

RICHARD ELMAN — poet, novelist and critic — describes himself as “a democrat and Socialist.” Maybe, like many of us, he will have to move to France. He has instead been spending his time in Nicaragua, before and after the revolution that chased the Somoza family out of the country and installed the Sandinists. Elman is also a character out of a very good novel by Graham Greene, tall, guilt-ridden, quick-tempered, scrupulous, struggling with the Spanish language, running out of cigarettes, contemplating history with dismay.

He despises the Somozas, who came to power with the help of the U.S. Marines and used Nicaragua as a sort of company store, with torture in the basement. But he isn't writing blurbs for the Sandinists. He is just as depressed by Managua after the revolution as he was before. He finds the government newspaper of the Sandinists, *Barricada*, as unreliable and as predictable as the government newspaper of the Somozas, *Novedades*; *La Prensa*, which costs twice as much as *Barricada* and represents, more or less, the liberal center, is the periodical he and his taxi driver trust. The Managua headquarters of *La Prensa* were reduced to rubble by Somoza.

There are still beggars in Managua. Nicaragua still requires an entrepreneurial middle class and U.S. loans. The Cubans are officious and their propaganda films mind-numbing. Joblessness persists, although the literacy rate is rising. Even the sympathetic North Americans, like Elman, are made to feel — well, not exactly unwanted but friendless and peripheral. Instead of the abrazo, there is the shrug. As a reporter should be, Elman is difficult to please. He wants fewer Cubans and more French food and an American publisher of books or magazines that will take Latin America seriously. He wants the revolution to be snappy, and criticizes himself for his own impatience. He knows how to be scared, and how to write about it.

Darkness and White Rum

Obviously, Elman is not John Reed. He refuses to empathize; he is acquainted with doubt; he is a poet of confusion. There is darkness in these pages, and white rum, and Scandinavian female journalists wearing see-through blouses and nylon stockings in the middle of a civil war. There is honor, and there is the scam, and beyond both honor and scam there is irony, that Western disease about which it is necessary to be ironical. There is also, for Nicaragua, breathing space, perhaps for the first time

since 1524, when the conquistadores slaughtered the Indians.

It isn't pretty and it isn't neat, this revolution, but it deserves its breathing space because it isn't brutal, either. That is Elman's overt message. His covert message seems to be that witnesses with return tickets should, in decency, mumble rather than sermonize. What do we know of blood and bravery? Edgy and eloquent, he roots for this revolution even as he combs his qualms. Nothing could be worse than the Somozas.

Like Elman, Susan Meiselas cites the Nicaraguan poet-priest, Ernesto Cardenal. If memory serves, she took the photographs that illustrated Elman's article on the revolution for *Geo* magazine. “Nicaragua,” consists of 74 of those photographs, all in color, plus an addendum of captions, snippets of official and subversive documents, and historical chronology. In what amounts to an act of preemptive criticism, John Berger blurbs of her book that it transcends the “aestheticization of violence.”

Not quite. From the very first photograph, of a Sandinist rebel wearing an Indian mask that belongs to medieval Christian allegory, we are asked to gasp at the fall of light, the angle of guns, the shadow of motorcycles, the sarcasm of Coca-Cola advertisements, the floor pattern beneath the bodies of wounded children. I have no doubt of Meiselas' excellent intentions, nor of her extraordinary talent, but somehow the sickening is made slick. We are locked into a series of gaudy gestures. The color burns and the grief has too much style; the grief has been thought about too much, as the photographer angles. My impression is of costume drama in which the actors, surprisingly, die.

I'm afraid this impression is all too characteristic of the way we think about Latin America — all those little, noisy nation-states, full of Spanish bravado and Indian passivity and surreal novelists. The Nicaraguans, like the Salvadorans and the Argentines, live in a dream, an advertisement for the historical unconscious. We need Elman's qualms, his awkward honesty, to counterbalance these sad glossies, these postcards from a plagued cathedral.

The last word should belong to Ernesto Cardenal. Meiselas quotes his poem on 186 parrots “about to be exported to the United States/ where they would learn to speak English.” Forty-seven parrots die in their cages. The rest of the parrots, nearing the mountains, where they once lived, make such a commotion that the cages are opened and they fly away like arrows.

Solution to Previous Puzzle

B	I	D	E	S	C	A	L	P	S	A	V	E		
R	A	I	N	T	A	B	O	R	U	N	I	V		
A	G	E	S	I	N	O	N	E	B	N	A	I		
Y	O	U	C	A	N	T	W	I	N	E	M	A	L	
				O	N	T	O		A	R	I			
S	H	U	N	T	S	C	I	T	A	T	I	O	N	
N	O	N	C	E	M	U	R	A	L	D	O	V	I	
E	R	I	E	D	O	R	A	L	P	E	A	T		
E	N	T	S	A	T	I	N	B	A	S	T	E		
R	E	S	O	L	U	T	E	C	A	R	T	E		
				L	A	G		C	O	L	A			
I	T	M	I	G	H	T	H	A	V	E	B	E	E	N
S	H	I	V		T	H	A	N	E		L	A	T	E

*That's what the Revolution did with us,
I think,
took us out of the cages in which we
were being carried off to speak
English.
And sent us back to the land from which
we had been pulled.
The green compass like parrots gave
back to the parrots their green
mountains.
But 47 had died.*