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Review of Ernesto Cardenal's Pluriverse: New and selected Poems (edited by Jonathan Cohen)

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Ernesto Cardenal. *Pluriverse: New and Selected Poems*. Edited by **Jonathan Cohen**. **Various Translators**. New York: New Directions, 2009. 249 pp.

With *Pluriverse: New and Selected Poems*, Ernesto Cardenal—Nicaraguan priest, liberation-theology advocate, and Minister of Culture under the Sandinista government—joins the ranks of poets like Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz, both Nobel Prize winners, whose work has attracted wide attention and the interest of many translators. The translators for this edition are Jonathan Cohen, Mireya Jaimes-Freyre, John Lyons, Thomas Merton, Robert Pring-Mill, Kenneth Rexroth, and Donald D. Walsh, all of whom have published or collaborated on the publication of Cardenal's poems prior to this volume. Their experience thus embraces a variety of presses that have brought translations of Cardenal into print. As far back as 1977, New Directions published *Apocalypse, and Other Poems* with editing and translation a collaborative effort by Pring-Mill, Walsh, Merton, Rexroth, and Jaimes–Freyre. Cohen was the translator for *With Walker in Nicaragua and Other Early Poems, 1949-1954*, which appeared from Wesleyan University Press in 1984, while Lyons later translated *Cosmic Canticle* for Curbstone Press in 2002.

Pluriverse organizes its selections chronologically with poems from 1949-1959 under the heading "Zero Hour," those from 1960-1969 titled "Apocalypse," verses from 1970-1985 labeled "Lights," with the final group from 1986-2005 completing the thematic approach as "Pluriverse." A combined index of titles and first lines is provided at the end of the book. A brief foreword by Lawrence Ferlinghetti attests to Cardenal's international reputation. Cohen's introduction, aptly described as "Songs of Heaven and Earth," offers a guide to the poet's life and works, to previous translations, and to the design and scope of this edition. Cohen notes that using translations prepared by different translators produces a felicitous result as "each translator has created a voice for Cardenal that may differ at times from that of others" (xxii). He concludes: "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" (xxii). A similar sentiment was expressed in Enrico Mario Santí's review of Neruda works, in which he stated that the bilingual edition edited by Nathaniel Tarn is an excellent guide to the extent of Neruda's poetic trajectory. Santí further noted: "It is perhaps fitting that various hands translated the poetry collected therein, inasmuch as the anthology is itself a collection of voices from the archives of Nerudiana" (186).

Due to the wide range of poems included in *Pluriverse* and the fact that seven different translators collaborated on the project, I will only give a few examples of the challenges and successes achieved in translation in this remarkable volume. The collection will be useful to teachers on many levels and for many subjects. In the first section, the verses linked to history like "With Walker in Nicaragua" and "Zero Hour" could well serve as auxiliary readings in courses on Latin American history in comparison (or contrast) with portions of Neruda's "Alturas de Macchu Picchu" or in many other ways for courses in literature and culture. The notes in Cohen's *With Walker in Nicaragua* provide a helpful historical context for this poem (8-10), and his note on translation for the works in this book is instructive for translators as well as students of history and literature (19-20). Since Cardenal relied on documentary sources in English for many of the poems, Cohen has consulted these as a way to connect with the poet and to suggest language for the translation. Similarly, Pring-Mill's introduction in *Zero Hour* (1980) is a useful guide for an informed understanding of this poem (xvii-xix). Such background information is not

found in *Pluriverse*, my only quibble with this superb one-volume introduction to Cardenal for the twenty-first-century reader. The epigrams here, especially "Epitaph for the Tomb of Adolfo Báez Bone" and "Somoza Unveils Somoza's Statue of Somoza in the Somoza Stadium," are excellent brief verse selections for beginners in literary studies (43).

The latter lets us see Walsh's skill in translation, especially when his version in *Pluriverse* is contrasted with a different rendering. Here are four lines from Cardenal followed by the translations:

> No es que yo crea que el pueblo me erigió esta estatua
> porque yo sé mejor que vosotros que la ordené yo mismo.
> Ni tampoco que pretenda pasar con ella a la posteridad
> porque yo sé que el pueblo la derribará un día.
> (*Poets of Nicaragua*, 154)

> It's not that I think the people erected this statue
> because I know better than you that I ordered it myself.
> Nor do I pretend to pass into posterity with it
> because I know people will topple it over someday.
> (*Poets of Nicaragua*, 155)

> It's not that I think the people raised this statue to me,
> because I know better than you do that I ordered it myself.
> Nor that I have any illusions about passing with it into posterity
> because I know the people one day will tear it down. (43)

It would be impossible to mention all the splendid moments of poetry this book contains, but "Nicaraguan Canto" ("Canto nacional"), which begins with the country's flora and fauna before recounting the nation's history, is truly beautiful to read in English, a pleasure to the ear and to the imagination. Similarly, a skillful rendering of variant speech is achieved in the translation of "Zero Hour." Cardenal, in giving the comments of a Turkish banana trader, wrote: "porque las mulas en Honduras eran más baratas que el Ferrocarril, / y 'un Dibutado más bbarato que una mula'—como decía Zemurray—" (*Antología*, 20), and "y así fue como Sam Zemurray buso bresidentes en Jonduras" (*Antología*, 22). The translations read: "because in Honduras mules were cheaper than the Railroad, / and 'a Gongressman was chipper than a mule,' as Zemurray used to say" (49), "and that's how Sam Zemurray abbointed bresidents in Jonduras" (51).

Questions could be raised about some translations. In "Katún 11 Ahau," where references to the Mayas and the *Books of Chilam Balam* abound, "tepescuintles" is translated as "badgers," although they are really rabbit-sized rodents and not members of the weasel family (92). In this same poem, "Honey Bear" for "Oso Melero," an animal name that in Spanish typically suggests an anteater-type creature, is likely to conjure up images for some English speakers that are very distant from those in the context of the poem. Some word choices seem more formal than Cardenal's language. For example: "Ya no pedirán al pueblo reducir la comida" (*Antología*, 92) is rendered as "The people be no longer bidden to eat less" (93). A minor point regarding type face: in *Pluriverse*, "Katún 11 Ahau" looks like "Katún II Ahau" because of the particular font used. But these are small points. Overall the translations are effective and, as mentioned in the

introduction, the distinctive translators' voices especially appropriate for the ranges of Cardenal's poems.

An essential question for translators is how many words or expressions to leave in the original language as long as they can be understood by readers and impart the right flavor. This is an area in which there is probably no one right answer. Nonetheless, I think I prefer Marc Zimmerman's usage in "The Arrival" (about Cardenal's arrival at the airport in Nicaragua) which renders "Compañero" as "Compañero" and "somocismo" as "Somocismo" (*Flights of Victory*, 7), rather than the words used in *Pluriverse*, "comrade" and "Somozaism" (171).

Pluriverse encompasses the universe of Cardenal's poetry, and the title lends its name to the last section, which features the most recent poems, including a selection from *Cosmic Canticle*, "The Word," and poems from a collection published in Nicaragua in 2005. All of these poems except for one, "Stardust," are translated by Lyons, who very successfully conveys their epic qualities. The final line of the poem "Pluriverse" perfectly explains the meaning of the word and its clever connection to poetry: "why say universe, as though it were only one / and not pluriverse?" (212).

Noteworthy is the fact that *Pluriverse* is the most comprehensive volume of Cardenal's poetry in English to date, and that the author both approved of the selections and helped decide the sequence of poems. At the end of the introduction, Cohen informs readers that Cardenal would have preferred an English-only collection rather than bilingual book so that more poems could be included. Cohen's final words are: "And so, here they are—to gladden your heart and enrich your soul" (xxii). I agree. For being such well-crafted versions in English, these translations will gladden the heart, enrich the soul, and reach a wide audience.

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--*Anne Fountain*