

# **Interviews with Latin American Writers**

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## Guillermo Cabrera Infante

Guillermo Cabrera Infante was born in Gíbara, in the Province of Oriente, Cuba, in 1929. One of the best-known writers of the "Boom," his name nevertheless does not appear in the 1980 *Dictionary of Cuban Literature*, published by the Institute of Literature and Linguistics of the Cuban Academy of Sciences.

Cabrera Infante is the founder of the Cinemateca de Cuba, the Cuban Film Library, which he directed from 1951 to 1956. In 1954, under the pen name G. Caín, he began writing film reviews for the weekly magazine *Carteles*, for which he later served as editor-in-chief between 1957 and 1960. In 1959, he became director of the literary magazine *Lunes de Revolución* until it was banned by the government in 1961.

In 1962, Cabrera Infante entered the diplomatic service as Cuba's Cultural Attaché to Belgium. In 1965, however, he chose political exile and moved to London, where he has been living ever since with his wife, the former actress Miriam Gómez, whom he married in 1961.

Cabrera Infante is known for his puns and his experiments with the language. With a keen sense of humor, which he hides behind a straight face, he views writing as a game: "For me, literature is a complex game, both mental and concrete, which is acted out in a physical manner on the page." He categorically rejects the term "novelist," and insists on the fact that he is a writer of fragmentary tales which reflect the history of Cuba and the life of prerevolutionary Havana.

Among his many works are *Así en la paz como en la guerra* (In War and Peace), 1960; *Un oficio del siglo veinte* (A Twentieth-Century Job), 1963; *Tres tristes tigres*, 1965 (*Three Trapped Tigers*, 1971), for which he received the 1964 Biblioteca Breve Prize of Barcelona and the 1970 French Prize for Best Foreign Book; *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*, 1974 (*View of Dawn in the Tropics*, 1978); *O*, 1975; *Exorcismos de esti(l)o* (Exorcisms and Exercises in Style), 1976; *Arcadia todas las noches* (Arcadia Every Night),

1978; *La Habana para un infante difunto*, 1979 (*Infante's Inferno*, 1984); and *Holy Smoke*, 1985. This last work is Cabrera Infante's first book written in English, which makes him a Cuban-born British writer. He has repeatedly said, "I am the only British writer who writes in Spanish." This work is another play on words, as it recounts the history of cigars and cigar smokers. Writing began for Cabrera Infante as a joke, but it has become akin to a drug which possesses him, the writer now says.

A new unexpurgated Spanish edition of *Three Trapped Tigers* is scheduled for publication in Venezuela in 1989. It will restore the twenty-two sections that were censored from the first edition.

The following two interviews were held in 1980 and 1984, in New York.

### Part 1

INTERVIEWER: In the *New York Times Book Review*, David Gallagher said of *Three Trapped Tigers*: "I doubt a funnier book has been written in Spanish since *Don Quixote*. It is also one of the most inventive novels that has come out of Latin America." Do you agree with this?

CABRERA INFANTE: I do agree. What I do not agree with is the title of your TV series, "Contemporary Hispanic Fiction," because of the adjective "Hispanic." A few malicious people have accused the United States of being fascist, which it is not, but it is "faddist." In the 1970s, the fad was to call black Americans "Afro-Americans." Nowadays, it is fashionable to call people who come from Cuba, Puerto Rico or Colombia "Hispanic." Like "Latin" before, it seems to be just another tag. I do not consider myself a Hispanic writer. I do not live in the U.S. and I am not a member of a minority group which comes from Cuba, Puerto Rico or South America. I live in

London and I am a British subject, although I do write in Spanish, of course.

INTERVIEWER: What would you call this series, if it were up to you to choose a title?

CABRERA INFANTE: It is very difficult to call a series like this any one thing. The usage of "Hispanic" in this country is not the same as in its original Spanish. It is like calling an American Jew "Hebraic," a Russian or Polish American "Slavic," or an Italian "Italic," which sounds really silly. But to turn to your question, David Gallagher very generously called my book the funniest written in Spanish since *Don Quixote*. When he made that statement, there were no really funny books in Spanish. Spanish and Latin American literature had always considered writing a very serious matter. Let me tell you about a famous Argentine novelist who went to the University of California at Los Angeles. He was asked by a student there, "What do you think of *Three Trapped Tigers*?" He pondered the question for almost a minute and finally said, "That is not a serious book." So, you see where my book stands among very serious men writing very serious books.

INTERVIEWER: *Three Trapped Tigers* is five hundred pages of humor. The reader gets the impression that you enjoy what you are doing, that writing for you is a kind of game, almost like playing chess, and that you would like to take part in that game. Do you have the reader in mind when you write?

CABRERA INFANTE: A very wise author once said that a writer writes for himself, and then publishes for money. I write for myself and publish just for the reader. But I do not have the reader in mind when I write. No true writer does that. You are just in the middle of a struggle with words which are really very stubborn things, with a blank page, with the damn thing that you use to write with, a pen or a typewriter, and you forget all about the reader when you are doing that.

INTERVIEWER: It seems to me that you want your reader to enter the characters' world or, on the contrary, to react violently



against that world.

CABRERA INFANTE: The relationship between reader and characters is very difficult. It is even more peculiar than the relationship between the writer and his characters. For instance, in *Three Trapped Tigers* the main character is called Bustrófedon and he is a kind of ghost who has come back from the dead to play with words. It is very difficult for a reader to identify with such a man, but in spite of everything I have received many letters asking about this particular character and not about the other characters, who were more real than Bustrófedon was. There was even one character based on a real-life singer.

INTERVIEWER: As an author, you like to play games with your characters and your readers, but above all you play with words.

CABRERA INFANTE: That is true, the characters are really swamped by words and so is the reader.

INTERVIEWER: You are a master at pun making. Andrew Sarris, the film critic of the *Village Voice*, has called your work "a perpetual fireworks of puns." Can you comment on that?

CABRERA INFANTE: I do like puns because I like humor. As you know, one man's humor is another man's facetiae, but that is not true for me. Every kind of humor is acceptable; it is there for the writer to work with and for the reader to enjoy. Puns are a form of humor with words. When you have several words that could mean the same thing, but you have several meanings in mind, then you have a pun in a single word. For instance, Spanish is a very difficult language in which to make puns because it is a very square and formal language. You have distinct sounds for everything. In English, on the other hand, it is quite easy to make puns. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is a pun from the title to the very last word.

INTERVIEWER: Do you carry this vital aspect of playing with words into the translation of your works?

CABRERA INFANTE: Yes, of course. *Three Trapped Tigers*

was 445 pages long in Spanish and 480 in the English translation, which is really a version of the original book. The translation has a few extra pages because of all the games I played, by myself and with my translator.

INTERVIEWER: Is that why you said in another interview, "Writers rush in where translators fear to tread"?

CABRERA INFANTE: I think writers rush in where everybody is very frightened to tread. Writers rush in where publishers fear to tread and where translators fear to tread. Let me give you one example. I was working with the French translator of *Three Trapped Tigers* and he was constantly saying, "We can't do that, that is not French." Finally I told him angrily, "Listen, this book is not in Spanish, you can't do that in Spanish, but I did, so I assume you can do it as well in French." From then on, we had no problems because he understood what the book was all about. I had the same initial difficulties with the English translation.

INTERVIEWER: What language do you find most adaptable to your style of writing?

CABRERA INFANTE: English, because of my familiarity with it. It is a very different language from Spanish.

INTERVIEWER: You claim that you write in Cuban, not Spanish.

CABRERA INFANTE: But that was true only of *Three Trapped Tigers*, and I have since stopped this practice. It was a bad habit. With my book *Exorcismos de esti(l)lo*, I took the Cuban language further than I could, and that's when I stopped. Another novel of mine, *Infante's Inferno*, is written in a variety of standard Spanish which might even be called mid-Atlantic Spanish.

INTERVIEWER: You like to use colloquial expressions that are typical of Cuba, especially of the Havana nightlife. Why does it have such an appeal for you?

CABRERA INFANTE: I believe that writers, unless they consider themselves terribly exquisite, are at heart people who live



by night, a little bit outside society, moving between delinquency and conformity. It is from this atmosphere that the language for *Three Trapped Tigers* is derived.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that by playing with words you have committed an act of terrorism against the Spanish language in order to destroy and then recreate a new language?

CABRERA INFANTE: It was indeed an act of destruction and then creation. I have done a little bit of that in *Infante's Inferno* but not as much as in *Three Trapped Tigers*, where I was out to terrorize Spanish readers and Spanish writers.

INTERVIEWER: In your writing there is the definite influence of journalism and film. You started working as a journalist and you were the founder and director of the Cuban Film Institute. Do you see the influence of these two crafts in your works?

CABRERA INFANTE: I do not see the influence of journalism. I was never a true journalist, I was a movie critic. I wrote for a weekly magazine and then edited a literary magazine, but I did not really feel comfortable with the profession of journalism itself. I feel dependent on films, particularly American ones, because I was taken by my mother when I was twenty-nine days old to see my first picture.

INTERVIEWER: But you do not remember that picture.

CABRERA INFANTE: I do not remember that picture, but it was certainly registered by the brain. I have no doubt about that. I was able to read a movie before I was able to read a book. Watching a movie from beginning to end is like reading, because even though what you see are images, they are telling you a story. So it is like reading, and I did this very frequently as an infant and a very small child. There were influences in my life that were more important than journalism, such as comic strips and radio. I was an avid radio fan when I was a boy, as well as a great lover of comic strips. Even the name of my surrogate in *Three Trapped Tigers*, Sylvester, comes from a fascinating comic strip from my youth called *The Spirit*. The Spirit used to live under a tomb in the Saint Sylvester Cemetery in a place

called Metropolis.

INTERVIEWER: Who are the writers who have had the greatest impact on you?

CABRERA INFANTE: First I must mention writers like Petronius, with his *Satyricon*, which I read as pornography. Later, in high school in Havana, I discovered Homer. I read the *Odyssey* because it was the story of a man who returned home after being absent for more than twenty years and was recognized only by his dog. Having always been a great lover of dogs, I was absolutely fascinated by the story of this dog recognizing his master and then dying, because he was a very old dog.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see your own influence on other writers?

CABRERA INFANTE: Not really, I do not think that what I do influences others easily.

INTERVIEWER: You use techniques such as collage, fragmentation, humor and nostalgia, which are part of the *roman comique* and the picaresque novel. Could you describe your own style of writing?

CABRERA INFANTE: I don't have any style. I am against the notion of style in itself. You are referring to one book, *Three Trapped Tigers*. In other works, like *View of Dawn in the Tropics*, there are different approaches and different styles. Each book I write has a distinct style. *Infante's Inferno* is written from an entirely different perspective than that of *Three Trapped Tigers*.

INTERVIEWER: Do you consider yourself a novelist?

CABRERA INFANTE: No, I am a writer of fragments. I describe my works as books, but my publishers in Spain, in the United States and elsewhere insist on calling them novels. I don't know why. Even *View of Dawn in the Tropics* is termed a novel, although it is a series of fragments about Cuban history.

INTERVIEWER: In your opinion, what makes up a novel?

CABRERA INFANTE: That is a very difficult question. Many people have tried to pin down what a novel really is. The

traditional concept of a novel is embodied by a writer like Charles Dickens. That is what I define as a novel: something that has a beginning, a middle and an end, with characters and a plot that sustain interest from the first sentence to the last. But that is not what I do at all.

INTERVIEWER: Since 1965 you have lived outside your country, almost in self-imposed exile. Are you not afraid of losing touch with your language?

CABRERA INFANTE: I must tell you that the exile was not self-imposed. I left my country because I was forced to, and I do not think that I am going to lose my language because I live in England. Just the opposite. One day, I discovered that there were too many Anglicisms in my Spanish, so I said, "Well, consider yourself the only British writer who writes in Spanish." And that's how I solved it.

INTERVIEWER: What is the effect of censorship on a novel?

CABRERA INFANTE: I can only talk about myself. I know that many writers have had to write under censorship and yet produced good novels; for instance, Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* under Catholic censorship. Authors have been writing under censorship for centuries. It is only now that we can write without restrictions in places such as England, the United States, Spain and several South American countries. That is why my book, *Infante's Inferno*, a very erotic work, was published in Spain—this would have been inconceivable ten years ago.

INTERVIEWER: Perhaps because of exile or because of your own approach to literature, memory plays an important role in your writing. *Three Trapped Tigers* and *Infante's Inferno* are memories of a double exile—a recollection of prerevolutionary Cuba, and your youth, lost and regained through your writing. Could you say something about this?

CABRERA INFANTE: I think all writing is done through memory. Memory is the great translator of reality, the great interpreter of past life, the great recollector of dreams. It is of

paramount importance to any writer.

INTERVIEWER: Is *Infante's Inferno* an autobiography? Does it contain very personal elements?

CABRERA INFANTE: No, certainly not. Somerset Maugham, describing a novel he once wrote, said he was very sorry he had used the first person singular because everyone mistook his book for a kind of memoir, which it was not. I used snippets of my life in *Infante's Inferno*, just as I resort to fragments from the works of other authors, past, present and future. It is not really autobiographical at all.

INTERVIEWER: How did you arrive at the title for this book?

CABRERA INFANTE: I do not believe in inspiration, but I must have a title in order to work, otherwise I am lost. I started out with "Las confesiones de agosto" (The Confessions of August), which is dreadful, but I needed something. One day, after I had finished the first draft, the title *Infante's Inferno* came to me all of a sudden and I said, "That is a perfect title, I do not need any other." Then I proceeded to rewrite the entire draft with that title in mind, as if it were a new book.

INTERVIEWER: You have said that your work should be read aloud, that it is a "gallery of voices." There is also the influence of music in your books. Could you say something about its rhythmic quality, its beat, its tempo?

CABRERA INFANTE: But that is true only of *Three Trapped Tigers*. *View of Dawn in the Tropics* is history, and history cannot be read aloud, of course. In *Three Trapped Tigers*, however, what I intended to do was to work with music by other means, such as literature. I use musical patterns there in one of the sections of the book dealing with the life of a bolero singer in Havana.

INTERVIEWER: But even in *Infante's Inferno*, for instance, there is the influence of Ravel's music.

CABRERA INFANTE: Yes, that is true. But only because I use many references to musical terms, as I do with ballet. In this novel, however, I never intended, as I did in *Three Trapped*



*Tigers*, to apply musical patterns to the writing.

INTERVIEWER: In *View of Dawn in the Tropics*, you say about Cuba: "And it will always be there, that long, sad, unfortunate island will be there after the last Indian, after the last Spaniard, after the last African, after the last American and after the last Cuban. It will survive all disaster, eternally washed over by the Gulf Stream: beautiful and green, undying, eternal." What is Cuba for you?

CABRERA INFANTE: It is difficult to say. It is a country that once was. It is not a country that I really recognize anymore. I think that I've tried many times to get Cuba in my writings, especially Havana, which was once a great and fascinating city.

## Part 2

INTERVIEWER: Guillermo, you once said, "For me, literature is a game, a complex game, both mental and concrete, which is acted out in a physical manner on the page." Do you conceive of the art of writing as a jigsaw puzzle?

CABRERA INFANTE: No, absolutely not, writing doesn't have to be like a jigsaw puzzle, it can be a very linear undertaking. For instance, there are very complex games like chess, or very simple ones like Ping-Pong or tennis. What I do believe is that there is always a relationship between writing and reading, a constant interplay between the writer on the one hand and the reader on the other. The page is like a reference point, like the net in tennis, a concrete area to which all the rules of the game can be applied.

INTERVIEWER: So then, what does the page mean for you?

CABRERA INFANTE: Too much has been said on this since the end of the nineteenth century, when Mallarmé unfortunately decided to speak about the blank page. All of a sudden, writers seemed to discover that there really was an empty page before they wrote. Then they all began to complain about that virgin

page, the trauma of the blank page, the suffering involved with an empty page, that page which must be filled. All of this has always seemed absolutely wanton and absurd to me, without basis or foundation. When I write, the first blank page, or any blank page, means nothing to me. What means something is a page that has been filled with words. I can then play with them, transform them, parody them, and find their relation to phrases from earlier times, whether they are instances of ordinary street language which any Cuban or Spaniard might use, or examples of extraordinary literature. Sometimes, the words to a song can be truly fabulous and a form of poetry in their own right.

INTERVIEWER: Music has influenced you greatly, am I right?

CABRERA INFANTE: Yes, greatly. My first memories, for example, are about movies and music—specifically, the words of Cuban songs, like the boleros, from the thirties and the forties, a whole gamut of South American songs, Mexican songs, and North American music. These have always been very important to me. In fact, I have said that I like one line from a song by the Chilean Lucho Gatica more than all of Neruda's poetry. I won't say I like it more than all the poetry of Gabriela Mistral so as not to offend your sensibilities. That masterful line, which Gatica used to sing in 1957, is from a song called "La barca" (The Boat), and it went something like this: "Ya mi barca tiene que partir. Voy a navegar por otros mares de locura" (My boat is about to leave. I must sail through other seas of madness). This is an extraordinary poetic find, and I have used this phrase repeatedly, it is something of a leitmotiv with me, unlike any of Neruda's verses.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you abandon your medical career?

CABRERA INFANTE: I didn't abandon a medical career—I never even started it.

INTERVIEWER: But you wanted to be a doctor?

CABRERA INFANTE: I wanted to be a doctor because my parents were set that I should have a university degree. So I



chose a field that I thought would be the most interesting for me, and it wasn't philosophy or law or economics that I picked, but rather medicine. In this respect, I was extraordinarily lucky to have been taken to the medical school by a friend after my high-school graduation. He immediately showed me the pathology section, where on five tables lay five corpses.

INTERVIEWER: And that's where your career ended . . .

CABRERA INFANTE: Yes, the corpses looked horrendous, and what was worse was that they smelled like sin. The combination of rotting flesh and formaldehyde in which the corpses were preserved was truly foul. To boot, on the fifth table a group of students surrounded a doctor who was in the process of cutting open a dead man's stomach. That's when I said to myself, "If this is what I have to do for two years in order to become a doctor, I don't want to be one." I am glad to this day that I avoided that because doctors are among the most traumatized people in life. Having to deal with death and disease like that has to be extremely painful and depressing.

INTERVIEWER: In 1952, you were arrested and fined for publishing a story which, in your own words, contained "English profanities." Would you like to tell us a little about that episode of your life?

CABRERA INFANTE: That episode, like many episodes in one's life, seemed tragic at the time it happened, and comical afterward. What happened was that I published a story in the magazine *Bohemia*, which was the most important Cuban magazine, and the editor, who was my mentor and protector, took out all the naughty Spanish words, but not the English ones. The reason for all those indelicate words was that the story dealt with a group of gangsters who set out to kill an individual in Havana. In their midst was an American tourist who waited with anticipation for the killing and who hummed a very obscene tune, which I am not going to repeat now because some people in New York speak English. Since neither the publisher nor the editor-in-chief knew English, however, that

obscene tune remained in the story. During the first year of the dictatorship of Batista, 1952, there was a man who was particularly interested in damaging the magazine for political reasons, so he complained to the Government that *Bohemia* was printing stories with dirty English words. When the director of the magazine was asked about this, he replied that he had no idea what those words meant and that all responsibility for the story lay with me. So they came to my house, arrested me, and locked me up for a few days. I have written about the events which then took place in a story called "Obsceno," which was published in my book *O*. As they led me to the police station, the detectives who had arrested me, plainclothes policemen, behaved with such extreme obscenity toward the women on the street that my story paled by comparison. I was finally fined 500 pesos, the equivalent of \$500 in those days, a tremendous sum for me back then, but which, thanks to my lawyer and my editor, I didn't have to pay. What was strange about the trial was that I was tried by a very solemn judge in a very noisy and chaotic courthouse replete with prostitutes and characters of that sort running to and fro. All of a sudden, the secretary announced that the next trial would take place behind closed doors. The courtroom hushed, because for a trial to take place behind closed doors meant that the charges were so serious that they could not be made public in front of the audience present that morning. I was led to a decrepit little room where I met with the judge, his secretary and my lawyer. The judge read me a lengthy brief questioning my motives for publishing stories with dirty words in the full knowledge that such obscenity was reaching Cuban homes. That's where that incident ended, although I suffered its consequences afterward. Among other things, I had to stop studying journalism for a period of two years.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you begin writing under the pseudonym of G. Caín?

CABRERA INFANTE: After that story was published, the magazine's director, who had found himself in a tight spot for

having permitted the tale to be published, wanted nothing to do with me. After a period of six months, my mentor, Antonio Ortega, who was the editor-in-chief of the magazine, told me, "Why don't you write something for *Bohemia*? You don't have to use your name, just invent a pseudonym." I wanted my pseudonym to be as close to my name as possible, so I took the "G" of Guillermo as the initial, and then I combined the first two letters of each of my last names, and "Caín" is what came out. I then wrote an article on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the creation of Mickey Mouse, which was highly praised by the magazine, although the editor-in-chief did not reveal my name, of course. I published two more articles in *Bohemia*, and when my mentor was finally made director of *Carteles*, he put me in charge of the film section of that magazine. I kept on using my pseudonym, however, to make sure that there would be no backlash against me.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you continue publishing with that pseudonym?

CABRERA INFANTE: For the film reviews, from 1954 until 1960, at which time *Carteles* was closed down by the Government.

INTERVIEWER: You have qualified *Three Trapped Tigers* as a "gallery of voices." What drove you to write a novel which was meant to be heard, where you combined jokes, plays on words, and tongue twisters? Your friend, the critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal, even went so far as to say that you "turned the phrase inside out as if it were a glove."

CABRERA INFANTE: The thing about a gallery of voices was really a guide I gave to those critics who, unlike you, only read the front and back covers of a book. If you look closely, there is no book more visual than *Three Trapped Tigers*, in that it is filled with blank pages, dark pages, it has stars made of words, the famous magical cube made of numbers, and there is even a page which is a mirror. It is an absolutely graphic work, with the movies as its theme, in a way, because the characters behave as

if they were actors in a movie; one of them speaks of nothing else, and the other is a photographer. So it is not a book made exclusively to be heard; it is meant to be seen and heard. These are the two most important components of literature: hearing and seeing from the writer's perspective, and seeing and speaking from the reader's point of view. It is a difficult book to read, in any case. For instance, I suggest at the beginning of the book that certain pages should be read aloud, but I don't think many people benefit from that advice because they would have to know what inflections to give, and I am really the only one in a position to know and interpret things like that. There is also a very arbitrary disposition of punctuation—there are commas where there shouldn't be and periods that have been placed whimsically in the middle of a line. So there is an entire series of relations between the author and the written page that were not stylistically oral.

INTERVIEWER: How did you manage to crack the secret language of the night of prerevolutionary Havana?

CABRERA INFANTE: That was one of my goals. . . . Raymond Chandler has a dictum that said a writer should be very careful about using slang because either it is passé by the time the book gets printed or it is completely impenetrable. The only way for the writer to protect himself from those two hazards is to create his own slang. This is what I did with the *Three Tigers*. I created a new language for Havana from Belgium and Spain, where I wrote the book. It began when I read a transcription of a meeting of contemporary Cuban politicians, workers, and peasants in Havana. This transcript ran about 1,500 pages, and I of course did not read them all because they were atrociously boring, but there it was, without any pretension to literature. It was then I realized that there was absolutely no relation between that transcription and my work, and that, in fact, there was no relation between my writing and the language used by Cubans today. Someone told me that the way Cubans speak has changed dramatically in twenty years. That may be possible,



but I wonder if they did at some time speak like the characters of *Three Tigers*.

INTERVIEWER: It means that your book represents a language that you invented, but which, at the same time, does really exist.

CABRERA INFANTE: It means that no matter what you write, be it a biography, an autobiography, a detective novel, or a conversation on the street, it all becomes fiction as soon as you write it down.

INTERVIEWER: How do you reconcile a sense of humor with a sense of the poetic?

CABRERA INFANTE: I don't think I have much sense of the poetic.

INTERVIEWER: But there are poetical moments in your writing.

CABRERA INFANTE: There may be such moments through evocation, which is very important, and I resort to nostalgia a lot. *Infante's Inferno* is a book full of memories of Havana. Those memories are manipulated to such an extent that even those people who participated in them are unaware of it. There is a constant manipulation of my own nostalgia, and I use it as a wellspring for my literature. I loathe any pretension to writing well, or to there being such a thing as fine writing, or poetical writing. For instance, an old Spanish educator who used to live in Cuba, when he first read my stories at the end of the 1940s, suggested that I look up certain Spanish writers to acquire another sense of the language. So I read those authors, who are not worthy to be mentioned, who wrote with what was known as a golden touch; they wrote well, with a finely structured prose. But I thought they were truly horrendous and that they were completely irrelevant to what I was trying to achieve.

INTERVIEWER: Since 1965 you have lived away from your country. Do you consider yourself a writer in exile?

CABRERA INFANTE: Well, I write in exile because I cannot return to my country, so I have no choice but to see myself as an exiled writer. Consider the fact that there were writers who

went voluntarily into exile, like Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and other writers who lived in Paris in the twenties, the "lost generation." They all believed themselves to be writers in exile, and I think I have more right to call myself that than they. That's why I never believed in the "exile" of the Latin American authors who lived in Europe at the same time as I did. The difference between myself and them was that I could not go home, whereas they did return to Argentina, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and so on.

INTERVIEWER: Who are your readers? Do you think about them when you write?

CABRERA INFANTE: I think that like all writers—and if any writer disagrees with this, then he is not a writer—I write primarily for myself. It is when I publish, or begin to think about publishing, that problems arise. When I write, however, I do so for my own pleasure. I have one main reader, Miriam Gómez, my wife. She reads everything I write—I have not finished writing something and she is already reading it. In fact, she is such a demanding critic that she made me eliminate a hundred pages from *Infante's Inferno*! But I don't really write for her either. When I write, I enjoy myself so much that what is being written really needs no reader. It is like a sexual act with one's self—I see the letters on my typewriter, and for me that is the greatest pleasure.

INTERVIEWER: And do you think about your characters? Or are they also unimportant?

CABRERA INFANTE: I don't much believe in the idea of characters. I write with words, that is all. Whether those words are put in the mouth of this or that character does not matter to me.

INTERVIEWER: You dedicated two of your books to Miriam Gómez.

CABRERA INFANTE: *Un oficio del siglo veinte* is also dedicated to her, although in a mocking way, because I decided to dedicate that book to my wife as well, as she had kept all my film reviews, making the writing of the book extremely easy.



So the dedication was to "Miriam Gómez and Marta Calvo without whom this would not have been possible." I was referring to the structure of the book, of course. But since then I have dedicated *Three Trapped Tigers* and *Infante's Inferno* to Miriam, although the dedication of the latter book was more cryptic, as it said "To M., my driving force."

INTERVIEWER: Does she read your books once they are finished, or do you discuss them with her as you are writing them?

CABRERA INFANTE: "Discuss"?

INTERVIEWER: Well, talk about . . .

CABRERA INFANTE: You don't know Miriam Gómez if you think I can discuss with her once she has made up her mind that I am not going to publish something! There is no appeal possible—she is like a medieval judge.

INTERVIEWER: So you believe in the Inquisition?

CABRERA INFANTE: Almost. She even reads and censors my letters, and not only the ones that I receive but the ones I send out.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you write?

CABRERA INFANTE: It started as a joke, a parody, and a bet, even though I am not a gambler. When I was in Cuba in 1947, I read fragments of *El Señor Presidente* by Miguel Angel Asturias. I then discussed that work with Carlos Franqui, an old friend of mine who later went into exile in Italy, and told him, "If this is writing, then I am sure I can do it," and he replied, "Yes, it is very easy." So I wrote a story, he read it and pronounced it quite good—today, I disagree with his judgment completely; I think it was a horrendous tale. But he suggested I take it to the magazine *Bohemia*, and that was where I met the person who was to become my mentor, Antonio Ortega, the editor-in-chief of the magazine. He said he would read the story and that I should come back in a week. When I returned, he told me that the tale would be published, and he paid me fifty pesos, the equivalent of fifty dollars. I had never had that kind of

money in my life, because I was very poor then, so I kept on writing stories, and they too were published, and I was paid again. I decided that was what I would do because I didn't have to work or study for it—writing stories and having them published would be enough. This then turned into a sort of *modus vivendi*, but without knowing it I became like the person who plays around with drugs, who as he injects himself with morphine thinks that he is not going to form a habit, that it is like a joke and he can quit any time he wants. Of course, that's when I became hooked for life. What had started out as a parody turned into a game first and then into a habit, from which I have not been able to free myself.

INTERVIEWER: In which genre do you feel the most comfortable?

CABRERA INFANTE: I don't know. I have assiduously avoided calling my books novels. That's something I discussed with my publisher, Seix Barral, over a long period of time, although you have to understand the motives of publishers as well. They need to have some way of identifying works for bookstores, so as to allow an easy categorization of differing genres. For instance, a book of essays would go on the same shelf with the works of Ortega, Cela and Unamuno; a book of short stories, meanwhile, would go next to Borges, and novels would thus be placed next to other novels. But my books could never be called novels—if that had been the case, then my first work would have been a novel, and my last one would not. That's a debate that has been raging forever among critics, whether the book is a confession or a memoir. I never interfere, because the idea of using the label of "novel" was never mine. *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*, for instance, was published here by Harper and Row under the name *View of Dawn in the Tropics*. They respected my demand that the book not be labeled a novel, because it is really a history of Cuba told through various vignettes. But then they sold the book as a paperback, and beneath my name was the label "a novel," which I thought was a terrible fraud and

deception perpetrated on the readers because they would believe that they were indeed going to read a novel. In reality, they came up against a history of Cuba told through vignettes, with no discernible characters, and even lacking names to identify historical figures.

INTERVIEWER: Could one call you a patriotic chronicler?

CABRERA INFANTE: No, I completely reject those labels. Not that of chronicler, because I wrote film reviews in which the central character was called "the chronicler," who was the person who went to the movies and criticized them. But I do reject the notion of "patriotism" because that word is so grandiose and so exploited that it has become virtually meaningless. Recently, there was a conference of exiled Cuban writers in Washington, and the organizer told me, "I want to tell you that I am doing this for Cuba." I thought this so pretentious that I had to reply, "Well, if that is the case, then I am doing it for Havana," because it was truly a statement worthy of ridicule, even though he was perfectly serious and believed that notions of Cuba and patriotism were more important than words. For me, words are just words, nothing else. So I do not consider myself a chronicler of my fatherland or even a chronicler of Havana. What I tried to do was to debunk the idea of "History," with a capital *H*, because I have always believed that history is like any other book and that it should be treated as such. Substituting the idea of God for the idea of history really leads back to the same thing. Whether you call it "God," "history," "universe," or "chance," or you believe, as the pantheists do, that God is everywhere, does not matter. What I tried to do in that book was to tackle the notion of Cuba as a tropical paradise, because even before Columbus's arrival, atrocious crimes were being committed there, something which has not stopped to this day. This is true of any nation, of course, but I was not interested in any country, I wanted to deal concretely with Cuban history, which is worshipped so excessively in exile and in Cuba itself.

INTERVIEWER: *View of Dawn in the Tropics* is your most controversial work. You dedicated it to Commander Plino Prieto, who was shot in September 1960, and to Commander Alberto Mora, who killed himself in September 1972. What relevance did these two men have within the framework of Cuban politics and what impact did they have on your life?

CABRERA INFANTE: Within the framework of Cuban politics, very little. But they were both friends of mine, especially Alberto Mora, whom I first met when we were both twenty years old in 1950, and our friendship continued throughout Batista's dictatorship, when he engaged in terrorist activities. Plino Prieto was the first director of the Cuban Film Library in 1950. He was crazy about film, but in a very specific sense, because he was only interested in cartoons. He didn't care in the least for anything that had to do with people on film. He loved cartoons and animation, like Walt Disney, with identifiable caricatures, like the stuff the UPA used to do, or the work of abstract Canadian animators. But the life of my two friends was greatly changed when Batista took over after a coup in 1952. They both dedicated themselves to anti-Batista activities, and in this respect, as I show in a vignette, Plino Prieto was a man for whom everything always turned out badly. His life was a series of failures. For example, in 1958 he organized a boat supply of arms to Cuban shores, but the small ship went astray in the Gulf of Mexico, which was subject to strong and unpredictable winds. Prieto had left from Yucatán, I believe, and the boat was adrift for several days. Finally, he managed to land at a secret spot in Cuba, only to see unexpected festivities going on—Batista had fled five days earlier! So, even though Prieto and his crew almost died several times in the crossing, his mission was a complete failure in every respect: consider the effort required to gather money and purchase weapons and a boat, travel with that boat to Cuba, land in complete secrecy, and find out there was absolutely no need for it. Shortly afterward, however, he became a counterrevolutionary and was caught in



the Province of Las Villas, where he was summarily shot. Alberto Mora's life was quite different. He was mildly successful because he was in one of the revolutionary groups that attacked the Presidential Palace. That group later became a part of the revolutionary Government, and he himself was the first director of its student wing. Later, he became Minister of Commerce after he associated himself with Che Guevara. When the latter fell from grace in Cuba, Mora ceased to be Minister. He then drifted into increasing obscurity, until the famous Padilla case, when he wrote personally to Fidel Castro to protest the treatment given Padilla, who was jailed and made to confess. As a result of this letter, he was sentenced to hard labor on a farm in the same area where Plino Prieto had been shot. But rather than go there, he decided to kill himself. These two persons were much beloved by me: Alberto was always very generous with me, and I admired Plino from afar, because he was not really a very communicative individual, thoroughly un-Cuban in this respect, and given to telling extremely dry jokes. They were both noteworthy persons, and I thought that they were victimized by the same historical event that they helped bring about. So I remembered them in a very particular manner, and they are the only truly relevant and real characters in my book.

INTERVIEWER: In that book you mention the murder of a police lieutenant by some youngsters, followed by their eventual deaths, and you don't disclose their names. Is there some connection between that story and the deaths of police sergeant Rubén Darío González, and the two students Gustavo Maso and Juan Regeiro, who died on December 12, 1949?

CABRERA INFANTE: The only possible connection is that Juancito Regeiro and Gustavo Maso were fellow students of mine in college. They were part of a gang that is difficult to understand in this country, if one does not think of the Mafia in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. They were gangsters because they were armed and violent, and wouldn't give too

much thought to killing someone. At the same time, however, they were not like American gangsters—they did not dedicate themselves to robbing banks. They thought of themselves as revolutionaries, and in that sense they were political gangsters. Curiously enough, they belonged to the same group as Fidel Castro, the *Unión Insurreccional Revolucionaria (UIR)* (Revolutionary Insurrectionary Union). The police sergeant belonged to the *Movimiento Social Revolucionario (MSR)* (Revolutionary Social Movement). As you can see, they insisted on the "revolutionary" aspect constantly. The sergeant's name was Rubén Darío González, although he was everything but a poet. He was an extremely violent man, who had quite possibly killed one or two members of the other band. What truly interested me in this occurrence was its similarity to a parallel scene from a western. Juancito was sixteen and Gustavo was twenty when they walked in through the swinging doors of the bar where Rubén Darío González was seated. There were several people sitting on stools, and the two youths said, "Gentlemen, please step aside, this does not concern you." González had no time to react; he was drinking a beer, he turned his head, and they shot him with .45 caliber guns and killed him. Then they fled and sought refuge with the leader of their band, but since they had committed the murder without permission, their chief wanted nothing to do with the killing, although he was hardly a humanist. So instead of hiding him, he handed them over to the other group. They turned up dead the next day at a place called El laguito, a well-known pond in an aristocratic residential area. They were both very young, and although Juancito Regeiro was most definitely a psychopath, Gustavo Maso was a reasonable boy and a good student. I saw how they degenerated step by step into gangsterism and mindless, destructive violence, which eventually did them in. The incident was widely commented on at the college because we all knew them well.

INTERVIEWER: In the same book, there is also a story in which you tell of the death of a character and say, "He who had



to die, died." Could you comment on this?

CABRERA INFANTE: This is a typically violent episode from that capitalist democratic period, 1947 and 1948, involving various so-called revolutionary student groups. It is an extraordinary occurrence because the head of the *Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios (FEU)* (Federation of University Students), Manolo Castro, was killed. This assassination is recounted by Hemingway in one of his famous articles. He used it as the beginning of a piece in which he went on to relate how he hunted antelopes in Idaho or something like that. Hemingway said Castro had been a very honest man because he had died with thirty-two cents in his pocket. He was indeed an honest person, but he had also engaged in violent acts. The group who decided to kill him was the same to which Fidel Castro belonged, the UIR. So there is a great probability that one of the men who murdered Manolo Castro was Fidel Castro, because the leader of the UIR had a very macabre sense of humor. For instance, if the UIR had been after someone for years, they would leave a note on the dead body saying, "Justice is slow, but it comes." This was the trademark of the UIR. So the fact that one Castro should kill another probably appealed to the dark sense of humor of the UIR's leader, although it was never conclusively proved that Fidel Castro was one of the killers, only that he knew when the murder was going to occur, and that he was a member of that group. And the reference to "he who had to die" indicates that Manolo Castro had been on the UIR's death list for quite some time.

INTERVIEWER: How do you come up with the titles of your works?

CABRERA INFANTE: Titles are not only important, they are essential for me. I cannot write without a title. The example that comes to mind is the book *Infante's Inferno*. When I first started that work, it was called, as I told you, "Las confesiones de agosto" for obvious reasons, which, however, are not always the most visible. I gave it that name because when I started

writing the book—which incidentally was based on an idea by Miriam Gómez—it was August of 1976. I wanted to allude to Saint Augustine's famous *Confessions*. As you know, there was nothing Christian or exemplary about his early life. I worked for two years on the book, between 1976 and 1978, and one day, as if Saint Augustine or Ravel were whispering to me, the Spanish title, *La Havana para un infante difunto*, came to me. And that is the title of my book, there is no other. It is a parody of Ravel's famous title *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. Ravel was making a joke because as you know *infante défunte* rhymes very well in French; it is both homophonic and cacophonous at the same time. That is to say, the words sound the same and yet they are shocking together. The word *pavane* was brought in because it is an archaic musical form, while *infante* was used because of the fascination foreigners have with that term, which in Spanish designates the sons of the king who will not ascend to the throne. When the title came to me, I became convinced it was perfect, so I set out to rewrite the entire book, which took me about a year. At the end of this period, I told Miriam Gómez the title, and she liked it. All my friends agreed that it was a very comic title. Many of my books have begun with the title, because naming a work already in progress makes no sense to me.

INTERVIEWER: From all the books you have written, which is your favorite?

CABRERA INFANTE: I don't have a favorite book, but I have a most despised book which I have tried to forget as much as possible.

INTERVIEWER: Which one is it?

CABRERA INFANTE: *Así en la paz como en la guerra*, my first book, which is a collection of fifteen short stories, out of which maybe three are salvageable. The worst thing about the book is the fact that my attitude when I wrote it was very negative. I was completely under the influence of Sartre, because I accepted the premise that a book should be a comprehensive

critical act. So not only did I have to include reality, which is an idiotic pretension, but I also had to have criticisms of reality and of the work itself. That book is therefore execrable for me. The next book I wrote, however, which was called *Un oficio del siglo veinte*, is perhaps my favorite work, because it is then that I truly began to write as I wanted to write, and not as I thought I should write.

INTERVIEWER: The Institute of Literature and Linguistics of the Cuban Academy of Sciences published a dictionary on Cuban literature a few years ago. How is it possible that your name does not appear in it?

CABRERA INFANTE: It's very simple. I turned out to be an enemy, and I am going to explain why. My parents were founders of the Cuban Communist Party, and I grew up extremely poor. When we moved to Havana, my father founded the communist newspaper *Hoy*. I began my writing career by doing translations for that paper. I also used to participate in many insurrectionary activities against Batista. Many of Cuba's current literary "heroes" (whose names I am not going to repeat here because it would be giving them free publicity) used to go to Mass every day in those times, and some even worked within Batista's government. By contrast, Alberto Mora hid in our house for six months at one time, and at great risk, since the second in command of Batista's police lived right next door to us. But it was decided that he should stay at our house because this represented a natural sort of camouflage—nobody in his right mind would hide a fugitive next to the house of a chief of police. I did other things as well, like writing for the clandestine newspaper *Revolución* with Franqui. When the revolution came to power, I collaborated with it. I was the first delegate of the cultural section of the Ministry of Education sent by the first revolutionary Minister of Education himself. This past is irrevocable; if anyone had credentials to be a part of today's Cuba it would be I, not Alejo Carpentier or Lezama Lima, because the former lived in Venezuela until the revolution ascended to power and

the latter was an official of Batista's cultural division. So they can never say that I left Cuba because I was the son of filthy rich parents who had ten sugar plantations confiscated. That is impossible. The only way to attack me was to completely eliminate me. My books, for instance, were banned in Cuba, but not because I had made counterrevolutionary declarations. They were banned from the very time when they were published abroad. *Three Trapped Tigers* never circulated in Cuba, and I had not criticized Fidel Castro's government at that time. So why did they ban this book? Because there was the possibility that, since I was abroad, I would sooner or later become a counterrevolutionary. There were also certain literary cliques and political interests which contributed to drawing a curtain of silence around me. I first came out against Castro in June 1968, fifteen months after my book had been published, and you cannot imagine how quickly a void was created around me. I ceased appearing in anthologies. I could tell you about a series of anthologies where they mentioned literally anyone, and I didn't appear. So it does not surprise me that I am not mentioned in that book.

INTERVIEWER: In an interview you held in Caracas, you described Fidel Castro as the "Stalin of the Caribbean." Nevertheless, your parents had portraits of Stalin and Jesus in their house in the 1930s. Why these apparent contradictions?

CABRERA INFANTE: I can explain quite simply why we had both a portrait of Stalin and one of Jesus. My mother had been educated at a convent, and she had been converted to communism by my father during Stalin's most rampant period, at the beginning of the 1930s. So she had two gods, God in heaven and god on earth. The comparison between Castro and Stalin is not really so farfetched if you consider that here are two men who eliminated practically all their enemies, amassing all the power for themselves. But in certain respects the comparison is not apt. A better parallel would be with Hitler, for instance in the massive mobilization of people. Specifically, Castro would



bring millions of Cubans to the Plaza de la República, while Hitler drew two or three million Germans to Nuremberg or Berlin. They both used loudspeakers, extreme body language, and could employ their voices in a particularly inflammatory, moving manner, in the sense that they could sway their audiences in one direction or the other. They were both great actors, at the peak of their powers when performing before the masses. All these factors make the comparison more plausible. Of course, there is one great difference between them: Fidel Castro never wrote a *Mein Kampf*. He was a surprise Hitler, because he never delivered what he promised: to reinstitute the Constitution of 1940 and return Cuba to a democratic state, with free elections. Hitler, on the other hand, did exactly what he set out in *Mein Kampf*, down to the extermination of the Jews.

INTERVIEWER: Who is Guillermo Cabrera Infante?

CABRERA INFANTE: I would prefer that we leave my strip-tease to a more private place.