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Title: Censorship and Self-Translation in the Era of the Latin American Boom¹

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¹ This essay is a revised version of a lecture delivered in Brussels in 2015.

I. The Case of Guillermo Cabrera Infante

“And she tried to fancy what the flame of the candle looked like after the candle is blown out...”²

Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s first work to be translated, his masterpiece *Tres tristes tigres*, was also the author’s first opportunity to ‘colaborate,’ a term he coined to speak of our collaborative translation into English, language of literary riches and economic power.

In “This Condition We Call Exile” Joseph Brodsky noted that writers often acquire a significance and style as exiles that they didn’t have as natives in their own land.”³ Political alienation, becoming a pariah sent into exile, would produce in Cabrera Infante a linguistic revolution, a need to stretch language as a writer to break out of what had become a prison, his own beloved country.

Part of this linguistic stretching was writing in English, the dominant foreign language in Cuba in the 1950s because of tourism and United States business interests—and therefore a language that played a role in the revolution and its aftermath which led to his exile. Along the lines of the modernist ethos regarding the poet’s objectivity or “impersonality” he wrote in English to create a distance, an impersonal space not because of too little emotion but rather where he could step back from too much emotion to bear, that is, nostalgia and an acute sense of loss of his native country.

First published in Spanish by Seix Barral, Spain’s principal publisher of the most significant Latin American writers during the turbulent 60s and the 1970s, *Tres tristes tigres*, or *TTT* as Cabrera Infante would nickname the book, was awarded the prestigious Biblioteca Breve prize in 1964. But before publication, under Franco who would not loosen his grasp on Spain until his death in 1975 (and beyond as evidenced by the recent controversy over “El Valle de los Caídos”) the manuscript was obliged to pass under the pencil and eraser of censorship. The book that started out with the title *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*, and ended up as *Tres tristes tigres*, was transformed from a view of dawn in the utopic tropics of a revolution to a vast ‘Nighttown’ in Havana on the eve of the end of a world lost forever, by the strange marriage of censorship and creativity. The final letter from the censor, Robles Piquer, that cleared the book for publication, is dated March 3, 1966 (see Herrero-Olaizola, 2007). By

² An epigraph to *TTT*, referring to Alice in Lewis Carroll’s famous book.

³ Cited from *The New York Review of Books* (1/21/1988) in *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2009, p. 20).

that time *Vista*, or *View*, did not change only its title, but, unlike the tiger, it changed its stripes, in form as well as content, esthetically as well as ideologically, and this made the unsuspecting censor into a kind of collaborative ghostwriter. Or as Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola writes in his well-documented study of *The Censorship Files: Latin American Writers and Franco's Spain* (which provides us with valuable correspondence between writers and censors)—*Tres tristes tigres* exemplifies the “undeniable continuity of practice between external authority of a dictatorial regime and the internal process resulting from self-censorship. It is to the interaction of official censorship and its creative personal twin that we owe *TTT* and the book that followed it, *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*.” (Herrero-Olaizola, 108).

It is significant to observe not only the interaction between original writing and self-translation in both the original and the translation of *Tres tristes tigres*, but also the role of censorship in Cabrera Infante's practice of self-translation in a context of political censorship he encountered in Spain as well as the traumatic after-effects of erasure and expulsion from Cuba. Thus, it is not surprising that I as “coselaborator” of Cabrera Infante, while not sharing his political history or exile, was in tune with the urge to flee referentiality and the logocentrism of language. As an American student on the margins of the 1968 revolutions, I fell into a radical questioning that was very much of the spirit of the late 1960s—part of that questioning including doubts about the integrity and destructive violence of the 60s revolutionary activity itself (The Vietnam era statesman Henry Kissinger, as a young adult who had escaped Nazi Germany, experienced the violent conduct of student protests as reminiscent of the SA). Mainly, in terms of my own personal history, the 1960s, re-evaluating popular and mass culture, introduced a nostalgia for the 30s, 40s and 50s which people of my generation were experiencing in movie theaters and on television in those years. In this sense I seemed well chosen by Guillermo Cabrera Infante to accompany him as irrepressible fellow punster in the spirit of his apt dictum, inspired no doubt by Freud's work on jokes and the unconscious: “Puns Hide Pain.”

Already in 1966, Cabrera Infante was no longer the editor of *Lunes de Revolución*, the literary supplement of Cuba's new revolutionary newspaper from which he had been ejected after a protest against Fidel's censorship of the film *PM*. Though from 1962 to '65 he remained, at least on the surface loyal to the cause, posted to the Cuban consulate in Brussels—this was Fidel's diplomatic way of making him invisible. Cabrera Infante was now divorced from the Revolution, especially after the death of his mother when he made his final exodus from Cuba, first to Spain, then to England, with his second wife and two daughters. When he made London his home in exile, he

was considered an enemy of the new Cuba and soon became embattled with fellow leftist Latin American writers who were quick to criticize him for his critical stance of Fidel, among them Julio Cortázar (born in Belgium) and Gabriel Garcia Marquez who, while politically divergent from Castro, was to remain great friends with the dictator until death did them part.

In this embattled situation with his literary peers, Cabrera Infante very much appreciated the friendship of Mario Vargas Llosa. During the censorship process of *TTT* in Spain he wrote to Vargas Llosa that “yes, political passages had been eliminated but there were still several “pornographic, irreverent, anti-militaristic passages that needed to be eliminated, and the censors complained about the lack of linear structure. ... I wrote to the censorship authorities and they did not even respond to my letter... I made good use of my time to make changes to the book, suppress things (all the unjustifiable vignettes, and went back to my original plan and restructured all the last part, adding a previously drafted section, and changing the title the way I wanted it before (Dec 29, 1966).” (Herrero-Olaizola, 97).

Here he revealed that the book he wanted to write was not the book he began writing while still living within the Revolution. Hence this very curious relationship with the Spanish board of censors, who, from one point of view could be seen as evil Kafkaesque bureaucrats, were, in other ways, just bungling scribes who were unintentionally on his side, proposing changes that went along with the book he was realizing more and more that he wanted to write, eliminating the revolutionary political bias and references in the book’s original version.

But, because Cabrera Infante was trying to shape a daringly innovative book, the censor, who complained about the fragmentary narrative structure of the book, was not cooperative across the board. Sr. Piquer was far from accepting or even understanding Cabrera Infante’s esthetic; after all Spain was strictly Catholic, and therefore direct sexual language, especially slang words, were unacceptable. As Eros was at the pulsing center of the Havana that Cabrera Infante was attempting to recapture in *voce viva*, such censorship seemed at first a huge roadblock. After the first set of changes that Cabrera Infante made upon the censors’ request, for example, the censors were not convinced that the book was changed enough; again the book had not been sufficiently purged of its sexual frankness and the “strong” language of the original had to be further mollified. Certain explicit anatomical terms needed to be attenuated, such as taming *tetas* or tits into *senos* or breasts.

Here again, however, the restrictions of censorship became a creative *trouvaille*; now sex would have to be alluded to, embroidered with verbal humor. Straightforward obscenities would be overtaken by double *entendres*, which would become the baroque principle around which the style of the writing and, hence, of the translation would revolve. Also, the love affairs of the mysterious woman Laura Diaz would become a postmodern “absent center” which now would appear as a tantalizing ellipsis in the chapter titled “Casa de los Espejos” or “Mirrormaze”—and as the allusive material in the psychiatric sessions which, originally a continuous narrative, were now fragmented throughout the novel, enigmatic vignettes from the past going into the future of an intimate history the reader feels motivated to reconstruct.

I highlight these details to contextualize Cabrera Infante’s situation at the time I came to collaborate on the translation in 1969. Cabrera Infante had begun it several months earlier, with the help of English poet Donald Gardner, whose previous translation credential had been poetry by Octavio Paz. Again, the context of which I speak was for Cabrera Infante a double state of embattlement, in conflict firstly with his native Cuba from which he had been exiled after joining a protest against censorship in the new regime of Fidel Castro in the early 1960s, and secondly, with Franco’s Spain, restricted under the rules of censorship then in place.

Comparing the original manuscript and the galley proofs, both of which now in the Princeton University archives, readers can discover that not only did Cabrera Infante depoliticize the novel though still retaining references to Batista’s ailing nation (for example in the story of a corrupt politician who cheats a starving musician out of a raise) but had opted for a “highly braided narrative structure” transforming the more linear narratives. By 1966 the novel had become exuberantly and morosely playful with endless puns and departures from traditional page layout. Also, a new tiger is generated, Bustrófedon, who introduces the act of writing “left to right, right to left,” alluding not only to Hebrew, an early language (in the Judeo-Christian world) but also to the Greek word for this form of writing called *boustrophedon*. This was a character (whose real name was Walter Cassalis) we could describe as the Joycean linguistic ideologue of the book, the master of puns and parodies, who, curiously, brings political content back into the book. This content appears at the center of the book, in the taboo form of parodies of several Cuban writers narrating the death of Trotsky (including Jose Martí who had died before Trotsky’s assassination). A controversial figure—ultimately branded treasonous—in Stalinist history, Trotsky was not exactly the Russian historical figure of whom Fidel wished to be reminded.

In this new and final form, *TTT*, a manifesto, a textual world that represents Cabrera Infante's subversive spirit and stance, is also a document of auto-censorship, especially as it became a more hermetic book braided with a secret language and private references, hence self-censoring. That is, by using concealment as a strategy, Cabrera Infante excludes the non-specialized, that is, non-Cuban reader. Among the many changes wrought in the final version was the foregrounding of the famous Bolero singer "La Estrella", Cabrera Infante "...making *La Estrella* the narrative center of the novel, while he suppressed all direct reference to the revolutionary guerrillas, and buries his allusions to the fighting in the Sierra Madre in the mix of voices, puns, and graphic illustrations that gives *TTT* its texture. In the end, then, Cabrera Infante appropriated Cuban nightlife as a quasi-nostalgic representation of a vanished Cuba for an exiled writer; and thus, ultimately, as a delayed response to the Revolution's censorship of the film "P.M."s depiction of nocturnal Havana."

II. The Translator as Secret Sharer and Becoming a Self-Writer via Translation.

During a translation project I worked on, the Mexican author Mauricio Montiel Figueiras, told me that in collaborating with me, he found that he was actually discovering what he really wants to write, precisely by confronting problems and reworking the writing in translation. I believe that this happened with Cabrera Infante, mainly because he had a kind of love affair with the English language, loved to play in it, to make fun with and of it. English was a catalyst for Cabrera Infante to deal with his exiled condition in literary terms.

As Dante did with the Tuscan dialect in the *Divine Comedy*, *Tres Tristes Tigres* turned into *Three Trapped Tigers*, which was also the first literary work to turn spoken Cuban into a written, literary language. *TTT*, with all its apolitical playfulness, with all its efforts not to talk about the Cuban revolution, is a gallery of voices, a subversive explosion of slang, wordplay and Joycean *dislocutions* signifying a vast fragmented world in a mulatto Spanish marked by the Cuban of certain streets in Havana, of a specific region and a city with its hidden codes, but enriched and polyphonic with diverse cultural and literary references.

Our translation follows the original's subversive path by invading proper names and undermining the semantics of titles. The censor, for all the wrong reasons, helped clarify what Infante wanted to tell and not tell. Obscenities paraded as allusions in the Spanish version; this allusive and elaborating process would expand further in the English version. I was the perfect foil for his transformation from Karl Marx to

Groucho Marx. Double *entendres* with a single sense were my bread and butter in adolescence, making jokes about sex instead of doing it was what young people sometimes did, and as a very young translator at that time I was still close to the experiences of adolescence and of coming from an assimilated Jewish family in New York that felt that it had to conform to the society around it and suppress origins that were now distant anyway. Alienation and exile of many types can produce psychological roadblocks and therefore compensating mechanisms to deal with that which you feel helpless to change. Translation, in this frame, can become a way to translate oneself into writing, taking another's writing and putting your mark on it, transforming a self that feels helpless into an individual that has agency.

For me, the act of translation also meant becoming a literary critic. Exploring and gaining access to the inner workings of Cabrera Infante for example, of this brilliant juggler of language and its possibilities, made me realize that one of the most valuable ways in which a translator could enrich his or her own language is by being a good critic, that is, by choosing wisely and perhaps in a spirit of rebellion, the writers she translates.

By Suzanne Jill Levine (2020)

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