The astronauts of Apollo 8
send a message of love
from the moon: "Peace on earth
and good will to the dead."

(p. 98)

What did Rugama know of the stars and the infinite spaces? He knew little of the planets and even less of the universe, and he only went to sidereal spaces beyond humanity, because he was human, because he wished to emphasize the dehumanizing circumstances of human beings in this world.

No one can doubt that Rugama's feet were on the ground, where the only measure was the perpetual struggle against the imperialist oppressor. For this reason, he speaks of the rockets, of the moon, of the innumerable Apollos that reinforce the tyranny of hunger, in order to destroy the true makers of history and their poet-spokesmen who, contrary to the words of Jose Coronel Urtecho, are indeed good for something.

Rugama's first aim is to trumpet forth the brutalization and possible destruction of the earth-- here through the ideological mouthpiece of mass media. Like a bird of ill-omen, LIFE spews signals of death down to the earth. Rugama sets the call of LIFE in the foodless bowls, emptied for the voyage to the barren moon: the people's appropriated product returns as a harvest of sand. The message does not exhaust itself in the still-lives of the weekly gloss, because Rugama shows the communion, the parallelism-- in poetry and in life-- between the Apollo and the people's hunger.

The Earth is a Satellite of the Moon

Apollo 2 cost more than Apollo 1
Apollo 1 cost plenty.

Apollo 3 cost more than Apollo 2
Apollo 2 cost more than Apollo 1
Apollo 1 cost plenty.

Apollo 4 cost more than Apollo 3
Apollo 3 cost more than Apollo 2
Apollo 2 cost more than Apollo 1
Apollo 1 cost plenty.

Apollo 8 cost a pile, but it didn't matter
because the astronauts were protestants
and on the moon they read the Bible
making all the Christians wonderous and joyful
and on their return Pope Paul gave them his blessing

Apollo 9 cost more than all the others combined
including Apollo 1 that cost plenty.

The great-grandparents of the people of acahualinca were less
hungry than the grandparents.
The great-grandparents died of hunger.

The grandparents of the people of acahualinca were less
hungry than the parents.
The grandparents died of hunger.

The parents of the people of acahualinca were less
hungry than the children of the people there
The parents died of hunger

The people of acahualinca are less
hungry than the children of the people there

The children of the people of acahualinca
are not born because of hunger,
and they hunger to be born, to die of hunger.

Blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the moon.
(pp. 96-97)

Here Rugama elaborates his theme, juxtaposing the moon and a poor Managua barrio. Two words, cost and hunger, weave around the Apollos, giving the poem its mordant rhythm and tone as the incarnation of dependency. If the first Apollo cost a lot, the ninth Apollo cost even more; if the great-grandparents of the people of Acahualinca were hungry, the people of Acahualinca are even hungrier. And we know all this because, as the poet has told us, the great-grandparents had already died of hunger, and we know too (though he does not say it directly) that those starving and aborting in the agricultural riches of Nicaragua will reap only the wind of the barren satellite that now usurps the raped earth.

Rugama confronts us with a scandalous historical crescendo: the cruel dependency of some humans on others, who grow and prosper, who augment the insupportable weight of capital's empire, and who make those who have paid plenty pay even more. And if this were not enough, the poet maliciously nudges us to hatred, telling how the Pope blesses the Protestant astronauts, and with this loving gesture of holy approbation, gives free passage to the murderous exploitation. And why not? Since, in so doing, the Pope draws his protective mantel over the dead who, once starved into absence from the reign of this fertile world, will inherit the heavenly kingdom of the empty (and hence spiritual) moon.

But Rugama's poetry does not exhaust itself in the contemplation of dependency and immiseration. The poet-activist knew well enough that the world was not so small and mean, that behind these images of death lay a potential human infinity which he somehow had to express and dynamize. For us and with us, the poet sought to confront the world of death in order to repossess and augment the rich world of the living.

The Houses Were Filled with Smoke

To the heroes of the Frente Sandinista:

JULIO BUITRAGO URROZ
ALESIO BLANDON JUAREZ
MARCO ANTONIO RIVERA BERRIOS
ANIBAL CASTRILLO PALMA

I saw the holes the Sherman tank
opened in the house of the seething barrio
And later I went to see more holes
in another house in Santo Domingo.
And where there weren't any Sherman tank holes
there were rifle holes
from Madsens
or Brownings
or who knows what.

The houses were filled with smoke
and after two hours
Genie screamed without a megaphone
that they surrender.

And almost two hours later
And almost four hours later
And almost one hour
he shouted

and shouted
and shouts
That they surrender.
While the tank
and the orders

The Brownings
the Madzens
the M-3's
the M-1's

and the bullet rounds
the grenades
and tear-gas bombs...
and the quakes of Genie's guards.

NO ONE EVER ANSWERED

Because the heroes never said
they would die for their country
but they died.

(pp. 59-60)

The poet sings of the fallen heroes. He reminds us that death is not only the end but the beginning of life. Buitrago, Blandon, Rivera and Castrillo, fallen comrades in the struggle for life, comrades whose ashes are to make us the phoenix. These figures were murdered by the Sherman tanks, by M-3's and M-1's and whatever-- the whole arsenal of murder imported to Somoza's bought, brutalized and brutal National corps of death. These figures die, but do not surrender-- and so, in dying, live.

The same weapons cause death-- but in two distinct ways. The world is emptied, but the spaces reach their limits. Those who would fill the empty spaces open themselves to massive fire and violence; but the bullets that tear through houses and bodies leave open revelatory spaces that, now defined and located, call for filling once again. The poet charges the silence to the unanswered cries and menaces of the leader of the guards, themselves trembling to the future indomitable response they are sowing from the seething barrios. "Los héroes nunca dijeron que morirían por la patria, sino que murieron." And in evoking their

death, Rugama keeps alive the obscured but unyielding struggle against the lethal smoke-filled emptiness out of which they, he and we are to forge a clear and infinite human future.

Elegy for the Guerilla Fighter

--to Leonel Rugama--

The day after your death
I rushed through the streets of Managua
I stared hard at the faces I met
and found them all indifferent
as if nothing had happened.

And your life was for this people!

For the girls who talk together
for the men in the streets
for the police directing traffic
And for the National Guards!

I talked with some professors and students
they told me they had known you
Just that
and maybe some small anecdote.

The truth is, we knew so little about you:
a shy kid, a student who wrote poems,
and of your poetry what's known is even less!

But word of you,
your grip on us,
will grow
And your words will spread
like grain in fertile ground.

Octavio Robleto (p. 19)

Art will disappear in Communist society, said Marx. Literary pundits should recognize the merit of a creation in which message and image merge. All of us should respond to the convergence of the poet's words and his life, and to the future convergence of reality with his hopes. Rugama's poetry, young like the now fifty-year-old struggle of the Frente Sandinista, growing in truth and rigor as does the movement of which he was a part, stands at the crossing point between words and acts, between present ugliness and potential beauty, between death and life, between the weapons of criticism and the criticism of weapons. This obituary to the memory of our comrade, activist-poet Leonel Ruga is, like his living creations, a call to a richer future in Nicaragua where a poetry of ugliness and violence will be the poetry of tribute by a happy people to those who suffered and hungered to bring forth, from ashes and smoke, the new world they have inherited.

(University of Minnesota, Migrants in Action, 4