

# Luis Cardoza y Aragón and Rafael Solana

*I feel no nostalgia for the places  
I have left. One never really leaves,  
hence one never returns either.*

Luis Cardoza y Aragón

## Luis Cardoza y Aragón: the lines of his hand

Luis Cardoza y Aragón, who died last September 4, was one of the most important and singular American writers of the 20th century. A Guatemalan-born creator of poetry, narrative, essay and art criticism, he lived in exile in Mexico from 1952 to his death, becoming a central figure in Mexican culture. His critical spirit, his love of democracy and his defense of human rights made it impossible for him to return to the country of his birth. However, Guatemala was always present in his life and in his work.

Cardoza y Aragón was born in the city of Antigua on June 21, 1904. In his childhood and adolescence he witnessed the persecution of democracy's defenders. His father was harassed and jailed under the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera.

Aided by his family, Luis left his country at the age of seventeen to live in Europe. He began studying medicine in Paris, but his passion for literature, the discovery of authors such as Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Nerval, and his friendship with surrealists such as André Breton, led him—within two years—to drop medicine for literature.

The surrealist movement and most modern European art trends were then centered in France, decisively influencing his development as a writer. His surrealist works include: *Luna park*, 1923, *Maelstrom*, 1926, *La torre de Babel* (The tower of Babel), 1930, *Cuatro recuerdos de infancia* (Four childhood memories) and *Elogio de la embriaguez* (In praise of drunkenness), 1931, *El sonámbulo* (The sleepwalker), 1937, *Pequeños poemas* (Short poems), 1945-1964, *Arte poética* (Poetic art), 1960-1973 and *Dibujos de ciego* (Drawings by a blind man), 1971.

His *Pequeña sinfonía del nuevo mundo* (Short symphony of the New World), written between 1929 and

1932, has been defined as a true masterpiece of poetic prose. In it, he combines biting criticism of the capitalist world and his preoccupation with what roads to follow in the face of crisis, with a marvelous song of hope for mankind's destiny.

While in Europe, he travelled through the Soviet Union and lived in Spain, where he made friends with Federico García Lorca—they wrote several magazine pieces and a play together. He also travelled to Florence and Rome, where he studied Flemish painting and the Renaissance at close hand. On returning to the Americas, he visited New York and Havana, arriving in Mexico for the first time in 1932.

In Mexico, he concentrated on study and art criticism. His efforts made him one of the greatest critics in Mexico, due to his innovative and singular way of approaching Mexican visual arts.

He was a contributor to *El Nacional*, in charge of its cultural section; a university professor; and a founding member of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists. According to his friends, Cardoza y Aragón possessed a penchant for sarcasm that earned him the nickname "Savage wolf", since his sharp judgments fulminated his adversaries.

He wrote several books and essays on contemporary Mexican painting, on the frescoes at the Department of Public Education, as well as on Mexican painters José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Rufino Tamayo, among others. Outstanding works are *La nube y el reloj* (The cloud and the clock), *Apolo y Coatlicue*, and his book on Orozco, published by the UNAM.

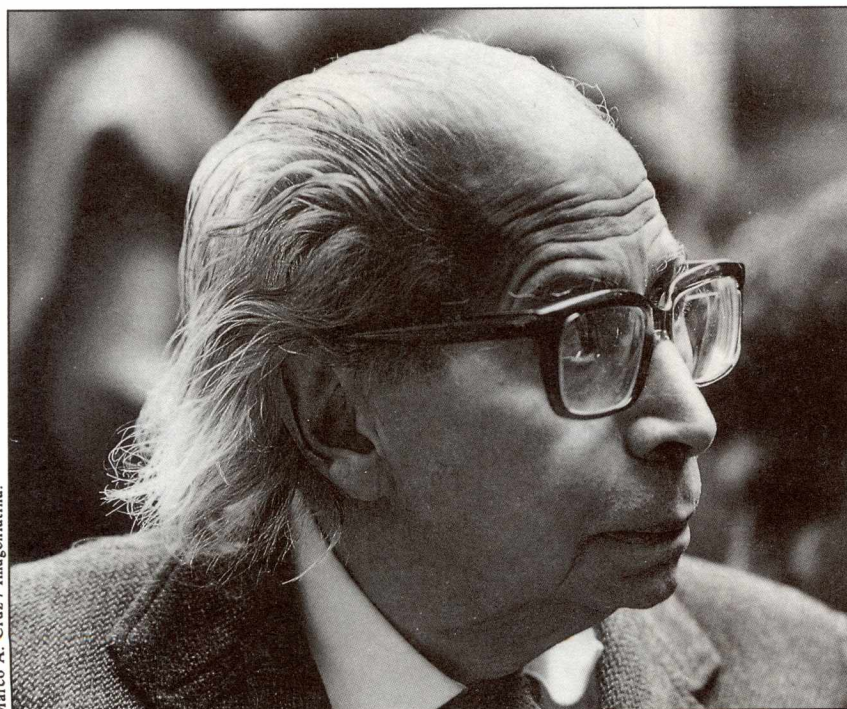
Cardoza y Aragón always travelled the innovative path. Constant creation—influenced by passion, love, and death—was his only way of accepting reality and transcending it. He stated: "In Paradise there was no art because there was no sin. Because there was no desire. Because there was no death. Art for art's sake is impossible, even in Paradise. A poet in Paradise would write escapist poems." In this spirit, his colleagues referred

to him as “Head Warlock,” one who lived out his nonconformity with savagery and abandon.

He returned to Guatemala full of enthusiasm for the efforts progressive organizations were making to leave behind dictatorial governments and bring democracy to the country, that had begun with the 1944 uprising. Jacobo Arbenz, declared Constitutional President of Guatemala, wanted his government to give land to the *campesinos*, dignity to native Guatemalans, and food and education to all Guatemalans. Cardoza y Aragón lectured at the Faculty of Humanities in the University of San Carlos, founded the *Revista de Guatemala* (Guatemalan journal), and also created the Guatemalan House of Culture.

He represented his country as a diplomat in Sweden, Norway, the former Soviet Union, Chile and Colombia. In Colombia he married Lya Kostakowsky, a Mexican of Russian ancestry, who was to be his lifetime companion—her death in 1988 was a great blow to him. To her he wrote:

*Because I have wanted nothing  
beside your love  
I never lost my homeland  
that invented me with you.  
I live enamored  
of light, sea and heaven.  
I wish I were embroidered  
on your soul and on your handkerchief.*



Marco A. Cruz / Imagenlatina.

Cardoza's nickname was “savage wolf”, since his sharp judgments fulminated his adversaries.

The Guatemalan experiment in democracy was doomed to fail. With help from Washington, a mercenary army overthrew Arbenz and reestablished the dictatorship. Categorically refusing to collaborate with the traitors, in 1952 Cardoza decided to return to Mexico as an exile.

A discerning perception of his country's issues, and his acute sociopolitical thought are reflected in books such as *El pueblo de Guatemala* (The Guatemalan people), *La United Fruit y la protesta de Washington* (The United Fruit Co. and Washington's protest), and *La revolución guatemalteca* (The Guatemalan revolution).

In *Guatemala: las líneas de su mano* (Guatemala: the lines of its hand), he shows broad knowledge of his country's history and reality. The work includes three distinct portraits of one single Guatemala.<sup>1</sup>

The first part, entitled *La boca del polen* (The mouth of pollen), is a poetic portrait: childhood memories, descriptions of geography and everyday life in Guatemala, where he shows his indignation at the misery of the Guatemalan Indians: “To see them provokes suffering, anger, a desire to serve. I don't pity them, I pity myself. How miserable I am, how can I sleep, how can I eat, without my dreams becoming nightmares and my bread souring? I could never envision my country as colorful, miserable and backward Indians in a glass case.”

The second part, *Las huellas de la voz* (Voiceprints), presents a historical portrait, a synthesis of Guatemalan history. The third part, *El peso de la noche* (The weight of the night), offers a sociological portrait, an attempt to interpret Guatemalan psychology, from its pre-Hispanic roots to the present. In it, he asserts that Guatemala has been a land of “eternal tyranny,” not one of “eternal spring” as touted by a well-known slogan.

This book, defined as an explicit repudiation of intervention and successive dictatorial governments—military or civil—closed the doors forever on his return to Guatemala. He would never go back, but he never abandoned the struggle to defend the Guatemalan people's human rights and dignity. In this regard, he pointed out: “I have accompanied my people from afar and in the best way I could. This has torn me, because even if Mexico is

<sup>1</sup> The description of this work is based on an article by Otto-Raúl González, “Adorable Lobo Feroz”, published in the newspaper *El Financiero*, on September 7 and 8, 1992.

my country by choice, what has been happening in Guatemala has hurt me deeply.”

He rejected several subsequent invitations to return made by the military governments, since he always maintained he would never go back until the political situation changed. “I am not a rebel, it so happens that I have shame, and believe that I have lived by an obstinate coherence of which I have never tired.”

He preferred the dignity of exile, where he represented all of his country’s exiles, whether intellectuals, professionals or natives. In his autobiographical novel *El río: novela de caballerías* (The river: a novel of chivalry), he says “The exile never loses his homeland. He takes it with him, more in imagination than in memory. As in love, it is the image we love more than the land itself.”

He always rejected injustice, and therefore he sympathized with Latin American rebel movements. He believed in socialism as a means of fighting injustice, but was neither a man of dogmas or parties, but of convictions and sound ideas: “I have always possessed a critical eye and have never been unconditionally for anyone. The fundamental principle of my life has been not to accept dogmas.”

Cardoza y Aragón received various awards in Mexico and abroad. The Order of the Aztec Eagle, the highest honor awarded a foreigner by the Mexican government, was given to him in 1979. He was awarded the Ruben Darío Order of Cultural Independence by Nicaragua, the Pablo Neruda Prize by the Soviet government, the Order of Félix Varela by Cuba, and other distinctions in France and Spain.

In February, 1992, he received the Mazatlán Literary Prize for the novel *Miguel Angel Asturias: casi novela* (Miguel Angel Asturias: almost a novel), as well as an honorary Doctorate from the University of San Carlos in Guatemala.

The passage of time affected his body, but left his mind intact. He said he did not resent or fear this: “Perhaps, it is because when I look to the past, I find the figure of a boy whose ideals are identical to those I now hold. This means I have not betrayed my life.”

In spite of a chronic lung condition, he remained active until the end: “The intelligence that serves a man for living should also be useful for dying. I know that my end is near. I accept it. I only fear to leave my affairs in disorder or my plans unfinished. So, now I am working very hard not to be beaten by time.”

Before he died, Cardoza y Aragón was putting the final touches to an anthology for the Ayacucho Library in Guatemala, an essay on the painter Agustín Lazo, and a posthumous seventy-page poem, *Lázaro* (Lazarus). He also personally supervised shipping all his books to

Guatemala; his entire library was donated to the country of his birth.

At his request, he was cremated and his ashes scattered on the Ajusco, a mountain on the outskirts of Mexico City, as were those of his wife Lya, who died in 1988. He also arranged for the sale of all his belongings to establish the Luis and Lya Cardoza Foundation, the only purpose of which will be to award an annual *Lya Kostakowsky* essay prize, as an aid to young authors.

The death of Cardoza y Aragón, Guatemalan by birth, Mexican by choice and Latin American by conviction, is a great loss for all who knew his life and work. Author Elena Poniatowska sums up: “There are no more men like him. Poets, astronomers, visionaries, subversives, unsubmissive, able to lavishly spend themselves until they are empty, to pour themselves out and give away their blood, men like that are hardly seen any more.”

#### Rafael Solana, prolific and versatile writer

The Mexican writer, Rafael Solana, died in Mexico City on September 6. His work covers a surprisingly broad range of genres: poetry, short stories, novels, essays, bull-fight chronicles, plays and above all, newspaper articles. Journalism was his first and most constant literary activity,



Poet at 18, short story writer at 28, novelist at 38 and essayist at 48.

although his plays earned him greater recognition, both at home and abroad.

He was born August 7, 1915, in the Port of Veracruz. At the age of fourteen he entered the world of journalism, following in the footsteps of his father, who had written bull-fight chronicles for the daily *El Universal* since 1916. "My father was a superb bull-fight chronicler as well as a clever, incisive journalist. He covered all the topics open to a journalist... It was through him I learnt to be a journalist, because we used to get all the papers and his journalist friends and colleagues used to come to our house."

Solana's writings span bull-fight chronicles, opera, music and drama criticism, and international and domestic political analysis. He worked for a number of dailies, among them: *El Universal*, where he was a journalist for 63 years; *El Día*, which published almost 1,500 of his articles over 30 years of continuous contributions, *Excelsior*, and the weekly magazine *Siempre*.

While studying law at the National University, he studied literature at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters in the afternoon, soon giving up law for literature.

His first volume of poems, *Ladera*, was published in 1934. At about the same time he co-founded the literary magazine, *Taller*, with writers Efraín Huerta and Octavio Paz. Although regarded as one of the most promising young poets of the early 40s, together with Huerta and Paz, Solana stopped writing poetry, turning instead to short stories, novels and finally essays.

"My poetic inspiration started to fail as I grew older so I began writing short stories that I later developed into novels and then essays," said the author of seven volumes of short stories, seven novels and a vast number of literary studies and prologues. He described the course of his literary activities as follows, "Poet at 18, short story writer at 28, novelist at 38 and essayist at 48, with the exception of journalism, first and foremost of my literary activities, as well as the most consistent."

According to a number of writers, Solana was not appreciated as a poet, short story writer or novelist. His works do not appear in anthologies of Mexican poetry or short stories. Nonetheless, short stories such as "El oficleido" are regarded as classics of contemporary narrative by several compilers. Conversely, his novel, *El sol de octubre* (October sun), together with Carlos Fuentes' *La región más transparente* (Where the air is clear) and Luis Spota's *Casi el paraíso* (Almost paradise) is considered a seminal work of Mexican urban literature that paved the way for later generations such as "the wave."

However, Solana is best known for his plays. In his opinion, when a writer's powers of observation and style have developed he aspires to works of greater scope and

maturity such as plays, since in this literary genre, accurate character portrayal requires a writer to draw upon his store of experience. A broad knowledge of grammar and considerable linguistic skill are also necessary to create authentic dialogue for characters from a variety of social backgrounds.

Solana studied acting at the National University to learn more about the theater. He was also a founding member of the National Theater and Music Chroniclers' Association, and three-time President of the Theater Critics' Association and Music Critics' Association.

His plays, translated into several languages and performed in Latin America, the United States and Europe, are characterized by satire, humor and local color. His first play, *The golden islands*, was produced in 1952.

He subsequently wrote close to 30 plays. Among the most famous are *Fading star*, *Born with a silver spoon*, *The return of Lazarus*, *His very image*, *Only the feathers were left*, *Noah's ark*, *The miraculous catch*, *A peaceful old age* and *Family talk*. His favorite was *It could have happened in Verona*, although *There should be lady bishops* ran for almost three thousand performances, with more than twenty actresses in the leading role.

Solana held a number of government posts, including Private Secretary to Jaime Torres Bodet while the latter was Minister of Public Education (1958-1964), Press Chief during the 1968 Olympic Games and Press Chief of the Mexican Social Security Institute from 1969-1977.

His work was recognized by four Mexican presidents; awarded the National Chronicle Prize by Luis Echeverría, the 1979 Special Prize for Journalism by José López Portillo, the National Linguistics and Literature Prize by Miguel de la Madrid in 1987, and early in 1992, he received the Mozart Medal from President Salinas de Gortari for his contribution to music in his role as critic.

He also received the French Medal of Merit and the City of Madrid Medal. Declared Doctor Honoris Causa by the University of Veracruz in 1991, he was awarded the "Juan Ruiz de Alarcón" National Prize for Drama in Taxco, Guerrero, that same year. In 1992, the Drama Critics' Association awarded him the "Sergio Magaña" medal for his play *Family talk*.

Up to the time of his death, Solana was Secretary General of the Theater Foundation and both director and teacher at the School of Journalism and Art for Radio and Television. He was a writer of astounding versatility and impeccable professionalism. His death is a loss to Mexican literature, but his work will continue to stand as an example for future generations of writers, journalists and playwrights ✕

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