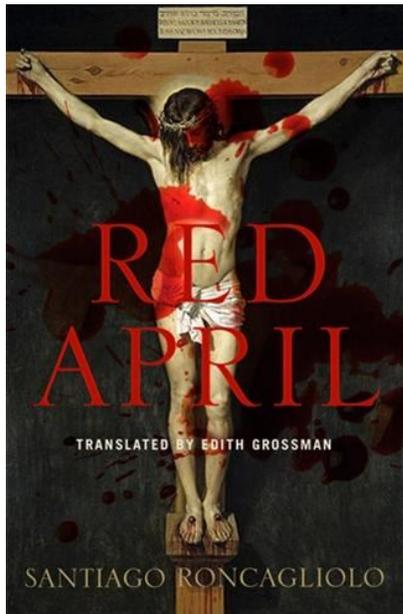


BOOK REVIEW

Red April

By Santiago Roncagliolo (Translated by Edith Grossman)



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Review by
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Santiago Roncagliolo's third novel, but the first one to be translated into English from Spanish, *Red April*, has elements of classic noir murder mystery mixed with a Kafkaesque style. Between the scrupulously-written report of Felix Chacaltana Salvidar at the beginning of the novel, and the report of Carlos Martin Elespuru, at the end of the novel, lies the grim prose of unscrupulous lives, of politics and terrorism. At the turn of the millennium when the scourge of Maoist terrorism has quite abated in Peru, it is time for the celebration of the Holy Week. But a badly burnt corpse with a missing arm is discovered and Chacaltana, the associate district prosecutor, is given the responsibility to investigate. Chacaltana, who has recently got himself transferred from Lima to Ayacucho, is pleased of the important task allotted to him. In due course of his investigation, aided by Dr. Posadas's autopsy report, Chacaltana suspects it to be a murder with links to the resurgent Sendero Luminoso –Shining Path – the Maoist guerilla group. Soon he finds his investigation walled by all government agencies. The police, under Captain Pacheco, become uncooperative in tracing the suspect, Justino Mayta Carazo. Elections are round the corner and the government is hell-bent on

proving that no insurgency exists. Chacaltana is forced to fabricate a report that will not give any fodder to the press.

Upon complying, Chacaltana finds the authorities favourably disposed towards him. He is invited by Commander Carrion and appointed as electoral prosecutor in Yawarmayo. In Yawarmayo he finds the town in the fearful grip of both the Maoist terrorists and the president's army. The situation is palpable and both the sides oppress the Quechua-speaking populace with their morally bankrupt terror tactics. It is here, amidst a frantic and fraudulent election, that Chacaltana encounters Justino, who tries to kill him but fails and flees. After returning to Ayacucho, Chacaltana starts to reinvestigate the case and in no time the brutal murders start to stack up. Justino is bizarrely killed and one of his arm is found missing too. Gradually Chacaltana realizes that whoever he speaks to gets killed – Hernan Durango or Comrade Alonso, the Maoist serving a life sentence, and Father Quiroz, whose church houses a crematory oven built by the military during the height of counter-insurgency operations. And both the dead bodies have one of their limbs missing. Until it is the turn of Edith, the girl whom Chacaltana loves, who is murdered and this time her whole torso is missing. The Frankenstein monster of different body parts is almost complete except for the head. When the denouement comes the reader is forced to reassess the incidents and the narrative afresh.

Chacaltana is an eccentric character. He has been abandoned by his wife. He keeps the memory of his long dead mother alive by catering to her haunting presence. In his work he is meticulous but often farcically so. He is quite unprepared for the horrifying confrontations that he sails into. And there is a secret he has harboured for many years. But the novel is not just a whodunit. Chacaltana is an existential character too. His conversation with Father Quiroz is profoundly philosophic:

"We humans, Senor Prosecutor," the priest began to expound, "are the only animals who have an awareness of death. [. . .] Perhaps each cat or dog thinks he is immortal because it hasn't died. [. . .] Human beings have soul to the exact extent that we are conscious of our deaths." (p. 157)

When Comrade Alonso says: "Here we all kill under threat of death. That's what the people's war is about." (p. 119) or when Commander Carrion says: "Have you seen your friends falling in battle? [. . .] When that happens you stop having friends because you know you'll lose them." (p. 137) it appears that all fatalities are machinations of death itself and human beings are merely its inexplicable agencies. Moreover there is an undercurrent of a historical wrong committed

against the native Indians by the Spanish conquistadors. In the Holy Week of the resurrection of Christ, the campesinos "disguise the goddess Pachamama with the face of Christ" (p. 160) and have their carnival in Ayacucho to celebrate the Andean myth of the resurrection of the Inca civilization. Ayacucho is no Macondo and there is no Melquiades's magic here but rather a grimness of realism prevails. Commander Carrion says:

Ayacucho is a strange place. The Wari culture was here, and then the Chancas, who never let themselves be conquered by the Incas. And then indigenous rebellions, because Ayacucho was the midway point between Cuzco, the Inca capital, and Lima, the capital of the Spaniards. And independence in Quinua. And Sendero. This place is doomed to be bathed in blood and fire forever (p. 200)

It is the history of violence and death that refuses to be wiped out from the palimpsest of the Ayacuchan people, society, and culture.

Santiago Roncagliolo is a writer of the post-boom generation of Latin American literature. He spent his childhood in civil war torn Peru of the 1970s and the 1980s when more than 70,000 people lost their lives. His position escapes the binaries of communist / capitalist or participant / suspect categorization that was so prevalent in the twentieth century. In *Red April* he evokes an era in Peru's history that succeeds the time of Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *Death in the Andes*. It is the simmering aftermath of blood-steeped insurgency – a time for covering mass graves and having fake elections amid latent pockets of Senderista terror. Roncagliolo shows the fallibility of human nature in such a world of alterations. Despite the precise situated-ness of the story, it is equally an existential and moral exploration, which cuts across cultures. Jorge Luis Borges once wrote in an essay that "our tradition is the whole of Western culture. [. . .] we must believe that the universe is our birthright." Santiago Roncagliolo belongs to that Latin American literary tradition.

Edith Grossman's translation of *Red April* is excellent. She conveys the ridiculously institutional language of the police force and the judicial department with as much ease as she does the chaotic words of the eventual murderer. This book adds to her repertoire of having translated Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* among others.

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