



Interweaving Narrative Discourse in Sergio Ramírez's *Margarita, está linda la mar*

Mark Edward Bates, Ph.D.

Simpson College

Within the last fifteen years, Sergio Ramírez has become Nicaragua's most prolific and celebrated novelist. Known first and foremost for his revolutionary activity to defeat the Somoza dictatorship in the 1970's as well as his tenure as Vice President during the first Sandinista Government in the 1980's, Sergio Ramírez has written a number of novels which include *Tiempo de fulgor* (1970), *¿Te dio miedo la sangre?* (1977), *Castigo divino* (1988), *Un baile de máscaras* (1995), *Margarita, está linda la mar* (1998), and *Mil y una muertes* (2004). Sergio Ramírez's rise as a novelist closely coincides with the end of his political career when he "returned to be what he was before dedicating 25 years of his life to the Revolution...a writer."¹ Since the end of the Sandinista Revolution he has achieved several awards and honors including the prestigious Primer Premio Internacional Alfaguara de Novela for *Margarita, está linda la mar*. Critics have approached Sergio Ramírez's work both thematically and structurally.

¹ Excerpted from an interview with Sergio Ramirez on April 26, 2004.

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Jeff Browitt's "La política cultural en el pensamiento de Sergio Ramírez" points to the Sandinista Revolution as an inescapable theme in Sergio Ramírez's work. Seymour Menton classifies the novel as "la única que podría calificarse de "nueva"...contiene los seis rasgos de la Nueva Novela Histórica que señalo en mi libro de 1993."² Nicasio Urbina's article "Violencia y estructura en *Margarita, está linda la mar* de Sergio Ramírez" suggests that theme and structure are inexorably bound, "Aún más, la percepción de los lectores de esta violencia está marcada por la estructura de la obra, por el orden en que los eventos son presentados, por el tono, por los detalles y el estilo que el artista ha escogido para realizar su narración."³ Critical reception of the novel has been overwhelmingly positive, placing it among Sergio Ramírez's most important works to date.

During the construction of the *récit* in his novels, the author experiments with innovative narrative devices, from more traditional elements of unreliable narrator and shifting narrative voice to more experimental features as interweaving narrative discourse, a technique found in many of his novels. In his 1977 novel *¿Te dio miedo la sangre?*, the novelist ambitiously intertwines six separate narrative lines represented by pictographs. These narrative lines find points of contact through narrated events (in one narrative line ex anti-Somoza conspirators plot their revenge against the Guardia Nacional officer who ordered their torture, specifically being thrust into a cage with tigers, an event found in another narrative line⁴). While the resulting disjointed narrative makes demands on even the most experienced reader, this experimentation leads to more polished examples of narrative interweaving found in *Castigo divino* and *Margarita, está linda la mar*.

In this last novel, Ramírez uses this narrative technique to intertwine two of the most significant events in Nicaraguan history, the return of Rubén Darío to Nicaragua in 1907 after his extended stay in Europe and the assassination of the dictator Anastacio Somoza García in 1956. Using a series of narrative strategies which include a critical third person omniscient narrator that manipulates the reader through humor and irony, characterization (both real and fictional), parallel events (historical and invented) and narrative loose ends, as well as the simultaneous existence of characters and places in the two narratives, Ramírez produces a critical vision of Nicaragua as a failed society where

2 Seymour Menton, "Margarita, está linda la mar, una Nueva Novela Histórica en la época posrevolucionaria: 1989-2000." *Istmo: Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos*. No. 3 enero-junio 2002.

3 Nicasio Urbina, "Violencia y estructura en *Margarita está linda la mar* de Sergio Ramírez," *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. 70, n.207 Spring 2004, 359.

4 Sergio Ramírez, *¿Te dio miedo la sangre?*

national heroes like Rubén Darío are presented as drunken manic depressives and the for an “elected” president is bought through fear and repression. In this study specific examples of this intertwining of narrative discourse will be examined in detail, as well as how this narrative technique reveals its implicit criticism.

The Omniscient Narrator

In order to effectively develop each narrative line, Sergio Ramírez employs a third person omniscient narrator aware of the events of both 1907 and 1956. This narrator focalizes the action through the eyes of Capitán Prío, a character that has direct ties to both narrative lines. The chapters on the 1907 Darío narrative begin with the view point of Prío (at the onset of the 1956 narrative line) as he observes the procession for Somoza’s official state visit to León to be renominated by the Liberal Party to another term as president. Associated with the captain are a group of Rubén Darío devotees who meet in the Casa Prío to drink and to discuss the life of the poet. As the narration develops we discover that this group comprises the very group of conspirators who will plan and execute Somoza’s assassination. Sergio Ramírez has maintained the historical accuracy of the name of Somoza’s assassin, Rigoberto López, while changing the names of the others in order to “give the story some historical flexibility.”⁵ Our narrator often engages in direct dialogue with the characters, occasionally with our focalizing character, as in this scene where the narrator talks to both the captain and the First Lady, who participates in both narratives,

“No se alcanzaba a oírla. (a la Primera Dama, Salvadorita) Pero presumo, Capitán, que no estaría recordándole al marido (Somoza) que quien reposa bajo el peso del león doliente (Darío) fue despojado de su cerebro la misma noche de su muerte, un enojoso asunto de familia. Por el contrario, es mucho más probable que su pensamiento volara hacia los versos que le escribiera un día en su abanico de niña:

*La perla nueva, la frase escrita,
Por la celeste luz infinita,
Darán un día su resplandor;
¡ay Salvadora, Salvadorita,
no mates nunca tu ruiñón!*

⁵ Excerpted from an interview with Sergio Ramirez on April 26, 2004

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--aunque ya lo supiera preguntaría, confanzudo, si le estuviera permitido:
¿cuándo fue eso, Salvadorita?"⁶

Moreover the focalizing character of Capitán Prío provides the transition from the 1956 narrative line to the 1907 line. This line, narrated traditionally and chronologically by our omniscient narrator, typically concludes with a debate among Rigoberto and the other conspirators about some fact mentioned in the narration as if they were listening to the events in 1907 narrated to the reader. This level of narrator involvement suggests an ongoing intertextuality between the two narrative lines, setting in motion the eventual intertwining of narrative discourse that occurs throughout the novel. These chapters frequently offer some sarcastic quip such as the ending which suggests that although Somoza has no anus, he has managed to figuratively defecate on Nicaragua. In other segments we have the stupidity of the border patrolman who confuses the identity of the fugitive Cordelio Selva and the actor Bienvenido Granda. Another example is the sardonically humorous battle over Rubén Darío's brain. These moments of humor and irony further underscore the demythification of both Anastacio Somoza and Rubén Darío as national heroes.

Characterization

The author employs shadow characters in the two narratives in order to interweave the narrative lines. These characters perform the same function in each ; for example, in the 1907 narrative line, we find El Sabio Debayle, (the future dictator's father in law) a know it all type who tries in every way conceivable to enter into Rubén Darío's world, even to the point of encouraging an affair between the poet and his wife's niece Eulalia. This character is reflected in the 1956 narrative by Baltazar Cisne, the clumsy Darío fanatic who is painstakingly transporting the statue to Nicaragua from San Salvador and insists on sitting near Somoza at the reception dinner and dance in honor of his renomination as president of Nicaragua. Somoza himself is depicted as a bumbling fool in the 1907 narrative line, and later as a ruthless tyrant who orders the absurdly comical replaying of *El barrilito cervecero*, an event which the author claims to be based on truth.⁷ Even the play *Tovarich*, staged by the conspirators as a distraction from the real assassination attempt, repeats this shadow theme. One of the group, Erwin, is cast as the handsome prince and his object of desire in the drama is played by his real life girlfriend *La Mora Zela*, ironically the daughter of Baltazar Cisne. The play reveals an impossible love between the two just as their real life love becomes impossible because Erwin is

⁶ Sergio Ramirez, *Margarita, está linda la mar* 17.

⁷ Excerpted from an interview with Sergio Ramírez on April 26, 2004.

implicated in the assassination. In the final analysis, these shadow characters reveal an absurd yet comical underworld where the reputations of both of the novel's central characters, Rubén Darío and Somoza, come undeniably into question.

Parallel events and narrative loose ends

Several parallel events foreshadow or emphasize the themes of the novel. There are for example three surgeries in the novel performed by Debayle: General Selvano's eye color change, *La Caimana's* sex change, and the removal of Rubén's brain, each a miserable failure. These reveal incompetence in the face of perceived ability which is a metaphor for Anastacio Somoza himself and perhaps for Rubén Darío. There are two banquet dinners: one in honor of Rubén Darío in which a drunken poet rambles on and insults his guests, and the second for Somoza at the moment of his assassination. Two sea voyages occur in the novel: Rubén's triumphant return on the *Pacific Mail* and the voyage carrying Baltazar Cisne, the co conspirator Cordelio Selva, and a cast of others that in some way or another have a connection to the past or the present narration. Numerous secret affairs, betrayals, illegitimate children, albinos, hidden identities, military rivalries, supernatural events, even gay romances swirl and intermingle, confusing the issues at hand, obscuring the details of the novel, and plunging the reader into a seemingly never ending series of narrative loose ends that provide comic relief and a feeling of a play in the genre of Theatre of the Absurd. Often these loose ends are based on historical events: the signing of Salvadorita's fan, Rubén's return to Nicaragua, Somoza's assassination, to list a few. The author even provides a chronology of Somoza's life in the section labeled as "Intermezzo tropical,"⁸ partly fact, partly fictionalized for humorous effect. The letter from Rigoberto to his mother explaining his motives for the assassination lends a level of historical authority and authenticity to the narration. The result of these parallel events and narrative loose ends is twofold; first, the reader is forced to actively participate in the reconstruction of the narrative, which seems at times a daunting task; second, the loose ends reveal the failures of the Nicaraguan society itself, where corruption and greed are rewarded, while personal sacrifice and determination are met with contempt and failure.

⁸ Margarita 165-177.

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Simultaneous existence of characters and places

The novel's structure revolves around the focalizing eye of Capitán Prío, and specifically the Casa Prío, where the conspirators complicit in Somoza's assassination gather in the 1956 narrative line and where Rubén Darío lived in the 1907 discourse. This place connects the two narrative lines and the narrator often uses elements of the house to transition between the two. Certain characters operate between both narrative lines. The best example of this is the pair of characters Quirón and *La Caimana*. In 1907 Quirón is the orphan who, touched by the poet, receives his "gift," and, after Darío's death, assists Debayle in removing the poet's brain for medical research. In 1956 he has become a professor who happens to be reading in the same plaza across from which *La Caimana* prepares to open her bar, Baby Dolls. In 1907 *La Caimana* is a young girl who is left by her pyrotechnic father at an all boys orphanage passing her off as a boy. When she is raped by the boys, Quirón comes to her aid. She later swears off men by becoming one, aided by Somoza who had gotten off scot-free in a counterfeiting scheme the two had concocted. Later Somoza asks his future father-in-law to perform the sex change operation. Debayle's scientific curiosity knows no limits; he accepts the adventurous offer. This opportunity opens the way for Somoza to marry Salvadorita. In 1956 the now androgynous *La Caimana* is the most devoted Somoza supporter, and although implicated in his assassination, is released when her loyalty to the dictator is revealed in the subsequent questioning. This scene shows the effect of the presence of the two characters in a chance meeting that weaves together the two narrative lines:

Quédense mejor todos donde están. La Caimana y Quirón, que ahora intercambian señales de despedida que a ambos les causan mucha risa, bien pueden llevarnos adonde es necesario ir, al 6 de febrero de 1916. Anochece como ahora aquí, y no pueden seguir perdiéndose ustedes de lo que allá ocurre. Hay una gran expectación en toda la ciudad. Rubén agoniza. (268-269)

Numerous other characters play a role in both narrations; Casimira, the robust mother of Salvadorita and Margarita who engages Rubén in witty conversation in 1907 aboard the *Pacific Mail*, becomes the wheelchair bound interfering mother-in-law in 1956. Salvadorita is the awestruck girl of 1907 on whose fan the poet inscribes a poem dedicated to her as well as the tyrannical first lady in 1956. These examples provide a deeper level of interweaving narrative discourse, suggesting the two historical events are not only inseparable, but undeniably linked.

Sergio Ramírez has created a complex novel where two worlds collide, and two key moments in Nicaraguan history become connected. His vision of intertwining narrative discourses seeks to debunk the hero worship of Rubén Darío, and in the case of Somoza García, both to dismantle the glorification of the leader by the political right and his demonization by the political left. The fact that history remembers Rubén Darío as the country's greatest literary figure remains unchallenged, however this man Nicaraguans venerate was at best a foolish drunkard and womanizer. Somoza García is painted as a swindling, unimaginative criminal worthy of neither esteem nor contempt. This becomes the ultimate criticism of the novel. In a world where true heroism is scorned, epitomized in Rigoberto's patriotic act, and deceit and lies are rewarded, as is the case of Somoza and his cohorts, justice and freedom are impossible to achieve and real national heroes can not exist.

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