

from **Writing the Trauma of Exile: Nilo Cruz's "Anna in the Tropics"**

I.

Reflecting on the germination of "Anna in the Tropics," a play which would eventually win the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Nilo Cruz explains that he took an old cigar box, placed it before him, and allowed himself to be absorbed by the object's details in order "to invite the writing into [his] hands." The object reminds him of his childhood in Cuba: the cigar box that held his pencils and "[t]he United States embargo and the scarcity of food and material goods [that] forced Cubans to embrace the concept of recycling" (85). It reminds him of "the political unrest and uncertainty of the early 1960s" in Cuba, and the "box of dreams" through which he could "escape from everything happening around him." Scarcity catalyzed the transformation of "[his] cigar box, with its landscape label of palm trees and women draped in flowing *tulles*," until it "became my box of dreams—my Houdini box—in which I was able to escape from everything happening around me" (86). The cigar box evokes memories of the adults around him as well: the smoke rings his father blew into the air, "more like smoke signals asking his friends in the States for political asylum;" and "the surge of smoke" his mother blew over her altar, "bath[ing] all her sacred statues in a blue cloud" as she prayed.

Memento mori and rebus both, the cigar box serves as a framework within which Cruz recalls the past and sees the contradictions (abundance for some, scarcity for others) within any given moment of time. But it also helps him see the contingency of how things are represented; how, as Said reminds us, they are framed—made to be seen and understood. And so this "Houdini box" becomes a medium through which Cruz can escape, suspending and sustaining his literary reveries. Cigar smoke and literary reveries, as he explains, "permit one to escape the weight of the world and defy the laws of gravity". Listening and dreaming are analogous for Cruz: "the listener collects words and draws pictures in his mind; the dreamer collects subconscious impressions and paints vivid images in his dreams". The listener is able to create emotional parallels to his own life" in the same way the "dreams present the dreamer with a series of images and symbols that mirror his present life or past existence". Neither listening nor dreaming is a practical tool for resolving problems, geopolitical or personal, but "to pause over a few lines of a book and share human emotion can bring a sense of consolation and alleviate reality" (87). Smoking, dreaming, praying, reading, listening—these actions are all presented within the densely packed symbol of the cigar box as equivalent to one another. However different they may seem at first glance, they are all forms of mediation, of the transit

between two points; and ultimately they all amount to something much greater than the two points themselves. They are all ways of mediating a trauma, a sundering that, however profane, requires a deeply spiritual reconciliation through an act of imagination and writing. The terrible wound of exile, the abyss that opens and separates past from present, one culture and language from another, that severs family members from one another, can be healed only by a willingness to abide within and to transit that space, to hold and to write that doubleness.

The exiled artist, like Orpheus, will lose his beloved if he turns to look behind him; he will be torn apart by the Furies—and yet these are the very things he is compelled to do. In Rilke's *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, neither the beauty nor the sensory pleasure of the music Orpheus plays on his lyre are as important as the fact that Orpheus “built a temple deep inside their hearing,” “their” referring to the “Creatures of stillness [that] crowded from the bright / unbound forest, out of their lairs and nests” when they heard him play. For Rilke the metamorphosis of Orpheus is abstracted, the intervals of sound and silence stretching, becoming a space held open, waiting. Rilke's Orpheus is the architect of a space within which the most transgressive act is the seemingly passive one of listening. The Aeolian harp can be heard only when the wind blows through it, its passivity and randomness pointing to the Romantic insistence that the world around us is fragmentary, contingent. For Rilke, the “new beginning, reckoning, change” that Orpheus initiates is a usurpation of crude materiality: Orpheus “built a temple” where there had been “at most a makeshift hut to receive the music, / a shelter nailed up out of their darkest longing, / with an entryway that shuddered in the wind”. Ovid's sense, so evident throughout the *Metamorphoses*, of the impossibility of causality, of at best a fragmentary understanding as to why anything happens, is repeated by Rilke, for whom only the story, in *medias res*, remains, giving testimony of what happened and pointing toward change as the only possible constant, for “if the earthly no longer knows your name, / whisper to the silent earth: I'm flowing. / To the flashing water say: I am.”

For Cruz, exiled from his beloved homeland, the decision to look back is a potentially deadly one, and he repeatedly demonstrates this danger by evoking Tolstoy's Anna Karenina—and rewriting it. Though for Tolstoy the metamorphosis of Anna from wife to lover is impossible, her adultery intolerable and subject to a degree of punishment not applicable to men who break the holy bonds of matrimony, in Cruz's play, Conchita responds to her husband's adultery with acceptance, seeing (and hearing) in the heart-breaking event an opportunity for transformation. Before her affair with Juan Julian, Conchita, which means little sea-shell in Spanish, attempts to explain to her husband Palomo that “[w]hat is happening in the novel is happening to us” [33]. Conchita has known for some time that Palomo is having an affair, but she does not plead with him to return to her. “Have you ever heard the voice of someone who is deaf?” she asks him.

The voice is crude and ancient, because it has no sense of direction or place, because it doesn't hear itself and it doesn't know if anybody else in the world hears it. Sometimes I want to have a long conversation with you, like this. Like a deaf person. As if I couldn't hear you or myself. But I would just talk and talk, and say everything that comes to my mind, like a shell that shouts with the voice of the sea and it doesn't care if anybody ever hears it. That's how I want to speak to you, and ask you things. (34)

Conchita, the little sea-shell, accuses her husband of nothing, asking instead for frankness, offering a language "crude and ancient," without "direction or place." Conchita is describing a non-referential language, like the faint echo of the ocean within the folds of a shell. What she is asking of her husband is not that he understand an argument that she might make or that change his mind about their marriage, but rather that he accept the ritual role of listener—much as Juan Julian will very shortly accept the ritual role in the Saint Candelaria celebration. Palomo does not understand what his wife is asking of him. The scene ends with Conchita evoking the words of Anna Karenina, trying one more time to mediate the enormous gulf between her husband and herself: "It's all right, Palomo. It's all right. There's something that Anna Karenina said and I keep repeating it to myself: 'If there are as many minds as there are heads, then there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts.' I can try to love you in a different way. I can do that. And you should try to do the same" (35).

The conversational impasse between Santiago and Ofelia, patriarch and matriarch, immediately follows in the next scene. The problem between this older couple is not adultery, but Santiago's excessive drinking and gambling, his perilous habit of selling off yet another portion of the factory, of their livelihood as a family, in order to raise the money to cover his debts. Because Santiago and Ofelia are not on speaking terms, Marela shuttles from point to point to deliver their angry messages, despite the fact that both Santiago and Ofelia can hear one another. Marela gives up in frustration and leaves. The silence between husband and wife is actually broken when Santiago confesses that he has been listening to the lector from his room upstairs. Ofelia engages her husband in that conversation, offering comments about the lector and the novel that they can both agree upon easily. Santiago's favorite character in *Anna Karenina* is Levin, who "reminds me of when I was young and my father left me to run the factory. It seems as if Levin has dedicated his whole life to his farm." Ofelia immediately responds, clearly affirming the parallel between her husband and Levin and beginning an important sequence of "yes" statements, affirmations that encourage her husband to risk his dignity:

Santiago: I used to be like [Levin].

Ofelia: Yes, you used to be like him.

Santiago: I like the part of the book when Anna's brother is going to sell the estate next to Levin's property and Levin counsels him not to sell it.

Ofelia: Yes, that's a good part. And I can't believe that you almost gave another share of the factory to Cheché.

Santiago: You're right, I lost my mind. I shouldn't drink.

Ofelia: That's right, drink you shouldn't. That's an idiotic thing to do, give away another share of the business. Cheché doesn't know what he's doing. He's like a scarecrow. He's been talking about bringing machines and replacing some of the workers. You need to go back to the factory. (38-39)

Aside from the mutual recognition and resolution of the problem, the difference in the conversation between Ofelia and Santiago and Conchita and Palomo is that Santiago willingly surrenders to the reading of *Anna Karenina*, allowing the story of Levin, and Levin's great and unwavering love for Kitty, to transform how he sees himself. In the mutual exchange between Santiago and Ofelia, both find common ground through literary reverie and the sound of the lector's voice.

The fear and shame Santiago eventually confesses to his wife, read against the more traditional polarities of gender established at the very beginning of the play, are emasculating to Santiago. Read against the "contrapuntal" or "double perspective," the act of listening demonstrates Santiago's willingness to abide within and to transit a very difficult space, to hold and to speak that doubleness within him. As he explains to his wife, every time "I gamble I try to repeat the same motions" (40). The problem, of course, is that compulsive repetition does not make him luckier at games of chance, but renders him an automaton, separating himself even more from what is actually troubling him. "Every time I lose, I feel that something has been taken from me. Something bigger than money. And I see a line of little ants carrying breadcrumbs on their backs. But the crumbs they are taking away are my pride and my self-respect. My dignity. Have I lost you too, Ofelia?" (41). Santiago's ability to express his shame and fear, especially his fear of losing Ofelia's love, renders him vulnerable, and yet stronger than ever. Here the literary reverie has created the opportunity for colloquy, and rendered the more normative assumptions about gender ineffectual, introducing Santiago to a different sort of masculinity--more complex, less cartoonish, and as deeply human as Levin's.

Unlike Santiago, Cheché/Chester will never allow himself to "listen to another love story and let the words make nests in his hair, so he can find another woman" (22). He is very comfortable being an automaton, crossing each day out on his calendar before the day has barely begun, a fact that horrifies the incredulous Santiago. There is no point in the play when Cheché/Chester has a conversation. For example, when he tries to address the workers,

demanding that they vote to bring machines into the factory, he keeps talking over them, refusing to listen, throwing out single words and phrases in lieu of reasoned argument: “I’m not joking,” he tells them all. “I’m talking about the modern world. Modernity. Progress. Advancement” (50). Cheché/Chester never questions the wound his wife’s betrayal caused him; never questions the need to integrate himself in ethnic or racial terms; never questions the manner by which *machismo* defines who he is. And because he does not want to smoke, dream, pray, read, or listen, he is not able to mediate or transform. Rather, he imposes his sense of the “individual” and the “personal” on everyone around him, an imperious decision that leads to violence. Cheché/Chester, unable and unwilling to enter the space of his own trauma, rapes Marela, his step-niece, and kills Juan Julian, whom he considers interchangeable with the lector who ran away with his wife. After the rape and homicide, there is no arrest. There is no justice for those who love Juan Julian or for the audience. Marela, the most excessively Romantic, “feminine” dreamer, is rendered speechless by her step-uncle’s act of violence. Asked to pose as Anna Karenina for the new cigar-box label by the same name, Marela steps onto the stage in a long winter coat and insists to her mother Ofelia that she is not too warm: “Some coats keep winter inside them. You wear them and find pockets full of December, January and February. All those months that cover the earth with snow and make everything still. That’s how I want to be, layered and still” (80). There is a deeply anti-climactic and elegiac tone to the play’s ending. In the span of a few days, we have been enfolded in parallel moments of place and time: Russia in the 1870s; Ybor City, Tampa, 1929; and a mythic past that looms and foreshadows the culture we move through daily in the United States in the present. The world of the lector, the factory where hand-rolled cigars are patiently crafted, that offered its laborers a sheltering space—these spaces no longer exist. We have inherited Chester’s world.

Cruz has developed within the space of the cigar factory a counter-hegemonic political model that embraces mediation and metamorphosis. The “feminine” characters who embody this model listen attentively, perform their gender fluidly, mediating political boundaries, as well as normative assumptions of gender. Cruz resists narrative closure. He knows that collective amnesia follows easy memorialization, and offers instead a distinct *testimonio* or *autohistoria* of the sort Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes, which undoes hegemony and the artifice of linear history through the mediation of memory and story. A “new vision of culture and society” requires a willingness to read history and to listen to histories we have refused to hear. It requires public intellectuals of the sort Said defined, who are unrelenting in their understanding of the contingency of all systems. And it requires the poet-legislator, the figure of Juan Julian.

The characters of Marela and Chester/Cheché, though at first glance seemingly dissimilar, are similar in their perspectives on change, the only possible constant. For Marela all

is transformation and possibility, a string of pearls can indeed become the woman wearing it, a bicycle can become the boy riding it. For Marela there is neither backward nor forward glance; and the rape of Marela by Chester/Cheché pushes her into a state of entropy that is the opposite of the dreamer, the dreamer who cannot frame her dreams, step across the threshold and become conscious. Chester/Cheché can only look back to the trauma of his wife's adultery and abandonment or forward to some Modernist future built on the ethos of Ayn Rand. Neither Marela nor Chester/Cheché is able to sustain a balance between past and present, Cuban tradition and capitalist modernity. There is no ability in either to hear anything except what they have already accepted. Marela's passivity is as absolute as Chester/Cheché's aggression, and both figures are marginalized by the play end: Marela within the identity of Anna Karenina, is lost in the "winter" of Anna's costume; and Chester/Cheché has disappeared into some socially liminal or future time outside the law, his actions a precursor to corsair capitalism, a new and extreme form of individualism that escapes judgment.

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