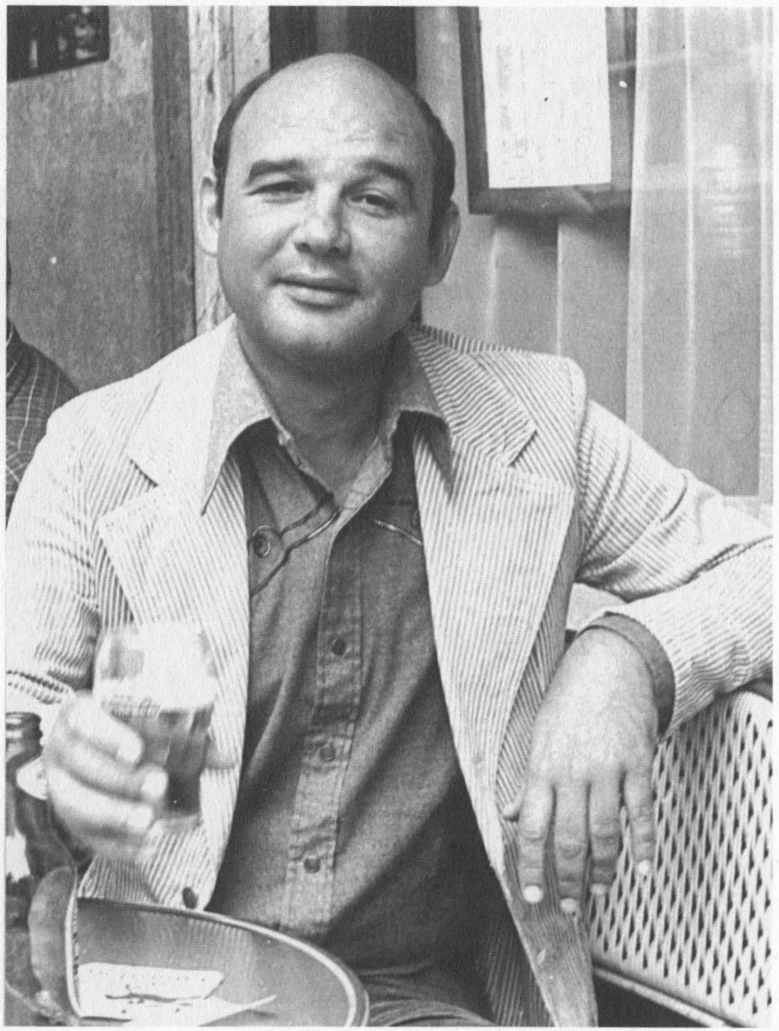

Severo Sarduy

Severo Sarduy was born in Camagüey, Cuba, on February 25, 1937. His work, whether in poetry or prose, brings out the exuberant feast of words typical of the tropics.

Sarduy began publishing his first poems at an early age in the local newspaper *El camagüeyano.* In 1955, when he was only eighteen, one of his poems appeared in *Ciclón,* Havana's leading literary journal, whose director was José Rodríguez Feo. A year later, he moved to Havana to start medical school. Sarduy, however, continued writing and, with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, began publishing his work in two of the most important journals of the time, the *Diario Libre* and the *Lunes de Revolución.* Cabrera Infante was the first ever to write a review of one of his literary works.

After receiving a grant to study the history of art at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris, in 1959, Sarduy left Cuba for France, where he has been living ever since. In 1967, he became a French citizen. From 1966 to 1968, he also wrote for the now defunct *Mundo Nuevo,* the literary magazine published in Paris by Emir Rodríguez Monegal, which gave exposure to the writers of the "Boom."

Sarduy is perhaps one of the best-known Latin American writers in France and one who has contributed greatly to the translation of many Spanish and Latin American writers into French. As head of a collection at the Editions du Seuil, he has focused attention on many of his colleagues from the Hispanic world. His own works have appeared simultaneously in Spanish and in French and have been translated into twenty-five languages.

His works may be divided into novels, essays and poetry. Among his novels are the following: *Gestos* (Gestures), 1963; *De donde son los cantantes,* 1967 (*From Cuba with a Song,* 1972); *Cobra,* 1972 (*Cobra,* 1975); *Maitreya,* 1978 (*Maitreya,* 1987); and *Colibrí,* 1984. Among his essays: *Escrito sobre un cuerpo,* 1969 (*Written on a Body,* 1989); *Barroco* (Baroque), 1976; and *La Simulación* (Simulation), 1982. His poetic works include: *Big Bang,* 1974;

Daiquirí, 1980; *Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado* (A Fleeting Witness in Disguise), 1985; *El Cristo de la rue Jacob* (Christ in the Rue Jacob), 1987.

Sarduy is also well known for his scientific chronicles in the French press, symbolic remnants of the interest he acquired during his years as a medical student in Cuba. He is equally known for his radio plays, *Dolores Rondón,* 1965; *La playa* (The Beach), 1971, winner of the Prix Paul Gilson de la Communauté Radiophonique des Programmes de Langue Française; and *Récit* (Narration), a collage based on *Cobra* which received the 1972 Italia Prix Médicis étranger. *Para la voz,* 1978 (*For Voice,* 1985), collects his radio plays.

Sarduy's writings have been inspired by the baroque. In the following interview he repeatedly mentions the influence of Góngora and Lezama Lima on his work. He also stresses the importance of the plastic arts, whether painting, music or ballet (he recounts a prank he played on some publisher by sending as his biographical note that of Rudolf Nureyev). Sarduy is an experienced art critic and should also be recognized as a painter in his own right.

INTERVIEWER: Severo, have you been affected in any way by the perfect symmetry of the initials of your name, S.S.?

SARDUY: Yes, my book *Cobra* was determined by them in some measure since it is a book about a sacred serpent, "s.s." Given the constant religious overtones of my books, one might also think that the "s.s." stands for sub-sanctity. For obvious reasons and because I live in a house shaped by those events, I would prefer not to refer to any other possible interpretations of the initials "s.s." that have been given in this century.

INTERVIEWER: Why "sacred serpent"?

SARDUY: Because the book deals with a cobra which is tied to the East (particularly India) and which is linked to initiation rites of one sort or another. For instance, in Tantrism the sacred serpent is utilized to achieve a kind of balance or stability through certain sexual practices. This cobra is visualized as Kundalini, which is a sacred serpent that the ancient tantric masters believed ascended the vertebral spine of an initiate to his brain through a series of sexual exercises. In the brain a white flower would explode, symbolizing enlightenment. So the tantric model is one possible iconography of the sacred serpent. India, however, is replete with allusions to sacred serpents and cobras. In Nepal, some of the gods sleep in a nest of serpents. Generally speaking, serpents represent a good and positive power in the East, contrary to Western notions.

INTERVIEWER: Why are you so interested in the East?

SARDUY: I could give you autobiographical reasons. For instance, in Camagüey, Cuba, where I was born, I was very closely linked to the teachings of the Theosophical Society from the time of my adolescence. The Cuban Theosophical Society, like those in the rest of the world, underwent a schism following the dissolution of the Order of the Star by Krishnamurti, who was to fulfill the role of Maitreya, the teacher of the universe. This is a long story, which I have detailed in one of my books called *Maitreya,* appropriately enough. Maitreya's story is Krishnamurti's story, more or less, and the latter is the main character of that book. Krishnamurti was discovered by members of the Theosophical Society near Madras, at a place which I know well. He was then groomed to be the teacher of humanity. They brought him to the West, and educated him in London to play that role. But when he was old enough, he immediately dissolved the Order which was supposed to receive his teachings. So, to get back to my childhood, I grew up in a

schismatic world triggered by Krishnamurti's dissolution of the Order. I started reading his works very early on, perhaps at the age of eleven or even younger. From that distant time to the present, I have had a constant thirst for the East.

INTERVIEWER: Is that why your novels represent a dialogue between East and West?

SARDUY: Yes, precisely. My books, however, represent not only a dialogue, but also what I believe to be the destiny of the entire world: the abolition of that dialogue. My works attempt to overcome the seemingly permanent contradiction between East and West. The identity of both cultures must be maintained at the same time that the gulf between them must be eliminated.

INTERVIEWER: Do you mean "eliminated" in the sense that the East is more important for you?

SARDUY: Not at all. Neither one is more important than the other. What is significant is what we could call the reflected images between both civilizations and among the various religions—what is important is to eliminate contradictions. That's why *Cobra* ends in Tibet, a Buddhist country, because Buddhism presupposes the eradication of contradictions. In that book, I was also interested in eliminating the contradiction between the sexes, which is as pervasive as that between East and West. That's why the central character of *Cobra* is a transvestite, because that type of person embodies both sexes and eliminates the contradiction between them. I don't want to sound pedantic, but I will mention a term devised by Hegel: *Aufhebung.* It refers to synthesis, to that cancellation of opposites. So *Cobra* works on both levels: the elimination of the opposites of East and West, and the eradication of sexual differences.

INTERVIEWER: Do you especially identify yourself with the character Cobra?

SARDUY: I identify with all my characters, but perhaps more with this one.

INTERVIEWER: According to Roberto González Echevarría,

in your work you speak of India to reclaim Cuba, by opposition with Columbus, who spoke of the new continent as if it were India.

SARDUY: Yes, everything that González Echevarría has written or said about my books is extremely sharp and intelligent, much more so than my own comments on my work. I am also going to respond to what might be called the anamorphosis of Cuban literature. In opposition to the rest of Latin America (including Brazil), when a Cuban wants to speak about Cuba, very frequently he speaks about something else. If a Mexican novelist is going to speak about Mexico, he will in all probability talk about the Mexican Revolution and the indigenous cultures of his country before Cortés. If an Argentine speaks about Argentina, he will probably write a book of sonnets, like Federico Urbach's *La urna* (The Urn). The works of Girondo and Borges also come to mind in this respect. When a Cuban writer wants to speak about his country, however, he will frequently refer to things that have no relation to Cuba. In Lezama Lima's *Paradiso,* for instance, the author talks about an imaginary university called Upsalón to refer to what is taking place in Havana under Machado's dictatorship. The characters in that book are called Fronesis, Foción and Cemí, thoroughly un-Cuban names, and Lima frequently alludes to Pythagoras, the pre-Socratics and Taoism in that work. The same is true of Virgilio Piñera: his book *Electra Garrigó* is a Greek tragedy in which he supposedly talks about Camagüey. In my very humble case, *Cobra* is a book which evokes India and which ends in the north of that country, but in which I speak about Cuba almost exclusively, in the tradition of Cuban literature. This process is what I have called an anamorphosis, and a good example of it is Holbein's *The Ambassadors,* a painting which looks like a seashell from the front and like a skull from the sides. This is what is also taking place in Cuban literature.

INTERVIEWER: You have just mentioned the name of one of your heroes, Lezama Lima. Do you think that if neither he nor

Góngora, another great master who influenced you, had existed, your work would have been different?

SARDUY: Yes, not only different but perhaps non-existent, because I write about concrete daily events, not abstract notions which I cannot put a handle on. For instance, when I wrote about Tibet, I was at Tibetan monasteries in Sikkim, Bhutan, Assam, Nepal and the north of India—in the ancient kingdoms of the Himalayas. I always write about what is right in front of me. But what is right in front of me is filtered or mediated by what Roland Barthes called "the paper code tradition," which is the age-old literary tradition that stretches from the Buddhists to Lezama Lima and beyond. Everything is filtered, transposed and metaphorized by this textual tradition.

INTERVIEWER: In addition to Góngora and Lezama Lima, do you also see the influence of Quevedo on your work?

SARDUY: Yes, especially in the poems. I have a book of poems called *Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado,* published in Barcelona by Edicions Libres del Mall, in which Quevedo's influence is very apparent, particularly in relation to the issue of death and the funerary aspects of the poems, but also in connection with the parodical and sometimes erotic allusions. There is a connection between love and death, a sort of bitterness or acidity, which comes directly from Quevedo, and also from Valdés Leal, who has deeply influenced my work.

INTERVIEWER: And what about the picaresque novel?

SARDUY: There are many picaresque characters in my novels: the Celestina is present throughout, as is the Lozana andaluza. José Rodríguez Feo's essay revealed that in *La lozana andaluza* the author, Francisco Delicado, speaks to his characters for the first time in history. This dialogue between author and characters is a device I resort to in my books. In fact, the characters criticize me, take me to task, and sometimes speak to me in a very disrespectful fashion, in the best picaresque tradition. They do not follow the designs or whims of an all-powerful author, but rather, they intervene directly in the

narrative, which they modify, alter, parody, erase, change or correct according to their own inclinations. The characters, therefore, are alive as a dialectic force in the books. It is never the case that an almighty author deals with inert matter which he can manipulate. Rather, the characters in the book speak and decide their own destinies.

INTERVIEWER: Is the author present in the novel as a narrator?

SARDUY: In the work of the great Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, the narrator is always the same, despite the baroque flavor of many situations, the exuberant decor, and the verbal luxury. In my own humble works, there is what might be called an exteriophony, which means that there are many voices, not just one. There is a fictional narrator, the voice of Severo Sarduy, the voices of the characters, and even the voice of the author's mother sometimes. It is a choral narrative situation, never a monophony.

INTERVIEWER: Who is the "we" that appears so frequently in your work?

SARDUY: That "we" frequently changes according to the situation. But what is important about it is that it is an articulation of a plural voice. At the carnival, particularly as it is conceived by Bakhtin, what is important is the plurality or polyphony of voices, or the fact that everyone is capable of speaking, laughing and parodying. To get back to the comparison with Carpentier, what is different about my work is that a monolithic voice gives way to a chorus of voices.

INTERVIEWER: Are your characters as powerful as their author?

SARDUY: Yes, and sometimes more so. On occasion, they insult me with words that I cannot repeat. The characters are interested in determining their own fate and narration, which they can do because they are the ones in charge.

INTERVIEWER: Where do your characters come from: your imagination or real life?

SARDUY: Everything I have written is strictly autobiographical, things I have lived through. I am a very limited author. In fact, I am so limited that I am incapable of inventing, I have never invented anything. There is a very small distance between what I have lived and what I write. A good example of this is a painting which has influenced me a great deal: Rembrandt's *The Night Watch,* a very famous group portrait which can be found at the Amsterdam museum. The realistic painting, which most likely depicts a group of cloth workers, has one special feature which could be taken as an example for all creative endeavors. In the midst of the picture, a young albino dwarf can be seen crossing with a dead chicken tied to her waist. This little girl changes the whole scene, because she doesn't belong there, at night, and with a chicken tied around her waist—children have never been allowed to play with dead animals. So her presence swings the balance from realism to fiction and the imaginary. My work tries to achieve the same effect: to move from mundane reality to fiction through a minor detail, which is what happened with Rembrandt's painting.

INTERVIEWER: Is that why there is always a female albino midget in your books?

SARDUY: It is an allusion to her, of course, but also to *Las meninas,* which is the absolute model of all enigma, representation and fiction as Foucault saw it. So the midgets are an echo of baroque artists such as Rembrandt and Velázquez, among others. Carreño's dwarfs can also be seen in the Prado museum, dressed up as Silenus and Faunus.

INTERVIEWER: Are the characters you create based on other people, or are they an extension of yourself?

SARDUY: Both. They are like *tableaux vivants* which come out of their paintings to accompany me through life. I frequently say that my immediate family consists of characters such as Carreño's obese midgets; they are a little like brothers or sons.

INTERVIEWER: Your books are really like a series of paintings, which reveal the influence of your studies in art history in Paris.

SARDUY: I do not consider myself a writer strictly speaking, in the sense of someone who could write a thriller, an autobiography or a screenplay. I see myself as a painter who uses words instead of paints and brushes. It is almost like a Zen Buddhist koan: how would you paint using only words and no colors? Lately, I have also been painting: I have had exhibits and even sold some of my paintings. Paradoxically, they are very reminiscent of a form of writing, but that is another matter.

INTERVIEWER: You started out studying medicine. Why, like Cabrera Infante, did you give it up?

SARDUY: I would say that I haven't stopped practicing it because I make my living as a science journalist with Radio France Internationale. Paris is one of the most expensive cities in the world, and I love to travel, and I could not meet my expenses through writing alone. The broadcasts I do are almost always on medicine, and I could even treat a patient if I had to. Another subject I address concerns the latest advances in astronomy, for which I also developed a passion in Cuba. I wrote the book called *Big Bang* on the subject. Medicine, biology, genetics, cosmology and astronomy are all constantly present in my work. Even *Cobra* is full of astronomical metaphors. The white dwarf, for instance, is no more than a star which has collapsed on itself, losing its gravitational stability to the point that it has imploded, as opposed to exploded. There are also gigantic red stars, traveling blue ones, black holes, and curved space. So the book is full of metaphors that do not come from any literary tradition, but rather from my own inventions based on current cosmological research, particularly from the United States.

INTERVIEWER: Is interpreting your work like holding a dialogue with poets and painters?

SARDUY: Yes, the root of everything is painting. I believe

that humanity and knowledge move along parallel tracks. There is a common episteme of our time, as Foucault said. In this sense, I believe that the first thing which moves forward is painting. Painting takes the lead and must be listened to, and I underline the words "listened to." For instance, in speaking of this century's episteme, we can say that the audible moment of a painter such as Mark Rothko has not yet arrived. Perhaps it will take another century before we can perceive his work in its entirety. We are barely beginning to visualize it and perhaps for the wrong reasons, like the beauty of the colors or the harmony of the proportions or even his own tragic life. I think that painting is so far ahead that we have to wait for architecture, music, science, mathematics and literature to catch up. The case of Rothko is a good example, because he cannot yet be heard, and once again I will emphasize the word *heard.*

INTERVIEWER: In *Cobra* you defined writing in many different ways. Could you add something to each of these statements? I'll begin with, "Writing is the art of the ellipsis."

SARDUY: Obviously, that is a reference to the baroque, to the astronomy of Kepler, where the planets are viewed as an ellipsis, contrary to Galileo's astronomy, where the orbits of planets are seen as circular. So there is perhaps a somewhat pedantic but hopefully humorous reference to Kepler's baroque and ellipsis and also Kepler's ellipse. Finally, I must also mention Góngora's baroque and his ellipsis. So there is a reference to the main components of the baroque, the ellipse and the ellipsis.

INTERVIEWER: Your second statement is, "Writing is the art of digressing."

SARDUY: Yes, as you can hear, when I speak or write I use digression and subordinate clauses a lot. I think I draw this from the Cuban mode of speaking, where everyone talks at the same time using digressions. Unlike the French and other people who speak in a linear fashion and develop a theme to its conclusion, Cubans speak with subordinate clauses and digressions, through

a type of syntactic and verbal arborescence which leads them to a disordered view of the world and its problems. They also all speak at the same time, which tends to give a choral impression of their subject matter. I believe talking in this way helps to mediate the topic under discussion.

INTERVIEWER: Now the third statement: "Writing is the art of recreating reality. Let's respect it."

SARDUY: That statement is a little parodical, because it is a reference to figurative or representative literature. My books are not really immediately readable. One must make a little effort to enter into the story—it is not a photocopy of reality.

INTERVIEWER: You also say, "Writing is the art of restoring History."

SARDUY: When I say that in the book, I systematically begin to alter the history that I am dealing with. So, I am laughing at that precept, because as I utter it I begin to change history. I am not restoring it in the least, therefore, but rather varying and modulating it, according to a series of paintings.

INTERVIEWER: Another reference is the following: "Writing is the art of disordering order and ordering disorder."

SARDUY: Yes, that has a lot to do with Lévi-Strauss's notion of *bricolage,* or rebuilding an object on the vestiges or ruins of another. Lévi-Strauss held that all art is like *bricolage,* restructuring something from the remnants of something else. I think that very frequently art is precisely this: starting with a given situation, one begins to alter and play with the elements to build up a second order, a metaorder, metaobject and metalanguage. It is a secondary operation on the primary data of our senses and our lives, and even of our paintings and representations.

INTERVIEWER: You also say, "Writing is the art of correcting."

SARDUY: Yes, because writing involves playing with words and correcting. In fact, the page is corrected to such an extent that it looks like an enormous scar or tattoo. In some way, writing is like tattooing. Like a person applying a tattoo on a

willing victim, the writer tattooes the skin of language with his motives, obsessions and compulsions. Under the hands of a great writer, dead and lifeless language is tattooed so that it becomes significant and vibrant, even violent.

INTERVIEWER: You also say, "Perhaps writing is like this: being able to invent life each time, destroying the past, spilled water, water under the bridge."

SARDUY: Speaking of inventing, something very funny happened: a Spanish magazine asked me for my biography, and since I think that my life and my ideas are rather dull, I copied the biography of one of my dancing idols, Rudolph Nureyev, from a dictionary on dance, and passed it off as my own. Dancing is another one of my obsessions. So I sent the biography, and to my considerable surprise another Spanish magazine thought it was true and used it in introducing me for an article I had written on sacred manuscripts. They said Severo Sarduy had performed with the greatest dance companies in the world.

INTERVIEWER: Why does dance always appear in your work, why does it attract you so?

SARDUY: Because I do my writing with my body, not with consciousness, intelligence, knowledge or culture. I write with my body as a whole, with every muscle, and with sex of course. So the body is present, and dancing is its epiphany. The ritual dances of India are very present in my works, as I have seen them performed many times in India. But Western classical and modern dances are there too. Nijinski and Nureyev have given the best lessons in writing. With them, the body ceased to be an inert, heavy, insignificant mass, and became a true ideogram and a symbol of pure expression, which has only happened two or three times in the history of dancing.

INTERVIEWER: Does the body turn into spirit when this happens?

SARDUY: I wouldn't use the word spirit, because it is very ambiguous. In my books, I have always refrained from referring to any notion of spirit, even when I was talking about Buddhism.

I think the concept of spirit can be very misleading in the context of Eastern religions, because in places like India there is no distinction between the body and the spirit: the dichotomy between sacred and profane is eliminated in reaching for the sacred. Daily life is sacred in India, as we can see when we look at workers from different castes going to the river, or washing their clothes or whatever. It is like witnessing a religious ritual, when in reality it is just a daily event. But the abolition of the distinction between sacred and profane has reached such a level that any menial task looks like a devotional exercise.

INTERVIEWER: Are you a Buddhist?

SARDUY: I can't say that, because it would sound a little strange and pretentious coming from a Cuban. I will say that I am very interested in Buddhism, as I am in the African religions of Cuba and Brazil. I am interested in the religious phenomenon per se.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you write and for whom?

SARDUY: I can tell you how I write; I could even give a course on it or write a thesis on how I use commas and adjectives. What I cannot tell you, however, is why I write. Many writers classify themselves in answering this question. Some say, "I write to change mankind," or, "I write to achieve a universal revolution," or, "I write to alter man's consciousness." And most of the writers who make these pretentious statements are traditionalists or reactionaries—extremely boring people. Other writers say they ply their craft to make money or become famous. But I distrust all these responses, because they categorize writers. I certainly don't write to make money, because I haven't earned a lot yet.

INTERVIEWER: Do you do it to restore freedom to writing and to ideas?

SARDUY: I am speaking to you from a little village in the French region of Oise, where Gothicism and impressionism first appeared. The French impressionist painters came from this area. The colors of the region, therefore, are unique, as well

as the general atmosphere of luminosity or mist which can be found only in impressionist paintings. I am very sensitive to color, form, drawing, trees, animals, and a river that passes by my house. I would very humbly argue that I try to restore color. To use a contemporary image, a writer is like a TV set: he uses the antenna to receive images, and the channels to transmit them. So the writer cannot stop writing or painting. In the region of Oise, he has to transmit color and form; if he doesn't, he will go mad.

INTERVIEWER: Is the art of writing a voluptuous one for you?

SARDUY: Yes, inasmuch as voluptuousness requires immense effort, because achieving pleasure and ecstacy are the hardest tasks. I try to give my readers immediate pleasure through words, very similar to sexual pleasure, rather than providing them with an ideology, a knowledge, or a thesis on how to capture reality. In Tantrism, certain colors are held to be beneficial. Likewise, I believe that words can also affect the body of the person reading them, especially if they are well written and people know how to read them.

INTERVIEWER: Do words also affect the soul?

SARDUY: The word *soul,* like the word *spirit,* can give rise to dead spiritualism or to partial philosophies in the West, which have no strength either conceptually or expressively. So, I don't like to use those concepts.

INTERVIEWER: What do you feel when you write?

SARDUY: It is very difficult to bring oneself to write. There is always some excuse not to write, such as having a glass of water, taking a walk, eating or sleeping. It can be extremely frustrating, because sometimes I can spend an entire day searching for a particular adjective or expression. Sometimes it comes at night, and sometimes it never comes.

INTERVIEWER: Is writing a solitary trip?

SARDUY: Yes, a solitary trip where the characters can provide some company. But there are mute characters, and an author may spend his entire life with a character who does not

speak. It's a little like the relationship with God: one can pray and pray for a long time and it is possible that God will not answer. It's almost a stroke of luck when a character appears with something to say. In my books, there are certain characters whom I have never managed to hear (I won't say which ones). On the other hand, there are others who spoke right away. So it's a little like a lottery.

INTERVIEWER: What do you feel upon turning in a completed work?

SARDUY: A book is like a living body. I let it take its own path, and I never read it or touch it again. In a way, Roberto González Echevarría or Ariana Méndez Ródena, among others who have written about my work, know my books far better than I. This does not mean that I don't understand the books of others. For instance, I consider myself a humble expert on Lezama Lima. But I forget my own novels because I never reread them. I do read the books of my friends on my works, however, although I stay away from doctoral theses on my work. If I read all the material written about me or reread my own books, I would never move forward. To be able to write, I have to forget everything I ever wrote, so that I can hear what the page has to say.

INTERVIEWER: You have said that the word is sometimes a paradise and sometimes a wall. What does it mean to you now?

SARDUY: Well, it was Roland Barthes who said I am in a paradise of words and that I want more of them each time. According to him, I am trying to create a sort of Jesuit paradise through words, and I think this is true. I try to create an atmosphere which will welcome, involve, fascinate and almost hypnotize the reader. It's almost like butterflies hypnotizing us through the designs on their wings, or life mesmerizing us with the beauty of its colors, volutes and arabesques. This hypnosis is writing, so words are a paradise. They fascinate in the same way that a peacock does when it shows off its colors. It's like a sexual attraction.

INTERVIEWER: You have also said, "The page is like a hall, the book is a palace, writing builds structures of symbols, the letters are repeated."

SARDUY: Where did I say that?

INTERVIEWER: In *Big Bang.*

SARDUY: I think *Big Bang* makes a lot of references to the Islamic world, because I wrote it in Iran and the north of Africa. That passage you just read evokes Islamic architecture for me, especially that of Isfahan. It's a very beautiful passage.

INTERVIEWER: And what relation do the pages have between them?

SARDUY: I think they are like spheres. There is a very persistent prejudice which insists that the page is an object with only two dimensions. In reality, the page has three dimensions, because it has depth. When writing, it is very important to keep the idea of a sphere in mind, and avoid thinking in two-dimensional terms, which is what painters have tried to avoid doing. The page has depth and perspective; it never works on just one level.

INTERVIEWER: Is that why in *Big Bang* the page not only has a written message but also a pictorial one?

SARDUY: Yes, the point is to achieve a pictorial representation, where the word representation includes abstraction, as in the works of Franz Kline or Mark Rothko or more recent American painters.

INTERVIEWER: Your prose is poetic, but it also has the elements of an essay, right?

SARDUY: I started as a poet and I am finishing as one (if I am finished), because that's what I am mostly writing these days. Poetry is the model for all writing. I am also working on a novel, but even with novels, the goal is for the narrative prose to have the conceptual clarity and formal beauty of poetry.

INTERVIEWER: What geometric forms would you give your books?

SARDUY: Polyhedrons, of course, because they are the

representative forms of the Renaissance, and the most complex spheres as well. I'll do anything to escape two dimensions.

INTERVIEWER: When you say Isabel the Chaotic One or Juana the Logical One, are you playing a game?

SARDUY: No, I am not, it is done in all earnestness. For personal reasons, I am very interested in Judaism and Islam. In the context of these two traditions, Isabel the Catholic is not a very endearing figure. So I call her the Chaotic One, and thereby vindicate the Jewish and Muslim traditions to which I feel so close.

INTERVIEWER: Since we are nearing the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery, do you have any comment on that celebration?

SARDUY: Yes, we are definitely reaching the 500th anniversary of a fiction. All of America is a fiction: the fiction of the East, the Renaissance, Marco Polo, Columbus and the Catholic Kings. We are definitely living the dream of the Admiral and explorer. And the dream has become a nightmare. So all of us who search for the meaning of America have to try to attenuate or control this nightmare. In my humble case, I do this through writing.

INTERVIEWER: What about the American Indian?

SARDUY: I am thinking of him above all, and of all other minorities of Latin America, because unfortunately this continent is made up of them. Everyone is alienated and perhaps that's why there are conflicts, because all these minorities are attempting to assert their autonomy and expression.

INTERVIEWER: Do you identify with surrealism, structuralism or "action writing," or are you unconnected to any movement?

SARDUY: My life was marked by French structuralism, because when I first arrived in Paris it had just begun. I was lucky enough to take courses and become friends with Roland Barthes, one of the leaders of the structuralist movement. I also studied with Jacques Lacan, and I met François Wahl, with whom I now live. So I have definitely been touched by structuralism, although I would say that its influence on me today is

less obvious. I am also very interested in the French surrealist movement, which I consider one of the most significant of this century.

INTERVIEWER: Do you compare yourself to any of the writers of the Boom?

SARDUY: If we consider that Lezama Lima belongs to the Boom, which is debatable, then he would be the one I am closest to, perhaps too close. I am a good friend of the writers of the Boom, I enjoy their work, but I don't see much resemblance between my books and theirs.

INTERVIEWER: But do you believe in the Boom?

SARDUY: Yes, I believe in the Boom, but I believe more in the post-Boom.

INTERVIEWER: What does it mean to be a Cuban, write with tropical vibrations, and live in Paris?

SARDUY: It's all the same, because even though I live in France, when I write it is as if I were in Cuba, sleeping on a hammock and having a guarapo, a tropical drink.

INTERVIEWER: Who is Severo Sarduy? Does he wear as many masks as his characters?

SARDUY: From the Buddhist viewpoint, the question has no meaning, because the subject doesn't exist; it is a fiction or illusion. Many writers complain that they are anxious, melancholy, and that they have lost their roots and their sense of identity. And laughingly I reply, "So what?"