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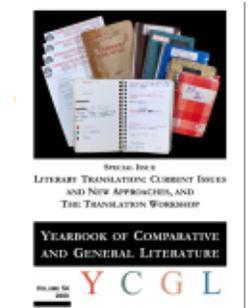
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Translating Cardenal's "Managua 6:30 P.M.": The  
Challenge of the Kiss and Other Things

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Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature, Volume 54, 2008, pp. 152-161  
(Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



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# TRANSLATING CARDENAL'S "MANAGUA 6:30 P.M." THE CHALLENGE OF THE KISS AND OTHER THINGS

*Jonathan Cohen*

*A poem can be finished, a translation only abandoned.*

—Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Translation of the work of Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal (1925–) presents a set of challenges that are unique to the particular language and style of his verse. All literary texts do this, of course; there are no universal formulas for translation. Writing in the Spanish of Central America, Cardenal uses colloquial speech often juxtaposed with other forms of language, from Biblical verse to technical scientific jargon, to create his distinctive voice. To identify his poetics, early in his career he coined the term *exteriorismo*, which he defines as “poetry created with images from the exterior world, the world we see and feel . . . an objective poetry: narrative and anecdotal, made with elements from real life, with concrete things, proper names and precise details, exact dates and figures and facts and statements.”<sup>1</sup> More than that, Cardenal’s poetry belongs to the lyric tradition, the tradition of sung language, in particular the ‘American’ (New World) lyric tradition forged by Rubén Darío in Spanish and Walt Whitman in English. He insists on the song of colloquial speech. His poetic style has been influenced by the classical Latin poetry of Catullus and Martial, and very much by the work of twentieth-century U.S. poets, including—to name a few—William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Fearing, Muriel Rukeyser, Carl Sandburg, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, and, above all, Ezra Pound, whom he has often called his main teacher. Much of his ‘studies’ with these poets, beyond reading them, took place when he translated them from English to Spanish.

Cardenal’s early poem, “Managua 6:30 P.M.,” offers a fine example of the

lyric power of his *exteriorista* poetry, as well as the complexities of translating it. It shows the challenge that simple, straightforward language can present, especially when the object of the translation is to offer readers a sense of the poetic quality of the original text; that is, an accurate verse translation that can stand alone as an equally masterful poem in English. Here, I am going to focus on the process of my translation of this one short poem, in order to throw some light on what actually went into it.

Cardenal first published “Managua 6:30 P.M.” in 1962 in an early issue of the influential bilingual literary magazine, *El corno emplumado / The Plumed Horn*, which in the 1960s did much to introduce Cardenal’s poetry to North American readers and fellow poets, especially those of similar literary and political orientation, including Ginsberg with whom Cardenal shared a particular affinity. The contributor’s note in the magazine about Cardenal points out that, at the time, he was “studying for the priesthood in the catholic seminary *Cristo Sacerdote* in Colombia,” and that the poem was “written during his recent stay in his native Nicaragua.” (126) Managua, the capital city, was where he had been living prior to his studies in Colombia (and it is where he lives now). He subsequently included this poem in his 1965 collection titled *Oración por Marilyn Monroe, y otros poemas* [Prayer for Marilyn Monroe, and Other Poems], which is where I first encountered it, in 1970. The poem is considered one of Cardenal’s famous poems, and my translation of it—which began during that year, but was not ‘finished’ until recently, decades later—appears in his *Pluriverse: New and Selected Poems*, edited by myself, and published by New Directions in January 2009. This history is relevant to the discussion of the process of the translation because of the long time it took me to find (i.e., hear) the finished form of the line that presents the image of the soul as a girl being kissed. The poem in Spanish and my translation of it appear en face on the next two pages.

## Managua 6:30 P.M.

En la tarde son dulces los neones  
 y las luces de mercurio, pálidas y bellas ...  
 Y la estrella roja de una torre de radio  
 en el cielo crepuscular de Managua  
 5 es tan bonita come Venus  
 y un anuncio ESSO es como la luna  
  
 las lucecitas rojas de los automóviles son místicas  
  
 (El alma es como una muchacha besuqueada detrás de un auto)  
 TACA BUNGE KLM SINGER  
 10 MENNEN HTM GÓMEZ NORGE  
 RPM SAF ÓPTICA SELECTA  
 proclaman la gloria de Dios!  
 (Bésame bajo los anuncios luminosos oh Dios)  
 KODAK TROPICAL RADIO F&C REYES  
 15 en muchos colores  
 deletrean tu Nombre.  
  
 “Transmiten  
 la noticia ...”  
 Otro significado  
 20 no lo conozco  
 Las crueldades de esas luces no las defiendo  
 Y si he de dar un testimonio sobre mi época  
 es éste: Fue bárbara y primitiva  
 pero poética  
  
 Ernesto Cardenal  
 (*Oración*)

## Managua 6:30 P.M.

In the evening the neon lights are soft  
 and the mercury streetlamps, pale and beautiful ...  
 And the red star on a radio tower  
 in the twilight sky of Managua  
 5 looks as pretty as Venus  
 and an ESSO sign looks like the moon

The red taillights of the cars are mystical

(The soul is like a girl kissed hard behind a car)  
 TACA BUNGE KLM SINGER  
 10 MENNEN HTM GÓMEZ NORGE  
 RPM SAF ÓPTICA SELECTA  
 all proclaim the glory of God!  
 (Kiss me under the glowing signs oh God)  
 KODAK TROPICAL RADIO F&C REYES  
 15 they spell your Name  
 in many colors.  
                           “They broadcast  
 the news ...”  
 I don’t know  
 20 what else they mean  
 I don’t defend the cruelty behind these lights  
 And if I have to give a testimony about my times  
 it’s this: They were primitive and barbaric  
 but poetic

Trans. Jonathan Cohen  
 (*Pluriverse*)

Translation of literary texts is at once a critical and creative act. Both endeavors—to the greatest possible degree—are required. The translation of a poem, thus, begins with reading. An understanding of the poem itself can be limited to reading the text alone, but may also benefit from an author's explanation of it. Cardenal talks about "Managua 6:30 P.M." in an interview, and describes the experience that underlies it:

I found the lights of the business signs to be poetic. They looked like something very primitive. Because we still are in a very primitive stage of humanity. They looked to me like something crude. I saw the beauty of that, as a city lit up can look beautiful. Now, I don't deny the cruelty behind those signs. In this poem I simply talk about the beauty of the city at that hour, as a visual thing.<sup>2</sup>

To further appreciate Cardenal's experience, it is important to consider that he was visiting Managua, coming from the seminary in Colombia, where he was studying for the priesthood (he was ordained three years later). His vision of the city during that visit was through the eyes of a passionate Christian with ideals for a better world, especially in his homeland.

Concerning the poem itself, the opening lines (1–6) present a montage of visual images, as if the poet's eye were a camera. These images are clear and objective, and they form a romantic picture of the city. They demonstrate one of the things Cardenal learned from Pound, who in his "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" insists that the poet must "go in fear of abstractions" and that "the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol." (201) Indeed, Cardenal's translation into Spanish of Pound's "A Few Don'ts," which he made around the time he wrote this poem, would serve as a retrospective manifesto of *exteriorismo*. Moreover, in the manner of Pound's imagism, the poem is composed in the sequence of the musical phrase, not that of the metronome, and it demonstrates Cardenal's use of colloquial speech inclined toward song. Even the four lines that catalog names of businesses work this way. And the poem builds to his implicit protest of the values of the modern world, where business signs "proclaim the glory of God." It is a world that, as he says in the penultimate line, is "primitive and barbaric." Yes, on the surface, the city looks beautiful to him, but what is not seen, what lies behind the pretty picture—namely, the cruelty to which he alludes—is troubling and problematic. It is something that cries out for change. Ultimately, Cardenal tells the truth as he experiences it, but he tells it slant, using poetry's language of indirection.

How, then, to make a translation of this lyric poem? How to convey the poet's truth in artful verse the way he does? The range of linguistic possibilities allows for an array of word choices. To guide my choices, not only must I understand his poem (and that he does more than "simply talk about the beauty of the city at that hour"!), my translation poetics must be clearly defined. Retrospectively, my goal was to produce an accurate translation that would be faithful not only to the literal meaning of the work, but also to its poetic quality, in particular its lyric power. I aimed to convey in American English, my native speech, a poetic 'paraphrase' of Cardenal's Spanish, as defined by John Dryden: "translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to

be amplified, but not altered.” (6) In other words, not word-for-word translation, but sense-for-sense translation. More than that, I aimed to give the language of the translation a music that conveys the lyrical force of the original poem.

Aiming for fidelity to both the sound and sense of a poem is the great challenge of the act of translating poetry, of making a real translation, as if the poet were originally writing the poem in English. A few examples will illustrate my point. First, the opening line—*En la tarde son dulces los neones*—rendered literally is: ‘In the afternoon/evening are sweet/gentle/kind/mild/pleasant/meek neons.’ Much fine-tuning is obviously required here; word choices must be made. The hour of day points to ‘evening.’ Possible renderings of the initial phrase are: ‘in the evening’; ‘at evening’; ‘at evening time’; and, moving from the confines of the literal but keeping with the sense of it, ‘at dusk’; ‘in the twilight’ (the *cielo crepuscular* [twilight sky] in line 4 supports this choice); or ‘at sunset.’ The religious nature of the poem also invites consideration of ‘eventide’ with its Biblical association, but this word is hardly an expression of contemporary colloquial speech. Next comes the question about the *neones* and the right word for how they look (*dulces*) at that time of day in Managua. The several Spanish-English dictionaries are not always the best resource. Sometimes one must simply project oneself into the situation and imagine the word that naturally would come to mind to express the idea.

Concerning the idea behind this particular line, here is what Cardenal himself told me at one point in the process: “the idea is that at that time those lights in the city become soft or romantic—that at another time they aren’t.”<sup>23</sup> Further, given his knowledge of English, he offered the following translation: “I think it should be translated: *At evening the neons are (or become) soft ... (or something like that).*”<sup>24</sup> How great to have the author provide this rendering! It was as if he truly were writing his poem in English. However, although his command of spoken English is good, it is not like that of a native speaker. Moreover, the word choices made for the first line must work well poetically, in terms of both sound and sense, with the next line: *y las luces de mercurio, pálidas y bellas*. My translation was guided by my understanding of the idea behind the line, to which he himself contributed, as well as by my ear for the sound of the English. Furthermore, I took the creative liberty to add the word ‘lights’ to go beyond the mere chemistry of ‘neons,’ in order to ensure a clear image expressed in language most natural to me. In the world of my audience, people talk about ‘neon lights,’ not ‘neons.’ The same desire to ensure the clarity of the image of the opening line motivated my translation of the *luces de mercurio* (lit. ‘mercury lights’) that appear in next line as ‘mercury streetlamps,’ especially since nobody I know could tell me, when asked, what a mercury light was. The technical name of that kind of light, once used commonly for street lighting in the United States, is a more ordinary term in Spanish.

Another example of a translation challenge in this poem, undoubtedly my favorite, is the great kiss in line 8: *El alma es como una muchacha besuqueada detrás de un auto*. This line is quite simple and straightforward in Spanish, and it also is very lyrical. The internal rhyme and assonance of the vowels ‘a’ [ah], ‘e’ [ay], ‘o’ [oh], and ‘u’ [oo] add to its euphony. A word-for-word translation is: ‘The soul is like a girl kissed repeatedly or covered with kisses or smothered with kisses or kissed and caressed or kissed heavily’ (i.e., not simply *besada*, or

‘kissed’) ‘behind a car/auto.’ Here is what Cardenal told me about the line: “It happened that I saw a couple kissing behind a car that was parked on the street, and then I compare the soul with that girl who was being kissed, the same way the mystics always compared the soul to a bride.”<sup>5</sup>

In the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz, the great Spanish mystic of the sixteenth century, whose work Cardenal has long admired, the figure of the ‘bride’ (soul) and ‘bridegroom’ (God) is central. In his poem “La noche oscura” [The Dark Night], the soul leaves her home at night, and searches for God through spiritual negation: everything is dark, no one sees her, nor does she look at anyone; with no other light or guide, only love guides her, until the “guiding night” brings together the soul and her lover, and they become one. The intensity of the implied consummating act of bride and bridegroom becomes metaphoric of the power of union with God through love, as seen long before in the Hebrew Song of Songs. Discussing San Juan’s poetry with Edith Grossman, whose translation of “The Dark Night” is a masterpiece, she emphasized to me the influence of the Song of Songs: “That image of the woman seeking her lover was, as far as I know, used by practically every mystic in the West (and maybe a few in the East), as a way of indicating the search for spiritual union, and once achieved, that was alluded to in terms of sexuality; that is, the ineffable ecstasy of the union with God.”

The challenge of translating *besuqueada* with fidelity, as I define it, thus required that the English be not only natural and colloquial, but clearly suggestive of the intensely sexual experience of the couple kissing in the image created by Cardenal. More than that, the translation of the entire line had to recreate the lyrical quality of the original Spanish. I was walking along the Hudson River in Riverside Park, in late afternoon, when the words that fully met the challenge came to me. The beauty of New York is that no one looked strangely at me as I passed them repeating the line out loud to myself: “The soul is like a girl *kissed hard* behind a car.” The simple clarity of the language and the internal rhyme of ‘hard’ and ‘car’ succeeded. It was an accurate rendering of the meaning of *besuqueada*, too. The right sequence of musical phrase was finally there in the line, in relation to its place in the poem (a previously published version of mine settled on “kissed a lot”).<sup>6</sup> At last, after brooding over the several different possibilities of words, the rendering of the line was true in every way to Cardenal.

I could present further examples of challenging words, phrases, and lines in “Managua 6:30 P.M.,” such as the *anuncios luminosos* (line 13) that demanded the choice of the right word for *luminosos* that would convey the idea of neon signs lit up, and also work effectively in the lyric structure I was creating in the translation. ‘Luminous’ is something of a false friend, since the word in Spanish is a more ordinary, colloquial word, like our ‘shining’ or ‘bright,’ in that Latin-based language. The solution of ‘glowing’ appealed to me because of its descriptive accuracy (see neon signs lit up at evening time), but equally important, its sound value worked well in terms of its resonance with ‘glory’ in the preceding line, and also its assonance. Here is another good example: the rhyme of the end words in the poem’s closing two lines, where *primitiva* and *poética* resonate with palpable irony, and end the poem with a lyric force to underscore Cardenal’s final comment on what he observed that night in Managua. My solution was to take the creative

liberty to reverse the word order of adjectives in the penultimate line to achieve the desired semblance of rhyme. This strategy guided my choice of the word for *bárbara* from among the several possibilities, including ‘barbarous,’ ‘barbaric,’ ‘fierce,’ ‘cruel,’ ‘crude,’ and ‘heathenish.’ The poem includes several more challenges of varying degree that are unique to the particular language and style used by Cardenal. But the rendering of the kiss, described above, was the most challenging and most rewarding for me in the process of translating the poem. That success gave me the greatest pleasure, and it was the finishing touch before I published the poem in his *Pluriverse*.

Twenty-five years ago, in my translator’s note appearing in the first book of Cardenal’s poetry that I published, *With Walker in Nicaragua and Other Early Poems*, I said this about my approach to the task of translation: “I have worked at bearing his utterance into my own, using language that I (as he) always could, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say. Moreover, approaching translation as an act of sympathy, I have done my best to convey the poetic quality of his work through living poems in English.” (19) Looking back on what I said then about my translation poetics, I stand by it completely, and recognize that my work as a translator belongs to a long literary tradition. This is a great tradition, for translation extends the bounds of our literature, our sensibility, and our speech.

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “...la poesía creada con las imágenes del mundo exterior, el mundo que vemos y palpamos... la poesía objetiva: narrativa y anecdótica, hecha con los elementos de la vida real y con cosas concretas, con nombres propios y detalles precisos y datos exactos y cifras y hechos y dichos.” (Poesía viii)

<sup>2</sup> “Encontraba poéticas las luces de los avisos comerciales, encontraba eso como algo muy primitivo. Porque todavía estamos en una etapa muy primitiva de la humanidad. Lo vi como algo salvaje. Encontraba la belleza de eso, como se puede ver bella una ciudad iluminada. Ahora, la crueldad de esos anuncios no la desconozco. En este poema simplemente yo hablo de la belleza de la ciudad a esa hora, como cosa visual.” (Borgeson 378–79)

<sup>3</sup> “La idea es que a esa hora se vuelen dulces o románticas esas luces de la ciudad—que a otra hora no lo son.” (Letter)

<sup>4</sup> “Creo que habría que traducir: At evening the neons are (or become) soft ... (o algo parecido).” (Letter)

<sup>5</sup> “Sucedió que yo vi una pareja besándose detrás de un auto que estaba estacionado en la calle, y comparo entonces al alma con esa muchacha que estaba siendo besada, igual que los místicos habían comparado siempre al alma con una novia.” (Letter)

<sup>6</sup> Rattapallax.

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