

## Books


### Looking for the Future in the Past

## EL RÍO

NOVELAS DE CABALLERÍA

LUIS CARDOZA Y ARAGÓN



TIERRA FIRME 

The event of the year in Mexican literary circles was the release of *El Río. Novelas de Caballería* (The River: Tales of Chivalry; 1986, Fondo de Cultura Económica). Guatemalan writer, Luis Cardoza y Aragón's most recent work. For many critics, it was even more than that; it was the most important contribution to Latin American literature in the past year.

Although virtually unknown in the United States, Cardoza y Aragón is not only considered to be the finest Guatemalan writer of the 20th century—better even, according to many critics, than 1967 Nobel Prize winner, Miguel Ángel Asturias—but also one of the continent's most outstanding intellectual figures. It is a well-known fact that even such master authors as Gabriel García Márquez or prestigious investigators as Pablo González Casanova and Carlos Monsiváis go first to Cardoza for his opinion on their new works and that potential publishers take his reviews very seriously. He has been an intimate friend of the great

literary and political figures of this century, from Pablo Picasso to Diego Rivera and Pablo Neruda to Lázaro Cárdenas and Fidel Castro. And he is the only foreign writer regularly invited to major events held by Mexican presidents. Luis Cardoza y Aragón has lived in Mexico for more than half a century, except for the brief period, 1944-1952, when democratic conditions in his native country allowed him to return there during those short years.

*El Río* is really a book made up of many books. It is commonly referred to as "Luis Cardoza's life story." But while the common thread throughout the book may well be the 82 year old poet's remarkable life, an enviable testimony to 20th culture, the book is very much more than a collection of his memories. It is, to use Cardoza's own words, "a search for the past, not to rescue it, but rather to grant it a future." It is a past considered to be alive by the author, and "always unpredictable," as he would say. The past is no longer the kingdom of the dead, but rather of memories and nostalgia. It is, then, an authentic memoir, not a simple assemblage of reminiscences.

Luis Cardoza was born in Antigua, Guatemala, in 1904, a time when the country was ruled by Manuel Estrada Cabrera, its dictator of the day. Cardoza is a poet, journalist, essayist and critic; a man who has struggled for his people's freedom, whose most intimate commitment has been to that cause. As he himself asserts, despite having lived many more years outside of his native land than in it, he has never abandoned it, never really left Guatemala, even in his exile. He has lived the last 30 years in Mexico, ever since Guatemala's 1944 October Revolution ("a renaissance movement") was defeated, when the Jacobo Arbenz government was overthrown in a 1954 coup-d'état, succumbing as the result of its own errors and its inability to confront the CIA-designed mercenary movement.

But before, Luis Cardoza travelled to Europe and Latin America. He won the friendship of Federico García Lorca, lived in a Paris effervescent with surrealism and cubism, educated his eye alongside of Picasso and shared sensitivity and intelligence with him.

Once in Mexico, he participated

in the intellectual awakening led by "the Contemporaries" and savored the fruits of the muralist movement while the paint was still fresh and the works still incomplete. He struggled and still struggles for his ideas; he defended and still defends the need for socialism. He always condemned Stalinism and suffered its consequences. He fought against it, especially in the field of esthetics. Cardoza reiterates that imagination cannot be subordinated to the dictates of any bureaucracy, "that socialist realism is not only an error, it is also a horror."

It would not be possible, nor do we intend, to summarize the book. It would be a crime. It is impossible to extract a single brush stroke from a mural, which could tell its entire story. Yet the brush strokes do reveal a painting's quality. This is a book of phrases, of words, each with a specific weight; in short, it is a poet's book.

*El Río* does not fit into any specific literary genre. Essays, poetry, narratives, journalistic articles and prose coexist, and grandeur harmonizes with humor. Words devoid of restraints, memory freed from prejudice. Luis Cardoza described it this way:

"The structure I gave these pages, or that they have taken, was not the usual one for similar works. I didn't remember by years or decades or six-year Mexican (presidential) terms. Its disorder is not intentional, it is not a Piranesian order, nor is it disorder; I simply trusted that my notes would reproduce life's forms and the behavior of the imagination.

"Literary genre, Greek and Latin models, become more intertwined every day, become more blurred. That's how I constructed things even when it was barely conceivable and tolerable. How could I have kept an accounting book?

"My memory flails me alive like the live river flails itself" (p. 37).

Some books are written by chapters; *El Río* is constructed by paragraphs, each page capturing several universes. It can be read in whatever order or direction the reader might prefer, with whatever rhythm the reader wishes to impose; it is an open text.

Its 857 pages are peopled by the great figures of 20th century

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culture, an interminable list of men and women who come together and separate, crossing lives' paths with Luis Cardoza, weaving the monumental tapestry created in the book.

But *El Río* also has its stellar figures. I believe these might include Federico García Lorca, Pablo Picasso, and José Clemente Orozco. They are major points of inflection in Cardoza's life. His wife, Lya Kostakowsky, is not a point of inflection, but rather the very curve itself.

The murder—some 50 years ago—of Federico García Lorca is still a source of pain for Cardoza:

"The impression was painful and upsetting. I doubted that he was really dead for several days. It seemed incredible to me, incredible that someone in Spain could make an attempt on a life so filled with grace and creativity. I imagined that bestiality had a limit; I forgot that I am Guatemalan" (p. 579).

The chapter dedicated to Pablo Picasso could only be summarized by reproducing it in its entirety. It is a memorable synthesis. To give just a taste of it:

"How simple, how charming, how complex, how violent and tender. How perfect and marvelous. I will never be able to say how much I loved and admired him. How much I owe to his genius. It seems he has died."

"There are too many fingers on a hand to count the men of his stature in this century" (p. 678 and p. 676).

José Clemente Orozco receives his already classic accolade, "The three greats of Mexican muralism are two: Orozco." He was the greatest of Latin American painters, according to Luis Cardoza.

Luis Cardoza y Aragón, an Antiguan of universal vocation, defines himself as Stradivarius to the ears of a *marimbero*,\* a citizen of the galaxy and lover of the Indian who has sent his *encomendero*\*\* to the gallows. Cardoza has said that he seeks not to assure his place in literary history through one of his books, but rather, in the best of cases, with but a single phrase. It is quite likely that the phrase is to be found in *El Río. Novelas de Caballería*.

I have not even tried to write a

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review. This is a passionate invitation to read. ★

Augusto Morales

\* Those who make *marimbas*, a xylophone-like instrument whose plaintive tones create some of the most traditional Guatemalan music.

\*\* Master of an *encomienda*, estates granted to the Spanish conquerors; the Indians on the land were forced to provide him with labor and tribute.

