Political Poetry and the Example of Ernesto Cardenal

Reginald Gibbons

Perhaps the subject of political poetry is so inextricable from specific poems and poets at particular historical moments that one can discuss only examples. Ernesto Cardenal is an interesting one, not least because the cause for which he long spoke, the release of the Nicaraguan peasantry from the oppressive burdens of economic exploitation and arbitrary rule by force, was victorious; the Sandinista victory gave him an opportunity, or an obligation, to become a poet of praise and victory after he had been a poet of compassion and wrath:

> De pronto suena en la noche una sirena
> de alarma, larga, larga,
> el aullido lugúbre de la sirena
> de incendio o de la ambulancia blanca de la muerte,
> como el grito de la cegua en la noche,
> que se acerca y se acerca sobre las calles
> y las casas y sube, sube, y baja
> y crece, crece, baja y se aleja
> creciendo y bajando. No es incendio ni muerte:
> Es Somoza que pasa.[1]

This essay has benefited greatly from the comments and conversation of Robert von Hallberg and Terrence Des Pres.

1. Ernesto Cardenal, *Poesía de uso (Antología 1949–1978)* (Buenos Aires, 1979), p. 59; all further references to this volume will be included in the text.

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Suddenly in the night there's a siren
of alarm, long, long
the gloomy howling of the siren
of a fire engine or the white ambulance of death,
like the cry of a mourner in the night,
that comes nearer and nearer over the streets
and houses and rises, rises, and falls
and grows louder, louder, falls and goes away
rising and falling. It's neither fire nor death:
It's Somoza going by.

In Latin America Cardenal is generally regarded as an enduring poet. He brought a recognizably Latin American material into his poetry, and he introduced to Spanish-language poetry in general such poetic techniques as textual collage, free verse lines shaped in Poundian fashion, and, especially, a diction that is concrete and detailed, textured with proper names and the names of things in preference to the accepted poetic language, which was more abstract, general, and vaguely symbolic. But what is notable in Spanish-language poetry is not only Cardenal's "craft," in the sense given this word by Seamus Heaney to mean manipulation of poetic resources; there is also this poet's "technique," which in Heaney's sense means a "definition of his stance toward life."[2] Cardenal's characteristic poetic stance has been admired because he addresses the political and social pressures that shape—and often distort, damage, or destroy—life and feeling. This is apparent even in the earliest poems Cardenal has chosen to preserve. "Raleigh," for example, is a dramatic meditation from 1949[3] in which the treasure-hunting explorer marvels at the expanse and wealth of the American continents and out of sheer pleasure recounts some of the triumphs and hardships of his travels. Although his alertness and wonder make him sympathetic, this Raleigh's vision of the New World as a limitless source of wealth is forerunner to the economic exploitation of the land and people.

2. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1969–1978* (New York, 1980), p. 47.
3. The date is from Joaquín Martín Sosa, "Breve guía (para uso) de lectores," preface to *Poesía de uso*, p. 9.

Reginald Gibbons is the editor of *TriQuarterly* magazine and teaches at Northwestern University. His most recent books are his third volume of poems, *Saints*, one of the winning books in the National Poetry Series (1986), and two edited collections of essays—*The Writer in Our World* (1986) and, with Gerald Graff, *Criticism in the University* (1985). He is at work on a critical study of modern and contemporary poetry, as well as new poems and fiction. His previous contribution to *Critical Inquiry*, "Poetic Form and the Translator," appeared in the June 1985 issue.

One might ask, What are the political and social circumstances which, rather than distorting and damaging life and feeling, nurture and preserve them? Perhaps one might answer that, paradoxically, destructive conditions of life have many times proven insufficiently powerful to prevent the creation of poetry. And some poetry has even arisen in reaction to the destructive: such conditions produce resistance, which, if it cannot heal the spirit, can lend it strength. One might answer further that it is not Cardenal's or any artist's responsibility to establish what circumstance will form a fruitful matrix for art, but only to work as honestly and as hard as political, social, and artistic circumstances will permit.

Poetry, perhaps of all arts, is least demanding of physical materials: mere scraps of paper and a pencil, or nothing at all but a good memory, may suffice for its creation. Its medium is the currency of our thinking and feeling, language; and its creation is individual, solitary, and takes place in response to, or despite, every known social and political situation. States may seek to suppress it by making publication difficult or impossible and by attacking its creators, the poets. But no state has found a way to expedite the writing of great poetry or to improve the quality of poetry generally.

However, one sees Cardenal seeking at times, especially in his most recent works, to praise conditions and possibilities which he regards as favorable to life and to art, and which he locates in the promises and principles, if not always the achievements, of the Sandinista government. Most such poems are less convincing than those which speak not for any form of social organization but for other persons in their suffering or happiness, or which represent a critical intelligence and speak against the destructive.

Indeed, in Cardenal's work as a whole there are two recurring contradictions which are never resolved convincingly, as far as I can tell. The first is between on the one hand poetic experiment and on the other hand a desire to write as accessibly as possible; that is, a contradiction between the poet answering his own expressive needs or the political needs of the audience (as he conceives them). The second is between on the one hand poems of anger and hope which speak *against* (against injustice, suffering, materialism, oppression both historical and contemporary, and so on) and which enjoy the advantages of a stance of independence, critical thinking, and resistance, and on the other hand poems which speak *for* (for compassion, for justice, for delight, and—or but?—for revolution, then for the Sandinista victory) and which may adopt a voice of consensus or even obligatory ideals. Both of these patterns of contradiction are also congruent with the modern dilemma of the artist-intellectual: "the unresolved conflict at the heart of the Romantic-democratic concept of art" is a "dual commitment both to 'high' literature (as the expression of transcendent personal genius) and to a literature

that represents 'the people' at large," in the succinct wording of Sacvan Bercovitch, writing of the classic (North) American writers.[4]

A common though blandly favorable reaction to Cardenal's poetry outside Latin America goes like this: "His poems deserve attention both for the ideas expressed (whether one agrees with them or not) and for their intrinsic poetic merit."[5] We are often so asked to divide poetry into two constituent parts, its technical virtues and its expression of belief, and to suspend or qualify our judgment of the latter. But is the division desirable, necessary, useful, or reliable as a representation of how we read, experience, and evaluate poems? How do the two elements function? What part of poetic *meaning* is constituted by belief? How is that meaning created and conveyed, how far is it subject to evaluation apart from the poem, and how generally may the poem be evaluated if it expresses belief?

These questions go beyond the broad notion of the inherently "subversive" nature of art, as in Marcuse's formulations. All art may indeed stand in a subversive or at least critical relationship to established institutions, to ideology, to "common sense," conventional wisdom, and habits of feeling. (I will return to this idea below, in discussing the rhetoric of poetry.) But that antagonistic relationship is flexible enough to permit artworks to decorate corporate buildings or to please tyrants. Equally problematic is the intention of authors whose essentially subversive works (such as surrealist poems) prove too difficult to be understood by those whom they would either attack or liberate. And when art, including poetry, professes belief or takes a perceptibly political stance toward life or allies itself explicitly with certain historical figures, movements, or causes, there can also be surprising contradictions. If Pound and Cardenal are, for instance, completely opposed politically, they nonetheless share not only a poetic technique but also the (related?) assumptions that the structure of society and of institutions, if changed, could improve the spiritual and material conditions of man, and that poetry may participate in the attempt to change what exists. How may the devices and powers of narrowly read literary works so participate? One answer derives from Kenneth Burke: literature may function as a kind of "symbolic action" which confronts that which cannot be effectively confronted by "real"

4. Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Problem of Ideology in [North] American Literary History," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Summer 1986): 650. In proposing that answers lie in the posing of the questions, the solution in the very problem of ideology, or rather in "problematizing" aspects of literary study which were previously neglected, like ideology, Bercovitch happens to participate in the ascendant literary-critical ideology of our time.

5. Robert Pring-Mill, introduction to Cardenal, *Apocalypse and Other Poems*, ed. Pring-Mill and Donald D. Walsh, trans. Thomas Merton et al. (New York, 1977), p. ix.

action, either categorically (such as death) or effectively (such as a war). (Symbolic action joins in spirit other forms of action that confront mutable realities such as the social and political organization of the human community.) This symbolic action has the power to satisfy our impulse to act, to *move* (as in political "movements"), our desire to be moved (as in "[e]motion"), and our need for solace and joy, which we seek even in "emblems of adversity." By no means does this amount to a mere "acting out," which would be a kind of blindness to reality; it is instead a clearer seeing of the world, an elucidation of reality by artistic means.

An example is the poem quoted at the head of this essay. This early work of Cardenal's uses the devices of poetry, including the enacted rhythms of perception, the chimes of similar sounding phonemes (especially assonance on the vowels *e-a* and *a-a*), and the dramatic possibilities of syntax to create first a perceptible sense-impression and then to reveal the source and thus the meaning of that sense-impression. Especially significant is the assonance on *e-a,* which links the words *suena* ("it sounds"), *sirena* (the siren), *cegua* (the "mourner"—a deliciously complicated word, of which more in a moment), *acerca* ("it comes near"), *calle* ("street"), and *aleja* ("it goes away").

Cegua is a Central American regionalism, a word indigenous to the world Cardenal is describing. It derives from the Aztec *cihautl,* "woman," and means a woman weeping, or even a hired mourner; but it's also a kind of apparition, a village bogey with the body of a woman and the head of a horse, which screams in the night and is popularly believed to be a ghost.[6] The *cegua*'s presence in folklore is pre-Columbian, so with this word Cardenal establishes the cry in the night as an ancient protest, heard by the humblest persons (to whose imagination and lives the *cegua* mostly speaks). The *e-a* assonance *is* the *cegua;* the assonantal words enact its approach and withdrawal through the streets. Cardenal plays on contradiction at the end of the poem, when he writes that the sound is not in fact that of a fire truck or an ambulance rushing to some emergency with which a mourner might be associated. The siren comes from Somoza's convoy of police, yet the ghost-soul in torment cries out at the passing of the tyrant, as if at fire and death. The tyrant is not the fact of fire and death but the ever-present threat. The *cegua* is not only his announcement of his passing but also the curse laid on him by the common people through the image of this supernatural mourner.

The terrible sound moves, as Somoza does, and the unmoving listener who hears it escapes simply because Somoza goes by without stopping. Is the deftness of the manipulation of expectation and surprise simply an ornament to the poetic contention that Somoza is an active, destructive force, against whom the passive citizen can do nothing except bear bitter

6. On the authority of Francisco J. Santamaría, *Diccionario general de americanismos* (México, D.F., 1942), vol. 1, and other sources.

witness? Or is this oscillation between opposites or containment of them something essential to the poem, and even to poetry generally?

The poem is "political" in that by means of its allusion and devices it attacks the dictator of Nicaragua. In terms proposed by Thomas McGrath, this would appear to be more of a "tactical" revolutionary poem, aimed at local and specific circumstances, than a "strategic" poem, whose effect is to "expand" the consciousness of the reader:

> One [. . .] kind of poetry [. . .] might be called tactical, about some immediate thing: a strike, let's say; some immediate event. The poet should give it as much clarity and strength as he can give it without falling into political slogans, clichés, and so on. I also thought we needed another kind of poetry that is *not* keyed necessarily to immediate events, a poetry in which the writer trusts himself enough to write about whatever comes along, with the assumption that what he is doing will be, in the long run, useful, consciousness raising or enriching. A strategic poetry, let's say. There have been a lot of tactical poems directed to particular things, and those poems now are good in a certain sort of way, but the events they were about *have moved out from under them.* Somebody asked Engels, "What happened to all the revolutionary poetry of 1848?" He replied: "It died with the political prejudices of the time." That is bound to be the fate of a lot of tactical poetry. [. . .] On the other hand, we take a poem like Neruda's *Canto General,* a marvelous big poem, but it's not there to help in some immediate kind of situation; it's a *strategic* poem. But anyone who reads it will have his consciousness expanded by the reading of it. . . . The ideal thing of course is to bring the tactical and the strategic together so that they would appear in this massive poem of pure lucidity, full of flying tigers and dedicated to the removal of man-eating spinning wheels from the heads of our native capitalists—absolute lucidity and purest, most marvelous bullshit. That's the poem I would like to have, because there's a place where those two are the same. That's in the archetypal heavens of course.[7]

The value of Cardenal's best work, even when it is most specific to Nicaraguan life, is that it is—in McGrath's terms—strategic as well. For does one have to know who Somoza is for the poem to make sense? Doesn't an inference of his nature suffice? One cannot substitute the name of a humane benefactor—Mother Teresa, Hippocrates—without introducing an absurd contradiction into the poem; but it *is* possible to substitute the name of any historical or literary figure identified with state terror, or any political figure identified by some audience, somewhere,

7. Thomas McGrath, "The Frontiers of Language," reprinted in *North Dakota Quarterly* 50 (Fall 1982): 28–29.

as tyrannical and violent, without changing the poem's meaning, only its focus.

Nonetheless, the poem's strongest gesture is in its naming of Somoza, and if a substitution of names reveals a deeper value, still the act of naming—ancient and consecrated to poetry—is crucial. Here the naming is not, as in some poems, a blessing, but a curse. And the poem is political not only in delivering the curse that is Somoza's name but also in its demonstration, within the terms of the descriptive diction, of a political relationship between the one who listens passively, powerless and vulnerable, and the one who raises sounds of fright and threats of harm. Both Somoza and the listener are "political" agents in their participation in Nicaraguan society. But the powerless agent—namer, witness, and giver of detail—has only the language and his poem, which by virtue of its artistic effectiveness is emotionally empowering, with which to "act" (symbolically), while the agent of power acts but has no voice of his own (in the poem), only the accompanying mournful cry of the *cegua,* which is at once the sound of his own destructiveness and the wail of those whom he harms. In life, Somoza's voice rules persons; in poems, Cardenal's can hope to rule only time (as poets have always hoped their poems would outlive themselves and their subjects).

When, with his fellow poet José Coronel Urtecho, Cardenal formulated his new poetics, which was intended in part to make a kind of political comment aesthetically possible in poetry, he gave it the name *exteriorismo* and offered a rationale for density of detail, use of documents, and free form. Aesthetically, "exteriorism" was influenced not only by Pound's introduction of materials formerly foreign to poetry but also by his advice to the Imagists to avoid subjectivity in their work and to prefer a precise description of the thing outside the self. One of several explanations:

> *Exteriorismo* is a poetry created with images of the exterior world, the world we see and sense, and that is, in general, the specific world of poetry. *Exteriorismo* is objective poetry: narrative and anecdote, made with elements of real life and with concrete things, with proper names and precise details and exact data, statistics, facts, and quotations. . . . In contrast, interiorist poetry is a subjectivist poetry made only with abstract or symbolic words: rose, skin, ash, lips, absence, bitterness, dream, touch, foam, desire, shade, time, blood, stone, tears, night.[8]

But beyond this aesthetic influence and preference, exteriorism seems also shaped by unmistakable political considerations. In the context of long-suppressed civil liberties and gross economic exploitation of the

8. Quoted by Mark Zimmerman in "Ernesto Cardenal after the Revolution," introduction to Cardenal, *Flights of Victory,* ed. and trans. Zimmerman (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1985), p. x.

peasantry, exteriorism looks like an attempt to find a poetic principle that would disallow the kind of language that was characteristic of, or acquiescent to, political and commercial powers. The acquiescence of poetic interiority and ethereality to arbitrary state power or capitalist exploitation would be forestalled if a poem contained the true names of things and the textures of perceived reality. No one who is unfamiliar with the clichés of bad poetry in Spanish can appreciate how bitter is the gesture of Cardenal's list of despised "subjectivist" words.

While it is unfair to expect manifestos to be reasonable, there are two objections to this one. First, if subjectivist words are indeed a poetic liability (as, in our poetry, the repetitive later work of W. S. Merwin seems to demonstrate with a similarly reduced symbolic vocabulary), it was nonetheless with such a brief poetic word list that Paul Celan created powerful—but not at all "exteriorist"—responses to the historical reality of the German concentration camps and the murder of so many Jews. A prescription for poetic diction cannot guarantee the truth of poetry, even if the example of Cardenal shows how one poet freed himself from an oppressive poetic context with just such a prescription (which excluded a few things and, more important, included many things). Second, as Czeslaw Milosz has written, "Not every poet who speaks of real things necessarily gives them the tangibility indispensable to their existence in a work of art. He may as well make them unreal."[9] I take him to mean that the mere naming of things is insufficient to suggest their reality to the reader, and such a failing has little to recommend it over its opposite poetic failing, mystification. But however valid these two objections may be generally, Cardenal's exteriorist poetics nonetheless empowered him to write a kind of poetry, and a poetry of distinct successes, not seen before in Spanish. The exuberance and plenitude of descriptive detail even in the early "Raleigh," and the American materials and occasions of this and other poems, attest to this. If these same two objections have more weight against Cardenal's later poems, that is another issue in a poetic career inextricably rooted in his changing political circumstances in Nicaragua, to which I will return.

The influence of both the ventriloquistic and autobiographical passages in Pound's *Cantos* is also apparent in Cardenal's early "La vuelta a América" or "León," although Pound's poems are denser and more far-ranging in their allusions. The irony of Cardenal's use of Pound's poetics—the leftist poet profiting from the reactionary's poetic achievements and discoveries—shows that those devices have no inherent relation to any particular political position but in larger terms simply accommodate the presence of political and historical materials in poetry. McGrath has warned against unthinkingly equating traditional poetic forms with reactionary political belief and has pointed out that "most of the inventors [of free verse]

9. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), p. 71.

were political reactionaries, even Fascists. Why should they smash up the traditional forms?" (Indeed—why should they? The topic is complex. The communist Hugh MacDiarmid, for example, used both traditional forms and meter, and free verse.) McGrath suggests unexceptionably that free verse "has often been used to bring new materials, attitudes and feelings into poetry. In this century, it always flourishes when poets interest themselves in social-political matters, when they take sides, even tentatively or unknowingly, in the class struggle."[10] McGrath doesn't specify on what side, and one thinks not only of Pound but also of Williams Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Aimé Césaire, and others in this context.

In keeping with this more general connection between free verse and political *materials,* and even before his political position is as clear as it will later be, Cardenal employs poetic detail in his early work simply to suggest the complex and unhappy effect of the first Europeans on the native cultures of America. His judgment of them as individuals is not at all sweeping; in "Los filibusteros" ("The Freebooters") he writes:

> Hubo rufianes, ladrones, jugadores, pistoleros.
> También hubo honrados y caballeros y valientes.
> [P. 27]
>
> There were rogues, thieves, gamblers, gunmen.
> There were also decent men, gentlemen, and brave men.

So these early poems are "political" in the sense of being concerned generally with a moral judgment of social and political relations and therefore with the historical record of conquest and governance in America. For, as Kenneth Burke puts it in an early essay, "The Nature of Art Under Capitalism," both "pure" art and "propaganda" arise partly out of the relationship between "work-patterns and ethical patterns."[11] That is, all poetic response is in some way tied to the ways in which the people around the poet live, work, and die. But, despite our being able to invoke Burke's symbolic action and McGrath's terms "tactical" and "strategic," the artistic accomplishment of a poem may well seem insufficient to a poet whose daily life brings him the sight of peasants debilitated, impoverished, and even murdered by their own government. Some poets and readers will always feel that in terms of its concrete effect on life, the poem is arguably of less value than bread would be, even though

10. McGrath, "Notes, Personal and Theoretical on 'Free' and 'Traditional' Form," *Poetry East* 20/21 (1986): 18, 20.

11. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action,* 3d ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973), p. 314.

Milosz says that the experience of Poland shows that when bread is scarce, poetry becomes most valuable. Cardenal's exteriorism, as a linguistic gesture, seems to be an attempt to bring the power of naming—as when he cursed Somoza in the poem quoted above—to bear on everything that could be named in the life around him, and his poetic faith in the power of naming is striking, one might even say touching, in the face of hopelessness. But exteriorism was an artistic solution to an artistic problem, not a political solution to anything.

After the successful revolution, Cardenal can be seen to move from the anecdotal and narrative textures of some of the exteriorist poems, juxtaposed against each other and against other kinds of quotation and poetic material, toward something simpler with, if anything, a renewed presence of names and naming, but more like homily that includes exemplary incidents or facts. The short postrevolutionary poems, while they sometimes have a lyric intensity missing from Cardenal's exteriorist poems, can also seem pieces of a larger work that he has not accomplished, perhaps hasn't wanted to accomplish. He prefers the tactical to the strategic *after* the revolution, one might say. Under the surface of many of the later poems is a felt, implicit obligation to make use of poetry as an inspiriting, uplifting kind of exhortation and for praise of revolutionary accomplishment.

Cardenal's case is less unusual in Latin American terms than in North American ones. The Latin American tradition of education and art differs from our own, first in grouping the artist with the relatively small caste of intellectuals, and second in expecting the intellectual (and artist) to be sensible of a social obligation to the rest of society. Latin American intellectuals and artists tend to be more involved in political activity than their North American counterparts: when governments are sufficiently acceptable to them, writers have often served them, and when governments are unacceptable to persons with humane values, writers have tended to oppose them not only with words but also with acts. When Cardenal writes in a spirit of solidarity with the revolutionaries against Somoza or the impoverished peasants or later the Sandinista government, he is keeping faith with the intellectuals' social responsibility as he has inherited it. Is he likely to be charged with breaking faith with a responsibility more familiar and more highly touted among North American writers—to independence from all constraints, from all responsibilities but those felt as personal? He might answer that the responsibilities he feels are indeed, to him, the stuff of conscience. Is the objection then to conscience itself, when conscience brings not only consciousness of "wrong," but also responsibilities of "right"? After all, in his major early work, *Hora 0* (1960), we see, as the poem itself says of Sandino, "poeta convertido en soldado por necesidad (a poet converted by necessity into a soldier)"

(p. 77). In the social context in which Cardenal has lived and written, preserving a strictly "personal" independence might be regarded not as a responsibility but as an intellectually irresponsible withdrawal from social and political life.

Cardenal's position as the first minister of culture of Nicaragua, dating from his appointment by the Sandinista government in 1979, is a circumstance that one cannot help pondering when reading his most recent work. After all, his poems closely identify him with the contemporary history of Nicaragua. The trajectory of his work moves from outrage and lament over suffering and injustice to a sense of triumph and an active encouragement of those who rebelled against Somoza, overthrew him and his army, and took control of the nation's government. With these views many North American literary intellectuals have no complaints. Ernesto Cardenal has done the right thing, has been politically correct—this is the viewpoint of the North American left (and, of course, of others whose stand is political because it arises out of moral repugnance at the inhumane dictatorship which the Sandinistas overthrew).

It is far more common in Latin America than in North America for a writer to join a political party or cause; this is the accepted, indeed expected, course of political conscience. If a party wins power, it may be just as common for those who have joined or supported it to find themselves in the position of having to choose to work for the new government or to be considered an enemy for having declined to serve. I do not know either the nature of the Sandinista government's invitation to Cardenal or his feelings about accepting it. But if his present position is no surprise, it is probably a reflection not only of conviction but also of political necessity. For this reason I am not sure Cardenal can be considered an architect of the political regime which eventually was established, insofar as it is not ideal. The practical necessities and compromises of political power will crush the scrupulosity of intellectual and artistic inquiry and experiment, even where these have had the apparent advantage in their formation of a consciousness of social responsibility. And even if ministers of culture had much power, the historical record shows few such officials who could bring their artistic scruples to the exercise of their personal power. But we so seldom see a serious artist in a position of state power that we may forget the inevitable conflicts of conscience that must face any intellectual whose public being is not outside power and devoted to critique but subservient to a power group and at least partly conscripted for the presentation and protection of that power.

Speaking in Chicago in 1985, Cardenal ridiculed as a perversion of the humanistic tradition the bizarre appendix on "Literary Resources" in the contra pamphlet circulated by the CIA. His justifiable scorn for this absurd little essay and its author follows from the assumption that poetry by definition can have no hand in violence against the innocent or in violation of humane ideals such as the sanctity of life or the desirability

of education or medical care. Yet because of Cardenal's own conversion from poet to soldier—and understandably—there come moments even in his poems when some of these values are abandoned. If a revolution is to win a military victory it must usually succeed in killing and capturing a sufficient number of the ruling forces. Revolutionaries weigh the violence they must commit against the violence suffered by those on whose behalf they fight. Others weigh the justice of that cause. Poets may side with revolutionaries, or against them, or neither; but their weighing of the same moral dilemma remains a "symbolic" act, in that poems, even when they move readers, do not carry arms. If it is true, as has been said, that Che Guevara carried poems of Pablo Neruda in his pack, it is also uncertain whether poems are sought in such circumstances because they encourage, or console.

It is no surprise when a great and political poem like Neruda's "Alturas de Macchu Picchu" prizes life over death, but a political (and especially a revolutionary) poem must also begin to say *whose* life. When Pound bitterly laments in poems the waste of life in World War I, the "enemy" is not Germany—no more than it is England—but a deadly failure that the political leadership of both nations share. In Cardenal's earlier work the lives of the powerless, the vulnerable, and the persecuted are movingly memorialized; perhaps, in such fierce work, it is impossible not to prize their lives above the lives of their tormentors or oppressors. In his postrevolutionary work the compassion narrows further. If it was true that there were no "innocent" victims on the side of Somoza, and that one cannot invite the murderous oppressor into one's own house, there is nonetheless something disappointing in the poet who makes such frequent reference to a Christian commune based on love, but who, in "Preguntas frente al lago" ("Questions Beside the Lake"), sounds not wise but strained when he writes that "God is something that is in everyone, / in you, in me, everywhere."[12] The exteriorist poetic cannot justify or redeem some of Cardenal's later poems, nor convince the reader to admire them solely for their value as sentiment or statement.

Another recent poem recounts the young Sandino's fury at seeing a trainload of American soldiers come to occupy Nicaragua for the benefit of American investment:

> y el chavalo se puso furioso
> y dijo que deseaba colgarlos a todos de los palos.
> Lo interesante de este cuento es que este chavalo
> después pudo realizar lo que deseaba.[13]
>
> and the boy became enraged
> and said he wanted to hang them all from the trees.

12. Cardenal, *Flights of Victory*, p. 92.
13. Ibid., p. 96.

The interesting thing about this story is that this boy
later was able to do what he wanted.

Again, one doesn't by any means expect to see a forgiving hand offered to the contras and ex-Somocistas who are still committing crimes of violence; one wonders only if the prophet of democratic, humane ideals can sustain his vision when he must speak for a regime—any regime—rather than against one. The lives of "men and women who find themselves in history's path" tend to be so much expendable currency to those who rule, and even to those who would rule. Cardenal's deep—and convincing—allegiance was to those who *are* ruled. In his much earlier poem "Apocalipsis" ("Apocalypse," published 1973) he rewrites the Revelation of Saint John and includes these lines:

y el ángel me dijo: esas cabezas que le ves a la Bestia son dictadores
y sus cuernos son líderes revolucionarios que aún no son dictadores
pero lo serán después
y lucharán contra el Cordero

[P. 114]

and the angel said to me: those heads you see on the Beast are
dictators
and its horns are revolutionary leaders who are not yet dictators
but will be afterward
and will fight against the Lamb

This frightening prophecy only confirms, to my mind, the humane sensibility and values in Cardenal's work. It does not alter my own understanding that the revolution against Somoza for which he hoped and which he supported did indeed rescue many people from violent or impoverished death, and has led to a life at least marginally better—especially regarding education and medical care—for many, perhaps most of the citizens of Nicaragua. But these early lines seem dangerously ironic in the present political context.

Cardenal's comments in Chicago sought to establish an intimate, essential link between poetry and the Sandinista revolution. Yet the U.S.-sponsored counterrevolution of the contras against the Sandinista government, which has put the former revolutionaries in the position of defending an established order, had inevitably driven him to a position we often call in English "artistic compromise." Now, in Spanish the word "compromised" does not have a pejorative connotation but means the same as the French *engagé*—committed to a belief and to a participation in the possibilities for action that follow from that belief. *Comprometido* connotes not "I will yield my interests and in part accept yours" or "I have cheapened my character" but "I am committed to what I have promised, in solidarity with you." Does this merely rationalize, or does

it justify, not only Cardenal's lament for the deaths and deprivations suffered under Somoza but also his desire to find glory as much as tragic loss in revolutionary death?

Among poems that present us with the issue of the "political," then, there are those which express identifiable party, ideological, or historical positions (the tactical poetry of a revolutionary). There are others that happen rather to represent human life in such a way that inevitably some of the social and political contexts of feeling and action are depicted, pondered, or enacted by the poet (the strategic poetry of a socially conscious writer). There may also be implied politics in a poem caught willy-nilly in a powerful sociopolitical context. Even the poem intended to be "pure" (a species deriving from Mallarmé and Valéry, and one whose value was much debated in Spain in the first half of this century) may come to seem political or reveal its political meaning (and its strategic value) in the context of repressive state power. The state, in permitting, perhaps undermines some art and, in attacking, foregrounds in art the humane values it would destroy (as with Mandelstam or Lorca). Less apparently political art may be attacked as forcefully as overtly oppositional works because its expressive power can be just as memorable, and because it too threatens to bear witness far into the future against the state.[14]

I think what distinguishes the strategic sort of poetry is that it *resists* ideology in favor of an insistence on the intrinsic value of life and the political value of life lived freely. Such poetry often shows an encompassing compassion. These very values can of course be claimed by an ideology—and as Burke notes, "the ideal act of propaganda consists in imaginatively identifying your cause with values that are unquestioned."[15] But the political practice of ideology will inevitably belie the rhetoric. (For example, Cardenal has said that there is no poetry of the contras, nor could there be; but even if there were, it would be bound up with the likes of Ronald Reagan's absurd claim of virtue for the contras when he calls them "freedom fighters" while at the same time condemning black revolutionaries who have far greater cause to rebel against the South African government.) The values that can truly claim the widest adherence,

14. "Purity" is a much larger topic than can be addressed here. Some might argue that all "pure" poetry, or poetry intended to be "pure," masks implicitly conservative politics, but I find that attitude simplistic. However, it is of course true that even poetry long judged to be nonpolitical, like Emily Dickinson's, conceals social and political content, whether of the sort hidden in "I like to see it lap the miles" representing the intrusion of industry and mechanization into a pastoral landscape, or that hidden in "Because I could not stop for death" representing crises of domestic, male/female politics. Yet another topic related to political poetry, but one that must be postponed to another, lesser occasion, would be poems of deliberate collusion with state power.

15. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, p. 87 n.

and which repressive states will strive actively to eradicate, or with bureaucratic structures will wear down, or with the manipulation of language and image will subvert and discredit, are those which in essence make a plea for peace, freedom from danger, mutual respect and compassion between persons, and an orderly social organization that forbids arbitrary power and fosters justice. Thus artistic works expressive of these values must unavoidably offer witness to the relationship between individual and state; to memory, as against forgetting (the cardinal point of Milosz's conception of poetry); and, quite simply, to life as against death.

I believe there is an identifiable rhetoric of poetry—a poetics, general across several historical periods, languages, and cultures (at least in the West), which is subtly and complexly entangled with these values. It is a rhetoric of observable techniques common to many poets—perhaps all of which belong to a general intention to write in such a way as simply to please the memory that recalls the poem. Perhaps the pleasure to memory of the wrought thing, the poem, partly accounts for the admiration and preservation even of poetry whose ostensible subject is pitiable or unpleasant. This does not mean subject is secondary or irrelevant; on the contrary, this shows that the poet's manipulation of poetic devices and resources (Heaney's "craft") tends to please the senses and to evoke one's admiration for the poet's gift, while the poet's "stance toward life" (Heaney's "technique") gratifies the spirit and emphasizes one's overcoming, with the poet, the distances between men. Thus Heaney says one can find poets of wobbly craft who nonetheless have a strong technique, like Patrick Kavanagh, but the most common failing is the poet of some craft who is lacking a technique, a stance toward life. Technique implicates the poet's materials, subjects, and occasions: Homer's craft becomes a source of pleasure and the vehicle of ancient lore, while Homer's technique makes one reread the poems to feel again our astonishment at them.

Obviously, poems of the sort that present what Terrence Des Pres calls "the *concrete* relations of men and women who find themselves in history's path" tend no less than any others to utilize this rhetoric, and we often call these poems "political" only in the most general sense of the word.[16] But to see this is nonetheless to catch a glimpse of the politics indeed inherent in all use of language. In English, the poetic rhetoric seems generally to privilege acute discriminations and vividness of detail, memorable freshness of diction, and strength of syntax. No better description of it exists than Coleridge's in chapter 14 of his *Biographia Literaria,* which implies the power of poetry to contravene the *habits* of perception, feeling, and thought and thus to confront us with a more profound sort of truth than we are used to, as well as giving us pleasure in the art. This quality of newness ("defamiliarizing," in the critical vo-

16. Terrence Des Pres, "Poetry and Politics," *TriQuarterly* 65 (Winter 1986): 17–18.

cabulary) is what William Carlos Williams meant when he wrote in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower":

> My heart rouses
> thinking to bring you news
> of something
> that concerns you
> and concerns many men. Look at
> what passes for the new.
> You will not find it there but in
> despised poems.
> It is difficult
> to get the news from poems
> yet men die miserably every day
> for lack
> of what is found there.[17]

The values inherent in such a poetic rhetoric would inevitably contend on some level with all bureaucratic and state powers. Is it for this reason that tyrants prefer music to poetry for their aesthetic pleasure? Music draws one, sometimes dizzily, into the self, as one responds to what Suzanne Langer called music's formal "morphology of feeling"; but poetry is unavoidably an utterance that presumes a connection between the one who writes and the one who, when reading, experiences not only a kind of dynamics of feeling but also the recognition of the referents outside the poem and of the concrete being of others. Totalizing powers, such as those of governments and bureaucracies, must be blind to the feelings and suffering of others in order to function; they fail to respond to individuals except as antagonists whom they would distract, coopt, suppress, or destroy. The rhetoric of poetry, in this context, is inherently critical; and its essence is a kind of quicksilver gleaming that cannot be eradicated.

Perhaps the poetic rhetoric I have described is natural to all literary works of enduring value; it collects, constellates, presents, transforms, and otherwise alters the names and descriptions of things, acts, and mental states in such a way as to produce in us a responsiveness to the descriptive detail and to the minutest functions and powers of language. To take an outwardly unlikely example, even such a programmatically generalized work as Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*—where in chapter 10 Imlac offers a famous definition of a poetic rhetoric quite opposite to the one I have just sketched—presents us nonetheless with a literary text to which we respond as to none other: we apprehend not only the descriptive specificities of the text and the unique substance and embodiment

17. William Carlos Williams, *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (New York, 1962), pp. 161–62.

of Johnson's thinking but also the admired and inimitable rhythms and textures of Johnson's sentences. Thus the poetic rhetoric of details and oppositions, in congruence with the moral values with which I have associated it, suggests that the nature of literary works is to resist tendencies in the reader to totalize, summarize, paraphrase, or abstract, just as the nature of those values is to stand against the effort of states and bureaucracies to oppress individual citizens, to generalize and quantify them, and thus to convert them from unique individuals to manipulable groups. Poetry's nature is to prize its own contravention of the political or social norm, even in a period when the poet considers himself an exponent of the norm, for the great poem defies above all the mediocrity of the other poems that form its literary context.

Even though individual poetic temperament may often be more important than any other factor in the poet's craft, some interesting generalities about individuality itself can be seen. In much eastern European poetry, the idea of privacy seems a defiance of state powers of surveillance, an insistence that individual powerlessness imposed by the state will not succeed in eradicating identity. The laconicism and antitraditionalism of such poetry are a kind of refusal of any tone of voice that might be interpreted as august, formal, "stately." What is wanted by the poet is the right to a thoroughly private life. This value, expressed in a poem, is political. In poetry written under parliamentary governments the idea of individuality seems often to be a defiance of market manipulation and an insistence on the irreducible identity constituted by genuine feelings. Yet what this poet wants is the ability to speak *for* others (beyond those found in the publishing "marketplace" as the relatively few buyers and readers of books of poems), to associate with others on terms of feeling rather than on grounds of economic or other statistical status (what the staffs of American commercial magazines call "the demographics"). The categorizing of the individual by either state power or advertising analysts is no more accurate, and no less false, than a précis of a novel or a paraphrase of a poem, for these always fall into more general categories of types. (My having to summarize in this discussion some of Cardenal's works and certain positions, opinions, and attitudes in those works is unfortunately also false, although imposed necessarily by the limited space of an essay.) To pursue this parallel: in some sense, paraphrase and literary taxonomy are census—and we might recall that after a census, the ancients felt a need to bathe, to cleanse themselves in order to restore their identities.

Now, compared to English, the Spanish language has less of the sort of concrete texture that I have been saying was a defining aspect of poetic rhetoric; by this I mean simply that Spanish has a smaller number of words for the naming of things, and that these tend to fall into less

various levels of diction. Is it merely a coincidence that when less precision is wanted in English, diction can become latinate and periphrastic, as in bureaucratic prose that aims at an authoritative and procedural, even ceremonial tone? Borges thought English a superior medium for poetry to Spanish, for reasons related to the poetic rhetoric I have characterized above. In formulating "exteriorism," Cardenal was reacting artistically against an apparently narrow tonal range in Spanish, *so that* poetry could speak against social and political circumstances which the old poetic diction had been inadequate either to resist or criticize. In order to attack more forcefully the "subjectivity" of accepted poetic diction, he exaggerated it somewhat; in truth it can indeed be physically evocative in Antonio Machado, even if etherealized in Juan Ramón Jiménez. But Cardenal found his preferred poetic models in Pound and other North American poets. I think the artistic defense of this poetic posture is that, in requiring poetry to refer to the tangible and historical world in a literal as well as a symbolic way, it draws attention to the *occasions* of poems as well as their *subjects;* Cardenal requires that there be an apprehensible occasion outside the poet, not solely an interior "poetic" subject like love or longing or death. Bad poems, in this view, are simply too vague and misty, and ask of the reader a familiar rather than a fresh response of feeling and thought. This would imply that poems bearing traces of ideology (of any sort) would also tend to echo propagandistic points of view (wrong not because they are already established but because they falsify with slogans and simplifications). The rhetoric of politics may prize either action or passivity, depending on the nature of the structure of government, and in either case a familiarity of statement, a mere reference; the rhetoric of poetry prizes the vital re-experiencing of feelings and thoughts, and vision—in both senses, and vividly. The rhetoric of politics prizes persuasion; that of poetry prizes perception (the sight of what is visible) and insight (the understanding of what is hidden). Of course this does not rule out political content in poems, but it does discount those poems bearing a heavy load of the ideological.

How one means to use the word "ideology" is crucial. The conflict is very wide—between the rhetoric of poetry and, on the other side, the highly developed modern rhetoric and media of persuasion, cultural and political amnesia, and the falsification of information by those who control its preservation and dissemination. Before the successful revolution of the Sandinistas against Somoza in 1979, Cardenal frequently used the word "propaganda" in the customary pejorative sense to mean precisely the language of state power and advertisements, as for instance in his first psalm:

> Bienaventurado el hombre que no sigue las consignas del Partido
> ni asiste a sus mítines
> ni se sienta en la mesa con los gangsters

ni con los Generales en el Consejo de Guerra
Bienaventurado el hombre que no espía a su hermano
ni delata a su compañero de colegio
Bienaventurado el hombre que no lee los anuncios comerciales
ni escucha sus radios
ni cree en sus slogans

Será como un árbol plantado junto a una fuente

[P. 161]

Blessed is the man who does not follow the orders of the Party
nor attend its meetings
nor sit at the table with gangsters
nor with Generals in councils of war
Blessed is the man who does not spy on his brother
nor inform on his school-mate
Blessed is the man who does not read advertisements
nor listen to their radios
nor believe in their slogans

He will be like a tree planted beside a fountain

Paradoxically, this moral high ground remains to some extent a luxury of the powerless, who in challenging ruling powers exercise a critical function that is more congruent with the rhetoric of poetry, with the artist's "criticism" of life itself. A successful revolution brings with it meetings and slogans, although these are certainly the most innocent of the sins denounced in this first psalm. As I have already noted, Cardenal's poetry falls perhaps unsurprisingly into two groups; there is a troubling difference between poems condemning injustice, mostly written before Somoza's fall, and poems praising the new political and social order, written afterward. Take Yeats as a counterexample: one can go so far as to ignore the contours of his (reactionary) politics and note simply that as an individual who actively sought to intervene in the political history of his nation, he remained relatively powerless because he was in the opposition. Therefore his two critical functions, as poet and as opposition political figure, were in a crucial way not at odds with each other, and he did not experience the torsions of the poetic impulse felt by Cardenal, who went from being a hunted conspirator against the Somoza regime to being the minister of culture of Nicaragua.

Earlier, I suggested a congruence between art's critical nature and a "speaking against." Harold Rosenberg's analysis of the relationship between the artist's engagement with politics and the use by political power of artistic method led him to hold that the artist is the most valuable critic of propaganda, for "as an expert in the fabrication of appearances and realities, he has the training needed to penetrate the fabrications of politics." Some of Cardenal's prerevolutionary poetry, aimed against the

manipulation of politics and political information by Somoza, demonstrates this critical impulse. Such artistic expertise is needed, according to Rosenberg, because

> politicians have become fiction makers, competitors and collaborators of fiction writers. One recalls, for instance, that mystery-story writers were invited to participate in think tanks on national military strategy [just as, I would add, more recently some science fiction writers have had a hand in advocating the so-called Star Wars Strategic Defense Initiative, in opposition to the expertise of some genuine scientists]. . . . A former assistant secretary of state declared on a radio program in which I participated that propaganda can no longer be successfully carried on by waiting for events to happen, and then interpreting them to support one's policies. It is necessary, said he, to create the events that verify the soundness of the policies one advocates.

Rosenberg held in the same essay that art could have almost no impact on politics, but that "the impulse to intervene in political life hovers like a ghost over the art of our century, perhaps because of the crisscrossing of fact and illusion which art and politics share."[18]

But as one can infer from Milosz's *The Witness of Poetry,* the impulse to bear witness *is* a kind of indirect intervention—a small act, at the very least, in the larger discourse of which politics forms a sometimes dominant part. It is in the realm of politics, too, that the only decisive answer to this indirect intervention may be given, either as persecution or state approval, neither of which should be wanted. The task of criticism, then, in addition to pondering artistic intervention in political life, should be to weigh political intervention in imaginative life, to which political poetry is in part a response. With regard to poems, criticism should consider not only expressed belief or conviction or political position but also the expressive significance of the poem's formal qualities *and* the formal value, in the overall structure of the poem, of the expressed belief or conviction.

And no one should suppose that an opposition between poetry and a state that uses literary devices to manipulate information and opinion leaves poetry altogether unharmed. The "competition" of opinions and of versions of information, like that of products, extends—as a circumstance of commercial life and also as an ideology dear to the industrialized, parliamentary states—into the very production and distribution of books of poems. The effect of this incursion is destructive because in the frenzies and failures of publicity it promotes not a genuine sorting out of artistic value but a race between public images and literary fashions. Inevitably,

18. Harold Rosenberg, "Art and Political Consciousness," *Art and Other Serious Matters* (Chicago, 1985), pp. 293, 281, 282, 284.

competition in this sense affects in a dubious manner the dissemination of artistic works in society, by whatever means (including all the phenomena related to the writing and reading of poetry: readings, workshops, writers' conferences, and so forth).

Therefore, even if poetry can usefully preserve humane values which stand against the inhumane, which show men and women suffering in the path of history, this political engagement of the art is not free from a reverse damage which the marketplace and the pervasive manipulated language of politics work on all language. The fundamental contradiction of poetry's engagement with politics is that if, especially when it's "political," poetry tries to intervene in history, then in all its forms poetry is subject to the intervention of politics and economic relations—both in terms of language and in terms of the very conditions of life (and sometimes death) of the poet. So in some sense writers generally work *against* "history"; for if, as Des Pres writes, "history has often shown us the long-term victory of truth,"[19] we might also concur with him in noting, less cheerfully, that history (that is, the surviving record) has also—and often—concealed the long-term victories of falsehood.

The critic is not immune to this sometimes unwitting falsification. It is the victor and his beneficiaries, however removed, who enforce the context of historical interpretation, which includes even poetry. Many examples testify to the susceptibility of evaluation and canon formation to political distortion. The phrase "evaluation of political poetry" can only suggest the phrase "political evaluation of poetry." We can play a game with adjectives revealing how difficult it is to untie the knots already tightly pulled at the heart of the evaluation of poetry. If one can speak of the "evaluation of a political poem," one might also substitute for "political" such words as "historical," "psychological," "philosophical," or "religious" without suggesting anything out of the ordinary in the history of literary criticism. But if one takes the altered phrase, "the political evaluation of poetry," and makes the same substitutions for "political," a whole range of different *sorts* of criticism presents itself, not many of them practiced with distinction. To place any adjective in front of "evaluation" is to play the victor, to abdicate a larger and more significant responsibility in favor of a smaller and less significant one (albeit more immediately *useful* to the concerns of various intellectual fields of inquiry), and to enforce an unresponsive, partial context of evaluation on the work evaluated. Our task should be, instead, to read the poetry for the sake of investigating every aspect of its participation in the life of the people in whose society it was created (even if that is our own); then to ask what it brings to those (even ourselves, in our most conscious moments) not overly distanced from that society and that poem by history or by greater or smaller cultural heritage, or by our individual formation as

19. Des Pres, "Equipment for Living," *TriQuarterly* 65 (Winter 1986): 91.

readers; then to ask what it brings to those who are indeed at such a distance. In such contexts of expectation, what was once tactical may turn strategic—the poem written in response to a given historical and political circumstance may finally reveal its resonance to wider human situations and command our admiration, evoke our pleasure, and compel us to preserve it.

Cardenal has written political poetry of both a general and a partisan kind, and some of the poems (mostly, but not entirely, written before the revolution) are enduring work, while others seem flawed by simplification and service to a political position enforcing idealization. (This is a practical judgment, an evaluation—the result of my reading his work through—which I must assert for lack of sufficient space to demonstrate.) Is it possible to go further and to open a generally valid theoretical avenue to the problem of evaluation of "political poetry"? I do not believe so.

The individual reader's judgment and evaluation are much shaped by experience and temperament. This acknowledgment may come less readily from critics, who tend to prefer theoretical consistency, than from writers, who are often and unavoidably engaged in informal evaluation and make little pretense to being "objective" about it. Their own artistic needs compel them to evaluate the work of others so as to determine whether and how to make use of it. Cardenal did this with the works of Pound and other English-language poets and took from them what he needed—but not Pound's politics, or his entire aesthetic, and certainly not his technique (his stance toward life).

Barbara Herrnstein Smith has noted how thoroughly the question of evaluation has been neglected by academic criticism for decades, and she has expounded an impressive theoretical examination of evaluation.[20] Her essay leads me to two points. First, neglect of evaluation is itself an ideological and evaluative act which, in removing the question of evaluation from ostensible concerns while continuing unavoidably to participate in a myriad of implicitly evaluative acts, is partly responsible not for "the decline of the humanities" but for the general decline of *regard* for the humanities (even among some engaged in humanistic study). When literary criticism shows no overt concern for the evaluation of individual works but only for abstract goals like "critical thinking" or "humanities," it contributes to the opinion held all too widely that there is little *value* in the humanities, only a teachable method. Thus the scientistic longings of criticism, when they do achieve some result, end merely in a self-destructive explosion.

20. See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," in *Canons*, ed. Robert von Hallberg (Chicago, 1984), pp. 5–40.

Second, it is not possible to construct any theoretical model of evaluation because the terms "theoretical" and "evaluation" are at odds. Can there be a "theoretical," that is, often "hypothetical," evaluation, except as a kind of mental role playing? Evaluation is an act of mind that may issue in conviction as well as proceed from it—a specific act of a specific individual, who if he or she evaluates a literary work solely in terms of a theoretical position may violate his or her own identity as a person, for we pursue evaluation—as Smith notes—with a larger portion of our being than that which contemplates theoretical possibilities, and rightly so. In Christopher Lasch's terms, we might say that we cannot evaluate solely as voices of reason, but do so also as voices of conscience and imagination.[21] To do otherwise is to narrow the critical act of evaluation to a partial act of analysis, as I attempted to demonstrate with my lists of adjectives for the phrase "the _____ evaluation of poetry."

Thus evaluation is always, in larger terms, the incorporation into criticism of the assessment and judgment of beliefs. But whereas a technical analysis or theoretical disquisition requires, for interest's sake, almost no prior or anticipated consensus except around the notion that criticism should be interesting to read, evaluation and judgment do require prior or anticipated consensus on the standards or values by which poetry, or any human endeavor, is to be judged as good, fruitful, acceptable, mediocre, bad, destructive, or whatever.

To substantiate a claim with regard to value, one can argue from verities perceived as eternal, as from religion, or from those perceived to survive over time, as from tradition, or from those perceived to lie in scientifically validated evidence, as from the natural world. The first method tends to seek its justification in the divine, the second in the people, the third in principles deduced to be inherent in the human creature because inherent in the physical universe. There is no great clarity here because from any one of these one can also argue to another—if there are apparently universal principles governing the nature of life on this planet, I can infer a divine order. If there is, as in Kenneth Burke's view, a "constellation" of human values such as courage, love, freedom, which are demonstrably present in cultures widely separated in time and space, I can infer from this tradition some universal and eternal aspects of human nature. And so on.

Sociological and Marxist thinking have insisted on the "socially constructed" nature of every value. Although based on the incontrovertible evidence that most human experience and all values held in common by human beings are affected by historical circumstance, finally this seems

21. See Christopher Lasch, "A Typology of Intellectuals: I. The Feminist Subject," *Salmagundi* 70/71 (Spring/Summer 1986): 27–32. My reading of this issue, titled "Intellectuals," was a rich occasion for my thinking about political poetry and Cardenal, and I am indebted to the contributors and to the editor of the magazine, Robert Boyers.

to lie just beyond the point of truth. (It would be hard to prove that the experiences of the rush of adrenaline when one is in danger, of the wearying heaviness of grief, of the ecstasy of orgasm, are socially constructed in any appreciable way.) Essentialist and politically reactionary thinking has insisted on the firm, inalterable, and flawed core of human nature, and, although based on incontrovertible evidence that across huge barriers of history, culture, and race, certain central human experiences find their unmistakable echoes in others, this too of course lies beyond the point of truth. (It would be hard to prove that the particular choices of one's active response to physical aggression, one's outward behavior at the death of one's child, or one's notions of romantic love, are not socially constructed almost in their entirety.)

So if a poem is called "political" and presents itself to our eyes as a tangle of poetic craft (which we judge by one conventional set of standards) and poetic technique, or "stance toward life," or "belief" (which we judge by another, subtly related set of standards), our response is diagnostic not only of the nature of the poem but also of the nature of our assumptions about art and politics. Most valuable among these, perhaps, is the assumption that works of art and human actions may be—should be—judged against one another, some to be preferred and some abhorred. Because evaluation is the act of an individual mind at a given moment, to evaluate Cardenal's political poetry is to evaluate individual poems against other individual poems, and to do so in the realm of both conviction and pleasure, both solace and connoisseurship, as well as that of literary history. Persons will disagree on the priority assigned to human values and will disagree on poems: I believe that some of Cardenal's poems are enduring works, and perhaps more important than that, I see his poetry as a sphere in which we are called as individuals to react not only to a poet's perceptions but also to feeling, conviction, and belief as they may be related to us in our own lives. Work like Cardenal's forces us to make ourselves as conscious as we can of the implicit assumptions affecting our evaluative decisions. Poetry, with its peculiar rhetoric, calls us thus to respond to an intense and vivid presentation of the human condition, and Cardenal's poetry is a particularly compelling instance of this. When criticism denies or ignores this call, it turns against its own subject.