

**WHAT ARE THE NEWLY LITERATE READING IN CUBA?  
AN "INDIVIDUALIST" MEMOIR**

**Anthony Kerrigan**

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**Anthony Kerrigan** has spent a total of fourteen years in Cuba and thirty-five years in Europe, mostly in Spain and Ireland, and has published widely in the last two countries as a steady contributor to journals and as an editor of *Goya* (Spain's leading art magazine). His work has been translated into Spanish, French, Hebrew, and Hungarian, and his translations of Borges have been re-translated into Gaelic (Irish). He has published three books of poetry and translated over fifty books, winning the National Book Award for a seven-volume edited, annotated, and translated edition of Unamuno (*The Tragic Sense of Life* and six other volumes, Princeton). *Inter alia* he has taught at SUNY (Buffalo) and the University of Illinois (Chicago). He translated, annotated, and wrote the introduction to Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses* (Foreword by Saul Bellow) for the University of Notre Dame Press. His latest book is a translation of a novel by Arrabal, with a Foreword (Viking Penguin), and he has just been awarded an unsolicited National Endowment for the Arts Senior Fellowship in Literature "for an

extraordinary contribution to American letters over a lifetime of creative work.” Kerrigan has been a senior guest scholar at the Kellogg Institute since 1984, and he is currently working on an Autobiography commissioned by Gale Press, and a translation of the Chilean José Donoso’s *El jardín de al lado*.

This paper was presented in part at a special assembly of the Kellogg Institute, and variants of the report have been presented at the Universities of Chicago and Virginia, Boston and Western Michigan Universities, and Hunter and Macalaster Colleges. The author thanks Caroline Domingo, Denis Goulet, Albert LeMay, and Rafael Tarragó for their helpful suggestions. He has made some additions and revisions for the second printing, December 1988.

## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the availability of literature in present-day Cuba. The experience was gleaned *in situ* by the author, brought up in Cuba from the near *in utero* age of nine months (after conception in Panama) through adolescence, followed by later study at the University of Havana. He was soon a Communist Party member in his own right (pre-Castro). This piece was largely penned after a recent return visit to a Cuba declared (from the top down) to be Communist. The methodology (dictionary definition: “a particular procedure, or set of procedures”) was based on the use of the five senses plus, perhaps, the use of a sixth sense based on having lived the life of the Left, first as a Stalinist, then as a Trotskyist (who volunteered for the POUM battalion in the Spanish Civil War), and finally with a youthful position akin to that of philosophical anarchism, doubtless based on a much berated “individualist” bent—Black rather than Red. Albeit reportage, the piece is based on lived experience, and is as “scientific” as any evidence adduced from seen and felt facts, a checking of the senses—the point of departure for all science. It is an idiosyncratic view, necessarily, but there is no element of fiction in this novella-of-oneself (compare Unamuno) facing the some-what hallucinatory phenomena of a closed society.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo trata del acceso que tiene el ciudadano en la Cuba actual a obras literarias de calidad. La experiencia en que se basa fue recabada *in situ* por el autor, quien vivió y se educó en Cuba desde la edad casi *in utero* de nueve meses (después de su concepción en Panamá) hasta la adolescencia. El autor después siguió estudios superiores en la Universidad de Habana y muy pronto se hizo miembro del Partido Comunista por cuenta propia (en la época pre-Castro). El trabajo fue compuesto después de un reciente viaje de regreso realizado por el autor a una Cuba declarada (desde arriba) comunista. La metodología (definición en el diccionario: “un procedimiento particular, o conjunto de procedimientos”) se basa en el uso de los cinco sentidos más, quizás, el uso de un sexto sentido, producto de haber vivido el autor una vida de izquierda, primero como stalinista, después como trotskista (voluntario del

batallón del POUM en la guerra civil española), llegando finalmente el autor a una juvenil posición cercana a la del anarquismo filosófico, derivada sin duda de una marcada tendencia "individualista" (negro antes que rojo) reprendida y calumniada según la voga de todo "progre." Si bien se trata de un reportaje, el trabajo se basa en la experiencia vivida y es tan "científico" como cualquier evidencia aducido de lo visto y lo sentido, de un registro de los sentidos, punto de partida éste de toda ciencia. Es, necesariamente, un punto de vista idiosincrático, pero no existe elemento de ficción en esta novela-de-uno-mismo (vease Unamuno) de un undividuo que confronta los fenómenos un tanto alucinatorios de un mundo social cerrado.

The man who cannot believe his senses, and the man who cannot believe anything else, are both insane.

G.K. Chesterton

The following is not an academic paper nor any part of a paraphrase of a mini-thesis. It is a Report from the Front. The only paraphernalia or addenda are testimony (in succinct and incandescent verse by Cubans of outstanding merit). The notes, however, cite the needful bibliographic references.

All five senses—plus nostalgia—were brought to bear and were not to be denied. The evidence is self-contained. The focus is on a single theme. It is more than an impression, and it is not fiction. The “methodology” was one of direct observation.

I had been brought up in Cuba and my sister was born there. I had come out of the island a young radical and had been an active Party member in the U.S.A., but on the most recent return visit covered here, I had turned down an invitation from the Cuban Affairs Section at the Embassy of the People’s Republic of Czechoslovakia in Washing-ton, D.C., to go as a guest of the nation (after an “investigation” had been made, I was told, which would take a “couple of months”), preferring the freedom and funds of a private foundation. As a former Communist myself, I was in some added measure equipped to deal with the ambience, with the ritual language and the double-speak of another, one more, Communist country, having also spent a month each in Hungary and Romania.

Where names of interlocutors or native informants are not supplied, that is done advisedly. The piece stands by itself as reportage, a documentary, in which the documents, the books, are missing, missing courtesy of the government of Cuba. Thus the documentation consists of missing documents, missing books. The Question is resolved with a question. The documents, the books sought, were not to be found. The only summary conclusion is a Why?

Reference to the laws of Cuba are pertinent here.<sup>1</sup>

The argument, *el argumento de la obra*, cannot supply or stand in for a plot. Although, since it is not fiction, it scarcely requires a plot. The only valid scientific method must refer to the evidence of the senses, and that is (is it not?) the basis of science, even where the “methodology” is not “scientific.” There is no need for charts or graphs, especially not for those supplied by government-payroll authorities. If it is less than a *cri de coeur*, it is also more. Strictly speaking this report is incomplete. I intended to plumb deeper—my trip was made to establish a beachhead, and I intended and still intend to pursue this study further. But promised foundation support did not materialize (I had no identifiable alignment either “right” or “left”), and no organization has proffered a follow-up trip to Cuba.

The ways of investigation are manifold. One of them is surely “direct obser-vation.” The reader need not accept or challenge the (personal) conclusion. If an assassination is described by a witness, the testimony only asks to be considered, even if with irony or even humor. The reader is invited to blouse out his own impressions only. Withal, my methods were in the end as “scientific” as those of Joan Didion, who wrote two acclaimed books, *Salvador*, and *Miami* (the latter mainly about its Cuban community which she interprets totally in her own lights). She is not bilingual, and perhaps does not even speak Spanish. Her center of operations in El Salvador was, by her own admittance, the U.S. Embassy.

Even murder is not conclusive, the ramifications are endless, and anyone else’s sensory evidence is equally valued (in any murder trial).

There is no caveat to the reader, who can retort on his own. The exercise of the pen is free—outside “people’s democracies,” i.e., in *this* democracy. There is no answer herein to the mass of contradictory statistics, charts and graphs of any government; only the theory of Occam’s razor is implicit: the unknown is known best in terms of the known, and the simplest explanation is best where the senses are allowed to testify. The most likely explanation of the phenomenon described is the one most likely, most obvious, and the one most available to the evidence of the senses.<sup>2</sup>

“Literacy campaigns” are the stock in trade for a whole string of “*progressive*” totalitarian regimes, as opposed to traditionalist authoritarian regimes. Left sympathizers around the world adduce this interest in anti-illiteracy as a proof of the *bona fides*, the good faith of the regimes they champion—however totalitarian they may be. Literacy campaigns and health care—people are taught to read and everyone’s medical problems are looked after or into—these are said to be the *sine qua non* of all “progressive” regimes. Of course the same can be said of the best penitentiaries. Idle prisoners are encouraged to read and no one is allowed to die of illness in the pen—not even those on Death Row. Only: the reading lists in prisons are undoubtedly less restricted. Probably no objections would be raised if a prisoner chose to read books by Saul Bellow or Jorge Luis Borges, not to mention Solzhenitsyn or Vargas Llosa or any of the authors not allowed—not permitted for reading by anyone, even those about to be liquidated—in progressive Cuba, as the data will demonstrate. (Medical treatment is equally gratis in both places: in progressive countries and in the pen.)

Celebrated writers with whom the author of this report has dealt include Bellow and Borges, most notably, and so it has been a constant habit to inquire in censored countries after their works as a measure of freedom-to-read.

Long ago, during Franco’s rule in Spain, I had occasion to point out (in a memoir in a book called *Irish Strategies* published in Dublin in 1975, containing versions in Gaelic of two Borges stories about Ireland, *en face* my English translations) that in the earlier years of the Spanish Caudillo’s rule, the books of Borges could often be found in Spain though

mostly under the counter; later, still under Franco, there were not only more and more editions, but also personal appearances by Borges in Madrid.

During a month's stay in Bucharest, I found neither talk of Bellow nor available editions of his books. (His novel, *The Dean's December*, is laid in Chicago and—Bucharest.) A month in Budapest, on the other hand, revealed that Hungarian intellectuals got around all limitations, even the non-encouragement of Borges and Bellow and all their works. Freud, too, is a non-person, an “individualist” non-author, in all countries that follow the Russian model.

In Havana, in the summer of 1986, the first questions I asked, capriciously and systematically, in all the bookstores I visited, four in the central portion of the city (the same ones used in *Newsweek*, *Time*, etc. to report on the “amazing” sales of Frei Betto's book on *Fidel y la Religión*), began with queries on the two Bs. *No one* in any Havana bookstore had ever heard of Bellow—or so they said. But he was, after all, I would protest, a Nobel laureate. There was never any reaction to that rather definitive fact. The Nobel Prize for Literature for 1976 was apparently not announced in the Cuban press—nor subsequently discussed in the bookstores. And Borges? Nothing in stock, though he was capaciously available to any Cuban (outside newly “literate” Cuba) in any number of editions in the original Spanish from Argentina or Spain. There was talk, among regime-writers I queried, of an edition-to-come. The exceptionally long-lived Borges would be well-buried by the time it would appear, if it did.

This idiosyncratic litmus-test might well be said to prove nothing. Still, a Nobel prize winner (Bellow) and a writer, in Spanish, whom many, very many, consider the greatest writer in that language in this century (Borges) unavailable to the newly literate masses...? It would prove nothing—except that they were found to be accompanied in their non-existence by a veritable host of other world luminaries. So many, in fact, that a list would be tedious.

Some examples are startling and will indeed prove that the masses are not getting full value, or even fair value, for their new devotion to the art of reading. For instance, why should the women of Cuba, presumably all now feminist, be unable to read Simone de Beauvoir's famous manifesto-tract and world best-seller *The Second Sex*? She was one of the Cuban Revolution's immediate supporters and went to Cuba with her consort, J.P. Sartre, to tell Fidel so. But: one day, some time after her visit, when she found out the facts from her homosexual friends, she uttered a somewhat weird witticism—which for her became “a statement of principle”: “Cuba has no Jews, it has homosexuals instead.” This referred to the treatment of the latter in Castro's Cuba, analogous to that of the Jews in Germany, minus the “Final Solution.” Her remark, once it appeared in the world press, was enough to cause her books to disappear in Cuba. She was no longer a “Friend of the Revolution.” End of stocks and sales. The same fate befell her mate, Sartre, who wrote a compendium of maudlin non sequiturs as an apologia for Castro, an embarrassingly gauche evocation of Fidel as the new Existential Man par excellence (a book issued under a marketing title: *Sartre on Cuba*), which was somehow stricken from the lists too.

And the Sandinista Minister of Culture, the Whitmanesque poet Ernesto Cardenal, who wrote a deviant-Catholic defense of the Revolution titled *En Cuba*, found that his eulogy was not orthodox enough, and *In Cuba* is unobtainable in Cuba, having been withdrawn from sale. So I have read, and so I have been told. And so I confirmed.

And thus on and on: an endless list of suppressed books, Left as well as Right. I did not, of course, ask after copies of *The Gulag Archipelago* nor for Eliot's *The Wasteland* (of which there are good editions in Spanish), nor for volumes by the great Spaniards of this century, whether Unamuno or Ortega y Gasset. No bookstore could produce a single work of Cervantes, not even *Don Quixote*, the universally acclaimed masterpiece in the language of Cuba.

I had already heard the fine Peruvian novelist Vargas Llosa called a Fascist by officials of the Union of Cuban Writers: there was no use asking after him any further. The Mexican poet, essayist, and diplomat Octavio Paz was also officially considered “an enemy of the people.” He was otherwise a non-person in Cuba.

There are no copies of the Bible (Hebrew Old Testament or Christian New Testament) for sale in Cuba. The only Bible or Holy Writ was *The Complete Works of Lenin* in every bookshop, uniformly massed in hieratic racks of red leather in an altar-with-reredos of honor. I never saw anyone handling any of the holy volumes, let alone buying one. Another holy and ubiquitous work in the bookshops—and in hotel lobbies both in Cuba and Nicaragua, for example the American-built No. 1 and only hotel in Managua, the Intercontinental, another center of anti-American “Internationalism”—is *El Libro Verde* de Muammar el-Quaddafi, the little Green Book of the populist Libyan “Internationalist.” I was never fortunate enough to see any human being buy this gem of world literature, even though its author is a favored friend of Fidel Castro.

As for the Cuban writers now living abroad—that is, all the best as judged by publishers and critics outside Cuba—I found them consigned to damnation by the heavenly hosts in Utopia. The regime-writers in Cuba, professional Communists I had known at literary gatherings in Spain (or New York), to whose homes I was summoned to drink Cuban coffee and rum, leading to easy converse (one would expect), instead furnished me with detailed vilification of the escapees, the Cuban Wild Geese.

Those upbraided *in absentia* included 1) Heberto Padilla (probably Cuba’s most talented poet, now teaching at NYU) who was variously described as an unstable drunk, “most unpleasant,” a mercenary—and a traitor; 2) Cabrera Infante (a sharp intellect, critically esteemed on both sides of the Atlantic, and now a British citizen living in London) who was best explained, I was seriously told on two occasions, as an unfortunate *macho*, misbegotten, handicapped by a tiny penis, and thus jealous and suspicious of the “people” (who are all naturally better endowed); 3) Reinaldo Arenas (an increasingly successful novelist and effectively political poet) who was, according to the official consensus, a CIA homosexual—a maximum oxymoronic concept, if there

ever was one.

Having translated these three myself, and having been in the houses of two of them in New York, my impressions were uncorroborative.

Then there was Carlos Franqui in Rome (keeper of what served as Fidel's diary and the Revolution's former chief spokesman), "spoiled by ambition," said one, though others kept mum; Severo Sarduy (the novelist in Paris), "a decadent homosexual"; José Kozer (the poet and professor at CUNY) "an Israelite"—and enough said. I soon gave up further inquiry in Cuba regarding Cubans abroad, "uncontrollables" all.

I had been a former member of the Communist (Stalinist) Party, U.S.A. (in San Diego and Los Angeles) and then a Trotskyist, Socialist Workers' Party, Fourth International (sent into the Socialist Party of California to take it over, which we managed to do, so that for a time it spoke with the voice of the Old Man, then in Mexico, before his assassination), and carried my own FBI record in my luggage (I had gotten it courtesy of the Freedom of Information Act after two years' trying) so that I could and did leave it open on my night-table wherever I stayed in Cuba. I was preternaturally equipped to confront much of the verbiage I found obstructing the facts. And I was familiar with defamation of "class enemies": I had indulged in it myself, at one time. I recognized the technique of wholesale character assassination and the creation of non-persons almost with nostalgia.

There are inevitable chinks in the armor of censorship. A student I knew told me, as we strolled with his girlfriend around the splendid Spanish buildings near the Cathedral, how he managed to read one of the "unauthorized" writers. (He also explained how it was very difficult if not impossible to prosper in an academic career if a Catholic background could be adduced and continuing religiosity "proven.") He much liked the Romanian writer Ionesco and managed to read him in *UNESCO!* That is: the Bulletin of the United Nations organization circulated openly, and it too seemed to like Ionesco. It tickled my fancy: Ionesco available only by courtesy of UNESCO. The latter organism was officially headed by an African Marxist (one reason Jeanne Kirkpatrick called for U.S. withdrawal from that body). Therefore its Bulletin, printed in Paris in

three languages, would require no censorship in Cuba. It came from a “friendly” source. That one of the editors fancied Ionesco was a fluke. And so, due to uncontrollable circumstances, the satirical neo-Surrealist “individualist” Ionesco can be read in Red Cuba.<sup>3</sup>

But then, though Cuba is, in effect, a member of the Soviet Bloc, none of the great literature produced by natives of Soviet Bloc countries—either in *samizdat*, or even legally published as is Danilo Kis in Yugoslavia, or regularly in the West—is allowed in Cuba! Perhaps the outstanding figure in European writing today as far as the literate—and purchasing—reading public of France, Italy, and Spain is concerned is the exiled-to-France Czech writer Milan Kundera. The critical acclaim accorded him amounts to a consensus in all the countries of free Europe, as well as in the English-speaking world. Since one of his principle themes is the brutal efficacy of the Marxist attack on Western civilization’s collective memory, he is unavailable in any form in Cuba. Not a single one of the other leading Czech writers seems ever to have been heard of in that Island either: certainly not the breaker of Marxist icons Vaclav Havel nor the exiled-to-Canada Josef Skvorecky. A Polish Nobel laureate and exile from Communist Poland, the splendid Czeslaw Milosz, is considered another Nobel non-person along with Bellow. And the latter’s favorite among the Eastern Europeans, Danilo Kis, is as remarked above still one more casualty to the censor.

So that even the literature that is left, left over or reborn in the occupied zone of Europe, or Red Europe, however published, has been erased from memory or not allowed to enter memory in Red Cuba.

And *nota bene*, the wondrous paradox: all good writing coming out of the Soviet Bloc is anti-Soviet! Pro-Communist writing from luminaries comes only from within the West itself, from the pro-Soviet so-called “Progressive”-Left Bloc (Ernesto Cardenal, Günter Grass, etc.) in the West.

As regards books in foreign languages, the Marxist “Internationalists” are singularly monolingual. Exiled-from-Spain Basque terrorists, who are extreme nationalists and who reject universal Castilian in favor of universal Basque(!) and who sign their parochial manifestos in the name of Marxist “Internationalism,” will find nothing in Basque to read whenever their demands to be sent to Cuba instead of Africa are met by the authorities in France or Spain. The busiest (but actually not very busy, except around the tables marked “*Juvenil*”) bookstore closest to the Habana Libre hotel, the center for Red sympathizers from around the world, boasted one book in English: *Decorative Arts in the Hermitage Museum* (Leningrad). It was not frequented by browsers, not shopworn.

As for the press in Cuba, the “popular press”: there are only the State newspapers, thin, meagre, dreary, reiterative, sloganeering. They run endless features on the Heads of State and their opinions, always raised to a high pitch of exhortation. Dispatches from other countries tend to be resolutions passed by the various Communist Parties of the world and news of Party-plenum decisions. Actual *happenings* (*sucesos*), from crimes to moonshots (the U.S. landing on the moon was not reported for weeks), are either considered “sensationalist” and therefore not covered or are vividly interpreted and re-cast to comply with dogma. News from the U.S. is always negative—and is often taken directly (with quotes) from the *New York Times* (stories suggesting the entire country subsists on drugs, to surveys detailing the unending bad luck of the oppressed Negro or Indian population which is forever held in virtual slavery). Events at Chernobyl, incandescent during my visit, were non-events. A speech against “foreign intervention in Afghanistan”—by Gorbachev—was featured one day without any further explanation. I never read in *Granma*, the Party daily and the country’s main newspaper, a single line of general cultural or artistic import, that is, a single paragraph in which culture or art was

separated from the Party's program.

Just as in the media in the U.S. in general (except for the *New York Times*) where only athletes or entertainers (or people in the media) seem to die or draw attention to their lifetime by their deaths, in Cuba only the deaths of Bolsheviks are newsworthy. One day all the papers were filled with page-long obituaries for a North Vietnamese Communist of historic and cosmic importance—whose name I have forgotten, although a street was promised him in Havana (there are already streets named for numerous dead Reds). The deaths of U.S.A. Americans are not noted, since there are no U.S.A. Americans of importance apparently, no theoretically pure Marxists, in the English-speaking North.

There is no point in choosing to read some newspaper other than *Granma*, the daily Party organ, for the press, like the country as a whole, has achieved a condition of squalid unanimity.

There is no style, as well as no spirituality left, literate or not. Even the materials (whether the newsprint, or the cloth, or the building materials) are all tawdry, when not downright bad. So that the system represents a triumph of materialism without materials: materialism without the materials of material civilization. The civilization available to Western countries at this stage is slowly oxidizing in Cuba, so that to the naked eye the most civilized part of Havana, for instance, is Old Havana, which the Spanish built, deliberately and substantially for good and ever, when Cuba was a colony and Cubans called themselves "*españoles americanos*." La Habana Vieja is being refurbished—by UNESCO. For my part, I could not help but compare and refer back in sensory memory to the culture available to me when I was a boy growing up in Cuba and later in young manhood when I was a student at the University of Havana and that city was a kind of tropical Paris.

And there was of course *El Carnaval!* On my last trip to Cuba I chanced to "coincide" (*coincidir*, as they say in Spanish) with the annual summer carnival. In place of the spontaneous and glorious joyousness I remembered, I was witness to a post-solstice fête which might have been staged by a visiting troupe in Red Square. Marching along the Malecón, by the side of the

Caribbean, were serried ranks (albeit tropical enough in their non-lockstep) of the Masses chanting slogans in unison. Nothing like that before. Now we heard orchestrated chants: “ *Viva las masas!* ” “ *Viva la Revolución!* ” over and over and on into directed dialectical boredom. How sad to note the lack of all spontaneity, of all sensual individuality and free spirit. The freed masses indeed! Which of them could have concocted or given vent to...unanimity? To total agreement on self-adulation in orchestration? No sensual, let alone sexual (*carne vale*: Oh carnivalesque!) public bacchanal could possibly achieve such a one-throated set of mechanistic cries-on-command.

As already mentioned, the bookstore displays attracting the greatest number of presumptive readers were those laden with children's books. The newly literate, whatever their ages, were most at ease, felt safest it appeared, among the harmless juvenilia, books published specifically for children. It seemed a full-bodied commentary on the degree of culture achieved after the massive—and universally hailed—Literacy Campaigns. One last rhetorical question. Now that the Cubans are deemed literate, why are they not ceded a vote, as well as a voice? Those who write and agitate for free elections in Haiti, South Africa, or Chile never seem to agitate for free elections in Cuba.<sup>3</sup> No one elected the government which has *proclaimed* the island to be a Red monolith.

Following a university talk I gave on these matters I was asked—by a Marxist—if all this wasn't a question of breaking a few eggs to make an omelette (the Revolution). Nigh on thirty years of breaking eggs and the omelette is not yet deemed ready! Bad cuisine, bad cookery, not a gourmet kitchen to be sure.

#### **Postdata: September 1988 and December 1988**

Carlos Franqui, once Castro's diarist, a very Pepys (*Diary of the Cuban Revolution*), recounts in a syndicated column (*Corriere della Serra*, Milan, August 1988; I saw the piece in *Diario de Navarra*, 18 de agosto, furnished by Professor Angel Delgado from Pamplona) that, when the Soviet Embassy imported copies of Gorbachev's *Perestroika* in a Spanish language

“Cuban edition,” the book was soon banned and could be bought only on the black market where it is quoted at 10 tins of condensed milk, a key item of barter in Cuba, thus topping the underground price for books by the Cuban-in-exile Cabrera Infante. The PCC, the Partido Comunista Cubano, has decided against the dangers of “Reform” even within the System: no *perestroika* for Cuba.

I should like to end this paper by citing from a pivotal book issued late in 1988: *Political Passages*, ed. by John H. Bunzel, New York. The quotation covers my avoidance of becoming a paid political tourist. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, a German poet who said he could not live in the country which had spawned Nazism, moved to “Socialist” Sweden and then to “Socialist” Cuba, where he lived among people in “dire poverty,” while most of the “radical tourists” learned nothing of the true situation. Ronald Radosh quotes him: “I kept meeting Communists in hotels for foreigners, who had no idea that the energy and water supply in the working quarters had broken down during the afternoon, that bread and milk were rationed, and that the population had to stand two hours in line for a slice of pizza; meanwhile the tourists in their hotel rooms were arguing about Lukács” (p. 228). And as regards the “glazed” expression of much of the population, Radosh reports on a visit to the “famed” Havana General Psychiatric Hospital, where he found some patients had been diagnosed as mad simply because they were...homosexual. The visitors were also fascinated with the “drugged-out expression of most of the inmates.” The “head doctor told us that a large proportion of the patients had been lobotomized.” One “radical therapist” in the tourist group was outraged: “Lobotomy is a horror... It’s exactly the mentality we are working against at home.” A woman who was a True Believer reprimanded him: “We have to understand there are differences between capitalist lobotomies and socialist lobotomies” (p. 229).

## ENDNOTES

1. I would like to adduce some of the laws of Cuba (promulgated from the top, though not by any democratic body) which pertain to the curbing of writers.

- 1) *La Ley de la Extravagancia:*

This applies to anything far fetched, *extravagant*, from homosexuals (the word "gay" is disallowed in Cuba, though it is used in Spain as a new word adopted into Spanish) and their extravagant dress, to writers of extravagant (unintelligible "surrealism," say) prose or verse.

- 2) *La Ley de la Predelinuencia:*

The Law of *Pre-Delinquency*. It can be used against anyone even *thinking* of a subversive poem, or who is capable of doing so, or of making other such narcissistic moves.

- 3) *La Ley de la Peligrosidad:*

The Law of Dangerousness. Though used chiefly against homosexuals, it can be applied against any "perilous" intellectual, or any dangerous Jew (if any such people are left on the island) who might be a Zionist or friend of Israel, against which country Castro has shown an obsessive hatred, which follows on his notion of the U.S.A. as run by Jews. (V. Mark Falcoff of the American Enterprise Institute in his piece on the book *Insider: My Hidden Life as a Revolutionary in Cuba* by J. L. Llovio-Menendez: "Apparently the Dictator [Castro] hallucinates that the U.S.A. is in the thrall of Jewish high finance, which among other things explains his hatred of Israel. But he seems to have a lively appreciation of the American press, which he regards...as a virtual fifth column working on his behalf." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 1988.) It can also be applied against all practitioners of religious cults and against "former offenders" condemned under any of the other laws.

- 4) *Le Ley del Diversionismo Ideológico:*

The Law of Ideological Deviationism. This is the law against Wrong Thought. A penalty of up to 15 years in prison is provided for any divergence or deviation.

- 5) For attempting to avoid these laws by leaving Cuba: "A typical sentence for a minor, nonviolent political crime, such as trying to leave the country illegally, seems to be five years" (Aryeh Neier, Vice-Chairman of Americas Watch Committee and Executive Director of Human Rights Watch: "In Cuban Prisons," *The New York Review of Books*, June 30, 1988). In a country where the laws are totally arbitrary, leaving the country is always "illegal" unless with the

government's cooperation, granted for some purpose of its own.

- 6) All authors' copyrights are suspended in Cuba. They no longer exist. Authors' work is the property of the State. There are no royalties paid. And the author does not control editions of his work. Foreign editions (editions of books by non-Cuban writers) are now, in effect, pirate editions. See Guillermo Cabrera Infante, "Entre la historia y la nada," *Escandalar*, enero-junio 1982, pp. 68-83.

2. In the days of my growing up in Cuba (fourteen years), and then when I went back to university there, the Cubans were the greatest lookers found in all my travels. The Cuban stare (at women, for example) outdid all other people's, including those of the Mediterranean world, most notably those of the Italians or Spaniards. It is the stuff of novels, even if unmeasurable. "*Que miras?*" was a warning signal in my youth. "What are you looking at?" meant flight or fight among boys in school or street. Since everyone stared a longer stare had to *mean* something.

A challenge, or *desafío*, defiance or engagement. Of hatred or of love, of engagement in any case. People engaged themselves by looks. In present-day Cuba I found that the Cuban does not engage with his eyes, nor make contact as before. He, the macho on the street, or even the dama (who tended to *avert*, self-consciously, her eyes from the ever present gaze which tried to engage her), characteristically looked at everything (the trees, the colorful street scene). On my last trip to Cuba I was struck by people *not looking*—at anything in particular. There was none of the brightness of the Cuban look, of the Cuban looking.

People did not seem to look at anything. They walked along unstarling. I was reminded of Bucharest, Romania, my month there one year: another captive people, and other streets full of unseeing people. Will those who pile up hopeful ever-burgeoning statistics of food production and distribution challenge this psychological (novelistic?) observation? Non-stare replacing stare, non-looking in place of looking. Such evidence, as that of the eyes, has no place on charts, of course. But is it not part of scientific observation? It is true that people in the street in Lisbon do not look at others as people do in Madrid, or that in Paris or Manhattan people seem too busy to look. And in Dublin (or Ireland as a whole) it is not good form to stare or even to look at other people with minuteness in a detailed manner.

But here I am comparing Cubans now with Cubans heretofore. Is it beyond significance, immeasurable altogether? I do not think so.

The critic John Richardson ("Picasso's Apocalyptic Whore-House," *The New York Review*, April 23, 1987) tellingly notes the Hispanic "*mirada fuerte*." John Golding (in *The New York Review*, July 21, 1988) speaks of it, as it occurs in Andalucía, as "the way in which the Andalusian grasps a person or an object with his stare or steady gaze, possesses it, rapes it." Picasso used it, this stare, not from men but from women, five naked women, in his *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, his most famed painting (along with *Guernica*), most certainly his most revolutionary and influential work, and perhaps this century's most iconographic—and heresiarchal—canvas. In Cuba, where this stare, "raping" or not but certainly intense, on the part of both sexes was classic, this Hispanic look is now reduced to lackluster unlooking. Even the police seemed dispirited and uninquiring in their perambulating scrutiny.

In Octavio Paz's magnificent book *On Poets and Others* (New York, 1986), Paz points up the dangers of *not-looking* when he speaks of Jean-Paul Sartre's reneging on his own senses: "Though Sartre has written subtle pages on the meaning of the look and the act of looking, the effect of his conversation was quite the opposite; he annulled the power of sight" (p. 41). And Paz goes on to say that Sartre, in the course of his own writing, "did not perceive in the freedom movements of the so-called Third World the germs of political corruption which have transformed those revolutions into dictatorships" (p.44). In regard to Cuba he adds: "In each of the Communist states the Caesar imposes his style on the regime...the Caesar of Havana

makes use

of dialectics much as the old Spanish landowners used the whip" (p. 122).

In *Behind the Wall: A Journey Through China* (New York, 1988), the British novelist Colin Thubron writes of the new look in China, where people stare "not with the acquisitive glitter of the Arab but with a dull, hopeless disconnection, as they might stare at fish." Since I had seen a similar look in Bucharest and in Havana I now wonder if there has not appeared in the world a radically new way of looking. Is there not now perhaps a "Collectivist Look?"

3. Another way to get some good reading done in Cuba has been through theft. Following the first printing of the present "Working Paper," I received a letter of *apoyo*, support, from the Cuban novelist, Miguel Correa, in his exile in Weehawken, New Jersey, and I should like to quote a ribald paragraph of politico-criminal history in epistolary form:

#### *Una cosa*

Una cosa que debes saber: en 1978, la Universidad de La Habana me puso a trabajar por las mañanas en la Biblioteca Nacional, en el Departamento de Literatura Rusa. Allí traducía insoportables manuales tecnológicos, casi todos sobre las naves espaciales soviéticas. De algún modo tenía que pagar los estudios "gratuitos". Pero lo importante de todo esto es que en el piso 7 del mismo edificio (yo trabajaba en el 8), se encontraban la mayoría de

las obras prohibidas por el régimen. Una empleada amable y torpe me llevó al misterioso piso 7 y quedé estupefacto al ver varios ejemplares de *Tres tristes tigres*, *Los mil días de Kennedy*, *Archipiélago Gulag*, *El Maestro* y *Margarita* e infinidad de obras condenadas... Mi amistad con la empleada se fortaleció al punto de permitirme visitarla en su recinto. Roberto Valero [a poet in exile, now a professor at George Washington University] y yo empezamos a robar a dos manos. Debajo de nuestras camisas, entre las nalgas, en unos paqueticos como si lleváramos flores silvestres, fueron desapareciendo aquellos ejemplares tan codiciados. Gracias a nuestro delito, media Habana pudo leer éstas y otras obras que empezaron a circular clandestinamente por la ciudad, forradas con periódicos *Granma*, con la carátula de *El Capital* y cosas por el estilo. Los autores mal vistos por el régimen eran los únicos que nos importaban. ¡Hasta libros de Evtuchenko vi en aquellos estantes condenados! Por ello es que estoy seguro de que hasta nuestros libros están en Cuba pero sólo para el uso de los aparatos de inteligencia, o sea, de estupidez.

4.

observer of the

Raymond Carr of Oxford, author of *The Spanish Civil War* and an astute Cuban scene, writes: "For José Martí [the greatest revolutionary patriot in the island's history] literacy would equip the masses...for the exercise of the vote; for Castro, the capacity to read enabled Cubans to read the regime's propaganda. One of the most moving and disturbing sights I observed during the 'Year of Literacy' in 1963 was that of peasants in busses ploughing through Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*—presumably the only Marxist book generally available at the time" ("A Revolutionary Hero," a review of three books by José Martí in translation: *The New York Review*, July 21, 1988, p. 28).

## **EXAMPLES OF POEMS BY PRINCIPAL CUBAN POETS**

**Not Published in Cuba**

**(A dozen poems, with four in the original Spanish)**

### **The Old Bards Say**

Never forget, poet,  
that in any time or place  
where you make or suffer History  
some dangerous poem always lies in wait.

Heberto Padilla  
Transl. by Anthony Kerrigan & Jeanne Cook

### **Dicen los viejos bardos**

No lo olvides, poeta.  
En cualquier sitio y época  
en que hagas  
o en que sufras la Historia,  
siempre estará acechándote  
algún poema peligroso.

Heberto Padilla

## Fellow-Traveler

Throwing down her manual  
of marxist-leninism  
my fellow-traveler, my girl-friend,  
stands up suddenly in the train,  
sticks her head out the window  
and hollers There Goes History!  
She can see it going by  
blacker than a hooded crow  
with a solemn pestiferous wake  
as if from the backside of a king.

All I can see is a roadway  
strung with barbed-wire  
and male and female beasts  
(billy-bucks and bitches)  
relishing their combat.

She won't let up  
where she squats on my baggage  
but raises her booted legs  
covered with mud  
and nails me with precious eyes  
beyond redemption.

Heberto Padilla  
Transl. by Anthony Kerrigan & Jeanne Cook

## La compañera de viaje

Tirando su manual  
de marxismoleninismo  
mi compañera de viaje  
se levanta de pronto en el vagón  
y saca la cabeza por la ventana  
y me grita que por allí va la Historia  
que ella misma está viendo pasar  
una cosa más negra que una corneja  
seguida de una peste solemne  
como un culo de rey.

Pero yo sólo veo  
caminos y alambradas  
y bestias  
    machos y hembras  
    gozando su combate  
y ella sigue gritando  
sentada en mi equipaje  
levantando las botas saturadas de fango  
clavándome unos ojos preciosos  
pero insalvables.

## Marx's Contribution

Karl Marx  
never unwittingly suffered a tape recorder  
to be strategically emplaced in some intimate part of his aura.  
No one spied on him from across the street  
while he scribbled on endless sheets of paper at his ease.  
He could even afford the luxury of machinating heroically  
in his own good time  
against the prevailing system.

Karl Marx  
never encountered the "obligatory retraction,"  
and he had no reason to suspect that his best friend  
might be in the pay of the police,  
nor, even less, was he ever forced to become an informer.  
He never heard of the queue which forms before the regular queue  
and gives one the right to be in the queue  
which waits to find at the head of the line that what was available  
were replacements for zippers (and: "They're all gone, comrade").  
I don't expect  
he was subject to a law that obliged him  
to cut off his hair  
or shave his "anti-hygienic" beard.

His times did not require him to hide his manuscripts  
from Engels' eyes.  
(Then, too, the friendship between these two homologues  
never proved a "moral concern" for the State.)  
If ever he brought a woman to his lodgings,  
he never had to hide his papers under the mattress nor,  
for reasons of political expediency,  
was he forced to deliver a discourse  
(while caressing her)  
on the Tsar of Russia or the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Karl Marx  
could write what he would,  
come and go from the country,  
could dream, meditate, speak, scheme, work against  
the party or power in his time.  
Everything Karl Marx could do  
lies in the grave of prehistory.  
His contribution to contemporary problems has been immense.

Havana, June 1973

Transl. by Anthony Kerrigan & Jeanne Cook

## Aportes

Carlos Marx

no tuvo nunca sin saberlo una grabadora  
estrategicamente colocada en su sitio mas íntimo.

Nadie lo espió desde la acera de enfrente  
mientras a sus anchas garrapateaba pliegos y mas pliegos.  
Pudo incluso darse el lujo heróico de maquinare  
pausadamente

contra el sistema imperante.

Carlos Marx

no conoció la retractación obligatoria,  
no tuvo por que sospechar que su mejor amigo  
podría ser un policia.

Ni, muchos menos, tuvo que convertirse en policia.

La precola para la cola que nos da derecho a seguir en la  
cola

donde finalmente lo que había eran repuestos para  
presillas ("¡Y ya se acabaron, compañero!")  
le fue también desconocida.

Que yo sepa

no sufrió un código que lo obligase a pelarse al rape  
o a extirpar su antihigiénica barba.

Su época no lo conminó a esconder sus manuscritos  
de la mirada de Engels.

(Por otra parte, la amistad de estos dos hombres  
nunca fue una "preocupación moral" para el estado).

Si alguna vez llevó a una mujer a su habitación  
no tuvo que guardar los papeles bajo la colchoneta y,  
por cautela política,  
hacerle, mientras la acariciaba, la apologia al Zar de Rusia  
o al Imperio Austrohungaro.

Carlos Marx

escribió lo que pensó,  
pudo entrar y salir de su país,

soñó, meditó, habló, tramó, trabajó y luchó  
contra el partido o la fuerza oficial imperante en su época.

Todo eso que Carlos Marx pudo hacer pertenece ya  
a nuestra prehistoria.

Sus aportes a la época contemporánea han sido inmensos.

### **A Swim Off Havana**

At times I immerse myself in the sea, for a long while,  
and surface with a sudden gasp,  
but I swim from the coast as far as I can  
and see the receding indefinite line of the shore,  
and the sun boiling in oil-stricken waters.  
The shoreline drowns in the haze,  
and I close my light-blinded eyes.  
There, as if a hand's-breadth away from the waves  
is the country  
which so long we thought we bore  
on our shoulders: white as a warship  
glaring against the sun and against all poets.

Heberto Padilla  
Transl. by Anthony Kerrigan & Jeanne Cook

## **A veces me zambullo**

A veces me zambullo en el mar largo tiempo,  
y emerjo de súbito jadeante, respirando  
y nado lo más lejos posible de la costa  
y veo la línea distante, borrosa, de la orilla  
y el sol que bulle en las aguas grasientas.  
El litoral se hunde en la calina  
y yo cierro los ojos cegado por la luz.  
Entonces, a un palmo de esas olas, aparece el país  
que tantas veces uno ha creído  
llevar sobre sus hombros: blanco como un navío,  
brillando contra el sol y contra los poetas.

Heberto Padilla

## Hard Times

They asked the man for his time  
so his time might be added to History.  
They asked him for his hands  
because in hard times there's nothing  
like a pair of hands.  
They asked him for his eyes  
(which had shed a few tears),  
so that he might see the good side  
of things—especially the good side of life.  
(To look on misery, a stunned glance will do.)  
They asked him for his mouth's lips,  
parched as they were and cracked, so that he might affirm,  
and with each affirmation build a dream  
(the tallest Tall-Dream).  
They asked him for his legs, tough and gnarled  
(his restless roving legs),  
because, in hard times  
is there anything like a pair of legs  
with which to work on a construction site,  
or dig a trench?  
They asked him for his woods, where  
his yielding tree had brought him up.  
They asked him for his chest, his heart, his shoulders.  
They told him  
that all those things were absolutely necessary.  
Then they explained  
that all these donations were useless  
if he didn't hand over his tongue,  
because, in hard times,  
there is nothing like a glottal stop  
to block opprobrium or memory.  
Finally they asked him to  
"Please go along."  
Because, in hard times,  
that would be, no doubt, the decisive proof.

**The Man by the Side of the Sea  
in Havana**

There's a man sprawled by the side of the sea  
but I won't say he's dying,  
a derelict, drowned along the shore  
even though the waves have dragged him about  
even though he's only a breathing scrap of cloth  
a pair of eyes  
hands searching  
    for certainties  
        in the dark  
even though it's all the same  
whether he shouts or remains mute  
and though the slightest wave  
might destroy him, drown him for good  
I know quite well that he's alive  
all along the length and breadth of his body.

Heberto Padilla  
Transl. by Anthony Kerrigan & Jeanne Cook

## **The Changing of the Guard**

When each new generation goes in  
or out, slamming doors,  
the old bard draws in his belt a notch  
and winds his horn, like a cock-of-the-walk.

“There’s no way to let them know  
that youth comes, in poetry, with age.”

Heberto Padilla  
Transl. by Anthony Kerrigan & Jeanne Cook

## **A Minute of Salt...**

To the thousands of men,  
women and children who have  
perished in the sea  
trying to flee Communism.

A minute of salt for the silence of those who could not  
return to dust.

Jehovah surely forgot about the waters  
about those who died  
in the beating wave  
their mouths filled with algae  
and their eyes devoured by the fish,  
forgot about those who became anchors of swollen flesh  
or modern Jonahs quartered  
in the bellies of sharks.

A minute of salt for the silence  
of those who dissolved  
unnamed and unremembered:  
those who sank  
those who were swept away by lead  
while on their rafts dreaming of freedom  
those who have neither tombstones  
nor tombs  
those who lie we know not where—  
there are not tombs in the waters...

Armando Valladares  
Transl. by Anthony Kerrigan