

INTERVIEW WITH CRISTINA PERI ROSSI
Conducted in May 2008 by Graciela Trevisan
Translated into English by Graciela Trevisan

Graciela: At the beginning of your prologue to *State of Exile* you wrote, "If exile were not a terrible experience, it would be a literary genre. Or both things at the same time." What can you say about exile as a literary genre that has produced such an enormous amount of fictional, testimonial and poetic literature, not only in Latin America but in many other parts of the world?

Cristina: Exile and Literature have a close relation. The Bible narrates the Jewish people's diaspora. I quoted one fragment from it at the beginning of my novel *The Ship of Fools*, "and you shall not distress a stranger: for you know the heart of a stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 23:9) The foundational poem of Spanish literature is The Poem of Cid, which narrates his exile. For ancient Greeks, the worst thing was death, and then, exile. Virgil was an exile, and so was Dante. Exile, banishment, emigration: big topics in all literatures, but also a deep metaphor, one of the most versatile symbols of universal art. To some degree, the writer is almost always an exile, even if she or he doesn't move from her or his birthplace. Dostoevsky had to flee Moscow because he couldn't pay his debts. Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* was censored and burned in a public square. Spanish literature during the Franco regime was that of exiles, like dissident literature from the Soviet Union was written outside the Soviet Union. Something similar is happening now with the best Chinese writers: they write outside of China to avoid being censored. The writer's place is usually that of criticizing the system, be that capitalism and the market dictatorship or the proletarian dictatorship. The need for freedom of thought and expression for art is different from a person's needs, which must adhere to certain limits to facilitate peaceful existence in society.

Graciela: What moved you to publish the poems in *State of Exile* in 2003 [when they were written so many years before]? Do you think that the wave of immigrants (political/economic/gender exiles) from Northern Africa into Spain and other European countries influenced your decision?

Cristina: When I wrote those poems, between 1973 and 1974, I wouldn't have been able to find a publisher in Spain: Franco was still there and my poems wouldn't have passed censorship. Outside of Spain, in the Spanish-speaking world, there were no publishers who would risk publishing them either. But there was also a personal, subjective reason: a sense of reserve. I felt that publishing these poems, that were so painful, would be like exhibiting scars in public that, after all, were less severe than those other victims had suffered. For amidst the sorrows an exile goes through, she or he almost always manages to save her or his life. I say, "almost always" because I have seen people in exile go crazy, get sick, die prematurely, have heart attacks or terrible depressions. When Latin American dictatorships fell, and the pain loosened, I thought that it was the

moment to bring my poems to light. The pain in my poems then could be better tolerated.

It's true that exile and immigration have a lot in common. I sometimes talk with immigrants and observe our shared feelings: a sense of uprootedness, of not belonging, an ambiguity toward the adopted country. Immigrants are, however, in better conditions objectively: they now have cellular phones to call their dear ones, they can get together in public without raising suspicions, they can obtain their residence or citizenship. Immigrants have an expectation: to return. They can do that. The exile cannot return, and this provokes great anguish. Now, once the dictatorship has fallen, the exile doesn't always return. Because in a strict sense, there is no return: one cannot go back to the past.

Graciela: What are the positive changes that you have experienced as a result of your exile, in terms of life experience, your identity, your ideas, relations, and emotions?

Cristina: I would be a robot or made of stone if I hadn't experienced any changes in 30 years. I think I am a little less romantic now than when I arrived in this country [Spain.] The change is not due to age, but to confronting a society much more pragmatic, more relativist than the society where I was born and raised [Uruguay]. But I continue to be extremely idealistic and romantic in this society too, where I have lived for 30 years. I have had the chance to contribute to the changes in Spanish society, from the rigidity and repression of the Franco era to the current social-democracy where laws I fought for have been adopted, like gay marriage and positive reforms towards women. I have met many women who like me live an alternative life style, and we can share our rejection of machismo and patriarchy. I also believe that exile gave me the opportunity to try my inner strength and my spirit for struggle. My books are published and read in Spain (they have been translated into several languages too,) and in these thirty years, I have loved, suffered, and tried to change the situation in a very active way. To learn how to turn suffering into something positive and creative is a necessary skill. I think this is a point Marilyn Buck [political prisoner, and translator of *State of Exile*] and I share.

Graciela: Can you tell us an anecdote directly related to your experience of exile?

Cristina: My books are full of narratives and experiences of exile. I have transformed them into literature. Perhaps the one I have written and talked the least about is my second exile. In 1974, when Franco was still in power and the Uruguayan dictatorship had only been in place for one year, I had to renew my passport in Barcelona. The consulate of my country's dictatorship told me that my passport's renewal was denied, as well as my birth certificate or any other

Uruguayan document. I didn't have any Spanish documents either. Therefore, from that moment on, I didn't legally exist as a resident of any country. I was "without a country," and the duty of any police officer in the world was to return me to my country of origin where I was wanted and my books had been banned as well any mention of my name. The Spanish police came to get me, and I fled to Paris. I had to cross the border without documents. We were four in a car (a Spanish couple and a Uruguayan friend) leaving from Barcelona to the first French town beyond the border. They all had current passports, except me. When we got to the border, we realized that there was a very strict control at the checkpoint. My friend then had an idea: since there were four of us, she decided that I would show my expired passport last. I knew that it was extremely unlikely that I would pass the checkpoint. Surely, the border guard would find out and would deport me directly to the Uruguayan prisons. The guard checked the other three passports first, and when he was about to check mine, he looked at the long row of cars waiting to cross the border and gave me back the passport without even opening it. I can say that my life was saved because of the traffic at the border.

Graciela: The rigidity of the gender binary, and the deconstruction and questioning of masculinity as a social, political and sexual power often appear in your books. What is the connection between gender, sexuality and homoeroticism that you approach in your poetry and narrative, and the subject of exile?

Cristina: I will answer this question with a simile, so I won't go into an ideological explanation that could take up many essays. We are primates that in some moment developed. In Congo, there are communities of chimpanzees and bonobos, separated of course. The chimpanzees live in patriarchal groups that are full of machismo and dominance. There are frequent acts of violence. In fact, there is nothing so close to a human being as a chimpanzee. They conspire, betray each other, steal, and if they can, kill each other. The females are submissive, and their main tasks are to reproduce and to search for food. The bonobos, on the other hand, live in matriarchal groups. There is no violence among them. They are cooperative, joyful, and resolve all conflicts by making love and caressing. When they are afraid or have a problem, the group tries to resolve it with caresses, licks and love. This simile may seem simple, but I believe that women provoked the major changes in the history of humankind. In the Middle Ages, women in the courts of Midi and the south of France imposed on society music, poetry and the use of utensils. They softened the males who only knew how to fight, and they created courtly love. With this simile, I want to say that I trust that a feminization of the world could end violence.

Graciela: What would you like to say to English-language readers in the United States who will read *Estado de Exilio* [*State of Exile*] translated by [political prisoner] Marilyn Buck?

Cristina: My dear friend Julio Cortázar used to say that chance doesn't exist. I don't believe in chance either. That [my friend] Graciela Trevisan would work with Marilyn Buck as her teacher in prison, that Marilyn would read my book and decide to translate it are part of a net of affinities, a delicate web of relations created by women to live in a better world. I have found it amazing and at the same time, natural. We were meant to meet. Like Borges says, "All encounter by chance is a previous appointment."