

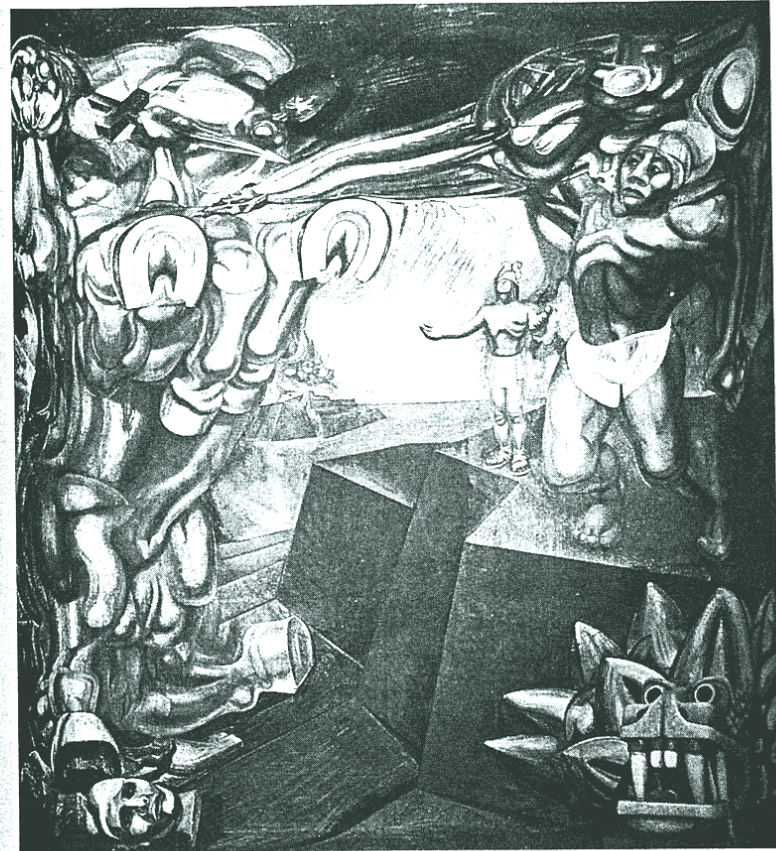
Ode to Cuauhtémoc

Carlos Pellicer

Poet Carlos Pellicer (1899–1977) was born in the southeastern state of Tabasco, where he learned to admire the tropics and the indigenous societies that had long inhabited them. He moved to Mexico City in 1914 and published his first poems in 1921. He was clearly influenced by “modernist” writers such as the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío and the Cuban poet José Martí, who wrote exuberantly about the glories of “Our America” (as Martí habitually referred to Latin America). Pellicer was very much in tune with the strain of “indigenismo” that surfaced during the Mexican revolution—that is, he celebrated Mexico’s native cultures as the true soul of the nation and its greatest glory. His work includes unabashedly romantic elegies to his heroes, principally Simón Bolívar, the leader of South America’s independence movement and a staunch Latin America nationalist, and Cuauhtémoc, the young Aztec emperor who tenaciously resisted European conquest and was eventually tortured and killed by his Spanish captors. The following poem, published in 1923, was the first of several poems Pellicer wrote in honor of Cuauhtémoc. It is a good example, not only of the exuberant indigenismo that progressive intellectuals sought to promote in alliance with the postrevolutionary state, but also of the tendency among the revolutionary generation to portray the United States as a soulless, acquisitive, and aggressive power.

1.

Sir, your will was so beautiful
that during the tragic months of your empire
the rhythm of the great stars quickened.
The time of your most terrible sorrow
remains within me:
when you searched for allies
among the men of your race,
and your cry was lost in the jungles.
That moment of your solitary bitterness
remains within me,
and before your desolate grandeur



Carlos Pellicer was not the only member of the revolutionary generation to celebrate the heroic resistance of Cuauhtémoc. In this 1944 mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros, “Cuauhtémoc Against the Myth,” the last Aztec emperor, standing atop a pyramid, hurls a flaming spear at the heart of a ferocious centaur representing the Spanish invader. In the background, Montezuma appeals to the gods, apparently immobilized by the myth of Spanish invincibility. (Tecpan de Tlatelolco, Mexico City)

I sing melodies of love and illusion,
I thunder a tragic symphony.
Before your august solitude
I unfurl my own, the solitude of a falling leaf.
Your religious upbringing
and your heroic, magnificent youth
make me a leaf that falls upon

the mountains and jungles,
proclaiming with great shouts
your grandeur, kicking awake all those who have forgotten
the prodigious course of your star.

The black arc stretched itself before the dawn
and the arrow sailed upward to pierce the last star.

II

We dedicate a mountain or a part of the sky
to the first of the Mexicans.
We delight at the magnificence of your actions.
You were handsome as the night and mysterious as heaven.
But your sorrow cannot be measured
by the orbit of the great planets,
or by the course of the sumptuous stars that shine upon our fears.

Your sorrow,
in the dark mirror of my eyes
begins to reveal to me
eternal anguish and eternal sorrow.
Cuauhtémoc was nineteen years old
when the Empire fell into his hands
like a wounded eagle.
Tenoxtitlán was the loveliest of all
the cities of the New World.
The divine Quetzalcóatl,
who was called Ku-Kul-Kan in the land of
the dear and pheasant,¹
had announced,
many moons before,
that other men would come through the South.
Thus, he dreamed.

III

And so it is that today,
with the sun broken in my hands
I hear rolling in my destiny
as in a cactus thicket,
the curse of the gods piercing my mouth
and the holy ax of tragedy lashed to my hands.
Can no one free me from
this pain, great as a basalt wave?

Can no one give me back
the sweet hours of love and the joy
of singing in the fields?
Because my eyes now glow only with hatred
and my free hands
think only of vengeance,
hatred and vengeance.
Who can go back to watching the stars serenely
when it seems that fate must trample us
with its stone feet?
The civilized monarchies of my America fell.
Tenoxtitlán and Cuzco
were its sculpted heads.
The fine races fell
before the brutal blows of the conquerors
who overcame the archers with their
loud cavalry and wide-mouthed cannon.
The divine prophet Quetzalcóatl,
did he foretell the arrival of these intrepid destroyers?
Since then, a mournful star
flees over the plains and sinks behind the hills.
For four hundred years we have been servants and slaves!
Who can look sweetly to the heavens
when the people of my America
were forced to flee before the curses of the Europeans,
weak, ignorant and sick?
They branded men like beasts,
and throughout the countryside, and in the entrails of the mines,
they lived the cruelty, the misery, and the tedium
I see, feel, and mourn still today.
Who can gaze sweetly upon the
sweet mysteries of heaven
when ignominy and infamy would bury us again beneath their steely din?
The men of the North loot the continent and the islands at their whim,
and they help themselves to pieces of heaven.
Oh, destiny of inexorable and gigantic tragedy!
You cover the wall of my anguish
and divert the course of the arrow that aimed at some star.
I see your figure sketched in the shadow of fire.
Shall we succumb to your laws of gold and silver?

In the Antilles and Nicaragua
the sun wallows in mud and fear.
Our vain and absurd America
is rotting.
Oh! destiny of inexorable and gigantic tragedy!
Can no one stop you?
Will you return to put our feet to the flame?²
Will you return with brutal hands
from the land of the yankees, mediocre, orderly and fat?
Will you return amid explosions and machines
to steal, kill, buy up caciques with your inexhaustible loot?
Oh Sir! Oh great King! Tlacatecutli!
Oh solemn and tragic leader of men!
Oh sweet, ferocious Cuauhtémoc!
Your life is an arrow
that has pierced the eyes of the Sun and
still goes on flying through the sky!
But in the crater of my heart
burns the faith that will save your people.

Notes

1. That is, among the Maya of the Southeast. *Ed.*
2. Cuauhtémoc was tortured by the Spaniards, eager to learn the whereabouts of Aztec gold, by having his feet doused in oil and then set aflame. *Ed.*