

**Carolyn Fornoff**

## **Ernesto Cardenal's Apologia for Ezra Pound**

University of Pennsylvania, EE.UU.

[cfornoff@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:cfornoff@sas.upenn.edu)

In an interview in 1983 with Margaret Randall, Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal explained the importance of reading Ezra Pound for his artistic maturation:

The poet who most influenced me, in whom I discovered the most, was Ezra Pound. His *Cantos*. [...] And my great discovery there was that poetry could be made from anything: anecdotes, texts by other writers, letters, news items, historical chronicles. You could put anything and everything into a poem just like you could in prose. Poetry didn't have to limit itself to a certain kind of vocabulary or a certain theme. You could write poetry about agriculture, politics, history, things you remembered. (97-98).

Cardenal was struck by Pound's multivalent engagement with the world through poetry. In contrast to the highly stylized tradition of Latin American *modernista* writers like Rubén Darío, Cardenal was less interested in poetry as a vehicle for cosmopolitan self-fashioning or psychological exploration, but as a tool for capturing and making sense of the immediate world in its countless manifestations: material, archival, political, and spiritual. Pound's reconfiguration of poetry as a space in which everything entered allowed Cardenal to remain within Nicaragua's poetic tradition –and its preoccupation with identity, lyricism and national history– while also pushing beyond *modernismo*'s circumscribed poetic voice and detachment from the urgency of the quotidian.

As robust scholarship by Greg Dawes, Isabel Fraire, Stephen Henighan, Yajaira Padilla, Steven F. White and Tamara Williams has shown, Pound's impact on Cardenal's work is palpable in myriad ways. Like Pound's *Cantos*, Cardenal's style is multi-discursive; it incorporates fragments from eclectic sources into a single poetic body. This textual inclusiveness reflects the conviction that poetry, like prose, can encompass social complexity and linguistic diversity. Cardenal also took up Pound's revitalization of the epic in works like *El estrecho dudoso*, to construct totalizing, but counter-hegemonic, accounts of history.<sup>1</sup> Pound's use of poetry as a political medium resonated with Cardenal, who described his work as aiming to "express Latin American reality, reach the people and be revolutionary" (Beverley and Zimmerman 70). Cardenal was so taken with Pound's manifesto, "*Imagisme/A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste*," and its three prescriptions for "those beginning to write verses" –direct treatment of the thing, linguistic concision, and musicality– that when he became Nicaragua's minister of culture, he institutionalized them in the curriculum of poetry workshops aimed at improving literacy.

While most scholarship examining Ezra Pound's influence on Ernesto Cardenal's work focuses on style and form, little attention has been given to the vast ideological differences that separate the two poets. Why would Cardenal, a committed Marxist and Liberation Theologist, claim as his biggest influence a poet whose fascist, anti-Semitic politics figure so prominently in his poetry and public persona? Perhaps the self-evident response is that Cardenal, like much of the New Directions inner circle at the time of Pound's decline, was more interested in his innovative artistry than his garbled fanaticism. However, this conclusion –while likely accurate– disregards the obvious question of how Cardenal accounts for Pound's fascism. Along a similar vein, one wonders whether it is possible to locate traces of Pound's ideology in Cardenal's revolutionary thought, in spite of the fact that the two poets represent rivaling ideological camps.

---

<sup>1</sup> Greg Dawes notes: "The paradox of Pound's writing, as well as Cardenal's, is that empirical reality is dissected, appreciated in its heterogeneity, and then cohesively fused into a whole. This procedure is manifested in the physical layout of the poem, in shifting focus (between the subject and the speaker), and in thematic composition. Presenting the text in this way gives it a dynamic appearance; it motivates the readers to act upon a reality that they can change." (107).

In response to these queries, this article argues that when considering Pound's imprint on Cardenal's poetic production, it is useful to trace not only his aesthetic legacy, but also how he conceived of art in relation to politics, and figured the poet as political actor. Probing the ideological concurrences between Pound and Cardenal reveals the proximity or slippage between two seemingly oppositional discourses, Marxist and fascist, during the twentieth century. Cardenal's conflicted admiration of his undisputed master indexes his belief in the endurance of art over the transitory relevance of politics.

When discussing Pound in interviews and essays, Cardenal rarely addresses his polemical politics outright. Instead, he focuses on Pound's expansive approach to poetry. In the first volume of his four-part memoir, *Vida perdida* (1998), Cardenal explains that his early epigrams –written before he decided to become a priest and during the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua– were modeled after Pound's.<sup>2</sup> As Yvette Aparicio has noted, this genre of the concise satirical poem lent itself well to Cardenal's expression of his "erotic and political frustrations" in *Epigramas* (1961), written during a period of disillusionment with both his love life and the State. An *Antología* of Pound's work, translated into Spanish and curated by Cardenal in conjunction with José Coronel Urtecho after Pound's death, reflects the centrality of these short poems for the Nicaraguan writers. The anthology includes many of Pound's well-known epigrams, such as "The Bath-Tub," "The Tea Shop," and the canonical "In a Station of the Metro," which Pound famously edited from thirty lines down to only fourteen words: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough." The focus on capturing a precise instant in time and distilling a specific image into language became a central tenant of Cardenal's *exteriorismo*: which sought to activate the senses through the text in a matter akin to photomontage.

*Vida perdida* also details Cardenal's first encounter with Pound's longer-form epics, *The Cantos*, while studying literature at Columbia University from 1947-1949. He humorously relates that because of his limited English, he relied on his Costa Rican girlfriend to help him decipher

---

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Henighan makes a compelling case that Cardenal's early epigrams were shaped more by Pablo Neruda than Pound, and reflect "Neruda's combination of romanticized love and insurgent politics" (61).

the text's meaning (see 64). Whether or not he understood every word, Cardenal was struck by *The Cantos'* heterogeneous inclusivity. Its energetic interweaving of voices and themes, chaotic combinations of contemporary with historical figures, and imbrication of fact with fiction, all indexed the potentiality of poetry to bring together the infinite: an aspiration of epic proportions that Cardenal later pursued in *Cosmic Canticle*. Tamara Williams sums up Cardenal's attraction to Pound's methodology: he was "profoundly committed to Pound's idea of the Canto as a literary manifestation of a larger project that sought a radical renewal of poetry through a re-definition of its conventional thematic, discursive, and generic boundaries" (44).

Notably, Cardenal's account in *Vida perdida* of reading *The Cantos* in the late 1940s doesn't mention the controversy that enveloped Pound throughout World War II, nor does it allude to the contemporaneous uproar around the Bollingen Prize, awarded to Pound for *The Pisan Cantos* in 1949. To briefly historicize this well-known case, Pound's pro-fascist, anti-Semitic statements and effusive support of Mussolini and Hitler had decisively turned public opinion against him in the United States in the 30s and 40s. During the war, Pound moved to Italy and regularly broadcast rambling and virulent speeches on Italian radio. The conspiratorial and pro-Nazi content of these broadcasts, which I will turn to in a moment, further tainted his reputation from that of an eccentric oddity to an absolute pariah. In 1943, Pound was indicted for treason by the US government on charges of adhering to the enemies of the United States in his capacity as a radio propagandist. Following his extradition, at the urging of his influential friends, he was spared trial and instead declared incompetent, and interned at St. Elizabeths Hospital for the Insane in Washington DC for twelve years. Within this context, the public widely maligned Pound, a sentiment crystallized in Robert Frost's description of the poet as "possibly crazy but more likely criminal" (Thompson 175) and the sensationalist 1945 headline of Marxist newspaper *New Masses*, asking, "Should Ezra Pound Be Shot?"

The story of Pound's redemption from disgraced figure to esteemed bard has much to do with James Laughlin, the American poet and founder of New Directions Publishing.<sup>3</sup> Gregory Barnhisel's illuminating monograph, *James Laughlin, New Directions and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*, chronicles how Laughlin rehabilitated Pound's reputation during his confinement to St. Elizabeths after the war by appealing to the trending formalist literary movement New Criticism. Drawing upon the New Critics' maxim that a text's aesthetics mattered far more than its content, Laughlin made a case for Pound's work. He redirected public focus from Pound's bigotry to the merits of his poetry by invoking aesthetic autonomy: the notion that a piece of art is self-contained, self-referential and should be judged apolitically. Helping this case, Laughlin chose to omit some of Pound's most egregiously pro-fascist propagandistic work, such as the Italian Cantos, from New Directions editions of the collected Cantos. Armed with these strategies to depoliticize Pound, critical support consolidated around his inventive *Pisan Cantos*, in spite of its anti-Semitic undercurrents and transparent praise of Mussolini.

Laughlin's project to market Pound's poetry as totally separate from his politics successfully culminated with Pound's receipt of the inaugural Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1949. Echoing the language of aesthetic autonomy, the Bollingen committee underscored the centrality of the "objective perception of value" in their decision to award Pound this honor (Barnhisel 120). Nonetheless, the public remained unconvinced. Many opposed the award, arguing that Pound's politics could not be separated from his art, and that the two were inextricably intermingled. Others, however, while not defending Pound's politics, continued to promote his work for its aesthetic originality. Ernest Hemingway, for instance, wrote in a letter to Archibald MacLeish that while Pound deserved "ridicule" for his "vile, absolutely idiotic drivel," his work merited defense regardless of his mental state: "It will be a completely unpopular but an absolutely necessary thing to do" (548).

---

<sup>3</sup> Laughlin was a key figure for disseminating Latin American poetry to North American readers. The *Anthology of Contemporary Latin American Poetry*, published by New Directions in 1942 and edited by Dudley Fitts, was the first large bilingual collection of 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American poets. This volume included ninety-five authors and was produced in cooperation with the US State Department as an effort to foster goodwill between the US and Latin America during WWII (see Barnhisel 145).

Thus the dominant critical approach to Pound during the forty years following the Bollingen, according to Tim Redman, was to separate his life from his poetry: to ignore Pound's activity as Mussolini's champion in order to consider Pound as poet (see 4). Parsing Pound's problematic politics from the work itself, avid readers stressed the critical interest offered by the text, and discarded its flashes of bigotry as the result of madness. Barnhisel nuances the periodization offered by Redman, arguing that Pound's literary reputation is a tale of radical transformation: from a pro-fascist, anti-Semitic crank in the mid-1930s, "to the close of the 1960s, when for a brief time he was seen as the most important and accomplished writer of the modernist period" (3). Ultimately, the declining popularity of literary criticism that focused on authorial intent or historical circumstances, replaced by engaging the text as self-sustaining, was crucial to the rehabilitation of Pound's reception. This new formalist approach to literature allowed readers to overlook the fact that Pound remained fervently fascist; he returned to Italy by boat in 1958 after his indictment was dismissed, and famously gave the fascist salute upon disembarking. Yet as Barnhisel points out, the irony is that this strategy –spearheaded by Laughlin– to separate Pound's politics from his art, was ultimately diametrically opposed to Pound's own belief that art must respond to its social context, and that cultural production cannot be stripped of its ideological content. As we will see, Cardenal echoes Laughlin's defense of the irrelevance of Pound's dogma, yet at the same time, adopts Pound's aspiration for literature to serve a clear political function.

Cardenal was initially put in touch with Laughlin through his mentor Thomas Merton, with whom he studied at the monastic Abbey of Gethsemani in 1957 and whose work he translated into Spanish. In a letter to Merton written on November 8, 1957, Laughlin first mentions Cardenal:

That is very interesting that you have a young Nicaraguan poet down there in your midst [at Gethsemani]. How is his English? I ask because I think it would be fine if we could have a little group of translations from Nicaraguan poetry in the next number of New Directions anthology, which is to be an

international one. [...] Will you pass the word to Cardenal that I am interested, and perhaps he will send me something? (Cooper 129).

On October 14, 1961, Merton wrote to Cardenal:

The translation of your poems arrived and it is excellent. Would you like me to send it on to J. Laughlin? It would make a fine little book [...] However I think it may be a little hard to persuade him to publish it immediately. He might want it to be in the same series of pamphlet-poets as Pablo Antonio [Cuadra], whenever that will be” (127).

Following up in 1962, Merton wrote to Cardenal that Laughlin had rejected the suggestion that New Directions publish Cardenal’s Gethsemani poems as a stand-alone book. “They are he feels too slight a collection with which to introduce you and in any case he does not want to publish these poems by themselves” (Merton 131). However, Laughlin continued to enthusiastically support Cardenal’s work, often publishing it in translation in his annual journal, *New Directions in Prose in Poetry*. Two such examples include Cardenal’s “Drake in the Southern Sea” in issue 17 (1961) and “Coplas on the Death of Merton” in issue 25 (1972).<sup>4</sup> As Cardenal developed a more coherent and extensive body of work, Laughlin’s New Directions Publishing Company became the primary venue for his work in translation. New Directions published Cardenal’s account in prose of visiting Cuba in 1970 and 1971, *In Cuba* (1974), and many volumes of his poetry: *Apocalypse And Other Poems* (1977), *Zero Hour and Other Documentary Poems* (1980) and most recently, *Pluriverse* (2009).

Situating Cardenal as a reader within Pound’s evolving public standing, the Nicaraguan poet would have first read him at Columbia at the height of the Bollingen controversy in the late 40s, when the role of politics vis-à-vis his art was hotly debated.<sup>5</sup> A decade later, Cardenal published a

---

<sup>4</sup> Other Latin American writers featured in these issues of *New Directions in Prose in Poetry* include Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Jorge Carrera Andrade, and Clarice Lispector.

<sup>5</sup> It is also likely, following Henighan’s observation in *Sandino’s Nation*, that José Coronel Urtecho introduced Cardenal to Pound’s poetry before he attended Columbia. This would place him even more squarely as a reader during the war, when Pound was widely disparaged by critics and the public.

piece defending Pound, “El caso de Pound,” in the Salvadorian journal *Cultura* in 1961, a moment of greater receptiveness to his work, but nonetheless a decade prior to the culmination of his canonization as acclaimed modernist. The argument advanced by Cardenal in this piece can be seen as particularly representative of his long-term position on his poetic predecessor because it was later adapted into a prologue for the *Antología* of Pound’s work that was translated by Cardenal, selected in collaboration with Coronel Urtecho, and published in Spain in 1979, several years after Pound’s death in 1972. Besides changes of syntax, the largest divergence between the two versions of the text is the *Antología*’s omission of Cardenal’s closing words in “El caso de Pound”:

UNDOUBTEDLY IF THERE IS ANY WRITER IN THE WORLD NOW THAT ABOVE ALL OTHERS DESERVES THE NOBEL PRIZE (AND HAS DESERVED IT FOR A LONG TIME AND IS A DISCREDIT TO THE NOBEL THAT HE HASN’T ALREADY OBTAINED IT), IT IS EZRA POUND” (12).<sup>6</sup>

This passage was understandably not included in the 1979 *Antología* since it was published after Pound’s death, when he could no longer be considered for the Nobel. Cardenal’s emphatic endorsement of the poet pointedly invokes Pound’s predilection to communicate emphasis through capitalization. For Cardenal, there is no doubt that Pound is the most deserving contender for the Nobel, yet has been unethically sidelined because of his polemical politics.

As can be construed from the concluding endorsement of Pound for the Nobel, “El caso de Pound” is a provocative apologia that constructs a heroic image of Pound as a skilled poet and devoted friend. Straddling the changing tides in literary analysis, Cardenal’s tribute analyzes Pound both on a biographical level as well as for his formal aesthetic contributions. He praises Pound’s cosmopolitanism: his knowledge of Chinese culture, ability as translator, and adherence to Confucianism (linking him to faith in a way resonant with Cardenal’s own spiritual poetics).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> All quotes of this work are my translation.

<sup>7</sup> Other Latin American writers also commented on Pound’s poetic negotiation with foreign languages. Jorge Luis Borges applauded Pound’s “medieval” method of translation for being more concerned with sonority than accuracy.



“El caso” emphasizes Pound’s central role in cultivating and propagating the work of then-unknown writers like T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. Quoting Ernest Hemingway at length from the 1925 issue of *This Quarter*, Cardenal evidences Pound’s boundless generosity toward younger artists: “He loans them money. He sells their pictures [...] He advances them hospital expenses and dissuades them from suicide” (8). Alongside Hemingway’s praise, Cardenal accumulates celebratory testimonials by figures such as Eliot, Joyce and W. H. Auden, that when brought together, erect a definitive portrait of Pound’s innovation and influence.

After establishing this exuberant sketch of Pound’s literary impact, Cardenal denounces the widespread “conspiracy of silence” that surrounds his oeuvre, motivated by political and economic posturing (“El caso” 9). Cardenal states that Pound “supported the fascist movement in Rapallo,” but nuances this affiliation by explaining that it was merely the means to a righteous end: the deconstruction of the exploitative economic system. Offering an apologia for Pound’s politics, Cardenal maintains that “Pound’s adhesion to fascism was only in the field of economic theory; he never defended their political practices” (“El caso” 9). Notably, by the time Cardenal reprinted this essay in the prologue to the 1979 *Antología*, he added a more definitive statement on the matter. Pound’s support of the fascist movement in Rapallo was also his “great crime” (13). Following this unequivocal condemnation of Pound’s fascism, Cardenal returns to the argument he first advanced in “El caso,” which details Pound’s critique of the United States’ neocolonial policies, a critique that resonated with Cardenal.

Arguing that Pound’s fascist leanings were motivated by the defense of liberty –specifically freedom from censorship and despotism– and consequently divorced from right wing authoritarian proclivities, Cardenal cites several Cantos (LXXIV, LIII, and XXXIII) and excerpts from Pound’s Radio Rome broadcasts during World War II. He quotes broadcasts that denounced

---

For Borges, true poets “know that the essence of verse lies in its intonation, not in its abstract meaning” and Pound’s “translations reflect not the matter of the original but its elusive forms” (51). Conversely, Octavio Paz found Pound’s inclusion of untranslated Chinese ideograms in his poems to be highly problematic because either “the citations demand translation which isn’t ideographic, or the ideograms are magic traces, signs that have lost the power to signify. [Pound’s] theory is barbaric and arrogant. The barbarism and arrogance of the conquistador: Rome is no Babel” (qtd. in Perloff 41).

U.S. involvement in WWII as unlawful, absurd, and ultimately doomed. For example, this one from January 29, 1942:

[T]he United States had been for months illegally at war, through what I considered to be the criminal acts of a President whose mental condition was not, as far as I could see, all that could or should be desired of a man in so responsible a position or office (10).

Such comments, Cardenal stresses, are evidence not of madness, but of Pound's patriotic desire to defend the Constitution. At the very least, the First Amendment presumably protects the right to criticism. Cardenal writes that Pound's patriotic critique was silenced by the State when he was arrested for treason in 1942, thus substantiating Pound's charge of US censorship.

It is important to signal that although Cardenal's excerpts of the Rome Radio programming further his argument that Pound was fascist in name only, other broadcasts not included in "El caso de Pound" were more extreme in rhetoric. In a transmission from May 1942, Pound's reactionary discourse speedily debunks the claim that he was only attracted to fascist economic policies, and nothing more:

Germany, natural civilizer of Russia, ought to keep western edge of Europe at level of civilization and amenity [...] As to the Hitler program [...] the breedin' of human beings deserves MORE care and attention than the breedin' of horses [...]. That is point ONE of the NAZI program. Breed GOOD, and preserve the race. Breed thorough [...] conserve the BEST of the race. Conserve the best elements. That means EUGENICS. (*"Ezra Pound Speaking"*).

This is not an exceptional example. Even if Cardenal was not exposed to these more virulent broadcasts, Pound's allegiance to fascism is also didactically inserted into his poetry, specifically the latter two thirds of the *Cantos*. The *Pisan Cantos* begin by describing Mussolini as Christ-like, and Cantos XLVIII, L and LII are explicitly anti-Semitic. Canto LII, which is included in Cardenal's *Antología* includes the following passage: "Remarked Ben [Franklin]: better keep out the jews / or yr/grand children will curse you / jews, real jews, chazims, and *neschek* [usury]" (*Cantos 257*).

However, while the assertion that Pound never supported fascist policies is an aspirational interpretation, Cardenal's attempt to transcend Pound's polemical politics by redefining his fascism not as political practice, but as economic theory, highlights an ideological affinity between the two poets that has been overlooked by scholarship: a shared interest in critiquing usury. Over half of the prose pieces by Pound that are included in Cardenal's *Antología* are economic tracts, a percentage that demonstrates that Cardenal carefully followed Pound's thought on money and government, and strengthens the hypothesis that Cardenal was interested not only in Pound's formal techniques, but in his ideology.<sup>8</sup> Following this line of inquiry, it is useful to explore why Pound's economics resonated with Cardenal, and compare how both poets inserted and articulated economic theory in their poetic production.

Pound's central premise is that no significant cultural or social reform is possible without reforming the economy first. Basing himself on C.H. Douglas's theory of Social Credit, Pound argues that financial capitalism, or "usury", has corrupted society, and that the fascist state must intervene to restore the natural order. Pound's pointed return to economic critique becomes progressively pronounced in his literary production throughout the thirties and forties, with the publication of money pamphlets such as the *ABC of Economics* (1933) and *Social Credit: An Impact* (1935). The increased centrality of financial condemnation is felt in his poetry as well; as Jean-Michel Rabaté observes, if in the early *Cantos* gold is associated with divine aestheticism, by Canto XXVI it has irrevocably transformed into the malignant "vice of luxuria" (72-73). In this formulation, gold and lust for wealth distance society from the true bases of credit, "the abundance of nature and the responsibility of the whole people" (*Guide to Kulchur* 194). Pound instructs his readers that it is imperative to return to a pure, unadulterated form of economic exchange (direct barter, for instance) that connects people and nature—consumers directly with the goods they are consuming—and removes any elements that interfere with this organic interchange. Pound advocates for reforming currency, which he views as an arbitrary sign and

---

<sup>8</sup> 14 of the 28 prose pieces compiled in the *Antología* are excerpts of Pound's thoughts on the economy, including, "The State", "Worgl", "Brooks Adams", and "Social Credit". The other prose pieces include Pound's translations and poetics.

false representation of the commodity, as well as for removing parasitical third parties such as bankers and usurers, generally subsumed under the racial classifier of Jewishness. In order to protect the common man, Pound argues, it is imperative to re-imagine an economy that combats the fundamental problem of mediation that prevents the direct circulation of goods.

Canto XLV, one of the nine Cantos included in Cardenal's *Antología* of Pound's work, exemplifies the manifestation of Pound's economic ideology in his poetry. A scathing indictment of usury, Canto XLV depicts how the practice of charging excessive fees for the use of purchasing power, without regard to production, corrupts society and deprives mankind of the most basic rights. The Canto opens by formulating an image of privation: "With usura hath no man a house of good stone." This initial depiction of the lack of "good stone" emphasizes usury's obstruction of access to raw, natural materials, representative of an idealized past harmony with nature that has been eroded by capitalism. Not only does the unethical practice of money lending result in the loss of shelter, private property, and quality materials, it also directly opposes man's ability to create. Craftsmanship, formulated in this Canto as the originary manifestation of aesthetic creation, when "each block [of stone was] cut smooth and well fitting," has been recklessly cast aside in favor of industrial reproduction, ultimately alienating man from both nature and art. As Canto XLV progresses, Pound further delineates how the mechanisms of mediation inherent to usury prevent creation, cause blockage, and misrepresent wealth:

Stonecutter is kept from his stone

weaver is kept from his loom

WITH USURA

wool comes not to market

sheep bringeth no gain with usura

...

Usura slayeth the child in the womb

It stayeth the young man's courting

It hath brought palsey to bed,

lyeth between the young bride and her bridegroom

(*The Cantos* 229-230).

Constructed here as the primary “sin against nature,” usura interferes with relationships of production that ought to organically coexist: it keeps the producer from his materials, prevents products from entering the market, and ultimately precludes economic gain. To further stress usury’s violation of social wellbeing, this series of thwarted economic affiliations gives way to a parallel sequence of interrupted sexual relationships; usura comes between lovers, impedes reproduction, and exterminates fecundity. As Robert Casillo notes, in Canto XLV the usurer is figured as the “chief obstacle to sexual and economic utopia,” whose greed obliterates both production and consumption (127). It is important to note that throughout the *Cantos*, the condemnation of structural injustice resulting from usury is recodified into racial villainy. The international banking system is repeatedly linked to an international conspiracy of Jews (see Morrison 51). For Pound, the root cause of capitalism’s corruption is the Jew, not the mechanisms of capitalism itself.

Pound’s understanding of economics as an epic struggle between good and evil, in which usury’s mediation threatens sovereignty, is echoed in Cardenal’s poem “Zero Hour” (1956). Written following Cardenal’s participation in the failed April Revolution that sought to overthrow dictator Anastasio Somoza, “Zero Hour” similarly posits that utopic national renovation can only be realized through the removal of unethical mediators: chiefly, U.S. corporations and their domestic allies. The explicitly political messaging of “Zero Hour” diverged from the preceding Central American poetic tradition, personified by Rubén Darío’s apolitical *modernismo*, which focused on cosmopolitanism, aesthetic sublimation and the interior universality of man. In his interview with Randall, Cardenal explains that he initially struggled to find examples for how to incorporate political critique into his poetry:

I was always obsessed by my hatred of Somoza. From the first Somoza.<sup>9</sup> And I always wanted to write political poetry, attacking Somoza. But I couldn't figure out how to do that. There didn't seem to be any models for writing political poetry. I didn't want to write propaganda, tracts ... I wanted it to be poetic and political at the same time. (97).

While Cardenal does not explicitly state that he found such a model in Ezra Pound, it is clear that reading Pound greatly impacted his approach to writing political poetry.<sup>10</sup> In terms of form, Cardenal borrowed upon Pound's sardonic epigrams and sweeping epics, refashioning these models in order to denounce the Somoza dynasty and imagine other possibilities for Nicaragua. Yet it is not just Pound's aesthetics that spoke to Cardenal, but his ideology itself. Although they represent rivaling political discourses, there are many affinities between Pound and Cardenal's populist political visions that elucidate how Cardenal read Pound's economic views through the lens of the Latin American fight against neoimperialism.

Both Canto XLV and "Zero Hour" are imbued with populist rhetoric: repeatedly returning to the underlying claim that all virtue resides in the People, a gesture accompanied by the ardent condemnation of foreign enemies and their local associates. Pound's universal, ahistorical formulation of usury's threat to social well being is adapted by Cardenal in "Zero Hour" to a specific national context of foreign corporate exploitation. "Zero Hour" sets out to trace the economic history of Central America, and denounce its status as a series of "banana republics": countries operated as commercial enterprise for private profit. The poem narrates how Somoza and other servile dictators representative of the kleptocratic State collude with U.S. corporations

---

<sup>9</sup> From 1936-1979, propped up by the support of the United States, the Somoza dynasty governed Nicaragua as a family dictatorship. The "first Somoza" referenced here by Cardenal is Anastasio Somoza, who ruled from '37-'56, and was later succeeded by his two sons: Luis and "Tachito". The Sandinista National Liberation Front defeated the Somoza regime in 1979.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that Pound is the only model of political poetry that influenced Cardenal. Pablo Neruda's epic, *Canto General*, published just a few years before "Zero Hour" in 1950, includes a similar denunciation of foreign corporate control of Central America: "The Fruit Company, Inc. / Reserved for itself the most succulent, / The central coast of my own land, / The delicate waist of America. / It rechristened its territories / as the 'Banana Republics', / And over the sleeping dead, / Over the restless heroes / Who brought about the greatness, / The liberty and the flags, / It established a comic opera".

in order to exploit public lands and labor, precluding domestic economic growth and development. Analogously to the Poundian binary of man opposite usura, “Zero Hour” juxtaposes *campesinos* against foreign loans and U.S. fruit companies:

The *campesinos* of Honduras used to carry their money in their hats  
when the *campesinos* sowed their seed  
and the Hondurans were masters of their land.  
When there was money  
and there were no foreign loans  
or taxes for J.P. Morgan & Co.,  
and the fruit company wasn't competing with the little dirt farmer.<sup>11</sup>

Cardenal's critique of neoimperialism –the United States' control of Central America's economy through capital investment– echoes the *Cantos* denunciation of the extraction of national money for the benefit of foreign usurers. As in Canto XLV, “Zero Hour” mourns the resulting separation of man from nature (“land”), as well as the loss of production (“seed”) and purchasing power (“money”). Similarly to Pound's heroic construction of pre-industrial craftsmanship by referencing the stonecutter, weaver, and shepherd, Cardenal nostalgically remembers a lost past before foreign loans, taxes, and US intervention. This idealized past is imagined as pure and primitive, a time when profit was not stored in banks to be accumulated, but when *campesinos* carried “their money in their hats”. Tellingly, the uncorrupted past imagined by Cardenal obviates colonial history, an omission that reveals Cardenal's condensed construction of the United States as principal villain.

Highly different rhetorically from Canto XLV, “Zero Hour” is not as abstract, ahistorical, or erudite, preferring to narrate history through concrete, accessible language that reflects the present-day idiom. Cardenal's language is not as stylized as Pound's, who erects Canto XLV in

---

<sup>11</sup> This translation of “Zero Hour” by Donald D. Walsh is included in *Pluriverse* (48-64).

an archaic literary register, using words like “stayeth, hath, lyeth” that give this Canto a biblical, timeless aura. While moments of “Zero Hour” are mythic or sublimely abstracted from the day-to-day, the majority of the text seeks to clearly narrate the usurpation of Nicaragua by foreign interests and corrupt elites. Unlike the abstractly denominated “usury” condemned by Pound in Canto XLV, the threat of mediation is given a postcolonial, Latin American specificity in “Zero Hour” through the insistent invocation of the enemy’s proper name:

But the United Fruit Company arrived  
with its subsidiaries the Tela Railroad Company  
and the Trujillo Railroad Company  
allied with the Cuyamel Fruit Company  
and Vaccaro Brothers & Company  
later Standard Fruit & Steamship Company  
of the Standard Fruit & Steamship Corporation:  
the United Fruit Company  
(*Pluriverse* 48-49).

Through excessive enumeration and the piling on of company names, Cardenal generates a literary conglomeration, symbolically manifesting the monopolizing effect of foreign interests within the domestic discursive space. This repetitive listing forms a block of text that demands that the reader pay attention to the proliferating threat of capitalist interests, similarly to how Canto XLV’s repetitive iteration of “usura” and pointed capitalization underscore the enemy’s name and significance: “WITH USURA ... CONTRA NATURAM.”

As this comparative reading of Canto XLV and “Zero Hour” demonstrates, Cardenal approached Pound’s economics through the lens of populist nationalism, rendering his assessment of usury akin to the contemporary Latin American struggle against neo-imperialism. Cardenal recognized in Pound an analogous impulse to purify society of unethical mediators, in order to restore the economy to the hardworking People organically connected to nature and craft.



The similarities outlined above between both poets' critiques of financial capitalism reveal the slipperiness of the supposed antagonism between fascism and Marxism. Porous, this boundary gives way to overlapping ideological terrain: the shared use of protectionist, populist rhetoric that elevates the nation in opposition to external enemies and their internal associates.

However, as many critics have been quick to point out, there are significant conceptual differences that distinguish Poundian economics from traditional Marxist thought.<sup>12</sup> Although Pound's objections to financial capitalism appear at first glance to have much in common with Marxism's critique of the exchange of commodities, unlike Marx, Pound doesn't seek to completely overhaul the capitalist system. Nor did Pound's elitism, as Stephen F. White points out, permit him to view his struggle as one against hierarchy (see 170). Instead of questioning the underlying logic of capitalism, Canto XLV simply proposes that the mediating element of usury be removed in order to reestablish harmony between the commodity (wool) and the market. Even though Pound expresses resentment against isolated capitalist practices like the creation of artificial scarcity, the consumer's lack of sufficient purchasing power, and the concentration of economic power, he doesn't challenge production –central to Marxist critique. Instead, Pound argues that “the problem of production was solved” by Mussolini, and that a strong protectionist State negates the need for structural reform.

Unlike Pound, “Zero Hour” exemplifies Cardenal's incorporation of a robust challenge to production. Cardenal targets the exploitative economic practices of foreign companies in collusion with local dictators, denouncing their structural perpetuation of regional underdevelopment and dependency. Following the Marxist critique of production, the poem delineates how the banana republic system alienates and estranges workers from their labor, and transforms work into a means of survival:

And the farmers are put in jail for not selling at 30 cents  
and their bananas are slashed with bayonets  
... And what can you do? You've got to eat.

---

<sup>12</sup> For extended analysis of the Marxist critique of Pound's economics, see Chace and Sieburth.

And you've got to accept what they offer to pay.

24 cents a bunch.

Rather than buy bananas at their true exchange value –determined by the amount of labor necessary for cultivation– capitalism manipulates and coerces laborers in order to obtain surplus value. These capitalist manipulations waste nature and destroy the commodity's use-value,<sup>13</sup> ultimately producing a deformed logic that is highlighted by Cardenal:

And the bananas rotting in the railroad cars.

So there'll be no cheap bananas.

And so that there'll be bananas cheap

(50).

Cardenal's turn to a Marxist critique responds to the failure of the Liberal promise that the region could successfully and autonomously participate in the global market. Instead, decades of dictatorship and economic dependency unmasked the emptiness of that pitch; Central America's participation in the market delivered none of the promised returns. In "Zero Hour" Cardenal repeatedly returns to the barrenness of capitalism, naming its unfulfilled promises:

The workers get IOUs instead of wages.

Instead of payment, debts.

And the plantations are abandoned, for they're useless now

(51).

While the Vanguardist literary movement that formed in Nicaragua in the 1930s was politically all over the map in their response to the failed Liberal project for national autonomy – variously claiming allegiance to Augusto Sandino, fascism, the Somoza dictatorship, and later

---

<sup>13</sup> Marx's definition of use-value: "A use-value has value only in use, and is realized only in the process of consumption" (20).

Somoza's opposition— Cardenal, part of the successive *Generación del 40*, has been considered by scholarship as consistently Marxist. Coronel Urtecho, who collaborated with Cardenal in the translation and selection of the Poundian *Antología*, exemplifies the *vanguardia's* ideological trajectory. Initially ultra-reactionary, Coronel Urtecho aimed to revamp the antiquated Conservative tradition, supported the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza and edited proto-fascist cultural journal *La Reacción* in 1934. Yet by the 70s, he reversed course and committed to the revolutionary Sandinista National Liberation Front. Cardenal, by contrast, though born into a Conservative family, was ideologically allied with the anti-Somocista opposition from the regime's conception, and actively participated in attempted coups like the April Conspiracy of 1954 mentioned in "Zero Hour". However, while much attention has been paid to the Marxist dimensions of Cardenal's work, typically read through the lens of Liberation Theology and the Sandinista guerrilla movement, Cardenal's reception of Pound demonstrates how a wide array of ideological inputs influenced his formation.

"El caso de Pound" reveals that Cardenal's interest in Pound extended beyond his poetics and economics, to the idea of the poet as tragic hero. In this essay Cardenal heroically figures Pound as a patriotic rebel who spoke truth to power and suffered because of it. Pound, Cardenal contends, defended national values by denouncing the American government's unethical actions and betrayal of the Constitution through waging illegal war and manufacturing lies. As a result, he was vilified by the U.S. as a traitor, isolated in a mental ward, and his importance as poet silenced. In Cardenal's formulation, Pound is a misunderstood rebel: persecuted for denouncing injustice. This forceful re-fashioning of Pound as an ethical voice of opposition reflects much more about Cardenal, and his vision of the ideal poet, than it does about Pound.

Read through the context of the Cold War, this exoneration of Pound's conduct indicates Cardenal's interest in recuperating Pound as a celebrated North American poet who was critical of the United States. Written in 1960, one year after the success of the Cuban Revolution, Cardenal's apologia for Pound's fascism mirrors the shifting ideological alliances of the time. With the showdown between fascism and communism central to World War II and the Spanish

Civil War long past, the Cold War set Marxist sympathizers against a new foe: the United States' capitalist ambitions. Cardenal's reconfiguration of Pound as a heroic figure recalls the old adage, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". Both poets denounced the United States' political and economic practices; critiques that, as we have seen, often coalesced in parallel argumentation.

Furthermore, the construction of Pound as a persecuted voice of opposition also fits a trope central to Cardenal's poetic narrative: the martyr. An ordained Catholic priest, Cardenal recurrently represents history through the frame of Christian eschatology, as the propulsion toward a prophetic destiny that promises to usher in a new way of being. Beverley and Zimmerman explain that in Cardenal's narrative framework, "[d]esper is lit up from within by the promise of an imminent redemption from evil, a time when 'the last shall be first,' when human beings will attain a new community and a new body" (68). For Cardenal, the redemptive promise is embodied: his heroic protagonists suffer, like Christ, in order to bring about the Messianic (Marxist) Age. In "Zero Hour," Sandino and Adolfo Bález Bone, two rebels assassinated at the hands of Somoza's regime, figure through their sacrifice the possibility of future national liberation. The poem concludes by underlining that death is simultaneously the path to rebirth: "the hero is born when he dies / and green grass is reborn from the ashes" (64). Cardenal conflates the Passion with revolutionary struggle, concluding that suffering for the People is the ultimate sacrifice that makes a utopian future conceivable. Within this framework, Cardenal configures Pound as yet another heroic protagonist. Vocally opposed to capitalism's separation of man from nature, Pound was persecuted by his own government: made into a prisoner of war, confined to a mental ward that Cardenal describes as "a cell of two square meters, hermetically closed," whose aesthetic legacy has been conspiratorially occluded. Thus, it is not just Pound's aesthetics that compel Cardenal, but also his symbolic sacrifice and refusal to be silenced that allow Cardenal to incorporate him into his constellation of poetic martyrs.

In his praise of Pound's resistance to the status quo, Cardenal figures Pound as analogous to himself. Cardenal, during the forty-three years of the Somoza dictatorship, rather than censor his work, continued to publish poetry opposing the regime, even though he had to publish

anonymously, through clandestine routes, and self-exile to evade oppression. Cardenal viewed his own position as public bard in similar terms to those he uses to describe Pound: as an ethical patriot whose primary aim was to wrestle the national future away from the fraudulent government. Like Pound, Cardenal believed that the poet was ethically obligated to identify social corruption, and through poetry, purge society from that debasement. The poet is the privileged figure who purifies social discourse, rescuing it from the decay enacted by capitalism and its mediators.

In Epigram 33, written shortly before “Zero Hour,” Cardenal borrows upon Pound’s revitalization of the epigram to elegize the recently deceased poet Joaquin Pasos:

Now he’s dead.

He has no monument.

But

Remember him when you have concrete bridges,

Great turbines, tractors, silver-colored granaries,

Good governments.

Because in his poems he purified his people’s language

Which one day will be used to write commercial treaties,

The Constitution, the love letters, and the decrees.

(44).

This epigram delineates Cardenal’s faith in poetry’s ability to enact social change. The prophetic martyr enters the social field to purify language through poetry. This purification is not confined to an aesthetic renovation, but actively renews economic and political discourse: engendering decrees and treaties. The poems written by Pasos, Cardenal posits, enact change in discourse itself, infiltrating commerce and government, and eventually constituting concrete institutions and infrastructure.

Cardenal concludes “El caso de Pound” by affirming that many years from now the “reasons why Pound has been attacked and silenced will not be understood except by scholars” (12). Quoting Pound, he argues that no one will remember Stalin and Roosevelt, but will intimately know the *Cantos*; as we now know Dante’s *Divine Comedy* but aren’t familiar with Constanza or Federico Barbarroja. In this far-off future, “the readers of the *Cantos* will not know, nor will they be interested in knowing, if [...] Pound was a Guelph or a Ghibelline” (12). With this zooming out, Cardenal constructs Pound’s fascism as evanescent compared with his eternal aesthetic legacy. The immortality of art dwarfs the ephemerality of politics; poetry has a lasting life, form, and significance. Yet this figuration is paradoxical: Cardenal values Pound’s poetics precisely because it models political engagement and ideological imagining, yet simultaneously dismisses the political content essential to this model as of secondary importance. This tension discloses Cardenal’s appreciation of Pound’s work for dismantling discourses of power in complex ways that exceed the limitations of fixed ideologies such as fascism or Marxism. In a manner that echoes Dante’s conversation with Virgil in the opening Canto of the *Inferno*,<sup>14</sup> Cardenal looks to Pound as the Sage who can show him how to fight the imperialist beast through poetry, but also aspires to fossilize the beast through language into a remnant of the past.

## Bibliography

Aparicio, Yvette. “*Epigramas: the Self-centered I and exteriorismo*”. *Istmo. Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos* 11 (2005).  
<<http://istmo.denison.edu/n11/articulos/cardenal.html>>.

Barnhisel, Gregory. *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.

Beverley, John, and Marc Zimmerman. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

---

<sup>14</sup> “Behold the beast, for which I have turned back; / Do thou protect me from her, famous Sage, / For she doth make my veins and pulses tremble.” (Canto I, *The Inferno*).

Borges, Jorge Luis. "Ezra Pound as Translator: Between Matter and Form". Trans. Anthony Rudolf. *Hopscotch: A Cultural Review* 2.1 (2000): 50-51.

Cardenal, Ernesto. "El caso de Pound". *Cultura: revista del Ministro de Educación* 21 (1961): 7-12.

Cardenal, Ernesto. *Pluriverse: New and Selected Poems*. Ed. and trans. Jonathan Cohen et al. New York: New Directions, 2009.

Cardenal, Ernesto. "Prólogo". *Antología*. By Ezra Pound. Trans. José Coronel Urtecho and Ernesto Cardenal. Madrid: Visor, 1979. 9-20.

Cardenal, Ernesto. *Vida perdida*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1999.

Casillo, Robert. "Troubadour Love and Usury in Ezra Pound's Writings". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 27.2 (1985): 125-153.

Chace, William M. "Ezra Pound and the Marxist Temptation". *American Quarterly* 22.3 (1970): 714-725.

Cooper, David D., ed. *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*. New York: WW Norton, 1997.

Dawes, Greg. *Aesthetics and Revolution: Nicaraguan Poetry, 1979-1990*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Fraire, Isabel. "Pound and Cardenal". *Review* 18 (1976): 36-42.

Hemingway, Ernest. *Selected Letters 1917-1961*. Ed. Carlos Baker. New York: Scribner, 2003.

Henighan, Stephen. *Sandino's Nation: Ernesto Cardenal and Sergio Ramírez Writing Nicaragua, 1940-2012*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014.

Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Nahum Isaac Stone. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1904.

Merton, Thomas. *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*. Ed. Christine M. Bochen. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993.

Morrison, Paul. *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Paul de Man*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Refiguring the Poundian Ideogram: From Octavio Paz's *Blanco/Branco* to Haroldo de Campos's *Galáxias*". *Modernist Cultures* 7.1 (2012): 40-55.

Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions, 1993.

Pound, Ezra. "*Ezra Pound Speaking*": *Radio Speeches of World War II*. Ed. Leonard W. Doob. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1978.

Pound, Ezra. *Guide to Kulchur*. New York: New Directions, 1970.

Rabaté, Jean-Michel. *Language, Sexuality and Ideology in Ezra Pound's Cantos*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1986.

Randall, Margaret. *Risking a Somersault in the Air: Conversations with Nicaraguan Writers*. San Francisco: Solidarity Publications, 1984.

Redman, Tim. *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Sieburth, Richard. "In Pound We Trust: The Economy of Poetry/The Poetry of Economics". *Critical Inquiry* 14.1 (1987): 142-172.

Thompson, Lawrance Roger, and R.H. Winnick. *Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938-1963*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

White, Steven F. *Modern Nicaraguan Poetry: Dialogues with France and the United States*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1993.

Williams, Tamara. "Reading Ernesto Cardenal Reading Ezra Pound: Radical Inclusiveness, Epic Reconstitution and Textual Praxis". *Chasqui* 21.2 (1992): 43-52.