

Esteban Luis Cárdenas: Poetic Elegance

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An entire family of extremely lucid poets who have overflowed their verses with the social obligation exists today. The poets' works cause rage and laughter; their works induce thought. Some of the most notable poets include Heberto Padilla, Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera, Raúl Rivero, Víctor Casaus, Luis Rogelio Noguerras, and Roberto Fernández Retamar. Some of these poets are as far from politics as they are close in the concept and practice of poetry. They even share a vocabulary, although the compositions are prepared for different loyalties.

In this context, poetry written by Esteban Luis Cardenas, specifically poetry presented in his book, *Magic City* (Deleatur Editions, France, 1997), represents a state of delicate height. The delicacy of this book is in its abstinence and in its containment. While no explicit loyalty is apparent, there is no evidence of rivalry. His book does not attempt to make anybody laugh or try to use a cleverness that would in any way, sway the reader towards the poet's opinions. Cardenas' poetry almost floats in a tide of an oriental stream. Perhaps, this is what seduced the painter Ramon Alejandro, his editor, whose work was sheltered by subtle mantras.

In the dedication section of *Magic City*, Cardenas wrote in the poet Joaquin Galvez's signed copy of the book that it would be a pleasure for his verses "to be of any use," but also "its implications." The dedication is then,



Esteban Luis Cárdenas Photo © Pedro Portal

about a poet that knows very well that words cannot be uttered without consequence, that they always imply something.

If the anti-theoretical painter has the possibility of thinking himself into a self-portrait, then the poet who does not want to wander can ramble on about his craft. The available theory does not help to understand or explain poetry; it only aids the critic in inflating his text and, sometimes, to proceed more easily from one reference to another. In any case, when the poet overlooks a poem about a poem, the use of theory is a matter of choice, with no cognitive privilege. Since it is only about an elective gesture, I can risk confessing that Cardenas could be read very productively by a certain Emerson.

The thinker Concord affirms in his essay, *The Poet* that "The amplitude of the problem is large, because the poet is a representative man. Amongst partial men, he represents the complete man and does not give us an account of his wealth, but of the wealth of the community".¹ By using this passage, Concord opens

a door to Cardenas' work that comes from the intimate and turns into a shared experience.

Emerson, like Thoreau, linked the poetry creator to his environment; but not to fracture a sociology of art or to undress the poet with impudence with coarse categories like "pulsión", "social relations of production", "power", or "reflection." The representative "poet" was the determined source in his environment, the origin that was confused with an end situated in its apparent literary opposite: the reader.

Currently, Esteban Luis Cardenas is a poet living in a semi-urban "locus" with the same strength that Thoreau had in Walden. A beach or lake, cabin or "efficiency," forest or neighborhood are spaces that can transcend if they find a pertinent poet. Further, Cardenas belongs to the troop that once took hold of a beach, specifically Miami Beach, whose street has the most beautiful name in the world—Ocean Drive. In his poems, the ladies beautify themselves and wait like Seville wives of the nineteenth century.

In his poem, *The woman and the dock* (*La mujer y la dársena*), Cardenas delves into a vanguard topic. He states that:

"The sea was blue
like an orange"

This is one of the few perceptible traces in a book that does not pay direct homage to any author.

In another poem, *Hunter's ballad* (*Balada del cazador*), which is the only one dated, places Cardenas in Havana in 1975. It's a poem that accentuates the island feeling, an essentially marine poem. However, there are no definite indications of the "old city". The island, the cliff, and the woodland could be Miami, Cuba, Watson Island, or any boat

from the Venetian Way. Cardenas, in any case, only disembarks questions:

"Who waits every night?
in the darkness of the woods,
at the edge of the ocean, on the cliffs,
to love you?
Who has not succumbed
to the terror and the fury – the scary enclosure
of the definitions, the fists against the chest –
and redeems your forehead
with the stubborn piety of his caresses?"

Cardenas coincides with Eddy Campa, another poet, when he represents himself as somebody who inhabits an ascetic universe, stripped of physical wants and needs. More than annoyance with luck, they have a certain religious satisfaction for the place from where they can look on. And, they look on with disdain without reaching hatred. I would say they even roam with arrogance.

The above can be perceived in the poem, *Poet's Variation* (*Variación del poeta*), where he says:

"A poet full of charity
smiles before the river's mist.
In a suggestion looks
at the ships on the water,
in search of cities. Then,
with humility counts his charity and thinks
of Altamirano, in the Greek carriages
and in Africa's thicket.

Cardenas does not say directly that the magic city is Miami, although he utilizes symbols and makes reference to very identifiable spots in this city. In some way, he relapses into what is already a traditional literary exercise, a state of necessity to rename Miami. Reinaldo Arenas, a Cuban writer, for example, called it "asphalt stable;" while a very belligerent Cuban publication (*La Jiribilla*) identifies it as

“Blunt Town,” in a disconcerting and analogical literary celebration.

It is in the great poem, *Visitations from the attic and the mirrors*, where Cardenas would dub Miami as the “magic city.” The city of the solitary poet, himself:

“I remain alone.
Loneliness is a tattoo, a mark.”

There is a moment in which he appears to be having a dialogue with Arenas:

“They say that Magic City is a field town
And they say it is not certain,
For they speak and do not know what they
speak
In all places.”

Cardenas replaces “not inhabit” with “not know,” for the poet appears to demand a direct experience for the acknowledgement and understanding of the Magic City. At this point, it is difficult to separate the imaginary symbolism of Miami from the traffic of toxics. Campa’s poetry, as much as Cardenas’, captures that element, which bursts into the everyday with hyperbolic gestures that include the exhibition of bodies, driving habits, and disrespect. Campa says:

“The cars illuminate a dispersion.
Breaths of bodies fatigued
by love. A mass.
Speak in another room
of cocaine, of dreams and women.
Outside something is being plotted.”

Esteban Luis Cardenas makes a series of prophecies in this poem that definitely satisfies the qualities that Emerson demanded from a poet as a representative man. The following are some of the adventures of the poet as a visionary:

1. “Magic City grows to its own rhythm
And people do not know why it grows.”
2. “Magic City gets scared, it cannot return
to its origins, or to its silence.”
3. “In the Magic City
Peace disappears and prophecies are incorporated.
The exactitudes remain disturbed.”
4. Magic City will disappear,
There are signs of a storm.”

Campa also kept an apocalyptic prophecy for Miami or for Little Havana, the section of Miami that he knew the most. He stated that Little Havana does not exist anymore. New accents, new flags, and new plates dominate the former scene. On the other hand, Cardenas lives in continuous exile. A before and after could exist for him, but not a here and there. Interpretation of the city as a neighborhood, the lack of trust toward the police, and life as a need for refuge or as an “escape” are experiences that make it impossible to say that you have traveled elsewhere. The poet certifies this same trans-territorial identity as follows:

“A black man (Cuban or North American)
crosses the street and pushes a silver colored
metal cart.”

In the end, Cardenas leaves a message of acceptance. Some calm verses can be found in his most beautiful poem, *The light of the birds* (*La luz de los pájaros*). There he tells us:

“The last peace is near,
illuminate us, then, the music
of the sacrifices;
the gift of purity, refined
the rumor and the relief, by the light
of the birds.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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