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## Translator's Preface

Jill Gibian

"Subversion of Carlitos the Magician" by Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti, situates the famous tango singer Carlos Gardel (c.1887-1935) amongst revolutionary forces fighting for social justice. The poem, first published in the collection *Viento del exilio* (1981), serves as a reaction to the political repression in Uruguay that first sent the author into exile after the 1973 coup. Benedetti born in Tacuarambo in 1920, shares Gardel's alleged birthplace, although some adamantly claim that he was born in Toulouse, France. The poem, interweaves tango lyrics made famous by Gardel such as "Sus ojos se cerraron," "Volver," "Arrabal amargo" and "Mi noche triste." Placed against a backdrop of the world of the *compadritos* or hoodlums of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the poem jumps anachronistically to the 1970's when military coups were synonymous with the electric prod and disappearances were the norm. The poem ends with Gardel joining the revolutionary forces, coming over to "our side" as the poem proclaims.

The poem presents many challenges for the translator. The use of tango lyrics to evoke memories of time past creates a nostalgic feeling for the reader who is familiar with the aforementioned classic tangos. However, for those who are not, the poem is glossed and in one case, the lyrics are left in Spanish for poetic effect. Another challenge is the use of *lunfardo*, the language of the *lunfas* or thieves that flavors many tangos and is found today in common street jargon. Words like pibe/piba for guy and gal, are but two examples. The word *cursi*, used as an adjective to describe Gardel, proved to be especially challenging. According to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Espanola*, *cursi* refers to 1) a person who pretends to be refined and elegant without being so; 2) artists and writers who pretend to be refined or who have elevated sentiments; 3) something that is kitschy or of bad taste. All three of these definitions place Gardel in sharp contrast to the Gardel that is molded into a revolutionary by the end of the poem.

Benedetti, author of more than 80 books covering all genres, continues to fight at age 87 for social justice. His latest work, *Vivir adrede* (Editorial Planeta), a reflection on problems of war, imperialism, religion, drugs, and social injustice was released September 2007.

## SUBVERSIÓN DE CARLITOS EL MAGO

Querés saber dónde están los muchachos de entonces  
sospechás que ahora vendrán caras extrañas  
y aunque pasó una sombra sonó un balazo  
guardás escondida una esperanza humilde  
que es toda la fortuna de tu corazón.

La verdad es que fuiste genialmente cursi  
y soberanamente popular  
te metiste no sólo en los boliches  
sino también entre pecho y espalda  
de vos hablaban por supuesto en los quilombos  
pero asimismo en los hogares de respeto  
atravesaste las capas sociales  
como una lluvia persistente y veraz  
y así gardeliaban los obreros y las costureritas  
pero también los altísimos burgueses  
y no era raro que algún senador y rey de bastos  
matizara sus listas de promesas a olvidar  
con citas de los griegos más preclaros  
y de tus tangos tan poco helénicos

## THE SUBVERSION OF CARLITOS THE MAGICIAN by Mario Benedetti

Translated by Jill Gibian

So you want to know whatever happened to the boys of the good old days  
You wonder about those strange new faces soon to come<sup>1</sup>  
and even though darkness abounds and gunshots resound  
you keep hidden a humble hope  
that's worth all the treasures of your heart.<sup>2</sup>

The truth is that you were brilliantly *cursi*  
and overwhelmingly popular  
you not only made your way into the clubs  
but also into people's hearts  
of course they used to talk about you in the houses of ill repute  
as they likewise did in reputable homes  
you crossed the social strata  
like a persistent and veracious rain  
and so, not only did you have the workers and the seamstresses singing  
tangos *à la gardel*  
but also the *crème de la crème* of the bourgeoisie  
and it wasn't unusual for some senator and would-be king  
to color their lists of promises-to-forget  
with quotes from the most illustrious Greeks  
and from your ever so un-Hellenic tangos.

<sup>1</sup> From the tango "Sus ojos se cerraron." "Sé que ahora vendrán caras extrañas/ con su limosna de alivio a mi consuelo." Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera, music by Carlos Gardel.

<sup>2</sup> From the tango "Volver." "Y aunque el olvido, que todo destruye,/ haya matado mi vieja ilusión,/ guardo escondida una esperanza humilde/ que es toda la fortuna de mi corazón." Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera, music by Carlos Gardel.

tus ensueños se van no vuelven más  
 tal vez por eso siempre sostuvimos  
 que no tenías inquietudes políticas  
 izquierdas y derechas nos pusimos de acuerdo  
 para situarte en el malevaje y otros limbos  
 donde había paicas y otarios y percal y gayola  
 pero no figuraba la lucha de clases  
 y aunque dicen que eras ateo y socialista  
 otros evocan tus alabanzas a radicales y conservas  
 pero vos/ antes y después de medellín  
 dejaste hacer/ dejaste que dijeran/ dejaste  
 que cada uno te inventara a su medida  
 y por las dudas no aclaraste nunca  
 si eras de toulouse o de tacuarembó

pero en alguna parte sucedió algo  
 que removió tu vergüenza de haber sido  
 tu noche triste y tu requiesca in pache  
 acaso fue la piba que murió en la picana  
 o el verdugo mayor que viste en el periódico  
 compungido y procaz ante la sangre joven  
 todo es mentira/ mentira ese lamento

your dreams have vanished never to return<sup>3</sup>  
 perhaps that's why we always swore  
 that you had no political concerns  
 those of us on the left and the right agreed that  
 you belonged in the underworld<sup>4</sup> and in other such limbos  
 where there was nothin' but loose women and Johns and cheap cotton and  
 the slammer  
 but no sign of class struggle

and although they say that you were an atheist and a socialist  
 others recall your praises of radicals and conservatives  
 but you, my friend/ before and after medellín  
 allowed them to make/ allowed them to say/ allowed everyone to invent  
 you in their own way  
 and for the sake of doubt you never did say if you were from toulouse or  
 from tacuarembó.

but somewhere something happened  
 that freed you from your shame of having been  
 your own saddest night<sup>5</sup> and your *requiesca in pache*<sup>6</sup>  
 perhaps it was the *piba* who died on the electric prod  
 or the chief executioner who you saw in the newspaper  
 sad yet unabashed before the blood of the young lass  
*todo es mentira/mentira ese lamento*<sup>7</sup>  
 everything is an illusion/ illusive is your lament

<sup>3</sup> From the tango "Arrabal amargo." "Mis ensueños se van, se van, no vuelven más." Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera, music by Carlos Gardel.

<sup>4</sup> Lunfardo: malevaje. The world of the *compadrito*, *malevos*: hoodlums; the world of knife-fights. See Jorge Luis Borges, "The History of Tango," tr. Suzanne Jill Levine. *Selected Non-Fictions*. Ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Reference to tango "Mi noche triste." Lyrics by Pascual Contursi, music by Samuel Castriota. This was the first tango recorded by Carlos Gardel in 1917. (Hector Angel Benedetti, *Las mejores letras de Tango*, Argentina: Seix Barral, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Rest in Peace.

<sup>7</sup> From the tango "Sus ojos se cerraron." "Todo es mentira, mentira ese lamento." Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera, music by Carlos Gardel.

pero es seguro que sucedió algo  
algo que te movió el gacho para siempre

fue entonces que sacaste de la manga  
los seis o siete tangos con palabras rugosas  
y empezaste a cantarlos como nunca  
hasta que el cabo le avisó al sargento  
y el sargento se lo dijo al teniente  
y el teniente al mayor y al coronel  
y el coronel a todos los generales  
que esa noche disfrutaban de wagner  
y no bien acabó el crepúsculo de los dioses  
te juzgaron culpable de ser pueblo  
y de asistencia a la subversión  
y así entraste en la franja de los clandestinos

de modo que se acabaron todas las dudas  
y las cavilaciones y los chismes  
ya no sobre toulouse o tacuarembó  
te llevaste el secreto a la chacarita  
sino sobre con cuáles estabas o estarás  
vale decir con ellos o con nosotros  
quien sabe si supieras  
pero ahora si está claro para siempre  
tomaste partido contra los jailaifes y la cana  
y estás con nosotros/ bienvenido mago  
compañero morocho del abasto.

but for sure something happened  
something that tipped your hat forever

it was then that you pulled out from up your sleeve  
those six or seven tangos with rousing lyrics  
and you began to sing them like never before  
until the corporal told the sergeant  
and the sergeant told the lieutenant  
and the lieutenant the major and the colonel  
and the colonel all the generals  
who were taking delight in wagner that night  
and no sooner had the twilight of the gods ended  
they declared you guilty of being for the people  
and of aiding and abetting political subversion  
and that's how you joined the secret world of the underground

which put an end to all the doubts  
and the caviling and the petty gossip  
no longer was it about toulouse or tacuarembó  
you carried *that* secret with you to the grave<sup>8</sup>  
but rather it was about who you were or will be with  
that is to say with them or with us  
who knows if you knew  
but now it is crystal clear  
you took sides against the *highlifes* and the cops  
and now you're on our side/ welcome magus  
our dark and debonair comrade from El Abasto.<sup>9</sup>

#### Lunfardo Glossary

*cursi* - pretentious, arrogant, kitschy, cheesy, corny, tacky, etc.

*piba* - gal, chic

<sup>8</sup> To the *chacarita* in the original. Cemetery where Gardel is buried in a special tomb.

<sup>9</sup> Neighborhood in Buenos Aires that was once home to Gardel.