



Brújula
Volume 9 • Spring 2012

Enfoques

Humor, Irony and Surrealism in Luis Cardoza y Aragón's Maelstrom: Films telescopiados (1926)

Adrian Kane
Boise State University

Introduction

Guatemalan novelist and critic Arturo Arias has suggested that the disappearance of the socialist block and the crisis of Marxism at the end of the twentieth century have provided an opportunity to reevaluate with fresh eyes much of the forgotten production of the avant-garde era in Spanish American literature (*La identidad de la palabra* 18). Indeed, in his study of twentieth century Guatemalan fiction, Arias argues that Spanish American avant-garde production has a direct aesthetic link to postmodern fiction (19). This assertion supports the work of several literary critics who maintain that the avant-garde era inspired many of the subsequent innovations in modern and postmodern Spanish American fiction (Bustos Fernández 18; Martínez 116; Verani 69; Burgos 111; Osorio XXXV). Although Spanish American novels from the 1920s have received

a considerable increase in critical attention during the last thirty years, Central American fiction from this period has been largely ignored.¹ Indeed, as Forster and Jackson note, critical work in all areas of the Central American avant-garde is “sketchy,” and “much more careful work is needed” (178). Despite the relatively limited quantity of Central American avant-garde production, the lack of critical attention noted by Forster and Jackson stems from a larger problem noted by Arias in a 1996 article. He states: “Central American literature is still seen as peripheral to the rest of Latin American literature [. . .] in spite of the Nobel Prize awarded to Miguel Angel Asturias in 1967, and the presence of other first-rate Central American figures such as Augusto Monterroso, Ernesto Cardenal or Luis Cardoza y Aragón” (“The Magic and/of Eroticism” 182). Since the publication of Arias’s article, the status of Central American literature has also improved in Latin American studies, but the necessity of this special issue is evidence that there are still many gaps to be filled due to decades of inattention in literary criticism to the Central American region. Critical analysis of Central American literature from the 1920s, in particular, will help provide a more complete picture of the continental project of the Spanish American avant-garde. The present essay focuses on *Maelstrom: Films telescopiados*, a lesser-known text by one of Guatemala’s most prolific twentieth-century authors, Luis Cardoza y Aragón. My reading of this novel attempts to illustrate the relation between the use of humor, irony and Surrealism as elements of play, and the way in which the text undermines dominant intellectual discourses and literary conventions.

Despite Cardoza y Aragón’s stature as one of Central America’s major twentieth-century literary figures, *Maelstrom* has not received the careful criticism that it merits, particularly in the context of avant-garde fiction.² José Emilio Pacheco has argued that with the passage of time literary history will prove Cardoza to be a central figure in the Spanish American avant-garde (7). The following reading of *Maelstrom* continues the process of reevaluation

suggested by both Arias and Pacheco by calling attention to an important and largely overlooked piece in the mosaic of the Spanish American avant-garde.

Cultural Context: Guatemala in the 1920s

Luis Cardoza y Aragón was born in 1904, just five years into the tyrannical dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera. Many readers of Spanish American fiction have come to know the horrors of Guatemalan life under Estrada Cabrera through Miguel Angel Asturias's classic novel *El señor presidente*. The nightmare portrayed in the novel, however, was the reality that Cardoza y Aragón faced for the first sixteen years of his life. As Arias notes, "Es en este medio social que surge Luis Cardoza y Aragón. Nació y vivió toda su infancia y adolescencia bajo la férrea dictadura de Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920). Vio de niño cómo su padre, ilustre profesional, era perseguido, humillado y apresado por los esbirros de dictador" ("Consideraciones" 12). The oppression experienced by Cardoza during his formative years cultivated in him a disdain for authoritarianism which in turn had a profound impact on his literary career (Rendón 10). In *Miguel Ángel Asturias: casi novela*, Cardoza declares: "no he sido prisionero de ideología o doctrina alguna" (qtd. in Rendón 57). Similarly, in his 1970 acceptance speech of an honorary doctoral degree from The University of San Carlos de Guatemala, Cardoza proclaims: "El dogmatismo estético, siempre rechazado por mí, es enemigo del espíritu revolucionario. Como todo dogmatismo. No es fácil entender, con análisis somero, cómo una sociedad nueva no busca al mismo tiempo formas nuevas. Parece absurdo que un movimiento revolucionario se aferre a estilos conservadores . . ." (Méndez de Penedo 64). It is thus clear that, for Cardoza, innovative artistic forms possess the potential to play a significant role in social revolution. In his autobiography, *El río*, he proclaims: "la liberación cultural es imposible sin revolución" (785). Cardoza's refusal to adhere to traditional literary genres and his commitment to

innovation parallel his rejection of ideological dogmatism and his desire for social revolution.

Similar to avant-garde movements in other parts of Latin America, literary production in Guatemala formed part of a larger cultural movement that was in favor of a modern democratic state. This movement, known in Guatemala as Unionism, involved the collaboration of several sectors of Guatemalan society. Participants in the movement, recognized as the Generation of 1920, consisted of artists, intellectuals, workers, students and professionals who were committed to the overthrow of Estrada Cabrera's dictatorship. *El Obrero Libre* and *El Estudiante*, two journals founded in 1920, manifested the increasing outrage of the masses and the development of socialist ideologies in Guatemala. On the literary front, José Mejía considers Miguel Ángel Asturias, César Brañas and Cardoza y Aragón to be the great lyrical trilogy of the Generation of 1920 (18). In the first issue of *El Estudiante*, on February 1, 1920, Asturias' name appears among a list of students who signed the "Acta de Organización y Adhesión del Club Unionista de Estudiantes Universitarios al Partido Unionista." Three weeks later in the same journal, Asturias captured the furious sentiment of the Unionist movement in the following declaration: "El pueblo ya no comulga con mentiras. Con hipocresías. Con farsas. Con jergas. Ya cayó el telón. Ha terminado el sainete de los reptiles. Vienen los cóndores . . . La opinión pública está con vosotros, liberales de 1920" (3).

Despite similarities in the overarching cultural movements in Guatemala and other larger Latin American countries such as Mexico and Argentina, major differences include the absence of both unified literary groups and significant cultural magazines during the 1920s in Guatemala. Indeed, one might argue that Guatemala's most important avant-garde activity took place in Paris, where Asturias and Cardoza spent significant portions of the decade and became closely acquainted with the theories and aesthetics of Surrealism.³ Guatemala's

relatively scarce avant-garde production, when compared with major Spanish American cultural centers such as Mexico City and Buenos Aires, is similar to that of other Central American countries during the 1920s. Nicaragua was the only Central American nation to produce a self-proclaimed avant-garde group. The *anti-academia*, as the Nicaraguan group was known, did not develop until the end of the decade.⁴ Thus, for Boccanera, it was Luis Cardoza y Aragón who opened the doors in Central America to the avant-garde (58).

With no unified avant-garde group to speak of in Guatemala, Cardoza y Aragón never signed a manifesto or pledged allegiance to a specific literary group. He participated in student magazines and anti-Cabrera publications during his adolescence, such as *El pabellón escolar* (1919), *El instituto* (1919?) and *La montaña* (1920), but his professional literary career began in Paris with the 1924 publication of his poem "Luna Park, instantáneas del siglo XX." He spent the majority of the 1920s in Europe, where he associated with major literary figures such as César Vallejo, Vicente Huidobro and Ramón Gómez de la Serna, who demonstrated to Cardoza y Aragón the possibilities of the avant-garde aesthetic for the Spanish language (Pacheco 9). Through his friendship with Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos and Antonin Artaud, he was introduced to Surrealism, and thus to a new vision of literature, life and knowledge. As Monsiváis proclaims: "Dos son las influencias centrales en la tarea poética de Luis Cardoza y Aragón: el impulso vanguardista y el Surrealismo" ("Asturias según Cardoza", qtd. in Boccanera 10).

Cardoza y Aragón arrived in Paris in 1921 during what Breton refers to as the "intuitive epoch" of Surrealism: 1919-1925 (*What is Surrealism?* 50).⁵ This period, which was rooted in Freudian theory and thus theorized that the subconscious could reveal a greater understanding of humanity and provide a more complete notion of reality, was a reaction to the grotesque inhumanity of the First World War. Robert Short refers to a "myth of progress" perceived in the

post-war Dadaists and Surrealists: “The war confirmed a growing conviction – hardly there in the pre-war Cubists and Futurists— that the West’s obsession with technological advance and the over-estimation of reason at the expense of feeling led straight to destructive megalomania” (293). He further maintains that Dadaism and Surrealism “were not so much new schools of poetry and art as movements of the spirit involving definite moral, philosophical and, in the case of Surrealism, political commitments” (293). For Cardoza y Aragón, the Surrealists’ challenge to the *status quo* was particularly attractive: “Su condena del mundo que nos rodeaba incendió mi corazón . . . Rebeliones, furias, desahucios fue lo más hermoso del Surrealismo más hermoso: el que me deparó elevación y agonía” (*El río* 252, 257). He also recalls: “Del Surrealismo me fascinó su concepto del amor y de la libertad, la recusación de lo contemplativo, de la ética burguesa, de todo lo que exigía (más que invitaba) transformar la vida” (*André Breton* 102). The influence of Surrealism is particularly evident in his 1926 work *Maelstrom: Films telescopiados*.

Elements of Play in *Maelstrom: Films telescopiados*

Maelstrom’s structure consists of five chapters that are mainly episodes in the protagonist’s life. Four of the five chapters include intercalated poems, and there is no chronological or causal relationship between each episode. The structure of the work thus blurs the boundaries between genres, a characteristic that nearly every critic of Cardoza y Aragón recognizes as fundamental in his literary production.⁶ Its iconoclastic, avant-garde stance towards literary tradition has lead Marco Vinicio Mejía to characterize *Maelstrom* as “una búsqueda poética de disolución de géneros” (*Homenaje* 5).⁷ This experimental literary strategy reveals a structural relation to the text’s ideologically subversive content, which will be discussed below.

Maelstrom is the story of Keemby, who dies in the first paragraph when the shadow of a cinematic character leaps out of the screen and murders him. The title of this chapter is ironically entitled "El autor empieza a suprimir personajes inútiles." In the next chapter, "Pompierlandia," Keemby decides to destroy an airplane by jumping on top of it.⁸ As the plane turns to smoke, Keemby descends into Pompierlandia, described as "la tierra donde no ha sucedido nada nunca" (29). The citizens of Pompierlandia have no national flag, but when Keemby shows them a Picasso painting containing a playing card, a guitar, a bottle, a harlequin and some other objects that had not yet been named, they quickly adopt it as their national emblem. Their new flag quickly inspires change in Pompierlandia. Significantly, nature's resentment of art visibly diminishes, and women begin giving birth to cubist babies. Keemby publishes his only book in Pompierlandia, entitled *Insultos a nuestra madre naturaleza*. The work is described as "Obra comprensible únicamente por pasión (¡oh, nunca por inteligencia!): el Sueño es la verdadera vida" (32).

In the following chapter, "Natividad de Nuestro Señor el Clown," the world is portrayed as a great circus. One stanza from a poem interwoven into this section reads: "Padre Eterno, / Clown maravilloso, / el hiperbólico universo / es un circo muy pobre de payasos" (52). God is depicted as a child whose toy, the world, has broken. After watching what is described as "la película grotesca de la creación" (53) projected onto the earth's polar caps, God decides to send Jesus of Nazareth to Earth for a second time. Dismayed, however, Jesus responds, "Los hombres de hoy son incapaces hasta de crucificarme" (54). In the fourth chapter, "Biografía de un paisaje," Keemby falls in love with a character named "Paisaje." One afternoon, Keemby awakes to find Paisaje missing. Through a police report in the newspaper he discovers that Paisaje was mistaken by a neighbor for an intruder. The police pursue Paisaje with orders to shoot with their cameras. He is captured, handcuffed, inserted in a glass frame and

sent to the Louvre. The novel culminates in the last chapter, "Remolino último." Keemby, struggling with his existence, loses his will to live. He wanders through the streets of Paris searching for the best place to plunge into the river and end his misery, but at the very moment that he finds a perfect bridge for his suicide, he stumbles across a vagabond who is asleep on the sidewalk: "Sueña. A veces sonrío, como si la luz de la luna le cosquillease la cara. Sueña. Es feliz. Sueña. Sonríe. Sueña. Sueña. Sueña. Sueña. Sueña. Sueña" (94). In a moment of epiphany, Keemby receives the necessary insight to sustain his existence. He exclaims, "¡Yo también sé soñar!" (95).

Throughout the novel, the empirical world and the notion of objective reality are juxtaposed with dreams and imagination. The relationship between art and the physical world is highlighted during the transformation of Pompierlandia. The narrator implies that nature resented the previously dominant mimetic forms of realism and naturalism, and is relieved by the presence of what José Ortega y Gasset refers to as "el arte nuevo" (11-13). He notes: "Disminuía, visiblemente, el rencor que guarda la Naturaleza por el arte" (32). This theme is continued in the fourth chapter, when Paisaje reacts to a photographic camera with great trepidation. Keemby recounts:

Entonces, deseando agradar a Paisaje, armé mi Kodak. Al verlo empezó a gritar desesperadamente. Temblaba de pavor. ¡Teníale más miedo que a un revólver! La lente ve a Paisaje con ese ojo terrible con que nos ve el ojo negro del revólver. Para calmarle descargué mi Kodak en su presencia.
(75)

Elsewhere, Paisaje expresses his boredom with nature: "Mi madrastra, Madame la Nature, me trata muy mal. . . Desde que vivo tengo cuatro trajes que me aburren ya: Otoño, Estío. . . Tú conoces los otros dos. ¡Cómo desearía vestirme

con ropas de Poiret, bufandas de Léger o Delaunay, cuadros de Diego Rivera o Carlos Mérida!" (76-77). Significantly, when Paisaje is captured photographically and sent to the Louvre, it is artists, poets and composers committed to innovation who liberate him. Included among his rescuers are Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, Andre Bretón and Max Jacob. For the predominantly future-minded vanguardists, a museum was equivalent to a prison. Upon his escape, Paisaje and Keemby return to Pompierlandia, a land that has been emancipated by avant-garde art.

By privileging imagination and creation in *Maelstrom*, Cardoza y Aragón implicitly undermines the positivist basis of the realist and naturalist novel. For the positivist, civilization's quest for progress could only be achieved through scientific data. The role of imagination in *Maelstrom* opposes positivist tenets and reflects the position taken by Cardoza y Aragón in his later declaration that "la poesía es la única prueba concreta de la existencia del hombre" (*André Breton* 111).

In his 1924 *Manifestos of Surrealism*, André Breton stridently rejects the absolutist claims of positivism, proclaiming that it "clearly seems to me to be hostile to any intellectual or moral advancement" (6). He further asserts:

We are still living under the reign of logic: this of course, is what I have been driving at. But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience. . . . Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices. (10)

He maintains, however, that:

the imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them--first to seize them, then, if need be, to submit them to the control of our reason. (10)

In *Maelstrom*, when Keemby realizes that dreams are the key to his existence, Cardoza seems to echo the sentiment of Breton's manifesto. Breton rhetorically asks: "Why should I not expect from the sign of the dream more than I expect from a degree of consciousness which is daily more acute? Can't the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life?" (*Manifestos* 12). It would be easy to interpret Keemby's insight as a form of escapism or a rejection of the empirical world. However, in Breton's argument in favor of the exploration of the subconscious, he explains that Surrealism is based on a fundamental synthesis. Breton professes: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going . . ." (*Manifestos* 14). Elsewhere, Breton expands on this point by defending Surrealism from accusations of escapism:

A certain immediate ambiguity contained in the word Surrealism, is, in fact, capable of leading one to suppose that it designates I know not what transcendental attitude, while, on the contrary it expresses—and always has expressed for us—a desire to deepen the foundations of the real, to bring about an ever clearer and at the same time ever more passionate

consciousness of the world perceived by the senses. (*What is Surrealism?* 49)

Cardoza y Aragón reflects a similar attitude in *El río*: “Me han interesado los sueños, me sirven para buscar la verdad. Espejo es la realidad en donde los sueños se reflejan. . . . Nunca he defendido lo irracional por irracional. He querido la totalidad; para ello no he apartado lo solar de lo nocturno” (210, 253). He further notes that in Surrealism, “hay encrespada lucha con la diosa Razón y el Siglo de las Luces” (254). As Cardoza y Aragón implies, Surrealism, by definition, defies the rational basis of positivism. In his 1924 *Manifestos of Surrealism*, Breton defines Surrealism as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason. . . .” (26). The objective of such automatic writing is the creation and “fortuitous juxtaposition” of images unfettered by reason (37). Breton asserts that “it is true of Surrealist images as it is of opium images that man does not evoke them; rather they ‘come to him spontaneously, despotically. He cannot chase them away; for the will is powerless now and no longer controls the faculties’” (36).⁹ Such images often produce what Breton refers to as an “extreme degree of immediate absurdity” (24).

Maelstrom is replete with such imagery. After Keemby’s death in the first chapter, for example, his soul is described in the following manner:

Fué [sic] un *cocktail* de espíritus opuestos. El Creador tomó un cubilete de los “American’s bar” y dentro puso un poco de jirafa, de Cristo, de Hamlet, de montaña rusa, de Grock, de torre, de Barba Azul, de Peer Gynt, etc., etc., y el contenido, bruscamente revuelto, lo derramó en el

cuerpo de Keemby, quien vivió su vida jaculatoria, ebrio de aquella mezcla trágica y funámbula. Se solucionaba en él la fórmula $2X2=5$, título de una novela inédita de mi amigo de González de Mendoza. Fue paradójico como el canguro, animal inverosímil. (21)

As Fernando Charry Lara has noted, Cardoza y Aragón's literary universe overflows with such imagery composed of unexpected relations (31). Boccanera suggests that, in addition to Surrealism, such imagery in Cardoza's early work was influenced by his contact with Ramón Gómez de la Serna's poetry and the Spanish Ultraist movement (37). Indeed, in the prologue to *Maelstrom*, Gómez de la Serna declares: "Hay que fumigar la naturaleza con imágenes nuevas" (9).

The unexpected relations produced by the imagery of such passages are evidence of the text's playful nature. Benjamín Jarnés, theorizing the role of play in literature, declares: "Juego: genialidad que en cada momento aventura sus cartas en una partida cuyo final no está previsto. Juego: elasticidad espiritual, vehemencia creadora, puesta al servicio de un golpe de ingenio. Juego: pasar de un brinco, desde estados físicos, triviales, cotidianos, a un estado estético, excepcional, trascendente. . ." ("El arte como juego" 112-113). Such imagery not only playfully defies reason, but also contributes significantly to the omnipresent humor in *Maelstrom*. Keemby's creator in the above passage appears to be the same deity who, in the third chapter, creates the great circus that is the world. The narrator proclaims: "Dios es el más grande humorista del mundo. Todos lo sabemos. ¿Lo ignora él?" (52). The carnivalesque universe portrayed in *Maelstrom* is not bound by the laws of cause and effect, but rather by chaos. The absurdist humor created by surrealist imagery is complemented by raucous moments of situational irony. For example, when Keemby first falls in love with Paisaje, Keemby writes him a sonnet. Paisaje, insulted by the gift, throws it out the window. At that very moment, the Parnassian poet José María de Heredia (who

is best known for his collection of 118 Petrarchan sonnets entitled *The Trophies*) was passing through the neighborhood shouting, “¡Sooooo-nee-ee-toooooossss!” (75). Heredia encounters Keemby’s sonnet and keeps it as a trophy of his own.

The use of irony, humor and the absurd is consistent throughout the novel. As Jarnés observed in his 1926 review of *Maelstrom*, “La ironía es solapada. No canta ni grita (“El Rabo de Luzbel” 25). In the last passage Keemby holds a character named Belleza at gunpoint, steals her pearl necklace and decapitates her breasts with kisses. Before doing so, the narrator, (whom the reader might suspect has been masking himself through his alter ego Keemby) offers a sort of *ars poetica*.¹⁰ He states:

Soy capaz de imaginar no importa qué, de creer no importa que... Las palabras Vida, Ilusión, Realidad etc., me vienen a la boca a cada instante cuando contemplo al mundo, para mí una inmensa manzana de tentación; me vienen envueltas en la dulce saliva de mi glotonería despierta. Lo real y lo irreal, se me confunde: no sé si esto que palpo es un libro o un sueño. . . . El Absurdo me ha dado más voluptuosidad que la mujer. (116)

By mutilating Belleza, the final passage clearly symbolizes the transformation of art and the concept of beauty that the implied author has consistently promoted throughout the text. As the narrator states: “Lo perfecto, lo bilateral, lo simétrico, lo completo, lo disciplinado, lo par, lo lógico, lo exacto, lo congruente, lo natural, lo razonable, lo plural, lo. . . no es nunca magnífico” (104). These words echo Breton’s assertion that “the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful” (*Manifestoes* 14). Moreover, the new concept of beauty posited in this quotation and throughout *Maelstrom* is the

deformed or dehumanized aesthetic that Ortega y Gasset keenly observed in avant-garde art.

Conclusion

Indeed, taken as a whole, *Maelstrom* can be interpreted as a manifesto or *ars poetica* of its own. As one critic has noted, "En *Maelstrom* se siente la necesidad de cambiar el mundo y la poesía" (Dávila 123). Read as fiction rather than poetry, this text undoubtedly participates in the avant-garde effort to transform the Spanish American novel. Critics have established that, for the vanguardists, to be modern was to break with the nineteenth-century European models of realism and naturalism (Williams 69). As Huidobro proclaimed, the role of literature was no longer to reflect nature or the empirical world, but to create new worlds. A similar approach to art and literature is evident throughout *Maelstrom*. From the beginning, there is a clear departure from realist-naturalist modes of fiction. Imagination is privileged as Keemby is murdered by the shadow of an actor on the movie screen. The transformation of Pompierlandia, inspired by the Picasso painting, can be understood as a call for a new form of art that revolutionizes society. Furthermore, the narrator's comment in this chapter that "el Sueño es la verdadera vida" (32) demonstrates the influence of Surrealism in *Maelstrom*.

In *Maelstrom* Cardoza y Aragón anticipates Breton's declaration that "it is time to have done with the provoking insanities of 'realism'" (*What is Surrealism?* 82). In his "Carta a André Breton," Cardoza y Aragón reflects: "Hablamos de arte irracional e irreflexivo, automático y onírico, que no es sino pasión de exactitud, de justeza de nitidez y de todo lo concreto. Amor de la realidad. Realismo y realidad son algo completamente diferente" (66). In his autobiography, Cardoza asserts that his surrealist work corresponded with the historical moment of the 1920s: "buscaba mi voz en el torbellino de la posguerra, de la revolución de Lenin (dadaísmo, cubismo, Surrealismo, abstracción), a mi edad, con mi

imposible desarraigo . . . No aspiraba a la libertad gratuita; sí a una relación con mi mundo . . . (*El río* 247, 251).¹¹

In addition to the historical moment of the artistic avant-garde, *Maelstrom* can be further connected to the political situation in Guatemala. The novel's rejection of positivism had significant political implications in 1920s Guatemala because positivism was the philosophical basis for the form of liberalism that developed in the late nineteenth century in many Latin American countries and was adopted by political leaders such as Estrada Cabrera. As the inspiration for the ideals of civil order and progress, positivism was the underpinning of many liberal policies that favored foreign capitalists and national oligarchs to the detriment of local citizens, and often, as in the case of Estrada Cabrera, led to forms of brutal oppression of the masses.

The development of the Unionist movement in the early 1920s is a clear sign of the masses' desire for cultural transformation and freedom from oppression. These were years of political turbulence in Guatemala. Estrada Cabrera was overthrown in 1920, and several of his henchmen were publicly lynched by the masses in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral. Despite a brief mandate by Unionist Carlos Herrera, Generals José María Orellana and Lázaro Chacón ruled for the greater part of the decade. In 1931, Jorge Ubico assumed command, establishing a dictatorship that remained in power until 1944. Unfortunately, no enduring democracy emerged in Guatemala in the early part of the twentieth century. However, the birth of the Unionist movement clearly established the influence of socialist ideologies that would inform the nation's political struggle for the rest of the century. In this sense, the 1920s constitute a significant moment of rupture in Guatemalan society. Despite Guatemala's failure to politically reform during the 1920s, Cardoza y Aragón's vanguardist activity must ultimately be understood as a part of this broader cultural

movement towards modernization for, as Ruth Burke suggests, ludic explosions correspond with moments of rupture in society (31).

Several critics have observed play elements to be fundamental in Spanish American avant-garde fiction (Pérez-Firmat 139; Unruh 1; Achugar 28). In Cardoza's novel, humor, irony and surrealist imagery combine to form what can ultimately be described as a subversive aesthetic. Ludic humor, which Prada Oropeza recognizes as having a desacralizing effect (166), pervades the novel. *Maelstrom's* humor intentionally defies the rationalist nature of positivism by embodying Breton's notion of absurd imagery. Furthermore, situational irony is a central element. In this work, Keemby's moment of clarity ironically comes when he stumbles across a sleeping vagabond at the very moment that he plans to hurl himself from a bridge. His insight is nothing more than the realization that he too has the ability to dream.

In *Maelstrom*, literary traditions and dominant intellectual discourses are undermined. Genre boundaries are erased. Realism and naturalism give way to an overabundance of free-flowing imagery. Reason is replaced by the absurd, and positivism is challenged by Surrealism. Surrealism is by its nature a subversive movement.¹² As an avant-garde text, the subversive aesthetic of this novel, underpinned by elements of play, corresponds with the desire for cultural transformation in 1920s Guatemala.

Notes

¹ One notable exception is Francisco Alejandro Méndez's study, *Hacia un nuevo canon de la vanguardia en América Central*. Méndez suggests that the task of literary critics of this period of Central American literature is to demonstrate that, despite the absence of a multitude of unified movements in the region, there are individual authors who exhibit avant-garde tendencies (10).

² *Maelstrom* has not previously been analyzed as a novel. In his *Historia crítica de la novela guatemalteca*, Seymour Menton does not include *Maelstrom*. Boccanera considers *Maelstrom* to be a poem in prose (40). Elisa Dávila maintains that Cardoza is a central figure in the development of the poem in prose in Spanish America (118). José Emilio Pacheco concurs with Dávila. He asserts: "Ya en *Maelstrom* Cardoza y Aragón había hecho estallar los géneros con un radicalismo que no se encuentra en ninguno de los que hasta 1926 habían escrito en español prosa de vanguardia [...] Cardoza y Aragón gusta de repetir con Shelley que "es un error vulgar la distinción entre poetas y escritores en prosa" (13).

The basis for the present reading of *Maelstrom* as a novel rather than a poem rests upon the fact that it is composed primarily of prose, and contains a protagonist, as well as a modestly developed plot. To argue that *Maelstrom* is a novel and not a poem would, as Cardoza implies, ultimately be fruitless. However, the notion that *Maelstrom* may be legitimately read as a novel allows Cardoza's work to be considered part of an important, albeit obscure, corpus of Spanish-American avant-garde fiction. Critics have increasingly called attention to this group of avant-garde fiction by authors such as Macedonio Fernández, Roberto Arlt, Jaime Torres Bodet and Arqueles Vela, establishing the importance of their work in the development of the twentieth-century Spanish American novel. Including *Maelstrom* in the discussion of avant-garde fiction demonstrates its participation in the transformation of the Spanish American novel during the culturally and artistically dynamic years of the 1920s.

³ As Boccanera points out, towards the middle of the decade there were three prominent Guatemalan literary figures living in Paris: Asturias, Cardoza y Aragón and Enrique Gómez Carillo (39). Gómez Carillo was well acquainted with the avant-garde movements but is more closely associated with the generation prior to Cardoza and Asturias.

⁴ For a complete chronology of this movement, see Jorge Eduardo Arrellano's study, *Encuentro con la vanguardia literaria en Nicaragua*.

⁵ Breton contrasts this period with the overtly politicized turn that Surrealism took in reaction to the outbreak of the Moroccan war in 1925: "Surrealist activity at this moment entered into its *reasoning* phase. It suddenly experienced the necessity of crossing over the gap that separates absolute idealism from dialectical materialism" (*What is Surrealism?* 51). As Surrealism became increasingly connected with the communist party in France, Cardoza grew disaffected by what he perceived as a dogmatic turn in the movement.

⁶ As Augusto Monterroso comments: "En toda la obra de Cardoza y Aragón las formas usuales se van al diablo" (qtd in Boccanera 70). Boccanera likewise observes: "Se adhiere decidido a un desarrollo personal amasado en la interioridad, y rechaza todo tipo de receta que involucre al arte" (41).

⁷ Cardoza y Aragón has commented on this characteristic of his work. In *Miguel Ángel Asturias: casi novela*, Cardoza y Aragón states: "A mí no me importan las categorías sino la calidad en el despliegue imaginativo. Aprecio muchos libros que son a la vez ensayo, novela, poesía en prosa, que se liberan de las académicas clasificaciones de los géneros literarios. La importancia, más que en lo narrado, se sitúa en la forma de hacerlo: su forma es su contenido" (qtd. in Boccanera 67). In a 1989 interview, he further maintains: "Yo no creo en los géneros literarios, que los cancelé desde *Maelstrom* (1926), mezclando prosa y verso. Yo escribo, escribo y escribo. Después organizo lo que he escrito y veo si hay alguna coherencia para integrar un volumen" (qtd. in Boccanera 67-68).

⁸ The name Pompierlandia is presumably derived from the French word *pompier* meaning pompous or pretentious. *L'art pompier*, also known as academic art, refers to a form of nineteenth-century art influenced by neoclassicism and romanticism that was associated with the French Académie des Beaux-Arts.

⁹ Here Bretón quotes Baudelaire, but does not specify from which text.

¹⁰ Pacheco offers a similar observation: "El poeta adopta una máscara funambulesca y habla por boca de un personaje, Keemby" (10).

¹¹ In *El río*, Cardoza y Aragón recognizes the influence of Surrealism in his early work: "Soy contemporáneo de los surrealistas, guardo cierta analogía con un momento de ellos, un momento de fuego. Momento que me hizo aún más diferente cuando este momento se hubo desvanecido" (253). In *André Breton: atisbado sin la mesa parlante*, he is critical of the direction that Breton's Surrealism took in its later phases: "Fue dogmatizante este fanático de la libertad y de la subversión surrealista" (21). Cardoza y Aragón thus maintains that he was never beholden to any formulaic notion of Surrealism: "No obstante la definición de André Breton es difícil precisar qué es el Surrealismo: Breton definió el suyo" (*El río* 253). Ultimately, he recognizes both the successes and the failures of Surrealism: "La revuelta surrealista produjo una transformación en la sensibilidad moderna y en su evolución, pero fue inofensiva en lo social, pese a su codicia" (*André Breton* 103).

¹² Bretón proclaims: "Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete nonconformism clearly enough so that there can be no question of translating it, at the trial of the real world, as evidence for the defense" (*Manifestoes* 47).

Works Consulted

- Achugar, Hugo. "El museo de la vanguardia: para una antología de la narrativa vanguardista hispanoamericana." Verani 7-40. Print.
- Arellano, Jorge Eduardo, ed. *Encuentro con la vanguardia literaria en Nicaragua*. Managua: Distribuidora Cultural, 1999. Print.
- Arias, Arturo. "Consideraciones en torno al género y génesis de *Guatemala, las líneas de su mano*." Vinicio Mejía, *Cardoza y Aragón* 9-26. Print.
- . "Gioconda Belli: The Magic and/of Eroticism." *The Postmodern in Latin and Latino American Cultural Narratives: Collected Essays and Interviews*. Ed. Claudia Ferman. Latin American Studies 3. New York: Garland, 1996. 181-99. Print.
- . *La identidad de la palabra: narrativa guatemalteca a la luz del Siglo XX*. Guatemala City: Artemis Edinter, 1998. Print.
- Asturias, Miguel Ángel. "Sursum Corda." *El estudiante* 1.7 (1920): 3. Print.
- Boccanera, Jorge. *Sólo venimos a soñar: la poesía de Luis Cardoza y Aragón*. Mexico City: ERA, 1999. Print.
- Breton, André. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. 1962. Trans. Richard Server and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1969. Print.
- . *What Is Surrealism?* 1936. Trans. David Gascoyne. New York: Haskell, 1974. Print.
- Burgos, Fernando. *Vertientes de la modernidad hispanoamericana*. Serie Literatura. Caracas: Monte Avila, 1995. Print.
- Burke, Ruth E. *The Games of Poetics: Ludic Criticism and Postmodern Fiction*. American University Studies Ser. III, Comp. Lit. 47. New York: Peter Lang, 1994. Print.
- Bustos Fernández, María. *Vanguardia y renovación en la narrativa latinoamericana*. Madrid: Pliegos, 1996. Print.

- Cardoza y Aragón, Luis. *André Breton: atisbado sin la mesa parlante*. Mexico City: UNAM, Centro Universitario de Profesores Visitantes, 1982. Print.
- . *Maelstrom: Films telescopiados*. Paris: Excelsior, 1926. Print.
- . "Los moradores del pensativo." *El Pabellón Escolar: Revista Quincenal Órgano del Instituto Nacional de Varones y Escuela Práctica Anexa* 2.15 (1919): 2-4. Print.
- . *Poesías completas y algunas prosas*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977. Print.
- . *El río: novelas de caballería*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986. Print.
- Charry Lara, Fernando. "Cardoza y Aragón." Introduction. *Poesías completas y algunas prosas*. By Cardoza y Aragón. 27-34. Print.
- Dávila, Elisa. "El poema en prosa en Hispanoamérica: a propósito de Luis Cardoza y Aragón." Diss. U of California, Santa Barbara, 1982. Print.
- Fernández, Jesse. *El poema en prosa en Hispanoamérica: del modernismo a la vanguardia (estudio crítico y antología)*. Madrid: Hiperión, 1994. Print.
- Forster, Merlin H., and K. David Jackson, comps. *Vanguardism in Latin American Literature: An Annotated Bibliographical Guide*. Bibliographies and Indexes in World Literature 27. New York: Greenwood, 1990. Print.
- Jarnés, Benjamín. *Ariel disperso*. Mexico City: Stylo, 1946. Print.
- . "El arte como juego." 1926. Jarnés 112-13.
- . "El Rabo de Luzbel." 1926. Jarnés 22-26.
- Martínez, Elizabeth Coonrod. *Before the Boom: Latin American Revolutionary Novels of the 1920s*. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 2001. Print.
- Mejía, José. Introduction. *Poesie guatémaltèque du XXe siècle*. Ed. Oliver Gilberto de León. Geneva: Patiño, 1999. 11-27. Print.

- Méndez, Francisco Alejandro. *Hacia un nuevo canon de la vanguardia en América Central: urdimbre de textos acromegálicos, invisibilizados por los discursos críticos*. Guatemala City: Editorial Cultura, 2006. Print.
- Méndez de Penedo, Lucrecia. *La índole polifacética de Luis Cardoza y Aragón en Guatemala, las líneas de su mano*. Guatemala City: U de San Carlos de Guatemala, 1979. Print.
- Menton, Seymour. *Historia crítica de la novela guatemalteca*. Guatemala City: Universitaria, 1960. Print.
- Ortega y Gasset, José. *La deshumanización del arte*. 1925. Madrid: Alianza, 2000. Print.
- Osorio, Nelson T., ed. *Manifiestos, proclamas y polémicas de la vanguardia literaria hispanoamericana*. Caracas: Ayacucho, 1988. Print.
- Pacheco, José Emilio. Prologue. *Poesías completas y algunas prosas*. Luis Cardoza y Aragón. 7-26. Print.
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Idle Fictions: The Hispanic Vanguard Novel, 1926-1934*. Durham: Duke UP, 1982. Print.
- Prada Oropeza, Renato. "Texto y proyección: los relatos de Arqueles Vela." *El estridentismo: memoria y valoración*. SEP/80, 50. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica. 159-75. Papers from a symposium organized by the Centro de Investigaciones Lingüístico-Literarias in Jalapa, Nov. 26-28, 1981. Print.
- Rendón, Catherine. *La dictadura y el indígena en la obra de Luis Cardoza y Aragón*. Colección Molinos de Viento 111. Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1996. Print.
- Short, Robert. "Dada and Surrealism." *Modernism: 1890-1930*. Ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane. 2nd ed. London: Penguin, 1991. 292-308. Print.

- Unruh, Vicky. *Latin American Vanguardists: The Art of Contentious Encounters*. Latin American Literature and Culture 11. Berkeley: UC P, 1994. Print.
- Verani, Hugo J., ed. *Narrativa vanguardista hispanoamericana*. Serie Manatí: Poesía/Ensayo. Mexico City: Coordinación de Difusión Cultural, Dirección de Literatura, UNAM, 1996. Print.
- Vinicio Mejía, Marco. *Asedio a Cardoza*. Guatemala City: Rial Academia [sic], 1995. Print.
- , ed. *Cardoza y Aragón: la voz más alta*. Guatemala City: Rial Academia [sic], 1989. Print.
- . *Homenaje a Luis Cardoza y Aragón*. Guatemala City: U de San Carlos de Guatemala, 1993. Print.
- Williams, Raymond L. *The Twentieth-Century Spanish American Novel*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2003. Print.