

Ernesto Cardenal

Continued from page 1

began this ambitious enterprise by invading Nicaragua. Initially he had the support of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, who ran a steamship line from New York to San Francisco with an overland crossing in Nicaragua. During the Filibuster War of 1855-57, Walker succeeded in making himself president of Nicaragua, legalizing slavery and making English the official language of the country. Or, rather, he succeeded in passing laws to that effect. Vanderbilt turned on him, made an alliance with Great Britain and the other Central American states and drove him out. He was later arrested and executed in Honduras.

Cardenal handles this story by telling it from the point of view of one of Walker's comrades-in-arms, an old man in a cabin on the American frontier reminiscing about his salad days. It is a brilliant and rather surprising choice, all the more effective for being morally and politically neutral, and it allows Cardenal to suffuse the poem with the old man's—and his own—love of the sensuous Nicaraguan landscape:

And that warm sweet odor of Central America
The white houses with red-tiled roofs and with warm
sunny eaves
and a tropical courtyard with a fountain and a woman
by the fountain.
And the heat making our beards grow longer.

It is easy enough to see where this tone and these rhythms come from. Here is Ezra Pound remembering Venice in 1903:

I sat on the Dogana's steps
For the gondolas cost too much that year
And there were not "those girls," there was one
face
And the Buccentoro twenty yards off, howling
"Stretti"
And the lit cross-beams that year, in the Morosini,
And peacocks in Kore's house, or there might have
been

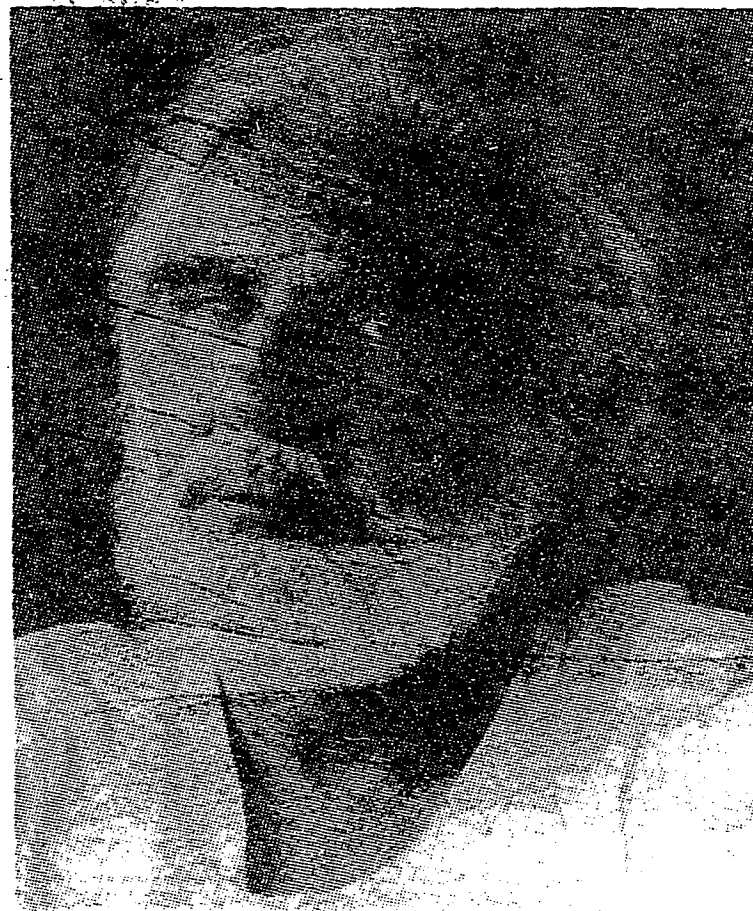
This cross-fertilization makes Cohen's translations eerily beautiful. Passed back into English, it is as if we have suddenly a limpid Pound, clear and sensual, without all that nervous and restless static. How well this technique suits narrative can be seen in Cohen's rendering of the moment when Corral, the Nicaraguan president whom Walker deposed, is about to be executed:

And that day on which he was arrested (tried by
court-martial
and the prisoner threw himself at the mercy of
Walker,
and Walker: that the prisoner would be shot at noon)
ladies came, with Senora Corral and her three
daughters
weeping,
the youngest two embracing Walker's knees:
and he, in between officers and surrounded by his
Cuban
bodyguards.

And we filibusters outside listened in silence.
And that man, who'd had a sweetheart in Nashville,
Helen Martin, a deaf-mute,
who died of yellow fever,
—for whom he learned the language of hands
and together they'd make silent signs in the air—
as if a fleeting compassion like the batting of an eye-
lid
had then crossed his eyes of colorless ice
lifting his hand he said:

—that Corral would not be shot
at noon, but at two in the afternoon.
And we saw the town square overshadowed by a
cloud,
the still palm trees, the Cathedral, the great stone
cross
and at the end of Main Street, like a wall, the leaden
lake.

"With Walker in Nicaragua" is a narrative poem; "Squeir in Nicaragua," a long lyrical poem rather like a Pound Canto, is both simpler and more complex. Ephraim Squeir was the U.S. chargé d'affaires to the Central American republics, a



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diplomat with an interest in archeology, who wrote a book about his travels, *Nicaragua, Its People, Scenery, Monuments*, in 1852. Squeir is a very entertaining writer, and if Americans had a taste for their own travel literature, his book would be in print. It is writing from an era of frank imperialism and Squeir's social and political attitudes were probably conventional enough.

Cardenal, in adapting his source, leaves these explicitly political materials alone. His Squeir is the travel writer, amazed at the lushness and beauty of the country:

Green afternoons in the jungle; sad
afternoons. A green river
going through green pastures;
green marshes.
Afternoons that smell of mud, rain-soaked leaves, of
wet ferns and mushrooms.
The green, moss-colored sloth
little by little climbing . . .

Though there is something of Neruda in this, the rhythmic model seems, once again, to be Pound:

Autumn moon; hills rise about lakes
against sunset
Evening is like a curtain of cloud,
a blur above ripples; and through it
sharp long spikes of the cinnamon,
a cold tune amid reeds . . .

The rhythms of the verse are hypnotic, like a steady ripple in clear water, and they suggest a traveler both dazed and alert. Cardenal makes no use of Squeir's wry social observation, or of the descriptions of the life of the cities, the cock fights, the pre-Columbian ruins. There is a glimpse of political violence in the poem, of cities in fire but it does not seem different from the green blaze of the jungle. The landscape is above all—and deeply—sexual, and it is full of women:

A black boat lashed to the shore;
in the water a woman with bare breasts
and a purple skirt,
washing clothes on a white rock,
and water up to her knees;
and her long straight hair was falling freely to the
water . . .
Nindirí, beautiful Nindirí:
oranges, golden bananas, icaco plums,
gold among the leaves.
Girls the color of chocolate,
their breasts bare,
spinning white cotton among the trees . . .
the flower of the *malinche*, the *sacuanjoche* flower,

in their curl and braids black as jet.
Smiles on lips rouged with annato.
And the girls of Masaya
with their large red earthen jars and pots
and their white sleeveless blouses . . .
The girls of Managua
toward evening would go singing down to the lake-
shore
to fill their water jars.
Silvery sardines were leaping up in the water.

On the surface of the writing is the sheer beauty of the place seen through a foreigner's eyes. It is only by implication that we understand Squeir to be participating, unconsciously, in a rape:

A green cross next to a spring,
decorated with dried wreaths,
and a little boy sitting at the foot of a cross.
And so I asked him why the cross was there:
It commemorated a horrible crime, he said.
And I learned nothing else about the cross,
except that the victim was a woman.

There are two remarkable things about these poems besides their gorgeous imagery. One is that the author grants his Yankee despoilers their point of view; the poems are an authentic act of historical imagination. The other is that, though they foreshadow the tragic political history of Central America, they convey into the present those first travelers' sense of wonder and freshness. It is the erotic current in Cardenal's love of the Central American landscape that does this. The poems describe a land that is resilient and luxuriantly possible.

CARDENAL'S LATER poems, indeed his entire remarkable career, are an exploration of this possibility. Jonathan Cohen's volume ends in 1954. In that year the young Cardenal became engaged in a plot against the elder Somoza. It was uncovered, and though he escaped torture and execution, some of his friends did not. In 1956, acting on his decision to become a priest, he entered the Trappist novitiate in Gethsemani, Kentucky, where his spiritual director was the poet, Thomas Merton. Cardenal was ordained in 1965 and founded a spiritual community among the Nicaraguan peasantry which tried to put into practice a conception of Christian social justice, and become an important center for Latin America's developing theology of liberation. In 1970 he visited Cuba and experienced what he described as "a second conversion" which led him to formulate his own philosophy of Christian Marxism. In 1977 the younger Somoza destroyed the community at Solentiname and Cardenal became the field chaplain for the Sandinista National Liberation Front, and in 1979 he became the Nicaraguan minister of culture. This development can be traced in many volumes of poetry and prose, some of which have been translated into English.

Cardenal's poetry in the 1960s is rich in variety and as fine as the early work. The poems of the 1970s, a very difficult time in his country, are not always so successful, I think. There is a tendency in them to make of the revolution a symbol that answers all questions, as in this poem translated by Donald Walsh:

"That was my Vision, that night in San José de Costa Rica/ all of creation even on billboards was groaning in pain/ because of man's exploitation of man. All of creation/ was screaming, screaming with great shouts for/ the Revolution."

This makes a static symbol of what one knows is a process. The history of this century has taught us that, however inevitable a revolution may be and however just, what follows in its wake is the settling of scores, the rebuilding of ruined economies, the countermoves of more powerful states, a tug of war between revolutionary idealism and human nature which gets decided as often as not in prisons. Reading Cardenal's later poetry, one wants to turn again to the no less adamant but more reflective tones of another poet whose country has suffered from its proximity to a powerful and jealous state; the Polish writer Zbigniew Herbert is less tempted by the idea of apocalyptic transformation and it makes his tone seem saner and more focused; in these lines, for example, from a recent book:

"My defenseless country will admit you invader/ and give you a plot of earth under a willow—and peace/ so those who come after us will learn again/ the most difficult art—the forgiveness of sins."

But no American writer is in a position to lecture a Nicaraguan writer on the forgiveness of sins.