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Evolving to Science Poetry:
Three Poems by Ernesto Cardenal

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Abstract

Nicaraguan poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal (1925–2020) is one of the most important Latin American poets. He developed his “exteriorist” poetics in the 1950s, much influenced by Anglo-American poets, in particular Ezra Pound, to differentiate his poetry from the prevailing subjectivist verse in Latin America. The impact of Pound’s canto technique on his work is clear, as well. Cardenal’s epic poem *Cántico cósmico* (*Cosmic Canticle*), published in 1989, is his magnum opus. This work is distinguished by his avant-garde use of science and its language, as he contemplates the entire cosmos and issues of being and non-being. Revolution is another major aspect of the poem, reflecting Cardenal’s commitment as a Christian-Marxist revolutionary. My translations of three fragments of his *Cosmic Canticle* selected by him are published here for the first time. They represent his focus on the origin of our planet and life on Earth.

Keywords: Ernesto Cardenal, *Cosmic Canticle*, science poetry, exteriorism, mysticism, verse translation

Ernesto Cardenal (1925–2020) of Nicaragua is widely considered one of the most important Latin American poets. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 1965. A liberation theologian and leading member of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, he served as Nicaragua’s Minister of Culture from 1979 to 1987, then seven years later he broke with the Sandinista party for becoming authoritarian and betraying the ideals of the Nicaraguan

Revolution. His poetry was celebrated internationally starting in the 1960s, and in 2005 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Cardenal developed his “exteriorist” poetics in the 1950s, much influenced by Anglo-American poets, in particular Ezra Pound, to differentiate his poetry from the prevailing subjectivist verse in Latin America. The impact of Pound’s canto technique on his work is clear, as well.

The poems here are fragments/passages taken from Cardenal’s magnum opus, the epic poem *Cántico cósmico* (*Cosmic Canticle*), published in 1989. He 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” (qtd. in Foley). 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,” the name of which historically denotes medieval Spanish songs, often religious or amorous. In this modern poem the Nicaraguan revolutionary poet-priest addresses big questions related to being and non-being: who are we, how did we come to be, why are we here, where are we going.

Cardenal gave me the final line of “Evolution” in English: “and it looked at the stars.” He had added the line to the fragment for the purpose of a reading tour he did in the United States in the fall of 2002. That series of readings was tied to the new release of the paperback edition by Curbstone Press of John Lyons’s translation. Each bilingual reading consisted entirely of a sequence of fragments from the epic poem. Cardenal invited me to read the English with him in New York at Hunter College on October 17, 2002 (Photos 1 and 2). He sent me Lyons’s translations. But I made my own translations of some fragments because I hear them very differently. Lyons is British and so is his English. The language of my Cardenal is American English. Furthermore, my translations are crafted differently. Read against the Spanish, they reveal some creative liberties aimed at clarity of images – an effort supported by Cardenal’s “exteriorist” poetics.

The final line of “Evolution” did not appear in Lyons’s translation or in the original published verse in Spanish. Cardenal gave it to me when we were backstage preparing for the reading. The line in Spanish that he added is: “y miró las estrellas.”

I must note that the titles of the poems are my invention. I had given a title to my translation of another fragment from *Cosmic Canticle*; namely, “Stardust,” the closing poem in Cardenal’s anthology *Pluriverse: New and Selected Poems* (2009) which I edited in close collaboration with him. Here, I am presenting fragments from his epic as individual poems. Many untitled passages of it were first published as individual poems with titles and later woven into the epic without them. I believe Cardenal would accept once again my liberties as translator taken in his behalf. In fact, he encouraged me to render him freely, as a poet, when I started translating his work a half century ago.

Talking about the poetry of *Cosmic Canticle*, Cardenal often said in interviews that just as there is science fiction, there is “science poetry.” His poetic use of science and its language – from chemistry to evolutionary biology to astrophysics – is nothing less than avant-garde. My translations here are published for the first time in the present journal.



Photo 1. Reading Together: Cardenal (l.) and Cohen (r.)

THIS LIVING EARTH

The largest living creature on earth

is the Earth.

We've seen it in photographs:

a sapphire sphere covered in white fleece

with gleaming white caps at its poles.

The new notion of *Gaia* – a living Earth.

The planet Earth, all one single living being.

That's how it was long before "life" began on its surface.

There's no place to live except the heavens,
and so,

emerging from the sun's equatorial region

the Earth became round in order to spin.

A living being that didn't need legs or arms or mouth or anus

just to be round and spin and spin around the sun.

It turned fast (5-hour days and 5-hour nights),

the moon creating tides ever since then.

By itself it created conditions for sustaining organisms

and then organisms with consciousness, people; and then

an organism that's at once a community and individuals.

Burning and arid, smoking, spewing lava, molten glass,

it seemed the Earth had no future.

Who would have ever said that from that flaming magma

would come forests and cities and songs and longings.

ESTA TIERRA VIVIENTE

La criatura viva más grande de la tierra
es la Tierra.

La hemos visto en las fotografías:
esfera de zafiro entre vellones blancos
y relucientes casquetes blancos en sus polos.

La nueva noción de *Gaia* – una Tierra viviente.

El planeta Tierra, un solo ser vivo todo él.

Lo era mucho antes que en su superficie hubiera “vida.”

No hay donde vivir sino en el cielo,
así pues,

salido de la región ecuatorial del sol
se hizo redondo para girar.

Ser vivo que no necesitaba piernas ni brazos ni boca ni ano
sino sólo ser redondo y girar y girar en derredor del sol.

Giraba rápido (días de 5 horas y noches de 5 horas),
la luna creando ya mareas desde entonces.

Se creó a sí mismo condiciones para tener organismos
y después organismos con conciencia, personas; y después
un organismo que es a la vez comunidad y personas.

Ardiente y árida, humeante, chorreando lava, vidrio derretido,
parecía que la Tierra no tenía futuro.

Quién iba a decir que de aquel magma llameante
saldrían bosques y ciudades y cantos y nostalgias.

EVOLUTION

Our teeth are from sharks
but later as mammals we got lips that could suck
and because of these lips that could suck we got kisses.
The opening of the mouth happened 1,000 million years ago,
in that primordial sea,
teeth 400 million years ago,
red lips just two or three million ago.
Having climbed down from the trees
 the ape was forced by the tall grass to stand
and it looked at the stars.

ELEMENTS

An apple is a few elements:
hydrogen, oxygen, carbon . . .
just as a woman is the same elements
with the same compounds:
water, sugar . . .
 Apple and woman.

LA EVOLUCION

Nuestros dientes proceden de los tiburones
pero despues como mamíferos tuvimos labios que mamaban
y por esos labios que mamaban tuvimos besos.
La abertura de la boca es de hace 1.000 millones de años,
en aquellas aguas,
los dientes hace 400 millones de años,
los labios rojos hace sólo dos o tres.
Bajado ya de los árboles
 las altas hierbas lo volvieron erecto
y miró las estrellas.

ELEMENTOS

Una manzana son unos elementos:
hidrógeno, oxígeno, carbono . . .
como también una mujer son los mismos elementos
con los mismos compuestos:
agua, azúcar . . .
 Manzana y mujer.

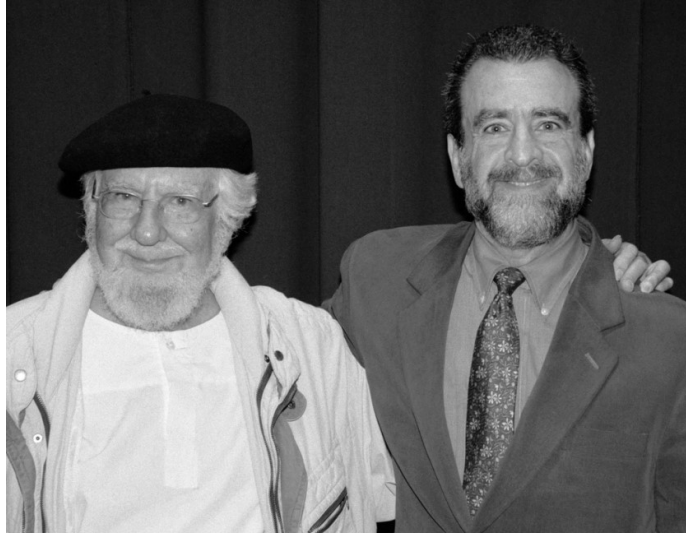


Photo 2. Posing Together: Cardenal (l.) and Cohen (r.)

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