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Author

Levine, Suzanne Jill

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Translator's Preface

Suzanne Jill Levine

Severo Sarduy (1937-1993) was born in Cuba and moved to Paris with a student scholarship in 1960, remaining there in exile until his death of AIDS in 1993. A poet, playwright, essayist, novelist, painter, he was also friend to Italo Calvino, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes, whose seminal post-structuralist study *The Pleasure of the Text* was inspired by Sarduy's third novel *Cobra*. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Sarduy was an editor at the famous Parisian publishing house Editions du Seuil. There, and towards the end of his career, at Gallimard, he was responsible for the French translations of major Latin American works such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and the works of fellow Cuban and AIDS victim Reinaldo Arenas (known most widely for the film based on his posthumous autobiography *Before Night Falls*). Sarduy thus played an instrumental role in the "boom" period that brought Latin American literature to the rest of the world, as well as being considered one of the principal innovative writers and thinkers of the post-boom era.

Since the publication in Spanish of his final books of poems and last non-posthumously published prose work *Christ on the Rue Jacob* (orig. 1987; Mercury House: 1995) which can be described as a spiritual autobiography via brief essays and miscellany—what the author himself called "epiphanies"—Sarduy's complete works have now come out in two volumes (1999), edited by Gustavo Guerrero, as well as an *Antología* (2000). Carol Maier and I are in the process of translating Sarduy's last novel and twenty essays from this anthology which gathers pieces not found in the *Obras Completas*, including the illuminating lecture excerpted here, in English, from "Sobre el castellano en America."

I have elsewhere spelled out the delightful challenges of translating Sarduy's lushly taut and witty Cuban Spanish into English.¹ A good example of those difficulties in this "American Baroque" is his pun with the colloquialism *aplatanado* playing with "plant," "plane," "plain," and "flat," suggesting the plainer, more lively and concise spoken Spanish American—as opposed to Spain's more formal Spanish perhaps—but which also contains that typical tropical fruit, the banana (*plátano*). In the

spirit of Sarduy's lucid meditations on neo-Baroque poetics, one might say that the translation is following intuitively the principle of the "proliferation" of signs he speaks of in his 1970s essay, "The Baroque and the Neobaroque."² Hence the series in the opening paragraph proceeds from implanted: planted, plantained and so on, imitating Sarduy's mock-erudite style of discussion, as if he were undertaking an entry in an encyclopedic dictionary.

**From "On Castellano in America" by Severo Sarduy
A Translation-in-Progress**

Translated by Suzanne Jill Levine

From Severo Sarduy, *Antología*, edited by Gustavo Guerrero (Mexico: FCE, 2000).

[a posthumously published selection of essays and articles by Cuban writer and artist Severo Sarduy (1937-1993)]

From "On Castellano in America"

I. American Baroque

A good question: why did the Spanish language evolve so radically once implanted in America? First of all, one should really say *castellano*, because of all the numerous and picturesque languages from the Peninsula, only Castilian Spanish settled in the New World. Implanted, planted—or plantained, a word which I coined departing from the very American plantain or banana—invoking plant of course but also the plane plains of America, flat as a plantain leaf. Plantained can also apply to the flat-footed Spaniards who were so mimetic that they became more Americanned than the Americans, South of course. But back to our question: why did Castilian change so much?

First theory: there were many, many things that needed to be named, and for which the term *castellano*, so to speak, did not suffice: the rivers were too large to be simply rivers and so a term like "branch of the sea" was needed. The term "forest" is so small, so "sylvan" that it makes one think of shepherds and nymphs, Pan's flutes and Greek ruins, things that have nothing to do with the jungle, the rainforest with its boas, millions and millions of insects, talking birds, and spider monkeys.

We should add that in America *castellano* really doesn't change. Rather—and this is the second theory—it experiences a phenomenon of grafting so detailed and frequent that it sometimes becomes disfigured.

The language of the *conquistadores*, Castilian, is like the façade of a Baroque church in Havana, Taxco or Minas Gerais. The general lines, the composition, even the eaves and volutes are doubtlessly European, but

from the mines or from the plantations where they worked or from their seaside villages the Indians brought small details, beautiful decorative things full of color which they mounted, threaded, grafted onto those façades. That's why we can speak in America of a silver miner's or sugar grower's baroque. By dint of these additions, in any case, the façade becomes marquetry, a proliferation of signs, a reflection of colors and shapes.

The same thing happens with language. From the time of the Conquest until the present day new ornaments—words and phrases not used before—are grafted onto it, and the old and dry skin of the language is revived thanks to tattoos, to sketches done in ink, to crosses and cobras like those of colonial baroque façades.

Thus the language has changed considerably, so much so that upon arriving in Spain with the manuscript of a novel, a famous South American writer was told: "Of course you'll want the book translated into Spanish, right?"

Notes

1. *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1991).
2. Severo Sarduy, "The Baroque and the Neobaroque." *Latin America In Its Literature*. Eds. César Fernández Moreno and Ivan Schulman (New York: Holmes & Meir, 1980) 115-32.