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NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND COUNTER-HISTORY IN *EL ESTRECHO DUDOSO*

Tamara Williams
Hamilton College

The most remarkable feature of Ernesto Cardenal's *El estrecho dudoso* is its collage of unaltered fragments of canonical and non-canonical historiographical documents pertaining to the discovery, conquest and colonization of Central America. The result is that intertextuality, that is, the concentration and legibility (visibility and explicitness) of external or alien discursive structures within a text,¹ constitutes the dominant structuring device in the poem. Frequent use of quotation marks, faithful transcription of the sources stylistic idiosyncrasies and archaisms, and typographical highlighting of segments of these pretexts make explicit Cardenal's unabashed borrowing. *El estrecho dudoso* appears to expose consciously its identity as "a text constructed as a mosaic of quotations; as an absorption and transformation of other texts."²

For the most part and in keeping with the overall trend in the criticism of Cardenal, readers have ignored *El estrecho*'s intertextual dimension. Although this trait is consistent with one of the main tenets of *exteriorismo* — Cardenal's chosen term for the expansion of the range of textual types allowed into poetic discourse — there has been no assessment of the impact of this tenet on the discursive configuration of the Cardenalian text³. Moreover, critics need to assess *exteriorismo* in terms of more conventional principles of poetic discourse in contemporary Latin America; and more specifically, its effects on a poem's production of meaning.

One of the consequences of *El estrecho*'s borrowing techniques is its strong dialogic quality, manifested by a consistently present double-voiced

discourse that “refers simultaneously to two enunciations: that of the present enunciation and that of the previous one.”⁴ When assessing the poem’s meaning, therefore, the reader cannot presume that the poem’s extensive and explicit reliance on the convergence of pre-existing historical texts is gratuitous and insignificant. Rather, he/she must assume that the repetition of fragments of historical discourse invite the reader to explore the nature of the inter-textual dialogue thus created. Cardenal’s use of another’s voice, speech, and language is not merely a duplication of the “other,” but rather, as Bakhtin correctly held, a vehicle for the author to express his or her intentions in a refracted way.⁵

By acknowledging *El estrecho*’s intertextual features it becomes clear that the work articulates the construction of a counter-hegemonic reading of the first one hundred years of post-Columbian Central American history. The elaboration of the reading is complex and relies on a wide variety of devices, only a few of which I will discuss here. In particular, I will describe how irony, satire and parody constitute key narrative strategies in the presentation of an alternative perspective of the Spanish incursion into the “New World.”

Cardenal’s preferred means of subverting the dominant interpretation of the Conquest is to revitalize systematically the words and deeds of the victors by means of a series of inter-related portraits and self-portraits of key figures derived from letters, “cartas de relación,” chronicles and histories of the period. Their recontextualization creates a distance between values intended by the portraits’ authors and Cardenal’s unspoken evaluation of them. The segments chosen “become relativized, de-privileged and aware of competing definitions,”⁶ as they undergo the dialogization typical of irony, one that critically revising and completing the picture of the character/speaker or action in which he is involved.

Joanna P. Williams states that an ironic situation has two necessary components:

First, the situation must contain two (or more) elements (events, ideas, points of view) that are incompatible or incongruous. Second, there must be someone (X), real or imaginary, who does not see the incongruity. Of course, we need another person (Y) to notice the contradictory elements as well as the possibility that someone does not see them. This person (Y) has perceived the irony. The ironist’s intention is to make his or her listener perceive and appreciate the irony of a situation, just as a joke teller’s aim is to make the listener perceive and appreciate the humor of the joke. What the ironist does, then, is to *display* the situation to the listener (Williams 127).

El estrecho combines these procedures with what Wayne C. Booth calls a dramatic picture. That is to say that the character (X) does not address the reader directly, but is shown to the reader as addressing other characters or speaking or thinking to himself (Booth 137). The reader, therefore, overhears a dialogue or a monologue in which the character, or the historian portraying the

character, inadvertently reveals more weaknesses and vices than he intends (Booth 141). The irony stems from the observable tension or contradiction between what the character (X) intends by or understands about his acts and what the poet (Y) shows them to mean.

In *El estrecho*, a pattern exists in the ironic portraiture of the Spanish explorer and conqueror. First, an individual is seen expressing optimistic anticipation for great wealth. This segment is juxtaposed to a detailed description of a subsequent disastrous outcome, involving one of the following: a maritime storm or an irregular experience at sea; loss of direction in a jungle or tropical forest; a shipwreck or desertion on an island. The incongruity which ensues from the juxtaposition of a fragment expressing greedy optimism to a fragment representing a disastrous outcome provides the pervasive source of irony in *El estrecho dudoso*. The Spaniards' quest for an idealized paradise of material treasures eludes them, and hurls them instead downward into a bizarre sequence of inter-related experiences in an unidealized world of grotesque and exaggerated mortality. This pattern, which moves key secular figures of the Spanish discovery and Conquest of America from a "high" position of greed-filled expectation downward, into an idealized godless world of rejection, is repeated consistently throughout the text. Catastrophic reversals of varying degrees and intensity befall Christopher Columbus (Canto I), Alonso de Hojeda and Diego de Nicuesa (Canto III), Gil González de Avila (Canto VI), Hernán Cortés (Canto VIII), Alonso Calero and Diego Machuca de Suazo (Canto XII), Pedro de Alvarado (Canto XV and XVI), and Hernán Cortés (XXI).

The following passages illustrate Cardenal's ironic strategy. The first appears in Canto III and is drawn from the description of the expedition of Alonso de Hojeda and Diego de Nicuesa to the Gulf of Urabá in 1508 that appears in Bartolomé de las Casas's *Historia de las Indias*:

... allén de estas islas y tierras descubiertas...
 ... una gran parte de tierra, que así por su grandeza...
 ... como porque han hallado diversos géneros de animales,
 que en las otras islas no han hallado animales de 4 pies
 se cree que es Tierra Firme...

...que no pertenecen el serenísimo Rey de Portugal
 Nuestro muy caro y muy amado hijo...
 Y podían rescatar o haber en otra cualquier manera
 oro e plata e guanines y otros metales
 e aljófar y piedras preciosas y perlas
 e monstruos serpiente y animales
 e pescado e aves y especería...

(yo El Rey) (Cardenal 45)

¡Y la ciénega! Tenían delante una ciénega —
Comenzaron a andar la ciénega, con el lodo en las rodillas,
 pensando que pronto se acabaría, y
andados tres días
 se iba ahondando más y más
y seguían andando
 esperando que pronto se acabaría...

(Cardenal 45)

... y anduvieron ocho días, diez días, doce días,
veinte días, con sed, con hambre,
con el lodo en la cintura, noches y días sin dormir,
o durmiendo en las raíces de los manglares
un sueño inquieto, triste, amargo,
comiendo las raíces,
bebiendo el agua salobre del pantano...

(Cardenal 46)

The second example, from Canto VIII, describes the ill-fated expedition of Cortés to Hibueras in 1525 and borrows from Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia de la Conquista de la Nueva España*:

Cortés no había vuelto a saber de las Casas
y resolvió ir él mismo a las Hibueras.
Fue con sus capitanes y con frailes franciscanos
y tres mil indios tlascaltecas, y con mayordomo,
maestresala, repostero, botiller,
con la vajilla de oro y plata,
camarero, paje, mozos de espuela y halconeros
y titiriteros, chirimías, sacabuches y dulzainas,
y con el príncipe Cuauhtémoc y Coanococh señor de Texcoco
y Teltlepanquetzal de Tlacopan y Oquici de Azcapotzalco

(Cardenal 71)

... La lluvia de noche les apagaba el fuego,
y alrededor rugían los animales. A esas horas
algunos desertaban para volver a Tenochtitlán
a donde nunca volvieron.
Los guías decían que estaban perdidos
y que no sabían adónde iban.

 Se subían a los árboles
y no veían desde las copas a un tiro de piedra.
Se comían los caballos

 y los indios ya iban comiendo muertos

... y no sólo indios (un Medrano contó después
que se había comido los sesos de un Montesinos).
No lo cuenta Cortés en las Cartas de Relación.
Nubes de zopilotes seguían el ejército.

(Cardenal 73)

The overall structure of *El estrecho* ultimately reinforces the ironic tension produced by these reversals of fortune. The poem begins with a segment from Bartolomé de las Casas's *Historia de Indias*, specifically his transcription of the letters allegedly written to Christopher Columbus by Toscanelli that describe the wonders of the yet undiscovered kingdom of The Gran Khan and appear to have been selected to represent the Admiral's deluded yearning to find a seaway that would lead to a city clad with gold and abundant in precious stones:

"El país es bello...
Escogen para gobernadores los más sabios.
Tomando el camino derecho a Poniente
hallaréis la famosa ciudad de *Quisay*,
que quiere decir *Ciudad del Cielo*,
en la provincia de *Mango*, cerca de Catay.
... De la isla Antilla hasta Cipango
se cuentan veinte y seis espacios.
Los templos y palacios están cubiertos de oro.
 Estad seguro de ver Reinos poderosos.
Cantidad de ciudades pobladas y ricas Provincias
que abundan en toda suerte de pedrería.
Y vuestra llegada causaría gran alegría al Rey
y a los Príncipes que reinan en esas tierras."

(Cardenal 39-40)

In a marked reversal, the poem closes with a detailed description of a world that human desire can only reject. A fragment derived from Fray Antonio de Remesal's *Historia general de las Indias Occidentales y particular de la gobernación de Chiapas*⁷ offers a painful glimpse of an excommunicated city submerged in a stench of mud and besieged by storms and earthquakes, plagues and infertility roughly one hundred years after Columbus's encounter with the frontier of the "Indies:"

Comenzó a retumbar el Momotombo.
Desde lejos se oían los rugidos
como truenos dentro de la tierra.
Como un tambor de guerra. Todas las noches
la tierra tenía temblores. Un río de fuego
bajaba del volcán, y el lago iba subiendo.
El agua del lago tenía sabor a azufre.

Las mujeres no parían, y si parían
se morían las criaturas. Llegó la plaga...

(Cardenal 169)

... Allá lejos junto al lago el Momotombo
de cuando en cuando seguía bramando.
El agua seguía subiendo
 y la ciudad *maldita*
con la mano de sangre en el muro todavía pintada
se iba hundiendo
 y hundiendo
 en el agua.

(Cardenal 170)

The consistency with which this ironic plot device is used reveals it to be a structural constant for the text's re-working (or transformation) of its many sources. In addition, this ironic employment projects a paradigm of descent onto the process of discovery, conquest and colonization, which for all intents and purposes, has traditionally sustained itself as a paradigm of ascent.

Complementing the series of ironic portraits, and embedded within them, the text offers brief and highly satirical character sketches or scornful depictions of one or more key figures of the Conquest. Invariably, the sketch combines a gruesome account of a person, or persons, caught in a hideous and irrevocable disaster, with a clearly stated and bitter attack on their voracious greed for gold and their arrogance in the conquering enterprise.

In these cases, the author has selected fragments of pre-existing texts that isolate and judge the inadequacies and the foolishness of these Spanish "heroes." The function of each satiric sketch is to enhance the tension within the ironic portrait that contains it, by clarifying the moral shortcomings of the characters' words and actions, and thus providing the ultimate explanation for their disastrous fate.

Two striking examples of vicious and effective satirical sketches can be found in Canto V and Canto XV. The first, borrowed from Bartolomé de las Casas's *Historia de las Indias* mocks the folly of the *caballeros* and *hijosdalgos* who sell and pawn all their possessions to join Pedrarías Dávila in his expedition to Tierra Firme. Their greed-filled hopes lead them to a sordid fate depicted in the shocking, painfully hilarious manner so characteristic of Cardenal's satire:⁸

Llegaron a Tierra Firme
a dar un sayón de seda carmesí por una libra de tortillas.
Caballeros con brocados gemían dadme pan, en las calles.
Preguntaban dónde estaba el oro que se pescaba con redes.

Caían muertos de hambre en las calles con vestidos de seda.
 Otros salían al campo a pacer las hierbas, como animales,
 y las raíces más tiernas. Morían de enfermedad y de modorra,
 y morían cada día tantos que en el hoyo para uno
 enterraban a muchos juntos, y muchos quedaban sin sepultura
 porque los vivos no tenían fuerzas para enterrarlos.

(Cardenal 55)

Canto XV borrows from the “Carta a S.M. del Adelantado Don Pedro de Alvarado, sobre las contrariedades que él mismo sufría de Pizarro, y estado de los descubrimientos de Guatemala”⁹ in order to describe yet another disastrous outcome, this time of Pedro de Alvarado and his men’s expedition to the Western coast of Tierra Firme. This passage is particularly interesting because it reveals the extent to which the author subverts the original meaning of pre-existing text by placing it in a new context. In writing to the king and describing his misfortunes, Alvarado had intended to secure the sympathy, compassion, understanding and continued support of his royal interlocutor. In their new context, however, Alvarado’s words are disparaged and rendered an object of grotesque and scornful ridicule. Cardenal combines explicit references to Alvarado’s love for gold and emeralds with detailed descriptions of the insanity, the physical mutilation and the hideous deaths experienced by members of his expedition:

Pedro Gómez se heló con su caballo
 y con todas sus esmeraldas.
 Las armas y la ropa iban quedando en la nieve.
 Allí quedó el oro tirado sobre la nieve.
 Allí quedaron tiradas las esmeraldas.
 Cuando salieron de la nieve iban como difuntos.
 Los indios iban sin dedos, sin pies, y muchos ciegos.

(Cardenal 113)

Cardenal also transforms the original by using what Bakhtin calls parodic stylization. Bakhtin describes how a narrator distances him or herself from somebody else’s speech by exaggerating its most visible characteristics. “Characteristics” is not to be understood here as limited to specific phonetic traits or an individualized lexicon, but also include distinctive types of language — generic, professional, ceremonial, etc. — with their attendant worldviews and value systems. The author thus succeeds in isolating, objectifying and exhibiting the archaic features or flagrant hypocrisy of certain types of languages.¹⁰ Consequently, the speaker of the parodied language is also exposed, ridiculed and stripped of his/her previously unquestioned authority.

In Canto V, which narrates Balboa’s discovery of the Pacific Ocean in 1513, Cardenal parodies a segment from Oviedo’s *Historia General*, which is

imbued with the ceremonial and official quality of the “royal proclamation,” a document read by order of the Crown whenever a Spanish explorer discovered and appropriated a significant landmark in the New World. Here parody hinges on the reproduction and highlighting of the proclamation’s ceremonious, archaicized, and oratorical qualities quoted in Oviedo’s XVIth century history. In its detailed enumeration of the extraordinary breadth of Spain’s interests, the parody simultaneously exposes the underlying greed and hypocrisy that prompts the utterance of such a proclamation.

“de los mares e tierras e costas e puertos e islas australes
 con todos sus anexos e reinos e provincias que les pertenecen
 o pueden pertenecer por cualquier razón o título que ser pueda
 antiguo o moderno o del tiempo pasado o presente o por venir
 ... en nombre de los Reyes de Castilla presentes o por venir
 cuyo es aqueste imperio o señorío de aquestos Indias,
 islas e Tierra-Firme septentrional e austral,
 con sus mares, así en el polo ártico como en el antártico,
 en la una y en la otra parte de la línea equinoccial,
 dentro o fuera de los trópicos de Cáncer o Capricornio,
 agora e en todo tiempo en tanto que le mundo durare
 hasta el universal final juicio de los mortales...”

(Cardenal 53)

To reinforce the parody intended by the transcription of this segment, the end of the Canto, in a shift back to narratorial discourse, reads: “El sol se hundió en el mar como un doblón de oro (Cardenal 53).” In equating the sun with a gold coin the speaker mockingly suggests that even the sun was transformed into material property in the verbal wake of such official proclamations by the self-interested and overly ambitious “proprietors” of the New World.

Another case of parodic stylization occurs in Canto VI, which tells how by means of a royal decree, Gil González de Avila obtained permission in 1519 to mount an expedition to the South Seas using the ships built by his predecessor, Balboa, to discover and explore the still elusive “estrecho.” The passage in question focuses on González’s presentation of the royal decree to Pedrarias Dávila in which he demanded that Davila release the ships, and on Pedrarias’s written but never fulfilled compliance with the decree. Pedrarias’ speech is distanced from its non-parodic context by highlighting characteristics of XVIth century written Spanish: the cedilla, the alternation between the inter-vocalic *y* and *i*, the use of the conjunction *e* instead of the more contemporary *y*. These features distance and objectify Pedrarias’s speech and position in the text. His ceremonious speech glorifying the power and the word of the King of Spain (which he ultimately dismisses) exposes his hypocrisy and unreliability. In the same passage, the reader’s distance from Gil González speech is narrowed by updating his words to match the contemporary speaker’s usage, a signal of the latter’s concurrence with Gil González’ anti-Pedrarias position.

Y Pedrarias tomó la dicha Cédula en sus manos
 y la besó y la puso sobre su cabeza y dijo
 que la obedecía e la obedecía
 con el mejor acatamiento que podía e devya
 como Cédula e mandamiento de su Rey e Señor natural
 a quien Dios nuestro Señor deje vivir y reinar
 por muchos e largos tiempos con acrescentamiento

de muchos Reynos e señoríos

(pero no la cumplió)

Y Gil González pide y requiere una y dos
 y tres veces y más veces quantas puede y debe de derecho
 que torne a ver la dicha cédula de su magestad
 y la obedezca y cumpla según y como en ella se contiene...

(Cardenal 60)

Finally, one sees a very effective use of parodic stylization in Canto XII where the language of an "escrito" that falsely establishes Rodrigo de Contreras's claim over the Desaguadero appears ridiculously absurd:

Tuvo que refugiarse en el monasterio de San Francisco
 huyendo del Alguacil y del proceso del oficio de oidor
 porque quería el Desaguadero para su yerno
 — el dicho señor oidor doctor Robles —
 que presenta el dicho escrito según dicho
 en el dicho año tal y tal, contra el dicho etc. antes dicho
 ante mí el dicho escribano suso dicho...
 (envolviéndolo en una red de dichos y susodichos).

(Cardenal 95)

In her book entitled *Resistance Literature*, Barbara Harlow points out the fact that historical struggles against colonialism and imperialism in numerous resistance movements, are waged at the same time as a struggle over the historical and cultural record (Harlow 7). *El estrecho* carries out this struggle in its re-reading and re-writing of the dominant historical versions of early European occupation of Central America. Through his re-ordering, re-highlighting and re-contextualizing of this historical narrative, Cardenal calls into question the hegemonic premises, orientations, and interpretations of colonial history. He subverts the very discourse that grants the text its authority by dialoguing with it and suggesting an alternative way of viewing Spain's momentous adventure into the so-called New World. Through irony, satire and parodic stylization, *El estrecho* involves the reader in a process critical re-examination of the past. The text's inherent dialogue with an anterior historical corpus demands an oppositional response to conventional interpretations of the

events described — it clearly is a text that “resists” previous stories about the Conquest.

NOTES

- 1 Wording borrowed from John Frow’s introductory remarks to Julia Kristeva’s definition of intertextuality in *Marxism and Literary History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986): 122. “The poet signified refers to other discursive signifieds in such a way that within the poetic utterance, several other discourses are legible. There is thus created around the poetic signified a multiple textual space whose elements can be applied to the concrete poetic text. We shall call this space *intertextual*. Caught within *intertextuality*, the poetic utterance is a subordinated system of a larger whole which is the space of the texts applied in this whole.”
- 2 See Kristeva, Julia, *Desire in Language*, Trans. Thomas Gora et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980): 66-67.
- 3 Cardenal clarifies this principle of *el exteriorismo* by discussing the influence of Ezra Pound on his poetry. See Benedetti, Mario, “Ernesto Cardenal: evangelio o revolución,” *Casa de las Américas* 63 (1979): 174-75: “(La influencia de Pound) consiste principalmente en hacernos ver que en la poesía cabe todo; que no existen temas o elementos que sean propios de la prosa, y otros que sean propios de la poesía. Todo lo que se puede decir en un cuento, o en un ensayo, o en una novela, puede también decirse en un poema. En un poema caben datos estadísticos, fragmentos de cartas, editoriales de un periódico, noticias periodísticas, crónicas de historia, documentos, chistes, anécdotas. Pound pues abrió los límites de la poesía, de manera que en ella cabe todo lo que se puede expresar con el lenguaje...”
- 4 Todorov, Tzvetan, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984): 71.
- 5 Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985): 324-325: “It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author... A potential dialogue is embedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages.”
- 6 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*: 427.
- 7 Remesal, Fray Antonio de, *Historia general de las Indias Occidentales y particular de la Gobernación de Chiapa y Guatemala*, 2 vols., Biblioteca de Autores Españoles. Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1964. From Libro VIII, Cáp. XIX: 156-159; Cáp. XX: 160-165; and Cáp. XXI: 163-166.
- 8 Hight, Gilbert. *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962): 5: “In this specimen we recognize the characteristic features of satire: it is topical; it claims to be realistic (although it is usually exaggerated or distorted); it is shocking, it is informal; and although in a grotesque or painful manner, it is funny.”

- 9 Alvarado, Pedro de, "Carta a S. M. del Adelantado Don Pedro Dalvarado, sobre las contrariedades que el mismo sufría de Pizarro, y estado de los descubrimientos en Guatemala," *Colección de documentos inéditos de Indias*, Vol. 24 (Madrid: Imprenta de Manuel G. Hernández, 1875): 211-235.
- 10 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*: 301-306.

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