

## INTRODUCTION: *Songs of Heaven and Earth*

*I have tried, above all, to write poetry that can be understood.*

—ERNESTO CARDENAL, in conversation

**E**RNESTO CARDENAL is Nicaragua's preeminent poet after Rubén Darío, the leader and founder of Spanish *modernismo* at the turn of the previous century. He is a truly global poet, whose work has been translated into more than twenty languages. A Roman Catholic priest, and often called poet-priest, he is the author of numerous books of poetry, as well as prose works. Over the past six decades, he has produced an extraordinary body of verse—from epigrams to epics: poetry of love and humanity, of history and justice, and of science. In 2005, on the occasion of Cardenal's eightieth birthday, Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolaños honored him with the Order of Rubén Darío, the highest accolade in the area of culture in his homeland, for his service to Nicaragua and to humanity in the fields of art and literature. In giving the reasons for the award, Bolaños praised Cardenal for being “a man of wisdom and a firm believer in the transformation of the people and the nation through culture; a poet equally adept at epic chronicle and prophesy, who scrutinizes our past and deciphers our future.” In his latest work, he has created a new, highly original poetics that integrates theories of quantum physics to contemplate the entire cosmos and the meaning of life.

Cardenal was born in 1925 in the city of Granada, Nicaragua—the colonial town the gringo filibuster William Walker nearly burned to the ground in the mid-nineteenth century—on the northern shore of Lake Nicaragua, near the volcano Mombacho. At the time of his birth, the United States had already occupied his homeland for well over a decade, and soon the guerrilla patriot, Augusto César Sandino, would lead a seven-year-long rebellion against the U.S. military presence there, fought in the mountains in the north of the country (where Sandinistas later fought U.S.-backed Contras). Cardenal's father, Rodolfo, a prosperous merchant, and his mother, Esmeralda, both descendants of colonial elites, provided him and his brother Fernando with a comfortable, upper-class life. Their home was Catholic

and conservative. In 1930 the family moved to León, where Darío had lived. Cardenal felt his spirit in many ways. His great-aunt Trinidad had known the poet personally, and often spoke of him. His father read Darío's poetry to him, when he was around six years old, and although he did not understand it thoroughly, it inspired him to compose his first poem that was about Darío's great marble tomb in the Cathedral of León. Darío's famous 1904 poem, "To Roosevelt," written in response to Roosevelt's taking control of the Panama Canal Zone, anticipates Cardenal's poetry of protest against U.S. imperialism: "Hunter, the only way to approach you / is with a voice like the Bible's, or verse like Walt Whitman's." Indeed, Cardenal's future life and poetry would have a complex relationship with the United States, its people, places, culture, poetry, and politics.

The first significant phase of Cardenal's poetic development dates from roughly 1940 to 1946. The poems he composed during these years echo the major Latin American poets of the time, and he has said: "When I was eighteen, Neruda exerted the greatest influence on the poetry I was writing. . . . But the influence of Vallejo was more profound, not so much on my literary style, but on my soul." Cardenal's earliest efforts were in traditional verse forms, but by the mid-1940s he was writing in free verse with a great degree of lyricism and subjectivity. For the most part he explored themes of romantic love, often attempting to gain emotional intensity through an excess of descriptive language. His first collection, *Carmen y otros poemas* (Carmen and Other Poems), was written from 1943 to 1945, and not published until 2000 for a variety of reasons. Cardenal has described this book as "adolescent and immature."

One of the strongest efforts from the initial phase of his development is a long poem of nostalgia and disillusionment, "The Deserted City," written in 1946 just after he broke up with his girlfriend Carmen who was his first great love. It opens this way:

Besieged by the deaths of all its afternoons forever  
on that land white as the salt on which it was founded,  
white as thirst, in the desolation of the sun  
and the death rattle of a lake that by noon feels like ash,  
dead calm, dead calm, all the way out to its horizon  
like a slab of stone fit perfectly to the infinite  
and those waves washing through an unceasing graveyard,  
often by myself I remember all the streets  
often in sleep my body has wandered through them once more  
and so at night it emerges, entirely white,  
in the midst of the land on which its ruin has been built.

Besieged by dust, by time slowly invading the stone,  
a defeated city that we have to flee  
because here a final ash has joined the assault  
because here nothing remains and we have to leave,  
we have to leave. Yet something comes back  
at certain unexplainable times just after it rains  
or when we sleep beneath long-absent skies  
or we resume a conversation left hanging years ago,  
something comes back, something can't leave for good  
and so we call excitedly to some precious door  
that opened in the evening to a hundred dreams of love.

Another transitional poem that should be mentioned here is “The Conquistador’s Proclamation” composed the following year. This poem marks a shift from personal to historical themes, and previews a distinctive feature of his later writing, namely, poetry based on history.

The turning point in Cardenal’s poetic development took place in New York. After receiving a degree in literature from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, he attended Columbia University from 1947 to 1949. There he immersed himself in the work of U.S. poets—Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Fearing, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Carl Sandburg, and, above all, Ezra Pound, whom he has often called his “main teacher.” He began to adapt certain technical devices of these poets as he developed his own poetic style, for which he later coined the name *exteriorismo* to describe “poetry created with images from the world around us [*el mundo exterior*] . . . an objective poetry: narrative and anecdotal, made with elements from real life, with concrete things, proper names and precise details, exact dates and figures and facts and statements.” It was during these formative years in New York, in the spring of 1949, that Cardenal wrote “Raleigh,” his first *exteriorista* poem and, in his opinion, the earliest poem that represents his mature voice—precisely the kind of verse Pound had expected: poetry not trying “to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot . . . [with] fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it . . . austere, direct, free from emotional slither.” Cardenal’s later translation into Spanish of Pound’s imagist manifesto, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” as “*Varios ‘no’*” would serve as a manifesto of *exteriorismo*. But Cardenal did not merely imitate imagist poetics; rather, he transformed it, and ultimately made it his own.

At Columbia Cardenal studied British and American (U.S.) literature. Among his professors were Lionel Trilling, Carl Van Doren, and Babette Deutsch. And among his classmates—unbeknownst to him at the time—was the young Allen Ginsberg, with whom he would later share a strong literary kinship and personal

friendship.\* Most important, in New York Cardenal began to identify himself as a poet. Although he produced only a small number of poems there, he initiated his rediscovery of the New World. The poetry that followed in the next few years would have, as Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra said, “a common denominator: the vision of America from a foreign eye.” Cardenal used the eye of explorers, travelers, journalists, and adventurers for recovering the wonderment and otherness of his world. And, like Pound, he adapted documentary sources, crosscutting from source to source, making a kind of verse montage that attains a lyric or epic movement of energy and whose grace lies in the cuts and seams of the poems. He continued to further develop this documentary method of writing poems, from then until now.



MANAGUA, 1950

Cardenal left New York to travel in Europe, staying for a time in Paris and Madrid, and in July 1950 returned to Nicaragua, where he settled in Managua, the capital city. He was twenty-five years old, with a growing reputation as a poet and critic. Soon after his return, he wrote “With Walker in Nicaragua.” This poem is based on the history of the Filibuster War of 1855–57 and its central figure, William Walker. Known as the Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny, Walker invaded Nicaragua, made English the official language, and legalized slavery, with the grand design to attach Central America to the Slave States. Not surprisingly, he is still remembered well in Nicaragua, where schoolchildren read about his

intervention and his quest for power. The poem tells the story of Walker’s rise and fall from the point of view of a sympathetic old man, a filibuster in his youth, whom Cardenal created out of several different sources. In later poems he makes allusions to Walker, who personifies this chapter in the mutual history of the United States and Nicaragua, as in the revolutionary classic “Zero Hour.”

“With Walker in Nicaragua” shows Cardenal’s idea of love broadening. He had come to embrace his homeland, its people, culture, landscape, and history. As an expression of this love, he began to take part in the political struggle against the dynastic tyranny of Anastasio Somoza, who, as President Franklin Roosevelt once famously remarked, “may be a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch.” Cardenal joined a revolutionary group, and over the next few years frequently wrote articles against the government for the country’s major newspaper, *La Prensa*. Despite his

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\* “What I have assimilated from Ginsberg,” Cardenal explained in a 1984 interview with Kent Johnson, “is his freedom of expression; in particular his attention to the details of the everyday world. The mundane, ‘un-poetic’ facts of the modern world which he, more than anyone, had the vision to regard as within the realm of poetry.”

growing political activity, he was still very much engaged with poetry. In early 1951, with the help of the poet José Coronel Urtecho, he realized his dream of setting up a poetry press. The press was named El Hilo Azul (The Blue Thread), and ran for a couple of years. In view of the repressive political climate in Nicaragua at the time, it was something of a revolutionary act in itself. The first book El Hilo Azul published was a translation of selected works by various U.S. poets titled *Lincoln de los poetas* (Lincoln of the Poets). Cardenal collaborated with Coronel on translating poems by Whitman, Sandburg, and others, which shared the theme of the memory of Lincoln, whom Cardenal considered the most poetic and heroic figure in U.S. history. Other El Hilo Azul books, with forewords by Cardenal, were devoted to Nicaraguan poets.

Cardenal's literary efforts grew along with his revolutionary activity. He was busy preparing a manuscript of his poems for publication, to be his first published book, but this collection never came out. Nonetheless, he was establishing himself as an important young poet. Inspired by Pound's translations from the classics, he was also translating the epigrams of Catullus and Martial, and writing his own epigrams, the earliest of which were stinging love poems. As he became more deeply involved with revolutionary politics, his epigrams became more political. For this reason they circulated in mimeographed form anonymously. Beyond Nicaragua, they were read in Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, and Colombia, and Neruda published some in Chile, without knowing who had written them. About his epigrams, Cardenal points out: "There is more to life than revolution. There is also love. My epigrams . . . are poetry of love and hate, some of love and hate at the same time, because while they are political poems they are also love poems." The epigrams demonstrate Cardenal's increasing ability to condense complex relationships into a single, hard and clear image—again, precisely what his teacher, Pound, had practiced: "dichten = condensare." They also demonstrate Cardenal's mastery of understatement, as well as a great sense of humor that often saves his poetry from falling into rhetorical bombast. According to him, the epigrams reflect his two main passions in the early 1950s, namely, "girls and revolutionary politics."

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In 1954 Cardenal's political activity culminated in his participation in an attempted revolt, later known as the April Rebellion. He had learned how to use a machine gun, and on the night of April 3, he joined an assault on the Presidential Palace. Treachery within the ranks of the rebels themselves caused the revolt to fail. Most of the leaders were captured, interrogated under torture, and killed; many others were jailed or forced into exile or they simply "disappeared" in the custody of Somoza's National Guard. Cardenal was lucky to avoid arrest, but he lived in fear of being

caught. The violence he had experienced haunted him. Over the next two years he suffered a growing feeling of emptiness. He wrote more angry epigrams and the long “Zero Hour,” a major section of which recounts the events of the April Rebellion. This was underground poetry, and could only be read by friends.

Cardenal came to feel that his amorous relationships with women could not satisfy him. “In reality,” he later said, “my obsession with love was a hunger for an absolute, for an infinite love that human love cannot satisfy, but I did not understand this.” He elaborated: “Sometimes at night, in moments of solitude, especially after a party or carousing with friends, I faced myself, and felt a hidden anguish. . . . It was as though within me I were hearing the voice of a scornful love. I was convinced God loved me and wanted me for Himself, with a jealous, tyrannical love. But I pretended to be deaf. However, the voice persisted over the years. One day I couldn’t stand it anymore. I felt harassed too much by that Lover, whom I didn’t love and who wanted me to love only Him, and I made up my mind to give in, to see what would happen.”

The result was a great religious awakening. Toward the end of 1956 he decided to meet this “Lover.” He then wrote to Our Lady of Gethsemani, the monastery in Kentucky that during his New York days he had read about in the books of the Trappist writer Thomas Merton. Cardenal was finding his way to love humanity as a whole, and to serve God. And so, in 1957, he entered the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani, where he became a disciple of Merton. Interestingly, to answer the question about his current profession when applying to the monastery, he wrote “Poet.” His more recent poem, “Telescope in the Dark Night,” written three and a half decades later, provides further elaboration on what its translator, John Lyons, describes as Cardenal’s “apocalyptic calling to a religious vocation.” In this poem, together with the modern language of astrophysics, Cardenal uses the same mystical language of St. John of the Cross, as seen in his “The Dark Night,” where God is *el amado*, the beloved, the loved one, the one we might affectionately call our “love” or “lover.”

Cardenal had to leave the monastery after two years, without joining the Trappist order, because of health reasons. He suffered constant headaches, and was unable to participate fully in the way of life there. He continued his religious studies in Mexico and Colombia. In 1965 he returned to Nicaragua, at the urging of Merton, and was ordained a priest. Early the next year, he founded a small contemplative commune in Solentiname, an archipelago of thirty-eight little islands located in the remote southern part of Lake Nicaragua, where less than a thousand people lived at the time. He had planned this commune with Merton, who hoped to join it, but Rome refused him the permission to do so. Cardenal named it Nuestra Señora de Solentiname (Our Lady of Solentiname). It was his calling and that of the small group of its core

members, as he later explained in a famous letter to the people of Nicaragua: “Contemplation means union with God. We soon realized that this union with God was leading us to union with the very poor, forgotten peasant farmers and fishers who lived along the banks of the archipelago. This same contemplation soon led us to political engagement. Contemplation led us to the revolution. And so it had to be; otherwise, it would have been false contemplation. . . . Merton had told me that in Latin America contemplation could not be divorced from the political struggle.”

The commune with its church and cultural center on the largest island, Mancarrón, became internationally known for its efforts to practice the gospel (see Cardenal’s account in his *The Gospel in Solentiname*), as well as for the school of “naïve” painting that developed there with Cardenal’s help. Now, through the growth of tourism in Nicaragua, Solentiname attracts visitors from around the world.

During his years in Solentiname, Cardenal’s fame as a poet spread throughout Latin America and the rest of the world. He believed that his two vocations, poetry and priesthood, went hand in hand. For him, poetry had come to mean “prophesy in the Biblical sense of guidance.” He published his first books, *Gethsemani, Ky.* and *Hora 0 (Zero Hour)*, in 1960, then *Epigramas (Epigrams)* and *Poemas (Poems)* in 1961. His *Salmos (Psalms)* and *Oración por Marilyn Monroe y otros poemas (Prayer for Marilyn Monroe and Other Poems)* appeared in the next few years. His influential 500-page anthology of North American poetry, co-translated with Coronel, that featured contemporary U.S. poets, as well as Native American songs, appeared in 1963. The books he published after founding Our Lady of Solentiname continued to express his New World love and his commitment to the radical ideals of liberation theology: *El estrecho dudoso (The Doubtful Strait; 1966)*, *Homenaje a los indios americanos (Homage to the American Indians; 1969)*, *Canto nacional (Nicaraguan Canto; 1973)*, *Oráculos sobre Managua (Oracle over Managua; 1973)*, and several more anthologies of ferocious selections of his work.

In 1977, in response to the revolutionary activities of Cardenal and members of his commune, the dictator Anastasio Somoza, Jr., destroyed Our Lady of Solentiname. He fled to Costa Rica, and became a roving ambassador of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)—the revolutionary organization that led the Nicaraguan people to fight the forty-five-year-long Somoza tyranny. He served as a spokesman for the FSLN, which finally succeeded in toppling Somoza in 1979. His “Lights” celebrates this victory: “This revolution is fighting the darkness. / It was daybreak on July 18th. And the beginning / of all that was about to come.” In that year, Cardenal was named Minister of Culture of the new government. For this government work he was suspended by the Vatican (barred from performing holy sacraments), but refusing to “abandon the people,” he did not give up his position: “My job is to promote everything cultural in Nicaragua. I have a ministry of poetry, music, painting,

crafts, theater, folklore and tradition, and scholarly research, which includes libraries, magazines, films, and recreation. I think of my ministry this way: just as Christ put the apostles in charge of distributing the ‘loaves and fishes,’ he has put me in charge of spreading culture. The people do not consume culture; they create it. This is what I did in Solentiname, only now I do it country-wide.” Unfortunately, however, the Ministry of Culture was forced to close in 1988, as a consequence of the U.S.-sponsored Contra War that necessitated austerity programs leading to cutbacks in government support for the arts.

The following year Cardenal, undaunted, co-founded the Casa de los Tres Mundos (House of Three Worlds) with Austrian actor Dietmar Schönherr. This foundation and international cultural center, based in Granada, continues in many ways the cultural and educational work of the Ministry of Culture and the Solentiname commune. The philosophy of the foundation, funded through international support, is that development aid should not concentrate only on economic aspects because the causes of underdevelopment and poverty are not limited to material needs; and that only by combining material, educational, and cultural elements can a development program be effective in the long term and support sustained prosperity. The Casa de los Tres Mundos aims to serve as a connection between various traditions, and by mutual enrichment to promote awareness of the diverse cultural roots of Nicaragua. This philosophy is very much in keeping with Cardenal’s vision of mobilizing the creative potential of the Nicaraguan people and rediscovering buried cultural heritage as ways to help the nation preserve its unique identity.

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During the years following the Sandinista victory, the period that Cardenal was Minister of Culture, he continued to write poetry. He produced many relatively short poems, compared with his long documentary works. His new poetry celebrated the revolution and was intended to serve it: the possibility of “a society of love” in Nicaragua. His *Tocar el cielo* (Touching Heaven; 1981) and *Vuelos de victoria* (*Flights of Victory*; 1984) included victory poems, love poems, elegies to fallen Sandinistas, travel poems, ecology poems, reportage poems, as well as socially committed poems reminiscent of the agitprop written in the United States in the 1930s, such as the *New Masses* poetry of Muriel Rukeyser, Langston Hughes, and Kenneth Fearing. These were poems of history in the making, in particular, Nicaraguan and U.S. history.

In 1985 Cardenal came to New York to be the featured poet of the first Latin American Book Fair. During his stay he talked about another kind of poetry on which he was working, the poetry that forms the latest work in the present collection: “I am now writing poetry of a cosmic character, which has elements of mysticism



and politics, as well as deeply personal feelings about my life, but it is framed especially in cosmologic language about the problems posed by time and space, matter, the atom, the stars and human evolution. It's likely to be long." This is the poetry of his magnum opus, *Cántico cósmico* (*Cosmic Canticle*), published in 1989. Its title suggests both the Biblical "Song of Songs" ("Canticle of Canticles") and Pound's *Cantos*, as well as "The Spiritual Canticle" of St. John of the Cross. Cardenal has described it as the culmination of his life's work of some thirty years, and further explained (with a bit of characteristic humor): "It deals with the entire cosmos. That's why the poem is so long. It is principally written in scientific language. I attempt here to unify science and poetry; also poetry and politics, science and mysticism, and mysticism and revolution." Indeed, with its epic magnificence, *Cosmic Canticle* is Cardenal's crowning achievement—a nearly 600-page poem that comprises forty-three autonomous yet integrated cantigas,\* or cantos. Many of Cardenal's poems that appeared in earlier books are woven into this long poem.

John Lyons, an Irish poet now living in Brazil, who undertook the monumental task of translating *Cosmic Canticle* into English, and whose intimacy with it as its translator gives him particular insight, writes: "It would be no exaggeration to state that to Cardenal, the terms 'mystic' and 'scientist' are synonymous: in particular, the paradoxes of quantum physics with its complex simplicities are so akin to the concerns of the mystic who seeks to reconcile the impossibility of belief with the universal evidence of a God's existence and the appearance of love not only as the underlying principle but also as the ultimate purpose of evolution." Lyons's observation extends the ideas of physicist Freeman Dyson, who in his acceptance speech for the 2000 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion said: "Science and religion are two windows that people look through, trying to understand the big universe outside, trying to understand why we are here. The two windows give different views, but they look out at the same universe. Both views are one-sided; neither is complete. Both leave out essential features of the real world." Cardenal's cosmic poetry attempts to marry these two views, and in doing so, he has created a daring new poetics and a new dimension of his *exteriorismo*.

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Cardenal's life after his break with the Sandinista party needs to be considered. He was the first public figure to leave the FSLN, in 1994, publicly arguing corruption and betrayal of its revolutionary ideals in a letter published in the national newspapers. He said the FSLN had been "kidnapped by a small group" led by its General Secretary,

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\* *Cantiga*, historically, denotes a medieval Spanish song, often religious or amorous.

Daniel Ortega (today President of Nicaragua, again), whom he accused of acting like a dictator by quashing dissent within the party and cutting cynical deals with its former opponents. Cardenal claimed that the internal elections of the party were “manipulated.” He added: “This is not the FSLN that we joined, for which we worked so hard nationally and internationally, for which so many martyrs died.” With his break from the official party, he stopped participating actively in politics, and returned to his previous life of solitude, silence, and writing. His memoirs appeared in three volumes (“they read like novels,” he says): *Vida perdida* (Lost Life; 1999), *Las ínsulas extrañas* (Strange Islands; 2002), and *La revolución perdida* (Lost Revolution; 2004).

In 2002 Cardenal came to New York as part of a reading tour in the Northeast. We gave a bilingual reading to an audience of hundreds packed into a theater at Hunter College. The white-haired poet, wearing his trademark beret, was dressed as always in a simple peasant shirt, blue jeans, and sandals despite the chill of that October night. On stage he sat on a stool behind a lectern. I stood by his side, and we alternated between Spanish and English. His reading consisted exclusively of fragments of *Cosmic Canticle*, passages taken from different cantigas to create a poetic sequence, which opened this way:

What’s in a star? We are.  
All the elements of our body and of the planet  
were once in the belly of a star.  
    We are stardust.  
15,000,000,000 years ago we were a mass  
of hydrogen floating in space, turning slowly, dancing.  
.....  
we are universal,  
and after death we will help to form other stars  
and other galaxies.  
    We come from the stars, and to them we shall return.

Cardenal read his poetry with a strong lyrical voice that by the end of the reading had moved the audience to a standing ovation.

Today, Cardenal’s life is one of active solitude. He lives in Managua, and works in his office at the small branch of the Casa de los Tres Mundos there. He receives visitors and entrusts a secretary, with whom he has worked since his days as Minister of Culture, with his extensive correspondence. He still sculpts, a passion that began during his student days at Columbia University. He continues to write, and gives occasional readings. He also runs a weekly poetry workshop for children with cancer

at a local hospital. For all he has done, Cardenal is the nation's beloved poet, and the winner of numerous national and international poetry prizes, including the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Publishers Association for a canon that reveals "love as an essential element of social change." He is the first Latin American to receive this prize, which—the year after the 1979 Sandinista victory—he accepted not for himself, but for the great and courageous people of Nicaragua. Widely recognized as the most important living Latin American poet, he recently was nominated for the Nobel Prize.

The revered poet, though, is not revered by everyone in Nicaragua. Daniel Ortega's response to Cardenal's continued criticism of his character and politics has taken the form of a long campaign of harassment against him. In the summer of this year, it got uglier when a puppet court revived a three-year-old case, and condemned him for insulting a man over a property dispute related to Solentiname. The original charge had been dismissed in 2005; no explanation was given for its revival. In a public statement he wrote in defense of himself, Cardenal said he refuses to pay the fine levied by the "Danielista" judge, calling the sentence unjust and illegal, and that he will go to jail if necessary. Letters in support of him then began to appear daily in the Nicaraguan papers, and throughout Latin America. All protest what they see as a transparent effort by the vindictive Ortega regime to humiliate and punish him. But in the end, Cardenal will prevail—he must—because, like his poetry, he embodies the hope and heart of his country.

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The present volume is the most comprehensive collection to date of Cardenal's poetry in English. He approved the selection, and participated in deciding the sequence of poems, which for the most part follows the chronology of their composition. He has a long publication history in English translation in the United States that goes back to the early 1960s, to the time of his earliest book publications in Spanish. Merton was among his first translators. He introduced Cardenal as "one of the most significant of the newly mature generation of Latin American poets" in his *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, published in 1963 by New Directions. That book of Merton's poetry includes his translations of selections from Cardenal's *Epigramas* and *Gethsemani, Ky.*, which are here in this edition. The two volumes of Cardenal's work later published by New Directions, *Apocalypse and Other Poems* (1977) and *Zero Hour and Other Documentary Poems* (1980), both edited by Donald D. Walsh with translations made by several translators, were the first to offer the full range of his poetry. These books, most of which are reproduced in the present collection, established Cardenal's reputation in the United States as a major poet.

The 1980s—the period of the U.S.-backed Contra War—saw a heightened interest

in Cardenal's poetry and the publication of his *With Walker in Nicaragua and Other Early Poems, 1949–1954* (1985) and *From Nicaragua, With Love: Poems 1979–1986* (1987), both anthologies edited and translated by myself. These books are represented here. The final section comprises new poems he subsequently wrote, and, along with “Telescope in the Dark Night,” includes one cantiga from *Cosmic Canticle*, “The Word,” as well as two cantigas—“Pluriverse” and “3-Pound Universe”—from Cardenal's collection *Versos del pluriverso* (Verse from the Pluriverse), published in Nicaragua in 2005.

The translations in the present volume are the work of several translators from different parts of the English-speaking world. Their translation poetics vary in subtle ways, but overall they aim to convey in English a poetic “paraphrase” of Cardenal's Spanish (“translation with latitude,” to quote John Dryden's famous definition, “where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered”). They have brought to the task their different ears for English, for its idioms, music, and cadences, as well as their different notions of how a poem by him should sound as if he had originally written it in English. As a result, each translator has created a voice for Cardenal that may differ at times from that of the others. This is a good thing, because it allows for different ways to approach Cardenal's poetry, and because it underscores the range of possibilities of translation itself. Faithfully bringing his verses in Spanish into our Germanic tongue often requires great efforts of critical and creative ability, even when his Spanish is a translation of English. Finally, it must be noted that for this book Cardenal himself preferred just translations, rather than a bilingual format, in order to allow for the inclusion of more poems. And so, here they are—to gladden your heart and enrich your soul.

JONATHAN COHEN  
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