

INTRODUCTION TO “WE ARE DUST OF STARS”

Odile Cisneros

University of Alberta

382 Born in Nicaragua in 1925, Ernesto Cardenal is one of Latin America’s most renowned living poets. His work, which spans more than twenty books of poetry, prose, and memoir, has been translated into scores of languages. The caliber of his work has been recognized by international prizes. He was also nominated for the Nobel Prize in 2005.

Cardenal began writing at a young age, under the influence of the great Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, but this phase soon gave way to a more mature style in which his model was the American poet Ezra Pound. At the time, the reigning poetic style in Nicaragua was called “interiorismo,” a hermetic poetry that was anchored in the literary tradition and rejected all references to the Nicaraguan social, political or historical context. In reaction to this, and following the model of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, Cardenal developed his own trend, which he termed, in contrast, “exteriorismo.” The idea was precisely the opposite of “interiorismo,” namely, the possibility that narrative poems could include any element of reality. This clearly echoes not only Pound’s definition of the epic as “a poem including history,” but also his montage or collage method of composition, whereby textual elements such as quotes, anecdotes, personal asides, fragments from chronicles and diaries, and statistics are incorporated into the body of the poem.

Cardenal explored Pound and T.S. Eliot and Anglo-American Imagist poetry during a period of study in New York from 1947-1949. The Imagist poetic notion of an image as “that which presents and intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” was also crucial for Cardenal’s poetic development, as was his discovery via Pound of the Latin poets Catullus and Martial, which he translated and took as his model. Back in Nicaragua in the 1950s, Cardenal began writing epigrams dedicated to two women, Myriam and Claudia, which display a contradictory range of emo-

tions, from the joy and exhilaration of love to sadness, melancholy and absence, all in a language laden with irony, sarcasm, humor and wit. In these poems too, his political commitment to fight the then reigning Somoza dictatorship is also evident.

"Hora 0," one of Cardenal's most famous poems inaugurates a new and lasting phase in Cardenal's poetry, both thematically and formally. At the time, Cardenal participated in a conspiracy to assassinate the dictator Anastasio Somoza. "Zero Hour" is both a portrayal of the exploitation of Central America by large multinational corporations through the use of cinematic language, and a plea for the liberation struggle happening there.

In 1956-57, Cardenal, who had always been a devout Catholic but was consumed by human passions, decided to abandon all this and enter the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky, where he became a follower of the American priest-poet Thomas Merton. Cardenal also eventually studied theology and was ordained a Catholic priest in 1965. Merton was his mentor, not only spiritually, but also politically and encouraged him to take up the cause of Native American cultures. The experience at the monastery inspired the book *Gethsemany, Ky*, book of vignettes of rural life in Kentucky and instigated as well *El estrecho dudoso* [*The Doubtful Strait*] an epic poem about the colonization of Nicaragua which intersperses quotes from chronicles of the Spanish conquistadors with a narrative voice that contests the official story. It also denounces the modern day abuses of the government as rooted in a history of pillage and oppression.

383

Cardenal's Marxist beliefs are also evident in "Oración por Marilyn Monroe" [*Marilyn Monroe and Other Poems*], a poignant portrayal of Monroe's troubled past and her exploitation by Hollywood seen as a symbol of the evils of capitalism.

In Cardenal's life and poetry, spirituality and politics have always been intertwined. So, just as he participated actively in politics, eventually allying himself with the Sandinista cause, and becoming minister of culture in the Sandinista government for 8 years, he also founded a utopian spiritual and artistic community in the island of Solentiname. As he once declared, "I came to this island looking for solitude, silence, meditation, and in the end looking for God. God led me to other human beings. Contemplation led me to the revolution."

These spiritual and political experiences inspired works such as *Psalms of Struggle and Liberation*, *The Gospel at Solentiname*, *National Song*, *Oracle over Managua*, and *Flights of Victory*. His advocacy of the Native American lifestyle and values are present in his *Homage to the Native American*.

In recent years, Cardenal has turned his attention to the world of science, particularly to exploring the mysteries of the origin of the universe and life, and the development of evolution on our planet. These topics fascinate Cardenal and have led him to do extensive reading on the subject. In his late poetry, especially his 500-page poem *Cosmic Canticle* (1989), he often cites scientific facts from quantum physics, astronomy, biology, anthropology and geology to which he gives a poetic interpretation. *Cosmic Canticle*, whose title and scope allude to works such as Dante's *Divine*

Comedy, Neruda's *Canto General*, and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, proposes how such scientific evidence can be used for the betterment of humankind on all levels, biological, social, and political. The following essay, "Somos polvo de estrellas," also explores similar topics. It was delivered as a lecture at the University of Alberta on November 18, 2010.