

On Reading Claribel Alegría

CÉSAR FERREIRA

CLARIBEL ALEGRÍA belongs to that unique part of the Spanish-speaking world known as Central America. A small territory in geographical terms, perhaps, but one of enormous cultural wealth and imagination. In fact, thanks to one Central American writer, those of us who speak Spanish as a native language know what it means to have grown up learning to recite the musical poetry of the great Rubén Darío and time and again have found ourselves proudly represented as Latin Americans by his unique lyrical voice and his many innovations of poetry written in Spanish. But along with Rubén Darío, the list of literary names that emerged from Central America in the twentieth century alone is rich in talent. Let us remember the great contributions made by such writers as Miguel Ángel Asturias and Augusto Monterroso in Guatemala or by José Coronel Urtecho, Ernesto Cardenal, and Sergio Ramírez, all of whom come from Nicaragua, Claribel Alegría's country of birth, but likewise the names of such writers as Salarrué, Claudia Lars, Roque Dalton, Matilde Elena López, and Manlio Argueta, all of whom share with Claribel Alegría her other home country, El Salvador.

An important voice of her generation, Claribel Alegría's talent and activism in contemporary Latin American letters have been widely recognized in the Spanish-speaking world for many years. However, she is the first Central American writer to be honored with the Neustadt International Prize for Literature and joins a distinguished list of recipients from Latin America that includes the names of Álvaro Mutis, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Octavio Paz, and Gabriel García Márquez.

Alegría exemplifies a life dedicated to the craft of writing, with Central America always at the core of her fictional universe. A prolific writer, her bibliography includes some forty titles across many literary genres. To date, she has published some fifteen books of poetry, as well as novels, novellas, short fiction, testimonial works, essays, and children's stories. She began publishing in the late 1940s, mentored by one of Spain's great poets, Juan Ramón Jiménez, and the Mexican essayist José Vasconcelos, who wrote the foreword to her first collection of poetry, *Anillo de silencio* (1948; Ring of silence). Since then her books have appeared in fourteen languages throughout Latin America, Europe, and the United States. A politically committed writer, she has been witness to important historical events in Latin America in the twentieth century such as the Cuban revolution of 1959, the Sandinista revolutionary period in Nicaragua from 1979 to 1989, and the Salvadoran civil war from 1979 to 1990. It is no secret that each of these events transformed her views on Latin America and indelibly marked both her prose and poetry. Like many authors of her generation, Alegría undertook the task of raising public awareness about the historical challenges of her time in Central America through her many books and through public forums. The British critic Nuala Finnegan has remarked that "In her poetry, prose, translations and other work, [Claribel Alegría] has left a resounding legacy that poignantly captures the intersection of her private self with that of the social and historical dimension of her people" (22). Indeed, it is this dual dimension between the personal and the social that has appealed to Spanish- and non-Spanish-speaking readers alike,

making Alegría a genuine ambassador of Central American culture around the world for many years.

Margaret Crosby notes that Alegría divides her own work into two categories: the literary-poetic and those known to her as *letras de emergencia*, or letters of emergency. The first category refers to the sentimental, introspective facet of her poetry that typifies her early collections published between 1948 and 1961. The second category describes Alegría's politically conscious poetry and prose, published from 1965 to the present in works that address crucial events of Central American history. Indeed, the term *letras de emergencia*, coined by Alegría herself, captures well the double meaning of urgency and the emerging spirit of her work. Time and again Alegría's books can be read as a response to critical historical moments in Central America, many of which still deserve our attention. In fact, reading the works of Alegría reminds us that the people of Central America, to whom she has given a voice through her writing, not only remain our close neighbors to the south; more important, they are a people always willing to engage in a fruitful dialogue so that their social and political struggles will be better understood. Few writers from Central America have been able to express such desires so eloquently in recent times as Claribel Alegría.

Despite her many years in exile, which took her to countries as diverse as Spain, Mexico, France, Chile, and Argentina, Alegría never forgot her roots, always yearning to return to her native Central America and, within Central America, to one place in particular: the town of Santa Ana that appears time and again in her writing, where she grew up surrounded by its many ceiba trees, its volcanoes, and a colorful vegetation. Alegría's early books of poetry, such as *Vigilias* (1953; Vigils) or *Acuario* (1958; Aquarium), show a colloquial yet intimate poetic voice nurtured by a vigilant spirit that expresses repeated attempts to communicate with the surrounding world. Such a voyage of exploration continues in *Huésped de mi tiempo* (1961; Guest of my time), a book in which the poetic "I" often relies on a sensitive intuition and a careful observation of its immediate surroundings in order to search for a more keen understanding of the world as a whole. There is great rigor in many of the intense verses of *Huésped de mi tiempo*, an intensity that seems to grow in a later book, *Pagaré a cobrar* (1973; Paid on delivery). *Pagaré a cobrar* is a mature book aesthetically speaking, where the reader is confronted with many of Alegría's recurring topics: the loss of innocence, the inexorable passing of time, and the experience of

death and human mortality. For example, as she reminisces about her parents and her childhood at the family household in the poem "Santa Ana a oscuras" ("Santa Ana in the Dark"), she writes: "Darkness came upon us / when my father died. / He was the town's doctor / and brought his lantern from Estelí. . . . / No one in Santa Ana / is capable of producing its own light. / Each time a lantern is turned off / things become even darker." And of her mother, she says: "Flowers / no longer grow as before / in my home garden. / My mother used to take care of the big carnations / and water the lawn / and help the jasmine tree grow. / Now she is no longer here / and everything has died." Indeed, childhood is that once bright but now lost paradise to which there is no return but which remains vivid in the memory of the poet. At the same time, a greater social awareness emerges in *Pagaré a cobrar* as in "The American Way of Death," a text where images of poverty and despair are expressed as an inevitable lifestyle for many children of the Americas, whether in the northern or southern hemisphere. Trapped in their despair and lack of opportunity, many of them will be driven to take up arms or resort to another form of violence in the hope of challenging the social injustice they must confront, only to find death as a final answer.

In 1978 Alegría was awarded Cuba's Casa de las Américas Prize for poetry for her book *Sobrevivo* (I survive). In many brief and intense poems, she continues to pose the large questions about life and death. However, the sadness of death and loss is often resisted by the determination to see human existence as a dynamic adventure that must go forward in a daring and courageous way. Such is the case in one of the best-known poems of the collection, "Sorrow," in which Alegría evokes the death of writer and activist Roque Dalton, who was killed in 1975 in El Salvador. Along with Dalton, the poem is a homage to other politically committed artists of the Spanish-speaking world such as Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, Federico García Lorca, Víctor Jara, Augusto César Sandino, and Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Interestingly, the narrative "I" in the poem becomes a collective voice, determined to rescue the memory of these icons of Hispanic culture by remembering their personal struggles of liberation, many of which were cut short by a violent death. From *Sobrevivo*, let us also remember the poem "Little Cambray Tamales," which could be read as a celebratory metaphor of the people of Central America and, by extension, of all peoples

* Translations mine unless otherwise noted.

from the Hispanic world, who come together in a great poetic recipe of sorts. Humor and wit are used to recall Latin America's turbulent history along with domestic, everyday symbols that are carefully woven in this text to arrive at a sense of community and cultural identity.

Little Cambray Tamales

Two pounds of mestizo cornmeal
 half a pound of loin of *gachupín*
 cooked and finely chopped
 a box of pious raisins
 two tablespoons of Malinche milk
 one cup of enraged water
 a fry of conquistadors' helmets
 three Jesuit onions
 a small bag of multinational gold
 two dragon's teeth
 one presidential carrot
 two tablespoons of pimps
 lard of Panchimalco Indians
 two ministerial tomatoes
 a half cup of television sugar
 two drops of volcanic lava
 seven leaves of *pito*
 (don't be dirty-minded, it's a soporific)
 put everything to boil
 over a slow fire
 for five hundred years
 and you'll see how tasty it is.
 (*Woman of the River*, tr. Flakoll)

Let us also remember other politically charged works such as "Flowers from the Volcano" and "The Woman of the Sumpul River," both of which belong in any anthology of contemporary Spanish American poetry. Likewise, the many personal poems by Alegría found in more recent titles such as *Fugues* (1993), *Umbrales* (1996; Thresholds), *Saudade* (1999; Eng. *Sorrow*, 1999), and *Soltando amarras* (2002; Eng. *Casting Off*, 2003). In these books the author returns to a concise and intimate form of writing to reflect on the meaning of death, the pain of loss and separation, and a personal sense of the passing of time. Often relying on mythology, these volumes contain poems marked by a strong confessional tone that express an eloquent and moving spiritual journey, repeatedly touching on the essential enigmas of human existence but ultimately transforming grief into a new form of vitality and strength.

While the many verses of Alegría remain as important references in understanding the author's personal life, equally important are her many contributions to the

contemporary Latin American novel and to testimonial literature. Undoubtedly, two of Alegría's most accomplished works are the novels *Cenizas de Izalco* (1966; Eng. *Ashes of Izalco*, 1989), and *Luisa en el país de las maravillas* (1987; Eng. *Luisa in Realityland*, 1987), both of which exemplify her work as an author and as a human-rights activist committed through her writing to shed light on the many trials and tribulations of contemporary Central American history.

Ashes of Izalco is based on Alegría's childhood memories of the 1932 peasant uprising in the town of Izalco in El Salvador. At the time, dictator General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez and his army slaughtered some thirty thousand peasants, allegedly fighting a communist-led insurrection. As Margaret Crosby has noted, the novel anticipates a number of recurring themes in Alegría's work: mother/daughter relationships, U.S. intervention in Central America, female/male relationships, political repression as reality and metaphor, and revolution as a means to social justice. When *Ashes of Izalco* was first published in 1966, the veracity of its events was questioned, and the book met high criticism from El Salvador's ruling upper class. By the 1970s, however, the ministry of culture made the book mandatory reading for high school students, and since then the novel has gone through many printings. Alegría's careful blending of fact and fiction has served as a valuable tool to preserve the memory of a tragic event in El Salvador's modern history for future generations.

A similar case is that of *Luisa in Realityland*. A book best described as a provocative mix of verse and prose, it is still one of Alegría's most widely read works. It tells the story of a young girl's upbringing in a family of storytellers who are able to convince themselves and others of the validity of their rich imagination to confront an adverse reality. The narrative cleverly juxtaposes personal perspectives and historical events, eventually questioning the distinction between inner and outer worlds and, in the final instance, underscoring the importance of spiritual growth in the context of political struggle.

Lastly, let us not forget another remarkable facet of Alegría's career in the area of translation. Along with her late husband, Darwin "Bud" Flakoll, Alegría translated and edited a number of English-speaking authors into Spanish, including the works of Robert Graves and Salman Rushdie. Most noteworthy was their book *New Voices of Hispanic America* (1962), an important anthology of Latin American prose and poetry that featured

a number of writers who later became key references of Spanish American letters during the second half of the twentieth century (Rulfo, Cortázar, Roa Bastos, among many others) and whose works appeared in English for the first time in this volume. In the 1990s Alegría and Flakoll's partnership also produced a number of riveting accounts of recent events in Latin American history, such as the assassination of Anastasio Somoza in Paraguay, as told in *Somoza: Expediente cerrado* (1993; Eng. *Death of Somoza*, 1996), and the escape of members of the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement from a penitentiary in Peru, as seen in *Fuga de Canto Grande* (1992; Eng. *Tunnel to Canto Grande*, 1996). These books and many others underscore the relevance of reportage and testimonial writing in contemporary Latin American letters.

Throughout her distinguished career, Claribel Alegría's talent as a writer has successfully blended writings in which multiple voices depict the many histories and traditions of the peoples of Nicaragua and El Salvador. It is such versatility in her lyrics and her prose, whether dealing with concrete images, political themes, or personal loss, that has gained her such respect and admiration in the world of letters. Her poetry and

prose celebrate the literary craft while at the same time bringing the reader closer to political awakening and an understanding of the transformational power of daily existence and historical experiences in Latin America.

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

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CÉSAR FERREIRA is Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where he teaches contemporary Latin American literature. A longtime contributor to *World Literature Today*, his recent books include *Edgardo Rivera Martínez: Nuevas Lecturas* (2006) and *Culture and Customs of Peru* (2003). He also spent a year in Peru as a Fulbright scholar in 2005.