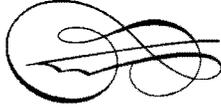


IN BRYANT'S FOOTSTEPS:
TRANSLATING
"CON WALKER EN NICARAGUA"



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I started translating Ernesto Cardenal's poetry seventeen years ago. I was twenty at the time, and he was forty-five. Since then I have worked closely with him on several projects, including the publication of my translation *With Walker In Nicaragua And Other Early Poems, 1949-1954* (Wesleyan University Press, 1984). My early work as a translator led to an active interest in the interpenetration of the American literary experience and Latin American poetry, for I leapt into translation — Cardenal's *Oración Por Marilyn Monroe Y Otros Poemas* (Medellín: Ediciones La Tertulia, 1965); that is, "Prayer For Marilyn Monroe And Other Poems" — just as I was discovering the extraordinary range of this literature and its marked influence on contemporary Anglo-American poetry. Furthermore, my scholarly studies — diggings — in this relatively unexplored field have led me to the wonderful tradition that lies behind all my translations of Latin American poetry. This tradition (pioneered by William Cullen Bryant!) gives me a sense of belonging to a great family of pan-American translators. Most important for me, it validates the translation work that I do.

The first translations of Latin American poetry did not, as many may assume, appear in the 1960s, the decade that saw Neruda, Vallejo, Paz and others begin to flourish in English, largely through translations made by poets — the decade that heard the echo of the "boom" in Latin American literature. Nor is it true that the flourish of translations during the Second World War marked the first period of interest in poetry from Latin America. Surprising as it may

seem, the first significant period of interest took place during the decades before the Civil War, beginning in the 1820s when Bryant was North America's leading Hispanist and the first of what has become a long line of poet-translators attracted to Spanish-language verse from the "other America."

Bryant was a true pioneer in American letters. Not only did his own poetry break new ground, he was the first to translate Latin American poets and to draw attention to them. Unlike other important translators of Spanish literature, notably Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Bryant was immediately curious about any poem written in New Spain. He translated the Cuban poet José María Heredia, whose Byronic expression of the American landscape, as in his much-celebrated ode to Niagara, attracted Bryant during the mid-1820s when he was getting a foothold in New York City and establishing himself as a writer. He later translated the Cuban poet Diego Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (pseud. "Plácido") and the Mexican poet José Rosas Moreno, one of whose verse fables he published on the opening page of the first issue of *St. Nicholas*, the popular monthly magazine for children. As editor of New York's *Evening Post*, he published a poem written in English by his young Colombian friend Rafael Pombo (who translated Bryant into Spanish) and a considerable body of his own prose devoted to Latin America. Like many of today's poets acting as translators, Bryant found inspiration in the elegiac strain of Latin American poetry, which through translation extended the bounds of his own speech, for he tended toward imitation rather than metaphrase. The theme of the emancipation of Latin America also appealed to him, and he maintained throughout his life a strong sympathy for the Latin American nations, whose bitter struggles to win independence have continued to this day, though from tyrants — such as William Walker — other than agents of Spain. Bryant laid the groundwork for one of the oldest literary traditions in the New World, namely, pan-American transla-

tion, which has only begun to receive the attention it deserves in efforts to understand our own national literature.

“*Con Walker en Nicaragua*,” one of Ernesto Cardenal’s earliest documentary poems, was written in 1950, soon after the young poet had returned to Nicaragua following his studies abroad in New York and Europe. He composed the poem on the eve, so to speak, of Nicaragua’s celebration of the centenary of its triumph over William Walker in the Filibuster War of 1855-57 (more about this war later). But I wasn’t motivated to translate the poem until 1980. I had been translating Cardenal’s poetry throughout the 1970s, working mostly on his more recent poems. My inspiration to do “With Walker in Nicaragua” was initially the result of seeing the announcement for a new fellowship program for literary translators, which the National Endowment for the Arts had just instituted as part of the growing recognition of the art of translation in this country. So I looked at the body of untranslated poems by Cardenal — mostly his early work — and selected enough of them to produce a book-length manuscript. Then I dashed off my proposal to the NEA, including a fragment of “With Walker in Nicaragua” and other sample translations: “to collect the early poems Cardenal published in various anthologies, and to make the first English translations of them.” I also noted that “these poems demonstrate history on an epic scale, offering Cardenal’s penetrating vision of the Americas, especially the historical ties between the United States and Nicaragua.” Little did I know at the time how relevant my translation would be, given the U.S. policy of intervention that followed the Sandinista triumph in 1979!

The NEA grants came at a good time (in the spring of 1981), because my son Daniel had just been born — and I was unemployed, down and out in the face of what looked like a dim academic future, with my new Ph.D. in English and a specialty in literary translation not yet appreciated by Academe. And, fortunately for our new family, my wife

Terry was able to land a good teaching job in Ohio. So we moved from New York and, between part-time teaching and shared parenting, I set about to pursue my translation of "*Con Walker en Nicaragua*," and to do the rest of the work for the Cardenal book I had in mind.

What still amazes me is that, until translating "*Con Walker en Nicaragua*," like most people I didn't have much of an idea who William Walker was. I had never been taught about him, nor had I ever seen more than a short footnote about him. This chapter of American history, it dawned on me, had been swept under the rug, and for obvious reasons, given U.S. relations with Nicaragua and with Latin America in general. Only now, in newspaper and magazine articles and in new books, are we being reminded of this shady past, which lies behind the grim headlines about U.S. involvement in Nicaragua today. (The story of William Walker, known in his day as the "Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny," is even being made into a Hollywood movie.) As the relevance to unfolding events charged the history of "With Walker in Nicaragua" with even greater significance, not only did the beauty of the poem itself inspire me to make my translation, the urgent need to bring this history to the attention of Americans (that is, North Americans) inspired me further, for in our correspondence Cardenal had confirmed my suspicion that Walker was the father of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. Indeed, Walker and his fellow "filibusters" (whom Bryant quickly denounced in the *Evening Post* as "desperadoes" and "land pirates") prefigure Reagan's *contras*.

The ultimate source of the name filibuster is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "certainly the Du. *vrijbuiter*, in Kilian *vrij-bueter* (see FREE-BOOTER)." It is not clear whether the 16th-century English form *flibutor* was taken from Dutch directly or through some foreign language. Late in the 18th century, notes the *OED*, the French form *flibustier* was adopted into English, and continued to be used, with occasional variations of spelling, until about

1850-54. Then, the form *filibuster*, from the Spanish *filibustero*, began to be used in reference to bands of adventurers who organized expeditions from the United States, in violation of international law, for the purpose of revolutionizing Central American states and the Spanish West Indies, especially Nicaragua and Cuba. Among these soldiers of fortune were Walker's men, and he was known in the popular press — *Harper's Weekly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *De Bow's Review* — as the "King of the Filibusters." During the mid-19th century, the name was used in a wider sense to describe anyone engaging in unauthorized and irregular warfare against foreign states.

According to the historian Frederic Rosengarten, Jr., William Walker was "the hottest news personality between the discovery of gold in California and the Civil War." He was for a time the most talked-about man in the United States. He had invaded Nicaragua with a band of fifty-seven men (later called the "Immortals"), soon commanded an army of thousands — men flocked to his filibuster army from all over the United States — and made himself President of Nicaragua. He was at first helped considerably by Cornelius Vanderbilt, who owned a prosperous steam-ship line to California via Nicaragua and gave free passage to filibusters en route to Nicaragua. Walker's plan was to make Nicaragua a powerful slave state and to build an empire based on the slave economy; his dream was to annex Central America to the U.S. slave states. As President of Nicaragua, he legalized slavery, issued bonds, and made English the official language. Finally, he alienated Vanderbilt by revoking his transit company's rights to Nicaraguan waters, and the combined forces of the five Central American states, supported by Great Britain and Vanderbilt, succeeded in driving him out in 1857. He made three attempts to return, but was finally captured and executed by firing squad in Honduras, at the age of thirty-six. Although Walker's exploits in Nicaragua have been obscured in American history, he remains, not surprisingly, well remembered in

Central America, where schoolchildren learn about his quest for power; in fact, the charges Nicaragua recently leveled against the captured filibuster Eugene Hasenfus opened with references to Walker.

Cardenal's documentary poem tells the story of Walker's rise and fall — the story of the Filibuster War of 1855-57, followed by Walker's death — from the sympathetic point of view of an old man named Clinton Rollins, who was a filibuster in his youth. Cardenal created this Rollins persona out of several different sources originally written in English by former members of Walker's army. How remarkable that from the ranks of Walker's own mercenaries came numerous books and articles, even several poems!

The *National Union Catalog* gave me my first lead to these various documentary sources. Knowing how Cardenal works with such sources, I pursued the obvious clue in the opening lines of the poem: "*En una cabaña solitaria en la frontera, / yo, Clinton Rollins, sin pretensión literaria, / me entretengo en escribir mis memorias.*" My library research began with looking for a possible citation to a memoir of some kind by Clinton Rollins. Luckily, I quickly found the citation for the Spanish translation of a serialized memoir titled "Filibustering with Walker: Reminiscences of Wild Days on the Pacific Coast," by Clinton Rollins of Baja California, originally published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1909-10; given that the series was copyrighted in the name of H.C. Parkhurst, it may well be that Clinton Rollins was actually a literary invention. More intriguing to me at the time of this discovery was the fact the translation had been made by a Nicaraguan, Guillermo Figueroa, and published in Managua in 1945. I had discovered one of the sources from which Cardenal had created his lines, and by finding a copy of the original newspaper series I would then have as raw materials for my effort the original English, to clarify the meaning of certain lines and phrases, as well as to provide me with authentic language, especially military talk, from Walker's era.

Cardenal, of course, took creative liberties in adapting the Spanish translation of the Rollins' text to his own poetic purposes. But more than that, he put the words from other accounts written by former filibusters, translating them himself from English to Spanish, into the mouth of Clinton Rollins. A beautiful example of this — beautiful because it reveals Cardenal's genius as a political poet who can artfully avoid falling into the traps of rhetorical bombast — is the section of the poem that describes the self-proclaimed General Walker:

I saw Walker for the first time in San Francisco:
 I remember him as if I were seeing his blond face like
 a tiger's;
 his grey eyes, without pupils, fixed like a blind man's,
 but which expanded and flashed like gunpowder in
 combat,
 and his skin faintly freckled, his paleness, his
 clergyman's ways,
 his voice, colorless like his eyes, cold and sharp,
 in a mouth without lips.
 And a woman's voice was hardly softer than his:
 that calm voice of his announcing death sentences . . .
 that swept so many into the jaws of death in combat.
 He never drank or smoked and he wore no uniform.
 Nobody was his friend.
 And I don't remember ever having seen him smile.

Clinton Rollins' actual description of Walker, in the translation which (bound in leather) can be found on the bookshelves of educated Nicaraguans today, portrays the General in distinctly negative terms:

When I first saw Walker he was a bright, energetic man about 30 years of age, well dressed, under sized, smooth shaven, a ready talker and a person of correct habits . . . [But] my ultimate opinion of him, after years of observation was this: He possessed no military abilities whatever, but imagined he did. There was not a spark of the cavalier or dashing freebooter in his composition. He was selfish, self-confident and ambitious . . . cruel, crafty . . . [And] his conception of soldierly conduct was indifference to the suffering of others, even of his friends.

Cardenal here used his poetic technique of crosscutting from source to source, and switched to lines from portraits of Walker written by admiring friends and comrades, Joaquín Miller and James Carson Jamison. Miller wrote an elegiac poem in homage to Walker, published in a turn-of-the-century journal called *Sunset Magazine*, along with a personal note describing “General William Walker, citizen, soldier, president and historian of Nicaragua” as the “cleanest man” he ever knew: “the bravest of the brave,” who “lived and died a devout Roman Catholic.” Since copies of the Miller poem are hard to come by, I imagine Cardenal used the excerpt from the biographical sketch that appears in Jamison’s book about the Filibuster War, titled *With Walker In Nicaragua, Or Reminiscences Of An Officer Of The American Phalanx* (E.W. Stephens, 1909) — I also imagine that Cardenal adapted the title of his poem from Jamison’s work, for he used not only Jamison’s lines about Walker but also his details regarding the events in 1860 that led to Walker’s death.

As my “Note on Translation” says in *With Walker In Nicaragua And Other Early Poems*, I worked at bearing his utterance into my own. I tried not to produce lifeless literal translations (metaphrase), simply for helping English readers get through the Spanish texts *en face*, or spirited imitations, freely adapting Cardenal’s poetry to express myself, not him. Instead, I tried to paraphrase him, as if he were originally writing the poem in English, using the various documentary sources described above. Like Cardenal, I worked with the natural rhythms of everyday speech, as well as different levels of diction, doing my best to invest the language with real feeling. I focused on re-creating in English the tonal structure of the poem, paying special attention to the tonality of each line, and to the poetic effect Cardenal had achieved by varying the length of his lines. In sum, to make an accurate translation as faithful to the letter as possible while maintaining the poetic quality of “*Con Walker en Nicaragua*,” I translated sometimes word for

word, and sometimes sense for sense. My success at rendering not simply what the poet said, but what he meant, poetically, was affirmed by Robert Hass, a poet and translator, who in the lead review of the *Washington Post Book World* (June 23, 1985) said the “translations are so good you feel that the poems might have been written in English.” He added that, in light of Ezra Pound’s poetic influence on Cardenal, “this cross-fertilization” makes my translation work “eerily beautiful. Passed back into English, it is as if we have suddenly a limpid Pound, clear and sensual, without all that nervous and restless static.”

The way I rendered the opening of the poem illustrates my style, or translation poetics. The Spanish verses written by Cardenal read:

*En una cabaña solitaria en la frontera,
yo, Clinton Rollins, sin pretensión literaria,
me entretengo en escribir mis memorias.
Y mis pensamientos de viejo retroceden:*

Las cosas que hace cincuenta años sucedieron . . .

*Hispanoamericanos que he conocido
—a los que he aprendido a querer . . .
Y aquel olor tibio, dulzón, verde, de Centro América.*

The Spanish translation of the documentary source, which is for the most part a rather close paraphrase, reads:

EN UNA CABAÑA SOLITARIA de las montañas de Cocopah, a larga distancia de la línea divisoria de los Estados Unidos y en territorio mexicano, muy poco frecuentado por extranjeros preguntones, se me ocurre ocupar mis horas de ocio en dejar ESCRITAS MEMORIAS que pronto pasarían al olvido y que son, por cierto, de alguna importancia.

Con la excepción de un período de servicio en el ejército antiesclavista he pasado la mayor parte de mi vida entre HISPANOAMERICANOS, A QUIENES HE APRENDIDO A QUERER. Ellos poseen cualidades que el arrogante, avaro y exigente anglosajón quiere exterminar, o será tal vez que yo odio la vida tiránica civilizada; entre yankis, ricos y ner-

viosos, estaría fuera de mi ambiente; la vida lánguida, fácil y serena de la tierra del mañana? es muy de mi gusto; y en medio de montañas y desiertos que hace tiempo me son familiares, espero pasar los últimos días de mi vida.

COMO TODO VIEJO, MIS PENSAMIENTOS RETROCEDEN; y RECUERDOS DE HACE CUARENTA O CINCUENTA AÑOS se encuentran en mi mente más frescos que los hechos recientes.

NO PRETENDO ESCRIBIR UNA OBRA LITERARIA...

At Columbia University I was able to find a microfilm reproduction of the original "Filibustering with Walker." Here is the original English from which the above translation was made:

IN A LONELY CABIN in a cool canyon of the Cocopah mountains, well across the Mexican boundary line and little annoyed by strangers or interlopers, IT OCCURS TO ME TO WHILE AWAY LEISURE HOURS BY PENNING MEMORIES that will soon vanish, and which, nevertheless, have a value. With the exception of a term in the Union Army, I have passed most of my life AMONG SPANISH-AMERICANS, and HAVE COME TO LIKE THAT PEOPLE. They have qualities the arrogant, fretful, greedy Anglo-Saxon stands in need of, for he is wearing himself out.

Too, I dislike the restraints of civilized life. Among rich and restless Americans I would be out of place. The languid, easy, unhurried life of Poco Tiempo land suits me, and among mountains and deserts long grown familiar, I plan to live and die. AS IN THE CASE OF MOST OLD MEN, MY THOUGHTS WANDER BACK to the past. I lose myself in memories of yore. RECOLLECTIONS OF FORTY OR FIFTY YEARS AGO are more vividly distinct than are matters recent. I SHALL ATTEMPT NO LITERARY STYLE, but, in a plain way, will narrate vicissitudes of other days that may add to the growing volume of Pacific Coast history and tradition.

Anyone familiar with the famous chronicle of the conquistador writer Bernal Díaz will recognize that Cardenal's verses echo the preface to *The Conquest Of Mexico*, which in John Ingram Lockhart's 1844 translation begins: "I, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, regidor of the town of Santiago, in

Guatemala [*sic*], author of this very true and faithful history, have now finished it, in order that it may be published to the world.” But more than that, Cardenal transformed the flowery 19th-century style of the filibuster’s account into the hard and clear, condensed style of his free-verse narrative.

Translating the opening lines of “*Con Walker en Nicaragua*,” it was especially fun for me to have as resources both Spanish and English of Clinton Rollins’ memoir because I was able to use them creatively in my effort. The language of my translation demonstrates how I have, like Cardenal, crosscut from source to source:

In a lonely cabin on the frontier,
I, Clinton Rollins, attempting no literary style,
pass the time by penning my memories.
And as an old man my thoughts wander back:

The things that happened fifty years ago . . .

Spanish-Americans I have known
—whom I have grown to like . . .
And that warm, sweet, green odor of Central America.

The phrase “*en una cabaña solitaria*” can be interpreted in several different ways, for instance, “in a *solitary* cabin” — “in a *lone* cabin” — or, “in a *lonely* cabin.” There is clearly a world of difference between lone and lonely! The original English of the documentary source guided my translation. In view of the original prose describing the cabin’s location as “well across the Mexican boundary line,” which Figueroa rendered as “*a larga distancia de la línea divisoria*,” I interpreted Cardenal’s phrase “*en la frontera*” as meaning “on the frontier,” not “on the border” (of which countries?). The phrase I used sounds better — its music is even closer to the Spanish — and it better completes the opening image of a rustic homestead on the fringe of 19th-century American civilization. The associations with the word frontier work better with the following sequence of images which form the poem’s “preface.” To animate in English and preserve the long breath of the descriptive

prepositional phrase "*sin pretensión literaria*," I simply made the idea behind "pretention" into a verb and based a similar participial phrase on Rollins' language.

During the months I spent working on "With Walker in Nicaragua," I thought it would be both exciting and worthwhile to take the translation process one step further, to do a stage adaptation of the poem. Its dramatic monologue is naturally suited to this purpose. I kept the idea alive in my head, and in the fall of 1984, to celebrate the publication of *With Walker In Nicaragua*, I finally produced one. As director, I worked closely with an actor, Bill Bruehl, who became Cardenal's Clinton Rollins in a performance rendering my interpretation of the poem, especially in terms of the poem's tonal movement. That is, the actor's own interpretation was guided by mine. Stage props were kept to a minimum to suggest the "lonely cabin on the frontier" of Cardenal's persona: a simple wooden table and chair center-stage, a pair of old-fashioned reading glasses, and a copy of the poem (photocopied on parchment-like paper) to suggest the manuscript of Clinton Rollins' reminiscences. The performance opened with a dark theater. Then the stage lights came up, and the character entered, shuffling around his cabin, mumbling to himself, and picking up his manuscript. He proceeded to read aloud "With Walker in Nicaragua" to himself — in effect, to the audience. Finally, the performance closed with lights out, following the last lines of the poem: "And there, by the sea, with no wreaths or epitaph remained / William Walker of Tennessee." Then, with the audience in the dark and a heavy silence, I had projected on the scrim at the back of the stage a wall-sized reproduction of the last photograph of Walker, taken just before he set sail on his last and fatal trip to Central America.

Further pursuing the possibilities inherent in the poem, I recently flew out to Hollywood to work with actor-activist Edward Asner, and recorded his dramatic reading of my translation, to be aired around the country by public

radio stations. I am now working with a filmmaker on the production of a film version of "With Walker in Nicaragua," using Asner's reading as the soundtrack, in addition to selecting illustrations from the popular magazines of Walker's day which often printed stories about his filibustering activities, and montaging them with contemporary color footage of Nicaraguan scenes and people, especially the *campesinos* who in many instances have changed their appearance hardly at all since the mid-19th century. I am also weaving music and other sound effects into Asner's reading of the poem — taking creative liberties to amplify the imagery and music of the poem itself, in an effort to translate Cardenal ultimately into an English-language audio-visual experience.

In translating "*Con Walker en Nicaragua*," I have been exploring the possibilities of creative translation, rendering an extraordinary poem that re-discovers a lost chapter of our national history at a necessary time. So much has happened — and been forgotten by us — in the turbulent history of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations over the last century and a half. Now, like the *contra* invasion itself, nearly every contemporary episode has its historical parallel. The forgotten story of William Walker is therefore news today — the poem tells it, remembers it, sings it. Bryant thought that Walker's death would "pretty much extinguish the spirit of filibusterism, and prevent our country from again being disgraced." But in this he was wrong. And, not surprisingly, as a recent editorial in the *New York Times* emphasized, Walker's name in Central America "remains a byword for a giant's arrogance in dealing with countries scorned as banana republics." Moreover, beyond its relevance to current U.S. intervention in Central America, "With Walker in Nicaragua" is unique as translated verse, given its ability to fit so naturally into our literature and culture, with its Poundian style and cold-eyed *yankis*. I think Bryant would view my translation in this light, too. □