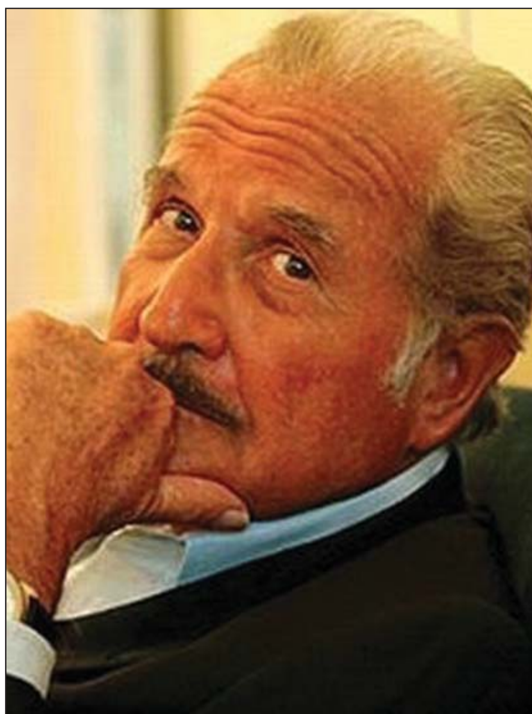

Carlos Fuentes: The Writer and His Translators

By Tony Beckwith

"Nothing disappears completely, everything is transformed."
— Carlos Fuentes, *Terra Nostra* (Translation: Margaret Sayers Peden)

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Carlos Fuentes died in Mexico City on May 15, 2012. He was 83. He had lived the fullest of lives, and was widely regarded as one of the grand old men of Latin American letters. With his passing, a major chapter in the literature of the Spanish-speaking world comes to an end.

Fuentes once told National Public Radio that when he was a boy living in the U.S., his father, a career diplomat, taught him:

> … the history, geography, the values of Mexico. Then I went and saw the real country and this created a conflict in me … In the tension between my imagination and reality, my literary possibilities as a novelist were born … I see criticism as our way of being optimistic in a growing nation such as Mexico. To abstain from criticism is, I think, a way of being pessimistic; to engage in criticism is to be concerned with the matters at hand and with the country.

For most translators, such a close working relationship with the author is the exception rather than the rule, but it was not unusual when working with Carlos Fuentes.

I met Fuentes briefly in 1997, when he came to address the American Literary Translators Association Conference and the Texas Book Fair. He was that quintessential Latin American figure—the public intellectual. He was an articulate force in social, political, and academic circles, well endowed with the courage of his convictions, which he expressed with a natural urbanity and sparkle that made him a welcome guest on interview shows all over the world. As a journalist, he was provocative and known to wield "a fearsome pen." During his visit, I wondered what it might be like to translate his books and mused on the many ways there might be to prepare for an opportunity of that kind.

News of his death made me think of his legacy of words and ideas, and of his penchant for promoting his fellow writers. As I looked at the long list of his works, my eyes hovered over the names of the translators who have introduced him to the English-speaking world over the past 50 years. I began to think of Fuentes in terms of those who knew him and his

work rather better than most, and what they remembered about translating his stories, essays, and novels. Three of them graciously agreed to be interviewed for this article: Alfred Mac Adam,[1] Suzanne Jill Levine,[2] and Margaret Sayers Peden.[3]

Alfred Mac Adam first collaborated with Fuentes in 1984 on the book *Christopher Unborn*, and remembers accepting the assignment "with tremendous misgivings":

> After all, the novel is long, unimaginably complex, and contains a huge range of styles, including long passages in the local slang of Mexico City. My Spanish, my English, and my sanity would all be put to the test. This was unlike anything I'd ever translated in my life, but the honor of translating the author of *The Death of Artemio Cruz* was an opportunity I would never turn down."[4]

Indeed, what a magnet! And not without immediate rewards. The project included a trip to Mexico with Fuentes and the editor from the publishing house for a one-week marathon editing session in a secluded country house. Mac Adam says the collaboration was a shock for Fuentes:

> Our daily reading exercise was actually the first time he'd ever gone over his Spanish original with an editor. The editor—as we know that person in U.S. publishing—had only recently come into existence in the Spanish-speaking world. In the past, it was simply assumed that the author would watch over his own work. Because of the editor's suggestions, Carlos found himself making changes in the English text that he wished he could have made to the original, paring and deleting to make the narrative more fluid. Producing the translation actually changed the author's perception of the original.

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Suzanne Jill Levine translated Fuentes' *Holy Place* in 1972. She was not quite 25 years old at the time, and the writer must have recognized a familiar precocity in the young translator. They became friends as they collaborated on the translation, and the correspondence between them is a fertile source of insights into their process. In a letter from Mexico City in November 1971, Fuentes says that Levine makes him, "read like Henry James." He goes on to say:

> I have only one basic desire: that the Claudia-Mito dialogues should be a lot harder, rougher, biting, more vulgar. As long as he narrates in the first person, the Jamesian tone with baroque overtones is just perfect; when the mother and son engage in verbal battle, there should be (as in the Spanish original) a marked difference; Claudia, particularly, should be much more bitchy and almost gangster-like in her speech: like something out of Raymond Chandler or Ross MacDonald.

Regarding how it felt to have Fuentes coaching from the sidelines, Levine says:

> I loved Carlos' guidance when translating *Holy Place*. He told me to make Claudia's quips more Raymond Chandler-esque, which was excellent advice, as he was doing a takeoff, in those sections, on the hardboiled American roman noir; indeed, one of the books that most influenced him in its style and treatment of social and political corruption was Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*.

Levine, a life-long academic and prolific translator of Latin American writers, met Fuentes in 1969 through her partner and mentor Emir Rodríguez Monegal, the Uruguayan scholar and literary critic. Monegal founded the literary magazine *Mundo Nuevo* that was published in Spanish in Paris and contributed to the "boom" in Latin American literature that spanned the 1960s and 1970s. Monegal and Fuentes were close friends, and thanks to their efforts *Mundo Nuevo* introduced unknown writers to a wider audience. In 1966, for example, the magazine published a chapter of *Cien Años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), the now-legendary novel by Gabriel Garcia Márquez. Fuentes and Monegal were key figures in 20th-century Latin American literature because they facilitated a literary dialogue between North and South America at a very difficult time. Literature and politics were uneasy partners in a complicated relationship, and initiatives such as *Mundo Nuevo*

provided a channel for dialogue. It was always about the dialogue.

Levine, who was at Columbia University writing her MA thesis on Gabriel García Márquez at the time, remembers having lunch with Márquez, Fuentes, and Monegal in Barcelona during a trip to Europe in the summer of 1970. She says Fuentes was very generous in his support of "Gabo" (Gabriel) and other writers, which is a quality that is always mentioned when people talk about Carlos Fuentes. Levine refers to Fuentes' generosity of spirit as, "an expression of the grass roots of politics in the world of literature; he understood that writers need defenders, they need champions." Levine says that what interested her most about this book as a translator was the shrill dialogue, the conversations with unspoken tensions beneath.

A translator must obviously be skilled in working with dialogue, especially when it includes a lot of slang. Fuentes was prone to put slang expressions into his characters' mouths. Mac Adam, who translated six of Fuentes' books, remembers this aspect of the work:

> The major challenge was his vast vocabulary in Spanish and his ability to make puns in several languages. Keeping up with that was hard. Translating slang is also difficult, especially if the slang in question is from another era. What do you do—try to replicate 1960s Mexico City slang in some kind of New York 1960s slang? Impossible.

When Fuentes came to Texas, I interviewed him for an Austin newspaper and asked which books gave him the most satisfaction. With no hesitation he said *Terra Nostra*. "It is the hardest to read. Many readers shy away from it, but my best readers are the readers of *Terra Nostra*."

We are sojourning in a time and place created by a writer as we describe it in another language.

One reason people shy away from it is that it is a long book, and I wondered what steps a translator would take to keep track of things when working on a book of that size. Margaret Sayers Peden translated it in 1976, so I asked her if she made a special effort, for the sake of consistency, to keep track of the way she translated particular words that reappear throughout the work. Sayers Peden says she did, adding: "I also believe that the same word, given the fact that words are slippery and treacherous, needs to be translated differently within different contexts."

Sayers Peden went back to school in 1962 to get her master's degree, but claims to have done nothing literary or academic before then. As she puts it, she was: "drawn to translating by forces I still don't understand. But once started, I wasn't going to be stopped … It never dawned on me that I couldn't translate anything I wanted." As she evolved as a literary translator she realized that she had, "a very persistent flaw. I wanted to stay too close to the Spanish. That was something very difficult for me to unlearn."

That process of "unlearning" sounds like an excellent way to develop the flexibility a translator requires to handle the endless subtleties of language and meaning. As Sayers Peden explains, "problems are essentially the same among the genres. There's music in prose, information to be communicated in poetry." She went on to translate six of Fuentes' books, including *The Old Gringo*, which was made into a movie.

So, what was it like working with Fuentes? Mac Adam says that:

> After working on *Christopher Unborn*, I became Carlos' regular translator. Meaning that when he had one of his manuscripts (he usually wrote in longhand) transcribed—by his daughter from his first marriage (to the actress Rita Macedo)—he would have a copy sent to me. I would then get right to work on it so the translation would be out in a timely fashion. It was like having a second job. For a couple of decades he was a part of my life, so his words were ringing in my ears constantly.

Levine's correspondence with Fuentes tells many stories, with many enticing sidetracks. A relevant item, however, that gives us some idea of how Fuentes approached the collaboration, is a request for clarification on a word that elicits this answer: "*Escuincle* is the Mexican equivalent of the Río de la Plata's *pibe* or the Chilean *cabro*. From the Nahuatl *itzcuintle*, a very small hairless dog. 'Brat' will do." In response to another query, Fuentes writes: "… Actually, *Chole* is a nickname for women called Soledad." He then adds, in his trademark tongue-in-cheek style: "*Cien años de Chole*."

Levine describes the relationship between writer and translator this way:

The relationship an author establishes with the translator is different from that with scholars and critics; authors may be willing to open up to translators in ways they would be reluctant to do with critics and scholars. There is a more intimate relationship at times, which may have to do with the shared experience of the materiality of writing."[5]

As translators we are not only doing what Sayers Peden describes as "bringing something new to people who wouldn't have it otherwise." We are also flowing the other way and sojourning in a time and place created by a writer as we describe it in another language. In this case, the writer was Carlos Fuentes, who will be greatly missed by his readers and his translators.

Notes

1. Alfred Mac Adam, Columbia University.

2. Suzanne Jill Levine, University of California at Santa Barbara.

3. Margaret Sayers Peden was unexpectedly unavailable at the last minute and unable to participate in the interview. She is quoted here from "The Intimate Presence of the Other: An Interview with Margaret Sayers Peden by James Hoggard," for *Translation Review*, Volume 56, 1998.

4. Mac Adam, Alfred. "On Becoming a Fuentette," AARP VIVA (Spring 2011), http://bit.ly/AARP-VIVA-Fuentes.

5. An excerpt from: Guzmán, María Constanza. "An Interview with Suzanne Jill Levine" (Words without Borders, 2009), http://bit.ly/wordswithoutborders-Levine.

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