

Book Review

THEY WON'T TAKE ME ALIVE
CLARIBEL ALEGRIA
1987
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No Me Agarran Viva (They Won't Take Me Alive) by Claribel Alegria is a very fine work built around some compelling - if not completely felicitous - literary devices and imagery that is both rich and subtle. Yet, just as one might anticipate little less from such a reputable author, so also is the expectation of a profoundly conservative perspective fully justified and even surpassed. In this text Alegria directly addresses matters of great importance to her as a political animal as well as a novelist - the shade of Victoria Ocampo, 1935 doyenne of Argentine literature and one of the foremost spokeswomen for Latin American writing, is here in all but name.

The book is markedly devoid of the fiercely polemical tone adopted by the author in her poetry, public statements and increasingly frequent excursions into journalism, but it provides an extensive display of the assumptions and convictions that underpin Alegria's more trenchant extramural invectives. One of the work's principal resources lies in the sympathy with which the central radical protagonist, Commander Eugenia, is drawn as an individual and more specifically as a woman, yet its essential character is established by the only constant feature of the text: the understanding that the being of the left is singularly self-determined and, even more importantly, that the catastrophe that is contemporary El Salvador is centrally attributable to the agency of this left. The notable lack of attention to the wider geopolitical and liberation struggle within which the personal ideology and organisation of progressivism are engendered is no mundane omission. For whilst all histories, 'imagined' or otherwise, are necessarily partial and Alegria is justifiably preoccupied with an internal discourse, the core of the book is constituted by the presumption that Eugenia can only be comprehended through her own vision of the world and esoteric protocols. For example (1987:54):

So it became essential to uncover our capacity for advancing along this path, and whether we as individuals were capable of transforming ourselves in order to follow it - if we were able to acquire the necessary political context, realise the necessary sacrifices, renounce normal life and exchange it for secrecy and the total compartmentalisation of one's existence.

Despite its title, the work has two protagonists - the restless Eugenia Castillo Rivas, an obscure Salvadorean guerilla helping to stage an insurrection in El Salvador in 1981, the time of the general offensive, and an anonymous narrator and collator endeavouring to reconstruct the story of this abortive revolt in present (1986) El Salvador when the state of strife has escalated to open civil war and intervention by the US marines on the side of the tyranny. This time gap allows *Alegria* to establish, but never explain, a linkage between Eugenia's not completely dishonourable failure in the past and the successes of the liberation front in the present (1987:145):

I think Eugenia died in this fullness. Fully Happy. Death merely bestows the crown of heroism upon her profoundly committed life, without reservations.

The 'plot' of the 1981 general offensive is subordinate but far from marginal since its unremitting advance towards the disaster it will become contains all the elements of detective fiction. However, the author bobs and weaves around this basic narrative line and its climax - the attack on Ilopango airport - with a series of literary devices that increasingly dominate the text. The most obvious of these is the constant exchange - most often between paragraphs but sometimes within lines - of the point of narration between the researcher-narrator, interviewing Eugenia's erstwhile comrades in the first person, and Eugenia herself, struggling towards her 'heroic' destiny in the third. This interchange 'relativizes' the text whereby one revelation after another is subverted through a change of voice as well as developments in the story.

Through all but one chapter the precarious nature of the 'truth' of Eugenia's escapade is engagingly demonstrated by the contrast between a narrative of 1981 invested with the authority of the third person and the versions of that same past recounted to the narrator by those who have survived it. Although these interlocutors are told that their confidences will be respected and that their account will be used only as a basis for 'fiction' and not as 'history', they are requested to provide a detailed concrete version of what occurred. Their reminiscences are then shown to be highly varied and fraught with all manner of insufficiency, the lapses and

adjustments of memory generally being openly self-serving although *Alegria* is not so banal as to exclude the more extensive and profound difficulties and richness of oral history. The book could easily rest on this basis, but even before the last chapter it is evident that our writer will play her trump on the decreasingly credulous reader. In the final pages the work reaches its denouement in a meeting between the narrator and Eugenia herself, which encounter provides both a resolution to the story of the beautiful guerilla and a final subversion when the narrator reveals her own 'exaggerations' within the text.

This contrived ending lacks conviction, not least because it extinguishes a doubt as to authorship that resists neat consummation after such diligent seduction. One suspects that the narrator's self-proclaimed extremism of the imagination yields to feigned rapture because it is in embrace with political conservatism: Eugenia's embattled trajectory terminates in careworn common-sense and apolitical sobriety yet cannot convincingly be dragged over this final mile unless we are assured that such an account belongs to the heart-rending cry of the title and is the 'real story'. The portrait of an exhausted, frightened woman glorified into a hagiographic stylised revolutionary is neither unpersuasive nor markedly indulgent, but it is only achieved by the liquidation of literary as well as political subversion, and in this respect the importance of *No Me Agarran Viva* lies far more in its substantive treatment of *Alegria*'s preferred themes of obsession and ideology than as an exploration of literary form.