Translator's Preface

Jill Gibian

"Subversion of Carlitos the Magician" by Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti, situates the famous tango singer Carlos Gardel (c.1887-1935) amongst revolutionary forces fighting for social justice. The poem, first published in the collection Viento del exilio (1981), serves as a reaction to the political repression in Uruguay that first sent the author into exile after the 1973 coup. Benedetti born in Tacuarambo in 1920, shares Gardel's alleged birthplace, although some adamantly claim that he was born in Toulouse, France. The poem, interweaves tango lyrics made famous by Gardel such as "Sus ojos se cerraron," "Volver," "Arrabal amargo" and "Mi noche triste." Placed against a backdrop of the world of the compadritos or hoodlums of the first part of the 20th century, the poem jumps anachronistically to the 1970's when military coups were synonymous with the electric prod and disappearances were the norm. The poem ends with Gardel joining the revolutionary forces, coming over to "our side" as the poem proclaims.

The poem presents many challenges for the translator. The use of tango lyrics to evoke memories of time past creates a nostalgic feeling for the reader who is familiar with the aforementioned classic tangos. However, for those who are not, the poem is glossed and in one case, the lyrics are left in Spanish for poetic effect. Another challenge is the use of lunfardo, the language of the lunfars or thieves that flavors many tangos and is found today in common street jargon. Words like pibe/piba for guy and gal, are but two examples. The word cursi, used as an adjective to describe Gardel, proved to be especially challenging. According to the Diccionario de la Real Academia Espanola, cursi refers to 1) a person who pretends to be refined and elegant without being so; 2) artists and writers who pretend to be refined or who have elevated sentiments; 3) something that is kitschy or of bad taste. All three of these definitions place Gardel in sharp contrast to the Gardel that is molded into a revolutionary by the end of the poem.

Benedetti, author of more than 80 books covering all genres, continues to fight at age 87 for social justice. His latest work, Vivir adrede (Editorial Planeta), a reflection on problems of war, imperialism, religion, drugs, and social injustice was released September 2007.

Translation 2, 2007
Querés saber dónde están los muchachos de entonces sospechas que ahora vendrán caras extrañas y aunque pasó una sombra sonó un balazo guardáis escondida una esperanza humilde que es toda la fortuna de tu corazón.

La verdad es que fuiste genialmente cursi y soberanamente popular te metiste no sólo en los boliche sino también entre pecho y espalda de vos hablaban por supuesto en los quilombos pero asimismo en los hogares de respeto atravesaste las capas sociales como una lluvia persistente y veraz y así guardelabas los obreros y las costureritas pero también los altísimos burgueses y no era raro que algún senador y rey de bastos matizara sus listas de promesas a olvidar con citas de los griegos más preclaros y de tus tangos tan poco helénicos.

THE SUBVERSION OF CARLITOS THE MAGICIAN by Mario Benedetti

Translated by Jill Gibian

So you want to know whatever happened to the boys of the good old days You wonder about those strange new faces soon to come1 and even though darkness abounds and gunshots resound you keep hidden a humble hope that's worth all the treasures of your heart.2

The truth is that you were brilliantly cursi and overwhelmingly popular you not only made your way into the clubs but also into people's hearts of course they used to talk about you in the houses of ill repute as they likewise did in reputable homes you crossed the social strata like a persistent and veracious rain and so, not only did you have the workers and the seamstresses singing tangos à la gardel but also the crème de la crème of the bourgeoisie and it wasn't unusual for some senator and would-be king to color their lists of promises-to-forget with quotes from the most illustrious Greeks and from your ever so un-Hellenic tangos.

1 From the tango "Sus ojos se cerraron," "Se que ahora vendrán caras extrañas/con su limosna de algo a mi cercanía." Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera, music by Carlos Gardel.
2 From the tango "Volver," "Y aunque el olvido, que todo destruye,/haya matado mi vieja ilusión,/guardo escondida una esperanza humilde/que es toda la fortuna de mi corazón." Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera, music by Carlos Gardel.
tus ensueños se van no vuelven más
tal vez por eso siempre sostuvimos
que no tenías inquietudes políticas
izquierdas y derechas nos pusimos de acuerdo
para situarte en el malevaje y otros limbo
donde había paícas y otarios y percal y gayola
pero no figuraba la lucha de clases
y aunque dicen que eras ateo y socialista
otros evocan tus alabanzas a radicales y conservas
pero vos/ antes y después de medellín
dejaste hacer/dejaste que dijeran/dejaste
que cada uno te inventara a su medida
y por las dudas no aclaraste nunca
si eras de toulouse o de tacuarembó

pero en alguna parte sucedió algo
que removió tu vergüenza de haber sido
tu noche triste y tu requiesca in pache
acaso fue la piba que murió en la picaná
o el verdugo mayor que viste en el periódico
compungido y procaz ante la sangre joven
todo es mentira/ mentira ese lamento

your dreams have vanished never to return
perhaps that’s why we always swore
that you had no political concerns
those of us on the left and the right agreed that
you belonged in the underworld and in other such limbo
where there was nothin’ but loose women and Johns and cheap cotton and the slammer
but no sign of class struggle

and although they say that you were an atheist and a socialist
others recall your praises of radicals and conservatives
but you, my friend/before and after medellín
allowed them to make/allowed them to say/allowed everyone to invent
you in their own way
and for the sake of doubt you never did say if you were from toulouse or from tacuarembó

but somewhere something happened
that freed you from your shame of having been
your own saddest night and your requiesca in pache
perhaps it was the piba who died on the electric prod
or the chief executioner who you saw in the newspaper
sad yet unabashed before the blood of the young lass
todo es mentira/mentira ese lamento
everything is an illusion/ illusive is your lament

2 From the tango “Arrabal amargo.” “Mis ensueños se van, se van, no vuelven más.” Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera, music by Carlos Gardel.
5 Reference to tango “Mi noche triste.” Lyrics by Pascual Contursi, music by Samuel Castriota. This was the first tango recorded by Carlos Gardel in 1917. (Hector Angel Benediti, Las mejores letras de Tango, Argentina: Seix Barral, 2000).
6 Rest in Peace.
7 From the tango “Sus ojos se cerraron.” “Todo es mentira, mentira ese lamento.” Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera, music by Carlos Gardel.
pero es seguro que sucedió algo
algo que te movió el gacho para siempre

fue entonces que sacaste de la manga
los seis o siete tangos con palabras rugosas
y empezaste a cantarlos como nunca
hasta que el cabo le avisó al sargento
y el sargento se lo dijo al teniente
y el teniente al mayor y al coronel
y el coronel a todos los generales
que esa noche disfrutaban de wagner
y no bien acabó el crepúsculo de los dioses
tejuzgaron culpable de ser pueblo
y de asistencia a la subversión
y así entrase en la franja de los clandes

de modo que se acabaron todas las dudas
y las cavilaciones y los chismes
ya no sobre toulouse o tacuarembó
tele llevaste el secreto a la chacarita
sino sobre con cuáles estabas o estarás
vale decir con ellos o con nosotros
quien sabe si supieras
pero ahora si está claro para siempre
tomaste partido contra los jaiíes y la cana
y estás con nosotros/bienvenido mago compañerito morocho del abasto.

but for sure something happened
something that tipped your hat forever

it was then that you pulled out from up your sleeve
those six or seven tangos with rousing lyrics
and you began to sing them like never before
until the corporal told the sergeant
and the sergeant told the lieutenant
and the lieutenant the major and the colonel
and the colonel all the generals
who were taking delight in wagner that night
and no sooner had the twilight of the gods ended
they declared you guilty of being for the people
and of aiding and abetting political subversion
and that's how you joined the secret world of the underground

which put an end to all the doubts
and the caviling and the petty gossip
no longer was it about toulouse or tacuarembó
you carried that secret with you to the grave*
but rather it was about who you were or will be with
that is to say with them or with us
who knows if you knew
but now it is crystal clear
you took sides against the highlifes and the cops
and now you're on our side/welcome magus
our dark and debonair comrade from El Abasto.9

Lunfardo Glossary

cursi – pretentious, arrogant, kitschy, cheesy, corny, tacky, etc.
piba – gal, chic

* To the chacarita in the original. Cemetery where Gardel is buried in a special tomb.
9 Neighborhood in Buenos Aires that was once home to Gardel.