

The Whole Codex

Andrés Rodríguez
University of Arizona, Tucson

To most North American readers of Latin American literature, the name and work of José Roberto Cea are likely to be completely unfamiliar. And yet by testimony of his own literary peers over the past thirty-five years, Cea has been ranked among Latin America's finest poets; it would be only a slight exaggeration to place him alongside Darío, Neruda, and Vallejo.¹ His place is not unclear, but it is unknown due to the apparent exigencies of public transmission and to the situation in his native El Salvador. For the most part, Cea has set himself apart from literary schools and movements, writing poetry, fiction, and criticism which all share values associated with his Indian background and, in particular, with the rural area of Izalco from which he hails. He writes a kind of magic poetry, filled with ritual, sacred beings and objects, and not at all revolutionary, ordinarily defined. Even his poems that deal with exile are peculiar and singular, certainly not representative of Salvadoran poetry but only of one of El Salvador's poets who bears the nation within his consciousness.

Cea was a member of the University Literary Circle which came together in 1956 in San Salvador. It included Roque Dalton, Manlio Argueta, Roberto Armijo, and the Guatemalan Otto René Castillo, among others. This core group of poets published extensively in the Salvadoran press during the late fifties and throughout the sixties, earning many distinctions in all of Latin America. Cea's work has been particularly extensive and highly esteemed. He has written much poetry, fiction, drama, and criticism on art and literature, and compiled anthologies of Salvadoran poetry, all the while managing to survive the trying circumstances inherent in an artist's life, as well as those produced by El Salvador's prolonged civil war.

Cea's poetry is so unlike most of his contemporaries' work that it is easy to set him apart from the main traditions in El Salvador. His vision of the Indian world makes him unique among the poets of metaphysics (Claudia Lars), existentialism (Seraffín Quieteño), Marxism (Roque Dalton), and surrealism (Alfonso Quijada Urfas). Yet Cea

remains within sight of a literature in Latin America whose subject is *indigenismo*, the Indian's world of numinous reality. One thinks of Guatemala's Miguel Angel Asturias, whose compelling works of poetry and fiction, written through the Indian's eyes, span several decades. What Cea attempts, too, especially in his poetry, is to speak the Indian's language of consciousness in which mystical experience becomes the territory of poetry.

Born in 1939 in Izalco, a small town in the western region of El Salvador, heavily populated by Indians, Cea's roots lie literally in the ashes and blood of national history. Izalco was the heart of the 1932 peasant uprising in which 30,000 Salvadorans were slaughtered by the army during a three-day volcanic eruption.² Farabundo Martí led an ill-timed and poorly planned revolt against the Martínez dictatorship, a savage regime which has been depicted in the poems of Roque Dalton and Claribel Alegría. This history makes for obvious tensions in Cea's work. Further biographical information is scarce, both in his poems and in the critical remarks of anthologies in which his poems appear. It is not known, for example, when he left his rural origins to live in the city of San Salvador where, describing himself as self-taught, he began publishing in 1956. While publishing his first poems, he edited and directed the literary journal *Gallo Gris*. A string of awards and distinctions followed throughout the sixties and into the seventies, with major works published in El Salvador, Argentina, and Spain.

Todo el Códice (*The Whole Codex*) was published in 1968, the product it seems, of several crucial years in the life and development of its author. In the few available remarks of critics, the book shows Cea in full possession of a poetic voice. Although Cea has written much since *Todo el Códice*, it remains a special work because of the demands of understanding imposed by the poems. It is a work structured on the poet's efforts to unify a paradoxical reality in which dessication is revealed in images of beauty, with neither one necessarily overshadowing the other. Above all, the poems grow out of a search for the indigenous origins of San Salvador, the city first called Cuscatlán. In the preface to *Todo el Códice*, Cea writes:

Diré algo sobre la fundación de esta ciudad. Es algo que hasta hoy se dice. ¿Quién soy para eso? Más adelante tendrán la respuesta. Lo importante es que les comunique hasta el último detalle, de cómo sucedió el acontecimiento.

Un acto como éste, tiene sus misterios, sus pormenores que trataré de mostrar. Antes de continuar les adelantaré que en mí, las edades pierden sus laberintos, su consistencia, soy como el augurio, que está hecho de todo y de nada, por eso puedo narrar lo que deseo. (13)

Cea believes that the seer, *el augurio*, is the recipient of dreams and visions and signs that impart "la sangre de las realizaciones primitivas, las cuales son para vivir" (16). The seer's desire and ecstasy is generated by knowing the truth which goes beyond historical evidence. Cea espouses his creed ("en mí, las edades pierden sus laberintos, su consistencia") to communicate what took place before the Spanish foundation of San Salvador.

The pre-Hispanic codices, in which the seer's vision or sense experience was recorded, becomes for Cea the site of both poetic activity and truth, of mysteries and particulars. In the preface, he explains that the Spanish chroniclers of San Salvador, "los historiadores blancos . . . unos a otros se contradicen" (13). They provide no true, clear record of the city's foundation. "En vista de esto," Cea writes,

me propuse encontrar y descifrar los Códices Sagrados, primitivos hallazos de expresión, que se encuentran en poder de los pocos naturales sobrevivientes, guardianes de secretos. Casi todos coinciden en partes, pero era necesario darlos a conocer en vista de que nadie lo hizo antes. He aquí las versiones que de ellos obtuve. (13-14)

These versions of discoveries and secrets, of sacred myths, constitute a responsibility for Cea to tell the truth, and as such they demonstrate a *paideia* or educational battle against a conqueror's tradition which excluded and cast out the original, longstanding context.

Cea overlays the Spanish accounts with what was inscribed in the ancient texts buried in Bululú. He quotes from the codices of "los Pumas Sagrados," "los Nueve Linajes," "el Venado Azul," "las Siete Lluvias," and the codices of "el Tiempo Perdido" and "la Luz Detenida." These chronicles themselves quote the dream-voices, signs, and glyphs (other inscriptions) from a magical world. The rhetorical play of meaning here—deciphering, reconnecting, superimposing—can be understood as a process within reading which produces a real problem, namely that the task of the seer or poet to

make his world known may result in that same world becoming obscure. Indeed, as Cea ends his prefatory account he finds himself in darkness, certain that all the codices speak of the city, but uncertain as to what city it is that they refer to: "Sólo dan indicios, pequeñas pistas que son cortadas por diminutas pringas de oscuridad" (18).

The light which Cea casts on his world are the poems themselves. Cea's preface is a pre-text, coming before the body of poems to weave its own fabulous design, and to make clear as an *apologia* the grounds of belief for the poems. We are meant to see at once, I think, that the poems are poems *and* versions or resuscitations of the ancient myths discovered in the codices. Claiming direct access to Mayan or Nahuatl writings, Cea brings forward the ideas of transmission and reconstruction of Salvadoran culture. This fiction gives the truth to the need of locating and disclosing a reality indigenous to El Salvador. What interests me most about Cea's story is that rather than attempting to re-oralize poetry and culture, he attempts to restore a pre-Hispanic literate order. And yet it is clear enough that the lure of inscription for Cea is not that of Western writing which, according to Foucault, represents the last of a series of orders that man has imposed on his ways of knowing. What Cea wants to compose is a codex of the whole, a totality in which the language on the page becomes poetry, bringing to life a numinous world where man not only perceives another order but is in intimate contact with it.

"Lectura de Códices," as Cea entitles his preface, is thus the threshold of a poetic journey to "la Ciudad del Canto" (18). It is a highly charged rubric which establishes his view of art and its function as the basis of a deeper understanding and appreciation of knowledge. Cea wants to discover and create an artistic process, "la poesía de los actos para respirar," to counter the oppressor historians' "grandes libros pálidos de amor" (16). Aware that poetry is generally thought to be divorced from reality, its postures and attitudes artificial and false, he wants to write for the generations to come "[una] historia que invo[que] y c[ue]nt[e] sin perturbación alguna" (14). This ethical and artistic imperative does not emerge in the poems as an explicit or programmatic discourse but rather links the general concern of poetic creation to the true foundation of San Salvador so that the poems have a definite frame of reference, a circumference wider than mere song for the poet-seer to bridge mysteries and particulars. In one of the most beautiful and unsettling of the poems in *Todo el Códice*, "Algo de

amanecer," Cea walks through the city: "no saber si el tiempo / ha seguido corriendo / allá, afuera—como fue mi deseo—, / o si está esperando que le llegue de nuevo" (95). This is a "fallen" place, neither dead nor alive, haunted by the tragedy, weight, and impact of the past. In a moment of confession or understanding or prophecy, Cea turns to us in the predawn dark with these words:

Ha caído el último silencio.
Levanté de las ruinas lo que pude.
Dispensad.
Ved la ciudad desierta.
Vedme caído. Solo.
Camino hacia la nada viviendo de la nada.
Voy de vida,
y con muchas palabras por decir. (95)

For Cea, whose nascent memory includes the *matanza* or massacre of 1932, history is apocalyptic. This violent and bloody history is the context for a sensibility equal to a drama reflecting humanity's end or limits, marked by silence. Cea is a poet with a frightening sense of where he is in time. He is one of the most compelling witnesses to the present, ongoing crisis in Central America, where the indigenous population continues to be brutally murdered. "Algo de amanecer," however, shows evocativeness taking precedence over definiteness. Cea doesn't tie things up through conscious echoes of the past, which gives the poem its mystery and integrity. He renders intense experience accurately and honestly in language which purifies and ritualizes consciousness. In the last stanza, this consciousness gives rise to a vision: "A lo lejos, / un lechero despierta las paredes, / trae niebla en los ojos / y un poco de olor a ternero" (95). It's a surprising image that drifts away in consciousness, keeping its own mysterious meaning contained, impermeable, and yet tantalizes for that reason.

For any man or woman, a desperate political-historical situation leads to psychic imbalance. But for an individual from a tribal, religious, and sensate world, the same situation bodes apocalypse of mythic proportions, contradictions enormously hard to live with. Cea seems to have fallen into the antinomies of the modern world. His voice is delicate, harsh, calm, urgent, joyful, wounded, sharing the tensions of history even while striving to harmonize them. Thematically, the fall into the "mud of history," as Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio

Cuadra put it (“Poema del momento extranjero en la selva”), where all things become changed, looks like a contemporary version of the Indian’s situation when the real New World arrived with the Spanish. Life is suspended between modern San Salvador and ancient Cuscatlán, and this setting becomes crucial to the poet’s purpose to look back, to look ahead, to balance and desire full presence and life. As Cea puts it, in almost a street tonality, “¿Quién soy para eso?” (13). I’ll tell you, he answers, even to the last detail.

Cea speaks in the presence of what is both profane and divine: “Levanté de las ruinas lo que pude” (95). That such action reveals the poet’s attempt to overcome the alienation of history is clear from the poems in *Todo el Códice* which embody the poet’s search for a *primitive* (primary, fully human and nonhuman) world. Poems like “Ritual del más abuelo,” “Invocación de la ciudad perdida,” “Instrucciones para escribir en piedras,” the bizarre “Yo, el brujo,” and many others, are recoveries of the ways of shamans and seers; they embrace and represent those primeval ways that can possibly resume the beginning which the sense of an ending prompts. These lyrics are rich with secrets and motifs articulating an ethnopoetics of no small scope. But Cea’s mode of vision is compelling not only because he discloses ritualistic and numinous objects. He also reveals the most immediate kinds of experience in San Salvador’s streets, parks, and barrios, thus making for a dialectic of the ancient and modern, mythic and historical, personal and private.

Cea’s feelings about the contemporary urban scene (a reality in need of transformation) are characterized by irony. Moreover, Cea turns this irony into stories or portraits which take on unexpected dimensions. One of the most admirable of these, “Crónica de una muchacha salvadoreña,” is a poem about a “cristiana creatura [sic]” (105), a “muchacha más nuestra” (105), whose story becomes a modern day myth embodying a moral-political theme:

Cuando la conocí
—tienen que dispensar este recuerdo—,
era un mango.
Quien de hombre, goloso la miraba.
Y le iba quitando, poco a poco, el traje
y el pudor;
hasta dejarla inerme, desnuda (103)

"Era un mango" suggests the perfection of nature's beauty which in this story is stripped and gobbled up by gluttonous men. We are brought close to this legendary girl ("Ella, / siempre inmutable, sonriendo para adentro")(103), whose story is woven into indecencies, degradations, and enigmas. Although we see her going through the street so buoyant, champion-like, that "no cabía en la acera"(104), we never once hear her speak; she relishes life but is mute. This silence causes the teller of the story to intrude: "Es terrible su historia"(104). Her story is terrible because it reveals with simplicity and clarity how the society violates the moral-political values that it holds most dear, and most represented by the Salvadoran girl:

Los vecinos la querían, la odiaban, suspiraban por ella . . .
Nuevamente la ponían desnuda sobre la fresca grama del
deseo.
En fin, era algo estupendo
Tenerla a boca de jarro. (104)

Now the chronicler repeats, "Fue terrible su historia, / y común," which insinuates or gestures toward the idea of the girl as embodying El Salvador itself, for the terrible and ordinary experience of the contemporary individual there becomes that naked and helpless condition of being held at point blank range. In this poem we have an image of all that Salvadoran society wants to preserve but contradictorily perverts. The girl is watched and ignored, loved and hated, beatified and debased. The troubled relation of these things finally turns into a conundrum: "Yo la vi. Yo la siento. / La empujé. La dejé. / La tenemos." That "we" is far from rhetorical. It has something of the dark omniscient force of The Voices in Robert Frost's "The Lonely Shall Be Choosers." But here that force is really the social deformations shared by all Salvadorans.

Cea's outburst in the closing lines of this strange poem has a curious mixture of omniscience and diffidence, unity and fragmentation. It reveals a labyrinthine consciousness, a centerless maze in memory where the girl exists "con toda su desgracia." "¡Ahí está!" he cries:

Entre anhelos sin calles.
Entre palabras obscenas.

Entre viejos que se ponen pelucas.
Entre citas a lugares de moda.
Entre empleos que no rinden amor.
Entre jefes frustrados.
Entre sombras que se han aprovechado de la angustia.
De boca en boca, está.
Entre murmullos que no dicen verdad y miradas que no
hablan, está

La tenemos. (105-6)

The litany of “entre” states syntactically what the poem states semantically, that the Salvadoran girl is not her own but belongs to something other than herself. She is lost, devoured (“de boca en boca”) in a tawdry world. Cea can only powerlessly, almost childishly, point her out (“¡ahí está!”), and when he ends they both are hopelessly separated: “Ella. Yo. Nosotros. ¡Solos! / Sin encontrarnos. / No tenemos salida. Pero canto. / Ella llora o se entrega, es igual” (106). Yet the modulation, “pero canto,” inducts the poet’s value in a world where Neruda’s “Canto general” seems to have been the only fully realized commitment to balance evil with goodness in Latin America. Although we know that the feeling-tone which concludes the poem is one of hopelessness, we are already convinced by the authority of the imagination of this compelling poem. Cea draws us close to the knowledge of the pressures of reality which is so crucial in transforming that reality.

In “Crónica salvadoreña,” the last poem in *Todo el Códice*, the transformation of self and society becomes the ardent matter of life itself. Cea’s moral and political beliefs dovetail here, creating a broad vision of Salvadoran history. This poem is called a “chronicle”; it relates a story of truths, paradoxes, and mysteries, not simply isolated, linear events. It is a story of the search for integration, an example of a poetry of directness and strangeness, realizing its drama in both overt and subtle ways. The poem doesn’t name a common, visible enemy, such as the army, national guard, or oligarchy, the way Roque Dalton’s poems do. The effort instead is to unmask El Salvador itself. There are many masks in this poem. These several *máscaras* or faces do not conceal an essential Salvadoran character or personality but show its many sides: death, suffering, silence, conflict, struggle, lies, dreams, songs, curses, praises, and so on. The poem chronicles all of these.

From the first lines we sense that the poet is about to tell of something momentous; the voice that comes to the fore, the collective "we," is here the felt truth of many individuals suffering history together: "Nosotros aquí, en El Salvador, / hemos perdido el aire / y a punto de estallar estamos" (129). The voice also takes on the task of both drawing upon and condemning certain assumptions of life and history which all Salvadorans share:

Sucede que en un pedazo de tierra
vivimos hasta mil.
¡Es fabuloso!
Este panal sin miel, es fabuloso
Hay que vivirlo para saber que es cierto.
Para saber su historia
hay que sacarle sangre a un gusano.
Hay que llorar al pie de una ecuestre figura.
Ignorar tanto texto vacío
escrito por mentiras y tinta y por las patas. (129)

These figures are parts of a unity governed by paradox (the honeycomb without honey) and by sheer impossibility (blood from a worm). They tell us that to know this history is to negotiate the paradoxical and the impossible, for that history which is sculpted life-size is as devoid of truth as the historical record which is written with lies, ink, and paws. These lines tell us that the "we" of the poem are a people themselves made paradoxical or radically alienated by history; they live in their native place at the most vulnerable time possible, at the point of losing everything to some final stage of history.

"Crónica salvadoreña" is thick with the sense of paradox, which brings out the idea of a monstrous quality of life blended into the fabulous or magical. Cea realizes the tragic cost to himself and to everyone of this reality:

Es una mierda, este San Salvador, pero divino.
Aquí, ¡hasta las piedras hablan, sufren, y se tiran abrazos!
Aquí, en El Salvador, la cosa es para tanto,
que tenemos que hacer las pequeñeces,
rodearlas de clamor
y esperar el vacío. (130)

In this poem, Cea chronicles the divine and profane without superimposing or prejudicing his narrative with symbolic structures. It's almost a pure, compulsive spilling out of words, a means of filling the void lest he be nothing. And that is the real world for Cea, though his chronicle too is subject to corruption by history. Thus he invokes the father of Salvadoran poetry when he feels momentarily overcome: "No me deja mentir Chico Gavidia" (130). The late nineteenth-century poet, Francisco Antonio Gavidia, possessed the light of a founder. He interpreted the content of Salvadoran national history and culture and pointed out the danger of borrowing the expression of other countries, a danger recapitulating the fall of the first (indigenous) world to the second (European) world (*Prólogo* 8).

The reality of life in El Salvador can force the response, "Jodida está la cosa," but the self-critical modality of the poem articulates a willful refusal to be totally silenced, deluded, or alienated: "¡Qué carajo! Somos un espejito reflejando lo de otros. / Nada nos pertenece de verdad. / Todo es prestado, ¡hasta la muerte!" (130). Although bitter, such criticism paves the way for a contemplation of fragility and the will to live fully by suffering for the sake of truth and poetry. Cea projects his hoped-for transformation into the poem at the moment of his greatest suffering:

El Salvador me duele.
Tanto me duele, que lo quiero tanto.
Y deseo vivirlo más, darle vuelta,
transformarlo de veras, ¡porque sí!
Porque se debe transformar.
Como está
ya no sirve No ha servido jamás ¡Perdón!
ha servido para algo: Es doloroso. (131)

The self-correcting tone of these lines is no ironical trick; it has that Keatsian quality of whispering results to one's neighbors, regardless if those results be difficult to hear. In this situation, where "siempre estamos peleando entre vecinos," there is all the more reason for such things to be heard. El Salvador, as Cea views it, is a system of fatal paradoxes built up on historical fraudulence and cultural dependence.

Finally, Cea brings forward his belief of what can possibly save his country, and in it we hear not the clenched-fist diction or

utopian song of some Third World poets but a sober, diligent, modest aspiration, and grief:

Aquí, en El Salvador, en esta semillita,
tenemos que llorar
para que brote el canto, para que salga pleno,
para que sirva algo.
Aquí, en El Salvador, tenemos que sacar a relucir lo cierto;
tenemos que dejar a un lado secretos,
o seguimos perdidos (131)

In this "little seed," all is diminished and in darkness, recalling the conclusion of Cea's preface. All the codices spoke of the City of Song, and now Cea has come to the center of it, finding there the need to sing in order to redeem his world from loss. Without song and clarity, all is lost to paralyzed will, tragic regret, flightlessness, silence, and darkness. Cea ends on a note which fixes the ephemeral nature of life in El Salvador: "Cuanta vida me gasto, es por él. / ¡Por su forma tan rara de ser en este mundo!" (131). "Crónica salvadoreña" embodies a place of radical nihilism. Yet the place is also poetry, the "form" is this poem. For Cea, El Salvador and poetic imagination exist in relation to each other as do the honeycomb and honey; each serves the other, and together both can counter the failures of love and conscience in public and private worlds. In the end, Cea's confession of dissolution, of how much life he wears out, is clearly meant to claim the writing of poetry as a defining of one particular man's mortality shaping itself by being in this world.

In his *Antología general de la poesía en El Salvador* (1971), Cea pronounced that in the poetry of his country there exists "una excedencia de versos más cerca del desahogo emocional—la sensiblería—que del pensamiento" (7). Cea disparaged those poets who did not express the true condition of Salvadorans and asserted that "hemos sido imitadores de lo provinciano de otros países, de América y Europa" (7). The situation of El Salvador's economic and cultural dependence, he argued, did not permit poets to probe deeply into Salvadoran realities. Under the influence of national history and culture, however, poets would "crear las condiciones para que todos tengan acceso a la cultura verdadera" (8). This was to be the goal of a revolutionary process. Although Cea expounded this view in 1971,

it had been the basis of his poetic practice since the 1950's. Cea's poetics finally are circumscribed by a sense of urgency, an advocacy of truth and poetry to save Salvadoran society from its own corrupt and equivocal values. Not only does he feel that the historical process grinds against his Indian elemental sympathy, he revisions life to give meaning to the living beings and creatures he apprehends, as they live and move, and not as concepts. In recent years, Cea's work has become less declarative and outwardly impassioned, and more epic in scope. Yet there remains, it appears, a lifelong ambition to pursue the lure of experience wholly inscribed within "El Salvador—Tierra adentro" (*Los pies sobre la tierra de preseas* 9).

Notes

¹ See the introductions and notes to such anthologies as those edited by David Escobar Galindo, Esther María Osses and Gabriela Yanes.

² Thomas P. Anderson has written a vivid and thoughtful account of this crucial moment in Salvadoran history. See his *Matanza*.

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