READING SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN CLARIBEL ALEGRÍA'S EARLY POETRY

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The literary career of Claribel Alegría (1925-) spans almost fifty years during which she has written over forty books of poetry, fiction and *testimonio*. Although she is arguably a poet first, most of the criticism of her work has focused on her fiction. An important 1994 publication entitled *Claribel Alegría and Central American Literature: Critical Essays* contains only one article devoted to her poetry. Even when they address her poetry, critics, including editors of her anthologies, have targeted her explicitly political poetry of the late 1970s and particularly of the 1980s. Perhaps Alegría's own view, that of Archbishop Oscar Romero's 1980 assassination being pivotal to her becoming a political poet, has prevented critics from examining her first poetry collections. This paper, therefore, traces briefly the development of social consciousness in that early poetry.

The concept is wrought with assumptions about subjectivity and social relations. It lacks meditation, however, on the actual act of acquiring "social" consciousness. In other words, how does one come to it? Marx first separates consciousness from the realm of spirituality and relates it to material existence, to ideological production, to the "actual life-process" (154). Lukács seals it from the bourgeoisie. Lukács speaks specifically of the proletariat as the sole owner of consciousness, which he calls class consciousness, defining it as the ability to express totality, to be critical and transform society. The bourgeoisie, its vision limited, its self-interest incompatible with revolutionary or collective action, possesses a "false," economic consciousness. The bourgeoisie, according to Lukács, cannot act upon its consciousness, has no "*thought-action*," in the words of Henri Lefebvre, no "movement, active, directed towards specific goals" (135).

Lukács' theory of consciousness as seeing reality as totality which must be opposed, has proven useful to many critics, including feminists, as they discuss various "marginal" groups and outline other types of consciousness, that of social circumstances, for instance. It would seem, by Lukács' theory, that an educated, upper-class poet is excluded from those socially conscious. Yet, as her late poetry and fiction bear out in critic after critic's research, Claribel Alegría *is* socially conscious. Alegría, her writing an act, action, of "sacrifice" and a manifestation of her interest in the "other," envisions the totality of the systems of

oppression at work in her native countries. Having witnessed, as a young girl, the horrors of the 1932 *Matanza*, she learns to consider events not as random or isolated, begins to understand them in their sociohistorical contexts, and writes in opposition, in resistance, to them. In 1966 she and Darwin J. Flakoll published *Cenizas de Izalco* as a response to the *Matanza*. The book garnered much critical attention, but her poetry of the same period has been overlooked. That does not mean, however, that it shows no sign of being socially conscious.

Perhaps critics' perceptions of what constitutes socially conscious, or rather "resistance," literature excludes Alegría's early, metaphorical poetry. According to Barbara Harlow in her influential book, *Resistance Literature* (1987), literature that is "resistant" calls attention to its politics and is "immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (28-29). Yet, can there be an indirect, or veiled, "resistant" literature? What is the role of conscious criticism in resistance, and when does a writer become resistant? Although Harlow prefaces her book citing the use of an allegorical folktale in a piece of "resistance" literature, definitions such as hers above exclude from the canon of "resistant" literature that which perhaps indirectly, though paradoxically clearly, questions cultural, ideological or social structures.

Unlike her later poems, such as "La mujer del río Sumpul" (1988) and "Flores del volcán" (1978), in which social criticism is explicit, Alegría's earlier poems deal with issues of injustice and power in more metaphorical, allegorical ways. From her first poetry collection, *Anillo de silencio* (1948), published while a student of Juan Ramón Jiménez, Alegría insinuates a desire to listen to others, reveals a nascent social consciousness. In "Aquí estoy," Alegría's poetic speaker confesses to the wind her desire, and inability, to hear the world in its pain, "Oigo de lejos al dolor .../// . . . llévame a una isla sin murallas / donde pueda escuchar todas las voces" (1; 5, 3; 11-12). When this collection is mentioned at all in surveys of Alegría's work, it is usually described as thoroughly subjective and introverted. Although much of the imagery is rather "romantic" and the poetic voice seems deeply engrossed in itself, "Aquí estoy" in particular challenges perceptions of *Anillo de silencio* as totally marginal to her later, better-known poetry.

Alegría's interest in social themes is clearer in *Vigilias* (1953), a collection of mostly sonnets in which is created a tension between more traditional lyrical poems such as the idyllic "El Salvador," and the

allegorically critical "Rito dominical," which depicts the ritual death of a bull. In the former the country is described in terms of its natural beauty and is finally declared a still pool of poetry, "un remanso de poesía" (8). It is a poem that a sentimental bourgeois woman, unconcerned with the world of which she is not a part, would be expected to write. "Rito dominical," on the other hand, portrays literally a Sunday bullfight and spectators' celebration of it. But the poem is also an allegorical rendering of the sacrifice and death of an innocent. The title both describes the ritualistic aspect of the bullfight and alludes to the Christian Sabbath and its rituals. The bull is born and bred for sacrifice, and its eventual death "[en] forma de cruz" reminds of Jesus' death and, by extension, the deaths of other martyrs. Death for sport of such a seemingly powerful body speaks also to the 1932 government massacre of thousands of people following a peasant rebellion.

Shortly after *Vigilias*, Alegría's social criticism and the influence of the *Matanza* become more apparent. A multiplicity of voices of Salvadoran society emerges in *Huésped de mi tiempo* (1961). In "Monólogo múltiple" Alegría explores a wide spectrum of archetypes, from the Artisan to the Warrior, that represent different social and political stances. The fact that the poetic voice understands these as archetypes is asserted by the epigraph, quoted from Jungian psychoanalyst Ira Progoff, "[they are] the universals in man, the psychic potentialities latent in mankind as a whole." The several speakers, heard from alternately but always in this order, the Mother, the Lover, the Warrior, the Old Man, and the Artisan, stand as representatives of their social positions.

The Mother in her monologue advises her newborn on the reality of the life into which he has been born. Her advice, though, is ambiguous. She seems to urge him to hear and listen to his own voice, while in later stanzas she reaffirms the power of authority, explaining to him he will be watched and that his existence is subordinated to History (10-12, 55-56, 61-62). In her final statement the Mother tells her son that he will be like everyone else, making his choices alone, "estarás siempre solo / cuando haya que escoger" (130-31). The ambiguity in the Mother's voice is lessened in this, her third and final monologue. Still, her own view as to what her son will need to do to survive remains unspoken.

In his monologue the Lover describes the changes wrought by the appearance of his female lover and contemplates the result of their union. Like the Mother, the Lover sees his world as small in

comparison to others', though he confesses the woman has enlarged it, "Ahora lo llena tu presencia / como llena esta poza tu reflejo" (22-23). Notice, though, the metaphor that he chooses to represent their existence, a puddle. He describes a traditional domestic existence, then directly draws a distinction between it and History (78-83). The Lover is conscious of his, and his kind's, separation from historic events. He sees no social transformation in sight. The family which he will head will remain outside of centers of power and/or change. His mediocrity pleases him, for he believes it allows for others to become heroes (136-37). Thus, the Lover in love with his own position in society is easily appeased and contented, self-satisfied and complacent, no participant in History.

In contrast to the Lover, the Warrior is in the middle of historic events but knows not why. In each of his stanzas he repeats, "Es difícil explicar / las cosas que a uno le suceden" (24-25, 94-95, 153-154). His lack of understanding is notable for one who represents power and authority. Of even more consequence, he views himself as under the threat of "wolves" and believes he has only survived them by the grace of some higher power, faith or a miracle (148-51). The Warrior thinks of his relation to the "lobos hambrientos" as that of David to Goliath, to which he refers in his first encounter with them, where his only defense is a stone (29-33). The Biblical allusion signals the existence of a benevolent power in the Warrior's world. The Warrior, powerless himself, is an instrument of this power, and fails to comprehend the direction of his life. Later, when the wolves bare their fangs, "y la baba cayendo de sus colmillos," he kills them (88). Like the apathetic Mother and Lover, the Warrior identifies himself a pawn or puppet who knows only that he is acting, without understanding why or how. For after he kills the wolves in self-defense and enters the lair of a dragon and slays it, he fights magnificently in a Warsaw ghetto, "y supe que había que pelear...Yo sigo sin entender" (145, 152).

The Old Man understands more of the world than any other but still cannot respond in an active manner. He laments society's lack of memory and the persistence of pain (44, 96-97). He questions the ill-conceived belief in progress that ignores death and pain (108-114). The Old Man's awareness of History's repetition and the "fallacy" of progress is a result of his long life. He confesses, "y regresaba yo de mi odisea, / y ahora, recién" (98-107). In these lines, the blood that poisons the fish and the praying women foreshadow real events of the

Salvadoran Civil War, as well as Alegría's own later poems about the conflict (110-14). Finally, the Old Man calls indirectly for "naïve" young men to take on the struggle for an ambiguous cause (155-64).

The previous speakers' complacency and ambiguity toward the world, as well as their incomprehension of it, is reversed in the Artisan's stanzas. The transformability of society rests with the Artisan because he is able to create, and destroy, with his hands; interestingly, he is also the creator of artifice. From the beginning his monologue directly speaks to the need for change and his role in that process (45-47). The Warrior's stone as defense against the wolves is the stone the Artisan needs in his search for a defense against those who chase him (51-54). The history of the stone presses itself against the Artisan, forcing him to find meaning in his life through it and ultimately sacrificing him (121-24). Although the Artisan understands his role in the unfolding of History, he remains an instrument of the possibility and desire for transformation. He feels he was born to be a martyr, to put the stone in place that will kill him but will continue the cycle of "piedra[s] palpitante[s]" that others will destroy (169-74). The Artisan creates new hope and changes that will ultimately be trampled.

At first glance, ending "Monólogo múltiple" with the Artisan"s words is a hopeful vision of social transformation through the cyclical sacrifice of others like him. Perhaps the real change called for, however, is found in the archetypal positions filled by the five speakers. All of them, Mother, Lover, Warrior, Old Man and Artisan, unquestionably accept their fates without searching for a broader social or self-consciousness. Although the Artisan's acceptance of martyrdom appears to be admirable, society needs to examine why it is necessary for some to sacrifice their lives while the rest lie stagnant in their "God-given," socially-sanctioned roles. Alegría implicitly disputes the accepted "resistant" position of exalting those who give their lives to political causes as a matter of course. She critiques "archetypes" which immerse individuals, thus the collectivity, in their own "puddles" to face the "wolves" alone. The title itself alludes to the gathering of all voices into one monologue while retaining the differences amongst them.

These are but a few examples of how Claribel Alegría develops as a poet of social consciousness and political conviction. The social critique in her early poetry is a clear indication of her understanding of the need for collective reappraisal of the state of society. Her development into a readily recognizable voice of "resistance" in the 1980s must be re-

evaluated in light of her beginnings as a poet and writer of fiction decades prior to the eruption of civil wars in her native El Salvador and Nicaragua. As Central America moves farther away from war it is particularly pertinent to understand how Alegría's poetics have evolved, especially noting her latest poetry collections, *Fugas* (1995), with its simple title and use of mythology, and the poetic memoir, *Umbrales* (1997).

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