

Book World

Ernesto Cardenal: At the Heart Of Nicaragua

**WITH WALKER IN NICARAGUA
And Other Early Poems, 1949-54**

By Ernesto Cardenal
Translated from the Spanish
by Jonathan Cohen
Wesleyan University Press
111 pp. \$17; paperback, \$8.95

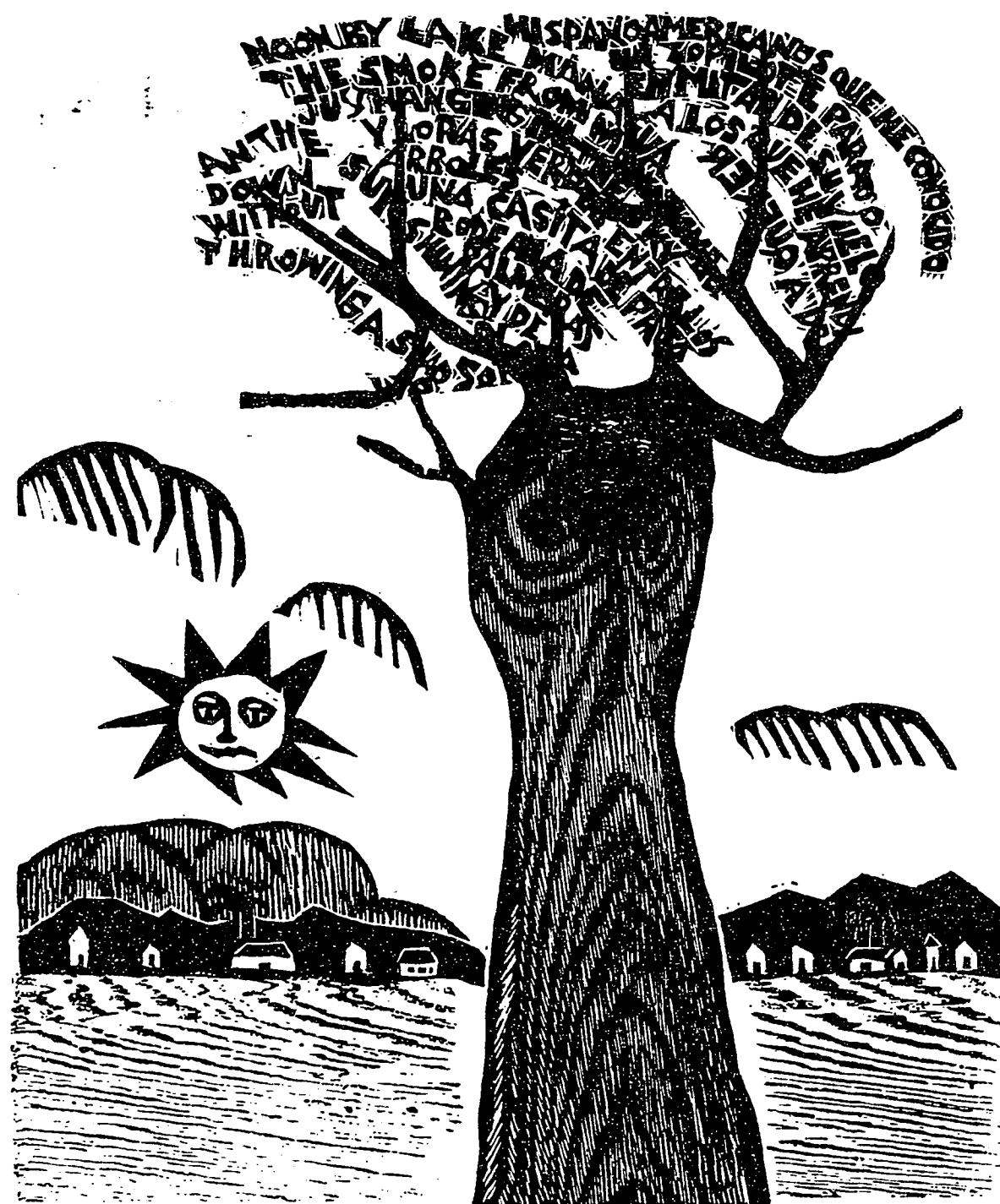
By Robert Hass

FATHER ERNESTO CARDENAL is the minister of culture of Nicaragua. A priest and a political revolutionary, he is widely regarded as one of the most important Spanish-American poets of his generation. *With Walker in Nicaragua* presents his earliest published work, poems begun in New York City when he was a student at Columbia University, studying with Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren. It is not without irony that he has been so strongly influenced by North American poetry, and it occurs to me to say by way of introduction to his work, that if Americans are going to pay taxes to support a war against his country, they ought at least to have the decency to read his books, in order to learn something about one of the visions that underlies revolution in Central America.

There could hardly be a better introduction to this poet than Jonathan Cohen's beautifully edited and really brilliant translations of his early poems. *With Walker in Nicaragua* is an admirable book in every way. There are two extraordinary poems in it, all of the poems are interesting, the introductory essay is helpful, clear, and brief, and Cohen's translations are so good you feel that the poems might have been written in English.

Cardenal was born in Granada on the northern shore of Lake Nicaragua in 1925. His early childhood was spent during the last years of the U.S. Marine Corps occupation of his country and he grew up under the regime of the elder Somoza. Then, as under the younger Somoza, Nicaragua was one of the poorest countries in Spanish America with an adult illiteracy rate of something like 70 percent and an infant mortality rate that rose, during recurrent periods of epidemic, to 30 or 40 percent. In his youth Cardenal's poems,

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WOODCUT BY NAUL OJEDA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

mostly love poems, were influenced by his countryman Rubén Darío and by the Chilean Pablo Neruda. It was not until he went to New York in the 1940s to study at Columbia that he came under the spell of North American poetry, particularly the work of Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound. Cohen's selections begin at this turning point.

Spanish poetry, including Spanish American poetry, has a tendency toward rhetorical lushness. What attracted the young Cardenal to the North Americans was their objectivity, their outwardness, and—in Pound's case—their use of historical and documentary materials. These gave Cardenal a way to re-envision his own country. He began by writing short, mostly descriptive poems based on the

journals of early mariners and explorers like Sir Walter Raleigh; when he returned to his homeland, this technique issued in two remarkable long poems, "With Walker in Nicaragua" and "Squeir in Nicaragua," both based on 19th-century history when the country had become interesting to its northern neighbor as an overland route to the California gold-fields and as a possible site for an interoceanic canal.

William Walker, the figure in the title poem, was a Tennessean and an adventurer who set out, with a small army of Yankee mercenaries, or "filibusters," to conquer Cuba and Central America, create a slave-owning empire, and attach it to the southern United States. He

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Bernard Shaw: Superman Of Letters

**BERNARD SHAW: Collected Letters
Vol. 3, 1911-1925**

Edited by Dan H. Laurence
Viking, 989 pp. \$45

By Frank Kermode

IT ISN'T customary nowadays to think of Shaw as one of the giants of his age, though some of the plays are regularly revived. We see him as an ancient, loquacious joker, vain, opinionated and cranky. Yeats dreamt Shaw was a sewing machine, and Wilde, in an epigram the victim enjoyed, said "Shaw hasn't an enemy in the world, and none of his friends likes him." Yet although his letters are wonderfully free of self-doubt (he refers to himself as the greatest living biologist, economist, etc.), it is impossible not to see him as full of sense and often of wisdom. His offensiveness was a strategy for getting things done and his generosity was extraordinary. He would give expert instruction to anybody from a prime minister to a fledgling actor, from a young singer to Sir Edward Elgar, without apologetic hemming and hawing, and with keen attention to practical detail. He tells theater managers how to run their business and publishers how to draw up a contract. It was this cocksure common sense that often annoyed people.

The term "collected" doesn't in this case mean that Dan Laurence is trying to give us every surviving letter of Shaw; the correspondence is so voluminous that only "a fragmentary selection" is possible. Even so, this third volume of Laurence's edition is over 900 pages long. Shaw was 55 when he wrote the first letter in the present selection, 69 when he wrote the last; and although he quite often says he

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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

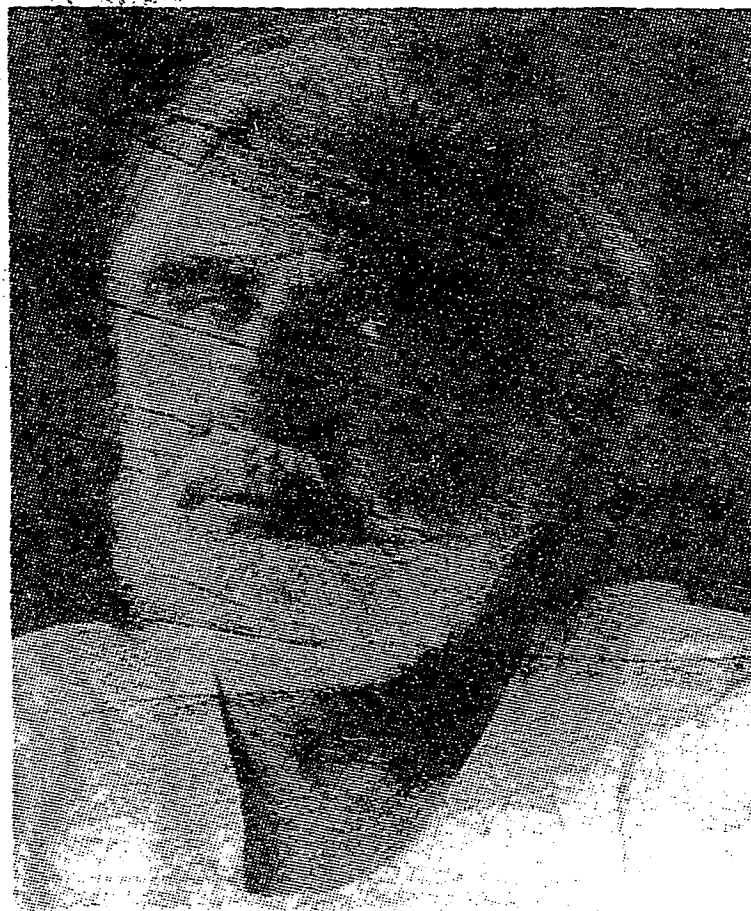
This cross-fertilization makes Cohen's translations eerily beautiful. Passed back into English, it is as if we have suddenly a limpid Pound, clear and sensual, without all that nervous and restless static. How well this technique suits narrative can be seen in Cohen's rendering of the moment when Corral,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



Ernesto Cardenal

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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.